

Seeing You Through Her and Me: Explorations of Blackness and Womanhood

By Gio Swaby

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Abstract

My research centers on an exploration of Blackness and Womanhood through textile-based portraiture. Working through the lens of Black feminist thought, I have investigated restorative modes of resistance and constructed a supportive framework by which to utilize them. This work is an inquiry into the portrait as a tool of resistance and is motivated by the desire to represent Black women in a way that is nuanced, multilayered and honest. My research asks the question of how Black women can navigate vulnerability in such a way that agency and power is maintained. At its core, this research is rooted in love and itself is an expression of love. It is a celebration of Blackness and creates space for Black people, especially Black women and girls, to be represented with honour and reverence. The tangible works created throughout this process come after the work of visiting, sharing and cultivating connection between myself and the people that have graciously participated in the process.

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Mummy and Daddy, I know you would be so proud. I miss you more than words could ever describe but I always feel you with me.

To my partner Steven, it has always been me and you. It is so fitting that we went on this journey together and I would not have it any other way. Through the highest highs and lowest lows, you have been my person. My love and admiration for you grows every day.

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To Betty, Jela, Rhonda and Brenda, thank you for joining me on this journey. Connecting with you through this project has been the most beautiful experience. Thank you for trusting me.

Dedication

To bell hooks

And the generations of Black feminist thinkers that she raised

We will always love you

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Who Ya People Is

When my father was a boy, he was a legend in his neighbourhood amongst the children. They said he was the only one fast enough to catch a hummingbird, that only he could climb to the tallest peak of the tallest tree. He told me stories of his many broken teeth and bones with a big smile. The adults saw him as a troublemaker, to the kids he was a king. He was rebellious and impossible to confine.

My mother was the second oldest girl of twelve siblings. She was a nurturer even as a child, caring for her baby sisters and brothers. All of the girls learned to sew but she was the best. Her work was meticulous, detailed, expressive, beautiful. My mother taught herself to sew using patterns and then she passed this gift of knowledge on to me. We sewed doll clothes and school uniforms and most importantly, we sewed love together. Her love and goodness and kindness still shine bright as ever.

I am here with you today as a rebellious, kind, nurturing, troublemaker, wanting to sew together a love that will be impossible to confine.

A Love Letter

To the women in my life that have loved me unconditionally and supported me always, this work is in dedication to you. To my mother and grandmother no longer here in the flesh, you will always carry on in my heart and through my work. I am deeply honoured to contribute to a movement of healing that has been cultivated through the immense and unwavering care of Black women globally. This work is how I express my gratitude for the networks of knowledge and support that we have created and maintained for one another. It is how I celebrate a journey of unlearning and relearning how to better love myself and those around me. I hope that when Black women and girls see my work, they see parts of themselves reflected with reverence, utmost care and love. My practice is reinforced by these beautiful moments of reciprocity. I do this work in celebration of us. Always and forever.

Introduction

The last few years of my life have truly been a journey of rediscovery. My father passed away in 2016 and at this time, I thought that I could never experience anything worse. In 2020 when my mother passed away, I realized I was wrong and that perhaps there is not a cap on the grief you can experience in a lifetime. In each instance, I went through an initial phase of intense grief. I could not speak of them, I could not say their names without breaking down into tears. This phase eventually passed and then I entered the lifelong grief phase — where you can start to remember them fondly but there is still an aching sadness that will never fade.

Watching my parents experience illness was unimaginably difficult and being without them has been the most trying journey in my life. Through this experience, I began to reframe my perspective. If life could truly be gone in what feels like the blink of an eye, then it is necessary to prioritize what matters to you most. I realized that the relationships in my life were most important to me — with my family, with my partner, with my friends and with myself. I wanted to unlock new ways to love openly and without boundaries. I wanted everyone to know how much they mean to me in the time I have here to tell them.

I also began to think about my happiness and whether or not I was truly enjoying life. Through my reflections, I realized that I had prioritized work above all else; above my well-being, above my day to day happiness and above my relationships. I made the intentional shift to reconfigure this order. I made a vow to find and create joy in my day

to day life and to treat myself with love, care, compassion and kindness. Equally as important, is to extend the very same to others. This is a life long journey that requires vast amounts of learning and unlearning.

I have chosen to undertake my thesis research as a part of this journey. My work is focused specially through the lens of Blackness and womanhood and as such, this is where my research is centered. I have conducted this research based on three questions:

- How can Black women utilize a framework of restorative resistance to recover from the ongoing effects of oppression?
- What does it mean to be Black and feminist?
- How can the portrait be used as a decolonial tool of resistance?

The body of this document explores these questions and is structured into four sections:

Section One: Heart to Heart

“Heart to Heart” is broken into three chapters which primarily focus on the interview portion of my work. In conducting this research, I have used the concept of Dylan Miner’s “Visiting Methodology” as a guiding principle. Miner’s work is often community based and involves the participation of other community members to collaboratively

execute art projects. Through reflecting on his practice, Miner explains that “the visiting, the sharing, the working together was the artwork” (33). He goes on to say that the physical artworks created are like remnants of those moments of connection, “material remains of visiting” (33). My work has been structured in the same way, it focuses primarily on interviews with four Black Bahamian women: Betty, Jela, Rhonda and Brenda, whose real names have not been used to protect their privacy. The interview excerpts included in this document are based on field notes but has been shared with each woman in advance to ensure that their thoughts and words have been accurately represented.

The interview excerpts are first introduced in “Things Tough” which focuses on a conversation of mental health. This chapter explores the various answers to the question “how are you?” and provides an entry point to begin understanding why a framework of restorative resistance is useful.

In “I Gotta Put Me First”, these conversations continue on to explore the various methods by which each woman finds and experiences rest and joy in their lives. These two key themes are significant to my construction of a restorative resistance framework.

“What’s In A Name?” explores the various approaches that each woman has taken to feminism and how it is significant in their lives. My research is grounded in Black feminist thought and this portion of our conversation was key to understanding how it has impacted each person’s lives.

Section Two: Restorative Resistance

A framework for restorative resistance is outlined in this section. This framework is structured based on the conversations with Betty, Brenda, Jela and Rhonda, as well as my own lived experience.

Section Three: In Dedication to You

The third section “In Dedication To You”, focuses on the physical work I created throughout this program and for my thesis exhibition. I discuss the process and decision-making of creating the physical textile portraits as well as my journey through this program. I walk through the fabric and posture selections for each portrait in the thesis exhibition and I connect this to stories shared in the interview excerpts. This section also explores the portrait as a decolonial tool of resistance.

Section Four: Connections and Reflections

The first chapter titled “Across The Road or Across The Water, I Feel You” explores the connections between Betty, Jela, Rhonda, Brenda and myself and how we relate to other Black women in our lives. It also analyses the cultural context of our experiences as Bahamians and how this informs our lives in The Bahamas and abroad.

The second chapter titled “Seeing You Through Her and Me” delves into the subject of representation and why diverse representation matters. It explores the connections that

viewers have made with the physical portraits and how Black women and girls may see themselves reflected in my practice.

Mama Said That It Was Okay (Methodology and Theoretical Background)

Black feminist thought is at the core of my research and practice. With love as a guiding principle, I draw from bell hooks's writings on developing a "love ethic" as a foundational component of my thesis work. hooks explains that an ethic of love prioritizes the well-being of ourselves and others and "presupposes that everyone has the right to be free" (117) . In representing experiences that are connected to, but still separate from my own, it is important to approach this work with genuine care, openness and respect. hooks provides a framework for achieving this that she describes as a love ethic. This approach also intersects with the work of Roxane Gay, Mikki Kendall, Joan Morgan and Alice Walker. hooks has developed the love ethic principles through the lens of Black feminism and these scholars all explore various forms and branches of Black feminism. Gay, Kendall, Morgan and Walker explore their complicated experiences of being Black and feminist, each from a unique perspective. The respective forms of feminism they explore are:

Bad Feminism - Gay presents a perspective on feminism that also acknowledges and even celebrates the fallibility that comes with being human. She encourages self-reflection and accountability with the understanding that people, including feminists possess complex dualities and that the moving parts of our beings are sometimes in conflict. She embraces imperfection as a regular part of the human experience.

Hood Feminism – Kendall Indicates that mainstream feminism has prioritized expanding the privilege of a select few women rather than focusing on ensuring that the basic needs of the least privileged are met. She posits that access to quality health care, education, personal safety, housing etc. should be viewed as feminist issues and Hood Feminism places these at the forefront.

Hip-Hop Feminism - Morgan's Hip-Hop Feminism is a branch of Black feminism that is grounded in the lived experiences of Black women and is structured to make space for the contradictions of being Black and feminist. It is marked by its accessibility in contrast to some mainstream forms of feminism which are overly academic and exclusionary of many marginalized peoples.

Womanism – Walker's womanism is an approach to feminism that centers the voices of Black women and is based on these everyday lived experiences. Womanism creates a more inclusive and intersectional space and challenges exclusionary feminist perspectives that center whiteness.

These texts all offer insight to better understand the multilayered experiences of Blackness and womanhood. They support my efforts to create representations of Black women that are nuanced and intricate rather than flattened and one-dimensional. They connect to and inform my explorations of what it means to be Black and feminist.

In constructing a framework for restorative modes of resistance, Tricia Hersey's Nap Ministry is strongly connected to my explorations of rest as a form of resistance. Hersey exposes the systems at work that deplete marginalized people of physical and mental vitality as a tool of oppression. She regards rest as a form of resistance for marginalized people because it disrupts capitalism and white supremacy. Hersey asserts that rest is in direct opposition to these oppressive systems that define our worth by labour and how much we can produce. She repositions rest as a basic human right rather than a reward for working. I will use these resources as support for constructing an anti-colonial framework for various modes of restorative resistance.

In my efforts frame the portrait as a tool of decolonization, I will reference the work of artists Micaklene Thomas, Deborah Roberts and Faith Ringgold. These three artists have all explored similar themes within their work and provide numerous examples of how to accomplish this effectively that I can transpose into my own practice.

I also draw from Dylan Miner's *Methodology of Visiting*, which explores the idea that the bulk of the work in his practice as an artist is in the visiting and connecting that occurs with participants involved in his projects. Miner explains that the physical works created within his practice are residue of the deeper work of connection building. I have applied this to my own practice by considering the conversations with the women involved in this research, our exchanges of mutual care and cultivation of love as my primary work. The portraits created are a tribute to that work and a dedication to the women represented in them.

A Way We Do Things (Methods)

Early on in my life, textiles became very connected to love and expressing love. My mother taught me how to sew as a child and it served as a basis of connection for us throughout my life. I began to understand the creation of textile-based objects (clothing, bedding, etc.) as an act of love. With my research led by love as a guiding principle, I chose a textile-based representation of these women I want to honour, uplift and immortalize through portraiture.

The basis of this research is exploring Blackness and womanhood so it was imperative that all participants identify as Black women. Identity is further explored through the lens of Bahamian culture. Brenda, Jela and Rhonda currently live in The Bahamas but also have the experience of living abroad during their college studies. Betty and I were both born and raised in The Bahamas and now live in Toronto. A history of living abroad was not required but coincidentally, all participants shared this experience.

After participants were selected, I moved into an active phase of creation. I began by conducting a photography session to capture images of the chosen sitters. Each person I photographed chose their own clothing and postures with little imposition on my part. Because this work is about celebrating the women I am representing, I wanted them to be themselves. I wanted to make a record of their unique essence and way of being in that moment and carried that energy through to the textile portrait. This process shifted slightly for my self-portrait but I used the same principles. During the photography process, I also engaged in an informal interview process with the sitter. This was very

conversational and offered the opportunity to further connect and learn more about their lived experiences. For my self-portrait, this interview portion was introspective and internal. My work is centered on creating nuanced and full representations of Black women; images in which we can see ourselves lovingly and thoughtfully reflected. The interview process is key to achieving this. It was important not just to capture a photograph of these women, but to gather a sense of them in that moment and cultivate connection to be able to represent them fully, honestly and with love.

After the photography session, I selected an image that the textile portrait is based on. I reflected on the interview process and selected an image that I felt contained a similar energy. A process of co-creation also took place at this point as I invited the sitter to share in this process of selection with me. I did this to maintain agency for the sitter and also to engage their expertise in selecting a photo that best represents them and the experiences that we shared during our conversation. Using this photo as reference, I constructed a textile-based portrait using appliqué, quilting and embroidery techniques.

Heart to Heart

Tings Tough: "How Are You?" and Other Difficult Questions

I was thinking back over my life recently and I realized that for as long as I can remember, my existence has always been accompanied by a generous helping of anxiety. As early as preschool, I was anxious every day about going to school; there were a hundred reasons why but sometimes none at all. I remember getting fully undressed in my mother's Nissan on the way to school, hoping that she would not have the energy to get me into my uniform again and simply drive us back home instead. I don't remember if it ever worked, I just remember the heat and tightness in my chest — the impending sense of dread. Through the conversations I held with four other women, I realized that I was not alone. While each person sat in front of me, exuding warmth, exchanging compliments and sharing smiles, at the same time, we were all holding a heaviness in our hearts. I started our conversations by asking how they were doing. I left this question open, to give them the opportunity to share in any way they felt comfortable. In each instance, we entered into a discussion of mental health.

This conversation of mental health is crucial in understanding the purpose of a restorative resistance framework for Black women. In order to begin a process of recovery, it is essential to recognize the harm we have encountered and how it has affected us. Moya Bailey coined the term misogynoir to more specifically describe "the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience" (763). While we discussed a number of contributing factors in our conversations, it is imperative to acknowledge that the specific forms of oppression we experience as Black women play a considerable role in the state of our mental health. Stephanie Pappas of the American Psychological

Association explains that “Black women are often pigeonholed as strong caregivers and providers who shoulder others’ burdens and do not share their own” (Pappas). If

Misogynoir is coupled with the tendency to socialize Black girls to care for everyone else before themselves, we have a basic recipe for the anxiety, depression and burn out that often plagues us. As each of our lived experiences are unique, so are the additional factors influencing our mental health. Detailed below are the individual responses stemming from the simple question: how are you?

Betty

Betty and I opened our conversation on a lighter note, attempting to answer a question that many have undertaken: cats or dogs? Betty tells me that she has always preferred cats as pets because they are more predictable than dogs and that she likes predictability — it makes her feel safe. She expresses that she feels as if her entire life is rooted in fear and anxiety. As she thinks about the course of her life, she recognizes that her fears grew as she got older. She is twenty-nine now and has changed considerably since her early 20s; slowly shedding recklessness and naivety for prudence and a well-formed sense of discretion. She worries now that she has passed a middle point and veered too far into anxiety and inherent distrust. She expresses her gratitude for the learning that has brought her better judgement and more peace. At the same time, she grieves parts of herself that have seemingly not survived the transition—she grieves her fearlessness. The wiser version of her that sits in front of me now has started therapy to reconcile this loss and to heal. Betty hopes to make a way back to that middle space that she passed over without realizing.

Jela

Jela welcomes me into her home and tells me how proud she is to have this space tailored just to her needs. Her walls and shelves host a small but impressive art collection. She tells me about strategies to save up and utilize payment plans in order to acquire the pieces that she has. Being surrounded by art brings her joy and she sees collecting as an investment into her own happiness. She tells me that she is preparing for her Saturn return and will start the new year by setting her intentions. She says that prioritizing her mental, emotional and spiritual well-being is one of these intentions. She has taken on a lot of additional stress at work recently and wants to figure out how to pull back. She enjoys her work so much that it was easy for her to overlook that she has been approaching burn out. To prevent this from happening, she explains that she must be really honest about how much she can accommodate in her personal, professional and social life. Alone time is important for Jela, to clear her mind and to check in with herself. Jela says she has found a good balance because she also describes being rejuvenated by the company of others. Jela told me stories about walking on the beach at night because her problems seemed smaller than the vastness of the ocean. She tells me that she is like the ocean, often reserved on the surface but full of a depth of passion underneath.

Rhonda

Our call takes place virtually but it feels like we are in the same room together.

Rhonda's energy is bright and radiates through the screen. She tells me she is nervous about a product restock tomorrow for her website. She recently left a job to pursue her passion in ceramics full-time. In her previous job, she was extremely unhappy and this lit a fire under her to push forward with self-employment. She tells me it is not as easy as it looks and describes herself as a "walking ball of anxiety". She is anxious about the success of her work but also experiences social anxiety. She feels this might be connected to her not wanting to disappoint others and her people-pleasing tendencies. She has felt this way for as long as she can remember. She has made it through by facing the source of her anxiety head on, pushing through to get to the other side. However, Rhonda recognizes the negative effects on her physical and mental health through taking this approach. After such intense stretches of working, she has to take long periods of recovery to get back to a pace of consistency. She describes this process as draining and wants to find her way to a better path.

Brenda

Brenda and I start off with a discussion of mental health and she tells me that she has been feeling really heavy in her mind and soul, that there is just a lot going on in her life. She feels she is in a transition period in her professional and romantic life and that both require extensive communication skills. She says she didn't learn how to communicate in a healthy way growing up and has put a great effort into learning on her own through therapy. She feels she is just on the other side of a breakthrough; she can see the light but just needs to get through that final barrier. She tells me that at this point, she feels somewhat reliant on coping mechanisms that she knows are unhealthy; she is using them as a bridge until she feels in a better headspace to utilize healthier tools. Brenda also explains that she has found being healthy to be expensive. Being consistent at the gym, eating healthier food and therapy all help to improve her mental health but they come with a hefty price tag, especially in The Bahamas. She knows that it feels good to engage in healthier behaviour, she feels triumphant looking back when she has made progress. Brenda is excited to get back to that place, but for now, she is riding the wave.

What I recognize in comparing our stories is that we are all on journeys of self-discovery which have manifested in many different ways for each person. We are becoming more conscious of our patterns, needs and learning how to course correct as we grow and change. Each person found their own ways of coping, but I recognized that overall, there is in strong contrast in how we appear to be doing and how we are actually doing. In our conversation, Brenda said that she believes that everyone is just ten minutes away from crying but that we are conditioned to feign strength and composure; more and more I believe this to be true, especially for Black women. Through these conversations where we made space for vulnerability and honesty, we were able to form a connection through our shared experience. Audre Lorde says that "it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken" (16). Perhaps in breaking our silences, we open space for connection, empathy and the opportunity to offer and receive support.

I Gotta Put Me First: Finding Rest and Joy

As young Black girls we grew up watching the women in our lives take care of everybody else. They generously offered their strength, knowledge and support, accessing their resilience to overlook the fact that people took them for granted. We were socialized into the same behaviour and many of us have reached a point in our adulthood where we are recognizing that it is simply too much. Many of us are on a journey of learning how to put ourselves first. After all, how can you fill someone else's cup if yours is empty? Joan Morgan opens the chapter title "Strongblackwoman" with a potent message: "For reasons of emotional health and overall sanity, I've retired from being a STRONGBLACKWOMAN" (137). Morgan shares her own experience of facing down the Strong Black Woman (SBW) archetype saying that "by the sole virtues of my race and gender I was supposed to be the consummate professional, handle any life crisis, be the dependable rock for every soul who needed me." (Morgan 140). Not only is this way of navigating life unsustainable in the long term, it also robs us of our opportunities for personal development and self-discovery. We don't learn enough, soon enough, about who we are and we don't get to dream enough about who we want to become.

I remember being in the last semester of my undergraduate program and any day I wasn't at school, I was at work. I never had a day off. I was far away from my home in The Bahamas, struggling financially and suffering from severe anxiety on top of other chronic health conditions. My father had also been recently diagnosed with leukemia and the emotional toll I felt was indescribable. Every time I took a nap, slept in,

watched Netflix or took any kind of break, I would feel an intense amount of guilt about the work I was neglecting. I carried myself too harshly, self-administering labels of lazy and unprepared, when in reality, no parts of my life truly reflected this. I was a high achiever academically and professionally, but imposter syndrome held me in a tight grip — I felt like a fraud and I was deeply unhappy with this part of my life. I want to send all the love and care in the world to my former self, I want to send forgiveness and compassion. I still struggle with some of these feelings today and through the conversations I had, I recognized how this was a common thread in many of our experiences. We spoke of rest and joy as companions and discussed navigating their shifting placements in the journeys of our lives.

Brenda

For Brenda, relationships and love are a primary source of joy in her life; she loves spending quality time with her partner and friends. She has found a core group of people that she loves, trusts and respects, and finds comfort in being able to talk things through with them. She feels lucky in this regard to have so many people in her life that can offer this level of companionship. In *All About Love*, bell hooks also explores the importance of friendships. hooks explains that "loving friendships provide us with a space to experience the joy of community in a relationship where we learn to process all our issues, to cope with differences and conflict while staying connected" (134). Brenda has recognized and intentionally cultivated this in her life which she feels has led her to greater fulfillment. Brenda is adamant that she doesn't want to plan her happiness, she says it's best when it is spontaneous. She explains that she finds the most joy in the small moments in life and that these often don't need to be planned. The beach is a sacred space for her. She sometimes goes there alone just to exist in the tranquility of it. She acknowledges that there are major issues in The Bahamas but feels lucky to live in such a beautiful country.

Rhonda

Rhonda expressed that she deeply cherishes and enjoys her time alone and needs this time to rest and recharge. She also tells me about her practices of gratitude. She is intentional about recognizing and expressing her gratitude and makes an effort to acknowledge small moments of joy. She has a strong affinity for the true crime genre and loves playing The Sims. She finds joy in creating a world outside of her reality and allowing herself moments to escape there. She finds great satisfaction in watching people put things together. Her favourite kinds of process videos are focused on the creation of dentures and prosthetic eyes. She finds them almost entrancing, sinking into the detail of each careful step. It is important for her to make time to get out of her head, honing in on the specifics of these processes allows her to access a space free from the anxiety of the everyday. She has done therapy in the past but tells me about the difficulty in finding a therapist in The Bahamas whose approach isn't heavily tied to Christianity. She wants to start again but with someone better suited to her needs.

Jela

Jela tells me that recently, she has been on a journey of putting herself first; She has been available to everyone but herself and wants to give up being self-sacrificing to fill her cup first. Jela wants to separate herself from the SBW archetype. In Joan Morgan's account of her own escape, she says "I actually had to learn how to put my needs first. Giving both Guilt and Struggle the finger, I confessed to the universe I wanted more out of life than simply being a STRONGBLACKWOMAN" (178). Part of Jela's journey toward releasing this part of herself has involved centering rest in her life rather than work. To prevent burn out, she needs to give herself a routine and be really honest about how much she can accommodate in her personal, professional and social life. She has worked to set boundaries in her life that allow for adequate rest and personal time. She has a separate phone for work and limits the amount of time she engages in activities that drain her social battery. She feels she functions best by being strategic about how she divides her time, using tools like calendars and timers to stick to the carefully considered schedule that she has laid out. In a complement to her very strong organizational abilities, she also engages her creativity as an artist and a dancer. She believes that movement is important for a healthy state of mind. She watches reality shows and listens to comedy podcasts to unwind. She finds the laughter restorative and appreciates the opportunity to enjoy herself without having to think too hard.

Betty

Betty creates spaces of safety for herself to have periods of insulation, recovery and rest; moments where she can escape inward from fear and anxiety. Mornings are her sacred time where she disconnects from technology, and focuses on the smaller things, like waking up slowly, her skincare routine and making breakfast. She feels a sense of peace in her routine without the distraction of social media or responding to messages. She makes an effort to focus on the small moments of joy and relishes in that feeling, documenting in her mind the activities that feel best and bring relief. She tells me about how much she loves the movie Minions and has actively rejected labeling activities as uncultured because they are rooted in joy and fun rather than pure intellectual stimulation. Betty says that she is currently in an era of silence in her life.

While reflecting on her past, Betty describes growing up learning that love was expressly connected to conflict and thrived on verbal combat with others. She also detailed scenarios in which as a Black woman, she was expected to explain her presence in certain spaces and prove to others why she should belong there. There was an intense emotional labour involved in this process for her. She found power in sometimes choosing silence; taking time to learn how to express herself in ways that serve her best and being selective in where and with whom to expend her precious energy.

I have recognized an increase in awareness, especially on social media, about the importance and necessity of rest and joy and this seems to be true for each person I spoke with. They all expressed being on a journey of redefining rest in their lives to some degree. Unfortunately, it seems that we have all learned the hard way that the body and mind cannot forgo rest for too long before we feel the consequences. In regards to joy, what stood out most in our conversations was that joy is found in the smaller, moments in life. Whether it is a long car ride with friends, sharing ice cream with your partner, cuddling with your cat, there is certainly happiness to be found and felt in the everyday. However, without a specific prompt, the sheer ordinariness of these experiences can make them easy to miss. They can simply pass you by and become buried in the more affective memories of the day. Overall, it seems that much of what brings rest and joy into our lives is intentionality — intentionally recognizing, acknowledging and creating space.

What's In A Name? Approaches to Black Feminism

bell hooks's writings have long been a deep source of inspiration to my visual practice, both in form and content. I remember feeling incredibly overwhelmed being introduced to critical and cultural theory in my first year of university. As a young Black woman, I felt there were not many access points for me into several of the writings and theories included in the curriculum. This was very likely due to my lack of experience in reading and analyzing such texts and certainly due to a pedagogy historically steeped in colonialism and white supremacy. It was challenging for me to gain a foothold of understanding. There was rigid dichotomy between my academic performance and the strong disconnect I felt with the material. I was doing well on paper, but I felt displaced and isolated. In this time, bell hooks became a beacon of hope for me, a life raft from the otherness I felt. I remember reading an excerpt from *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* and feeling things click together. There was space for me — I didn't need to bend, reshape or repackage myself. This is when I actively began to identify with feminism and more specifically, Black feminism.

When I spoke about feminism with the women I interviewed and whether or not we identify with the term, the overwhelming response was, it's complicated. There was a lot of uncertainty and hesitance toward the use of the term for a number of reasons. The most cited of these was the historical centring of whiteness in many feminist movements and the belief that feminism has always and still does primarily cater to white women. Rather than to heavily direct the responses with specificity, I asked about their opinions and how they position themselves in relation to the umbrella term of feminism. This left

space for their own definitions, understandings and personal experiences. It was important to discuss feminism in our conversations because much of our discussion around mental health, rest and joy were strongly connected to Black feminist principles. I also felt it was critical to understand how each woman approached feminism and how they did or did not integrate it into their lives because I have grounded my restorative resistance framework (partially derived from our conversations) in Black feminist thought.

Betty

Betty considers herself to be a feminist but identifies more specifically with grass roots form of feminism in line with authors like bell hooks. She recognizes the ways in which feminism has been rooted in whiteness and is adamant that feminism must be intersectional. After a rigorous academic history, she has chosen to reject what she refers to as a “university rhetoric”, that is, the unnecessary overcomplicating of language in favour of language that is more accessible. She feels that as a Black woman, she is expected to police herself — her tone, her facial expressions and body language. She also describes an undue burden of being expected to represent the ideas and politics of all Black and Caribbean people. She wants to exist free of this burden and feels that the kind of feminism she connects with most accommodates this aspiration.

Jela

Jela goes back and forth about whether or not she identifies with feminism. She aligns herself more strongly with womanism, a form of feminism coined by Alice Walker that places a specific focus on experiences of Black women and other women of colour (Walker 115). She finds difficulty in identifying with feminism because of how often it centers whiteness. She believes she lives in a way that executes womanist principles and works to ensure that what she does in theory is what she does in practice. She wants to uncover a path to defining womanhood outside of a patriarchal blueprint.

Rhonda

Rhonda explains that her existence as a Black woman is layered. She describes herself as a Black, curvy, Bahamian woman and shares some of the encounters she has experienced in this body. While in college in the United States, she often felt fetishized because of her body type and Caribbean heritage. She tells me how much she loves being Black but also struggles with her experiences of racism and bigotry. Rhonda explains that although she is not much into semantics or terminology, that she would use the term feminist to describe herself and more specifically aligns with womanism. She says that her focus is to simply acknowledge the power of women. She explains that she has never felt soft or small and has always taken roles of leadership throughout her life. She wants space for nuance in defining herself as a Black woman and freedom to be just as she is.

Brenda

Brenda tells me about her perspectives on feminism and says that it is complicated. She explains that she identifies with many feminist principles and is certainly pro women's rights and empowerment. However, she feels that she can define who she is without using the label of feminist. She feels that feminism has historically catered too much to whiteness and that she is a Black bisexual woman first. She doesn't necessarily see the benefits in aligning with feminism as a Black woman but would be more inclined to identify with a movement that acknowledges the complexity of her intersecting identities. What does it mean to be Black and feminist? It appears that what we reach toward most is the space for nuance in how we choose to define ourselves — as feminist, as Black feminist, as womanist and much more. While our identities intersect in many ways—we are all Black, Bahamian women, however, we are certainly diverse in our individual lived experiences and this is reflected in how we choose to define ourselves in relationship to feminism. It is easy to see from the responses that it is difficult to reconcile an impossibly long and ongoing history of anti-Black racism and the current fourth wave feminist movement that claims to prioritize intersectionality (Munro). Through our conversations, it appears that none of us have found this to be true based on our lived experiences.

In Hood Feminism, Mikki Kendall explains that “since its inception, mainstream feminism has been insisting that some women have to wait longer for equality, that once one group (usually white women) achieves equality then that opens the way for all other women. But when it comes right down to it, mainstream white feminism often fails to show up for women of color” (2). In the age of the internet, it is easier now more than ever to access information generated outside of the status quo and to find that which truly resonates. We can seek out spaces for ourselves that more accurately represent our individual experiences. We can also more easily form those spaces ourselves when they don’t exist. Now, it is easier to move on when we are asked to splinter ourselves; come as only woman but not Black, come as only Black but not woman. Alice walker says that “no person is your friend (or kin) who demands your silence, or your right to grow and be perceived as fully blossomed as you were intended” (103). When we are asked to only show up as a part of ourselves and to quiet all else, it makes sense that we would hesitate to identify with such spaces.

Restorative Resistance: The Tools of Recovery

I reflected on the conversations we had in constructing and understanding a framework for restorative forms of resistance. Restorative resistance refers to forms of resistance such as rest and joy that carry the benefit of improving mental and physical well-being. Before composing this framework, it must first be established what is being resisted. bell hooks uses the phrase “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” throughout her body of work and describes these as “interlocking systems of domination that define our reality” (“Cultural Criticism and Transformation” 7). This phrase succinctly describes the various intersecting forms of oppression and exploitation we may encounter and acknowledges that “all of these things are functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives” (“Cultural Criticism and Transformation” 7). Understanding that these systems of oppression affect us concurrently, in our complex identities as Black women, and especially queer and trans Black women, we bear the collective brunt. In “Tings Tough” I explored the effects that we experience as we exist within such systems including anxiety, depression, burn out and much more. In order to engage a framework of restorative resistance, it is often necessary to reframe how we approach rest and joy in our lives.

As we learned from Tricia Hersey of the Nap Ministry, we must reposition rest as a necessity rather than a reward and move toward releasing the guilt and shame that often accompany rest (Hersey). For those that naturally gravitate towards working, we must be intentional about setting aside time for rest. Especially for Black folks, rest can be a political act — a politics of refusal. “Rest is a form of resistance because it pushes

back against capitalism and white supremacy” (Hersey). We learn from being reared in a capitalist society that we are only as valuable as how much we can produce and the amount of work we can do. With this in mind, It is easy to see how the experience of burn-out has become so common. With the added SBW archetype that we often inhabit as Black women, the effects of this are multiplied and we end up in a cycle of either working or feeling guilty of not working. By resting, we refuse to participate in this system built to destroy us.

As for joy, we must develop an understanding of how to create it in our lives and why it is important for us on an individual level. Tanya Denise Fields shares her experience saying “I embraced joy as my birthright. Radical black joy is inherent as a human need and not some special trinket you get after you rise high enough on the social-economic ladder or unlock some special level of desirability or accomplishment.” It is important to be intentional in recognizing, acknowledging and cataloguing moments of joy. In reflecting on the conversations that we shared, small moments of joy were the most meaningful in the grand scheme. This mostly included activities and moments based in connection and interactions with loved ones. These moments look different for each person, so intentionality is important in recognizing and finding what brings joy to any one person. There is also a mindfulness required to really feel the additive positive effect, otherwise, these experiences seem to carry much less meaning and impact in the sum of our lives.

After we learn the importance of joy and rest in our lives, how we can heal from a past in which we starved ourselves of such basic needs? bell hooks tells us that the

answer to this question is love — “It is essential to our struggle for self-determination that we speak of love, as love is the necessary foundation enabling us to survive the wars, the hardships, and the sickness and the dying with our spirits intact” (*Teaching Critical Thinking* 176). hooks also tells us that “The one person who will never leave us, whom we will never lose, is ourself. Learning to love our female selves is where our search for love must begin” (*Communion* 163). And in this conversation about love and loving ourselves we learn from Joan Morgan that “Perhaps one of the most loving things sisters can do for themselves is to erase this tired obligation of super-strength. Instead, let’s claim our God/dess-given right to imperfections and vulnerability” (181). We must be easier on ourselves, we must be kinder. We must find the softness as a counterbalance to strength and cultivate this part of our being. I believe that this is how we move from an existence framed by survival to one full of life.

Lastly, we ask the question: how can we recover? This question is complex and almost impossible to answer for more than one person at a time because this process will look different for each of us. However, I believe that through utilizing a framework of restorative resistance, we can create individualized pathways to recovery. While we can certainly begin a process of recovery, It is important to understand that this is an ongoing journey as we will experience continual exposure to oppressive structures and systems. This framework is intended to propose the integration of restorative forms of resistance to offer moments of reprieve that in turn create space for reflection. It is not intended to increase our capacity to work but rather prioritizes the health and well-being of the person that utilizes it.

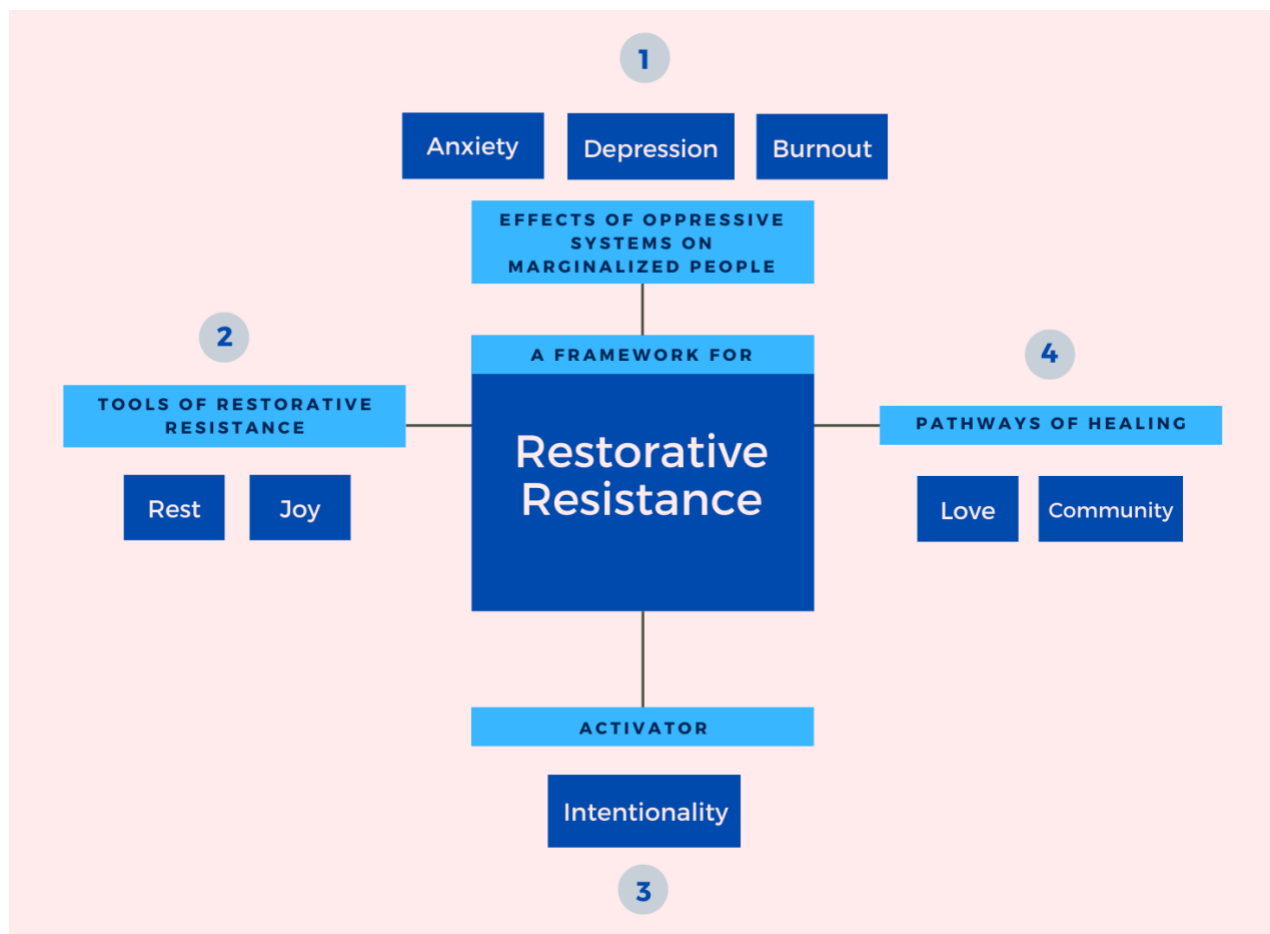


Figure 1 Restorative Resistance Framework by Gio Swaby, 2022

1. As marginalized people, we experience various effects of oppressive systems on our mental and physical health.
2. In order to care for ourselves in response to these systems, we can utilize tools of restorative resistance such as rest and joy.
3. Once tools of restorative resistance are engaged, an activator of intentionality is necessary for their effectiveness.
4. Pathways of healing are centred in love (for oneself and for others) and community (a support system to receive from and contribute to).

In Dedication to You

A Journey Through

Through this program, I built upon my existing skillset in textiles and delved deeper into several areas of exploration through two main series of artworks.



Figure 2 Another Side to Me 1, by Gio Swaby, 2020. Thread Sewn onto Canvas.

24" x 36".

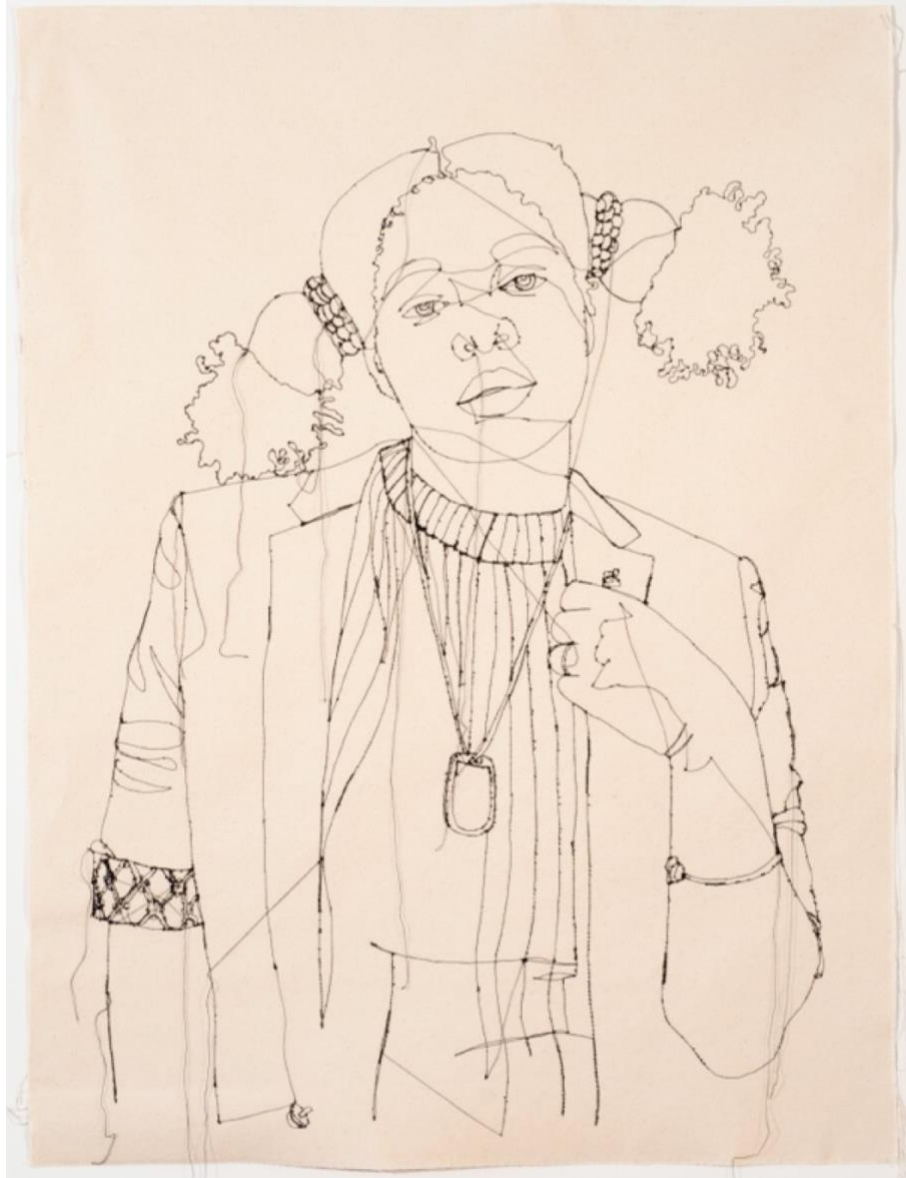


Figure 3 Another Side to Me 2, by Gio Swaby, 2020. Thread Sewn onto Canvas.
24" x 36".

Another Side to Me was the first series of works in which I began to explore showcasing the reverse side of the stitching. I had always held a particular fascination with the underside of my stitched portraits but until this series, I had never shared that with viewers. As I thought more about showcasing the work in this way, I recognized it

connected with my explorations of vulnerability and how to represent it. The underside of these stitched portraits show tangles, knots and other imperfections in the stitching that are not visible on the front. As a maker, I am essentially sharing the true process of creation, that is not as perfectly polished and tidy and as the regular final product. To me, the underside of the stitching more closely resembles our experience as human beings. This ties directly to the embrace of imperfection that I explore through portraiture — I am highlighting the beauty of imperfection. This also connects to Roxane Gay's teaching on bad feminism — embracing the duality of our nature and understanding the beautiful fallibility that comes with being human. We can be better versions of ourselves when we understand that we are capable of error. It means that we are can keep ourselves open to learning and growing.



Figure 4 Love Letter 5 by Gio Swaby, 2020. Thread and Fabric Sewn onto Canvas.

36" x 84".



Figure 5 Love Letter 6 by Gio Swaby, 2020. Thread and Fabric Sewn onto Canvas.

36" x 84".

I have always struggled to communicate my feelings and I think this stems from growing up in a household where we didn't talk much about feelings. It has been a big undertaking to unlearn this behaviour and I am very much still on that journey. Last year, I began to explore ways in which I could learn to better express myself and communicate the love I felt for the people in my life. I started a practice of writing love letters because I found the written word more approachable than verbal communication. As a visual artist, I immediately thought about how I would interpret this visually. In the *Love Letter* series, these works serve as a dedication to the women that I have represented — It pays tribute our connection and mutual love. While it is an expression of love to the women I am representing but also to a larger network of Black women that look at this portraits and see versions of themselves. I chose to forgo detailed features as seen in *Another Side to Me* in favour of silhouetted shapes. This allows for a greater opportunity for that moment of recognition in the viewer, to more easily see themselves reflected in this portrait. I also believe that it still remains true to the individual represented by capturing their body language and personal style.

Seeing You Through Her and Me: The Exhibition

For my thesis exhibition I created five portraits, one of each woman I interviewed and one self portrait. These works are titled "Seeing You Through Her and Me" followed by a colon and the name of the woman the work represents and is dedicated to. For the purposes of this project, the code names were used for each sitter. Visually, this series draws elements from both the *Another Side to Me* series and the *Love Letter* series.

From *Another Side to Me*, the same style of stitched line drawing is used to create the body of the figure. *Seeing You Through Her and Me* (SYTHM) is about representing the individual experiences of each woman and for this reason, I chose to use the more detailed line drawing for the body of the figure. This work also showcases the underside of the stitching as is seen in SYTHM.

As in *Love Letter*, SYTHM shows the full body of each figure and is represented in life-size. It was important for the figures to be life-sized in order to occupy the space in the same way they might if they were present in person. When thinking about connections with the viewer, I also think that relating to a representation that is life-sized is easier; it is as if you could almost literally step into that person's shoes. I also represented the clothing in each piece with patterned cotton fabrics as I did in *Love Letter*.

The fabrics I chose for each person were a reflection of the conversation we had, stories told to me and parts of their personality gleaned from this conversation and our

overall relationship. I am trying to capture some of their essence through these fabric choices. As I piece together the fabric on canvas, I piece together the fabric of our lives.



Figure 6 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Rhonda by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. 60" x 78".

Rhonda's portrait utilizes strong bold patterns because she indicated this strength and inclination towards bold choices in her style as an integral part of her personality. I immediately felt her energy radiating brightly before our conversation even began.



Figure 7 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Jela by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. 60" x 78".

I chose softer, pastel colours for the top layer of Jela's outfit. She explained that she is calm and reserved on the outside. I made use of a bolder orange for her inner layer, relating to her expression of being passionate and fiery underneath.



Figure 8 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Betty by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. 48" x 84".

This is the second time I've photographed Betty and there was a notable difference in the way she moved through this photography session. She was more confident and energetic in her movements and postures. I wanted to reflect this shift through the brightness and boldness of the jacket and hat fabrics. Her romper underneath is a more muted green; strong, earthy and calm. This honours her journey of coming to a more peaceful and grounded place in her life.



Figure 9 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Brenda by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. 60" x 78".

In Brenda's piece, I have incorporated colours of the ocean, blues and greens that pay homage to her special connection to the ocean and the peace she feels there. I also utilized brighter colours and patterns on some items of clothing to acknowledge the brighter future she sees just up ahead for herself.



Figure 10 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Gio by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. 48" x 84".

For my own portrait, I wanted to honour and acknowledge my personal and familial history; it is an origin story in some ways. I used the hummingbird print for my jumpsuit to honour my father and represent his childhood connection to the bird. I chose a blue fabric for my jacket to honour my mother through her lifelong signature colour and special love for the ocean. The converse I wear represent my journey of self-discovery. Converse were the first shoes that I chose and bought for myself and signified a journey of finding my own path.

In every portrait, I utilized poses sitting, lounging or reclining to establish a sense of comfort for the sitter. There is something affirming and grounding about being closer to

the earth and making contact with it. When photographing each woman, I also sat on the floor to be at eye level with them. I think this helped in establishing the connection between us as well as their connection to the camera. This also connects to the restorative resistance frameworks. These women are physically in repose relating to our conversations on rest.

I thought a lot about how the figures would occupy space. I wanted the women represented in these works to unapologetically claim their space and for this reason, I chose a horizontal orientation for these works. Vertical pieces with the same measurements placed side by side would occupy much less on a wall when we place the works side by side. Orienting horizontally demands the monumentality of a large wall space. This grandiose nature of the space occupied is in contrast to the kind of gentleness captured in delicate hand movements or the softer expressions on the face. It highlights a duality that I explore in the series — strength alongside vulnerability existing in balance and harmony.

How You Make That Bey?

I approached my making process in the same way that I approached the interviews for this project — with an open heart and mind. I opened up compassion and understanding for myself with the knowledge that this physical process can be hard on my body and I must respect my limits. When things took longer than expected or were more difficult than expected, I reminded myself that this is about learning and growing and sometimes that feels uncomfortable.

The first step in my physical making practice was to draw a sketch of the portrait I eventually stitched and appliquéd with fabric. All lines shown on these pieces are created by stitching thread onto canvas and the coloured portion of the work is made using fabric. Using heat erasable markers, I drew the figure onto the canvas including most of the lines and detail. These guide lines are removed once the stitching is complete.

Next, I began stitching the parts of the figure that consisted only of line work. These portraits are stitched on a long arm sewing machine. I chose a sit-down, table version of this machine rather than one that uses a frame. With the sewing machine on the frame, you control the movement of the machine using handles and move the machine itself to create stitches. With the sit-down version, the machine stays stationary and the fabric is moved around under the needle to create stitches. I feel more connected to my work when I can come into direct contact with the fabric and I choose to use the sit-down version for this reason. As seen in the *Another Side to Me* series, the stitching shown on

these pieces is actually the underside. When I am stitching, I cannot see what this looks like underneath. Many of the imperfections on the underside are unpredictable and I like to say that it leaves some space to collaborate with the universe in my process.

Next, I traced each piece of clothing onto interfacing using pencil. These pieces of interfacing, now in the shapes of the clothing items worn by the sitter, are then attached to various pieces of patterned cotton fabrics; a different fabric for each piece of clothing. I added detail to these pieces and removed them from the realm of silhouette by stitching the lines, wrinkles, folds, buttons, etc. This is also stitched in such a way that the underside of the stitching is what is shown in the final physical work. The interfacing was removed from these pieces by tearing, cutting and tweezing and these clothing pieces were then stitched onto the larger canvas.

Once all of the stitching was complete and the pieces of patterned fabrics were in place, each piece was ironed several times to remove any bunching and wrinkles created in the sewing process. At this point, I decide on the final size of the piece. I waited till near the end of the process to do this to ensure that when I looked at the finished piece, that the figure had enough canvas space to occupy without feel constricted and boxed in. I also wanted to make sure that the space was not too expansive and overpowering in comparison to the figure. Once I decided the size, I cut down the excess canvas leaving some additional length all around for stretching.

The final step was to stretch the artworks. I chose to have these works stretched not only in consideration of conservation, but also as a nod to traditional practices of embroidery that are stretched across a hoop to embroider by hand.

Tell Me A Story: The Portrait as a Tool of Resistance

As a Black woman artist whose work is about representing Black women, my practice automatically becomes political in nature. It is not a reality I seek to escape but rather, I intentionally engage with these aspects of my work. Mickalene Thomas has said that “I define my work as a feminist act and a political act because I'm Black and a woman... the act of making art itself is a political and feminist act when you're a woman” (Street). In addition to the act of art making as political, I am also positioning the portrait in the context of my practice as a tool of resistance.

In my practice, I am exploring the complexity of identity through portraiture and representing contemporary experiences of Blackness and womanhood. This is an undertaking that I understand carries a large responsibility considering our complex histories. In an interview with the Hirshorn Museum, Deborah Roberts said that “having one’s identity dismantled, marginalized and regulated to non-human status demands action” (Hankins). I have chosen to take action, like Roberts, through my practice as an artist. Before creating any physical works, I prioritize the process of connecting with the people I am representing. I want to be sure that I can represent them in a way that is honest and layered. I want to reclaim the space to define ourselves and it is crucial in this process of rebuilding for Black people to have our stories told by us and for us. I see the portraits I create as tools of resistance to white supremacy because they are created through a practice rooted in love. These pieces visibilize everyday Black women without prerequisites. Contrary to what we have learned through teachings rooted in colonialism and white supremacy, these women do not need to exist in extremes of

greatness or struggle to be honoured and cared for. I am opening up space for them to be just as they are.

The physical portraits I create are also strongly connected to what has been historically categorized as women's work— quilting, sewing and embroidery. These practices, especially quilting, are community based and founded on principles of care. Especially in the context of Blackness and womanhood, these forms of creation have always been anti-colonial in nature. They operate outside of colonial ways of knowing and make space for traditions like story-telling and knowledge passed down by word of mouth. This is part of the reason I chose not to record the conversations I held with Betty, Brenda, Jela and Rhonda. I wanted to honour this history and its connection to my work. This part of the process was for us and not meant to be shared in its full form. I believe that it is necessary to keep some things sacred and just for ourselves.

Faith Ringgold, a pioneer and foremother in the field of textile portraits has commented at length on her reasoning for working in textiles. In an interview from 1975, Ringgold passionately proclaims “who said that art is oil painting stretched on canvas with art frames? I didn't say that. Nobody who ever looked like me said that, so why the hell am I doing it? So I just stopped; and now I do sewing and all kinds of things. Sewing has been traditionally what all women in all cultures have done. What's wrong with that?...Feminist art is soft art, lightweight art, sewing art. This is the contribution women have made that is uniquely theirs” (Author). Ringgold indicates that textile art is feminist in nature, which aligns to my overall approach to this work that is rooted in Black

feminist theory. I do not shy away from associations with women's work or domesticity. In fact, I embrace and celebrate these qualities of my work that connect me to a lineage of powerful women.

Connections and Reflections

Across The Road or Across The Water, I Feel You

Poem No. 4

You call me
“sister”
not because you are my blood
but because
you understand
the kind of tragedies
we both have endured
to come back into loving
ourselves
again
&
again

(Ijeoma Umebinyuo 66)

In 2014 during my first year in Canada, I had to have an emergency appendectomy. It was only matter of minutes between arriving in the waiting room and being told I would need surgery right away. My partner and best friend got there shortly after and I was breaking down — which for me looked like unusual calmness and excessive dark humour. They knew me well enough to know I was afraid and comforted me in the best ways they knew how. One moment in particular has stayed with me in vivid clarity from that day. My hair was in an afro and I knew it would become extraordinarily matted and tangled through my recovery without a protective style. Perhaps in the way only another Black woman could, as if sensing my thoughts without a verbal cue, my friend began to part my hair and put it into two large cornrows. This moment of connection between us illustrated more than just a decade long friendship, but an intimate shared knowledge that can almost exclusively be acquired only through the lived experience of Blackness and womanhood. She reached out to me through an act of love that maybe only we could understand as such and I felt the warm embrace of support, without even a word.

Betty mentioned in our conversation that she feels a strong camaraderie with other women, especially Black women and that she experiences a specific joy in forming these connections. In *Eloquent Rage*, Brittney Cooper declares that “friendships with Black girls have always saved my life” (14). There is a shared bond between Black women shaped through our often mirrored and overlapping lived experiences. I feel a safe space with other Black women, here, I experience a freedom to be myself, without pretense or explanation. Brenda spoke about her time as a student in the UK and that her friendships with Black women were a defining aspect of her positive experience

there. While these relationships are built upon mutual support and the relief of being understood, they are also underscored by joy and sisterhood. Of course, this is not always the case. After all, we are complex beings and sometimes the commonalities are just not enough and other factors such as personal beliefs, interests, family and lifestyle come into play. However, when I reflect on the core and extended support systems in my life, most of them are made up of Black women and girls. There is a special comfort in being understood without always having to explain and it is a true honour to be able to offer the same in return. It is a connection rooted in reciprocity.

In addition to the shared experience of Blackness and womanhood, there is also a cultural context by which connections are formed. Rhonda shared a story with me about a woman in a grocery store in The Bahamas stopping to pray for her, completely unprompted because she was wearing all black with heavy eyeliner. Rhonda ended this retelling with “you know how people go in Nassau” and I did know. Many Bahamians are extremely religious and practice almost radical forms of Christianity. It is not out of the ordinary for a stranger to attempt an impromptu exorcism based on your choice of wardrobe. She didn’t need to explain this to me, so with a mutual understanding, we could get to the heart of the matter and discuss her reaction and feelings. Living in Canada for the last eight years has certainly increased my awareness and excitement around these kind of interactions. I’ve nearly given myself whiplash more than a few times whirling around to discover the source of the familiar cadence of a Bahamian dialect. It does more than remind me of home, it strengthens the connections to my own memories and experiences of home. It begins to break down some of the isolation and

homesickness and in its place comes a rush of comfort. Home is closer that I realized and I'm back in my grammy's yard eating a mango straight from the tree, still warm from the sun.

There is a poem by Ijeoma Umebinyuo titled "Diaspora Blues" that perfectly encapsulates the experience of having two homes, the country where you grew up and the country where you grew older. It goes "So, here you are / too foreign for home / too foreign for here. / Never enough for both" (175). You exist in an in-between space. Is it possible to have two homes? If I can only choose one, then, which do I choose? Betty and I spoke of our experiences of moving to Canada. We exchanged stories of culture shock and the difficulty we both had in acclimating. We talked about returning home and what it felt like to be away for longer than we ever had. It is a strange sensation of feeling like you occupy two bodies, one that never left The Bahamas and one that has, shifting back and forth like the tides. I've been working on combining the two to form one whole self, which is a lot easier said than done. After spending eight years code switching in order to assimilate in Canada, it is not so easy to retrain my tongue to use my Bahamian dialect at all times.

Between Betty and I, our experiences contrasted in many ways, but we did agree on the cruciality of creating and maintaining friendships with other Black women. Betty explained that when she lived in The Bahamas, she took some of those relationships for granted. It was also almost a given that most of her friends were Black women because of the racial demographics of The Bahamas. She described recognizing the importance

of connecting with Black women after spending some time in Vancouver. She realized that she could not relate to other women in the same way and she felt an emptiness and longing without that connection. I could certainly relate and thought about this in a cultural context as well. There is a strong cultural tether to be felt and more easily maintained in the regular presence of other Bahamians. I feel that those parts of me might just float away forever if I could not come home every day and speak freely with my partner in my own dialect and hear it spoken back to me. I couldn't imagine not being able to share the excitement of finding conch in Toronto with Betty when we stumbled across of Bahamian restaurant on Instagram. We never need to find our way home because home is here with us, reflected through the other.

Seeing You Through Her and Me

Some of my fondest early memories of my mother are those in which we sewed together. We would make doll clothes from old socks and scraps of fabric and they were some of my most cherished items. We grew a special bond through sewing. None of my other siblings ever really took a strong interest and even as a child, I could feel how excited she was to share this practice that she had been developing since her own childhood. My mother most often expressed her love and dedication through actions rather than words and sewing with me became an extraordinary act of love. At an early age, I grew to associate this practice of sewing with love. Using my mother as an example, I recognized the ways in which love can be illustrated and communicated through textiles. After her passing in 2020, it was difficult for me to approach my textile practice because I could only think of her loss. When I reframed this practice as a portal of connection to her, my practice opened up a new way for me to honour her legacy and our beautiful memories together. Considering my personal history with textiles, it felt natural to use this medium as an expression of love in my practice.

With this approach to textiles in mind, I am very specific about the representations of Blackness I choose to produce. We are regularly fed images through various forms of media of Black people experiencing extraordinary violence, suffering and trauma. In *All About Love*, bell hooks reminds us that “even though some individual scholars try to tell us there is no direct connection between images of violence and the violence confronting us in our lives, the commonsense truth remains — we are all affected by the images we consume” (127). I wholeheartedly believe this to be true and use my practice

as a tool to counteract such images. I am creating moments where we can see ourselves, as ordinary people, empowered through loving and thoughtful representation. In each instance, we see ourselves and our loved ones reflected and the negative or positive effect that we experience becomes amplified when we can identify with the image and the person in the image that we see.



Figure 11 Mother and Daughter Observing "Love Letter 5" at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 2021.



Figure 12 Mother Photographing Daughter Posing with “Love Letter 3” by Gio Swaby at Claire Oliver Gallery, 2020.



Figure 13 Mother and Daughter Posing with "Love Letter 6" by Gio Swaby at Claire Oliver Gallery, 2020.



Figure 14 Woman Photographing Friend with “Pretty Pretty 9” by Gio Swaby at Claire Oliver Gallery, 2020.

In creating these portraits, I am offering a space of relief, comfort and joy for Black viewers. In this way, the work continues into the gallery space where these pieces are shown. It is at this point social media becomes a useful tool in my practice. I often receive feedback through the forms of images of people posing alongside the works I

have created or messages about the experience they had in connecting my work. The feedback I receive, especially from Black women and girls is the most gratifying experience of my practice — more than institutional or professional critic feedback, my work is bolstered by these beautiful moments. This work is only possible by first forming connections, listening and learning from the people I intend to represent in order to construct representations that are layered, nuanced and full of life. hooks says that “loving Blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life” (*Black Looks* 20). Loving and celebrating Blackness is at the core of my work, and through my practice, I hope to contribute to a future of prosperous Black life.

When I think about why I do the work that I do, I think about who the work is for. My audience is first and foremost Black women and girls. They are the subject as well as the intended viewers of my work. This does not bar others from enjoying my work, but to establish and maintain the purpose and direction of practice. I am connected to a legacy of women that began this work before me: Faith Ringgold, Rosie Lee Tompkins, Xenobia Bailey, Bisa Butler, and so many more. I take a cue from Audre Lorde in remembering that “...my work is part of a continuum of women's work, of reclaiming this earth and our power, and knowing that this work did not begin with my birth nor will it end with my death” (Lorde 10). Working with textiles contributes to a long-standing conversation about what is considered art. Works that are made primarily with textiles have often historically been excluded from this category, in part because of their strong

connection to domesticity and work that is firmly connected to womanhood. My practice does not shy away from these connections or deny them in any way. In fact, I want to embrace and celebrate the historical context of the material that I am using. That comes into play for my work conceptually as well as in form. A part of my work is honouring the unseen and often under-appreciated labour connected to womanhood and to use my work as a way to pay tribute and show gratitude for that labor.

In my practice, I must also take into account the historical exclusion of Black people from the very spaces in which my artworks are now shown. If my work is for people like me, I must remember that before I studied art in college, I had never set foot into an art gallery or museum. I approach this work and world as an outsider and for this very reason, accessibility and approachability are crucial to my practice. This is evidenced by my choice to work primarily in textiles, a material that is so deeply interwoven in our everyday lives. The fabric and thread used in my work are the same fabrics used to make clothing, bedding and many other everyday household items. This adds a layer of approachability to the work for a wider scope of viewers. In constructing this part of my practice, I am particularly inspired by bell hooks, referred to as “one of America’s most accessible public intellectuals” (Jhally 1). I learned from hooks that it is not necessary to trade intricacy for approachability, they can coexist with a delicate and intentional balance.

We often hear the phrase “representation matters” and it is important for me to outline this expression within the context of my practice. I believe that through

representation, we gain the ability to see ourselves in ways we hadn't thought possible — it grants us the power to imagine. In *Feminism is For Everybody* bell hooks asks an important question: "How can you become what you cannot imagine?" (152) I deeply connected to this thought in the sense that we may not know what is possible unless we witness it. Witnessing is only a portion of the equation, the effect is immeasurably intensified when we can see ourselves reflected. Representation is important because it gives us hope and it encourages us to dream, bigger and bigger each time. What is the point of painstakingly beating down your path if it closes right behind you? I want Black girls to look at my work and see someone that looks like them, taking up space, unapologetically, confident and bold. I hope that they leave with this energy and perhaps choose to harness it for themselves later. hooks also tells us that "when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn to other bearers of light. We are not alone" (*All About Love* 133). I want my life and my work to be a light that shines and for Black girls to feel that warmth.

When I think about why I make the work that I make, I think about a quote from Toni Morrison. "It has been said that someone asked Toni Morrison why she writes the kind of books she writes, and that she replied: Because they are the kind of books I want to read" (Walker 26). With my practice, I am putting into the world more of what I wish to see and should have seen throughout my life.

I See You

I want you to know, that I see you. I see you in the full glory of your existence, apart from the flattened narrative systematically imposed upon us. I see you, both soft and strong, vulnerable and powerful. I see you, bright and beautiful, perfectly imperfect, nuanced and complex. I want you to have the space to be just who you are, unapologetically and without explanation. I want us to thrive, to rest, to be joyful, to love and be loved without limitations. I open this space for you, free of expectation and with room to grow. Your very existence is proof of your capacity for healing. I celebrate your journey and honour your perseverance; I also imagine a future that does not always call upon us to access such parts of ourselves. Together, let us exhale and release all notions that we are not good enough. We are worthy of it all.

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Appendix A: Exhibition Documentation



Figure 15 Exhibition View



Figure 16 Exhibition View



Figure 17 Exhibition View



Figure 18 Exhibition View



Figure 19 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Rhonda by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. 60" x 78".



Figure 20 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Rhonda by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. Detail.



Figure 21 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Rhonda by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. Detail.



Figure 22 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Brenda by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. 60" x 78".



Figure 23 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Brenda by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. Detail.



Figure 24 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Brenda by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. Detail.



Figure 25 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Jela by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. 60" x 78".



Figure 26 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Jela by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. Detail.



Figure 27 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Jela by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. Detail.



Figure 28 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Gio by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. 48" x 84".



Figure 29 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Gio by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. Detail.



Figure 30 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Gio by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. Detail.



Figure 31 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Betty by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. 48" x 84".



Figure 32 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Betty by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. Detail.



Figure 33 Seeing You Through Her and Me: Betty by Gio Swaby. 2022, Fabric and Thread Sewn onto Canvas. Detail.

Appendix B: Resistance, Refusal

During my defense, the external examiner, Alyssa Fearon asked me to consider my usage of the words “resistance” and “tool”, expressing the importance of these considerations, especially in the context of an art practice that centres of explorations of Blackness and womanhood.

The Practicing Refusal Collective describes their practice as “a refusal to accept black precarity as inevitable, and a refusal to embrace the terms of diminished subjecthood through which black subjects are presented. We seek instead to develop strategies for confronting black fungibility and creating alternative possibilities for living otherwise” (Bradley et al, “The Sojourner Project”). As I understand it, refusal pushes further than resistance in that it completely withdraws participation in oppressive structures. Refusal places focus on developing supportive pathways for Black existence rather than our positioning Blackness in relation to whiteness. Refusal offers the opportunity to imagine an existence without boundaries instead of analyzing how we can function within a system that was never built to accommodate us in the first place. This is in line with my explorations of creating individualized and nuanced representations of Black women. To be our true and full selves is, in itself a refusal to uphold values rooted in white supremacy that encourage self-hate. This work is about reaching towards love and it may be that refusal is the best route to this.

Regarding my usage of the word “tool” in relationship to the portrait, I was asked to consider how I could work outside of this language and move toward more community

centred thinking so as to avoid positioning my practice within a capitalist framework. Much of the way I approached this work was with the intention to de-centre forms of knowledge production and sharing that are rooted in colonialism. I focused on storytelling in my writing, kept my interview process informal and unrecorded and worked with textiles to create the physical portraits. There is certainly room to explore how I could further this work by being even more intentional and careful with my language. Thinking of the portrait as a tool of resistance is also at odds with explorations of rest because of how the term “tool” is so heavily connected to labour. Perhaps there is space to explore these portraits outside of this framework — perhaps they can be just what they are, a gesture of love and care intended to generate joy and community.

Overall, I feel that there is always room to expand our thinking and ideas around any subject. I will continue to explore these pathways in my practice, and I will also continue with an openness in my approach to learning. It is important to understand that what we know to be true at any given time can change and evolve just as much as we do as human beings.