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Reconfiguring a Black American Identity: the Art of Amy Sherald

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Abstract

This thesis engages the concept of identity in the representation and presentation of Black Americans. It counters historical moments like the Black Arts Movement, whose artists aimed to speak directly to the needs and aspirations of Black Americans by demanding recognition from white power on its own terms. This thesis explores contemporary artist Amy Sherald, whose portraiture explores social and political contexts that limit the expressiveness of the Black American subject. It considers how, through the method of reconfiguration, Sherald exudes an imaginative interior of American Blackness not privy to the public, how her figures' pensive and assertive gazes disobey and subvert western aesthetics, and how she advocates for an expressiveness that isn't resistive. Through the use of monochromatic backgrounds, fashion, grisaille, and literary titles, Sherald refuses to rely on the framework of resistance to define Blackness and creates a unique body of Black portraiture that requires a new visual aesthetic to understand identities not actualized in the public sphere.

Reconfiguring a Black American Identity: The Art of Amy Sherald

by

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Introduction

Analyzing the work of contemporary artist, Amy Sherald, this thesis explores how traditional artistic methods are deployed to reconfigure conventional notions of Blackness. It demonstrates how three critical aspects of Sherald's style – monochromatic backgrounds, literary titles, and grisaille – destabilizes the marginalized Black subject rendered in canonical art history, thus freeing the Black American identity from the conventions of presenting Black figures. This thesis explores a way of self-projection, as Sherald's painted figures are granted an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be a Black American not defined by a racialized existence. Hence, it is the portrait that provides the conceptual framework that helps one to understand Sherald's expressions of Black interiority. I borrow an analytical tool from art historian Huey Copeland, who argues that structural conditions rooted in racialization modulate how contemporary artists position Blackness as a discursive site that is both "bound to violence" and "bound to appear."[1] Copeland's analysis grounds this thesis as it explores the limitations canonical art history imposes on perceptions of Blackness that impede self-actualization. The research emphasizes how Sherald's work is one of many strides toward defusing the conceptual parameters created from the logical fallacies of race. A thread of freedom shapes her portraiture. Her depictions of autonomous Black figures are a departure from traditional forms of representation. They display a new visual aesthetic that moves Black identity beyond stereotypical public identities forged in racist social contexts.

In Sherald's hands, the traditional medium of portraiture frees Black identity from the enduring framework of the 'Black Other' that was forged in slavery to signal inferiority,

[1] Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). 12

subordination, and oppression. Beverly Tatum explains this "other" as a being whose identity is subsumed by the notion that Blackness means defective, substandard, and at best, references a consumer of knowledge who cannot produce it.[2] Sherald's work exposes such singular and disparaging constructions and enables viewers to explore a question arising from George Lipsitz's research on white privilege and what it means to inhabit a world where the advantages of whiteness are carved out of other people's disadvantages.[3] What do the identities of Black people look like in the various dimensions of such a world? The disadvantages are institutional, systematic, and cumulative, marks the 'Black Other' in the space of inferiority, allowing the subordination and oppression to be intact two centuries later.

Sherald engages in a practice of reconfiguration to create alternative representations of Black identity. Her paintings maintain salient aspects of traditional portraiture, with powerful posing and implacable gazes. Yet, they evoke reflections on Black interiority and self-actualization. Reconfiguration shapes how Sherald engages Kobena Mercer's concern that Black artists can no longer rely solely on aesthetics of realism or protest to counteract "misrepresentation." They must formulate new ways to contend with emotional realities. [4] Functioning beyond the resistance narrative that characterized Black Power, Amy Sherald's works align with Kevin Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* in the way he investigates expressiveness and interiority through the notion of "quiet." This expansive framework marks a divorce from white Western aesthetics and representations of Black subjectivity in canonical art history

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[2] Beverly Daniel Tatum, "The Complexity of Identity: 'Who Am I?,'" in *African Diaspora and the World* (Atlanta: Spelman College, 2015). 108-109

[3] Lipsitz George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*: How White Peoples Profit from Identity Politics (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2018). xxii

[4] Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 57

In essence, Amy Sherald imagines a private subject that requires a new kind of aesthetic language that quietly engages Black Americans' perceptions, not solely restricted to visual representation in the art historical canon. By manipulating techniques and media, Sherald confronts the historical dependence on the element of color as a tool for racialization. Her refusal to limit her subjects to being defined primarily by racial identity opens up the space to answer the question, what is Blackness without color? Sherald's investment in understanding the sensibilities, personalities, and ideas that shape Black identities is captured in her conceptual approach to portraiture. This thesis draws the connection between the imagined images of Blackness and the "logical fallacy" within racist discourse produced by Western philosophers.

Although the trans-Atlantic slave trade initiated the subjection of the African within an American context, the interplay between subjective discourse and denigrating visuals of Black people perpetuates unequal and unjust conditions of Black life in the present day. Challenging the entrenched practice of denigrating visual art, Lisa Gail Collins insists that slavery was dependent on myths to explain controlling practices and beliefs and was strengthened when linked to visual representations.[5] The disruption of hetero-normative, racist Western philosophical and aesthetic traditions I trace in Sherald's work enables me to highlight how the idea of "quiet" informs her agency by presenting images that depart from stereotypical conventions without needing to denounce them. I demonstrate that, in contrast to resistance narratives in popular images of Blackness in the Black Arts Movement, Sherald reconfigures the Black American identity in the twenty-first century on her own terms.

The chapters analyze three facets of Sherald's portraiture and compares them to other contemporary Black artists. Chapter 1 investigates how the art historical canon within portraiture

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[5] Collins, Lisa Gail. *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 12.

created a one-dimensional public identity. Sherald's monochromatic backgrounds present an opportunity to explore how one's inner life is expressed, and how the idea of "quiet" supplements the articulation of one's humanity. The chapter explains how her work draws on and brings innovations to the historical work of portrait paintings that captures the sitter's subjectivity while pushing beyond limitations created by racial hierarchy. Chapter 2 considers the emphasis placed on color to represent Blackness as a racial construct. It offers a close analysis of how grisaille provides new ways of representing Black people's identities. It shows the power of twenty-first century visual images that helps to address the long tradition of racial misrepresentations. Chapter 3 highlights the use of literary titles to expand visual experiences. It considers the recovery of Black female subjectivity through evoking text. Together, the analysis of monochromatic backgrounds, grisaille skin color, and literary titles explore how Sherald's figures call upon viewers to consider the interiority of Black Americans that is often illegible in public discourse.

As Amy is mindful of all the discourses and multiple realities of the Black American identity, she makes a crucial discussion to implement an alternative narrative that recognizes these realities that are overshadowed by the construct of race.

Literature Review

As Black American artists continue to work in a white-driven art world, the assertion of the historical and contemporary legitimacy of Black representation is necessary. As James Rolling argues in his effort to "erode master narratives," contemporary artists can provide a valuable lens for understanding ways of "navigating the social history of whiteness." This literature review references methodologies and influences of traditional art practices, the growing recognition and

representation of Blackness, and the theme of freedom running through various pieces of literature. As Amy Sherald engages perceptions of Black Americans not solely restricted to visual representation, this thesis looks to both the image of Blackness and its alignment with racist discourse produced by late eighteenth and nineteenth century Western philosophers. I have analyzed and investigated how historical discourse and visual representation are presently being reconfigured through the application of methodologies learned from artists, curators, and art historians.

To fathom how the work of Amy Sherald aims to reconfigure our perception of Black identity, ultimately freeing the Black American from the visual hegemony ignited during slavery and continued in eighteenth-century American art history, there must be a comprehension of how such framework continues to visually subject Blackness in today's world. Relying on the analysis provided by Michelle Wright's *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*, this thesis considers Sherald's work in light of a long tradition of popular images. These images were embedded in philosophical discourses of such eminent eighteenth and nineteenth-century thinkers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Count Arthur de Gobineau. They gave legitimacy to racist discourse that located the 'Black Other' outside of analytic history and justified the subordination of Black people. The 'logical fallacy' of hierarchy sanctioned by these philosophers illustrates the possessive investment in whiteness as it exaggerates differences in appearance to create and sustain social, political, and economic stratification.[6]

In *The Rule of Racialization: Class, Identity, Governance*, Steve Martinot explains Michelle Fine's paradigm of how America's social institutions continually play a part in the

[6] Lipsitz George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*: How White Peoples Profit from Identity Politics (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2018). Viii.

production and reproduction of whiteness. Identifying whiteness brings the idea of being non-white, which requires whiteness to be characterized through color.[7] If whiteness was characterized through color, then the 'Black Other' was defined first and labeled as inferior to give power to whiteness. This process is defined as racialization; a social invention that produces the concept of race, making the entire concept of race fundamentally relational.

In *The Complexity of Identity,* Beverly Daniel Tatum presents the work of world-known psychologist Erick Erickson (1902) and his psychosocial development of "identity vs. role confusion." Introducing the concept of identity, Erickson examined how identity is grounded in historical, social, and political contexts and formed through a simultaneous reflection and observation process. This process occurs on all levels of mental function by "which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them."[8] One's perception is not an original or single assessment, but a synthesis of multiple existences and integration of one's past, present, and future of a cohesive sense of self. This is a complex task that persists throughout a lifetime. With this in mind, Black identity is never constant, yet is constantly subjected to the grievously unequal unjust conditions that remain due to white privilege and white supremacy.

Utilizing Wright's analytical framework to understand subject formations, I draw from Larry Neal and Mike Sell to introduce the Black Arts Movement and blackface as a departure point in understanding contemporary artist's current disruption of the idealized Black subject in canonical art history. In his analysis of blackface minstrel shows, Sell describes them as rebel

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[7] Steve Martinot, *The Rule of Racialization: Class, Identity, Governance*, Labor in Crisis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003). 36.
[8] Beverly Daniel Tatum, "The Complexity of Identity: 'Who Am I?,'" in *African Diaspora and the World* (Atlanta: Spelman College, 2015). 106.

modes of performativity, deeply problematizing the issue of Black legibility, which in turn fed into white anxieties and fantasies about Black people.[9] In *The Art of History: African American women artists engage the past*, Lisa Gail Collins notes that the vigorous debates of representation, aesthetics, ideology, and their relationships, with the belief that increased control of the visual sphere, ultimately aided the struggles for equality and Black liberation.[10] The continued struggle for accurate representation has led to the reconfiguration of Black American identity by Black contemporary artists.

Furthermore, it is essential to comprehend the canonical perspective of American art history to grasp the dynamics and potentialities of its reach in representing identities. Because art is non-binary and is not one-dimensional, similar to Black identity, its complexities often go beyond the visual. In *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Brent Edwards revisited the work of 1920's Black intellectuals to create a collective anthology that breaks past the limitations of expression and proves the depth of Black culture.[11] For instance, by investigating the various articulations of the term 'Black,' Edwards explains how various articulations account for the diversity within the diaspora. The term 'Black' was designed to include 'negros' and all other 'non-white' races and eventually claimed the word Nègre, as it also aligned with the term Black to construct an appeal for solidarity. This tactic of revisitation is also found in Huey Copeland's *Bound to Appear* as he didactically explores the historicity of Blackness through four contemporary artists. Positioning Blackness as a discursive site that is both "bound to violence" and " bound to appear" within Western culture.[12] This

[9] Mike Sell, "BlackFace and the Black Arts Movement," *TDR* 57, no. 2 (2013): 144.
[10] Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).2
[11] Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).46
[12] Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).12

method of revisitation is one I use to analyze the ways in which Black artists investigate Blackness and its forms of representation. [13] Not only are they disrupting canonical frames of art history, but they are providing innovative ways to conceptualize Blackness through visuals.

Denis Murrell's *Posing Modernity*: *The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* investigates the role of the Black female muse and how it is foundational to the development of modern art. Murrell traces the impact of Manets *Olympia*'s reconsideration of the Black model to Henri Matisse, who produced transformative portraits of Black dance as icons of modern beauty. Murrell also investigates the things that we have missed with viewing *Olympia,* such as how race, class, and gender play a role in modernity.[14] Manet and Matisse ultimately had two different artistic visions, but produced work linked by the same iconographic lineage.[15] In the section 'A Reimaged Legacy,' Murrell provides numerous examples of how Manet's *Olympia* has been reimagined and used as a source for contemporary artists to create their own distinctive vision. In conjunction with the philosophical framework provided by Michelle Wright's analysis of the "logical fallacy" of racist discourse which erases the possibility of a female subject, Murrell's analysis continues this research through a historical investigation of Black female subjectivity and art historical objecthood in visuals.

This thesis heavily relies on literature produced by Black scholars and looks to past exhibitions that seek the holistic representation of Black culture and Black identity. Similar to Thelma Golden's 2001 exhibition *Freestyle*, as it identified the indicators and pacesetters in the beginning of the twenty-first century, this thesis presents Amy Sherald as an indicator and

[13] revisitation - when new material revises the understanding of the original work
[14] Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (New Haven : [New York]: Yale University Press ; in association with The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University in the City of New York, 2018).2
[15] Ibid., 85-102.

pacesetter of the current generation of artists.[16] *Freestyle* reopened the debate about 'form vs. function' in contemporary art, maintaining the broader conversation of the misrepresentation of Blackness in art. *Freestyle* facilitated the understanding of artists as individuals and their realities through post-structuralist methods and the boundless avenues and the multiplicity of communicating Blackness. Nevertheless, contemporary artists of all cultural groups are challenged to evolve and to explore their artistic prospects, not setting limitations on what they and their art can accomplish.[17] Aiding the thread of freedom, *Freestyle* provided an opportunity for artists and viewers to have nuanced experiences concerning diverse identities within the Black community.

New innovative artists are now rising and producing art that reflects the particular era and society they experience. Kobena Mercer understands this development. In Travel & See, he argues that work generated in the present reflects a changed disposition toward the past, acknowledging that present and future discoveries respond to things already stated. In *The Image of The Black in Western Art: The Twentieth Century, Part 2: The Rise of Black Artists*, Mercer explains that at the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, the transformations of representations of Black people in Western Art were due to social, cultural, and political factors.[18] The analysis provided by Mercer within *The Image of The Black in Western Art* provides documentation of the changes in cultural differences and how participants within each era reflect the current realities through art. Western art motivated artists to understand the social context in which shaped their individual directions of examining

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[16] Thelma Golden, introduction to *Freestyle: The Studio Museum in Harlem*, ed. Christina Y. Kim and Franklin Sirmans (New York, NY: The Museum, 2001).12

[17] Cathy Byrd, "Is There A 'Post-Black' Art? Investigating The Legacy Of The 'Freestyle' Show," *Art Papers* 26, no. 6 (2002): 35–39.

[18] Kobena Mercer, "New Practices, New Identities: Hybridity and Globalization," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art: The Twentieth Century, Part 2: The Rise of Black Artists*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, (Cambridge, Mass. : London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press; 2010), 225.

representation. Identifying the struggle of representation as due to the lack of documentation of Black people, bell hooks *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* elaborates on ongoing dialogues about art, visual politics, aesthetics, and how they have been used against Blacks to disempower and to write Blackness out of history.

While contemporary thinkers continue to penetrate the complexity of racial identity and racialization as it is used to create and distort identity, artists and art historians draw on the vernacular and canonical art history used to represent the Black Body. Richard Powell's *Cutting a figure: fashioning Black portraiture* emphasizes the ideological nature of subject-specific art and the centrality of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity to understand portraiture.[19] Through fashion and Black portraiture, artists like Amy Sherald depart from conventional standards; she chooses to highlight the prohibited Black subject. Pairing *Cutting Figure* with Kevin Quashie's, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture,* I analyze how Amy Sherald challenges the radical Black aesthetic of the 1960s and moves beyond the idea of freedom being a public struggle. I frame her approach in terms of Quashie's argument of quiet which "aims to give up resistance as a framework in search of what is lost in its all-encompassing reach."[20] Engaging Quashie's stance, Sherald engages acknowledges the need to discover freedom within the Black identity and the quietness of an expressiveness that goes against the resistive framework for understanding Black identity and Black culture.

This literature has provided structure for my research and initiated an inquiry into the patterns and themes within individual artistic practices and artistic movements. Not all art changes with the times, which is something to consider when analyzing how art reflects society.

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[19] Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).xvi
[20] Kevin Everod Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2012).5

As my research evolves, my literature expands to works that not only investigate the visuals created by Black artists, but discuss concepts and methods of resistance. Some of thesi concepts includes but are not limited to the public vs. private identity, and social milieus that inform perceptions of Blackness, ultimately indicating how the absence of representation frame the function of power or lack thereof.

Contemporary Art

With the increase in popularity of exhibitions focusing on the representation of Black identity, Black contemporary artists are reaching new heights as they re-interpret and re-invent the Black figure within the American art history narrative. As they expand into new and vast realms, the growth in experience, scholarship, international recognition, and commercial value climactically informs and define contemporary art today. Black artists and scholars are contributing to these areas of growth and this era of reconfiguring Blackness. From Kerry James Marshall's "Past Times," which sold for 21.1 million dollars[21], to Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald's historical portraits of the Obamas, and Denise Murrell's exhibition *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today,* which explores the presence of iconographic art history in global contemporary art — these developments of Black identity are expanding our understanding of the complexities of the Black presence in American art.

Social and cultural institutions like museums have fostered racialization through misrepresentations of the Black body in American history. Still, it is pertinent to utilize these same institutions to reconfigure the one-dimensional presentation of Blackness. With this in mind, it is essential to note that Amy Sherald's work is collected by museums and cultural institutions, climactically contributing to the correction of a white-dominant historical art

[21] Barbara Graustark, "Sean Combs Is Buyer Of $21.1 Million Painting," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2018, New York edition, sec. C.

narrative in institutional spaces. Sherald is very adamant about fulfilling historical gaps and offering a corrective narrative. She wants her work to be accessible to the everyday viewer, allowing the public can recognize and experience the power of the Black American presence.[22] [23] National Portrait Gallery curator Dorothy Moss describes how Sherald's portrait of the first lady Michelle Obama aligns with the museum's mission of advancing the art of portraiture simultaneously critiquing history in order to be more inclusive and relevant for future generations. (See figure 0.1) [24] What sets Michelle Obama's portrait apart from Sherald's other works is that it was commissioned. The first family made a deliberate decision to be discursive through the visual tradition of portraiture, by creating an opportunity to publicly consider those who are habitually left out or misrepresented in the very institutions we expect to record and preserve our history.

Along with many artists, Sherald works to establish autonomous representations of Black people within institutions that preserve culture. This undertaking signals the range of interruptions necessary to facilitate new modes of interpreting Blackness. This level of interruption within social institutions stipulates an openness of representation rather than a closed image with a one-dimensional and surface-level interpretation. Nevertheless, it is not solely the artist's job to open up the space for Black identity; those who construct the space for art presentation are also responsible. Scholar Erica Moiah James asserts that today's curatorial work should emphasize reflexive engagement, and conceiving environments that encourage audiences to freely imagine the possibilities rendered by the Black body and Blackness itself.[25]

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[22] Amy Sherald, Externship Interview, interview by Cornelia Stokes, audio, July 2, 2020.
[23] Tiffany Yates, "How Amy Sherald's Revelatory Portraits Challenge Expectations," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 2019, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/new-work-amy-sherald-focuses-ordinary-people-180973494/.
[24] Taína Caragol, Dorothy Moss, Richard J. Powell, and Kim Sajet. *The Obama Portraits* (Washington, DC : Princeton: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution ; in association with Princeton University Press, 2020). 26.
[25] Erica Moiah James, "What Will Blackness Be?," *Callaloo* 38, no. 3 (2015): 589–93.

Figure 0.1. *Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama*, 2018

Amy Sherald's Biography

A native of Columbus, Georgia, Amy Sherald was exposed early to the performative aspect of race within southern culture. In a place where everybody knows who you are, Sherald was expected to mind her manners, be well dressed, and speak in a manner befitting her family's social status. Although art was something done on Sundays, Arturo Lindsay declares that Sherald's work "is grounded in a self-reflective view of her life experiences as a young, black, Southern woman through the lenses of a post-modern intellectual."[26]

In 1997, Sherald received a Bachelor's of the Arts in Painting from Clark Atlanta University, where she was mentored by Dr. Arturo Lindsay, the head of the art department at Spelman College. During her time in Atlanta, Sherald began to form her identity as an artist and a critical thinker. Committing to her practice, Sherald moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where she received her MFA in painting from Maryland Institute College of Art in 2004. Sherald describes her practice during this time as always creating work one would find in an Octavia Butler book. Collecting knowledge and experiences at every opportunity, Sherald spent a year studying with Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum, who taught her the classical technique of beginning a portrait with the figure in grisaille – or grayscale.[27] The world now knows Sherald as the first woman and first African-American to

Figure 0.2. Amy Sherald pictured with *Breonna Taylor,* 2020

[26] Arturo Lindsay, "The Magical Real-Ism of Amy Sherald" (UNC: The Sonja Hayes Stone Center for Black Culture and History, 2011)

[27] Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, "Amy Sherald's Newest Portraits on View at the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art" (Spelman College, 2018), https://museum.spelman.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SCMFA_AmySherald_PressRelease12-18-2018.pdf.

receive first prize in the National Portrait Gallery's triennial Outwin Boochever Portrait 2016 Competition, and the artist selected to paint the former first lady, Michelle Obama.

Research Methodologies

I recognize that this thesis, as well as the work I am analyzing, comes to fruition only because of the foundation laid by scholars, curators, artists, and art historians who have dedicated their lives to understanding and presenting the intricacies of Black identity in the midst of white hegemonic racist structures. In the words of George Lipsitz, "everyone enters a dialogue already in progress." [28] Focusing on the techniques used by Sherald, this thesis investigates how within Black art and American history, the thread of freedom establishes a foundation for reconfiguration. It is my hope that this research furthers the conversation of Black American representation and ignites in-depth research on the artist Amy Sherald.

With this in mind, I began my research with a survey of literature, a review of past interviews, and historical research to support the idea of reconfiguration due to visual misrepresentations of Black Americans. Once I completed this foundational research, which started to provide insight into the reasons Amy Sherald employs grisaille, ultimately reconfiguring the Black subject, I combined visual and content analysis to discern how specific elements such as line, shape, color, and value, are applied to single emotions and identities of Black lives that are not traditionally recognized or

Figure 0.3. Amy and Cornelia in New Jersey Studio, 2020

[28] Lipsitz George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*: How White Peoples Profit from Identity Politics (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2018). Xxii.

represented in the portraiture genre. After an analysis of her portfolio, I selected works that vividly demonstrated how Sherald's monochromatic backgrounds, literary titles, and grisaille intentionally create a space for the private identity to actualize. As I started to conceptualize the reach in which Sherald's work had as it pertained to illustrating an interior identity, I held multiple interviews and casual conversations with Sherald to guide the idea of reconfiguring the Black American identity. In December of 2020 I was able to visit Sherald in her New Jersey studio, granting me an invaluable experience to deeply explore the specifics of her artistic methodology. Mindful of her completed works, I was captivated by progress of the pieces that would make up her Los Angeles solo exhibition in April of 2021, *The Great American Fact*, which I also had the opportunity to attend. Across all of these immersive encounters I asked specific questions inquiring about the reasons of her visual investigation of American Blackness and grisaille. Describing a vital piece of literature Sherald calls Kevin Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* her "bible," stating that it "expanded my own internal view of what I was doing. I knew what I was doing but I didn't have the language for it" and that the 'idea of public identity and a private identity, I think it was really enlightening for me. I understood what it was, but his language in that way really makes it clear.'[29] Ever since my

Figure 0.4. Amy and Cornelia at 'The Great American Fact', 2021

[29] Amy Sherald, Externship Interview, interview by Cornelia Stokes, audio, July 2, 2020.

first conversation with Amy, I have used Quashie's text to guide my investigation of her practice. Quashie's analysis of resistance as a dominant expectation of Black culture, Du Bois' double consciousness, Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*, and a plethora of other concepts, all provided the lens to interpret Sherald's work.

Frameworks

Basing my research in the frameworks of Pan Africanism, quiet, and resistance, I have deconstructed the way Black Americans are defined in a resistive and an oppressive framework. Intending to be inclusive to all African Diasporic identities that occupy the United States, I have chosen to refer to people of African descent who live in America as Black Americans and not African Americans because not all people of African descent identify as African. Nonetheless, I also want to avoid continuing the stigmas attributed to the identity of 'African American' set forth by hegemonic white capitalist social systems. In addition, in the practice of inclusivity, using the pronoun "we" and the possessive "our," I propose to dismantle the thought of remoteness of Black identities, emphasizing the legacy of the collective struggle for authentic representation by Black people.

The Black Arts Movement

The excitement and recognition shown in 2021 to Black artists and the ways in which they investigate Black identity, humanity, and equality, is made possible by the cultural nationalism ignited in the Black Arts Movement. In the 1960s and 70s, Black Americans were anxious to reject the current and dominant culture of white America and fearlessly sought autonomy to obtain a place for themselves to be recognized socially, economically, and politically. Promoting the concepts of Pan Africanism and Black Nationalism through

empowering visuals, the slogan “Black Power” signified the necessity of racial consciousness and solidarity amongst all Black people. As Black nationalism invoked these visions of a “new world” of Black identities, the core principles of the 1960s Black Arts Movement (BAM) ultimately linked Black Power, Black Arts, and nationhood.[30]

Figure 0. 5. Wadsworth A. Jarrell, *Revolutionary (Angela Davis),* 1971

The importance of the 1960s comes from the multifaceted ways in which Black Americans addressed the blatant disregard for Black life. From bus boycotts, the murder of Fred Hampton, the Black Power fist, and the visuals committed to the articulation of social justice, the 1960s were a definitive time for Black America. As a cultural wing in the struggle of Black nationhood, Larry Neal, the "spiritual leader" of the BAM, describes how the movement envisioned an art that spoke directly to the needs and aspirations of Black Americans. A part of the Chicago artists’ collective AfriCOBRA, Wadsworth Jarrell painted the 1971 portrait *Revolutionary (Angela Davis)*, vibrantly celebrating the radical activist and intellectual Angela Y. Davis. The conditions created by the Black Power movement and the assassinations of Malcolm X and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave AfriCOBRA an urgent sense of purpose to develop images that embodied the ‘expressive awesomeness that one experiences in African Art and life in the

[30] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2014. 7.

USA.[31] Emphasizing positive and uplifting images of and for Black people, Jarrell captures Davis' intensity and power of her activism during tumultuous times.

Uniquely the demand for representation varied within the Black community, allowing the struggles of balancing freedom of expression with the accountability to the BAM fueled the debate of form versus function. The struggle to balance is seen in Amiri Baraka's play *Great Goodness of Life*, subtitled *A Coon Show*. The main character is accused of shielding a wanted criminal, and in order to be absolved of his crime, he has to kill the murder suspect, which is symbolically both himself and his son. The play demonstrates how Blacks will go to the extreme to deny or sell their Blackness in order to assimilate into white Western culture, or the Black bourgeoisie, simultaneously cleansing their conscience of any anti-black behavior, "my soul is white as snow."[3233] In *Great Goodness of Life,* African American subjectivities become a misrecognized blackface performance as the main character enters into the absurd, immoral, and theatrical realms of racist "justice," failing to understand the morality of choosing to combat systemic evil.[34] The lesson to be learned is that African Americans kill their 'Black spirit' when they are not sincerely involved in discovering and nurturing their Blackness.[35] With Baraka being a Black Nationalist, he was criticized for his plays frequently concluding in violence directed against the Black psyche, perpetuating the violence and racism he supposedly criticizes.

Considering Baraka's, *A Coon Show*, the misrecognition of Blackness in blackface is why Larry Neal called for people in the Black Arts Movement to prioritize the destruction of the regime of racist commodification. At first, in the 1960s, blackface had diverse functions and was

[31] Mark Godfrey et al., eds., *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc, 2017). 88.
[32] Mike Sell, "BlackFace and the Black Arts Movement," *TDR* 57, no. 2 (2013): 150
[33] Nilgun Anadolu Okur, "Drama as Social Criticism: Assessing Baraka's Great Goodness of Life," *Journal of Black Studies* 19, no. 4 (1989): 411–21.
[34] Sell, 151.
[35] Okur, 417.

deployed by the BAM to combat racial stereotypes, increase the African American community's visibility, and demanded recognition from white power on its own terms.[36] However, blackface was used by whites and Black Americans, which made blackface racism a condition of (mis)recognition. Despite its various uses, without a doubt, blackface was shaped by the hegemony of whiteness and provided the social reproduction of racism. Later the BAM found that blackface supplemented far more than stereotypes to be destroyed and more than evidence of irremediable racism of U.S. culture, economy, and politics. The BAM discovered that blackface minstrels were modes of performance that deeply problematized Black legibility and fed into white anxieties and fantasies about Black people.[37]

In the efforts of Black nationalism, the BAM funded local and international cultural institutions like the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem, which allowed liberatory creativity in the situational articulations of Blackness. BAM artists used various performativity to raise consciousness and celebrate the advancements and accomplishments of American Africans. Performance within the African American community enabled activists and artists to counteract and disable the commodification of Black bodies. *In Blackface and the Black Arts Movement*, Mike Sell explains that within the BAM, questions of performativity inevitably returned to the question of recognition, that "the politics of form and context that emerge any time an African American body is represented as Black in order to be looked at, admired, sympathized with, or desired."[38] For this reason, the BAM birthed the term "black aesthetic." The Black aesthetic was characterized as anything that uplifted, beauty, art, literature, poetry, music, and theater centralized around Black life and culture.

[36] Sell, 156.
[37] Ibid, 144.
[38] Ibid, 148-150.

> "… the Black artist, in creating his own aesthetic, must be accountable for it only to the Black people…. the motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors'?" [39]

The development of the 'black aesthetic' comes from writers re-evaluating Western aesthetics and the traditional role and the social function of art. Writers and revolutionaries, like Larry Neal, understood that Western aesthetics had run its course, as it was no longer able to characterize the melting pot of American identities, making it impossible to construct anything within its decaying structure.[40] Comparable to the development of the 'black aesthetic' and its re-evaluation of Western aesthetics, contemporary artists like Renee Green, Lorna Simpson, Glenn Ligon, Titus Kaphar, Mickalene Thomas, Kerry James Marshall, and Amy Sherald are reconfiguring the 'black aesthetic.' In the twenty-first century artists are re-evaluating the traditional roles and social functions of art, conceiving a new framework to allow both freedom of expression and artistic development. The work produced by artists like Amy Sherald visually unearths our past tragedies, probes our current identities, and leaves our sense of consciousness to fluctuate.

In this thesis, it is crucial to understand that Black identity was initially created in comparison to whiteness and was fostered by visual "evidence" to discourage autonomy of the "Black Other." Now, Sherald's investment in the ideas of Blackness through a social public lens brings attention to a practice intended to dehumanize Black people.[41] Nonetheless, Sherald's

[39] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement" 12, no. 4 (1968): 28–39.
[40] Ibid., 28.
[41] Quashie, 4.

portraits broaden the resistive framework expected of Black culture and create autonomous figures that strive to regain a sense of power and agency.

Chapter 1 – Monochromatic Backgrounds & Fashion

Karen Dalton emphasizes that "a portrait is the visual definitions of the complexities of a unique individual, by nature, it explores the skin color and facial features in search of the inner characteristics that define a person."[42] Amy Sherald continues this tradition as her portraits reflect this quest to portray inner qualities in contrast to derogatory images of Black Americans that persist in the twenty-first century.[43] She reconfigures Black portraiture by fashioning figures' identities through corporeal style and sartorial self-expression set against monochromatic backgrounds. This practice defines and highlights Black identity in experimental spaces that foster new forms of engagement and expression.

The use of fashion and monochromatic backgrounds engages two critical factors comprising "social narratives" that became what James Rolling calls " 'socially visible' as a normative identity" for Black people. Historically, clothing and contexts have been used as tools to define the status, worth, and identities of Black people. Nineteenth-century advertisements like "Woodville cottons for negro clothing" and "Plantation Negro Clothing" signaled the clothing used to ensure Black people were readily identifiable as slaves. It was "an important and immediately visible mark of social status." Sherald has shared her own stories of growing up learning to dress and speak in ways that would signal her family's status as respectable. She has

[42] Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw and Emily K. Shubert, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*, (Andover, Mass. : Seattle: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy ; In association with University of Washington Press, 2006).11.
[43] Susanna W. Gold, "Recovering Identity: Nineteenth-Century African American Portraiture," ed. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *American Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2006): 1167–89.

expressed an appreciation for the performative nature of identity and is mindful of it in choosing clothes for her.[44]

Monochromatic backgrounds force the viewers to focus on the figures. In this way, the portraits prevent them from relying on scenery to interpret what they see. Sherald's work thus silences the noise of external social factors commonly used to define who Black people are and what it means to be Black. She goes against the grain of many photographers and painters alike who use the background to present additional layers of meaning, transforming the mood and meaning of the final image, or enhancing the portrait's subject. For Sherald, the background establishes a resting place to explore the interiority of the viewed and the viewer.

This chapter identifies and studies how and why the notion of "quiet" enables one's inner life to be expressed in articulating one's humanity and then supplemented by the stillness of the solid backdrop. In her captivating compositions, Sherald predominantly highlights a single figure, quietly announcing the importance of both the public and private identity of one Black American. Employing portraiture to convey an opportunity for self-actualization, Sherald collapses art history's hierarchical canon and instead uses a traditional medium to create an alternative presentation of Black identity. With her striking yet slightly familiar portraits, Sherald inherits and continues a legacy of disrupting misrepresentations of the Black body. Knowing the extensive history of portraiture, she tackles the genre with her intensive stylish, and autonomous Black American figures. By featuring stand-alone figures, the monochromatic backgrounds intensify the innovation of representing Blackness with unnatural skin tones, liberating the sitter from fixed social contexts.[45]

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[44] Arturo Lindsay, "The Magical Real-Ism of Amy Sherald" (UNC: The Sonja Hayes Stone Center for Black Culture and History, 2011). 3-6

[45] Amy Sherald, Externship Interview, interview by Cornelia Stokes, audio, July 2, 2020.

From the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, enslaved Africans virtually had no agency in how they were visually portrayed and were most often shown as peripheral to the main subject, subordinate to a dominant white figure.[46] Controlled by the dominant white culture, in portraiture, the Black body was visually reduced in several ways to signify the subordinate and servile status of the figure. This type of subordination included, but was not limited to the lack of detail and concealment of half of the subject body, the tilt of the figure's head to create an adoring gaze, and the positioning of the Black body all to enhance the rarified white bodies. The oppression did not end at anatomical positioning, but continues through style and dress. The Black subject was ultimately an accessory used as a symbol of status for the colonizing elite.[47]

Building upon the legacy of figurative painting as the nineteenth-century roots of Black portraiture vividly illustrate a social and political function, Sherald finds a way to balance an interior presence with a public one.[48] Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw analyzes these social and political functions in the exhibition *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*. The 2006 exhibition showcased the humanity and personalities of almost 100 African American people.[49] *Portraits of a People* depicted Black figures as humans with distinctive identities

Figure 1.1. Justus Englehard Kühn, *Henry Darnall III,* 1710

[46] Shaw and Shubert, 16.
[47] Ibid, 16-20
[48] Externship Interview, 2020.
[49] Shaw and Shubert, 11.

and not just anatomical beings/figures used to define white existence. Shaw furthered the critiques of how canonical art histories present Black figures as markers of qualities attributed to race, obliterating and rendering invisible individual identities. For instance, the portrait of Henry Darnall III by Justus Engelhard Kühn is the epitome of colonial portraiture. Not only is the Black subject partially concealed and presenting an adoring gaze, but he also wears a silver collar which marks the Black figure as "an enslaved person and reduces him to the status of an object within the portrait."[50] This thesis introduces the unique ways Sherald operates in a long tradition of freeing Black subjects from lenses of white oppression and hegemonic social structures that degrade Black identity.

Capturing Realities: Photo Portraits

In portraiture, the application of photography provided people with the ability to take control of their own image and was heavily relied upon to capture Black American realities. Photography has produced decades of portraits, from the first experiments of early photographic techniques in the 1820s to the 1960s polaroid and now the twenty-first-century high-level digital cameras. In the nineteenth century, seeking accurate visual representation was the only way to disprove negative portrayals of Black people. No matter the class, there was a struggle with representation as the issue was linked with the lack of documentation.[51] For decades, Black Americans have relentlessly tried to insinuate the Black identity accurately into history. Through visible and tangible efforts, through the appropriation of historic scenes like Robert Colescott's *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware*, 1975, or through athletic activism like that of Tommie Smith and John Carlos' 1968 Olympics demonstration of "Black Power," Black people have publicly expressed the desire to be included in the American narrative. I mention

[50] Ibid, 17
[51] bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995). 59.

these two examples to exhibit the range of efforts to incorporate and validate the Black body in American history. They illustrate Black Americans' awareness of oppressive institutions, the variation in methods, and the resilience in their quest for autonomy.

Since the camera was the central instrument by which Blacks could disprove representations of them created by whites, portraits of leaders like Sojourner Truth and Fredrick Douglass revealed Black anticipation of moving beyond the cultural logics of slavery.[52] The fight to end slavery and racism with the ratification of the Thirteenth amendment placed Douglass in a position to *publicly* counter racist narratives, ensuring an accurate portrayal of Black Americans at a pivotal time in American history. Aiming to displace whites' preconceived notions of Blacks, Douglass refused to be portrayed as a happy smiling slave, which played into the racist caricatures of the era. His stern look was intentional as his gaze confronted viewers and the perception of Black people. (See Figure 1.2) The camera offered Frederick Douglas and other Blacks a way to disempower white culture by documenting a reality that could be shared for years to come.

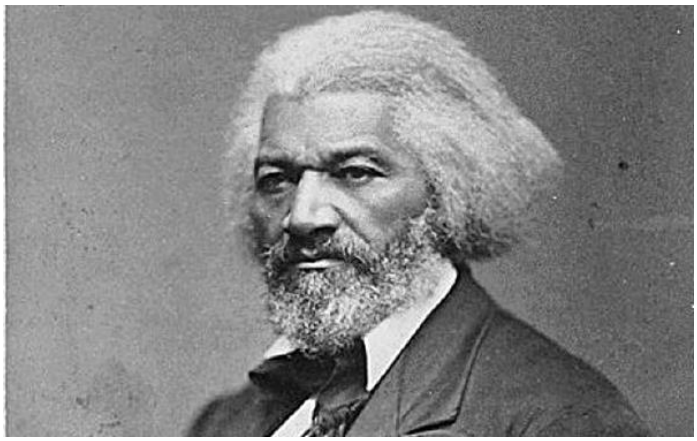

Figure1.2. Frederick Douglas

Despite the momentous strides in recording realistic depictions of race into Western history, there are intrinsic hegemonic structures that prevented progress in representing the Black American. The continuing struggle to break the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being, blocks the capacity to see ourselves [Black Americans] oppositionally and imagine, describe, and

[52] Ibid., 59.

invent ourselves in authentic and liberatory ways. Douglass knew that "until African Americans began to represent themselves, they would not find artists capable or interested in portraying them with the sensitivity that the serious representation of individual required."[53] Douglass' argument points to a concern about emotion that Kobena Mercer references in explaining the need for new forms of addressing misrepresentations of Blackness. Sherald's portraiture style enables viewers to reexamine the visual and psychological dynamics of representation.[54]

Quietly Seeking

As art historian Anna Arabindan-Kesson examines self-actualization in contemporary portraiture, she states that artists are propelling us towards new discussions that explore the "relationship between the surface and depth and interior and exterior that underpin the genre of portraiture." [55] Sherald's new visual aesthetic explores this relationship as her extremely detailed grisaille figures are clothed in stylish garments and placed against a timeless monochromatic background. Shifting away from determining Blackness only through a public lens of oppression, Sherald's new visual aesthetic is not disregarding the traditional forms of portraiture which sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot describes as a method of inquiry and documentation; however, it permits the subjects to "breathe in a bigger space."[56] Sherald's portraits still "capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social cultural context" but alter the public lens to recognize nuances within Black identity and experiences.[57]

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[53] Shaw and Shubert, 13.
[54]Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 57
[55] Anna Arabindan-Kesson, "Portraits in Black: Styling, Space, and Self in the Work of Barkley L Hendricks and Elizabeth Colomba," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2016, no. 38–39 (November 2016): 70–79, https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-3641700.73
[56] Externship Interview, 2020.
[57] Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). 3

The aspects of the portraiture genre are evident in the intensity of Sherald's focus on the figure and extend through its ability to symbolize the essence of an individual in relation to society. The stability offered in the solid backdrop enables viewers to engage in the mode of "quiet" to appreciate a different kind of expressiveness that evades the stereotypical performative aspects of Black culture. In Kevin Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black culture,* the idea of "quiet" is described as a quality or a sensibility of being and represents the broad scope of one's interior.[58] In other words, "quiet" can express anything that is not recognized in the public realm. Sherald's portraits are "quiet" because the figures are not conforming to an established public visual framework. They quietly seek characterization elsewhere, but are not necessarily legible in the imagined outer world.

Here, in ***Mama has made the bread (How things are measured)***, 2018, an exterior of the figure illuminate's concepts that are socially acknowledged including feminism, the mythical power and strength of Black woman, and socio-economic status, while the interior remains quiet and indefinite. Feminism is announced through the choice of garment, the polka-dotted dress, but is made powerful through the sitters accessories and anatomical movement. With an assertive facial

Figure 1.3. *Mama has made the bread. (How things are measured.)*, 2018

[58] Kevin Everod Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2012).21

expression, strength is found in the firmness of the sitter's hand on her hip. Walking a thin line between exerting a passive or an aggressive facial expression, the sitter's quiet assertiveness is resistant to the stereotypical connotations of the 'Angry Black woman.' ***Mama has made the bread*** visually communicates how Black women deal with daily oppressive situations, leading them to develop strategies of resistance in a world that systematically denies them. Any intense expression from Black women typically gets pathologized as the angry Black woman, then demonized and marginalized by Western patriarchal ideology.[59] For Black women to step out of those stereotypes, it threatens the complacency of those who view gender and Blackness only in terms of aggressive resistance.

Accompanying her quiet assertiveness, the sitter's entire outfit engages the significance of appearance and its place in historical Black public discourse. An example from the nineteenth century illustrates the point. In 1837, Augustine, a pseudonymous reformer writes to a nineteenth-century African American newspaper detailing their perspective and the significance of dress for Black people. In the excerpt, the writer explains how a person's rank and treatment is determined by their dress by insisting, "colored females should be extremely attentive to cleanliness and neatness of dress," and that every female who desires polite treatment should be cautious of her personal appearance regardless of the quality of the clothing.[60] This caution is seen in ***Mama has made the bread*** as she pairs this expensive shawl with an unexciting/underwhelming dress and tops it off with a pair of dangling gold earrings. It is almost as if the sitter is communicating a desire to be treated with a value that might not be granted without the shawl and earrings. Augustine's perspective encourages Black people to use clothing

[59] Sherrie Sims Allen, "Transforming Rage: Revisioning the Myth of the Angry Black Woman," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., Ann Arbor, Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2015), ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (1778844116), https://libezproxy.syr.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/transforming-rage-revisioning-myth-angry-black/docview/1778844116/se-2?accountid=14214.Pp 18.
[60] Augustine, "On Dress," *Colored American*, August 12, 1837.

to assert status. It reflects an awareness of the social significance of dress and its capacity to affect treatment. Despite her best attempt to suggest an idea or a particular rank in society through her accessories, ***Mama has made the bread*** yields a familiar presence, an everydayness dealing with everyday struggles.

Even with all the exterior adornments, the solid background paired with the grisaille skin signals a quiet interiority that commonly goes unnoticed in the genre of portraiture. If ***Mama has made the bread*** was presented in shades of brown with a scenic background, viewers would depend on the exterior details of the composition to define the sitter. Whereas a still quiet portrait distinguishes an individuality of the figures the requires viewers to consider more than what is visually depicted. Quashie elaborates that the interior is never fully represented and is "neither resistant to nor overdetermined by the vagaries of the outer world" and is ultimately escaping definitive characterization.[61] Sherald assembles these portraits that are so infinite and undefined that the ability to articulate what occurs in the interior falls short of what is being expressed, which makes the experiences with these portraits monumental in how we rethink the nature of Black expressiveness.[62] The pink background defines the quietness of the figure, which is not always publicly legible.

Sherald's portraits are experimental spaces open to conceiving other ways of being. In this way, they reflect the fact that, for centuries Black women have created spaces to insert public identities. In the nineteenth century, free Black women created counternarratives through a tailored public appearance that directly countered slavery's visual culture. Just as the silver collar marked the Black figure as an enslaved person, and reduced him to the status of an object, dressing the free body was deemed a political act, as clothing assisted in signaling free Black

[61] Quashie, 103.
[62] Ibid., 22.

women's distance from "the hand-me-downs of slavery."[63] This social performance emphasized how the free person could exercise autonomy in ways denied to enslaved Africans/Americans and clothing's capacity to communicate status to the broader society. Throughout Sherald's practice, social performance is investigated as she wraps her sitters in clothing that spans outward displays of socio-economic, political status, and private concepts of identity/self-hood/autonomy.

Fashioning Freedom

Although fashion is a consistent component of Black culture, its function differs with context. The fashionable agency observed in the portraits of Fredrick Douglas and ***Mama has made the bread***, is what sets them apart from nineteenth-century images depicting the Black subject subordinate to whiteness. This indicated a person's status in society, as fashion distinguished free Blacks from enslaved Africans and generalized servants. Fashion's capacity to encompass and reveal the reality of maintaining an American presence while seeking agency for one's Blackness alludes to W. E. B Du Bois' concept of double consciousness. In the duality of Black existence, "double consciousness imagines that black subjectivity is without escape from the publicness of racialization – that blackness is always faithful to or in resistance of the projection of white culture."[64] With this in mind, as a social performance resistive of white culture, fashion enabled self-concepts that were in conflict with the visual logics of slavery and slavery's visual culture yet functioned differently for free Black women and Black men. While Black women were evading images like the Jezebel and the mammy, Black men resisted being categorized as "criminal, indolent, dull-witted sexual predators."[65] Newly freed Black women

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[63] Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*, America and the Long 19th Century (New York: New York University Press, 2015).121.
[64] Quashie, 126.
[65] Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).8.

often had to cultivate new self-perceptions to coincide with experiences of freedom, in order to demonstrate mainstream concepts of womanhood, and later grew to indicate their respectability through dress.[66] Free Black men typically had to enunciate their power through dress, giving way to identities like the Black Dandy.

Figure 1.4. James Van Der Zee, *Marcus Garvey with George O. Marke and Prince Kojo Tovalou-Houénou*, 1924

Aiding attempts to escape stereotypes, Black style functioned as "a process of identity formation grounded in irony, satire, wit and self-consciousness."[67] To distinguish oneself from others, the Black Dandy used fashion to establish his ability to exist free from European counterparts. Emancipated from conventional social and historical circumstances and "a byproduct of rural-to-urban migration, fueled by industrial expansion," Black dandyism lifted many Black men out of the depths of invisibility.[68]

As a form of agency, Black dandyism indicated the transformative feature of fashion as the Black dandy's audacious appearance transformed how the public acknowledged the Black

[66] Cobb, 111- 120.
[67] Monica L Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), http://qut.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=1170642.15 .
[68] Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).75.

male, disrupting American societies and upsetting the white majority's cultural superiority.[69] Black men appeared before audiences fashionably challenging degrading stereotypes mainstreamed by Black face minstrel shows, which invoked a decided self-agency has allowed Black dandyism to grow in the public realm from Toussaint L'Ouverture and Fredrick Douglas to Marcus Garvey and Alain Locke, making the physical appearance of a social or political leader, specifically a Black man, a timeless facet of Black culture. "The dandy was ideologically as well as socially anachronistic, a human work of art dressing and acting the part of a latter-day aristocrat, a willful outcast from the conventional life of an average citizen in an emerging European state."[70]

Concentrating on the emergence of the Black Dandy and its construction and deconstruction of masculine identity, Monica L. Miller elaborates on how the Black Dandy uses clothing to transform and create new images and identities. Sherald's 2018 portrait ***When I let go of What I am, I become what I might be*** echoes Black dandyism's performative mode of being as it highlights "the necessity of challenging limited categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, and proposes new ones that are potentially

Figure 1.5. *When I let go of What I am, I become what I might be (Self-Imagined Atlas)*, 2018

[69] Powell, 69.
[70] Powell, 69.

progressive."[71] Explored in Tatum's "The Complexity of Identity," ***When I let go of What I am, I become what I might be*** vividly communicates the need to balance both internal and external elements that can either imped or enhance our self-perceptions. Derived from Lao Tzu's inspirational quote, "If I let go of who I am I become who I might be," through style and strict posture, Sherald's portrait escapes stereotypes, fixity and essentialization.[72] The sitter is situated within Black Dandyism through style, the straighten long but tucked hair, and the flower on the left side of a loose suit, all challenges heteronormative constructs. Specifically, ***When I let go of What I am, I become what I might be***'s fuchsia background exudes a feminine tone that directly conflicts with what society deems masculine. This, in turn, leads to question the sitter's sexuality. Regardless of the previous analysis, the audience is drawn in first by the visual challenge to masculine stereotypes and secondly by the self-authorizing title—deliberately letting you know who he is, rather than who you want him to be.[73]

Figure 1.6. Barkley L. Hendricks, *New Orleans Niggah,* 1973

At a time when deviation from masculine heteronormative codes of twentieth-century was subversive, Barkley Hendricks invested in the psychological

[71]Miller, 11.
[72]Ibid., 15.
[73]Shantrelle P. Lewis, *Dandy Lion: The Black Dandy and Street Style* (New York, NY: Aperture Foundation, 2017).

nuanced qualities of the Black male. Hendricks' artistic practice explored race, gender, sexuality, by elevating his subjects into an empowered iconic status and emphasizing their unique style, attitude, and individuality. Born in 1945 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Hendricks thrived during the Black Arts Movement as his work was color empowering, captivating, and sometimes confrontational. Unique for its combination of American realism and post-modernism, Hendricks' portraits often depicted the under-represented Black voices of the 1960s and 1970s.

As the Black Power Movement gained momentum, Hendricks' life-size portraits of friends, relatives, and strangers encountered on the street communicated a new assertiveness and pride among Black Americans. As a part of the series depicting sitter and friend George Jules Taylor, ***New Orleans Niggah***, the third portrait within the series presents both confidence and restraint in his existence, varying degrees of intimacy. In the third section of *Cutting Figure*, Richard Powell deeply analyzes the fashionable, deviant, and Black corporeal style that is indicative of Barkley Hendricks. Powell describes ***New Orleans Niggah*** "as an audacious, over-the-top portrayal of Taylor in a black leather jacket, yellow and red tank top, black and gray pinstripe trousers, and a floppy black fedora" channeling a self-conscious sportiness from the high fashion pose to the slight averted but dead-on gaze.[74] Powell pairs this analysis with

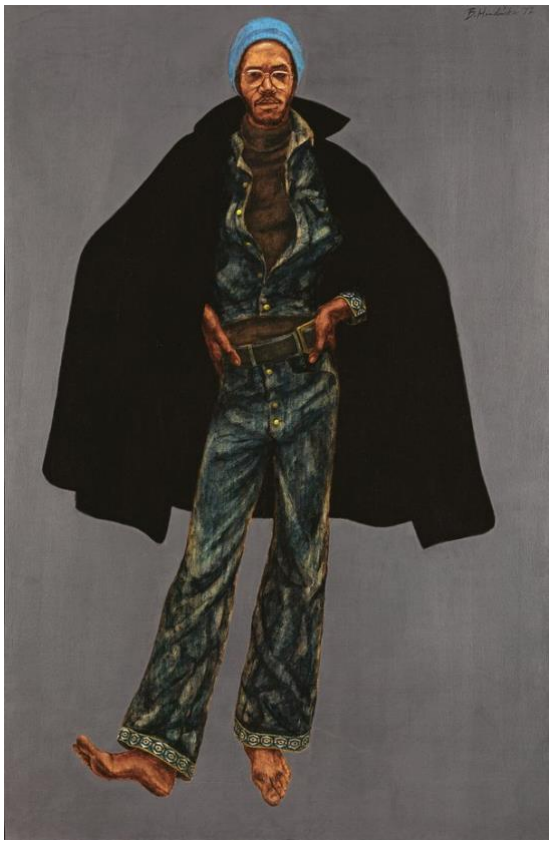

Figure1.7. Barkley L. Hendricks, *George Jules Taylor* 1972

[74] Powell, 146.

Hendricks' 1972 portrait, ***George Jules Taylor,*** (see figure 1.7) as it achieves an "unrealized enactment with black portraiture: the painting of a gay man as a forceful presence, and not dominated by stereotype".[75] Serving visual rhetoric favoring a culturally complex Black body, both Sherald and Hendricks force a conversation about the psychological interstices between race and sexuality.

As seen in ***When I let go of What I am, I become what I might be*** and in ***New Orleans Niggah,*** the contrast between the figures clothing and sharpens the effects of the skin against the solid background.[76] This hyper-realistic look is described by Mary Schmidt Campbell as having "the capability to give us a sense of our collective values and, at the same time, preserve what is uniquely, and often mysteriously individual".[77] Collectively, fashion is a performative aspect of Black culture, individually, it enunciates what is unique and distinctive. The Black body alone in the material alters the fabrics impact to inform identity.[78] While Hendricks' fashionable wrapper highlights what is *inside*, it also forms a protective wall against racism and defies limited social constructs.[79] In contrast, Sherald's figures are not constrained to rely on the body's wrapping to escape from the publicness of racialization. Sherald's concern lies with the spirit and interiority of her figures, allowing a holistic view of the individual being, consecutively questioning the meaning of portrayal. What does it mean for Sherald to portray an autonomous figure, using traditional methods? She reconfigures traditional methods such as portraiture to engage an interiority that is commonly invisible to current frameworks. This nuanced engagement shifts the

[75] Ibid., 146
[76] Anna Arabindan-Kesson, "The Painting," Tate Research Publication, In Focus: Family Jules: NNN (No Naked Niggahs) 1974 by Barkley L. Hendricks, 2017, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/family-jules/the-painting.
[77] Powell, 159.
[78] Miller, 14.
[79] Ibid., 131.

expression of dandyism from Hendricks' fashionable dramatic figures to a quiet – yet intense assertiveness.

The various methods of Black representation during the BAM and thereafter, are significant precursors to many themes found in contemporary art today. In the 2019 interview with The New York *Times* Magazine, "I Want to Explore the Wonder of What It Is to Be a Black American", with Simone Leigh and Lorna Simpson, Sherald describes her work as a way of processing an identity that was given to her through religion and popular culture. In realizing that her own identity was performed, Sherald became invested in reflecting something other than what was projected out into the world. Reflecting the same type of self-agency, in her portrait ***When I let go of What I am, I become what I might be,*** Sherald creates an unseen narrative, that is conventionally overshadowed by social constructs such as race, gender, and sexuality. With this in mind, it is important to note that Sherald's disinvestment in the conventional idea expressed by Dalton, that portraiture captures identity through accurate representation of physical details, Sherald's works broadens what it means to portray a person through portraiture.[80]

Chapter 2 – Shades of Gray: Grisaille and Skin Politics

Through the racialized and visual hegemony of eighteenth-century Western philosophy, Europeans created the 'Black Other' in opposition to whiteness and sought visual evidence to support racialized theories. Within this structure, people of African descent were provoked to develop multivalent self-concepts, managing both inward understandings of Black identity and outward displays concerning public concepts of race.[81] This phenomenon was conceived as

[80] Joan Bryant, "Discussions of Reconfiguring the Black American Identity: The Art of Amy Sherald," May 1, 2021.
[81] Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*, America and the Long 19th Century (New York: New York University Press, 2015).8.

white Americans wrestled with fears of retribution about slavery. When Thomas Jefferson sought evidence for his proposition that, once they were freed from slavery, Negroes should not remain in the newly independent American republic, he looked to physical appearance to reinforce preconceived prejudices. "The first difference which strikes us," he argued, "is that of color."[82] The hierarchy of skin color that Jefferson espoused has endured as an American standard for determining beauty and human worth. Even though race and white supremacy emerged from a long process, in *The Rule Of Racialization: Class, Identity, Governance*, Steve Martinot describes how it is through notions of "passing," "appearance," and "noticing" that the mere chromatic difference was sufficient to generate complex prejudices that required constraints and structures based on the identification of dispositional characteristics.[83] Whether it was pitch Black or softly brown, the subtle chromatic differences constituted by the prejudices produced by men like Thomas Jefferson ignited the colorism debate and continues to engulf and divide the Black community

In parts of the world, having dark skin means you are not as educated or essential to society as someone of a lighter complexion. Explicitly, in an American context, being of a darker shade is often framed as unattractive. Then the infatuation with biracial identity consecutively devalues Blackness in its original form. Still, with consistent favoritism of lighter skin women, the media plays an integral role in perpetuating colorism and significantly contributes to the deterioration of young Black girls' self-esteem.[84] White supremacy and the privileges given to white Americans reinforces the idea that the Black community will never be equal or be granted the same privileges because of their color. Despite several attempts to diminish the value of

[82] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia: With Related Documents*, ed. David Waldstreicher (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002).176.
[83] Steve Martinot, *The Rule of Racialization: Class, Identity, Governance*, Labor in Crisis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003). 33.
[84] Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry, *Dark Girls* (RLJ Entertainment, 2011).

Black identity, the resilience and commitment from artists like Amy Sherald, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Kerry James Marshal, and Titus Kaphar in their visualizations of alternative narratives, they remind us of the beauty and strength in Blackness as well as its role in American history. This kind of agency disturbs the leisure in relying on the dominate white racist narrative to define our worth as human beings.

In the twenty-first century, Black Americans and Black artists refuse to remain divided and oppressed by old constructs of western aesthetics and complicit and comfortable with residing outside the dominant historical narrative. Just as the Black Power Movement declared Blackness beautiful and created realistic, appealing images of people with dark skin, plump afros, and stylish 'bad' attire, using the 1960's mantra "Black is Beautiful," Black contemporary artist are evoking new vehicles for asserting power, agency, and humanity.[85] It is through the discursive discourse and alternate visual narratives created by Black artists and scholars that seek innovative and authentic visual representation, in which enables Black Americans to reclaim their identity and evoke their humanity.

Grisaille

Figure 2.1. Grayscale

[85] David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, eds., *The Image of the Black in Western Art: The Twentieth Century, Part 2: The Rise of Black Artists*, New ed, vol. 5, (Cambridge, Mass. : London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press ; In collaboration with the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research and the Menil Collection, 2010).137.

The variations of grisaille permeating Sherald's artistic practice provide an intentional ambiguity and neutrality and investigates Blackness as a phenomenon usually defined by the extreme of one color, Black. Gray is the middle ground in-between two extreme tones, white and Black. In Sherald's work, gray signals an area of in-betweenness, something that is not resolved. It can yield to a viewer's interpretation and also defy it. Throughout my conversations with Sherald, she routinely expressed that because Blackness requires actions at all times, it becomes difficult to see past that identity in itself. Therefore, existing in the framework of resistance becomes exhausting and unsustainable.[86] Sherald interprets the consideration of grisaille skin as a subconscious fear of marginalization; not wanting her sitters to be reduced to presentations of racial identity, she thought the paintings deserved more than to be a part of a racialized dialogue.[87] This intentional exploration of grayness illuminates a "world in which the constructs of whiteness and blackness collapse."[88] Supplemented by the 'quiet' aesthetic, this collapse ignites a shift in our ways of reading, looking, and expectations of race, allowing grisaille to emerge as a resting place.[89] This fresh way of paying attention leads to another kind of expressiveness that is not tethered to "what is public and to a discourse of resistance."[90] Embracing grisaille, Sherald refuses to rely on the framework of resistance to define Blackness.

Replacing traditional visual representations of brown skin tones in Black portraiture with grisaille, which does not have historical connotations of inferiority ascribed to brown skin, allows new frameworks for viewing and understanding Black identity. By prioritizing Black people's inner-self/ interiority, Sherald's grisaille reveals evidence of an emotional reality

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[86] Amy Sherald, Externship Interview, interview by Cornelia Stokes, audio, July 2, 2020.
[87] Amy Sherald, Externship Interview, interview by Cornelia Stokes, audio, July 2, 2020.
[88] Eddie Silva, *Amy Sherald.* (St. Louis: Contemporary Art Museum, 2019).15.
[89] Amy Sherald, Externship Interview, interview by Cornelia Stokes, audio, July 2, 2020.
[90] Kevin Everod Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2012).6, 22.

otherwise not seen in a public context and places the meaning of skin color on an unfamiliar register. Painting her sitters with unnatural and unrealistic complexions addresses Kobena Mercer's concern that the aesthetics of realism are no longer adequate to counteract historical "misrepresentation" of Black people. More is required to interrupt and disrupt that tradition.

Furthermore, as the grisaille technique rejects the presentation of Black Americans to be solely defined by color or race, it encourages new methods of presentation of the Black American identity. Not only does grisaille disrupt the way skin color serves as a signifier of race, it challenges the mass-produced, one-dimensional idea that Black experience is determined by skin color, and it radically changes color's traditional function in portraiture, specifically, Black portraiture. Due to the technique's inability to directly present (racial) color, which initially shifted the portraiture genre to Black portraiture, there is an interruption in the expected aesthetics of realism. Quashie states that there is an agency in the act of withholding aspects of ourselves from being revealed.[91] So, is there agency in grisaille? As racial color is withheld from the subject, there is a new understanding of Blackness and its visual capacity to communicate the variation of identities and multiples realities.

A painting technique in which an image is depicted in shades of gray, grisaille is typically used to create the illusion of sculpture. Not only was it used by fifteenth-century Flemish painters and seen in eighteenth-century classical sculptures and ceiling decorations, but it is also commonly used to create a painting's first layer. [92] Categorized as an underpainting process, grisaille is gradually built upon, creating shadows, highlights, and details to evade starting with

[91] Kevin Everod Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2012).17.
[92] The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Grisaille," Encyclopedia Britannica, February 2016, https://www.britannica.com/art/grisaille.

either the extremely dark shades or extremely light tints.[93] Also known as "dead coloring" in the oil painting process, grisaille serves as the base layer in an oil painting. Within this first layer are thick pigments composed of white and black and some kind of red chosen according to the complexion of the flesh painted.[94] Artists typically paint a final layer on top. Yet, in Sherald's portraits, grisaille serves as both the initial and final layer.

Although the grisaille process does not serve a singular purpose historically, when coupled with Sherald's self-assertive approach to Black American portraits, it promotes interrogations of racial identity and hierarchy. Neither black nor white, grisaille visually locates Black identity outside the binary logic of racism.[95] The varied shades used to present Black figures may raise questions about the issue of colorism. Nevertheless, denoting gray as unnatural skin color, viewers cannot simply assume that Sherald's figures signify one shade but instead signals the variation within Blackness and Black identity.

Beyond Resistance

Fracturing the habitual visual representation of American Blackness through the adoption of grisaille, Sherald begins to go beyond the resistance framework and threads the theme of freedom through her work. Not simply reimagining the Black body within the idealized subject of canonical art history, Sherald imagines a subject that requires a new kind of aesthetic language. This new aesthetic language serves a similar purpose to the Black aesthetic, as its creation was due to the need to interrupt and re-evaluate the white ideas within the Western aesthetic. In *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, Hegel describes how the word 'aesthetic' enables individual subjects to mark their boundaries of beauty, considering aspects such as utilitarian and

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[93] "Grisaille Painting: Definition & Technique.," Study.com, March 2017, https://study.com/academy/lesson/grisaille-painting-definition-technique.html.
[94] Albert Abendschein, *The Secret of the Old Masters, by Albert Abendschein* (New York(State): D. Appleton and company, 1916).92
[95] Kevin Everod Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2012).43.

formal properties. This means that the aesthetic is based on the subject within Western Art, which visually depicts and justifies Black subjectivity through concepts such as "primitivism," and is systemically unable to consider the validity of the Black subject. [96] The BAM's 'black aesthetic' is another form of Black subjectivity; however, the agency of Sherald's grisaille differs from the Black Arts Movement's 'black aesthetic' as it challenges the concept of race and racialization on its own terms.

Often historical and traditional techniques are reconfigured and manipulated into contemporary artwork, altering the traditional style's initial use or application. Thus the adoption of grisaille not only reconfigures the technique's initial purpose, it also grants a moment of freedom allows her subjects to have self-expression beyond the dominant expectation of Black culture, restoring "a broader picture of humanity of people who were enslaved" and considers the possibility that racial designations do not define all experiences, identities, or perspectives of Black people.[97] Such autonomy ultimately warrants an answer to the question: what is Blackness without color?

Figure 2.2. *What's precious inside of him does not care to be known by the mind in ways that diminish its presence (All American),* 2017

What's precious inside of him does not care to be known by the mind in ways that diminish its presence (ALL

[96] Primitivism is a Western construction used to classify 'uncivilized' or 'simple-minded' behavior and helps establish control over another population.
[97] Quashie, 5.

American, 2017) illustrates how Sherald reconfigures Black identity. It invites viewers to see the figure through characteristics other than their skin color. She accomplishes this by weaving a thread through identity, culture, and patriotism, materializing the conflicting conversations surrounding the topic of being Black in America. From head to toe, the "old West" apparel of the sitter screams "ALL AMERICAN." Descending from the hat, our eyes land on the most striking part of the outfit, a crisp button-down collared shirt. The shirts American flag pattern functions as a central site in understanding the patriotic component of the sitter's identity. As discussed in chapter two, fashion's capacity to encompass the various realities attached to being an American, while maintaining agency within one's Blackness is both a private and public battle.

The shirt draws viewers in, while the grayscale of the skin holds the viewers' attention with the inquiry of what it means to be both Black and a patriot or if being Black affects one's patriotism. The "old West" apparel is continued with the sitter also wearing a belt buckle depicting a horse and the American standard, blue denim jeans. His apparel is paired with a stance, posture, and a detailed physiognomy illustrating the sitter's strength in his identity. Coupled with the quiet space provided by the monochromatic background, the grisaille allows viewers to notice how the technique amplifies the physiognomy of the figure. Specifically, the subtle white lines highlight the sitters exquisite facial bone structure and define the veins spread across his hands, contribute to the portrait's intensity.

While American representation is heavily dependent on the element of color to signify Black existence, relying on one image, one moment, or one discourse, risks flattening out the human complexity of Black Americans.[98] Quashie address this in his critique of Black cultural studies.

> Racist discourse expects black art to tell the true story of black life unvarnished by craft, which is also an expectation of nationalism. This reinforces the social imperative of black art, and it encourages us to read black cultural work as social documents or as texts of resistance. What is lost here is not only an appreciation of artistic value but also a sense of how form can disturb the assumed precision of content and support a reconsideration of expressiveness.[99]

Although it is easy to define Amy Sherald's portraits within the current parameters of Black representation, what does that do for Black culture? Using Quashie's analysis of a quiet expressiveness to interpret Sherald's work permits us to see beyond the framework of resistance in order to notice other things about Black culture and subjectivity.[100]

The feeling of uncertainty in one's Blackness is an additional phenomenon Sherald explores and conveys through the sitter's tense facial expressions and body language. In her 2017 portrait, ***She was learning to love moments, to love moments for themselves*** **(2017),** (see figure 2.3) Sherald beautifully imagines a Black woman using a higher value of grisaille, hinting at the diversity of the Black American experience within Black identity. Along with the title, the high value of grisaille, the figures shifted weight, and the dress, causes one to infer that there is a

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[98] Kevin Everod Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2012).75.
[99] Ibid., 105.
[100] Ibid., 23. Jenna Wortham, "'I Want to Explore the Wonder of What It Is to Be a Black American,'" The New York Times Magazine, October 8, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/08/magazine/black-women-artists-conversation.html.

deep reflection about the current realities and their effect on uncertain possibilities. ***She was learning*** becomes a resting place for Black women dealing with the double bind of being a woman and Black in a country that disrespects and oppresses both. [101] These constant systematically related pressures cause a 'fight or flight' response that Sherald is actively trying to evade.[102] Derived from Gwendolyn Brooks' novel *Maud Martha*, the title alludes to a search, not for the main character's identity in social terms, but for herself in human terms. The novel is immersed in existentialism, privileging the interior sensibility of Maud Martha as she comes into womanhood. Captured in Sherald's portrait and Brook's novel, Sherald gives attention to the sitter's interior consciousness in the small moment of living that is reflected by this portrait.[103]

Figure 2.3. *She was learning to love moments, to love moment s for themselves* (2017)

In *The Sovereignty of Quiet,* Quashie assesses James Baldwin's use of literature to indirectly question positionality in a Black person's subjection. Using this concept, one can grasp how Sherald accomplishes something similar in the positionality of her figures. Quashies analyzes Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and notes how his letter to his nephew is both a private and public conversation. Baldwin's essay is personal in how he intimately addresses his

[101] A double bind is when one is caught between two systematically related pressures, and all options expose one to negative consequences.
[102] Amy Sherald, Externship Interview, interview by Cornelia Stokes, audio, July 2, 2020.
[103] Quashie, 51.

namesake, yet public as he addresses Black people as a collective and the white world "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger … but I am writing this letter to you, to try to tell you something about how to handle them."[104] Baldwin's "you" is both his nephew and the Black collective. Then, through the conditions Baldwin's nephew and other Black Americans were born, Baldwin implies the role of white people by addressing them as "the white world," "countrymen," and them/they. Quashie concludes, "what motivates Baldwin's letter writing is not only racism as a public discourse, but the real impact racism can have on his nephew's heart, as it seems to have had on his brother's and his father's."[105] Baldwin's management of the white reader and the collective Black voice perfectly demonstrates balancing the interior and exterior.[106] As the concept of race is shaped by publicness, Baldwin uses the power of word to bring consciousness to the Black collective in the way that Sherald's grisaille makes it impossible to remove such topics from the conversation. This public investigation allows twenty-first-century Black Americans to question the construction of their Black identity through their own autonomous agency. Baldwin's letter and Sherald's portraits considers our role in perpetuating racism by encouraging us to refuse to let it define the nature of the subjects' existence, humanity, and struggle.[107]

Unnatural colors signify Black essentialism.

Presenting a model of criticism on aesthetic strategies within Black visual art, Kobena Mercer's *Travel & See* argues that work generated in the present reflects a changed disposition toward the past, acknowledging that present and future discoveries are in response to things already stated.[108] Like anything else, art changes with the times, and Sherald is not alone in a

[104] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1st Vintage International ed (New York: Vintage International, 1993). 4-6.
[105] Baldwin,82.
[106] Quashie, 8.
[107] Quashie, 88.
[108] Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 29.

changed disposition towards conventional black and browns representing Blackness. Instead, she creates unnatural colors to inspire reflections on skin tone and Blackness as an identity. A closer look at her work alongside Kerry James Marshall's representation of Black people suggests a broader effort among twenty-first century Black American artists to use color to disrupt societal conventions that shape images of Black identity. Marshall creates figures whose skin is virtually black. It is not a shade commonly associated with natural skin color. His visual representations of Black people are starkly different from the gray skin in Sherald's works. However, both artists illustrate a contemporary aesthetic that moves beyond realism and offers new challenges to historical misrepresentations of Black people's identities and to the hierarchy of skin color.

In contrast to the gray images that have become Sherald's signature style, unnaturally dark figures are unique to Kerry James Marshall's style. His work, *Past Times*, which was reported to be the most ever paid for a living African American artist's work, illustrates his unique approach.[109]

[109] Barbara Graustark, "Sean Combs Is Buyer Of $21.1 Million Painting," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2018, New York edition, sec. C.

Figure 1.4. Kerry James Marshal, *Past Times*, 1997

Kerry James Marshall is a world-renowned twenty-first-century artist whose style consists of applying a deep shade of black paint to signify Black essentialism (or existence). Like Sherald, Marshall is affected by everyday Black American experiences and creates work that disrupts Black subjection in American art. Born in 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama, and raised in South Central Los Angeles, Marshall steadily expresses the social responsibility of being from historically Black places. Marshall is also known for meticulously choosing his mediums and heavily researching his context. The form and the style all have an important relationship to Marshall's message, which is, "it has to reinforce the content."[110] Marshall utilizes his erudite knowledge of art history and Black folk art, to structure his compositions, while he also mines Black culture and stereotypes for his unflinching subject matter.[111]

[110]Cornelia Stokes, "Rewriting History," *Cleveland Art*, 2018.
[111] Pigment International, "KJM's 'Past Times' at Sotheby's Sets Records, Breaks Barriers," n.d., https://pkeenan1.medium.com/kjms-past-times-at-sotheby-s-sets-records-breaks-barriers-7b5607b0d9ed.

Characterizing Black identity through color, Marshall proposes an unapologetic attitude about being Black in America.

The Garden Project series comprises four paintings that investigate the daily lives of African Americans living in an urban housing project. *Past Times*, the summation of the series, renders an "idyllic scene of African American suburbia."[112] Across the top of the composition, a banner reads, "who plays all of heart and skill, will also work with heart and will." This alludes to the promise of an American Dream for those entering the United States that is routinely and relentlessly withheld from Black Americans.[113] The allusion continues as Marshall illustrates a high-class American lifestyle through depicting the activities of croquet, golf, picnics in the park, water skiing, and the concepts like classism and the nuclear family. Still, Black identity and culture are referenced in the lyrics arising from the stereos, including, for example, Snoop Dog's "Gin and Juice." Cultural irony transpires as the Black figures in this painting are dressed in all white and was purchased by hip-hop fashion mogul Sean "Diddy" Combs, known for his icy-white dress code.

Typically, Marshall references Black figures in domestic settings, communities, and landscapes, alluding to the idea that the image is not solely about race in the use of color about the reality of Blackness in both its inward and outward displays of humanity. He explains his focus in a conversation with Charles Gaines. "What I'm not doing is making work that addresses the idea of racism. What I am doing is establishing a presence that isn't traumatically conditioned by its relationship to a practice or structure called racism."[114] Compelling the viewer to observe an identity and a way of being that is not recognized by public discourse, the scene

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[112] Art Dip, "Kerry James Marshall PAST TIMES," *Medium*, 2019, https://medium.com/dipchain/kerry-james-marshall-past-times-aaee56485458.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Charles Gaines et al., *Kerry James Marshall* (London ; New York, New York: Phaidon Press Ltd, 2017). 32.

reflects an expressiveness that is outside of the binary logic of racism. Parallel to Sherald, without giving much context about the relationships and social milieu of the scene; Marshall presents an opportunity for viewers to explore their own proximity to the artwork. Maintaining ambiguity also allows viewers to add or deduct context and a storyline, significantly contributing to the work's immersive aspect. Both Sherald and Marshall are ultimately storytellers, painting stories connected to larger stories that surround Black identity.[115]

Turning to unnatural colors to characterize Black identity creates a new framework that recognizes Blackness outside the traditional visual regime. While Marshall's choice to embrace and empower Blackness happens through the use of the darkest shade of Black, Sherald's intentional exploration of grayness suggests a "world in which the constructs of whiteness and blackness collapse."[116] The reconfigured portraits and scenic compositions of everyday Black American life are not the only methods that confront how America's reliance on color enacts visual forms of oppression but encourages current and future generations to question it.

[115] Tracy Zwick, "Storytelling: An Interview With Kerry James Marshall," Art in America, August 2013, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/storytelling-an-interview-with-kerry-james-marshall-56337/.
[116] Silva, 15.

Chapter 3 – Literary Titles: Accentuating Black Womanhood.

In the words of Malcolm X, "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman."[117] No matter the framework, Black women are and continue to be victims of institutional oppression and the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class. Still, while pointing to the politics of oppression, Black American women have managed to compose discourses that reclaim the subjectivity of Black womanhood and signal autonomy through literature, music, and visual arts.[118] Within traditional artistic practices of Black women, including those of Elizabeth Catlett, bell hooks, Samella Lewis, Lorna Simpson, the work produced has defied social matrices to explore the arts as a liberatory space. Continuing the legacy of scholarship accentuating Black womanhood, Amy Sherald's oil paintings support the notion of freedom by demanding a new visual aesthetic that brings the Black female subject into being. Her portraits showcase the complexity of Black identity, emphasizing how a desired public identity enacted by Black women satisfy social and public expectations, simultaneously suppressing her interior being.

Beginning with 1840s daguerreotypes, women have displayed their smartness with clothing, jewelry, and books, creating a scene of intelligence and literacy satisfying social expectations.[119] Jasmine Cobb's *Picturing Freedom* seeks to explore how nineteenth-century Black women cultivated new self-perceptions to coincide with experiences of freedom which notably conflicted with the visual logics of slavery. Broadening the conversation of Black

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[117] Malcolm X in Los Angeles May 5, 1962 "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?" (Los Angeles, 1962), https://worldhistoryarchive.wordpress.com/2017/02/03/malcolm-x-speech-in-los-angeles-may-5-1962/.
[118] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2014. 3.
[119] Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*, America and the Long 19th Century (New York: New York University Press, 2015). 2.

freedom, Cobb proposes a new way to think about Black visuality and visual emancipation and how it functions within a complicated interplay between subjectivity, social context, and cultural representations as circumscribed by the trauma of slavery.[120] "It is about the ways in which the racialized object, in fact, has eyes, casts a gaze, and consciously construes a way of being visible."[121] Reconsidering existential phenomenology's idea of the "look," Cobb argues that such linear constructions of the gaze are proverbial in the dominant white experience of vision. Therein lies the problem. The practice of picturing freedom does not occur in one single moment but exists in the "day-to-day methods of survival, submission, and resistance to the prevailing codes of looking."[122]

Once free Blacks gained autonomy, they interrupted white surveillance, and the notions about having the right to look and the right not to be looked at in return expanded. Free Blacks are *looking* directly at dominant whites, subjecting whiteness to a "Black gaze." Cobb uses the slave runaway notice as an example of a tool of capture and control via spectatorship of Black people. Reconfiguring the "tool of capture" vision also meant the power to make Whites vulnerable to the gaze. Not only does this use of vision and the "gaze" now empower Blackness, but it aligns with the discursive narrative ignited by free Blacks in the pre-emancipation era to recover the privileges initially grounded in white supremacy and Black inferiority.[123]

Framing vision as a tool to capture helps explain why Sherald's gaze is so critical and impactful. The gaze produced by Sherald's figures captures the viewer's attention and hints at the issues of ocularity and ontology within canonical American history that prohibits an autonomous appearance of the idealized Black figure. Sherald's figures unapologetically look back,

[120] Ibid., 9.
[121] Ibid., 9.
[122] Ibid., 11
[123] Ibid., 127-131.

simultaneously dismissing the visual logics of slavery while shredding the subjectivities maintained through slavery's ocular institution.

Furthering Cobb's proposal to consider the management of Black Freedom through visuals, Sherald employs the "gaze," an established practice of whiteness during slavery, and reconfigures the dynamics between the viewer and the viewed. Falling within a tradition of Black women using art to recover Black female subjectivity from white-dominated spaces/gazes/narratives, Sherald paints figures that require a new way of looking and new aesthetic language. Just as colonial discourse is incapable of recognizing or producing Black subjectivity, the white gaze and visual logics of slavery are incapable of recognizing the interiority of the Black subject. Again, this line of thought is a continuance of responding to Kobena Mercer's concern that the use of aesthetics of realism is no longer enough to interrupt misrepresentations of Black identity. Creating her own distinctive framework to recognize the interiority of Black identity, Sherald uses the relationship between the title and the visual to indicate an emotional component not actualized in the public sphere, referring to Kevin Quashie's notion of quiet mentioned in previous chapters.

To illustrate, in the 2014 portrait entitled ***Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance)***, (see figure 3.1) Sherald engages the notion of quiet to help articulate a different kind of expressiveness. Inspired by Alice in Wonderland, ***Miss Everything*** illustrates an alternative existence in response to dominant diminishing narratives of Black history.[124] This alternative existence is not concerned with publicness but instead is the expressiveness of the interior. ***Miss Everything*** is self-assured through her body language, dress, her pensive –

[124] Kyle Canter, "Amy Sherald Portrait on View," September 2018, https://ncartmuseum.org/blog/view/amy_sherald_portrait_on_view.

intentional gaze, and declarative language used in the title. Sherald lets the viewer know that the existence of ***Miss Everything*** is all that is needed to signify identity and that she should only have to exist to be recognized.[125] Although Sherald created this piece to illustrate who ***Miss Everything*** is in the present moment, its timeless aesthetic allows the narrative to develop as people interact with it in the current era. “Her art brings this history into the present to point is toward the way to the future,” remarks Moss, curator of painting and sculpture at the National Portrait Gallery.[126]

Figure 3.1. *Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance), 2014*

In today’s Black popular culture, "tea" is often used to describe the attainment of new information or gossip. In a casual conversation, one might say "spill the tea," meaning to dish out the gossip, the 411. Pairing a large teacup with a Black woman, especially with a nonchalant disposition, could imply the Black woman as being all-knowing. Michele Wallace contends that the Black woman has never been initially recognized, always positioned to ground others' subjectivity, that the Black woman is the "Other of the Other."[127] In *Becoming Black*, Wright

[125] Amy Sherald, Externship Interview, interview by Cornelia Stokes, audio, July 2, 2020.
[126] Dorothy Moss et al., *The Obama Portraits* (Washington, DC : Princeton: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution ; in association with Princeton University Press, 2020). 37.
[127] Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).126.

adds that “the failure to consider gender, like those theories of subjectivity that ignore race, is not simply an error of omission," but allows white men, white women, and Black men to come into being through the denial of Black women's subjectivity.[128] Visualizing ***Miss Everything*** in a place of privilege interrupts the continuance of Black women's oppression in order to guarantee others positions in privilege and power. The assertive, authentic, and unbothered disposition indicates an undesirable need for public validation to create a Black woman's subjectivity—the relationship between the viewer and the viewed is also being reconfigured. Through the “Black gaze,” Sherald places the power to define oneself upon the subject being viewed, potentially creating an uneasiness in the viewer. Moreover, viewers must navigate between Sherald’s physically assertive subjects and a self-assured artist. ***Miss Everything,*** along with many of Sherald’s other works, defy all social conventions, so viewers have to interact with the sitter without the trappings that are associated with Blackness in a racist society. This entices the viewer to discern what is important to the sitter's subjectivity outside social constructions.

Parallel to the need for viewers to reconfigure the tool of vision, there must be a whole new set of theoretical tools if the Black woman subject were to come into being.[129] Nevertheless, visual freedom from the white gaze grants the opportunity for works like *Miss Everything* to describe the uniqueness of her interiority through both language and outward expressions. Aligning with Sherald’s objective of freeing Black Americans from the confining aspects of canonical art history, ***Miss Everything***'s nonchalant expression aims at the way publicness inhibits true eloquence.

[128] Ibid., 125.
[129] Ibid., 131.

The Legacy Of Recovering Black Female Subjectivity

As Sherald furthers the thread of visual freedom in the twenty-first century using reconfigured portraiture to discuss social processes like racialization, it is the work done by artists like Elizabeth Catlett that has allowed such a thread to exist and flourish. Rising during several crucial moments in African American history, Catlett transformed suppressed histories and personal trials into public testimonies.[130] Elizabeth Catlett's practice is situated in a kind of visual essentialism rooted in the clarity of the message and ambiguity of form, suggesting growth from a social realist style associated with the 1930s.[131] Once the stock market crashed in 1929, the detrimental decrease in economic stability left many Americans uncertain about the future. Despite the country's economic status, Black artists cultivated a much-needed cultural identity following the Harlem Renaissance and through the New Deal relief programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Benefitting from these significant periods, Elizabeth Catlett was committed to creating work that represented everyday people.

In the 1940s, Elizabeth Catlett shared a cultural dynamic with the Mexican art movement and joined the Taller de Gráfica Popular, a printmaking collective in Mexico City.[132] Living in Mexico and being a part of the Taller's collective offered Catlett the opportunity to focus on the content and form of her work away from the racial tensions faced in the United States. By creating images of heroic Black females in the visual language popularized by the Taller de Gráfica Popular, Catlett fuses African American female protagonists' struggles and accomplishes visual social justice with Marxist political sympathies. Along with Catlett's political and social convictions, the prints manifest her command of form, sensitivity to materials, technical

[130]Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). 51.
[131] Elizabeth Catlett et al., *Elizabeth Catlett: Works on Paper, 1944-1992* (Hampton, Va.: Hampton University Museum, 1993). 49.
[132] Dianne Drayse Alonso, "The Linocut: A One-Hundred-Year History and Redemption of a Marginalized Medium.," n.d. 21.

proficiency, and the inclusive international dimensions of her subjects' Blackness and femaleness.[133] Subsequently, Catlett was convinced that her work should contain a narrative, be culturally specific, figurative, and aimed at a specific audience. Her first major series, ***The Negro Woman***, was an epic commemoration of African American women's historical oppression, resistance, and survival.

> *I Am the Negro Woman, I Have Always Worked Hard in America, In the Fields, In Other Folks' Homes, I Have Given the World my Songs, In Sojourner Truth I Fought for the Rights of Women as Well as Negros, In Harriet Tubman I Helped Hundreds to Freedom, In Phillis Wheatley I Proved Intellectual Equality in the Midst of Slavery, My Role Has Been Important in the Struggle to Organize the Unorganized, I Have Studied in Ever Increasing Numbers, My Reward Has Been Bars between Me and the Rest of the Land, I Have Special Reservations, Special Houses, And a Special Fear for My Loved Ones, and My Right Is a Future of Equality with Other Americans.*

The series contains fifteen linocuts, approximately 6 inches by 9 inches, the typical size for a Mexican linocut. [134] The linocuts are mostly comprised of linear, angular, and all-over textual cuts. The close-cropped, starkly chiseled, and simultaneously intimate and monumental images reflect the historically marginalized achievements of African American heroines and the private but complex realities of the lives of ordinary African American women.[135]

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[133] Melanie Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: In the Image of the People*, 1st ed (Chicago : New Haven: Art Institute of Chicago ; distributed by Yale University Press, 2005).
[134] Alonso, 54.
[135] Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, "I Am the Negro Woman," n.d., https://www.pafa.org/museum/collection/item/i-am-negro-woman.

Catlett prefigures Sherald's use of literary titles by utilizing titles of her prints in *The Negro Woman* series to develop narratives through a singular African American female narrator. The titles and images work together to create a sense of dissonance. The repeated "I" demands the viewer to witness through the act of identifying to create his or her own unique interpretation of The Negro Woman.[136] Stuart Hall reminds us that representation practices always implicate the positions in which we speak or write; using 'I' positions the viewer to become personally invested in the narrative.[137] Catlett establishes a narrative device through a specific voice that guides the viewer through each of her series, possibly offering insight into the artist's intentions or inspirations.[138] Prompting the viewer to establish his or her own interpretation, made the act of identifying become a fundamental aspect of Catlett's printmaking and the basis for renaming the series *The Black Woman*. Catlett's practice progressed as she sought an inclusive designation favored by African Americans during the 1970s Black Arts Movement.[139]

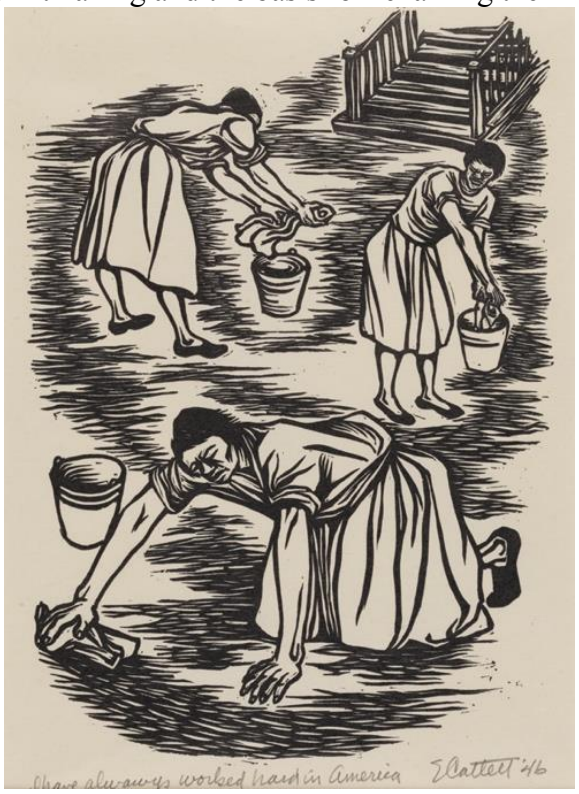

Figure 3.2. Elizabeth Catlett, *I have always worked hard in America,* 1946

Described by Larry Neal, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) envisioned an art that spoke directly to Black Americans' needs and aspirations. Uniquely the demand for representation varied within the Black community, allowing the struggles of balancing freedom of expression with the accountability to the BAM fueled the debate of

[136]Julie Riegel, "Heroism In Elizabeth Catlett's The Negro Woman, 1945-1946" (2017).iii.
[137] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," n.d., https://sites.middlebury.edu/nydiasporaworkshop/files/2011/04/D-OA-HallStuart-CulturalIdentityandDiaspora.pdf.222.
[138] Riegel, 35.
[139] Herzog.

'form versus function.[140] The 'form versus function' debate continues in the 21st century as Black artists do not create work that is solely or directly based on racial identity. In reference to Kobena Mercer's claim that artists generate work based on a changed disposition towards our past, making this also relevant as artists choose, for example, to create a non-figurative sculpture to represent the ongoing effects of Black oppression. In *Bound to Appear*, Huey Copeland explores this changed perspective as artists Fred Wilson, Lorna Simpson, Glenn Ligon, and Renée Green differently understand and interpret aspects of slavery's legacy in their work and design work outside the figurative realm.[141] Their sculptural objects "accent the inability of figurative modalities of representation alone to address the structural logic of slavery."[142] The capacities of Black representation are no longer limited to traditional racial figurative methods. Amy Sherald refuses to limit Black Americans to the hues of Black and Brown and pairs them with a literary text, broadening our experience of Black identity.

Interplay Between The Said And Unsaid

In *Cutting Figure*, Powell notes that verbal descriptions of people of color, like their visual counterparts in the world of art, popular culture, and mass media, have often functioned as cruel criticism and used to belittle rather than carefully characterize Black identity. [143] Through Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault, we learn that discourse is about the production of knowledge through language, which is also produced through practice – the practice of producing meaning. [144] The knowledge produced is construed as a set of beliefs that usually serves a particular

[140] Mike Sell, "BlackFace and the Black Arts Movement," *TDR* 57, no. 2 (2013): 143–62. 150.
[141] Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). 20.
[142] Ibid., 14
[143] Powell, 12.
[144] Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays, Volume 2* (Duke University Press, 2019),.155.

group's interests while consistently operating in relation to power. In other words, regardless of whether knowledge is "true," the discourses used to evoke actions are real effects in practice. This is to say that the language used to characterize Black identity does not have to be "true" for society to act upon it. We have witnessed this in the murder of Breonna Taylor. Initially, news outlets and the police described the event as a drug raid, *Cops met with gunfire. One suspect dead. The other in custody*. As this actively contributes to the hegemonic racist discourse that keeps Black Americans oppressed, Breonna Taylor was publicly described as a drug dealer and as someone undeserving to live. Sherald's ***Breonna Taylor*** (2020)**,** embraces both the public and private identity of everyday Black Americans, establishing a way of seeing that forces the viewer to look beyond the visual. In her article "Sidelong," Krista Thompson brings attention to a vision that allows for a broader purview on representation, insisting that this "sidelong glance" then brings attention to the absence of the subjectivities not captured by visual representation.[145] As Western institutions created systems that aid the criticism and belittlement of Black identity, discourse can also be created to resist persistent degrading frameworks. For decades, Black women writers have created discursive discourse which interrupts the invisibility of Black feminist interpretation in the realm of the dominant discourse.[146]

Using Krista Thompson's sidelong glance to examine Amy Sherald's portraits brings attention to how the pairing of literary titles (language) with the notion of visual (looking, ocular capacity, visibility) attempts to uncover what is not being said/explored exclusively through a visual representation of Black American identity. Specifically, in the allusions to fictional characters created by Black woman writers, Sherald's literary titles further the opportunity to

[145] Krista Thompson, "A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States" 70, no. 3 (2011): 6–31. 27.
[146] Wright, 136.

discover the complexity of Black womanhood and self-actualization through the pairing of established literature and a new visual aesthetic. When considering the intersectionality of a Black woman's identity, one recognizes the limits of identity politics. As Sherald adopts lines from Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she supplements a storyline that considers both gender and race in the novel's investigation of gender roles and female subjectivity. The work entitled ***She had an inside and an outside now, and suddenly, she knew how not to mix them*** (2018), is taken from chapter six, where Janie, the main character, is slapped by her husband Jody because the dinner she prepared is not to his liking. This physical interaction is vital as it points to what is lost in understanding expressiveness only through a discourse of publicness.

"She had an inside and an outside now, and suddenly she knew how not to mix them." – This signifying act allows Janie to find the connection and the difference between her interior-being and public expressiveness. In her quest for a secure sense of independence, Janie Mae Crawford learns that silence can be a source of empowerment. Having found her voice, at that moment, she learns to control it. Although Janie is a character who often does or says very little, her agency is broad and deliberate, ultimately relying on the

Figure 3.3. *She had an inside and an outside now, and suddenly, she knew how not to mix them*, 2018

interplay between said and unsaid.[147] ***She had an inside and an outside now, and suddenly, she knew how not to mix them*** **(**2018) is a visual interruption of a Black women's dormancy/complacency within the American context illustrating the constant battle Black women face as they interrupt white hegemonic structure. Its displays the birthing stage of autonomy. In Sherald's aim of situating Black Women within the everyday Black American identity, the images are not enough. Pairing them with characters from Black woman writers accentuates the private identity of Black women.

In the absence of viable Black feminism to investigate how intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class contradict dominant ideologies of American womanhood, a sense of devaluement could easily be turned inward – leading to internalized oppression.[148] Amy Sherald's work is the epitome of pushing against that internalized oppression as she uses more than the visual to communicate an expressiveness that is not recognized by public discourse. Alongside the literature produced by Black women, by negating theories of subjectivity that ignore gender, Sherald creates a mode of representation whose starting point is Black subjecthood and transformed into a vehicle for advocacy of Black womanhood cultural discourse.

[147] Quashie, 18- 20, 71
[148] Hill Collins, 11-12.

Epilogue

As a counternarrative to representations of Black Americans in contemporary art, Amy Sherald employs traditional artistic methods to disrupt conventional notions concerning Black identity. Engaging in the long tradition of portraiture in unique ways, Sherald's portraits disrupt established dialogues as they seek freedom from constricting white American narratives. What sets Sherald's work apart from other engagements of portraiture is the requirements of an aesthetic language that is able to describe how Sherald's new visual aesthetic sits outside the dominant resistive framework used to read and interpret Black culture. In *Cutting Figure*, Richard Powell claims that "it is important to recognize that sometimes the idea of freedom is present even in the face of antithetical intentions or social barriers and that these portraits are often resistant to the racial barriers and bigoted scenarios in which they reside."[149] By reconfiguring the historical narrative supported by nineteenth-century portraiture to create a new visual aesthetic inclusive of the Black figure, Sherald's work is attentive to the greater depth of the subjectivities that are consistently flattened by the broad sweep of racism.[150]

What is observed throughout this thesis are the various psychological effects on the portrayal of Black identity. Depending on the context in which visuals are created, the portrayal can empower or disempower the figure. In this way, Sherald pushes the question of what it means to portray the Black American identity. Does her unique portraiture style make Sherald an interpreter or a transcriber? Sherald is an interpreter merely on her refusal to use current marginalized frameworks to characterize her sitters. A prime example placing the portraits of Breonna Taylor and Mrs. Obama in a political context. Yes, there are political aspects attached to

[149] Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). 76.
[150] Kevin Everod Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2012). 15.

their identities, however that is not what Sherald intends to capture in her paintings. "The Former first lady allowed herself to be vulnerable in the process by granting Sherald the opportunity to direct the important decisions of pose, dress, and setting"[151] Consistent with her other portraits Sherald captures a subjectivity about her sitter that is regularly overshadowed by so many social and public identities that we forget the humanity of the figure. In Mrs. Obama's vulnerability Sherald reflects an expressiveness that is not recognized or acknowledged by the public or politics (See figure 0.1). Sherald explains that the "Black body is politized in general and that's why it [the portraits] becomes political, but that is not my intention behind the work." Knowing the work will be politicized by others means there is no need to operate within that framework.[152]

Being Black Is An Everyday Heroic Action.

Like Elizabeth Catlett, Amy Sherald celebrates individuality and characteristics of being Black in tumultuous times; yet Sherald does not singularly highlight monumental heroism. She honors the courageousness of Black Americans whose everyday resistance is itself a heroic action. Sherald's investment in understanding the sensibilities, personalities, and ideas that shape Black identities is captured in the 2020 portrait, ***Breonna Taylor***. While not reducing the 26-year-old Black woman's representation and life to the violent context of her death, Sherald alludes to the everydayness of the violence against Black Americans. While this portrait celebrates and publicly validates the life of a beautiful Black woman, it also advocates for the acknowledgment by American institutions of the humanity not afforded to Taylor. Although Vanity Fair commissioned Breonna Taylor as their cover for the September 2020 issue, Sherald's portrait is not glorifying the fact Taylor was gunned down in her own home but brought attention

[151] Dorothy Moss et al., The Obama Portraits (Washington, DC : Princeton: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution ; in association with Princeton University Press, 2020).
[152] Amy Sherald, Externship Interview, interview by Cornelia Stokes, audio, July 2, 2020.

to its normalcy. Supporting the everydayness of Breonna Taylor, the portrait emphasizes the everyday violence faced by everyday Black Americans, perpetuated by other Americans, which is historical rooted in the subjection of the 'Black Other.' Fighting Black oppression is an everyday battle fought by regular everyday Black people.

Figure 4.3. *Breonna Taylor*, 2020

As seen in Cobb's description of nineteenth-century women and the women portrayed in Sherald's works, Taylor's portrait expresses self-assurance through her body language, dress, and invigorating yet graceful gaze. From the fullness of the lips, to the gentle touch of her left hand, the composition embodies the strength and power of Black femineity and the guiltlessness of inhabiting that identity. A sense of strength is detectable through the angle of Taylor's right arm, the position of her shoulders, and in the slit of the left side of Taylor's dress, the right side of the

viewer. Sherald is expressively creating movement. Symbolism is carried throughout the composition as Sherald has painted the engagement ring Breonna will never get to wear, the cross necklace representing her faith, and the color of her dress referencing Taylor's March birthstone. Sherald references her birth in the dress's color while using hues of brown in the skin, signifying her post-human existence. Mindful of the hues within the grisaille skin, Taylor's soft and graceful gaze induces an angelic glow, implying the difference in the figure and the viewer's existence. Taylor's glow is the most notable difference between this portrait and Sherald's other works. Having to alter her process of beginning with a photograph, Sherald studied past photos of Taylor, hairstyle choices, and Taylor's personal characteristics.[153] Although. Taylor's death is located in the public and societal spectrum, it engages public discourse surrounding police brutality and institutional racism. Consequently, Sherald creates an empowering framework that being Black is an everyday heroic action.

It is my hope that this thesis furthers the conversation of Black American representation and ignites in-depth research on the artist Amy Sherald's unique style as her methods of investigating Black American identities interchange and expand. Through Sherald's monochromatic backgrounds, fashion, literary titles, and grisaille, both the viewer and the viewed (her sitters) have had the opportunity to experience Blackness outside of western aesthetics, aiding the process of self-actualization. As Sherald's visual vocabulary evolves to include multiple identities with scenic backgrounds, it is almost as if both Sherald's figures and the viewers are ready to be in context with external elements. Again, in line with Mercer's assertion that Black artists can no longer adequately use aesthetics of realism or protest to

[153] Miles Pope, "Living Memory," *Vanity Fair*, September 2020. 48.

counteract "misrepresentation," these interruptions now require an acknowledgment of an emotional reality. Sherald's portraits nurture viewers' process of reconfiguration as we define what being in Black in America means to us, aside from a chromatic difference.[154] Not only does her work supplement self-conception, her most recent body of work illustrates a natural progression of her practice and an expansion of her visual vocabulary, engaging the idea that the Black American identity is never constant but ever-evolving with changing times.[155]

Figure 4.1. Amy painting A Midsummer Afternoon Dream, 2020

[154] Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 57.
[155] Amy Sherald, Externship Interview, interview by Cornelia Stokes, audio, July 2, 2020.

In her most recent solo exhibition, *The Great American Fact*, Sherald references the 1892 book, *A Voice from the South,* by Anna Julia Cooper. Drawing upon the line "The most talked about of all the forces in this diversified civilization [Black Americans], they seemed the great American fact, the one objective reality, on which scholars sharpened their wits, at which orators and statesmen fired their eloquence, and from which, after so long a time, authors, with varied success and truthfulness have begun at last to draw subjects and models."[156]

Sherald employs Cooper's statement as a framework for considering public Blackness, as it centers the idea that "Black life and identity are not solely tethered to grappling publicly with social issues, and that resistance lies equally in a full interior life and an expansive vision of selfhood in the world."[157] The works within the exhibition depict ambiguous and unspecified Americana-like places, allowing Sherald to reinsert the Black identity in American discourse in her own way.

In all, Amy Sherald's portraits conduct emancipatory work, facilitating an opportunity for visual discourse to conceptualize an autonomous and self-reflective identity, enabling us to understand that surrendering to the imaginative interior is indeed what allows freedom.

Figure 4.2. Amy photographed with 'Midsummer Afternoon Dream', 2021

[156] Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). 179.
[157] Hauser & Wirth, "Amy Sherald: The Great American Fact" (Press Release, Los Angeles, March 2021).

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Cornelia Stokes Biography

Cornelia Stokes received a B.A. in Art with a concentration in curatorial studies Magna Cum Laude from Spelman College in December 2018. At Syracuse University, Cornelia pursued a Masters of Art in Pan African Studies where her thesis focused on reconfiguration, a contemporary method of visual representation of Black identity. In addition, Cornelia's research interests include the representation of the Black body in art history and the struggle for a genuine representation of non-western cultures in western institutions such as museums. She is also interested in how a Pan-African framework seeks to advocate for people of African descent in order for western presentations to reflect the realities Black lives, specifically Black Americans. From 2020 to 2021 Cornelia served as the President for the Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA), the senator for the Pan African studies program in the GSO senate, and as the 2020-2021 Recording Secretary for the Graduate Student Organization (GSO).