

Reclaiming Histories: Betye and Alison Saar, Feminism, and the Representation of Black Womanhood

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The feminist movement has given me more professional exposure. But I resist that now, just like I resist exhibiting in African American artists' shows. I've always worked the same way, and haven't done anything I would consider "feminist art."

–Betye Saar

Yes, I am a feminist. I was involved with the Women's Space [Womanspace] here in Los Angeles. Feminism for me implies more like humanism, just accepting yourself and knowing that it's okay to be the way you are. . . . For me the ultimate goal is to be a whole person and to accept the outcome.

–Betye Saar

People aren't really ready to deal with fierce female passion.

–Alison Saar

Betye Saar considers herself a feminist; however she resists designating her artwork as such. Similarly, Alison Saar, Betye's daughter, avoids labeling her own art as feminist.¹ Yet, both artists have helped to shape a feminist consciousness in the arts since the early 1970s through their probing constructions of autobiography, self-identity, family, and the female body: a consciousness circulating around the historical development of the African American female nude. Betye's early ideas of spirituality and ethnicity, shaped in the early 1970s, have germinated within her daughter, evidenced by Alison's bust- and full-length nude, non-white female figures of the 1980s and 1990s. The Saars' intergenerational explorations of race, history, and the black female body represent a crucial step to reclaim the contentious history surrounding the visual representation of African American women.

Contemporary scholarship often distinguishes Betye's era as the beginning of a reclamation project that has continued to flourish in the art of Alison and her contemporaries. Alison's sculptures reflect her mother's experiences and ideas, but they also form part of a continual, adaptive development of African American representations of the female nude that artists began in the first half of the twentieth century. Negotiations between the binaries of race and gender occurred in the arts much earlier than the 1960s and 1970s, the period when these issues received such great attention. Artists such as Eldzier Cortor and Rose Piper produced images during the 1940s that illuminate the constant contemporary problems related to women's control over their own bodies within social, racial, and sexual milieux. Thus, as a means of filling a missing link, this essay examines the generational conduit between mother and daughter. I argue that Alison's nudes are connected to her mother's autobiographical investigations and, moreover, that they form part of a larger historical struggle for self-identity articulated against and through models of the feminine, feminist, and maternal.

In recent years, scholars such as Judith Wilson, Michael D. Harris, Lisa Gail Collins, Michele Wallace, and Richard J. Powell have problematized the near virtual absence of African American depictions of black female nudes in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. They emphasize how this dearth of representations stemmed from certain factors: the black community promoting sensitive, realistic portraits; artists who feared being deemed improper or pornographers by middle-class society; and most prominently, contemporary scientific theory, which, linking black sexuality to deviance, disease, and decay, infiltrated white European and U.S. visual expression to perpetuate a negative, abhorrent view of the black body. Sander Gilman's often-cited work on the intersections between nineteenth-century science, race theory, and visual expression has proved important in determining a basis for these connections, both for making visible the hypersexualization of the black female body as both fetish and taboo and also for igniting a discourse that has proved to be as problematic as it is valuable. In effect, Gilman argued that nineteenth-century intellectuals used "scientific" evidence to prove racist ideology. Doctors and scientists deduced, through dissection and photography, that the biological and physical characteristics of black females—their allegedly overdeveloped sexual organs and large buttocks—signified ugliness, abnormality, and sexual degeneracy. Saartjie Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus" who was exhibited throughout nineteenth-century Europe to display her protruding buttocks, illustrates the extent of these racist imaginings. Further proof of an excessive pathology came from the discovery that, like black women, white prostitutes also possessed overdeveloped sexual organs. Superficially, the prostitute might appear normal, even beautiful; however, a trained observer could

recognize innate atavistic sexuality through visible traits such as the shape of the ear or an asymmetrical face.²

Naturally, Gilman posited, these ideas found their way into visual expression, evident in well-known painted images by Edouard Manet and Pablo Picasso. In Manet's *Olympia* (1863), the black maid (Laure) marks the nude white female (Victorine Meurent) as a prostitute, whereas his *Nana* (1877) illustrates the convergence of race and sexuality within one white body. *Nana*, clearly a prostitute by her state of undress and the gentleman visitor in her room, doubly reveals her position through her physical characteristics: large protruding buttocks linking her with African females and a Darwin's ear linking her with prostitutes. In case a viewer misses these clues, the image of a *grue*, which visually represents a Japanese crane, but linguistically is slang for prostitute, hangs on the wall behind her. Griselda Pollock has also argued that *Olympia's* Laure, frequently overlooked by white art historians, signified darkness and death in nineteenth-century Eurocentric discourse.³

Responding to images such as *Olympia*, to *National Geographic* pictures of nude African women, or to daguerreotype records of slave women exploitatively stripped to the waist, black artists pointedly chose to avoid similar imagery. In fact, Wilson identified Edmonia Lewis's sculptures of nonblack children as the only known nineteenth-century nudes by a black artist. The fact that Lewis, as a woman artist, could gain access to nude models was unusual because, as Linda Nochlin argued in her landmark 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" women artists had traditionally been restricted from working with nude models. Lewis, however, spent much of her artistic career in Italy, a country that lacked many of the same gender and racial barriers that black women artists faced in the United States. When black artists finally began to frequently image the nude in the first half of the twentieth century, they fell back on a conventional approach to representing women, visualizing them as objects of beauty and desire and conflating them with nature. Correspondingly, artists positioned them within a modern primitivist rhetoric made popular in contemporary literature, music, film, and theater, a rhetoric that was also indirectly compounded by Alain Locke, whose influential "Legacy of the Ancestral Arts" (1925) encouraged African American artists to emulate European modernists' fascination with African aesthetics and subject matter, both of which centered on the nonwhite body. According to Wilson, before 1960 no artist focused on the volatile intersections of gender and race or on the inflammatory myths of black sexuality that representations of the black nude frequently carried.⁴

What, however, happened during the other fifty-odd years of the twentieth century that may have contributed to, or made a reclamation of the black female body possible? How exactly are issues of self-identity

and the body in the art of Betye and Alison Saar unique? How can they be more fully historicized? In response to such questions, I maintain that it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that African American women became able, both verbally and visually, to react so stridently to a long-term struggle to create a strong, complex, sexual identity. This marked the period when feminism, in conjunction with black nationalism, made its impact on the arts community. The union of the two proved significant because the gendered and racial body became a hotly contested site.⁵ Betye Saar's oppositional, introspective, autobiographical works of the 1970s emerged from the backdrop of the southern California feminist and black consciousness art movements and laid the groundwork for Alison Saar's later sculptures.

Yet, previous to this period, African American artists did attempt to negotiate a similar struggle and resisted addressing the body explicitly for more enigmatic reasons than can be explained by pervasive pseudo-scientific race theories. Important to my response are writings by feminist critics such as Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Paula Giddings, Ann duCille, and Anne Stavney.⁶ Although for the most part, these women focus on literature, blues music, and popular magazine imagery, rather than the fine arts, they indirectly suggest alternative understandings for why nonwhite artists, both female and male, may have avoided the painted and sculpted nude, choosing it only sporadically as a subject before the 1960s. As early as the nineteenth century, black women faced not only the sexualized stereotypes bestowed on them by white America, but also the exclusionary practices of feminist organizations and certain standards created by black males such as the black Madonna or ideal mother, a sexually pure vehicle for racial uplift. Accordingly, they have long struggled to construct sexual, racial, and economically viable selves and to reconfigure more heterogeneous models of black womanhood.⁷ In the visual arts, a discipline slow to allow women access, this endeavor proved especially difficult; ironically, only a handful of images by male artists, such as Cortor, reveal a more complex identity contained in a woman's nude body. This history, in addition to Betye's experiences within, and negotiations between, two 1960s and 1970s artistic and political movements, provide an important means of contextualizing and historicizing Alison's contemporary feminist consciousness.

The Autobiographical Impulse

In downplaying the feminist content of her art, Betye Saar has instead emphasized its cross-culturalism, autobiography, and spirituality.⁸ In this section, I argue that these emphases must be considered in light of two historical circumstances: her encounters with 1970s feminism and the historical representation of black female identity and the body. During the early 1970s, Betye Saar's experience of racism within a very

white feminist arts movement solidified her allegiance to a predominantly male group of black southern California artists interested in promoting a black, inclusive, metaphysical consciousness distinct from the black power politics of that era. Her foray into an increasingly autobiographical mode of representation reflected her negotiations between these two geographically proximal, but ideologically different, factions; she explored a black womanhood conditioned by both.

Betye Saar's autobiographical representations of black womanhood from that period are not erotic and do not explicitly represent her body. She thus demonstrates a resistance to imaging the black body, but a resistance unlike that of earlier black women artists and writers, who, during the first half of the twentieth century, often avoided the erotic black female body because of its negative connotations of the primitive and the exotic. Saar's resistance instead suggests her rejection of white feminism and her disavowal of the white feminists' interest in a "feminine aesthetic" determined by female sexuality. It also attests to her view of identity as metaphysical, rather than material. But although her resistance is different, it nevertheless situates her 1970s artwork within the twentieth-century historical struggle to construct a model of black womanhood produced through a nexus of race and gender ideologies. Forged first during the nineteenth century by women activists who spoke out against racial violence and white exclusion and then by 1930s and 1940s black women writers who constructed female characters that rebelled against racist assumptions about black female sexuality, this struggle was later strengthened by black artists during the 1940s and 1950s, who turned toward the potent trope of the black female nude to probe conjunctions of economics, race, and gender. Saar's autobiographical artworks, which interlace diverse spiritual, cultural, and gendered facets of blackness, signal another development in reclaiming the black female body and its identities. By contextualizing her assemblages within such an explosive moment as the convergence of feminism and black power, in addition to a wider historical struggle, I establish a richer basis for Alison Saar's future exposés of the black body.

Betye Saar's *Black Girl's Window* (cover art and fig. 1) not only represents a black woman, but also makes audiences aware of an individual's identity through its probing, self-reflexive underpinnings. In Saar's assemblage, made from an old window with hinges, latch, and glass intact, a dark painted silhouette with piercing bright eyes stares outward, her face and hands pressed against the pane as if being held captive. Above this girl's head, nine smaller grids, arranged like a tic-tac-toe game, display various images and symbols pasted directly onto the glass: crescent moons and stars, a sketched skeleton, a howling wolf, a tintype of an older white woman, and an American eagle with the word "love" emblazoned across its breast. The entire structure functions like a child's

treasured type-tray containing rocks, miniatures, and other precious collectibles. The girl is trapped, her interior thoughts and connections bound and compartmentalized: she is conscious of her surroundings and beyond but not able to escape. This early, potent work forces the viewer to recognize a self-conscious black girl, struggling both to understand and to resist her past and present history, family, relationships, religion, and myth.

Critics and scholars avoid addressing Saar's work as feminist, for a variety of reasons: because of her aversion to being designated as a "feminist" artist; because of the essentialist stigma attached to 1970s conceptualizations of a "feminist aesthetic"; and because of the racially exclusionary nature of the movement. Race, Okwui Enwezor believes, complicates feminist discourse in such a way that no singular feminist history can exist as no singular art history can either. To overlook a feminist context in this case would be to ignore the intersections of race and gender within the movement in general and to obscure how Betye Saar negotiated her position within a specific geographic and cultural sphere: ultimately, to corroborate an exclusive history.⁹

One of Saar's first serious explorations into autobiography, *Black Girl's Window*, merged her interest in Joseph Cornell's art with her continual fascination with occult and astrological symbols. These ideas permeate other contemporary assemblages such as her well-known, black power-inspired *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) and her mystical, otherworldly *Spiritcatcher* (fig. 2). Critics are often quick to mention the personal and spiritual aspects, but rarely delve into their cultural impetus. Beryl Wright describes *Black Girl's Window* as a display of occult signs that have become autobiographical symbols, and Carolyn J. Luccarelli notes that this piece intertwined many personal objects related to self, politics, and astrology. Why did Betye's impulse for autobiography burst forth at this point? Saar herself has provided one explanation: "We'd had the Watts riots and the black revolution. Also, that was the year I got my divorce. So in addition to the occult subject matter there was a political and also personal content."¹⁰ Building on these clues, I offer another: her connection to Los Angeles, where she still lives, which was then the site of a geographic convergence of feminism, assemblage art, and black consciousness.

The autobiographical subject matter and the materials—old photographs, dried flowers, and gloves—of *Black Girl's Window* and other assemblages such as *Letters from Home . . . Homesick* (fig. 3) strongly suggest the influences of female artists and artists' collectives working in Los Angeles. Saar actually became a member of the original board of the short-lived Womanspace gallery, which opened in Los Angeles in 1972, but she has since avoided a strong connection with the feminist movement of the 1970s. Originally a separate space, in 1973 Womanspace be-

came part of the Woman's Building, an entire building devoted to women's art and culture. Led by artists Arlene Raven, Judy Chicago, and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, the Woman's Building also contained the Center for Feminist Art Historical Studies, the Sisterhood Bookstore, the Associated Women's Press, and the Los Angeles Feminist Theater. This combination of diverse groups proved important in integrating feminist theory with academic programs and alternative gallery structures.¹¹ Scholars have also distinguished the Los Angeles feminist milieu from that of New York: feminist artists in California limited their attacks on museums and emphasized women-only institutions. The Californians also used unique environments such as the Woman's Building to develop more collaborative projects and performance pieces that incorporated political issues of rape, incest, and abusive media practices. Nevertheless, like many alternative galleries without an established leadership structure, Womanspace had its share of directional problems that caused it to close only eighteen months after it opened.¹²

Covert instances of racism and separatism also contributed to Womanspace's demise. Betye Saar certainly experienced racism during her involvement there, and many other nonwhite artists recorded dissatisfaction with their galleries and exhibition spaces for similar reasons. When Saar curated "Black Mirror" at Womanspace in 1973, an exhibit devoted to black women artists, white women artists rarely attended the exhibition activities and events: "It was as if we [black women] were invisible again. The white women did not support it. I felt the separatism, even within the context of being in Womanspace." Saar's experience was not atypical, either of the present or of the past. Both Giddings and Carby have documented how racism proliferated throughout the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century temperance and suffrage movements and how black women have consistently been critical of white feminists' exclusionary tactics.¹³

Alongside Betye Saar, contemporary artists such as Faith Ringgold, Howardena Pindell, and Ana Mendieta voiced their protests through interviews, catalog essays, and artwork.¹⁴ Along with five other artists, Ringgold formed the group *Where We At: Black Women Artists*, which grew out of an exhibition planned to combat these instances of racism. Probably the first of its kind, this exhibition, held at the Acts of Art Gallery in New York in 1971, provided a springboard for further shows featuring black women artists in other areas of the city. Several years later, Pindell created her video *Free, White, and 21* (1980) in reply to her outrage at the racism shown by the women's art movement and the art profession in general. She played two characters: a black female narrator and a white female respondent. In a continual back and forth dialogue, the camera oscillated between a close-up of the black Pindell describing instances of racism experienced by herself and the white

Pindell, who, dressed in a blonde wig and dark glasses, simply ignores the black woman's complaints, calls her paranoid, and tells her to be more appreciative. White viewer responses to her tape are unbelievable and shocking; in her book *The Heart of the Question*, Pindell describes how one woman "asked sarcastically if it made [Pindell] feel better to have made the tape," and one man refused to believe her experiences really happened.¹⁵

Consequently, there can be no question as to why Betye Saar would want to distance herself from specific institutions of the predominantly white feminist arts movement. It also follows that implicit in her remarks would be a refusal of any "feminine aesthetic," a term that provoked intense debate between women artists and scholars in the 1970s. Definitions of this aesthetic ranged from a specific female sexual iconography, to a process of reacting against previous modes of expression, to an anti-logical approach. In 1975, Betye Saar cleverly avoided answering feminist writer Cindy Nemser's questions in a *Feminist Art Journal* interview: "Should [women] be making specific female imagery and if so what would that imagery consist of? And if we are not making that kind of imagery are we male oriented?" Saar simply responded: "It really comes down to the individual."¹⁶

Although attempts to define a feminine aesthetic became the subject of much criticism, Saar's early autobiographical art suggests an awareness of issues such as identity, media, and process that surrounded the aesthetic and that her contemporaries were experimenting with in their work, even though she has never overtly admitted such a connection. *Black Girl's Window*, with its astrological and ancestral symbols, emphasized Saar's own ethnicity, spirituality, and position as struggling artist and single mother. Contemporaries such as Adrian Piper and Eleanor Antin took similar autobiographical approaches about the self-fashioning of brain and body. Piper's performance, *Food for the Spirit* (1971), relayed her experiences fasting and reading Emanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, while Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1973) was a photographic document of her struggle to lose weight.¹⁷

Saar increasingly delved into autobiography in 1974 following her great-aunt Hattie's death. This death, coupled with the death of her father when she was six years old, impelled her to participate in a workshop at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), "Intensive Journal," based on Ira Progoff's psychological theory and method. Progoff, a Jungian psychotherapist specializing in holistic depth psychology, developed his "Intensive Journal Method" in the 1960s and 1970s based on his research having patients keep a journal. In workshops throughout the United States and Canada, he trained participants to keep disciplined, private journals, detailing daily events, thoughts, dreams, wishes, and memories. Progoff describes the operating principle of the journal

as "when a person is shown how to reconnect himself with the contents and the continuity of his life, the inner thread of movement by which his life has been unfolding reveals itself to him by itself. Given the opportunity, a life crystallizes out of its own nature, revealing its meaning and its goal." Saar recounts her workshop experience: "One exercise was this: Close your eyes and go down into your deepest well, your deepest self. Whatever you meet there, write down. I had this vision. There was water and a figure swimming. I had a feeling of intense sadness. I started to weep right there in class. Later I realized that of course the figure was myself."¹⁸

Progroff's self-probing, stream-of-consciousness technique compares to Betye Saar's approach to creating assemblages of found objects she finds attractive. Like diary entries draw bits of memories together to form a narrative, Saar's assembled relics of her great-aunt Hattie, who took care of Betye's mother, construct a commemorative portrait of Hattie and her impact on Saar. About this series Saar stated:

And it comes from a very deep level that I can't always explain because my memory of events and situations is really poor. It's what I call automatic art, the art that I do. I make conscious choices about images and materials and spacing and pattern. A lot of that is art training, but a lot of it is that I know it evokes something. I can't always explain it. So much of it is intuitive, strictly intuitive. In doing an installation, I have all these fragments and all these materials, but until it's put in the space, it's just all those separate things. And it's the same with building a box. It's all just fragments until it's put together. It's like, and I know this sounds corny, a shaman mixing a potion and having the potion work.¹⁹

Record for Hattie (1974), *Letter from Home . . . Homesick*, and *Keep for Old Memoires* (1976) remember her great-aunt Hattie by collaging Hattie's belongings in keepsake containers. In *Record for Hattie*, the artist festoons a wooden jewelry box with a cracked mirror, Hattie's faded autograph book, a tiny carved crucifix, a string of pearls strewn across a pink pincushion, and, reminiscent of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century carved gravestones, two symbols of a life extinguished: a skeleton and an hourglass eggtimer. *Letter from Home . . . Homesick's* and *Keep for Old Memoires'* antique frames house torn notes and letters written by Hattie's second husband, lacy handkerchiefs, and worn photographs.²⁰ The two leather gloves in *Keep for Old Memoires* function like forgotten hands arranging mementos into a scrapbook, harking back to nineteenth-century women's domestic arts and crafts traditions.

Like *Black Girl's Window*, with its central figure foregrounding race and Betye Saar's position within a larger aesthetic debate, and a milieu that overlooked or disregarded both, these "nostalgia" boxes, as she has termed them, not only invoke personal memories, but also resonate with a collective racial history and memory. The idea of collective women's

history pervaded feminist artworks like Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974-1979), a paean to hundreds of the world's most significant women, but a collective gendered and racial memory remained less visible until more recently. It has now become an important issue for contemporary African American artists dealing with an intensely traumatic past that many never actually experienced, but which remains embedded in the minds and bodies of their ancestors and has been passed down from generation to generation. Toni Morrison discusses recollection and how it inflects her own writing:

Memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find significant. . . . Zora Neale Hurston said, "Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me." These "memories within" are the subsoil of my work. But the memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me.²¹

But because Betye Saar comes from a mixed racial heritage, including Irish American and African American blood, she wants her art to function on more than one level and to appeal to a wider, more universal audience. To Betye, *Keep for Old Memoires* and even *Grandma's Garden* (1972) and *Grandma's House* (1972), two constructions that evoked the garden and house of her grandmother where she played as a child, memorialized not only her own aunt and grandmother, or just black families and black grandmothers, but all families and all grandmothers.²² Saar liked that a Jewish woman saw the assemblages at Womanspace and felt they were "just like the people in my house when I was a little girl."²³ Similarly, Ishmael Reed viewed the grandmother pieces as "ghostly" and "spiritual" because they were like the "soul of Grandmotherhood."²⁴ These repositories for Saar's great-aunt thus crossed color lines in their collective remembrance, flowing between her own "tangled roots."

My roots are tangled
 My unknown ancestors from
 Africa, Ireland and America
 A blend of black and white and red
 I am labeled Creole, mulatto, mixed-
 Colored in every sense
 Enslaved by the "one drop" rule
 But liberated by the truth
 That all blood is red.²⁵

An interpretation of Betye Saar's art as universal could be dangerous because, as Homi Bhabha argued, it has the potential to transcend historical and social contexts and "render them transparent." But, at the same time, such an interpretation serves to dismantle the contested idea of a "black aesthetic" that was heavily promoted through exhibitions,

writings, and artist groups during the late 1960s and 1970s and that has since been critiqued as essentialist. Critic Hilton Kramer and artist Benny Andrews debated the issue in editorials, while curator Edmund Barry Gaither wrote about the importance of a "black show" in his catalog introduction to his 1970 exhibition, *Afro-American Artists, New York and Boston*. Kymberly Pindar claims the "black aesthetic" "continues to muddy the waters" of Western art history survey texts.²¹ In Betye's art, the artist's allusions to mixed ancestry and to various religions become her means of de-essentializing blackness to move beyond binaries of race and ethnicity. She refuses to be pinned down in representing a "black aesthetic" as she refused a "feminine aesthetic."²⁶

Black Consciousness

Although it is clear that Betye Saar's artistic subject matter, media, and her desire to keep herself and interpretations of her art at a distance from feminism reflect her negotiations within the women's arts movement that burgeoned in southern California in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, it is also evident that her choice of mixing African and other non-Western mythology and symbolism with personal mementos and icons of U.S. popular culture links her spiritually and artistically to the predominantly male black assemblage artists working in the Los Angeles area during the same time. Artists such as Noah Purifoy, John Outterbridge, and David Hammons, from the early 1970s onward, began experimenting with a diasporal, race-conscious collectivity using a spiritual, introspective tone in addition to the radical, nationalistic, confrontational tone used earlier by black artists groups in Chicago and New York. As Betye Saar herself noted in the passage cited earlier, the 1965 Watts Riots sparked a wave of civil unrest and protest images like her own gun-toting Aunt Jemima. Influenced by the strategies of contemporary white California Pop and assemblage artists Edward Kienholz, Bruce Connor, and John Baldessari and by the politics of the civil rights movement, the Los Angeles black artists used found objects to explore their diverse, non-Western heritage and aesthetics. However, Betye's approach, like her race-conscious counterparts, differed from that of the Pop artists. Whereas the Pop brand of Los Angeles assemblage addressed mass media, consumerism, politics, tourism, and Hollywood film culture, hers looked toward community and ancestry. Influenced by Arnold Rubin's discussions of African art, Saar found that her work paralleled African assemblage with its emphasis on "consensus," "consolidation," and the "affirmation and reinforcement of social values and continuity," rather than Western assemblage that referenced the irrational, the accidental, and the dreamlike. She and her associates established a significant black artistic presence based on a meta-physical and spiritual representation of blackness.²⁷

Both Saar's *Spiritcatcher* and Purifoy's *Watts Riot* (1966) reference

Watts, Los Angeles, through their form, appellation, and materials. Saar's table altar, a pyramidal construction made of rattan, grass, beads, shells, and painted bones she collected over a three-year period, uncannily resembles Simon Rodia's *Watts Tower*, the stunning, spiraling architectural landmark made of broken bottles, stones, cement, and steel near where Saar grew up. Purifoy's abstract assemblage, meant to hang on a wall, uses material from smoldering, burnt wood scavenged just after the riots by the artist, who was a member of the (Watts) Towers Art Center. Intrinsically, *Watts Riot* embodies the protest and site of the riots, yet extrinsically nothing overtly designates it as such because it references a particular culture and locale with abstract language. Similar to Hammons's *Beach Garden* and *Inside Hair Garden* (1975), two installations in which the artist strung balls of African American hair on lengths of wire to resemble cat tails fluttering in the breeze, Purifoy, in his art, seems to be "searching for an abstract voice—like jazz—that could be identified as distinctly African American; something that could be non-objective in form and coded with (self) reference, without relying on representation."²⁸

Although Saar's, Purifoy's, and Hammons's nonrepresentational artworks all contain racial signifiers that, in Hammons's and Purifoy's case, were once in direct contact with black bodies or locales, Saar's *Spirit-catcher* still seems rather different from the others. It is coded with a much more specific self: it references Africa (and African Americans), but also points toward the artist's own diverse background by her inclusion of even more diverse cultural symbols such as a Star of David, an Islamic crescent, Christian rosary beads, and an Egyptian ankh. Similarly, its shape reveals not only Betye's own neighborhood, but its personal, ritual function: to entice powerful spirits and induce spiritual passage from one world to the next. Drawing on her own investigations into shamanism and mysticism and on her belief in an active art object, she modeled her lure on Tibetan spirit traps that were empowered by shamans and placed on the roofs of houses. In numerous interviews, Saar has expressed the sense of ritual that pervades her work: "I may have a Crescent and Star mixed with a cross or a Jewish star. The basis in the pieces is that man has a need for some kind of ritual."²⁹ Her process of working is even part of a ritual that she describes as part of a five-step process: the imprint, the search, the collecting and gathering, the recycling, and the release.

Overall, even though Saar's art reveals a more autobiographical thrust than Hammons's or Purifoy's, her conception of herself as promoting a spiritual diasporal consciousness positions her more securely within the milieu of the California African American assemblage artists, rather than within the feminist collectives of the Woman's Building. This positioning, however, was not unique to Betye, or to West Coast women artists of color, because Kay Brown, one of the founders of the New York

Where We At (WWA) group, recently emphasized her allegiance to the black arts movement over the feminist one:

Some people link the gains made by black women artists to the influence of the feminist artists. I don't believe this is an accurate assessment. Although WWA members and other black women artists agreed that women should empower themselves to gain economic and artistic equity, we generally viewed ourselves as integral to the black arts movement. Our struggle was primarily against racial discrimination—not singularly against sexism. We were not prepared to alienate ourselves from our artist brothers.

Of late, Betye Saar yearns to be exempt from any kind of categorization. In 1990, she emphatically proclaimed that she no longer wanted to participate in certain exhibitions that had "woman" or "black" in the title: "Midway through 1989 I made a decision not to be separatist by race or gender. I decided not to become involved with shows that had 'woman' or 'black' in the title. What do I hope the nineties will bring? Wholistic integration—not that race and gender won't matter anymore, but that a spiritual equality will emerge that will erase issues of race and gender." Although this statement resembles protests made by women artists in the 1970s who viewed themselves not as women or black artists but as human artists or just simply artists, Ringgold and Elizabeth Catlett have adamantly voiced their opposition to these positions. Ringgold noted that "No other field is as closed to those who are not white and male as is the visual arts. After I decided to be an artist, the first thing I had to believe was that I, a black woman, could penetrate the art scene. . . ." Catlett similarly stated that she had nothing against "being identified as a woman or a female artist" and voiced agreement that some kind of "woman's estheticism" exists. For Ringgold and Catlett, black and female could never be exclusive terms. And, although spiritual equality is an admirable goal to work toward, issues of race and gender remain dominant features of Betye Saar's art and of her rigorous support and denunciations of contemporary African American artists. In fact, her statement appears slightly disingenuous considering that in 1997 she began a campaign against the explicit, stereotypical silhouettes of Kara Walker that sparked numerous conferences and debates and caused her to resurrect the figure of Aunt Jemima for 1998 and 2000 shows at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York.²⁵ Her statement also silences the important role she has played in paving the way for women artists, like her daughter Alison, to address such charged issues, with a high degree of visibility.³⁰

Looking Backward

Up to this point, I have located Betye Saar's autobiographical explorations of black womanhood at the juncture of the feminist and black arts movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. I have shown how her

representation of black female identity as cross-cultural and metaphysical reflects both her antipathy toward white feminism—with its racism and preoccupation with the correspondence between female sexuality and aesthetics—and her affinity toward the racially conscious, spiritually inflected art of the black southern Californian assemblagists. However, I also want to contextualize Betye's artwork within a history of African American artists and writers who, throughout the twentieth century, have struggled to construct complex, nonstereotypical models of black female subjectivity and feminist consciousness, both through literary characters and through visual representations of the body. Although these revised models of black womanhood respond predominantly to white-constructed stereotypes of black female sexuality, they also respond to black-perpetuated ideals of propriety and maternity. The development of the representation of the black female nude belongs to this history and must be understood as such.

Both duCille and Carby articulated different modes of struggle by early black women writers and musicians to claim subjectivity and to overturn the conventional stereotype of black women as powerless, erotic objects for white (and black) consumption. For example, Helga Crane, the mulatta character in Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand* (1928), rejects the marriage proposal of a white Danish painter who has told her that she has the impulsive nature like the women of Africa and a soul of a prostitute. He has also painted a portrait not of her, Helga believes, but of some "disgusting sensual creature." Through Helga, Larsen made clear the resistance black women felt toward representing or expressing a sexuality that was so entrenched in primitivist rhetoric, fostered especially by white Europeans. In Larsen's later novel *Passing* (1929), her two light-skinned characters, the proper, bourgeois race worker Irene, who is married to a black man, and the sexy, glamorous Clare, who is married to a white man and "passing" for white, represent "body doubles."³¹ While Clare symbolizes Irene's repressed sexuality, Irene suggests Clare's hidden racial self. Through these two women, Larsen articulated two extremes of black female sexuality—excessive or nonexistent—available to black women at the time. Yet in the events that play out between Irene and Clare, culminating in the latter's death, Larsen also offered models of women who are active agents in confronting and shaping racial, sexual, and classist ideologies and iconographies in the modern urban environment.

Larsen overtly critiqued the contemporary iconography of sexualized exoticism, exemplified by the nudes of Picasso and by Josephine Baker's revues, through Helga's intense dislike of her portrait painted by the white Dane. Yet, although writers such as Larsen explicitly dealt with issues of independence, race, gender, and eroticism, African American women artists rarely did. Instead, it was male artists, such as Cortor, who

explicitly began to use the trope of the black female nude and to cast off its "disgusting" sensuality. Although the 1960s and 1970s have been considered the turning point in the development of the black female nude from exotic object to critical subject, a result of the intersection between the black pride and feminist movements, the thorny problems of representing the black nude were addressed by earlier African American artists such as Cortor. This artist, to whose work I will turn briefly, created images that addressed complex issues of race and gender, contrary to many scholars' assertions. Cortor, a painter trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and who worked at the Chicago Southside Community Center, a prominent Works Project Administration (WPA) workshop sponsored by the Federal Arts Project in the 1930s, produced several interior genre scenes filled with contemplative, isolated figures.³² In the 1940s and 1950s, the nude black female became central to Cortor's work. Certainly Cortor focused on the nude both because of its historical dominance since the Renaissance as an artistic subject and because of Locke's call to imitate European avant-gardists like Picasso who had stunned the art world with their modernist renderings of the black female nude. Importantly, however, Cortor's images progress from being a conventional display of the black woman as mythic and fruitful to an exploration of her as independent, complex, and unsettling. Cortor's oeuvre, then, may not dispel all of the inflammatory myths about African American female sexuality, but his later nudes are some of the earliest to begin to subtly undermine these myths. His paintings thus provide a stronger historical foundation and context for understanding both Betye Saar's assemblages and Alison Saar's sculptures.

Cortor's *Southern Gate* (fig. 4) displays a black earth goddess strikingly reminiscent of the model "black Madonna" of the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1940s, Cortor had traveled to the Sea Islands in South Carolina and later to Haiti.³³ Usually his imagery only slightly references the culture and not very authentically at that. *Southern Gate* focuses on a nonspecific black woman, adorned only by a strip of fabric around her waist, a precious necklace and earrings, three sunflowers pinned up in her hair, and a songbird on her shoulder. She is positioned in a dream-like setting of lush, fertile fields and rolling hills dotted by a tiny church steeple, a turquoise lake, an ominous gray sky, and an iron gate hanging from a brick pillar with peeling paint. A far cry from a specimen of lust and pathology, Cortor believed that "the Black Woman represents the Black race. She is the Black Spirit; she conveys a feeling of eternity, and the continuance of life," whereas an art historian compared the woman to a Renaissance Madonna because of the religious symbols surrounding her: the church, the bird, the flowers, and the clouds forming a halo of pink sky around her head.³⁴

Cortor's surreal landscapes evoke the West Indies and his choice of

subject matter follows modern primitivist conventions of abstracting, yet exoticizing a nonwhite woman's body. More remarkable is how the descriptions of his enchantresses uncannily parallel 1920s and 1930s African American literary representations and popular magazine illustrations of the "black Madonna." Although other important feminist critics such as Christian have extensively analyzed repressive cultural stereotypes of black mothers in literature, Stavney notably addresses visual representation. During the New Negro Movement, prominent African American leaders, such as W.E.B. DuBois and Margaret Murray Washington, rebelled against white stereotypes of the sexualized black female and black mammy by promoting the ideology of the "true black woman." This woman, like Larsen's heroine Irene, with her potential penchant and suitability for motherhood, would advance her race simply by being a good mother and creating a good home life. Motherhood, as Stavney points out, figured prominently in the literary and visual arts. Writers, such as Claude McKay, used birth imagery to suggest renewal and regeneration, while the artist Winold Reiss decorated the frontispiece of Locke's 1925 *New Negro* anthology with the *Brown Madonna*, a sweet image of a pensive black mother cradling her baby. Thus, the "true black woman" ideal of the twentieth century recasts the nineteenth-century concept of true (white) womanhood. And like repeated illustrations of women by artists Aaron Douglas, Roscoe Wright, Laura Wheeler, and Joyce Carrington that appeared on covers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) publication, *Crisis* (ca. 1915-1930), Cortor's woman is distanced from the masculine, modern city portrayed in *Southern Gate's* pervasive dreamlike milieu.³⁵ Yet, despite the central figure's designation as a virginal spirit, she does not quite conform to a prescribed chaste, familial role. She remains naked . . . beautiful . . . seductive . . . and sexual: delocalized and exoticized through her mythic settings.

But what about African American female visual artists of this early period? The fact that Wheeler, a contemporary of Larsen, imaged Africa as a stereotypically bangled and turbaned, nearly nude and very voluptuous female body and Carrington imaged an African American woman as a flapper-inspired Egyptian princess, indicating that although both had responded to Locke's encouragement, women artists encountered barriers, physical and mental, in creating personal, urbanized, sexual images. Historian Darlene Clark Hine has also suggested that because of the historical violence committed to black women, especially rape, they created secret, empowering personas that opposed the negative stereotypes of their sexuality. They chose an invisibility, in which they could "accrue the psychic space and harness the resources" for their struggle, because they knew that they did not hold the power to eradicate negative sexual imagery.³⁶ Although Hine's argument convincingly makes a

case for why African American women artists continued to resist the nude, it does not entirely explain why they continued to produce images perpetuating stereotypes.

Rose Piper, however, through her later paintings of female blues singers, was one African American woman artist who, according to art historian Ann Gibson, refused to conform to middle-class standards that restricted women artists from addressing erotic topics. In *Empty Bed Blues* (1946), named for Bessie Smith's song, Piper portrays a forlorn, but determined, African American woman, wearing a simple dress and loose-hanging scarf, her hands solemnly folded on top of the table at which she sits. Behind her lies an empty, made-up bed. Gibson, whose analysis relies on Carby's essays on blues women and songs, argues that Piper's blues-titled pictures were a form of veiled resistance to the taboo subject of female sexuality that blues songs made explicit. Gibson compares Piper with other women artists who, working in an abstract style, portrayed sexualized women, but Piper was unique in painting African American women subjects connected, through blues music, to an eroticism interlinked with race. Like contemporary black women writers, black women blues singers often sang about, and themselves personified, sophisticated, sexualized urbanites.³⁷ By referencing blues music, Piper was able to address issues of race, women's sexuality, independence, and family burdens that an African American woman could not overtly do through speech or actions in the pre-World War II United States.

As a male artist, Cortor was not so restrained by middle-class propriety from painting erotic subject matter, but his Guggenheim and Rosenwald fellowship applications indicate that as an African American artist, he wanted to portray more realistic, complex images of African Americans. Consequently, his *Room No. 6* and *Americana* (1947) stand out because both paintings probe the economic effects of racism on a nude black female body by placing her in abject, urban conditions. The bird's-eye view in *Room No. 6* of a tenement room in Chicago depicts the nearly naked body of a woman lying face-down on a bed, barely covered in a worn patchwork quilt and ragged sheets. Surrounding her figure are three others—a partially clothed child and two additional nude women—who spill outside the frame of the image, but who obviously share her bed. The collage-inspired *Americana* similarly reveals a nude woman standing upright in a washtub, in a dingy room papered with newsprint. Cortor wanted to illustrate the "lives of people living in the poorest areas . . . and . . . the overcrowded conditions of those who are obliged to carry out their daily activities in the confines of the same four walls in utmost poverty." But, upon its exhibition at the 1947 Carnegie Institute Annual Art Exhibition in Pittsburgh, the anonymous defacement of this striking body verifies that its incriminating tone did more than mildly illustrate. Instead, it forcefully struck a raw nerve in one member of its audience—

an audience used to seeing black nudes abstracted into modernist forms and mythologized into exotic, primitive beings. This defacement, although a minor incident, shows that Cortor's images refused to conform to contemporary standards for the black female nude subject. According to Gibson, such refusals by artists to adhere to conventional subjects and styles establish a basis for later, more visible, political action.³⁸

In this context, although neither Cortor nor Piper may have directly influenced the next generation of African American women artists, their images are the roots from which Betye Saar's *Black Girl's Window* emerged, and in turn, Alison Saar's sculptures took form. Betye built on the tradition of redefining black womanhood developed by African American writers and artists throughout the twentieth century. She also, like these earlier writers and artists, indicated a resistance to the erotic body, but one that was different because of its specific context. Betye's resistance, like that of her predecessors, arose from her negotiations within a racial struggle, but more specifically, it resulted from her opposition to contemporary (white) feminism's correlation between the female body, sexuality, and aesthetics, and from her focus on the abstract, metaphysical aspects of identity, rather than the material, physical marks of the body. Yet despite the fact that, in *Black Girl's Window*, the body played a minor, almost nonexistent part, revealed only in silhouette—dramatically contrasting with the contemporary displays of the nude in Ringgold's painted fabric *Fight for Your Life* (*Slave Rape* series, 1972) and Piper's *Food for the Spirit* performance—Betye's assemblage conveyed a girl very much aware of the intersecting politics of race, gender, and spirituality that literally floated above her head, that had come to inform and shape her own identity, and that, because of the historical moment, embodied enormous potential for radical political change.

***Terra Rosas, Strange Fruit, and Sapphires:* Alison Saar's Black Female Nudes**

In Alison Saar's sculptures of women, Betye Saar's *Black Girl* has finally broken free; she now invades her viewers' space to stand towering above, dangle ominously beside, or rest quietly below them. With their intense, confident sexuality, Alison's figures prove to be potentially active generators of a positive, ancestral, transformational energy. As Betye Saar's daughter, Alison inherited a rich artistic legacy from her mother. She grew up in Laurel Canyon in Los Angeles, received her bachelor's degree from Scripps College where she studied folk, African diasporal, and Caribbean art, and completed her masters of fine art at the Otis Art Institute. She lived in New York City for several years but now lives in Los Angeles; thus, the family members are never far from each other. Like her mother's autobiographical assemblages, Saar's figures generate a dia-

logue with the past: with black female writers whose characters contested stereotypes of black female sexuality, and with later black artists whose paintings visualized interrelated issues of economics, geography, the body, and female erotics. However, Saar's conversation is quite different; she does not resist the body, but centralizes the black female nude.

Alison Saar uses the nude to make visible black women's historical struggle to reclaim their own bodies, turning themselves from exoticized objects into critical subjects. Her large-scale, stately nudes suggest a complex debt to Betye Saar's negotiations within the feminist and black consciousness movements both by revealing a conscious knowledge of art and art historical debates surrounding essentialism and a "feminine aesthetic" and by stressing spirituality, ancestry, and multiracial identities. Alison's sculptures are often autobiographical, yet they more profoundly acknowledge the historical role of the body as a marker of identity, and the body's connection to contemporary identity politics. Building on examples such as Cortor's and Rose Piper's paintings from the 1940s and 1950s, and Ringgold's and Adrian Piper's early 1970s fabrics and performances, in addition to recent feminist and cultural critiques of the body as site of identity formation, Alison Saar, like other contemporary artists such as Lorna Simpson, Renée Cox, and Renée Stout, has returned to, and reconfigured, conventional tropes of the nude to emphasize the historical importance of the visual arts in manipulating the female body to construct racist ideology and justify racist practice. Saar's use of the nude also reflects an increased interest in the erotic black body in contemporary black women's literature. Farrah Jasmine Griffin has stressed how writers such as Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, and Sherley Anne Williams each claim the erotic as a fundamental tool of resistance. Critically, Cliff and Williams have focused on the historical era of U.S. slavery in their work because it was the time when many myths about black sexuality emerged and was a period of horrific violence toward black women. Both women's texts document this oppression, then employ the erotic as the tool with which their female heroines endure, confront, and combat it.³⁹

Alison's *Terra Rosa* (fig. 5), *Strange Fruit* (fig. 6), and *Sapphire* (fig. 7) each construct a contemporary model of a critical, self-reflexive black womanhood: they are replete with references to nature and fecundity—the "essential feminine"—but their titles, scale, and placement, as I will show, also expose how black women have resisted and overcome the violence that such references effected.

Centered around interpretations of slave narratives, Saar's initial inspiration for her 1993 installation *Fertile Ground*, with its striking sculptures of female nudes, was the deep bond she felt with the nefarious South, from whence her mother's people came.⁴⁰ Her father is white, but she identifies with her mother's side of the family because she "spent

more time with them." Throughout school she felt alienated by both the black and white student bodies. Consequently, her works often evoke the sense that they reside between worlds: African, African American, European, American, Hispanic, and Afro-Caribbean. Although she had neither lived in the South nor had it been a concrete part of her experience, on traveling there, she felt "a deep kinship . . . to these surroundings that was transformative." In the installation, Saar positioned five over-life-size figures—*Cotton Demon*, *Rio Dulce*, *Sweet Magnolia*, *Terra Rosa*, and *Tobacco Demon*—within a softly lit room, the walls lushly painted with various shades of brown, blue, and green. Consisting of roughly carved wood, coated with worn metal, luminous earth-colored paint, tufts of cotton, dried leaves, and dark red dirt, they faced inward, almost forming a circle, as if in distracted dialogue. Saar's look back at her mother's ancestry recalls works such as *Record for Hattie*, Betye's tribute to her great-aunt. Yet, Betye's nostalgic assemblage first memorialized her own family, then, a universal, interchangeable conception of family: crossing color lines, not solely a "black family or a black grandmother," but "all families and all grandmothers." Alison Saar's installation worked in reverse. *Fertile Ground* referenced a general locale (the antebellum South) and a collective racial history. However, her impetus for the piece—to commemorate her mother's family—lent the installation an autobiographical flavor, a way to establish a connection and to "talk about what it's like to come to *that land*" and have "a knowledge of *that history*."⁴¹

By drawing on the collective, transracial, and autobiographical impulses of her mother, along with her own art historical studies of African American history and aesthetics, Saar invests the figures within *Fertile Ground* with a familial and cultural significance and links them to a specific female lineage and to a diasporal cultural history brought to prominence by her mother's generation of artists. Further, by depicting nude female bodies with names evoking both the romantic, natural world—the soil, the fragrant trees, and slow, flowing water—and a brutal, slave-supported, southern landscape, she also makes these sculptures part of the problematic visual history of the African American nude. Themes of nature and fertility underscore the sculpture of *Terra Rosa*, whose name means red earth.

She sits nude, pregnant, and pleading, in the midst of the four other characters. On the one hand, Saar's figure represents the fertile, natural world, true to established conventions and stereotypes of women. On the other, the pregnant woman attacks fertility as natural through her placement next to *Cotton Demon*, either the slave child sent to work in the cotton fields at a very young age, the child who could be easily separated from his family, or the child of rape—the child of a female slave and her master. Perhaps her unborn child will share his same, miserable fate; with his white, parched, cracked clay covering and his left

hand open to reveal bloody wounds from the sharp pricks of the cotton boll, he makes it especially clear that "the South's 'fertile ground' was . . . anything but for the blacks whose lives the [cotton] fields circumscribed and defined."⁴² This juxtaposition emblemizes the slave-holding Old South and accentuates African American women's position within an environment of violence, miscegenation, and racism. The era of slavery, as Griffin indicates, was the crucial period that determined the course of U.S. ideologies about black women's sexuality. *Terra Rosa's* inherent multiplicity—her embodiment of an autobiographical significance, of the modernist trope of the natural, and of a contemporary critique of the historical treatment of black women's bodies—illustrates the black body's pivotal shift from object to subject.

Like *Terra Rosa*, *Strange Fruit* also plays with stereotypes of women and nature, popular culture, Western and non-Western art, and feminist theory. With her wood and tin-coated, over-life-size, succulent body hanging upside down from the ceiling, a noose encircling her ankles, she is the visual analogy to Billie Holiday's song of the same title that mourns the tragic history of lynching:

Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange Fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Both her name and her powerful physique oscillate between evoking the ripeness and desirability of women and the fear of, and anxious fascination with, women's difference. She is an enigma: terrifying in her peculiar, stolid nudity but also simultaneously fascinating for the same reason. Like Paul Gauguin's Tahitian women, she is exotic and strange; however, her trussed ankles emphasize the violent outcome of this kind of bodily treatment. Saar's quoting of the "Venus Pudica" pose—nude, one hand over breast, the other over genitals, brings to mind such well-known marbles as the Hellenistic *Medici Venus* and Hiram Power's Neo-Classical *Greek Slave* (1846). Saar reshapes the glistening white maiden into a stalwart black goddess, no longer demurely looking away but screaming out in anguish. More recently, Saar created the sculptural installation, *Afro-Di(e)ty* (2000), for the Getty Museum in response to the Getty's sculpture known as the Landsdowne Herakles and the museum's collecting proclivity toward European images of men dominating women. Similarly punning on the Greek goddess "Aphrodite," Saar's powerful sculpture, surrounded by basins of salt and water, blends different African female deity attributes such as Mami Wata and Yemaya, the dieties of childbirth and rivers. Like other nonwhite artists, Saar appropriates classical and modernist artistic tropes to highlight racist conventions whose underlying meanings have become masked through repetition and imitation.⁴³

In her 1997 installation *Hairesies*—a pun on women's obsessions with

problem hair, hair as a signifier of race, and the 1970s feminist journal *Heresies*—Saar continued to use the archetypal feminine poses of the "Pudica" and the reclining nude. Within a stark, spacious, unadorned room, ten decorated wooden and metal heads and full-length figures cleverly explored the idea of hair as a marker of racial identity. They also remarked on how certain women have celebrated their hair with elaborate hairstyles or have felt stigmatized by their hair and desperately, sometimes comically, tried to change it. *Nappy "Red" Head's* electrifying hairstyle could not hide the assorted bits of junk—a wrench, some plastic toys, and a flashlight—nested within it, while the enormous head of *Pressed* rested on a table, tilted on its side, its frizzled mass of wire hair streaming to the floor, weighed down literally with tailors' irons and metaphorically with the time, trouble, and pressure of straightening it. Although at first glance, Saar's hairstyles appear so bright, so contrived, so seemingly anglicized, they suggest the pressure to straighten one's hair and whiten one's appearance. Yet, as Wilson noted of the artist's earlier assemblages, *Nappy Hair Votives* (1988), Saar offers an inside look at black hair culture. Additionally, Saar assumes an understanding of contemporary scholarship about African hair by the likes of art and cultural historians bell hooks, Kobena Mercer, and Wilson. While bell hooks, in "Straightening Our Hair," concludes that hair straightening, although once a communal, ritual activity for women, has developed into a form of racial and sexual oppression, both Mercer and Wilson argue that artificiality does not necessarily equal negative European imitation and domination, nor does naturalness equal positive cultural liberation. For Mercer, every hairstyle is political; a coded cultural response; additionally, in many African cultures, "artifice is valued in its own right as a mark of invention and tradition. . . ." African Americans potentially share this African-derived "fondness for artificial means of hair elongation . . . not only by their consumption of hotcombs and hair relaxers or the popularity of jheri-curls, but also by a tendency to augment cornrows and plaits by attaching braided 'extensions.'"⁴⁴

Although, the axis of *Hairesies* revolved around the "heresy," or unorthodoxy, of black hair, Saar's bodies also played an important role in the overall interpretation of the installation. Like Simpson's late-1980s and early-1990s photo assemblages juxtaposing vivid, cropped color photographs of African American female body parts with poetic, but unsettling language, Saar's sculptures highlight a critical intersection between visual culture and the real life construction of racist ideology, historically advanced through visible designations. In Simpson's 1990 diptych, *Outline* (fig. 8), a U-shaped black braid fills the left panel, the word "back" bolded in white letters underneath. Opposite, the right panel displays the back of an anonymous African American woman, her shirt's neckline exposing her shoulders to mirror the U of the braid next door. A column of words—



Fig. 1. Betye Saar.
Black Girl's Window, 1969.

Mixed media assemblage,
35.75 x 18 x 1.5 inches.
Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld
Gallery, New York.
© Betye Saar.



Fig. 2. Betye Saar. *Spirit Catcher*, 1976-77.

Mixed media assemblage, 45 x 18 x 18 inches.

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York. © Betye Saar.

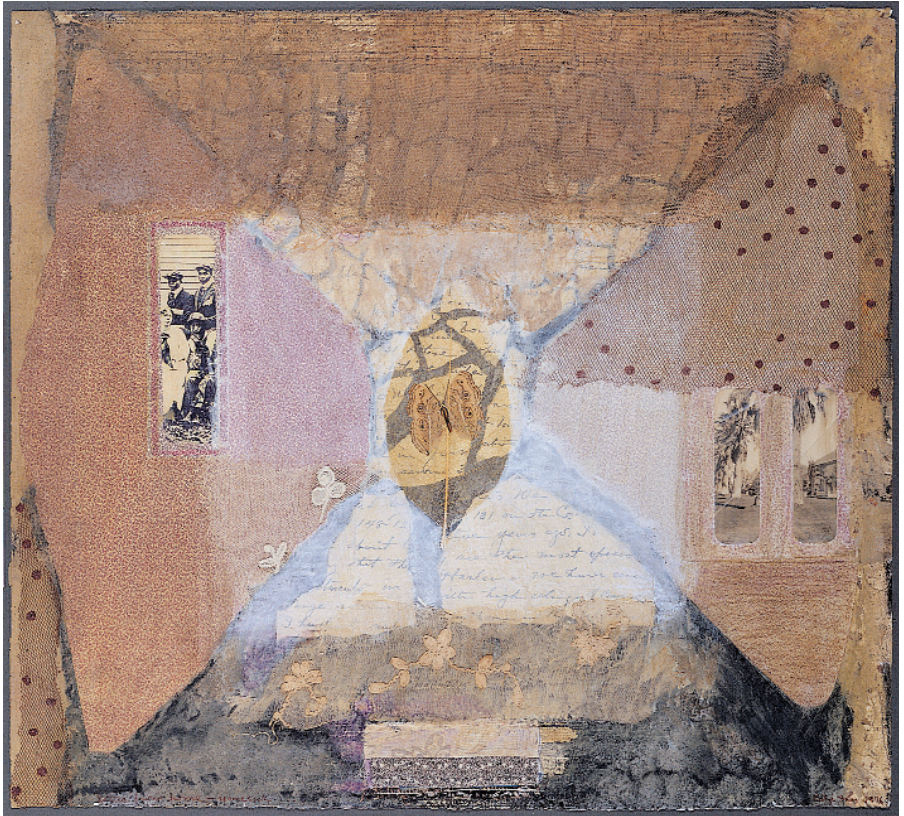


Fig. 3. Betye Saar. *Letter from Home...Homesick*, 1976.

Paper collage, 18 x 20 inches.
Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York. © Betye Saar.

Fig. 4. Eldzier Cortor. *Southern Gate*, 1942-43.

Oil on canvas. 46.25 x 22 inches.
Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Washington, D.C.
© Eldzier Cortor.



Fig. 5. Alison Saar. *Terra Rosa*, 1993.

Latex, dirt, polymer on wood, wax,
54.5 x 15.5 x 25 inches.

Courtesy of Alison Saar.

© Alison Saar.

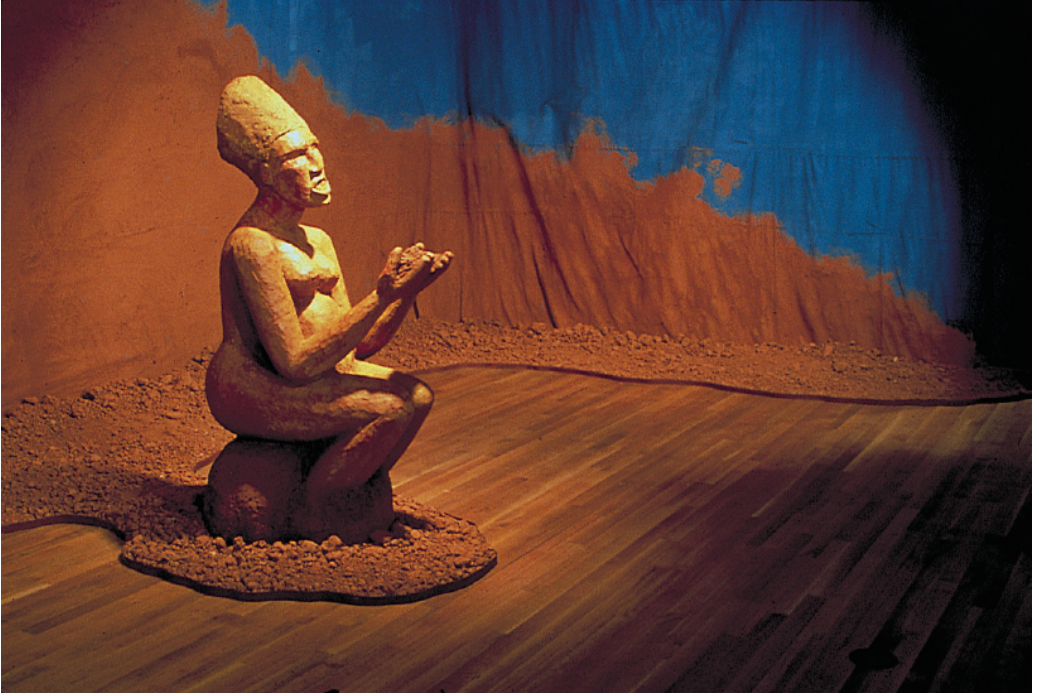




Fig. 6. Alison Saar. *Stranger Fruit*, 1995.

Rusted tin roofing and wood,
76 x 21 x 14 inches.
Baltimore Museum of Art.
© Alison Saar.



Fig. 7. Alison Saar. *Sapphire*, 1985.

Carved wood, mixed media,
28.5 x 31 x 10.5 inches.

Collection of Gai Gherardi and Rhonda Saboff.
Courtesy of Alison Saar. © Alison Saar.

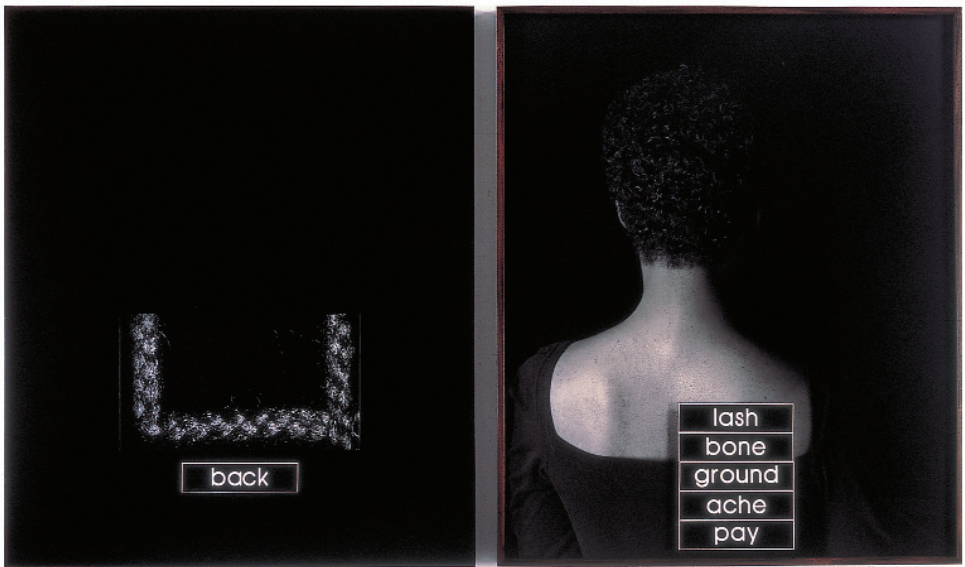


Fig. 8. Lorna Simpson. *Outline*, 1990.

Two framed silver gelatin prints
with plastic plaques.

Each panel: 48.75 x 40.75 inches.

Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

© Lorna Simpson.

"lash," "bone," "ground," "ache," and "pay"—rests below. Similar to a child's phrase game, Simpson asks the viewer to combine these ordinary words with the end effect of a stunning, yet disturbing commentary on the historical position of African American women. As Enwezor eloquently writes, she "traces the trajectory of a particular word from its ordinariness to its pungency in describing actions and historical moments."⁴⁵ Back turned, the woman seemingly reveals, but ultimately refuses to become trapped by this history. Whereas Simpson's images wage their attacks on Western culture through the use of synecdoche, refusal, and language, Saar's sculptures pursue theirs through a more overt inversion of Western classicist ideals. Following *Strange Fruit*, *Sweeping Beauty* and *Blond Dreams* employ recognized poses to satirically upend traditional ideas of the female nude as white, invitational, and unproblematic. As such, they put a whole new twist on fairy tales by questioning their racial, or racist, assumptions. With their brightly colored exteriors and biting appellations, Saar's women expose the problematics between self and culturally imposed definitions of beauty, perpetuated through such supposed innocent contemporary and historical stories. Painted a brilliant orange-red, *Sweeping Beauty* hangs upside down, one hand covering her breast, her hair carved in the shape of broom bristles, a comment on the black woman's historical role as domestic servant, not fairy tale princess. Similarly, the black *Blond Dreams* dangles from the ceiling, her feet trussed, her hand grasping her sparkling gold eight-foot-long Rapunzelesque tresses, and her body tarred and feathered—a possible result of aspiring to change one's natural appearance?

Paradise Bound departs from the traditional odalisque or reclining nude and displays a recumbent woman, her flowing locks of fake hair binding her dark, painted, and tarred body like a boa constrictor. She resembles two of Saar's previous figures, *Black Snake Blues* and *Briar Patch*: two supine nudes, one bound as Eve by a sinful snake and the other entwined by a prickly vine. Although Saar has discussed *Black Snake Blues* as a way to open up issues of female desire, infidelity, and transgression, in *Paradise Bound*, questions of female sexuality and authority remain more ambiguous.⁴⁶ *Paradise Bound* oscillates between the visible and invisible; her twining hair neither accentuates her sexualized body nor does it ever annul it. This ambiguous sexuality recalls Saar's earlier bust-length female nudes, the royal blue *Diva* (1988), modeled on soprano Kathleen Battle, and the brown, blonde-haired, green-eyed *Sapphire*, a play on the minstrel character. Although each bust's fulsome, voluptuous form exudes sexuality, her open chest reveals something more complicated. *Sapphire's* breasts open to reveal a crimson interior lit by a red lightbulb and filled with shards of glass and rocks, whereas the cut-out square above *Diva's* left breast houses a tiny parakeet.

In reviews of *Sapphire*, critics recognized an interesting underlying dynamic to the figure, but never identified its source. Donald Kuspit noted how "[*Sapphire*] . . . reveals not simply the power of a female prototype, but the power of passion. It is an object that can survive its analysis by taking refuge in the unconscious." Amelia Jones called her a "clever mockery of the cliché image of woman as sexually primitive devourer [because of Saar's crude carving style], [and] as the cavernous and unknowable other [because of the exposed interior]." Never, however, does Kuspit or Jones emphasize how *Sapphire's* exposed interior functions as a link to the unconscious or as a misinterpreted symbol of an unknowable other; neither critic delves into what the sculpture's body cavities represent or how they have previously been used by Saar and other African American artists. These openings recall the *minkisi* figurines made by Kongo Cubans in the nineteenth century to mystically attack slaveholders and other enemies along with Bakongo *minkisi*: charms containing such objects as leaves, shells, packets, and sachets that act medicinally to help one to heal, be more decisive, or hunt down enemies. Wyatt MacGaffey likens an *nkisi* to a portable grave that holds a spirit personality from the land of the dead, whereas Robert Farris Thompson explains that to the Bakongo a *nkisi* is alive, for residing within it is an inner spark of divinity or soul.⁴⁷

Alison Saar's knowledge of African mythology and imagery stems from her parents. As an art history major, she studied African diasporal art and African American folk art; however, her interest in the art and traditions of these cultures, including the Bakongo of western Africa, surely developed much earlier, a result of constantly being around her mother's studio and working for her conservator father. As her father's apprentice for approximately eight years, she gained technical expertise and a broad knowledge of materials by helping him work with Latin American, Asian, African, and European art and artifacts.⁴⁸ She stated that "it was through the restoration work that I taught myself how to carve because we'd have to carve a piece to replace part of an icon or something like that."⁴⁹ Betye Saar's studio and home in the hills of Laurel Canyon, in Los Angeles, were filled with references to Africa and other cultures during Alison's childhood. Betye's interest in Haitian *Vodun* and one of its variations, New Orleans hoodoo, along with her travels to Haiti, Mexico, and Africa in the 1970s, resulted in constructions such as *Spiritcatcher*, the assemblage *Eshu (The Trickster, 1971)*, whose name refers to the Yoruba deity Eshu-Elegba, the trickster and god of the crossroads, and the altar *Damballa (1975)*, named for the Haitian loa that manifests itself as a serpent. Thompson has even compared Betye's installation *In My Solitude (1981)* to Kongo tombs and ritual practices. In this piece, a dress worn by Betye's great-aunt hung suspended in a corner, an empty chair in front of it, the floor covered in moss and dried

flowers. Projected on the walls were two painted silhouettes, one of a woman reading in a chair, the other of an empty chair. The flower-covered floor, with its potent smell, was similar to the odors released by a Kongo *nganga* (ritual expert) for healing, while the dress of Betye's great-aunt resembled an article of an ancestor's clothing left on a Kongo tomb to eternally connect the deceased's spirit to the present.⁵⁰

Jones suggests that in Alison Saar's *Sapphire*, the opening in the chest plays on ideas of sexual difference—that female "otherness" remains so abnormal it is "unknowable." This interpretation seems prefaced on an understanding of *Sapphire's* chest cavity as simply exposing the interior of her female body. Ironically, no heart and lungs appear, but only a near empty chamber—hence, the "cavernous and unknowable other." Further, Saar's placement of the chest cavity also emphasizes the cliché that beauty is only skin deep. Whereas Bakongo *minkisi* figurines have openings in their bellies, or the center of their abdomens, *Diva's* opening is right above her breast and *Sapphire's* breasts completely swing open to reveal her interior. Saar then adopts the idea of the *nkisi*, but positions its distinctive feature to highlight various superficial and sexual clichés that have been attached to the female body.

These explanations, however, seem inadequate. Harris posits that in works by African American artists nudity cannot be read as purely sexual but instead carries ritual connotations. For example, in Stout's self-portrait, *Fetish #2* (1988), she displays herself as frontal, standing, and in the nude. *Minkisi* bags cover her clavicle and shoulders, while a *nkisi* compartment, filled with a Nigerian stamp and a photo of a child that denotes her African ancestry and its transmission to future generations, adorns her belly. Nudity, like the *minkisi* bags, also refers to African practices. In certain transformative rituals (rites of passage or initiations) nudity, as a symbol of honesty and humility, proves necessary.⁵¹ In essence, by combining a nude self-portrait with Kongo artistic and religious iconography, Stout turns her own body into an object of potential mediation and transformation. Stout's emphasis on ritual and personal use value, differs from the tradition of the Western female nude that displays the body as a sexual object openly available to the masculinized gaze. This does not mean that Stout's image negates the sexual because first, her sculpture was produced in, and directs itself toward, a Western audience. Second, in both Western and non-Western cultures, sexuality cannot be divorced from ritual and vice versa. Forcing such an explicit opposition between them only reinscribes those negative stereotypes of the primitive, natural Other. Yet, Harris's ideas concerning Stout's use of ritual nudity for personal transformation prove useful because they suggest that Saar's busts should not be interpreted simply as personifications of women's bodies as more than superficial sexuality, but that they should also be read as utilitarian power objects. Like her mother's assemblages and altars, Alison's

sculptures are active agents. Betye's *Spiritcatcher* was meant to act: to entice spirits and to induce spiritual transformation. Alison uses this idea but takes away the intermediary ritual object; she places the power directly into her sculpted figures, which then act like distorted, mirror images of the human body. In effect, Alison's women become not inactive bodies for the consumption of viewers, but personal, potentially active generators of a positive, ancestral, transformational energy. Collins has argued for a similar understanding of Alison's and Stout's contemporary female figures. She believes that they offer us new visual possibilities in their illumination of "past economies of the flesh" and "provide a visual language that continues to address the legacies of the past while encouraging the possibility of a self-determined black female presence."⁵² Alison's bodies thus are not trying to simply refute a masculine, Western-centered concept of vision, but rather they are attempting to effect a different one rooted in the spiritual, race-conscious collectivity made so visible by artists, like her mother, of the previous two decades.

Conclusion

Returning to 1970s feminist scholarship and theory, Enwezor's discussion of Nochlin's 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" and Wallace's 1992 response, "Why Are There No Great Black Artists?" again prove significant. Enwezor argues that, since the 1980s, Simpson's career eludes the binary divisions of the two ideological positions of Nochlin and Wallace's questions. Within this argument is the implication that Simpson is one of the first and most successful artists to do so, in contrast to her contemporaries, such as Cindy Sherman, whose own deployment of feminist discourse universalizes the agenda of white women. Although I do not want to suggest that Enwezor is mistaken about the importance of Simpson's contemporary, postmodern art, I do want to emphasize that negotiations between the binaries of race and gender *did* occur during the first half of the twentieth century, not just within, and as a consequence of, the 1970s feminist movement. These negotiations have become repeatedly occluded by generalizations about African American representations of the nude and about how the 1970s feminists "built up impediments" against "minority women as empowered social and political subjects" without enough exploration of specific situations of "minority" women (and men) working within their respective environments.⁵³ Cortor's series of nudes, although they ultimately fail to overturn racist and sexist assumptions of the day, illuminate the constant contemporary problems related to women's control over their own bodies within social, racial, and sexual milieux. And, although Betye Saar's experiences reinforce the separatist nature of the West Coast women's collectives, examining her move toward artwork that attempts to negotiate a complex female identity—and her success in

doing so—provides a better means of understanding the condition that gave rise to the 1980s responses to Nochlin and Wallace by such artists as Betye's daughter, Alison. Alison Saar's artwork is thus part of a continuous, adaptive development: a development that ironically makes a feminist history less cohesive or coherent, but perhaps more acceptable.

NOTES

1. Quotes in these epigraphs are from Carey Lovelace, "Weighing in on Feminism," *Artnews* 96 (May 1997): 145; *Betye Saar: Secret Heart* (Fresno, Calif.: Fresno Art Museum, 1993), 27; bell hooks, "Talking Art with Alison Saar," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 34. Throughout this essay, where necessary for reasons of clarity, I commonly refer to Betye and Alison Saar by their first names.
2. Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Michele Wallace and Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 114; Michael D. Harris, "Ritual Bodies-Sexual Bodies: The Role and Presentation of the Body in African American Art," *Third Text* 12 (Autumn 1990): 82-83, 92-95; Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 37-63; Michele Wallace, "Afterword: 'Why Are There No Great Black Artists?' The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture," in *Black Popular Culture*, 342, and "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russel Ferguson et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 45; Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 146-51. Sander Gilman, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality," in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76-108. For a critique of Gilman, see Mieke Bal, "The Politics of Citation," *Diacritics* 21 (Spring 1991): 25-45. She argues that Gilman, often, rather than "returning the gaze [of the neocolonialist and critiquing it as a postcolonialist], occasionally adopts it," 39. *Venus 2000: The Legacy of Saartjie Baartman*, ed. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999) focuses on the impact of Saartjie Baartman, while Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) provides a fictionalized account of her life.
3. Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992).
4. See Lorraine O'Grady on exposing and overturning the shadow of Manet's black maid in "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," *Afterimage* 20 (Summer 1992): 14-15, 23; also see Carla Williams on the black female nude in photographic history, "Naked, Neutered, or Noble: Extremes of the Black Female Body and the Problem of Photographic History," <http://www.carlagirl.net>, excerpted from *The Black Female Body in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002) (a version of Williams's essay also appears in *Skin Deep, Spirit Song: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace Sanders [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003]); Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over," 121, n. 13; Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Women, Art, and Power, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 158-64; Alain Locke, "Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (Salem, N.H.: Ayer Co., 1986), 254-67; Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over," 116.

5. For a discussion of the nude body in feminist art, see Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 60-82. For the nude body in African American art, see Harris, "Ritual Bodies-Sexual Bodies," 81-95; and Collins, 37-63.
6. Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York: Routledge, 1990), 238-49; Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), and *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Female Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984); Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Anne Stavney, "'Mothers of Tomorrow': The New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation," *African American Review* 32 (Winter 1998): 533-61.
7. Stavney specifically refers to how Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, two protagonists in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), foreground this struggle: the "modern black women's subjective challenge"; see Stavney, 554.
8. For a thorough discussion of Betye Saar's art and life, see Jane H. Carpenter's recent monograph *Betye Saar* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2003).
9. Okwui Enwezor, "Social Grace: The Work of Lorna Simpson," *Third Text* 35 (Summer 1996): 43. See also Yolanda M. Lopez and Moira Roth who write that "A body of literature on the intersections of culture, gender, and race exists, but it has yet to be seriously incorporated into general historical accounts of women artists" in "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 140.
10. Beryl Wright, "Betye Saar," in *The Appropriate Object* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Albright-Knox Gallery, 1989), 52; Carolyn J. Lucarelli, "Between Matter and Spirit: The Art of Betye Saar" (M.A. thesis, Dartmouth College, 1993), 19; Betye Saar, quoted in Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 358.
11. Judith K. Brodsky provides a summary of the gallery founding in "Exhibitions, Galleries, and Alternative Spaces," in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 109.
12. Lopez and Roth, 151; also Brodsky, 109.
13. Betye Saar, quoted in Lopez and Roth, 152. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*; Giddings.
14. Lopez and Roth, 155.
15. Faith Ringgold's *Slave Rape* series (1972) was one of her first attempts to combine issues of race and gender so controversially. She portrayed a series of nude slave women, armed with various weapons and ready to fight, painted on fabric; see Lisa Farrington, *Art on Fire: The Politics of Race and Sex in the Paintings of Faith Ringgold* (New York: Millenium Fine Arts Publishing, 1999), 137-62. The initial six members of Where we At included Ringgold, Kay Brown, Jerrolyn Cook, Pat Davis, Mai Mai Leabua, and Dindga McCannon. The group later grew to seventeen participants and showed at such venues as the Weusinyumba Gallery. For further discussions of this and other groups, see Brodsky, 106; Kay Brown, "Where We At Black Women Artists," *Feminist Art Journal* 1 (April 1972): 25; Lucy Lippard, "Dreams, Demands, and Desires: The Black, Antiwar, and Women's Movements," in *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973*, ed. Mary Schmidt Campbell (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985), 79-80; Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, "Afrofemcentrism and Its Fruition in the Art of Elizabeth

- Catlett and Faith Ringgold," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: IconEditions, 1992), 479. For Pindell's accounts of racism, see Howardena Pindell, "Art (World) and Racism" (3-28) and "Free, White, and 21" (65-69), both in *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997).
16. Cindy Nemser, "Conversation with Betye Saar," *Feminist Art Journal* 4 (Winter 1975-1976): 24. On the "feminine aesthetic," see Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 80, 84, 81, 83; Silvia Bovenschen, "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?" *Art and Revolution* (Summer-Fall 1976): 136; and for a challenge posed by Teresa de Lauretis, see *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 131, 146.
17. On Piper's performance, see O'Grady, 15, n. 19; and Adam Shatz, "Black Like Me: Conceptual Artist Adrian Piper Gets under Your Skin," *Lingua Franca* (November 1998): 40.
18. Ira Progroff, *At a Journal Workshop: The Basic Text and Guide for Using the Intensive Journal* (New York: Dialogue House Library, 1975), 10; Betye Saar, quoted in Munro, 359. Ira Progroff died in 1998; however, his *Progroff Intensive Journal Program* continues to conduct workshops in the United States, <http://www.intensivejournal.org>.
19. Betye Saar, quoted in Wright, 58.
20. Carpenter, 81.
21. Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Out There*, 299.
22. Betye Saar, quoted in Wright, 57.
23. Betye Saar, quoted in Nemser, 23.
24. Ishmael Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), 151.
25. Betye Saar, poem for *Tangled Roots*, an installation in the exhibition *Ritual and Remembrance and Personal Icons*, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, 1998.
26. Homi Bhabha, "Third Space Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207. For comprehensive discussions of, and bibliography for, the "black aesthetic," see Sharon Patton, *African American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 183-266, 296-99; and Powell, 121-60; and Kimberly Pindar, review of "Black Representation and Western Survey Textbooks," *Art Bulletin* 81 (September 1999): 534.
27. Powell, 151-52; Edmund Barry Gaither, "Heritage Reclaimed: An Historical Perspective and Chronology," in *Black Art/Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African American Art* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1989), 23-29, and *Tradition and Conflict*; Lizetta Lefalle-Collins, *19Sixties: A Cultural Awakening Re-evaluated, 1965-1975* (Los Angeles: California Afro-American Museum, 1989). For more on California assemblage, see *Forty Years of California Assemblage* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, 1989); Anne Ayres, "Directions in California Assemblage," in *Forty Years of California Assemblage*, 60. For a discussion of Arnold Rubin's influence on Saar, see Mary Schmidt Campbell, "Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973," in *Tradition and Conflict*, 60. For Rubin's comments on assemblage, see "Accumulation: Power and Display in African Sculpture," *Artforum* (May 1975): 35-47.
28. Lefalle-Collins, 25; Kellie Jones, "In the Thick of It: David Hammons and Hair Culture in the 1970s," *Third Text* 44 (Autumn 1998): 20.
24. Betye Saar quoted in Houston Conwill, "Interview with Betye Saar," *Black Art* 3 (1979): 13; for the full discussion of *Spiritcatcher*, see Conwill, 10-12; Lucy Lippard, "Sapphire and Ruby in the Indigo Gardens," in *Secrets, Dialogues, Revelations: The Art*

of *Betye and Alison Saar*, ed. Elizabeth Shepherd (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, 1990): 16; Lucarelli, 44-65 and Betye Saar, *Rituals: Betye Saar* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1980).

30. For the original citations, see Kay Brown, "The Emergence of Black Women Artists: The 1970s, New York," *International Review of African American Art* 15 (1998): 47; Betye Saar, quoted in "Hope for the 1990s: What Feminist Art Movement Leaders Feel Today," *Artweek* 8 (February 1990): 23; Ringgold, quoted in Michele Wallace, "Daring to Do the Unpopular," *Ms.* 1 (1973): 24-27; and Catlett, quoted in Samella Lewis, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett* (Claremont, Calif.: Museum of African American Art and Handcraft Studios, 1984), 104. Tesfagiorgis notes Ringgold's and Catlett's responses to declarations of women artists wanting to be "human first" or "artist first" in Tesfagiorgis, "Afrofemcentrism," 478. For a summary of debates over Kara Walker, see "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," *International Review of African American Art* 14 (1998): 3-15; and "Stereotypes Subverted: The Debate Continues," *International Review of African American Art* 15 (1998): 44-52. For Saar's 1998 and 2000 exhibitions, see *Betye Saar: Workers + Warriors, the Return of Aunt Jemima* (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 1998), and *In Service: A Version of Survival* (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2000).

31. duCille, 95-96, 104.

32. Powell, 146. For the fullest account of Cortor's background, see Corrine L. Jennings, "Eldzier Cortor: The Long Consistent Road," in *Three Masters: Eldzier Cortor, Hughie Lee-Smith, Archibald Motley Jr.* (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1988), 12-16.

33. Jennings, 13-14; Powell, 98.

34. Cortor, and Jeanne Siegel, "Four Negro Painters: 1940-1965" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1965), 36, both quoted in Jennings, 15.

35. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism and Black Women Novelists*; Stavney, 534-39, 544, 547. For Stavney's discussions of Aaron Douglas, Roscoe Wright, Laura Wheeler, and Joyce Carrington, see 547-50.

36. Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," in *Unequal Sisters*, 294.

37. Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 139. Also, see Angela Yvonne Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); and Hazel Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 752-55, and "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime," 238-49.

38. The Cortor quote is from Jennings, 16. Powell notes a letter to Cortor from the Carnegie Institute pointing toward a housekeeper or other night-time institute employee as a probable suspect. Eldzier Cortor Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gibson, 113.

39. Farrah Jasmine Griffin, "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies: The Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery," *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 519-36.

40. Alison Saar, quoted in hooks, "Talking Art with Alison Saar," 29.

41. The quotations, respectively, are from Alison Saar, quoted in Ronica Sanders Smucker, "Interview with Alison Saar," *Art Papers* (July-August 1994): 14; Alison Saar, quoted in hooks, "Talking Art with Alison Saar," 29; Betye Saar, quoted in Wright, 57; Alison Saar, quoted in Susan Krane, "Digging in the Dirt: Alison Saar's *Fertile Ground*," in *Alison Saar: Art at the Edge. Fertile Ground* (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1993), 6.

42. Krane, 8-9.

43. Pepe Karmel ("Behind Folk Forms, Classical Modes," *New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1995, sec. C, 25) notes a profundity of quotations throughout Alison Saar's works: Alison's

Stone Souls reference "Gauguin's paintings and prints" and "André Derain's *Crouching Man* (1907), itself based on an Aztec sculpture in the British Museum"; her *Dying Slave* (1989) is a take-off of Michelangelo's *Dying Captive* (1513-1516); and her *Small Pox Demon* looks like Cycladic figurines. "In effect, [Alison Saar] is creating sculptural equivalents to the paintings of Robert Colescott, who reworks familiar masterpieces like Emmanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* with black instead of white figures [George Washington Carver *Crossing the Delaware*]."

44. Judith Wilson, "Beauty Rites: Toward an Anatomy of Culture in African American Women's Art," *International Review of African American Art* 11 (1994): 47-55, 11-17 (quotation at end of paragraph is Wilson, 13); bell hooks, "Straightening Our Hair," *Zeta Magazine*, September 1988, 33-37; Kobena Mercer "Black Hair/Style Politics," in *Out There*, 247-64 (quotations on 251, 256).

45. Enwezor, 53.

46. About *Black Snake Blues*, Alison Saar states, "The idea for this piece came to me from the song 'Black Snake Blues.' It's about a black snake crawling on this lady's bed—and it's a way to talk about infidelity, transgression. The woman's longing for some black snake to come into her bed is exposed. She needs and desires more. People aren't really ready to deal with fierce female passion." Quoted in hooks, "Talking Art with Alison Saar," 34.

47. Donald Kuspit, review of Alison Saar at Monique Knowlton Gallery, *Artforum* (April 1986): 112; Amelia Jones, review of *Secrets, Dialogues, and Revelations*, *Artforum* (April 1990): 182; Wyatt MacGaffey, "The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo *Minkisi*," in *Astonishment and Power* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 27, 43, 61; Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 117-18, 125.

48. Judith Wilson, "Down to the Crossroads: The Art of Alison Saar," *Callaloo* 14, no. 1 (1991): 112 (a version of this essay was reprinted in the exhibition catalog, *Secrets, Dialogues, Revelations, Secrets*).

49. Wilson, "Down to the Crossroads," in *Secrets*, 37.

50. Robert Farris Thompson, "Betye Saar: Priestess of Chance and Destiny," *The Migrations of Meaning: A Source Book*, cur. Judith McWillie and Iverna Lockpez (New York: INTAR Gallery, 1992), 21. For more on *Eshu* and *Damballa*, see Lucarelli, 26-28, 48.

51. Harris, 86-88, 90.

52. Collins, 63.

53. Enwezor, 46, 47. Importantly, Enwezor (47) claims that Simpson's work is only classified as feminist when it is convenient, but it does not follow the platform of cohesive feminist discourse for the very reasons stated above.