

# The Art of Blackness: Queering and Advancing the Black Representational Space

by Jasmine Tilman



*Foxy Lady*, Dorothea Rosenthal Art, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36"

In his lecture at the *liquid blackness* Symposium, Hamza Walker asked the question, "how do we know race?"<sup>1</sup> One way he approached the issue was by discussing Jason Lazarus's *Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, The Day of Exhumation* (2005), a kind of dedication to the narrative of Emmett Till and to the 2005 exhumation of his body. Walker described this photo by Lazarus as "unearthing history" and the curator's statement about the piece references an observation by Susan Sontag that history is mediated through iconic photographs.<sup>2</sup> The theme of history was consistent throughout Hamza Walker's and Derek Conrad Murray's lectures, and Walker further described this idea as "transmission of fate." Murray's talk complemented Walker's and offered insight into the policing function of black art as well as the ways that some contemporary black artists strive to liberate themselves from rigid definitions of blackness. Specifically, Murray discussed the complicated notion of "liberation," whether it is liberation from racial polemics or liberation from the heteronormative ideas of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements. Murray argued that queer black art applies pressure to the kinds of ethnic authenticity that negate non-heteronormative forms of sexuality. Both Murray and Walker echoed Darby English's concept of the black representational space, which implies that blackness is always undergoing a constant policing or renegotiation. While the "transmission of fate" has in some ways bound black artists to an ascribed blackness, its very contradictory nature has allowed for black artists to "queer" it in order to fit their own articulations of blackness.

In the introductory chapter of *How To See A Work of Art in Total Darkness* Darby English explains that the black representational space "imagines the history of black art in America as an institution of refusal, too frequently bent on ordering, as a distinct series, a range of phenomena that, when approached differently, enable us to discover chance, the discontinuous, and materiality at their very roots."<sup>3</sup> Beyond this, English further describes the black representational space as a "society of objects, whose members share...an agreement about honoring rather than testing their limitations."<sup>4</sup>

Similar to Walker's discussion of Lazarus's Till piece, English singles out the practices of Isaac Julien, Glenn Ligon, William Pope.L, Kara Walker, and Fred Wilson because their experimental approaches confront some of the "biggest and oldest problems accompanying black visual representation."<sup>6</sup> Some of these problems include the marginalization of black women, the assumption that black artists will privilege black viewers and Frantz Fanon's fact of blackness, which describes a blackness that promises a visual gift (the black body) to its viewer. In focusing on these artists and the problems they address in their work, English maintains that he privileges cases with "broad historical implications [...] which can indicate black representational space's complex contemporaneity precisely as a matter of history."<sup>6</sup> Understanding the black representational space in this way means that artists, whether they know it or not, are part of a larger revisionist project on black history. While they may not explicitly refer to a singular moment in black history, the origin of their work stems from a black cultural artifact or institution, whether their art critiques or accepts that particular origin.<sup>7</sup> English understands the history of black art as an institution of refusal, but black people's existence, historically, has also been one of refusal (and resistance).

Reflecting on Hamza Walker's lecture, I recalled his article, "Domino Effect" introducing the 2008 *Black Is, Black Ain't* Exhibition at the Renaissance Society, where he previously questioned notions of race: "But what kind of fact is race?" Walker asks.<sup>8</sup> One of his responses: "Although a biological fiction, it remains a social fact whose history more than compensates for all that science disavows."<sup>9</sup> In the article, Walker discusses race as a social fact, meaning it is part of public discourse and monitors social progress. While Walker notes that these social facts of race more than compensate for biological myths about it, blacks have inherited from our Civil Rights forebears the task of transcending race. This task is paradoxical because as we seek to break free of racial limitations, public racial discourse (or discord even) heightens our race consciousness. As debates about race

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and blackness become more public, black artists will not be able to escape and resist the influence of these social facts. The task put forth by the Civil Rights generation of transcending race is (and was) ambitious but also potentially an undesirable pursuit since it hardly considers that race could be interpreted in a myriad of ways by artists and therefore unlock new understandings. Like the black representational space, blackness and its definitions are always in constant renegotiation. Race, does not need to be erased, but rather foregrounded and embraced in its complexity. In English's words, black artists "accentuate the difficulty of representing a historical and cultural position."<sup>10</sup> In a moment where intraracial polemics are very public, how can black artists free themselves from compulsory solidarity?

Revisiting Murray is helpful at this juncture because I think he discussed some ways in which black artists, like Mickalene Thomas, transition from black art that serves as a didactic political narrative to art that serves as post-black satire. This process does not come without obstacles, especially because of what Murray called the "profitable marketing of otherness." Black artists can subscribe to this limited lens through which their otherness is marketed, but as English notes, "few serious ones can afford to limit either their practice or their market [to black audiences] in this way."<sup>11</sup>

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Thus, while blackness can be seen as an unavoidable framework for the reception of their work, black artists possess also the ability to “queer” blackness as a response to the often limiting and restrictive definitions of the concept. Murray suggested that one of the ways that black artists queer blackness is by addressing marginalized identities within blackness, sexual identity being one example. In this way, according to Murray, black artists attempt to liberate themselves from the heteronormative expectations of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, which have often forced them to subscribe to an “ethnic authenticity that negates sexuality.” Here is where the black representational space becomes relevant to this liberation because the “enforcement of [it] is set forth, in a familiar turn, as a means of ‘diversifying the field’ that won’t diversify itself. Perhaps, but seldom does this diversification also entail the analysis of our role in reinforcing the blind spots.”<sup>12</sup> By addressing those in the blind spots within blackness (i.e. the marginalized) a more heterogeneous blackness can emerge. Using the artist Mickalene Thomas as an example, Murray described how artists can intervene in black historical eras like the Black Power Movement and reinterpret cultural models to include diverse sexual identities.

In the end, I think Walker and Murray address both sides of the same coin that is the black representational space. Walker stressed that blacks cannot be disconnected from history because the concept of blackness becomes its own cause and effect, or a “domino effect.” Complementarily, Murray suggested that liberation is an achievable pursuit through the “queering” of blackness, or by interventions that revise cultural models of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Murray was initially troubled by his

ideas about post-black being conflated with post-racial, specifically by scholar Touré in his book *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness*. Despite this confusion, there are some elements that are useful for liberation of black artists. The post-black paradigm is beneficial because it transitions from a black cultural model that only critiques the dominant culture’s bigotry to one that critiques the former as well as the black community’s prejudices. English argues that “thinking about specific contemporary interventions by many black artists into this history of resistance necessitates a view that recognizes the multiple meanings of blackness and the plurality of ways of living under the black sign but also sees beyond them to another realm of complexity.”<sup>13</sup> Black artists then have the twisted pleasure of being in a liminal space, where, Walker explains, their art serves as a “site of unresolved soul searching” but still continue the process of revising blackness to accommodate its multiple identities.<sup>14</sup>

## Black art serves as a “site of unresolved soul searching” but still continue the process of revising blackness to accommodate its multiple identities.

Keeping this in mind, I think black artists do have a responsibility—that is, a responsibility to continually negotiate what blackness means and to incorporate marginalized identities within it. This continual revising process reminds us of the historical and cultural lineage from which we come and even if black artists disagree with the concept of blackness, they must understand that they continually add new layers to the conversation. Certainly this is not a small burden to bear, but constant policing is an essential piece of black art and culture, whether or not you engage in compulsory solidarity because, after all, “regardless of how you vote, you have to admit, watching history being made is better than watching it repeat itself.”<sup>15</sup> Without this continual negotiation and dialogue, the black representational space (and black art) loses its purpose and work produced

by black artists will indeed be monolithic. Symposiums such as this one, along with scholarly discourse and other forms of racial dialogue are necessary if the goal is to achieve a blackness that is fluid and ever-changing.

- <sup>1</sup>All quotes from Hamza Walker and Derek Murray, which are unattributed to his written work, are from their lectures at the 2014 *liquid blackness* Symposium at Georgia State University, April 11-12.
- <sup>2</sup>The Renaissance Society, untitled, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, accessed 5 May 2014 [http://renaissancesociety.org/site/Benefit/Preview.html?benefitID=1&benefit\\_auctionsID=277&printable=1](http://renaissancesociety.org/site/Benefit/Preview.html?benefitID=1&benefit_auctionsID=277&printable=1)
- <sup>3</sup>Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 9.
- <sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.
- <sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>8</sup>Hamza Walker, "Domino Effect," *Black Is, Black Ain't*, Hamza Walker, ed. (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 2013), 11.
- <sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>10</sup>Darby English, *How to See*, 15.
- <sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.
- <sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.
- <sup>14</sup>Hamza Walker, "Domino Effect," 13.
- <sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.



*The Code* (2009), Fahamu Pecou acrylic and oil stick on paper, 42" x 26"