

From Politics to Post, and Other Idioms in Contemporary Black Art:
A Look at Postrace

by

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Abstract

The term “postrace” has emerged in recent years as both a theoretical and sociological construct, but as yet has been little discussed in relation to cultural production, specifically visual art. This thesis reviews the terminology, theory and issues that shaped the production and reception of Black art in the past century as it leads to the current discourse of postrace in the Obama era. My research investigates how art, discourse and politics interrelate to form the context for Black artists' production. Through the case studies of watershed exhibitions such as the *1993 Whitney Biennial* (1993), *Freestyle* (2001) *Documenta 11* (2002), and *Afro-Modern* (2010), I analyze the implications of terms such as “identity politics,” “post-black,” “creolization” and, most importantly, “postrace” in relation to recent and contemporary Black art.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2010 I attended the third incarnation of P.S.1's "Greater New York Show" in New York City. Of the works by the sixty-nine artists, I found one particularly striking: Rashaad Newsome's *Shade Compositions* (2009). It consisted of a video from a previously recorded live performance, which was projected at the far end of a narrow room on the first floor and filled the wall from floor to ceiling. Newsome's video was composed of live performances of sounds and gestures that were looped and layered. The performance began with a soundtrack: a song from nineties all-female RnB group En Vogue. The lyrics "However do you want me? However do you need me?" played *a cappella* as twenty-one Black women took the stage and formed rows distinguishable by the colour of their dress. The artist entered the frame shortly after, sporting a conductor's jacket and a Wii™ controller for a baton. Beginning slowly with a discrete "uh-uh" and followed by a click of the tongue, and later "child please," the Black bodies performed gestures of Blackness with a sway of the neck or a wave of the wrist with a finger snap, rolling eyes, hip sways, and arms folded with contempt. These movements and sounds both reflected both lived Black experience (specifically, a female Black experience), and carried the history of a culture riven by contentious race relations, where I must admit I saw myself.



Figure 1. Rashaad Newsome, *Shade Compositions*, 2009, still from a colour video, 21 minutes 3 seconds.

Newsome's work signaled that something was happening to the interpretation of the word "Black," an interpretation that had been evolving through the culture wars, identity politics and multiculturalism of past decades. A Black man, now in the middle of his first term as president of the United States of America, presides in the Oval Office. Blackness—once deemed invisible and marginal—migrated into the global spotlight. Media outlets, like the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, wrote of a "resurrection of hope,"¹ and "the last racial barrier,"² proposing that race

¹ Michael Eric Dyson, "Race, post race: Barack Obama's historic victory represents a quantum leap in the racial progress of the United States," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2008 (accessed July 9, 2010).

² Adam Nagourney, "Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls," *New York Times*, November 4, 2008 (accessed July 9, 2010).

relations in the United States had changed for the better. From the final quarter of 2008 to the present, Obama advocates and optimists ventured a proposal that America was finally, postrace, that is, beyond antiquated notions of racial inequality. Having a Black president suggested new developments in American (and arguably global) race relations. For decades, a precedent-setting battle for Black visibility and inclusivity had ensued in America, and Obama became a symbol of Black victory.

This political moment of new Black visibility, and the word “postrace,” influenced my reading of Newsome’s work. It provided a suggestion for a new way to interpret race that, for me, felt like a risky conjecture. Though Obama is not the only person mentioned in discussions of postrace, he is a global icon who is acknowledged as the representation of new strides in American Black and White race relations, which in the past fought primarily for visibility and equality.

If this moment of Black visibility affects Black culture, then I ask: How can “postrace” influence the production and reception of Black art and what, if anything, is at stake by aligning “postrace” with contemporary Black art? Understanding Newsome’s work and the implications that postrace might carry requires a reading of past social and political moments that have impacted Black art production and reception. The complex relationships between language (like “postrace”), art (like *Shade Compositions*), and distinct moments in history (like the first Black president of the United States

of America) provide the framework with which to look at the intricacies of Black art. As a term, postrace has yet to be explored in relation to contemporary art. This thesis will apply recent articulations of “postrace” in socio-political contexts to uncover the possible effects on the production and reception of contemporary Black art.

Considering Language

Newsome’s work is only one example in the recent history of American Black art that demonstrates how discourse influences both artistic production and critical interpretation. Events in history, like the current global Black visibility—brought on by Obama and the American media—affect cultural reality and inevitably frame artistic activity. But Black art history is no stranger to new political events and the language it disseminates, all of which affect the reception of artworks.

Language can become a combative tool when connected to issues concerning race. As an instrument, language works through the complexities and paradoxes of contemporary moments and much can be observed by examining the parallel between the evolution of the social and Jean François Lyotard’s description of “language moves,”³ whereby utterances move with shifting perceptions of culture. Interpreting the term “postrace” carries an obligation to understand what the word “Black” means. As I shall be using

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11.

the term, “Black” means to belong to or denote any human group having dark-coloured skin, especially of African ancestry. The term is capitalized when referring to Blackness personified so as not be confused with “black” as a colour and not a marker of racial difference. I also use Black as opposed to hyphenated or hybrid identities like African-American—an overdetermined identity that is formed by a traumatic history and inherited memory.⁴

Acknowledging how language works in relation to Black art is particularly interesting when investigating the potential for a postracial trend. Though connections exist between the cultural formation of the word “postrace” and its application, understanding the etymology, and history of its antecedents, helps to explain the consequences of an application to the discipline of art. A survey of the connection between socio-political shifts and the vernacular of a particular moment in history reveals the potential for disconnected definitions.

In his introduction to *Keywords* (1983), Raymond Williams characterizes the Cold War climate as one disengaged from preceding generations, stating: “the fact is, they just don’t speak the same language.”⁵ Williams observes that language illuminates generational differences, affected by diverse cultural experiences and political climates, and it

⁴ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁵ Raymond Williams, “Introduction,” in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 9.

consistently carries varying definitions through successive generations. The iteration of “culture,” and its specialized features that vary and are specific to disciplines and areas of study, sparked his compilation of a collection of keywords.⁶ Williams noted the difference between defining words and meanings associated and fixed to a particular history, and words that potentially shifted across time and discipline, which were more often debated (e.g., “literature,” “aesthetics,” “class,” “materialism”).⁷ My interest in this “postrace” moment was kindled by my reflecting on a possible shift in how Blackness functions in American culture. I am most interested in the terms’ connection to past generational experiences in relation its recent political application.

The intrinsically hybrid nature of Blackness complicates arguments about an overdetermined Blackness and similarly “Black art.” Henry Louis Gates Jr. reflects on the implications of considering “culture” and its accompanying definitions in *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (2010). If one accepts that culture cannot be static then, as he states, “cultural studies becomes cultural work.”⁸ This work, according to Gates, insists that the study of any one discipline evolves into a rhizome of considerations—history, sociology, religion, and language—

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the Africa Diaspora* (New York: Perseus Books, 2010), 63.

requires ongoing criticality so as not to simply pronounce an occurrence as “cultural,” or a group of people as belonging to a particular “culture.” Here, art—synonymous with culture—and specifically Black art (and Black culture), moves through myriad discourses beyond the aforementioned general categories – including race, literature, and aesthetics.

As expansive as the parameters are for working through nuances of Black art, a look at the language and terms (like “postrace”) at particular moments provides the grounding for an overview of how political and social moments and accompanying language contextualizes Black art. Political events in history situate Black art alongside politics, through which paradoxes materialize within the meaning and subsequent use of words like “identity politics,” “creolization,” and “post-black.” Each term frames a different way of thinking about the relationship between identity and culture.

“Identity politics,” for instance, appeared in the eighties and reflected the consideration of marginalized groups and the survival of identity in refined form.⁹ Alternately, pronouncing that identity is political in fact saves one from, as Gates observes, “having to investigate and to specify precisely how it comes to have political effects of functions and what the nature of

⁹ See, for example Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” 71-88, and Cornel West, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” 19-37, both in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, edited by Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

those effects and functions might be.”¹⁰ This helps gloss over potentially dense components in one general movement.

“Creolization” describes the result of two cultures, but more often it is used in relation to the mixing of languages, usually of the ruling over the ruled. It represents comingling, which creates a hybrid. While creolization embraces the cultural hybrid, it constructs questions around tradition and heritage indicating that if there exists a process of creolization, there must be a pure or original form.¹¹

The term “post-black,” used specifically in relation to art at the turn of the twenty-first century, signifies an idea that Blackness no longer defines positionalities.¹² Although it may be attached to someone or something Black, it proposes to be free of a Black historical obligation to avow.¹³ It is important to understand past terms used in relation to Black art, and to recall them to inform any new developments in the discourse.

¹⁰ Ibid., 123.

¹¹ See, for example Frantz Fanon, “On Language” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), and Stuart Hall, “Créolité and the Process of Creolization,” in *Documenta Platform 3*, edited by Okwui Enwezor (2003) 27-41.

¹² Curator Thelma Golden and artist Glenn Ligon claim to have coined the term, specifically in relation to Black art and Black artists, and it was explained and explored at length in *Freestyle* (2001) at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

¹³ “Diaspora,” too, is included in the expansive language that frames Blackness or Black art. Though meant to be inclusive to a global population that identifies as Black or African, it is predominantly theorized, and locates itself on American and British soil thus, generalizing the varying experiences and omitting the diasporic populations of say, their neighbours to the North. See, Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

To use these words is to propose a new reality, based on their definitions, while suggesting a move beyond, or possibly a veiling of components, of the past. In the art world, these terms illustrate the invisibility and inclusivity of Black voices in the discourse of art and institutions by inserting issues of race and marginality by way of cultural observations. The term “postrace” is another word that shifts the nature of race relations, but it has a very short and recent history.

Postrace Obamanation

The direct context for viewing Newsome’s work is the socio-political environment of postrace as represented by the election of Barack Obama. The term “postrace” has been theorized as a political ideology or strategy, and much of the literature roots itself in sociological studies of race in America.¹⁴ The prefix “post” links postrace to other discourses that overcome something like postmodernism and post-colonialism. More recently “postrace” serves as an ideology for the current social and political American environment and implies that skin colour no longer justifies discrimination.

“Postrace” proposes to move beyond the contentious history of the construction of race, not by any one person but by the very origin of the word. “Race” established a scientific classification of humans and provided

¹⁴ The sociological study conducted by Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (1994) which organized the distribution of government resources in relation to racial categories – concluding in the end that there will always be disparities – has been widely reference in work that explores the effects or possibilities of a postrace reality.

the grounding for an imperial rationale for distinction between high and low cultural participants or European and the Other.¹⁵ Postrace, or postracism as Ken Ono refers to it, is a “politically driven fantasy that repudiates the history of race relations.”¹⁶ Instead, it replaces the racism of the past with a suggestion that race relations in America have improved.¹⁷

As a sign of a postracial America, Barack Obama has become the default example, though there exist various views of an Obama postracialism. He represents the grounding for new projections of race relations, for both sides of the argument, either for or against the idea.¹⁸ In a speech delivered at the Democratic National Convention, Obama pronounced: “There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America.”¹⁹ Revered for championing a colourblind America and working to unify a nation of disparate populations,

¹⁵ Haller, Jr., John S, “Concepts of Race Inferiority in Nineteenth-Century Anthropology,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 1(1970): 40-51.

¹⁶ Ken A. Ono, “Postracism: A Theory of the ‘Post’- as a political strategy,” in Brouwer et als, “What is this ‘Post’- in Postracial, Postfeminist...(Fill in the Blank)? *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no.3 (2010): 224.

¹⁷ Ken A. Ono, “Postracism: A Theory of the ‘Post’- as a political strategy,” in Brouwer et als, “What is this ‘Post’- in Postracial, Postfeminist...(Fill in the Blank)? *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no.3 (2010).

¹⁸ See for example, Matthew Bigg, “Obama Win Does Not End Racism, Activists Say,” *Reuters* (November 6, 2008), Uzodinma Iweala, “Race Still Matters: Obama’s Success Doesn’t Mean That America is ‘Post-racial’,” *Los Angeles Times* (January 23, 2009), Pamela Merritt, “Post-racial America? Dream On: The Anti-Obama Birther Movement and the Arrest of Henry Louis Gates Proves America is Still Charged with Issues of Race,” *The Guardian* (August 1, 2009).

¹⁹ Transcript: Illinois Senate Candidate Barack Obama, *The Washington Post*, July 27, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19751-2004Jul27.html> (accessed March 1, 2011).

Obama has also been accused of turning his back on minority communities.²⁰

The dangers of turning one's back on race, as articulated by Sumi Cho, Professor of Law at DePaul University College in Obama's hometown of Chicago, lie in the false promises of ideology:

First, post-racialism obscures the centrality of race and racism in society. Second, it more effectively achieves what the Racial Backlash movement sought to do over two decades ago—forge a national consensus around the retreat from race-based remedies on the basis that the racial eras of the past have been and should be transcended. Third, post-racialism as an ideology serves to reinstate an unchallenged white normativity. Post-racialism is fast becoming the “race card” of whites, deployed with obligatory reference to Barack Obama's presidency in an effort to trump the moral high ground held by survivors of racial discrimination in a country with centuries of racial injustice and inequality. Finally, post-racialism denigrates collective Black political organization.²¹

Cho argues that, although the ideology may appeal to a range of actors, mostly political, the risks outweigh the theoretical benefits. As a strategic position, it glosses over race in the ideological realm however, its application produces real consequences in the social and cultural arenas.

One such example can be found in the fashion world. French fashion house *Lanvin* created a buzz with their 2011 show at Paris fashion week. The buzz: five Black models in long, floral-patterned, silk dresses closed the show

²⁰ (no author listed) “Black Caucus Turns Up Heat On Obama,” *The Washington Times*, December 11, 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/dec/11/black-caucus-turns-up-heat-on-obama/> (accessed March 1, 2011).

²¹ Sumi Cho, “Post-Racialism,” *Iowa Law Review* 94(5): 1593.

by walking down the runway together. The reviews that observed the all-Black model finale, like that of *Washington Post* journalist Robin Givhan, described uneasiness in the room following a round of applause.²² Five Black bodies, on stage for all to see, and the crowd was unsure whether to stand and applaud or leave in their normal swarm. The fashion world blogged about it, some about how more fashion houses need to include Black models, others chose— in what seems to be a strategic move—not to acknowledge the oddity at all. The *Lanvin* five represent a contemporaneous example to my own experience with Newsome's *Shade Compositions*. These displays of Blackness within a year of each other create a sense that the interpretation of "Black" may need to be revisited to reflect a current political ideology.

Race and Art

As I discussed with Newsome's work, it is difficult to separate race from artwork that displays contemporary interpretations of Blackness. Within the discipline of Art, practices responding to "postrace" should, by definition, reject the legitimacy of race as a descriptor or subject position, but proposing the invalidity of race repositions it as a delineation of both the present and the past. Blackness, then, becomes something recognizable and tethered to a short Black history: displacement, injustice, the Civil Rights Movement, or: all of the events that took place in a span of time that Okwui Enwezor refers to

²² Robin Givhan, "Why Fashion Keeps Tripping Over Race" *NYMag*, February 13, 2011 <http://nymag.com/fashion/11/spring/71654/> (accessed February 13, 2011).

as “the short century,”²³ 1945-1992—a time period framed by Black liberation movements. When defined by this history, Black signifies a constant struggle against oppressors, and makes them subject to cultural racism, i.e. a lack of visibility and critical discourse around Black contributions to culture, and an obvious exclusion from cultural institutions.²⁴ As articulated by Adrian Piper, art and literature serve as vectors to combat Black cultural racism and as criticisms that question whether art should or can be labeled as “Black.” Piper also suggests that Black culture may benefit from such distinctions as a unified Black aesthetic.²⁵ There exist divisions and unequal opportunities for exhibiting work, but Black art, strengthened by recognizable qualities, has a discernable group of Black cultural producers.

The theory of a Black aesthetic assumes that Black artists and audiences share immediate responses to art, and a shared sensibility amongst Black diasporic populations, such as vernacular, hair, food, and dress.²⁶ Art historian Richard J. Powell would agree, though his

²³ Though framed by the events that took place on the African continent specifically, Okwui Enwezor curated *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* (2002)— I would argue this short century timeline was also a time where post-colonialism race politics in the United States of America overshadowed all other modern realities.

²⁴ Adrian Piper. “Ways of Averting One’s Gaze,” (originally published in 1988) in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 127-147.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ These aesthetic trends, or sensibilities, outlined by many, including Michael Eric Dyson, Kobena Mercer, Lisa Jones, and Cornel West, speak to the thread pulled

comprehensive overview of Black art as a cultural history grounds itself in the fact that any sort of universally understood Black aesthetic can only be as free-flowing as culture.²⁷ If the aesthetic indeed does change with the fluidity of culture, then a postracial shift evokes the need for a renewed understanding of culture and cultural production. Mainstream aesthetic shifts arrive under titles like “Modernism,” and “Postmodernism”; however, Black aesthetic shifts are often categorized by political or social moments that rupture race relations—such moments as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Civil Rights Movement, the first Black president—and spawn reflection on an established, though contested, relationship between races. Although Black artists make Minimal or Pop Art, contextualization of their work often reflects on the broader state of Blackness. For example Sam Gilliam’s abstract colour work occasionally facilitates a discussion that acknowledges the artist’s Black socio-political influences from the 1960s and 1970s. Though the artist himself has argued against applying the term “Black art” to his work, certain pieces have been noted as engaging with and signifying a Black-American experience.²⁸

across a vast Black population whose aim is to distinguish between cultural markers meant to delineate between those, which pass as “Black,” and those, which establish the impostors.

²⁷ Richard J. Powell. *Black Art: A Cultural History*, Second Edition (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2002).

²⁸ The Corcoran Gallery of Art, *Press Release*, April 20, 2005 (http://www.corcoran.org/exhibitions/PDFs/Gilliam/Gilliam_Release.pdf), accessed July 25, 2011.

The formation of a Black aesthetic has obscured the fact that its formation is rooted in consciousness. As Powell notes, “blackness is less a colour than a metaphor for a political circumstance prescribed by struggles against economic exploitation and cultural domination: a state of consciousness that peoples of various pigmentations have experienced, empathized with, and responded to.”²⁹ The Black-White dichotomy typifies the default example used when discussing the formation of racialized identities, where Black and White oppose and the former normalizes the latter.

Methodology

This thesis looks at how recent theoretical articulations of “postrace” could, as a discursive tool, affect Black contemporary art. Rooted in a position that recognizes the importance of localizing a discussion in time, and having consideration for concurrent social and cultural milieux, this project primarily employs qualitative research and analysis. It considers the identities formed within a particular time and cultural context, including my own experiences.

With an overwhelming amount of literature relating to race and the Black race, in particular, I limited the search parameters to American and British discourse. I made this decision after realizing that these two regions

²⁹ Ibid., 10.

produced the most seminal texts. Reviewing the relevant literature consisted of a constant observation of news reports, both printed and televised, on the political and social application of the term “postrace,” specifically from American media outlets. An overview of the moments that have affected the formation of Black art history involved extensive archival-based research through reviews of books, journals and exhibition catalogues. In addition, I conducted an interview and studio visit with the artist Rashaad Newsome (whose work precipitated this postracial art inquiry) to better understand his research methods in composing performances that showcase contemporary interpretations of Blackness.

To fully understand the potential implications of “Black” and how it functions in relation to contemporary artworks like Newsome’s *Shade Compositions*, my thesis will be divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 provides a genealogy, from a predominantly American context, of how the production and reception of Black art since the 1900s reflected social realities, culminating with an analysis of the 1993 *Whitney Biennial* and the term “identity politics.” Chapter 2 considers how the prefix “post” functions in relation to Black art production and considers the change from a political aesthetic to a post-soul aesthetic, and the “post-black” artist, specifically the discussion that emerged from the 2001 exhibition *Freestyle*. Through a reflection on the process of creolization, the chapter also discusses the multicultural and multinational sentiments that were prevalent at the

beginning of the century through the examination of *Document 11* (2002) and the term “creolization.” After reviewing how preceding and recent Black art themes have shaped the production and reception of Black art, Chapter 3 considers what kind of influence “postrace” could have on contemporary art. My conclusion questions the advantages, disadvantages, and validity of using a postrace terminology for art of the late 2000s and early 2010s.

Chapter 1

***1993 Whitney Biennial:* A Retrospective, pre-post**

The relationships between socio-political atmospheres, Black art and language often venture toward something promising, and progressive. Strides made in search for the “new” Black leader, icon, or artist did and continues to march through shifting racial paradigms. The term “Black,” as defined by a hegemonic colonial perspective a century ago, which solidified the lines between the powerful and the powerless, differs from “Black” of the twenty-first century. As culture morphs, so do the implications of what it means to be Black. When the minority Black American population began encroaching from the margins at the turn of the twentieth century, figures like W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke and Carter Woodson were at the helm steering through Black spaces, making way for the future cultural workers to come almost a decade later. This chapter briefly reviews the cultural atmosphere and influences of the early to mid-twentieth century, summarizing a trajectory for the contextualization of contemporary Black art. It explores, first, and most broadly, how the phrase “identity politics” evolved from the New Negro during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, and the Black Nationalism of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Secondly, it engages in a more discrete look at the term “identity politics” in relation to its application in art and the 1993 *Whitney Biennial*.

The New Negro

During the first half of twentieth century, America felt the storm of two World Wars, battling on foreign fields, and would be left with the wreckage soon after. But another war ensued, one that preceded that of the 1980s, only without a combative title. DuBois, and his contemporaries, witnessed a moment of opportunity for Black empowerment, and art and literature stood as the most effective vectors for change. On the eve of the first World War, and in response to the unjust laws of segregation, DuBois founded *The Crisis* (c.1910), a journal dedicated to fight against a lack of visibility and injustice by, first, being used as a record of “important happenings and movements in the world which bear on the great problem on inter-racial relations, and especially those which affect the Negro American,”³⁰ and, second, publishing literature, and art, in an attempt to give Black artists a podium.

The journal was heavily influenced by DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). DuBois’ seminal text articulated the paradoxical construction of race—described by a Black man—whereby Blacks were forced to identify from two antagonistic perspectives: 1) how they see themselves, and 2) how they see themselves based on the misrepresentations from the outside world, which, according to DuBois, becomes a form of insight, a theory of “Double

³⁰ W.E.B DuBois. *About The Crisis: Editor’s Note, 1910*, <http://www.thecrisismagazine.com/TheCrisis1910.html> (accessed February 21, 2011).

Consciousness.”³¹ *The Crisis* commented on the then current racist and segregated climate. Black artists reflected on their identity and (in)visibility through both Black and White eyes with editorials, poetry, and visual art—with contributions made by Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Romare Bearden, and Laura Wheeler, to name but a few.³²

The Crisis was symptomatic of a renaissance germinating in Harlem at the same moment (in the 1920s and 1930s). Here, literature articulated and art illustrated Black identity, as did other cultural markers like music and clothing.³³ At the turn of the century, art responded to oppressive political and social structures, and the “New Negro” represented a moment of social rift. As a Black archetype, the New Negro presented a medicinal cure-all by suggesting that a claim of “newness” allowed for Black cultural reconstruction, free from problems of the past. In *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett compiled an anthology of texts in an attempt to capture the one, widely referenced, moment when Black cultural

³¹ W.E.B. DuBois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

³² Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W.E.B. DuBois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007): 167-220.

³³ These markers were seen especially in James Van Der Zee’s photographs. Trained first as a musician—the violin—Van Der Zee captured the spirit of Harlem, including new movements in art, family life, and the era of swing. See: Deborah Willis Ryan, “James Van Der Zee,” in *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, edited by David C. Driskell, et al (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1987): 155-167.

producers attempted to reverse the depiction of Blacks as an inferior race—

the “New” concept implied tension between artistic and political concern:

The “New Negro,” of course, was only a metaphor, a trope. The paradox of this claim was inherent in the trope itself, combining as it did a concern with time, antecedents, and heritage, on the one hand, with that for a cleared space, the public face of the race, on the other. The figure, moreover, combined implicitly both an eighteenth-century vision of utopia with a nineteenth-century idea of progress to form a black *fin-de-siècle* dream of an unbroken, unhabituated, neological self—signified by the upper case “Negro” and the belated adjective “New.” A paradox of this sort of self-willed beginning was that its ‘success’ depended fundamentally upon self-negation, a turning away from the “Old Negro” and the labyrinthine memory of black enslavement and toward the register of a “New Negro,” an irresistible, spontaneously generated black sufficient self.³⁴

The proposal of the ability to aspire and attain a “New Negro” status attempted to uplift the Black race by claiming to be new or beyond old oppressive ideas. With an increase in visibility came critics who questioned the thorny passage of Blackness from the periphery to the centre. DuBois himself, while fighting to make room for the display of the Black experience, grew concerned with how race would be depicted and interpreted, and he challenged the merit of Black visual or literary content.³⁵ Although the trope of the New Negro might have benefited from accessible and recognizable

³⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett, “Introduction,” in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton University Press, 2007): 4.

³⁵ Eric King Watts, “Cultivating a Black Public Voice: W.E.B. Du Bois and the ‘Criteria of Negro Art,’” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4(2) (2001): 181-201.

representations in various types of media, the fear of potentially disparaging portrayals and unmediated interpretations persisted.

Civil Rights Culture

The stakes for art during the Black liberation movement in America in the 1950s and 1960s were high. The New Negro in Harlem created a refined Black identity, and soon after stirred the nation-wide Civil Rights Movement that would fuel a fiery and empowered Blackness. From the mid-1950s to the late 1960s, Black identity was framed as more political than ever and artworks acted on behalf of marginalized groups and against the class-divide, advocating a kind of Afrocentrism and fight for equality—including peaceful sit-ins and violent riots, marches and songs, protests and fire. The visual artist or author prevailed as a force for change, and so too did the orator, both on the podium and the street corner. From the preachers in the barbershop to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the Black orator occupied a central and lionized role in the process of decolonization.³⁶ Artists like Faith Ringgold and Romare Bearden created works that commented directly on the ensuing fight for equality, and the Black Arts Movement included Amiri Baraka and popularized spoken word and the dub poet – the artistic orator. Much of the Black art produced at this time also reflected on the historical

³⁶ bell hooks, “Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition,” in *Let’s Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 212.

legacy of the enslavement of Africans, and their subsequent plight for equality on American soil. Art drew attention to the oppressive systematic racism – putting out a call for action by creating memories and tradition by linking the Black American population with an African consciousness, which had also occurred during the Harlem Renaissance

Following a decade of revolution, or, at least, revolutionary consciousness, the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, inscribed with ideas about pluralism, visibility and equality, framed the production and interpretation of Black art through words like “hybridity,” “transnationalism” and “multiculturalism,” and spoke to the evolving influences that affect the politics of identity formation. The fire of the 1960s blazed a bridge, from Harlem and the steps already taken by DuBois and his contemporaries, closer to the center of the art world. Artists (among other cultural producers) continued the fight, not only in the streets, but in art galleries, art publications, and art institutions. Black artists in particular, moved from a prescribed Blackness, which aspired to a New and uplifted social position, to a theoretical and at times contentious Black struggle for power and equality.

When one writes about Black art, acknowledging a Black experience recurrently accompanies sentiments of political resistance and social change, with the Black cultural producer recognized as an ideal catalyst. Though, within the realm of Black cultural producers, there is a fracture. Recognized by Cornel West as a division between liberals and conservatives, this

splintering prohibits Black universalism. Black liberals, as West notes, “adhere to a victim-status,” “harbor debilitating loyalty to the race,” and “truncate intellectual discourse regarding the plight of poor black people by censoring critical perspectives,” and create a position that impedes the possibility for real change in the Black experience.³⁷ Alternately, Black conservatives feel uneasy with the possibility that their White peers may view them as playing the victim and often attack policies meant to promote equality, for as West notes, they want “to be judged by the quality of their skills, not the color of their skin.”³⁸ This Black fissure informs the potential for division in the production of culture, including art and art criticism. It also informs how Black cultural participants must contend with markers of race, beyond skin colour, such as vernacular, hairstyle, food, and music. Even names risk being read as overdetermined signs of Blackness. Within markers of Blackness, artists must contend with not only how their Black peers view them, as loyal to the race and culture by way of negotiating certain codes, but how non-Blacks view them, as either a victim or worthy opponent.

New Global Positions

The end of the twentieth century saw the emergence of theories that applied a cartographic terminology to Black experience: In 1993 Paul Gilroy theorized the passage of the Black Atlantic and the effects that movement

³⁷ Cornel West, *Race Matters*, 50.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 53.

across the vast figurative and literal space has on Black modernity and on the construction and reproduction of Black identity.³⁹ A year later, Homi Bhabha also attempted to locate the production of culture amidst the “multi,” “trans,” “global” creations of hybridity;⁴⁰ and Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer looked at a new Black generation, on the other side of the Atlantic, and at the cultural evolution born from identity politics of the recent past.⁴¹ In “Intermezzo Worlds,” Mercer explains what he identifies as the intermezzo level: an *étage* that floats between an unstable attraction to the extreme polarities of local and global. Expanding upon earlier work, by Edward Said, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, Mercer contends at that moment that the art world bore witness to the process of “multicultural normalization.”⁴² This process framed a moment when cultural differences, no longer an exotic anomaly, were accepted as a global reality, and, as Mercer noted, threatened to mask social inequalities by no longer acknowledging the need to point to marginal difference. Globalization and hybridization framed the movement and production of culture, and explored representations of pluralism.⁴³ In an attempt not to topple cultural or racial differences previously constructed, a new way to discuss the distinctions of Black art arose that distinguished

³⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993).

⁴⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁴¹ Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues*, eds. David Morley and Kuan Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996); Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁴² Mercer, “Intermezzo Worlds,” *Art Journal* 57(4) (1993): 43-45.

⁴³ Ibid.

between art for the sake of art, or art for political change. The ability to shift between the boundaries of local and global Blackness by way of new global movement and exchanges, was an extension of a discussion about new globalisms at the end of the twentieth century, which informed the politics of identity formation.⁴⁴

1993: Identity Politics

Referencing the past not only happened through literal representations on a wall or canvas. In the 1990s artists began digging through the histories of cultural institutions only to produce, and attempt to work with, ghosts of the past, and people like the art historian, critic, and curator Maurice Berger were asking “are art museums racist?”⁴⁵ The 1993 *Whitney Biennial*, though not an explicit mining of the museum (like that of Fred Wilson and his project *Mining the Museum*⁴⁶), included artists who may have been previously been omitted from such an event and whose work was contextualized within a framework of identity politics and alterity.

The nineties produced a theoretical cultural discussion, informed predominately by British and American politics, and the political

⁴⁴ Mike Featherstone discusses the implications that globalization has on the formation of identities, and the symbolic use of communities and fractured representations of nations at length in his essay “Localisms, Globalism and Cultural Identity,” (1995) *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*. Edited by Linda Martín and Eduardo Mendieta (Blackwell Publishing, 2003): 342-359.

⁴⁵ Maurice Berger, “Are Art Museums Racist?” *Art in America* (July 1989): 69-77.

⁴⁶ Judith E. Stein, “Sins of Omission: Fred Wilson’s ‘Mining the Museum,’” *Art in America* (October 1993): 110-114.

undercurrent reflected a shift in the identity of minority artists, in America particularly, symbolized by growing global anti-American sentiments. Changes in the American socio-political climate included the inauguration of Bill Clinton as President of the United States in January 1993. One month later, on February 18, the World Trade Center was bombed. Fear of anti-American views from the rest of the globe swelled in the media. In the same *Newsweek* issue that reported on the bombing and an alerted approach to terrorism, critic Peter Plagens reviewed the Whitney Biennial, which opened six days after the headlining news.⁴⁷ In his review, Plagens compares the Biennial to European salons of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the old salons “boasted the occasional masterpiece,”⁴⁸ for Plagens, “this newest salon,” referring the *Whitney Biennial*, “sports the occasional witty work but is mostly preachy and glum.”⁴⁹ Plagens saw the exhibition as an accumulation of social grievances and noted that the Biennial’s attempts at inclusivity made it “as close to as a museum could get to a Salon of the Other without becoming an outsider art festival.”⁵⁰ Elizabeth Sussman, who was one of the curators of the exhibition, considered Plagens’ review of the Biennial to be missing a key element: an obvious connection to the global

⁴⁷ Peter Plagens, “Fade From White,” *Newsweek* (March 14 1993), <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/1993/03/14/fade-from-white.html>, accessed May 2011.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

events.⁵¹ Work demonstrated the artists' concern to represent individualism and collective identities, exemplified by Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), which looked at both the individual and collective experiences across three generations of Black American women. Overall, the exhibition was viewed by the press as being focused on the politics of identity formation.⁵²

Retrospectively, the Biennial served as a touchstone for the consideration of the relationship between identity politics and the institution of art. It marked one of the earliest large-scale exhibition attempts at inclusivity, representing previously underrepresented voices in the art world. A valuable record of, among many things, an impact on the inclusivity of other institutions and exhibitions, it functioned as a marker of something politically symptomatic: focusing on the global within the boundaries of the

⁵¹ Elizabeth Sussman, "Then and Now: Whitney Biennial 1993," *Art Journal* (64) (2005): 75.

⁵² The May 1993 issue of *Artforum* included coverage of the 1993 Whitney Biennial and offered varying opinions that were for the most part, not impressed with its efforts. Hilton Als suggested that "Black" was being "dressed-up" once more, as it was during the Harlem Renaissance, only this time it was seeking more attention from the museums. Bruce W. Ferguson concluded that "the Whitney Biennial not only deserves respect but engaged critique," and goes on to offer his own critique: be free of rigid binaries, both in the curatorial position and reception of the work. Jan Avgikos and Dan Cameron talked about their initial feelings of "hope" for what they were to experience but both felt disappointed in the exhibitions overt agenda. And Lawrence Chua welcomes the Biennial's motivation and execution of an inclusive and "complicated" film program, while Thomas McEvilley notes that ironically, within the exhibitions proposed theme of difference, "there is no difference, just the same rhetoric of difference repeated again and again as another unitary position." pp.7-17

local by recognizing both the individual voice and experience, as well as a collective or diasporal one.

Globalization and geographical disruptions, brought on by a discussion multi and trans-cultural, affected the politics of identity and, as Coco Fusco stated, “in the United States...an ideological battle over symbolic representation.”⁵³ The theory of a liminal space of difference contributed to fractured identities and became the ground on which to question the effects of focusing on individuality versus collectivity. In Homi K. Bhabha’s essay for the Biennial catalog entitled “Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation,” he noted that questions around political identity formation in the nineties was “born out by the ‘language’ of recent social crises sparked off by histories of cultural difference.”⁵⁴ Diasporal voices essentialized their collectivity in hopes of attaining new levels of visibility.

This Biennial sought to uncover the shift in politics of American identity, previously underrepresented in museums, through the politics of sex, race, and gender. It symbolized a particular cultural and social moment that witnessed a shift in the political construction of what constituted an American identity, and was the first time that the Biennial selection was not determined by a large team or group.⁵⁵ The artists and artworks exhibited

⁵³ Coco Fusco, “Passionate Irreverence: The Cultural Politics of Identity,” in *1993 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993): 75.

⁵⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, “Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation,” in *1993 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993): 63.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

spoke for previously underrepresented voices. In the catalogue's preface, David A. Ross—who was then acting director of the Whitney Museum—wrote of the changing cultural atmosphere and the weight of politics on identity:

The "1993 Biennial Exhibition" comes at a moment when problems of identity and the representation of community extend well beyond the art world. We are living in a time when the form and formation of self and community is tested daily. Communities are at war, both with and at their borders. Issues of nation and nationality, ethnic essentialism, cultural diversity, dissolution, and the *politics* of identity hang heavy in the air.⁵⁶

The change from local to global positionalities moved the discussion of marginal art beyond national borders. In her curatorial essay, Sussman found it useful to recognize essentializing categories (like Feminism) even if only to identify differences, but clarified that these constricting lines are as fluid as time, and thus strategic contextualizations.⁵⁷

Thelma Golden took up the discussion of race, as a politically underrepresented theme on white gallery walls, in her essay "What's White...?"⁵⁸ She discusses the work of such artists as Renée Green, Byron Kim, Glenn Ligon, Robbie McCauley, and Fred Wilson and their (along with

⁵⁶ David A. Ross, "Preface: Know Thy Self (Know Your Place)," in *1993 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 8. (emphasis in the original).

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Sussman, "Coming Together in Parts: Positive Power in the Art of the Nineties," in *1993 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art), 14.

⁵⁸ Thelma Golden, "What's White...?" in *1993 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 26-35.

many other 1993 Biennial artists) tendency to “deconstruct and de-center the politically constructed site of whiteness and its relation to the ever-changing definition of Americanness.”⁵⁹ Asking “what’s White?” is in fact asking what (or who) is different and in opposition to the normative Whiteness. All of the work in the Biennial critiques the individual as part of a collective and for a number of artists, it reflects on “What’s Black...?”

Robbie McCauley’s performance *Mississippi Freedom* (1992) reconstructs a moment during the Civil Rights Movement: the Mississippi bus boycotts. With an interracial cast, McCauley revisits a traumatic moment using both experienced and inherited memories to create a revisionist drama. The performance reveals “what’s Black” as a combination of real and transferred experiences, which contribute to a politics of identity that recognizes both the individual and collective group.

In an exploration of how Blackness is reflected, besides the obvious manifestation of colour, Renée Green’s *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992) explores how Blackness, namely hip hop music, crosses national boundaries via interviews and primary research in an attempt to understand how outsiders (non-Blacks in America) interpret Black culture.⁶⁰ Green’s ethnographic research methods move beyond the hypothetical shifting of borders in cultural production to consider how Black culture, as a political

⁵⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁰ Golden, “What’s White...?” 34.

identity, is constructed and the potential effects of its reproduction. Coded slang of hip hop culture like “buggin’,” and “fly,” installed on the wall and translated into German, demonstrated a real example of Blackness being lost in translation. It also included more than twenty-six hours of video interviews conducted by the artist, and as Jennifer González discussed in her chapter on Green, the artist’s interest in researching genealogies was manifested here in her archiving of her findings in metal shelves, books, and recordings, both audio and visual.⁶¹ Green’s installation evoked thoughts of origin, interpretation and reproduction of Black culture.

Criticism of the exhibition highlighted a recognizable shift in the Whitney’s artist selection, which reflected a wider movement in art. In the autumn of 1993, the journal *October* published a roundtable discussion on the Whitney Biennial that included Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Silvia Kolbowski, Rosalind Krauss, and Miwon Kwon. The conversation between the artist and four art historians vetted the then current tendency in art, as stated by Foster: “a certain turn away from questions of representation to iconographies of content; a certain turn from a politics of the signifier to a politics of the signified.”⁶² This was also a comment on a particular moment in art: the nineties. Reading the criticisms a decade later, Sussman says: “I

⁶¹ Jennifer González, “Renée Green: Genealogies of Contact,” in *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008): 204-249.

⁶² Hal Foster, “The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial,” *October* 66 (1993): 3.

clearly recognize that this was a moment of confusion and change to which critics were charged to respond.”⁶³ This shift in politics reflected a trend to shed past markers in art; no longer limited to the confines of an image, the art represented a larger political and cultural plight—in this instance, for visibility.

Playing with signifiers, at first, appears to offer a useful stage for encouraging equality and speaking on behalf of the Other. Though, on this unfettered ground lies the potential for misrepresentation, as much as representation. In her essay “Performance and the Power of the Popular,” Coco Fusco comments on the danger of relaxing the signifier by mapping out performance trends amongst artists of colour from the 1970s to the 1990s. She recognizes the “themes of gender politics, institutionalized racism in the arts, and the formation of hybrid cultures and identities”⁶⁴ as dominant threads throughout Black-authored performances. Fusco points to the paradoxes that surface when attempting to reposition race or other markers of difference:

Reworking stereotypes leads to heated debates about the extent to which the artists’ ironic reinterpretation of an established paradigm can be discerned by different audiences,

⁶³ Sussman, “Then and Now,” 75.

⁶⁴ Coco Fusco, “Performance and the Power of the Popular,” in *Let’s Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*, ed. Catherine Ugwu (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 170.

and hence the danger of inadvertently recapitulating the scenarios they seek to subvert.⁶⁵

Moving away from an emphasis on the signifier and towards the signified, though seemingly free from creative restrictions, runs the risk of reifying difference. Artists desiring to create work influenced by their own Black experience gamble with the possibility of strengthening the very myths of identity they originally sought to dispel.

From the DuBois era to the era of identity politics, Black artists showcased and highlighted the experiential. They referenced bleak and racist realities in the hope of igniting change through awareness. Both the visual and the discursive acted together as an aesthetic force that meant to empower a collective group of people that either identified as being Black or were sympathetic to the cause: ending racism and racial inequality.

The Black art produced at this moment took hold of an opportunity to comment on the effect the political atmosphere had on the individual and collective notion of Blackness. And its reception was both hopeful of the possibilities for previously underrepresented groups, and weary of shifting too much of the focus onto experience. Black artists producing work under the “identity politics” umbrella seized an opportunity to answer the call to action from their New Negro father and Black Nationalist mother, all the while responding to their own social reality. Artists in the *1993 Whitney*

⁶⁵ Ibid., 161-164.

Biennial like Green and McCauley presented politicized characteristics of Blackness, from the effects that global cultural exchange had on authenticity to the legacy of traumatic memory. Unlike the recent articulation of a “postrace” America, the Biennial did not claim to be beyond racial markers of difference. However, under the veil of “identity politics,” it offered a renewed understanding of the construction and interpretation of racialized identities.

Chapter 2
Freestyle and Documenta 11:
From *Politics to Post*, and Other Idioms

When I think about the relationship between postrace and contemporary Black art—and consider a shift in the current reception of Blackness—I recall recent “post” terms. A cultural, social, or political moment that is “post” points to either the blindness or foresight, or combination of the two, of its previous manifestation. The idea of “postmodernism,” for instance, offers no clear universal markings of a beginning and end, but is positioned in reference to a “modernism” predecessor. In his report on the postmodern condition, Jean-François Lyotard investigates how the play between the social and the scientific legitimizes knowledge and metanarratives.⁶⁶ And with the advent of science and technology, the exclusivity and reason from the Enlightenment, no longer certain, and questions universalisms, single points of entry, or a single understanding of lived experience.

In his 1991 essay “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” Kwame Anthony Appiah examines the function of the prefix “post” in relation to African art, and how it serves as a point of entry to explore the articulation of “postmodern” and “postcolonial.”⁶⁷ In light of overwhelming and varying proposals to define postmodernisms, Appiah

⁶⁶ Lyotard, “Introduction,” *The Postmodern Condition*, xxi-xv.

⁶⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” *Critical Inquiry* 17(2) (1991).

makes clear that he has no definition to put in place of existing articulations but goes on to add that, “postmodernism can be seen, then, as a retheorization of the proliferation of distinctions that reflects the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity, the need to clear oneself a space.”⁶⁸ Black identities formed in the “post” challenge modernist paradigms in an effort to move away from certain ubiquitous Black cultural codifications. What does this mean for a “post” period in relation to Black art and experience? Building new platforms on which to discuss enactments of Blackness carry different requirements based on the particular moment of reflection, one that challenges the modernisms of the past.

In this chapter, an overview of the discourse on Black aesthetics sheds light on how Black culture affects any shifts in its theorization. One adjustment to the discussion of a Black aesthetic is made with the label “post-soul.” A post-soul aesthetic does not propose to adhere to a specific timeline save for the one qualifying requirement that artists be born after the Civil Rights Movement and thus mark an era that is beyond the New Negro mentality of the DuBois era and the Black Power movement of the 1960s. Though the advent of “post-soul” appeared in the era of identity politics, it also reflects a more contemporary moment that supports a “post-black” artist.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 346.

This chapter will also look at two exhibitions, *Freestyle* (2001), and *Documenta 11* (2002), that move away from the benchmark “identity politics exhibition” of the previous decade, and consider the implications of the language used to carve out a place for contemporary Black art by examining how the terms “post-black” and “creolization” functioned in each exhibition, respectively.

From the Black Aesthetic to Post-soul

The Black Aesthetic is a reflection of a socio-political state of Blackness. Not limited to a discussion of line and form, the Black aesthetic has long been understood as a display of a political moment, which began with an attempt to unify Black artists and provide agency.⁶⁹ With regards to a discussion of the significance of “post,” a proposal of “post-soul” marks a categorization of art that is post-Civil Rights Movement. In *The Black Aesthetic* (1972), Addison Gayle Jr. edited a collection of essays theorizing a Black aesthetic in relation to music, poetry, drama, fiction and art. Written and compiled at the tail end of the Civil Rights Movement, Gayle addressed the value of looking to the artist as a contributor and record growth—where the American context provides the primary examples of Black artists. The Black aesthetic sought to further the political strides made by Black nationalism by attempting to raise Black cultural consciousness and privileged collectivity as opposed to

⁶⁹ Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*, 197-198.

instances of autonomous creativity and the individual artist.⁷⁰ Double consciousness, or the twoness of an American-Negro, as noted by Gayle, problematizes any attempt to de-Americanize the Black American and inscribe explicitly Black artistic sensibilities. He spoke to the divisions among Black artists themselves, and the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”⁷¹ Concluding that to understand these conflicts, and the very thing that must be done to correct them, “is to understand the Black Aesthetic,”⁷² which sought to unify them.

The politics of representation transformed the theory of a Black aesthetic from an interested message of inequality and invisibility to one that aspired to be free from such obligation. Stuart Hall’s reference to a Black aesthetic disputes its existence as “an aesthetic grounded in the theory of a *new*,”⁷³ but many scholars (including Bertrum Ashe, Trey Ellis, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Addison Gayle Jr.)⁷⁴ realize the inevitability of aesthetic changes, which are informed by cultural ones, forming a collective aesthetic—though it may only be recognized theoretically.

⁷⁰ Gayle, *Black Aesthetic*, xxi.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., xxii.

⁷³ Qtd in Powell, *Black Art History*, 15 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁴ The scholars mentioned here mark a trajectory of almost twenty-year of attempts to establish a critical framework for the study of the post-Civil Rights Movement in art. Beginning with Ellis’ *The New Black Aesthetic* (1989) to Ashe’s “Theorizing the Post-soul aesthetic,” (2007), they all aim at achieving a renewed understanding of Black artistic breaks from the past.

The post-soul aesthetic, as discussed by Richard Schur, labels a post-Civil Rights Movement generation of Black artists whose lived experiences have subsequently veered away from the strivings for empowerment of the previous era.⁷⁵ Schur points to the prevalent use of humour and irony in Black art, through the works of such artists as Jean Michel Basquiat and Alison Saar. The author notes that for young artists, like the late Basquiat, “the representational strategies of previous generations did not provide an effective visual vocabulary to articulate the new position in which desegregated African Americans found themselves as inner cities crumbled and white flight accelerated.”⁷⁶ The new generation of Black artists questioned mass and consumer culture using both original and borrowed images in dialogue with other elements of Black culture like music and graffiti, and made cynical comments on the reality of Black American life. The “soul” that this aesthetic claims to be beyond stems from the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement (especially at the height of Black Power politics), when the trope of the New Negro answered the call for renewed Black agency.

The soul of Black folks incorporated pride, history and aspirations for the future. Hence, the post-soul aesthetic was a form of self-criticism and subverted a culturally familiar trauma through recognizable images, and

⁷⁵ Richard Schur, “Post-soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art,” *African American Review* 41(4) (2007): 641-654.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 643.

through humour, would revisit the representation of Black bodies.

Germinating concurrently with identity politics in the latter part of the twentieth century, but referring specifically to the cultural consciousness of the Black artist, the post-soul aesthetic liberated contemporary Black artists, allowing them to question the social construction of race. No longer relying on overdetermined tropes of Blackness, they questioned traditional notions of art and beauty, which have perpetuated racial inequality.

2001: Post-black

The complex relationship between language and moments in history may now always be representative of a specific event, but the reflection of words on art can echo a trend or shift in a particular cultural trajectory. In the spring of 2001, the Studio Museum in Harlem investigated such a relationship—between art and the term “post-black”—with a group show entitled *Freestyle*. The exhibition presented twenty-eight young artists, and showcased art in a variety of media, and as curator Thelma Golden told Jerry Saltz in *The Village Voice*, the best thing about the show was that the title did not have a colon.⁷⁷ For these young artists, the big idea began and ended with one word “Freestyle”: an opportunity to exhibit work, without restrictions or thematic backdrop. The show was incubated from a discussion between the curator and artist Glenn Ligon about their observation of a growing trend

⁷⁷ Jerry Saltz, “Post-Black,” *The Village Voice*, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-05-15/news/post-black/1/>, accessed January 16, 2011.

amongst young Black artists to be “post-black.”⁷⁸ This movement had morphed away from the identity politics of the 1970s, multiculturalism of the 1980s, and globalization of the 1990s. It signified artists who, according to Golden, “were adamant about not being labeled ‘Black’ though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.”⁷⁹ In her curatorial essay, Golden declared: “post-black was the new black.”⁸⁰ This referenced a generation of artists who held a different relationship to images and history, than the curator’s own generation, or the generation before. For Golden and Ligon, the term really referred to their way of talking about artists working with a particular type of practice at a particular moment, or for Golden, “an artist who has moved several steps beyond having to work out their relationship to a particular set of issues.”⁸¹ The category of “post-black” labeled a group of artists who felt they no longer needed to engage in the debates of the past thirty years, and who aspired for freedom from rigid classifications like the distinction between “positive” or “negative” Black images—where the criteria for distinguishing such categorization were not their own.

⁷⁸ Thelma Golden, “Introduction,” *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2000).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Huey Copeland, “Post/Black/Atlantic: A Conversation with Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon,” edited by Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* (London: Tate Liverpool, 2010), 77.



Figure 2. Rashid Johnson, *Jonathan With Closed Eyes*, 1999

Most of the artists included in *Freestyle* were born after the Civil Rights Movement (after 1968, with the average artist age being 32)⁸², and presented artworks that commented on their experiences and new understanding of Blackness. Many artworks, like that of Johnson,⁸³ present a paradox: symbols, which have long signified the history of race in America like skin colour, hair texture, and music, were used by artists who preferred not to be categorized by such markers of racial inequality. Much of Johnson's

⁸² See *Freestyle* exhibition catalogue.

⁸³ Rashid Johnson, who was included in the *Freestyle* exhibition, has been widely discussed within a post-black context and Johnson is often referred to as *the* post-black example.

work references African-American literature and its influences from food to music. His photographs and installations are parodies that frequently move between kitsch and Blacksploitation. His work in *Freestyle*, pieces from a series of black-and-white photography entitled *Seeing in the Dark* (2001), looked at the physical manifestations of human migration, and class. Through abstract representations of hands and feet, and close-up cropped portraits that exposed every crow's foot, the photos commented on the exploitative nature of slave or immigrant labour, as well as the work put forth to secure a more equitable future for subsequent generations of Black Americans.

If identity is politicized and it attempts to amend past injustices within the context of unprecedented global and cultural movement, then why would Black artists like Johnson contribute to an exhibition whose aim was to explore, what the curator recognized was, a "post-black" wave of artists? Within the context of *Freestyle*, the term "post-black" was used to label a post-Civil Rights Movement generation of artists who aspire to more contemporary categorizations for their work as opposed to confines of the Black aesthetic, contextualized mainly by the social atmosphere. Criticisms of "post-black," focused on how the term redefines a previously established notion of the subjectivity of Black artists but in fact maintains it. According to Amelia Jones, "post-black" lacks criticality, and the label functioned as a

marketing tool.⁸⁴ It may have been read as such on account of its controversial suggestions and glossy conclusions. As the force behind the presentation of renewed Blackness, an utterance of “post-black” communicates an identity that is no longer “Black” at all. Post-black artists may not aspire to completely reject past themes for Black art, which spoke to a crusade for recognition and equitable treatment, but the ambiguity of that “post” affords them the power to construct narratives that play between the local and the global, the past and the present.

Though not specifically in reference to a visual style or trend, the post-black generation has been linked to a post-soul aesthetic in that it reflects, for one, a departure from predominantly Black figurative content. In Schur’s exploration of a post-soul aesthetic of a post-black generation of artists, he states:

Post-black art offers neither propaganda in the war for social, political, or cultural equality, nor an easy rallying point for cultural solidarity. Rather, it interrogates the foundation of African American identity and artists’ relationship to that identity.⁸⁵

Here, the “post” operates in relation to the Black artist and submits that, at best, it questions the connection that a generation of post-Harlem Renaissance or post-Civil Rights Movement artists share with their antecedents. The sometimes dangerous, unmediated translation of terms like

⁸⁴ Amelia Jones, “The Post-black Bomb,” *Tema Celeste* 90(2002): 53-54.

⁸⁵ Richard Schur, “Post-soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art,” *African American Review*, 41(4) (2007): 5.

“post-black” may hinder the ability to fully understand the shifts that take place between race and representation.

2002: Creolization

Art that uses more than one type of medium is referred to as “mixed” media art. Rather than delineating numerous components of the work, applying the term “mixed” implies that there are too many parts, which make up the whole, to name. Similarly, in acts of language, the term “creolization” classifies mixed or blended cultures. Comparative Literature studies examine the historical formation and presence of *créole* languages in texts that reflect a social reality. The term refers to the marriage of two, or more, cultures or ethnicities, brought together through migration and colonization to produce a hybrid that carries traces of both an “indigenous” and settler languages. For the part of the world known as the Caribbean, *créole* languages are found on most islands, including Haiti, Grenada, and Martinique. In the summer of 2002, the theory of creolization supported one of five platforms in the eleventh installment of *Documenta* in Kassel, Germany.

As an international exhibition, *Documenta 11* boasted collaboration and unprecedented inclusivity. Organized by a seven-person team, directed by Okwui Enwezor, the show opposed the previous Documentas by seeking to create greater visibility for those excluded in the past – beginning with Enwezor himself as its first non-European curator. Enwezor attempted to

create a dialogue with the rapid changes and growing fluidity within the global art world: “How do we make sense of these rapid changes and transformations, which call upon all practitioners for new, inventive models of enabling trans-disciplinary action within the contemporary global public sphere?”⁸⁶ Enwezor spoke to the difficult but important task of interpreting the features of contemporary culture, reshaped by political friction:

The challenge of making a meaningful articulation of the possibilities of contemporary art in such a climate, as well as the disciplinary, spatial, temporal, and historical pressures to which it has been subjected, represent the diagnostic, deliberative process out of which the full measure of *Documenta 11* has been engaged.⁸⁷

Documenta acted as a site for discussion and presented an opportunity to explore the more pressing relationship between art and globalization. The exhibition published five separate platforms on which to discuss a number of critical issues that affect the “location of culture.”⁸⁸ A three-day workshop held in St. Lucia, which brought together linguists, cultural theorists and writers, all of whom were interested in and challenged by the notion of *créolité*,⁸⁹ resulted in the third platform, entitled *Créolité and Creolization*. For the participants in the workshop, the inquiry and application of creolization

⁸⁶ Okwui Enwezor, “Preface,” *Documenta11_Platform 5* (Kassel: Hantje Cantz, 2003), 6.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994.

⁸⁹ Participants included: Petrine Archer-Straw, Jean Bernabé, Robert Chaundenson, Juan Flores, Stuart Hall, Isaac Julien, Dame Pearlette Louisy, Jean Claude Carpanin Marimoutou, Gerardo Mosquera, Annie Paul, Virginia Pérez-Ratton, Ginette Ramassamy, Françoise Verges, and Derek Walcott.

moved beyond the limits of language and into the larger, all-encompassing, “culture,” and sought to engage in the benefits or consequences of the formation and mélange of cultures, based on the structure of center/periphery.

When applied in relation to contemporary art, and *Documenta 11* in particular, “creolization” intends to acknowledge a previously overlooked global position while at the same time draws attention to the ever-present politics of identity and inclusivity. It creates a fissure between an original Black culture and cultural reproductions, and supports a blurred sense of “multicultural.” Optimistically, Stuart Hall looks at the process of cultural mixing and asks: “what is [creolization’s] general applicability?”⁹⁰ He notes that it can be useful if attempting to understand the function of the “third space”: a liminal space informed by forced exile and conquest, and an unsettled or ambivalent mood.⁹¹ Here, the term might function as an answer to a general question regarding cultural formation, and a response to the effects of globalization.

Enwezor’s curatorial methods intended to be more inclusive of marginalized groups than the past fifty years of Documentas, but were careful not to use the artists’ ethnicity as the sole criteria for selection. More often than not, the artist’s ethnicity was difficult to discern based on

⁹⁰ Stuart Hall, “Créolité,” 27.

⁹¹ Ibid., 34.

represented subject matter of the work. As noted by Sylvester O. Ogbechie, in his discussion of the presence of an Occidental gaze at Documenta, “Enwezor’s curatorial project was implemented in identity politics when he declared his intention to focus on circuits of knowledge outside the predetermined institutional domain of Westernism.”⁹² The politics of identities here was about the politics of recognition for previous unrecognized facets of the human experience that departed from a Euro-centered one. In reality, non-Western artists only constituted twenty percent of the participants (including such artists as Destiny Deacon, Stan Douglas and Lorna Simpson), and criticism of *Documenta 11* revisited the paradigm of a dominant Western visibility in contemporary art.⁹³

The suggestion that a blending of cultures and an acknowledgment of the periphery answers the call for inclusivity actually falls short as progress towards equality in the culture industry. Ogbechie explored the potential for an Occidental hegemonic gaze in an exhibition that hoped to move beyond rigid borders of who’s in and who’s out., and alludes to a theme of “confrontation.”⁹⁴ The conflict arises when the application of creolization—stemming from the creation of hybrid languages—is used to read new global and cultural realities. Though the platform of *Créolité and Creolization* was

⁹² Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, “Ordering the Universe: Documenta 11 and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze,” *Art Journal* 64(1) (2005), 81.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ogbechie, *Ordering the Universe*, 82.

not the sole lens used to look at *Documenta 11*, it functions as a useful exemplar when considering goals of inclusivity versus the normalization of the decentered hybrid. Creolization poses questions about whether or not one should recognize that there ever existed an “original” form and using the term normalizes the act of hybridization when there may still exist a powerful/powerless dynamic. Although the term “creolization” departs slightly from the discussion of “post,” it offers a timely example in relation to “post-black,” which also recontextualizes “Black” within contemporary culture.

On September 11, 2001, New York City took center stage in the global arena. The brutal attack on the twin towers was far more traumatic than that almost a decade earlier. The moment became historicized once it was added to the rest of the “posts”: “postmodern,” “post-colonial,” and now, “post-9/11.” For the art world, post-9/11 and a revived fear of anti-American sentiments repositioned White America against the others, though not always in an antagonistic way. Rather, it called for a rethinking of cultural relations and the way in which inclusivity was defined. Black artists’ definitions of “American,” “America,” and “Black” shifted from those based on a history that was not necessarily experienced by a new generation. The state of Black subjectivity went from a fight for equality and visibility to a desire for the ability to explore other ways in which art can mediate contemporary Black culture.

Ending An Eighty-Year Discussion

Contemporary Black artists have examined recurring themes of identity, influenced by DuBois' "double consciousness," and Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, which address patterns of the production and reflection of Black identity (specifically the Black-American twoness) and the construction and interpretation of the Black cultural experience. While the trope of the New Negro spawned hope for equitable treatment and social acceptance—in the realm of art, and beyond—a revised understanding of the how culture moves and reproduces framed the context for multicultural visibility. The discourse of Black art draws on a wide array of Black cultural traits, which can change with the taste of the time, including the often recognizable examples—referencing the visibly discernible formal qualities and cultural allusions: hair, skin colour, music, vernacular.⁹⁵ But the, at first, imperceptible examples of less obvious influences on Blackness maintains a common thread within Black art. Though these traits may not always be conventionally illustrated within the artworks, the historical references and inherited memories that they produce are often used as the lens with which to view and interpret art created by Black artists.

⁹⁵ See Lisa Jones, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994) and Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, eds. Russell Ferguson, et al (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990): 247-264.

Shifts in the sensibilities of contemporary art occur within what Cornel West identified as the “new cultural politics,”⁹⁶ which are shaped by the economic, political, and intellectual challenges that threaten to inhibit individuality. These cultural workers were Black men and women, called upon to revise old notions of difference from disparate points a variety of experiences. West was speaking to the early discussions of difference and the politics of identity but articulated the new identities, formed as a result of some sort of cultural rupture:

[T]he new kind of critic and artist associated with the new cultural politics of difference consists of an energetic breed of New World *bricoleurs* with eclecticism; persons from all countries, cultures, genders, sexual orientations, ages and regions with protean identity who avoid ethnic chauvinism and faceless universalism; intellectual and political freedom-fighters with partisan passion, international perspectives, and, thank God, a sense of humor that combats the ever-present absurdity that forever threatens our democratic and libertarian projects and dampens the fire that fuels our will to struggle.⁹⁷

The new cultural worker arises from a particular moment of rupture that demands a new awareness in the production and, for the discipline of art, display of culture, lived experience, or identity. The nineties witnessed this moment, manifested in the political display of identity at the 1993 *Whitney Biennial*, and almost ten years later, *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem proposed that Black artists no longer wish to be framed with the

⁹⁶ Cornel West, “The New Politics of Difference,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 19.

⁹⁷ Cornel West, “The New Politics of Difference,” 36.

same colour of obligation and struggle. Not quite as revolutionary as the fight for emancipation on the ground, the post-black artist fought for freedom from expectation and history. But this too proved problematic. Henry Louis Gates Jr. speaks to the conflicts brought about by race, representation and a fight for equality:

Any discourse of emancipation, insofar as it retains a specifically cultural cast, must contend with similar issues. That's the paradox entailed by a politics conducted on behalf of cultural identities when those identities are in part defined by the structural or positional features that the politics aim to dismantle.⁹⁸

There is a doubling that happens when Black identities are politicized, and it occurs within what Michele Stephens designates as, "race consciousness,"⁹⁹ which is the prominent way of understanding the formation of racial identities, uniting a group (culture) temporally and geographically. This consciousness also grapples with a DuBoisian double consciousness. Here, the artist recognizes a common position of Whiteness in relation to the viewing process, but must declare whether their work speaks from a lived experience, or from what Stuart Hall refers to as an "enunciated position."¹⁰⁰ Whether the position is carved out in the identity politics of the nineties, a post-soul aesthetic, a post-black artist, or the normalization of mixed global

⁹⁸ Gates, *Tradition and the Black Atlantic*, 148.

⁹⁹ Michele Stephens, "What is This Black in 'Black Diaspora'" *Small Axe* 13, no.2 (2009): 34.

¹⁰⁰ In an essay entitled "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," (1994) Stuart Hall refers to an 'enunciated position' as an attempt to place ourselves while being influenced by how we have been placed by others.

culture and creolization, each historical moment and its cultural producers create movements in the language used to understand and aid in carving out new cultural realities and moreover, risk being critiqued as violent breaks from history.

Although Golden and Ligon may not have intended for the term “post-black” to be applied or read with a lack of criticality, the term may be used and interpreted as a proposed state of Blackness that is beyond the “Black” formed during the Harlem Renaissance or the Civil Rights Movement. For art, then, it supports a Black artist who can be free of an identity that is political, or the need to represent the race in a “new” light, but the interpretation of the artworks might still hold to a theory of a Black aesthetic informed by a contentious history of American race relations.

Chapter 3
Afro-Modern:
The Postracial Stage

When I refer to a “postrace moment,” I am speaking about two distinct albeit connected moments. One indicates my time in New York City, experiencing an artwork and reflecting on, what I felt was, a shift in the general understanding and approach to Blackness. The other is in reference to the political incarnation of the term in 2008 with the election of the first Black American president. My concern or interest in the term is: what are the effects of the political theorization of “postrace” on contemporary art? One of the major conceptual issues highlighted by the term “postrace,” which is closely linked to the theory of “post-black” developed seven years earlier, is that of the ontology of Blackness. Though “post-black” was born out of a specific art context, “postrace” reacted to a political ideology. If applied to the discipline of art, it could account for all “races”—though allusions to a state of “postrace” by American media outlets often reference the Black race as a default example—but I am most interested in its global consequence on contemporary Black art and the formation of Black identity.

As a departure from interpretations of “Black” in the twentieth century, the language moves trace instances of “New” with a migration from “identity politics,” to “post-black,” to “postrace.” And though its function has

been applied theoretically in social and political theories, its potential role in Black contemporary art may not be so different than past utterances that claim to be beyond burdens of the past.

What is Postrace?

Newsome's work immerses the viewer in a visual and aural sea of Black identity. Trying to negotiate one's identity, largely based the categorization of others, often ends up meaning that one must take sides and decide which side of the defining characteristics is best suited for each Black individual: the good stereotypes or the bad stereotypes. In the 2003 study *Mixed Race, Post-Race: Gender, New Ethnicities and Cultural Practices*, Suki Ali notes the individual process of Black racialization, often being a balance between inclusion and exclusion, and defined by words like "communities," "identities," "marginal," "upbringing" and "family." Ali uses postrace as a signifier of a change from an old, essentialist view of biological races. By delineating the discourses of race and culture and acknowledging how they inform the way people interact with each other, Ali argues that the lived experience and narratives of history combined are what inform the postrace identity.¹⁰¹

The idea of "race" and the possibility of genealogical differences that mark inferiority are antiquated. However, the language created from past

¹⁰¹ Suki Ali, *Mixed-race, Post-race: Gender, New Ethnicities and Cultural Practice* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 2-4.

measures used to establish differences remains, and postrace carries traces of that history. The term carries a similar function to that of “post-black,” but by definition “postrace” can be applied to all races, though the Black race is the most commonly encountered example. One of the earliest utterances of an idea called “postrace” comes from Paul Gilroy.¹⁰² Gilroy’s discussion of the crisis largely references new biologisms of racial categorization—like the “one drop rule” and genealogy—that speak to the assumption that race can no longer be argued as a scientific construct. His articulation of postrace has been critiqued as a utopic ideal. But in *Against Race* the author pointed to, what he saw as, “a crisis of raciology” and the need for the “pursuit of liberation from ‘race’.”¹⁰³ Both Ali and Gilroy believe that people need to be free from rigid classifications based in outdated racist justifications, and from what Gilroy sees as the “bonds of raciology and compulsory raciality,”¹⁰⁴ but the postrace proposal they offer creates an ideological promise that does not translate easily to a cultural reality. Rather, postrace signifies a new way to approach the manifestation of skin colour and racial stereotypes that affect identity formation and realigns the role race plays in the production of culture, and more specifically, Black cultural tropes.

¹⁰² Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹⁰³ Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁰⁴ Ali, *Mixed-Race, Post-Race*, 18.

Looking at how postrace reinforces racism and racial categorizations, Alys Weinbaum explores how this relationship plays out through the visual representations of art and how art responds to the divide between an oppressive social order and an anti-racist, or post-racist, one.¹⁰⁵ In the author's discussion of racial auras and works of art, Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" frames the postrace conflict and the role of contemporary art signifies both the loss of racial aura and its contribution to the reified racial aesthetic. As Weinbaum states, "using art to locate racial aura in contemporary culture may be the first move towards creating critical awareness of the transformation of modes of perception now underway,"¹⁰⁶ and these modes are stimulated by the repositioning of race in cultural production. In other words, for Black contemporary art, ghosts of the past haunt the production, display and reception of work in the present.

Black (In)Visibility: Obama Takes the Stage

As a platform for analyzing shifts in Black art, Black literary aesthetics foreground visual trends. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* illustrates a particular understanding of the role of Black art, and the Black artist. Written during the Harlem Renaissance and just before the Civil Rights Movement, *Invisible Man*

¹⁰⁵ Alys Weinbaum, "Racial Aura: Walter Benjamin and the Work of Art in a Biomechanical Age," *Literature and Medicine* 26(1) (2007): 207-239.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

fictionalized Black duality. Like DuBois' "double consciousness," Ellison pointed to a twoness of the Black man: caught between the self-defined and the imposing White world.¹⁰⁷ The main character (the invisible man), nameless, shapeless (though inscribed with gender), vague, with no distinctive tone of voice, fulfills the role as "the anonymous Black man." Envisioning the title character is then left entirely up to the reader. For example, my invisible man (woman) is familiar– a Black boy (girl) turned Black man (woman), displaced at least once, who struggles to see him (her)self beyond the limits of how others see him (her). Lacking distinct facial features, the character is merely the vessel and can take on anyone's face, "plugging into the blackness of [your] mind."¹⁰⁸

Feelings of anger and resentment grow in the invisible man and they fuel an urge to speak up, especially at embarrassing or belittling moments. Although, even with all of the support the invisible man received from the community to eventually making his dream of becoming a powerful and eloquent speaker come true, he was advised that the longer he remains unseen the longer he would be effective.¹⁰⁹

Today, Barack Obama speaks on behalf of Americans, and he is not invisible – quite the contrary. He represents a substantial rupture in accepted

¹⁰⁷ That same year, Frantz Fanon published *Black Skin, White Masks*, which theorized similar concerns about the formation of Black identity.

¹⁰⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1952), 239.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 294.

theories and rational behind the fragmented Black individual. As president of the United States of America, Obama steers the helm of the hegemonic power in the West. Does this visibility connote ineffectiveness, like Ellison's protagonist? For the art world, the use of a postrace ideation has not been applied as explicitly like "identity politics" or the proposal that artists are, perhaps, "post-black." In relation to a particular moment that fractures the history of the construction of Black identities, it is valuable to look at how Black art works by way of art and exhibitions that occur within a particular timeline.

2010: Postrace

Following the conclusions drawn in Chapter 2 about ideas like "post-black," and "creolization" used in relation to exhibitions, what can be said about a postrace exhibition? Though not labeled specifically as "postrace," the *Afro-Modern* exhibition, held at the Tate Modern in April of 2010, fell within, what may later be stamped as, a postracial moment. Curated by Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter, the show was inspired by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) and sought to unveil particular moments of Black modernity by exploring where and when artistic practice challenges a dominant mode of modernism.

The exhibition included over seventy artists with works that ranged over almost an entire century. Not limited to solely exhibiting Black artists, it

included sculptures by Brancusi and Picasso, and photographs by Walker Evans and Man Ray, and examined not only Black art but intersections of culture and influences from the Black Atlantic. Divided into seven parts, *Afro-Modern* created a dialogue around ideations like *Négritude*, the Avant-garde, Modernism, Creolization and Post-black.

Ten years after the first conversation between Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon that sparked the “post-black” idea, Huey Copeland interviewed the pair for the *Afro-Modern* catalogue.¹¹⁰ Copeland noted that though Black artists’ work may be included in exhibitions, art fairs and biennials with an all-inclusive curatorial thesis, discursive limitations remain on how their work is framed. Golden and Ligon recounted that for them, post-black was about a generation of artists who do not see Blackness and Africa through the same lens of a preceding Black generation. This particular moment seemed free from an obligation to address Black history in a political and combative way. Post-black artworks fought against the notion of a singular narrative, and yet sought to be part of a larger discussion. Golden noted, at the time of its utterance, post-black was an “abbreviation of post-black art, which really referred to our way of talking about a particular kind of practice at a particular moment that engaged with a particular set of issues and a

¹¹⁰ Huey Copeland, “Post/Black/Atlantic: A Conversation with Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon,” in *Afro-Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* (London: Tate Liverpool, 2010).

particular ideology.”¹¹¹ Similarly, in reference to a particular moment that engages with a new global Black visibility and the potential for a new understanding of Blackness, postrace opens a door to numerous possible narratives about identity and ways in which to enter a discussion about race and art.

The “Black” that has been informed by how both Blacks view themselves, and others interpret Blackness, operates under the same structure of double consciousness, first articulated by DuBois at the turn of the twentieth century. One hundred years later, the suggestion of “postrace” has repositioned “race.” No longer represented by clear opposing poles of Black and White—or Other and White—double consciousness contends with the notion that where Black and White had previously informed the formation of identity, postrace proposes that they now cease to recognize race all together. Thus, the Black experience pits itself against knowing that others are meant to reject the idea of race but concedes that this is only a utopic ideal and in fact, others do acknowledge race with the caveat that they are not supposed to consider it all.

From James Van Der Zee’s portrait of the hopeful new negro family in *Garveyite Family, Harlem* (1924) to Glenn Ligon’s use of comedian Richard Pryor to comment on the expectation placed on the construction of Blackness in *Gold Nobody Knew Me #1* (2007), *Afro-Modern* looked at Black modernity

¹¹¹ Qtd in Copeland, “A Conversation,” 78.

from various perspectives. The exhibition showcased artworks that marked the transformation from the New Negro aesthetic to a post-soul ironic aesthetic.

The more than one hundred works in the exhibition negotiated the space between cultural realities and historical moments of influence. Rather than display modernisms formed on a linear timeline, the exhibition explores various moments that cross or influence one another. Both the exhibition and catalogue present a timeline that encompasses everything from the eighteenth century to the present, art movements to births, deaths and publication dates. As a way to read the role of art at a particular moment, *Afro-Modern*, provides a contemporary example of how Black art functions as a reflection on a new cultural reality. As a postracial approach to art and curatorial practice, the exhibition opts to explore instances of Black modernisms, and considered various factors affecting identity formation as opposed to single and specific contextualization.

Reading Postrace Black Art

If “postrace” becomes an accepted approach or understanding of a most recent generation of Black art and Black artists, it begs the question: how, if at all, should race be acknowledged when referring to Black art?

Contemporary art historian Darby English explores the parameters for interpreting Black art in the new millennium. His work *How to See a Work of*

Art in Total Darkness (2007) presents “darkness” as an analogy for a common default position of reading Black art, which inhibits a thorough analysis. Through his discussion of Glenn Ligon’s art practice, English observes that the work expresses a “quandary highly specific to its time.”¹¹² The author notes the potential roadblock of presenting new inquiries into Black art, motivated by a desire to uphold its uniquely Black characteristics rooted in the past. His position in relation to potential cultural influence on art production and reception implies a fluidity that constantly warrants a reassessment. English questions the role of Black works of art that revisit a particular moment in history, when Black art was either not afforded the right to rigorous critical analysis or seemed overly idealistic in their assumed aspiration of preserving the plight of Black history, and instead encourages a revised framework with which to see Black art.¹¹³ I would argue that English does not suppose to be rid of the structure presented by a Black art historical canon, which made strives toward something renewed. Instead, he calls for an alternative to what he believes to be a “tremendous self-regulating power,”¹¹⁴ within the area of Black art and the Black experience. And though English does not overtly point to a postracial approach to analyzing art, I believe it represents an alternative to the restricting paradigm already in

¹¹² Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 213.

¹¹³ Ibid, 10.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

place for interpreting Black art. Thus, postracial Black art essentially becomes rooted in a definition of Blackness before it can hope to move beyond controlled or rigid discourse regarding the Black experience or aesthetic, frozen in the past.

Reading Shade

Reflecting on particular moments that informed the receptions and contextualization of Black art provides a grounding on which to read Newsome's work that is not "postrace" at all. After experiencing Newsome's *Shade Composition* in the summer of 2010, I secured a meeting and studio visit with the artist. I valued the opportunity to meet the composer of the Black orchestra who had heavily influenced my interest and desire to reflect on what "Black art" means today. Newsome has been workshopping and performing this piece in Europe and the United States since 2005. His methodology incorporated primary research.¹¹⁵ The artist interviewed women of varying racial backgrounds and asked them to "act Black"—actions that carry a long history of constructed and appropriated ideas of Blackness. This methodology, ethnographic in its approach, considers first, an unmediated interpretation of "Black," and second, an attempt to reproduce those depictions to an audience. After compiling the research, Newsome worked with a choreographer and filters through the footage for the actions,

¹¹⁵ All details of Newsome's practice stem from a conversation with the artist in his studio in New York City, NY on May 21, 2010, unless otherwise indicated.

words and sounds that are repeated the most. The product for those interviews, *Shade Compositions (screen tests)*, is a component of the final performance. Comprised of a selection from the white room interviews, the video plays on a screen above the stage and behind the live performers. Though *(screen tests)* projects silently, it offers some transparency into where the orchestrated moves came from, and from whom the moves were recruited. Black sounds and gestures perform together creating a layered composition that resonates. I was most drawn to the sense of apprehension it conjured in relation to my interest in writing about the work: How much, if at all, should I acknowledge the history behind the construction and display of Blackness?

I believe this question materialized in response to a recent contemporary moment: one that feels free of inequality, invisibility and racism of the past, but also senses the danger of potentially losing a battle, which started before the current generation of Black artists were born. Not strictly an incarnation of magnified ambivalence, postrace allows for multiple readings of an artwork like *Shade Compositions*. Though an ever-present double consciousness affects the production of Black culture, a performance like Newsome's—when played on a postrace stage—welcomes various interpretations of the artist's methodology and aesthetic. I see *Shade Composition* as a humorous comment on insulting Black stereotypes, which is

presented as a reflection of the real; it asks participants of culture to recreate contemporary tropes of Blackness, as they see it.



Figure 3. Rashaad Newsome, *Shade Compositions (screen tests)*, 2008, still from a colour video, 11 minutes 29 seconds.

Richard Powell ends his 2002 survey of the history of Black art by noting a series of events that were based around Black art, awards and art commissions given to Black artists, Black art acquisitions by large institutions, and highlights the plans for two new museums, dedicated to Black art, including a new Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Powell states that these museum projects in particular, “even at this contentious moment, promised that African diasporal arts,

rather than disappearing or ‘fading to black,’ will persist in the collective and cultural imagination well into the 21st century.”¹¹⁶ Art exhibitions act as a window into the interpretation of Black art at any given moment. As such, *Afro-Modern* is interesting within a postrace context in that it provides a platform on which various interpretations of “Black” can be explored. Whether reassessing the global visibility of Blackness or revisiting past movements of Black emancipation or equality, a postrace exhibition may both uphold unique characteristics of Blackness and be either idealistic or lack a certain criticality. This is not to imply that a “postrace exhibition” or “postrace art” is limited to ambiguity. Rather, it would encourage various discursive points of entry for generations past and present, with no clear right or wrong approach.

¹¹⁶ Powell, *Black Art*, 241.

Conclusion

*Those trees that looked as if they might uproot themselves
and simply walk away, were it not for the knowledge that
on this earth one place is not so different from another—the
knowledge that one moment carries within it all that's gone
on before.*

-Barack Obama¹¹⁷

With this thesis I wanted to respond to what I saw as a cultural moment of change in contemporary art—which carried specific implications for Black artists—by reflecting on moments of the past. In order to look at the relationship between postrace and art, I had to first understand how Black art functioned during earlier instances of cultural change, so as not to repeat charged suggestions like “identity politics,” “post-black,” and “creolization.” Utterances imbued with, namely, the hasty divorce of contemporary Blackness from the very events that ushered in a proposal of something “new.” Postrace inherently carries with it the ghosts of Black identities constructed in the past.

The proposal of a postracial America arose around the same time as the *Freestyle* exhibition, though only recently has there been a swell in its appearance in the media, with the election of America’s first Black president.

¹¹⁷ Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father: a Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 437.

The sentiment of not wanting to be judged by a standard, chained to a particular history, becomes a performance of Blackness – where Black artists no longer wish to be associated with a struggle for equality that may result in their being viewed as a victim. For contemporary art, post-black and postrace art responds to ideas that simplify and gloss over a complicated history. Paradoxically, they connect to the history, aura, and “authenticity” of Blackness and reorient themselves within the discussion of what Blackness implies in a postrace moment. And in an attempt to contend with this paradox, art presents signifiers that hope to no longer represent a sign of struggle and oppression.

In the March 21, 2011 issue of *The New Yorker*, Peter Schjeldahl wrote: “If [Barack] Obama’s election didn’t end identity politics in American culture, it certainly complicated the matter.”¹¹⁸ Schjeldahl’s review of Glenn Ligon’s retrospective at the Whitney Museum presents an interesting layer to the postrace debate. Artworks created during an era that was not rid of racial markers—but on the contrary, saturated with identity politics—are referenced by Schjeldahl as examples of “successfully executed vehicles of awareness.”¹¹⁹ And Ligon’s ability to “normalize public assertions...without compromising his personality and his artistic standards is a sign of more

¹¹⁸ Peter Schjeldahl, “Unhidden Identities: A Glenn Ligon Retrospective.” *The New Yorker*, March 21, 2011: 77.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 78.

than hope.”¹²⁰ So what, if anything, did it do? It illuminated the space that Black artists need to play with identity.

Rashaad Newsome’s *Shade Compositions* did not stray so far from the ethnographic research methods of Renée Green or Robbie McCauley’s performance of inherited memories almost twenty years earlier. Like Green, Newsome’s ethnographic methods for gathering primary research went outside of American Blackness to understand how other parts of the world perceive and reproduce Black culture from the West, and like McCauley, Newsome takes that research and performs constructed memory from a historically designed notion of Blackness. Attempts to dislocate Blackness from any one kind of authenticity that had been shaped in the trauma of the past are socially violent processes. For the discipline of art, this violence manifests itself in one of two reactionary ways: either as a spectre of the political and social struggle for visibility and equitable treatment of Blacks, refuting the suggestions that Blackness is or ever could be different than that which was constructed in an inequitable time; or, the response works within the guidelines of race-dislocation and aspires to create new meanings and contribute new ideas to the canon of Black art by removing the label of “Black art” completely. Of Newsome’s *Shade Compositions*, I recognize a current theme, not only in the act of displaying Blackness but also, in a performance that so unabashedly displays a stereotypical perception of Black culture, at a

¹²⁰ Ibid.

time when such a comment is moot, thus, demanding more cultural work in an attempt to define the moment.

If this very moment hopes for racial equality and colourblindness, when a new global Black visibility should be at its most optimal, then one could assume it possible that Black performances be revered for their conceptual initiative, artistic originality and flawless prose. But *Shade Compositions* reflects a more realistic state of race relations and America's ability, or inability, to see past colour. Though the postracial has been articulated and strategically positioned in relation to American politics—where the President offers a realignment in the definition of Black tropes—and sociology—where the argument has been made for equitable opportunity—the production and reception of contemporary art, produced in the postrace era, presents an interesting anomaly. The relationship between whether intentions and obligation are free of racial expectation is not as black and white as the manner with which it is used in the jargon of the political arena. The potential for play in a postracial art practice calls for allegiance to sides, centers and periphery simultaneously.

Artists that claim or hope to be part of the post-black or postrace generation are really asking for the ability to vacillate between being Black and being invisible. The idea that the value of Black art is less than that of Eurocentric masterpieces and exhibitions of new work may no longer be a reality however, artists that identify as Black may find it difficult to ignore

the expectations associated with their race and cultural experience, informed by their fragmented twoness, or double consciousness. This doubling, based on perception—both of oneself and of the categorizations constructed by others—has long been defined by invisibility.

Looking at Barack Obama—a Black American of mixed background (Kenyan and British)—it would seem that the model for transnationalism, hybridity and diaspora has been found. And not only found but put on display for the all the world. My interest in the dichotomy between Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the Black president of the United States was in understanding what total visibility now implied for the production of Black culture and Black art. I chose to explore the possibilities and limitations of postrace by focusing on particular moments and the theories they spawned: 1993 and identity politics, 2001 and post-black, 2001 and creolization. This was by no means a goal to be pedantic or dogmatic about the transgression of Blackness. Rather, it provided one possible way of looking at the correlation between race relations and the political and social realities. Approaching contemporary art and exhibitions in this manner sets up a structure from which to compare and depart from.

In relation to art, I see postrace as a tool with which to explore contemporary interpretations of Blackness. In a 2010 moment, postrace— Influenced by a new Black visibility—can be considered through a timely exhibition, like *Afro-Modern*. The exhibition demonstrates an alternative way

to display Blackness through various moments of modernity, including its interpretation from non-Black artists, male and female, spanning across a century. Not all postrace exhibitions or artworks (classified as such based solely on the timeline offered by this thesis) need be so expansive but one thing it does assure, as noted by English, is the possibility that one can only know an artwork, “not from a position of contemplation but from one of collaboration.”¹²¹ It may be reductive to figure this critique on “New” moments as a generational shift, but there is indeed a rupture. If this break is “postrace,” it affects a new generation—not solely a Black generation—and art becomes a compelling vector for a discussion about race in the twenty-first century, through a dialectic of visibility and invisibility.

¹²¹ English, *How to See*, 2.

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