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Research and Imagine the American Black Art Since 2005

Richard J. Powell

- 1 One hundred years ago, author, editor and civil right activist Freeman Henry Morris Murray published *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture* (1916), a pioneering study of the depictions of peoples of African descent in art. Although Murray's primary focus was on figural works produced by some of the leading (i.e. white) American and European sculptors in the latter half of the nineteenth century, his sculptural survey also included works by several important African American artists (specifically, Mary Edmonia Lewis and Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller) and, thus, marked his book as one of the very first histories and critical studies of black American art (MURRAY, 1916).
- 2 Since Murray's publication the art-historical literature on black artists, their artistic production, the aesthetics of racial difference and cultural distinctiveness, and the black image has grown incrementally, from a rare and happenstance phenomenon at the beginning of the twentieth century to a relatively common occurrence in the first decades of the twenty-first. A non-scientific method of gauging this proliferation of art-historical scholarship on African American artists and their works would be a simple comparison, say, between 1915 and 2015, of the frequency with which known African American artists are referenced in scholarly and popular literature. For example, in 1915 probably the names of only three black artists – William Edouard Scott, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller – would have appeared more than once in newspapers and art journals nationwide. In contrast, in 2015 no listing of significant, contemporary artists would be considered accurate without Dawoud Bey, Mark Bradford, Nick Cave, Renee Cox, Theaster Gates, David Hammons, Lyle Ashton Harris, Rashid Johnson, Glenn Ligon, Steve McQueen, Kerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, Wangechi Mutu, Chris Ofili, William Pope.L, Lorna Simpson, Hank Willis Thomas, Mickalene Thomas, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, Kehinde Wiley, and Fred Wilson, among many other black artists of note.
- 3 In thinking about a historiography of African American art studies, it is important not to adhere too strictly to a conventional definition of art history: that is, a body of

scholarship that, usually in the form of an article, treatise, thesis, or monograph, studies visual production in its historical and/or cultural contexts. African American art histories have not only been produced in these standard ways, but also in less overtly academic formats, such as exhibition catalogues, art gallery and museum publications, periodical art reviews, cultural criticism, and literary anthologies. The breadth and variety of these art-historical and critical studies of black artistic production encourage a broader scope and far more adaptable modes of investigation from scholars: approaches to research that not only take into account the blinders that most of the academy has historically worn when it came to seeing and appreciating African American artists and artistry, but also taking into account those unexpected sources and hidden archives – far off the treaded paths that art historians normally embark upon – in which black art histories can be rediscovered and reimagined.

- 4 Not unlike other chronological, national, or culture-specific studies in art history, African American art histories fulfill many objectives. Apart from bringing greater scholarly attention to the lives and careers of individual artists, describing certain historical moments or periods during which artists and patrons coalesce around particular ideas and stylistic sensibilities, or charting the contours of this particular subfield (and frequently questioning its very existence), historians of black visual culture scrutinize and visually deconstruct specific works of art. Such close readings invariably involve a quest for meaning, revealing artistic intent, and putting into words the art object's affinities with a particular style or visual idiom. A matter of endless debates and conceptual disagreements, the question of the necessity of a distinctive African American or black category in art scholarship infiltrates the works of virtually every historian who ventures into this subfield, from Benjamin G. Brawley's early twentieth-century musings on "Negro Genius," to Derek C. Maus' and James J. Donahue's early twenty-first-century considerations of art and identity in the post-Civil Rights period (BRAWLEY, 1918; MAUS, DONAHUE, 2014).
- 5 Among the many topics and theoretical directions African American art-historical studies have touched upon in the past decade, five themes and/or conceptual routes have produced an abundance of new scholarship and, thus, are prime for discussion. These five themes are: the two black movements ("The Harlem Renaissance" and "The Black Arts Movement"); Feminine - masculine - feminine; the Post-black (*noirceur chimérique ou l'art noir sans négritude*); the Insider outsiders; and the revised histories. In the realm of those aforementioned studies that focus on philosophically cohesive historical moments, many revolve around two black cultural movements: 1) the early twentieth-century project known as the Harlem Renaissance, and 2) the circa 1960s and 1970s cultural insurgency popularly known as the Black Arts Movement. These two "black movements," approximately forty years apart from one another, collectively generate a strain of art-historical scholarship that, since the late twentieth century, has significantly reshaped earlier interpretations of these two cultural nationalist uprisings, by way of a greater emphasis on each movement's nascent gender and sexual politics, their respective occasions for global outreach, and their mutations via early- and mid-twentieth-century mass media.
- 6 Parallel to the amplified presence of African American women writers in late twentieth-century American literature, art practitioners and historians throughout the African diaspora increasingly came to terms in their respective works with persistent questions of gender, sexuality, racial and cultural blackness, as well as their often

uneasy interrelationships. These theoretical concerns, along with a new disciplinary commitment to highlighting the contributions of black women in art history and visual culture, have significantly reshaped African American art studies. A preponderance of African American art-historical studies in this period grappled with these themes and the ethical dilemmas they imposed upon audiences for art and, intentionally improvising upon the title of one of Jean-Luc Godard's film classics, I make my subheading for this discussion feminine-masculine-feminine; a kind of methodological coda for this direction in art research, alluding here to the gender interdependency and, in particular, to the feminist focus of recent scholarship.

- 7 A popular topic in African American art scholarship over the past decade is the concept of a "post-black" aesthetic in contemporary art. Manifested in the actual examples of "post-black" art – rather than in the term's connotations of a total departure from racial and/or cultural blackness – is a parallel (or "shadow") racial/cultural preoccupation: one which privileges a kind of playfulness, or an irreverence, with regards to identity, history, and/or culture. Although art historians and critics who have written about this *noirceur chimérique* have tended to keep an objective distance when chronicling this phenomenon, many scholars are not as dispassionate, exploring instead the philosophical pitfalls of embracing racial ambiguities, or the broader political implications of taking a more inventive attitude toward black history. Very much like the research that has developed around the other African American art topics discussed in this essay, most "post-black" studies approach the topic without an *a priori* agenda that views this phenomenon, "l'art noir sans négritude," uncritically.
- 8 Coinciding with the contemporary art scene's heightened appreciation for works by socially marginalized, non-academically trained visual artists, art historians and theoreticians have begun to look closely at these part-artistic, part-sociological practices, from providing biographical information and career trajectories for these "insider outsiders," to positing cultural and social theories about the artistic appeal of this work. Since African American artists figure prominently in this group, as do artists located mostly in the American South, much of the research is understandably indebted to critical race theory and cultural hypotheses that address center/periphery social dynamics.
- 9 Finally, a lot of the recent research in African American art history hasn't been so much directed toward particular topics or a set of theoretical concerns, as fundamentally revising or offering correctives to an extant art history. These "historical revisions" have taken many forms, including alternative approaches to the art survey, multi-volume or multi-authored studies, and thematic investigations based on art genres, styles, or historical occurrences. Like the other categories of recent scholarship, monographic studies – usually in the form of exhibition catalogues published in collaboration with art galleries and museums – readily lend themselves to historical revisions, either providing augmented histories of recognized art-world figures, or introducing relatively unknown individuals to the art-viewing public. A more detailed description of each of these art-historical topics follows.

Two Black Movements: “The Harlem Renaissance” and “The Black Arts Movement”

- 10 The Harlem Renaissance or, as it was popularly referred to the 1920s and 1930s, the “New Negro Arts Movement,” was an interlude in the larger span of modern history that most scholars agree was a period of major artistic flowering among African Americans, celebrated and championed by an assortment of advocates on many fronts: cultural, social, political, and racial. Commencing around the end of World War I and continuing well into the Great Depression, the Harlem Renaissance trained a virtual spotlight on African American artists, highlighting their contributions to the literary, performing, and visual arts, with a special emphasis on their almost libidinal powers during the jazz age. In contrast, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, with its comparable examples of an insurgent black creativity, has only recently become recognized – in the last twenty-five years or so – as another, very important moment in African American arts and letters. Born out of the ashes of the Civil Rights Movement and the alternative battle cries of “Black Power” and “Black is Beautiful,” the Black Arts Movement privileged a politically inspired aesthetic of figural expressionism and racial romanticism, as played out in spoken poetry, ritual theater, and hyper-visibility. In tandem with a new appreciation for the Black Arts Movement, cultural historians over the past decade have used the notion of a chronologically defined, black artistic “renaissance” to critically revisit the 1960s/70s and the 1920s/30s, perhaps seeing in both moments occasions for a radical rethinking of race and the role of the artist in re-conceptualizing society. Apart from a common emphasis on producing art that reflected “race pride,” or that exemplified a kind of conspicuous blackness, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement were both cultural projects in which cross-generational debates around the black artist’s responsibilities to the black masses abounded, often initiated by youthful black provocateurs who lambasted their opposers without formal restraints or political inhibitions.¹
- 11 Since 2005, several important books and anthologies have reassessed these two movements, questioning, for example, the efficacy of the Harlem Renaissance’s call to racial distinctiveness in the arts (CALO, 2007), and critiquing the assumptions of racial exclusivity in the reception and understanding of art during the Black Arts Movement (COLLINS, CRAWFORD, 2006; HASSAN, CRAWFORD, 2011, 2012). The Harlem Renaissance has especially inspired art historians of late, fostering previously uncharted research into that era’s expansive, art-informed print culture (GOESER, 2007), the underappreciated role of women artists (KIRSCHKE, 2014), Chicago, Illinois as an important, but frequently unmapped New Negro territory (*They Seek a City*, 2013), and other thematic directions (TRIBE, 2007; THOMPSON K., 2007). Recently, some of the most important Harlem Renaissance artists have been the subjects of major art exhibitions, such as Aaron Douglas (*Aaron Douglas*, 2007), Hale Woodruff (AMAKI, BARNWELL BROWNLEE, 2007; *Rising Up*, 2012), Nancy Elizabeth Prophet (AMAKI, BARNWELL BROWNLEE, 2007), and Archibald J. Motley, Jr. (*Archibald Motley*, 2014), while the life and work of sculptor Richmond Barthé were the focal points of two very important biographies (VENDRYES, 2008; LEWIS, 2009). Journal articles have also offered alternative readings of the Harlem Renaissance, introducing into the topic the era’s overtures toward the esoteric and spiritual in art (VINCENTI, 2006) and artistic explorations of stereotype and satire (OTT, 2008; WOLFSKILL, 2009).

- 12 Given the contemporary visual appeal of classic works by such Black Arts Movement figures as Barkley L. Hendricks, Joe Overstreet, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, and Charles White, much of the recent scholarship surrounding this period can be found in exhibition publications. From a scholarly repositioning of some of the Movement's most significant activities to Los Angeles, (*'Now Dig This!'*, 2013), to a philosophical volleying between the Movement's activist orientations (*Witness*, 2014) and its psychological performances of race (*Back to Black*, 2005), the Black Arts Movement has prompted many historians and curators to go beyond the period's agitprop façades and political rhetoric (*Black Panther*, 2007) and, instead, to delve deeply into its philosophy of community (ZORACH, 2011) and its revamped aesthetic of the black quotidian (FINE, 2005). Despite the focus on individual careers, many monographic studies on Black Arts Movement artists have considered their subjects within more theoretical frameworks, taking into account the broader question of artistic genre (Barkley L. Hendricks, 2008; Dawoud Bey..., 2012) and divergent, alternative modernisms (*American People...*, 2011; FINE, FRANCIS, 2011; Romare Bearden, 2011).

Feminine-masculine-feminine

- 13 Feminist perspectives within recent studies of African American art and visual culture have traversed the rather obvious identity politics of gender recognition and the attendant critiques of historic, male-dominated institutions and social practices. Instead, some of the most interesting scholarship of late has been informed by a subset of cultural theorists and social scientists who foreground the situational realities of gender, race, sexuality, and class, and the need for rigorous, fully engaged examinations which address questions of fundamental rights, individual agency, engendering practices, and the full, conceptual arc of recognition/misrecognition (BRAND, 2006).
- 14 As suggested in this section's subheading feminine-masculine-feminine, the sandwiched nature of an ontological maleness between concepts of the feminine, womanhood, and the entire gendered/sexual scale of lived experiences has shaped much of the scholarship, especially writings that definitively insert issues of racial and cultural blackness into art history (GOLDEN, 2012). Indeed, a good number of these investigations aim at the shifting perceptions of the black female subject in art (BROWN, 2012), from pictorial meditations on beauty and corporeality (WILLIS, 2009) to case studies of real-life black women as paragons of elegance and style (WILLIAMS, 2007) and investigations of cultural stereotypes (THOMPSON C., 2013).
- 15 Arguably, though, the never-ending need for original scholarship on forgotten or under-examined black women artists has persisted well into the present, and several art historians have addressed this historical void, utilizing the comprehensive overview (FARRINGTON, 2005a) as well as the monograph to examine such canonical figures as the nineteenth-century sculptor Mary Edmonia Lewis (WOODS, 2009; BUICK, 2010) and the twentieth-century painter Lois Mailou Jones (*Lois Mailou Jones...*, 2009), the latter being one of the very few artists who participated in both the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. Contemporary black women artists have also inspired art historians and curators to bridge their work with feminist thought, identity politics, and unresolved questions of gender, sexuality and social difference. Again, recent

monographic studies on artists such as Carrie Mae Weems (*Carrie Mae Weems*, 2012), Mickalene Thomas (*Mickalene Thomas*, 2012) and especially Lorna Simpson (ENWEZOR, 2006; LAMM, 2011; BELISLE, 2011) have all relied on modern and contemporary feminist theories for their impetus as much as on the artists' careers and works themselves. Clearly, the gulf between examining the creative output of black women artists and investigating black female imagery in the visual arts is negligible when considering performance art or, rather, the black female body as an artistic vehicle, and several authors have taken up this topic with thought-provoking and compelling findings (SMITH, 2011; BOWLES, 2011). An exhibition catalogue that took as its premise the uncharted occurrence of black women filmmakers and videographers since 1970 (BARNWELL, OLIVER, 2008) added appreciably to these recent histories of African American art and visual culture, also augmenting the few extant studies of women across the racial spectrum working in media arts.

Post-black (noirceur chimérique ou l'art noir sans négritude)

- 16 The 2001 minting of the term “post-black” by Studio Museum in Harlem director Thelma Golden and visual artist Glenn Ligon was not only perspicacious to a shift in the cultural mindsets of the latest generation of African American artists, but it was prescient for what was on the artistic horizon: a parallel (or “shadow”) racial preoccupation among African American artists that unapologetically embraced the contradiction of making black art without bringing into play a platitudinous, archetypal blackness. Before the decade ended, scholars had given the post-black concept full-court scrutiny (KEITH, 2005; ENGLISH, 2007; MURRAY, 2007; SCHUR, 2007; TAYLOR, 2007), and this interrogation and critical exegesis of the concept have continued unabated (GONZALEZ, 2011; FLEETWOOD, 2011; WALKER H., 2013; MAUS, DONAHUE, 2014).
- 17 Even when the term “post-black” wasn't prominently positioned in a publication's title or text, its presence has hovered over certain scholarly enterprises in recent African American art histories and visual studies, whether the topic was conceptualism (*Double-Consciousness*, 2005), heterodox belief systems (*NeoHoodoo*, 2008); the enduring memory of the Civil Rights Movement (*After 1968*, 2008); African diasporic aesthetics (THOMPSON K., 2015), or contemporary art in general (*Black Light/White Noise*, 2007; *30 Americans*, 2008; BACKER, 2013). And this same, shadowy blackness – which, again, Golden and Ligon first referenced in the context of a 2001 survey of works by African American artists at the Studio Museum in Harlem (*Freestyle*, 2001) – would continue to loom in subsequent iterations of the contemporary African American group show (*Frequency*, 2005; *Flow*, 2008; *Fore*, 2013); ironically, an exhibition format that was paradigmatic of the prosaically race-based Black Arts Movement exhibitions in the 1960s and 1970s.
- 18 Also characteristic of the post-black phenomenon was, paradoxically, a greater visibility in major art galleries and museums for black artists and for works that expressed a decidedly ambiguous racial and cultural drift. Although not considered the principal proponents of a post-black philosophy, important African American artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Martin Puryear, Kerry James Marshall, and Wangechi Mutu all exuded enough complexity and opacity in their work to garner critical notice and visual currency in a post-black art world, resulting in a steady stream of exhibition

publications and monographic studies (MAYER, 2005; *Martin Puryear*, 2007; *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 2010; *Wangechi Mutu*, 2013). But the artistic purveyors of a post-black aesthetic have been some of the most conspicuous art world figures and subjects for art criticism, as seen in Hank Willis-Thomas's digital odes to visual appropriation (GUZMAN, 2008), Glenn Ligon's text-based paintings and sculptures (*Glenn Ligon*, 2011; DELAND, 2012), Rashid Johnson's racially deconstructive assemblages (MORTON, 2012; *Rashid Johnson*, 2012), and, last but not least, Kara Walker's silhouetted satires and frank moral defamations (*Kara Walker*, 2007; BERRY, 2007; WALKER K., 2007; WALL, 2010; ALS, 2013).

Insider outsiders

- 19 Sociologist Gary Alan Fine's 2004 study of the position and perception of artists operating on the fringes of the modern and contemporary art world had major consequences for subsequent African American art scholarship (FINE, 2004). The typical profile of Fine's subjects – African American, non-academically trained, and socio-economically vulnerable – represented a vital yet frequently ignored subset among African American artists: an artistic contingent that, following the critically acclaimed Corcoran Gallery of Art's exhibition *Black Folk Art in America, 1930 – 1980* (*Black Folk Art...*, 1982), forever challenged the art world's presumptive notions of authenticity, insularity, hierarchy, and difference. Indeed, Fine's emphases on the social and economic forces that essentially created this artistic cohort shifted the discussion away from the stylistic vagaries of visual crudity and the individual eccentricities of these artists and, instead, prompted a close and critical scrutiny of the art world trends, market forces, and mythologizing around these “insider outsiders.”
- 20 Various described as “folk,” “self-taught,” or “outsider,” these accidental artists and their champions troubled an already fractious art world. Because of their separate yet vaunted status, they provided additional fodder for viewing the greater art scene as often racist and exploitative, especially in light of more established and, yet, overlooked African American artists and their documented struggles for greater recognition. Social scientists and art historians have looked closely at this cultural phenomenon, and have not resisted casting a critical eye on the politics of institutionally embracing these artists (ROTHENBERG, FINE, 2008; COOKS, 2014). Despite the formation of a “black folk art” canon decades earlier, several recent historical summaries (CROWN, RUSSELL, 2007; RUSSELL, 2011) and survey exhibitions (*Great and Mighty Things'...*, 2013; *When the Stars...*, 2014) have further institutionalized this subgenre, aligning much of this art with spiritual aims and/or regional interests. Artists who live and work in the southern United States and many within a small-town or rural context have often been studied from the perspective of such vernacular art forms as quilting (ARNETT, 2006a) or, with an eye directed more toward an urban visual lexicon like yard decorations (GUNDAKER, MCWILLIE, 2005) and street performances (BECKER, 2013).
- 21 As with the other research-generating areas of African American art history, recent case studies of individual self-taught or outsider artists have both strengthened the primary source materials on these artists, and used the monographic format as a vehicle for thinking about the theoretical issues that impact the outsider art category (ARNETT, 2006b; *The Treasure of Ulysses Davis*, 2008). Artist Bill Traylor, an ex-slave working in Depression-era Alabama, inspired several scholars to grapple with the idea of an

African diasporic racial memory in art (*Bill Traylor*, 2005, 2012; SOBEL, 2009), while both Clementine Hunter and Horace Pippin, two celebrated mid twentieth-century folk artists, encouraged art historians and curators to reconcile these artists' social isolation and provincialism with their well-connected gallery representation and market notoriety (WHITEHEAD, SHIVER, 2012; *Horace Pippin*, 2015).

Revised histories

- 22 The enduring value in African American art scholarship of conducting original research and reexamining important historical figures and subject matter cannot be overstated. Twenty-first-century scholars of African American art have wholeheartedly embraced historical revisionism in multiple ways, from reimagining earlier versions of the art-historical survey (BERNIER, 2009), to reworking the standard narratives surrounding the art and artists of the African Diaspora, both well-known and relatively obscure (*Afro-Modern*, 2010). In using the term “historical revisionism” in this particular context, what is not being suggested are recalibrations that invent false accounts or ignore historical truths. Rather, what has transpired in the literature is a critical enterprise that, by asking different questions and conducting new research into uncharted art-historical waters, amends the record with a fresh and, yet, an anarchistic perspective.
- 23 The most comprehensive of these art-historical reconsiderations was the African American artists-themed volumes *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (BINDMAN, GATES, 2014), which conceived modern and contemporary black artistic production in a part-chronological, part-international, and wholly original fashion. In a somewhat different manner, a number of American art museums have organized major African American art exhibitions with accompanying catalogues that, exclusively focusing on their own, occasionally encyclopedic collections, utilized the survey exhibition formula for somewhat different purposes (GOLDEN, 2010; *African American Art*, 2012; MERCER V.J., 2012; *Represent*, 2014; *Common Wealth*, 2015).
- 24 Original scholarship has continued to take place around individual artists and their artistic production, but often integrating novel ways of interpreting these artists' works and careers. One observes this radical rethinking of African American artists and their art in studies chronologically located in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where the memories of enslavement, the specters of racial prejudice, and the movements toward African American social activism undergirded many art-historical studies (SHAW, 2005; *Charles Ethan Porter*, 2008; KETNER, 2011; *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 2012). From relatively under-appreciated but historically significant artists such as sculptor Meta Warrick Fuller and painters William Edouard Scott and Norman Lewis (ATER, 2011; PINDER, 2011, *From the Margins*, 2014), to canonical American art figures like Jacob Lawrence (HILLS, 2009; *Jacob Lawrence*, 2015) recent art histories have revisited the standard African American art narrative in light of alternative readings of American nationalism, mid-twentieth-century gestures and aspirations toward universality, and a corresponding race- and class-informed modernism.
- 25 Since 2005 theme-based research has continued to capture the attention of many historians of African American art (FRANCIS, 2012), enabling scholars to focus more intently on unresolved issues in the literature, such as race and abstraction (*Energy/Experimentation*, 2006), philanthropy for black artists (*A Force for Change*, 2009), African

Americans and art museums (COOKS, 2011), and art, race and trauma (TRIBE, 2013). Several anthologies (FARRINGTON, 2005b; JONES, 2011) and exhibition catalogues (*Portraits of a People*, 2006; COOKSEY, 2013) brought greater attention to the notion that African American art scholarship could be deeply topical, and particular enough to engage with comparable and similarly focused research in the visual arts and the humanities. Cultural historian and theoretician Kobena Mercer successfully integrated and assembled many of these thematically focused studies of African American art into the four-volume series, *Cross Cultural Perspectives in the Visual Arts*, framing this scholarship within the larger contexts of cosmopolitanism, abstraction, the vernacular, and expatriation (MERCER, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008).

- 26 This fairly recent theoretical turn in African American art history – conterminous with many humanities subfields and their shift toward more critical and ideational approaches to history – has manifested itself in many ways over the past decade. For example, the often pedantic and moralistic lens through which the history of slavery has been viewed was deconstructed through a part-thematic, part-theoretical perspective (COPELAND, 2013), and a similar multi-pronged tack was undertaken on the subject of black portraiture (POWELL, 2008). Likewise, certain basic themes in African American art, such as the African diaspora and the idea of a distinctive black aesthetic, have been significantly reconceived, both through the conceptual mechanisms of the dialogic (MERCER, 2012) and the synaesthetic (THOMPSON K., 2009), and by means of the relatively traditional, yeoman-like processes of historiography and critical interpretation (THOMPSON K., 2011).
- 27 In closing, one might assume that the assorted texts discussed here and the new directions in African American art-historical research are indebted to all of the scholarly undertakings and intellectual “dream work” that preceded them. Today's art historians and cultural critics could not have even imagined pursuing the study and analysis of something called “black” or African American art without the intellectual substratum that had already been surveyed and leveled by the following: William Dawson, Freeman Henry Morris Murray, Benjamin Brawley, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, Meville Herskovits, James V. Herring, James A. Porter, Dorothy Porter Wesley, Cedric Dover, Sidney Kaplan, David C. Driskell, Robert Farris Thompson, Regenia Perry, Elsa Honig Fine, Marcia M. Mathews, Deirdre Bibby, Ed Spriggs, Harry Henderson, Romare Bearden, Samella Lewis, Edmund B. Gaither, Jeff Donaldson, Floyd Coleman, Murry DePillars, Rosalind Jeffries, Maude Wahlman, Mary Schmidt Campbell, Steven Jones, Lucy Lippard, John Michael Vlach, Henry Drewal, Monni Adams, Lynn Igoe, Leslie King-Hammond, Lowery Stokes Sims, Patricia Hills, Sharon F. Patton, Guy McElroy, Lizzetta LeFalle Collins, Judith Wilson, Greg Tate, Ann Gibson, James Smalls, Marilyn Richardson, Albert Boime, Joseph Ketner, David Lubin, Juanita M. Holland, Beryl Wright, Michael D. Harris, Deborah Willis, and Maurice Berger, among countless others.
- ² Prior to the twenty-first century these forerunners in African American art scholarship engaged in intellectual pursuits that, through many decades of archival research, bibliographic groundwork, personal interviews, cultural retrievals, artistic rediscoveries, and thoughtful, desk-bound writing, culminated in what theoretician Kobena Mercer has described as a “multi-vocal dialogue on matters of cultural difference, in which the identities of all participants were open to new possibilities.”³
- 28 Scholars working in the early twenty-first century have witnessed a period of creative exchange and intellectual re-engagement with the discipline, in which not only

longtime scholars of African American art and culture have participated, but also art historians and theorists from across the geopolitical, ideological, and racial/cultural spectrum. As seen in this state-of-the-field reflection, recent scholarship in African American art touches on a multiplicity of issues, including such previously unexplored or barely addressed topics as the vernacular arts, performance art, mass media, embodiment, corporeality, historicity, spirituality, racial indifference, visual queering, satire, migration, nativism, multi-linguistics, global violence, urbanism, and homelessness, to name just a few.

- 29 Clearly, an intellectual project such as the study of African American art is, by design and necessity, one that privileges an African diasporic or black perspective. However, the scholarly outpourings of the last decade have made it apparent that the centrality of a black perspective does not mean blackness can be successfully reduced to an inviolable racial category, or a succinct definition. Many of the writings discussed in this essay argue that, in spite of an assumed singularity, blackness and the African diaspora are, in fact, hybrid entities, multilayered in their discursive acts, historically transnational in scope and, yet, reliably unstable and transitory.
- 30 Although much of this writing opens up art history to a twenty-first-century world of radically different ideas, new artists, and critical, cutting-edge methodologies, probably all of the authors under review perceive the previous century as a key moment for creating unprecedented black images and for reimagining how art history might be more thoroughly documented and democratically narrated. The twentieth century's chronicled instances of: disenfranchisement and the eventual re-enfranchisement of black peoples; political and cultural imperialism perpetrated on black communities; questions of alliances from both within "the race" and beyond; mass migrations of African peoples to Western metropolises; the flowerings of assorted black cultural "renaissances"; and the *ad infinitum* debates over racial discrimination; are all proof of that century's importance to the development of black narratives, whether art-historical or quotidian, retrospective or contemporaneous. If, in 1916, African American art historian Freeman Henry Morris Murray had had a crystal ball, magically enabling him to observe how the study of art by and about peoples of African descent had evolved from his solitary vantage point to, say, one hundred years in the future, not only would he have marveled at the many social and cultural changes that had transpired, but he would have been amazed by a discipline and subfield that, unlike in his more apathetic time, acknowledged the historical importance of black artists, as well as the intrinsic value of studying works that placed questions of race and culture at their very core.

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NOTES

1. Fully developed but relatively concise accounts of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement can be found in the author’s two chapters “Enter the Exit the ‘New Negro’” and “Black is a Color” (POWELL, 2002, p. 41-65, p. 121-160).
2. For an in depth examination of the historiographic breadth of African American art research, including many of the historians and critics listed in this Conclusion, see Sharon F. Patton’s comprehensive “Bibliographic Essay” (PATTON, 1998, p. 283-299).
3. Kobena Mercer, “New Practices, New Identities: Hybridity and Globalization” (BINDMAN, GATES, 2014, p. 225).

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Keywords: african-American art, feminism, black outsider art

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