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Dianne M. Stewart

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FOREWORD BY

Richard J. Powell

Art as Sanctuary

Conjuring an Africana Aesthetic

MICHAEL D. HARRIS

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RELIGIOUS CULTURES OF AFRICAN & AFRICAN DIASPORA PEOPLE

SERIES EDITORS: Jacob K. Olupona, Harvard University • Dianne M. Stewart, Emory University • Terrence L. Johnson, Georgetown University

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM & LONDON 2026

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Lisa Lawley
Designed by Matthew Tauch
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro IBM Plex Sans
by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Harris, Michael D., 1948–2022, author. | Stewart, Dianne M., editor. | Smith, Theophus Harold, editor. | Powell, Richard J., [date] writer of foreword.
Title: Art as sanctuary : conjuring an Africana aesthetic / Michael D. Harris ; edited and with an introduction by Dianne M. Stewart and Theophus H. Smith ; foreword by Richard J. Powell.
Other titles: Religious cultures of African and African diaspora people.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2026. | Series: Religious cultures of African and African diaspora people | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2025021619 (print)
LCCN 2025021620 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781478017691 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478015062 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478022305 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: African American arts. | African Americans—Music. | African diaspora in art. | Arts and society—United States.
Classification: LCC NX512.3.A35 H377 2026 (print) | LCC NX512.3.A35 (ebook) | DDC 700.89/96073—dc23/eng/20250625
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025021619
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025021620

Cover art: Ben Jones, *Billie Holiday #1*, 1998. Mixed media, 15 × 10 in. From the collection of Sydne Tarry. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Manuel Acevedo.

PUBLICATION OF THIS BOOK HAS BEEN SUPPORTED BY GRANTS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES ENRICHMENT FUND AT EMORY UNIVERSITY AND DR. CAROL ANDERSON, THE ROBERT W. WOODRUFF PROFESSOR OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES AT EMORY UNIVERSITY.

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO SYLVIA ARDYN BOONE

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Foreword

Richard J. Powell

On an initial perusal of Michael D. Harris's *Art as Sanctuary: Conjuring an Africana Aesthetic*, a reader might ask, "Can you find safety in a painting?" or "Can music provide one with a refuge from trouble or danger?" A deep dive into Professor Harris's book answers these questions in a variety of ways, with each of his responses shaped by the particular philosophical understandings that have been handed down to us by assorted thinkers and believers from the African diaspora. Harris also bolstered his replies to these questions via the lived experiences of the makers and audiences of art: people for whom the past is never disconnected from today or tomorrow, and for whom ancestorism has the remarkable capacity to safeguard and sustain when the world's negativities feel as if they are about to pounce on and overwhelm us.

Knowledgeable about selected West and Central African religions and their interpreters (in the latter category, the art historian Rowland Abiodun and the cultural theorist Fu-Kiau Bunseki), Michael Harris employs these philosophies to establish the ontological bases of black people's aesthetic orientations: sensibilities that acknowledge the God-given potentialities to profoundly effectuate (*ashé* among Yoruba peoples), or perspectives that are ever mindful of a person's spatial and genealogical position in the universe (termed *tendwa nzá* by Kikongo speakers). Harris augments these African philosophies with their parallel mindsets in the greater "Africana" cultural sphere: from the syncretized forms of Judeo-Christianity in Afro-Atlantic communities to the syncopated hymns and semitoned harmonies of the spirituals, gospel music, the blues, jazz, salsa, rhythm and blues, reggae, and hip-hop. One moves through *Art as Sanctuary* with the sense that black art and its practitioners reflect these aforementioned folkways and religious practices either knowingly or unconsciously and by doing so make profound connections with—and provide forms of asylum to—their audiences. "Often *it* spoke *to them* and *for them* and *with them*," Harris writes about

expressivity in the arts (emphases mine), giving black art anthropomorphic configurations and competences that speak to its guardianship role. "And *it* loved *them*," he added, endowing the arts with human emotions that veer into filial, carnal, and spiritual domains.

In chapter 2 of *Art as Sanctuary*, titled "Etymologies and Black Love," Harris presents a comprehensive history of these cultural and artistic refuges, examples of metaphorical safe havens and creative therapeutics that, as experienced by socially and psychologically damaged people, "heal[ed] the fissures in the black consciousness" (p. 68). Many of these sanctuaries have a performative dimension, an "expressiveness coded in the improvisation of gospel music," Harris writes, "dancing emotional utterances as one was filled with the spirit, the sensuous hip rolls in slow dances, and octave jumps in saxophone solos" (p. 68). That such rapturous actions might be artistically conceived in ways that vault pictorial representationalism is suggested throughout *Art as Sanctuary*, as seen, for example, in abstract paintings by artists such as James Phillips and Adger Cowans. This emotional expressiveness was also noted by Harris in conceptual works of art like Fahamu Pecou's *Watch the Throne* (figure I.3), a mixed-media assemblage where a whimsically gold-leafed barber's chair—upholstered in an African textile—invoked an "interior black life," while also alluding to the gold stools of Asante royalty and the barbershop as a communal yet intimate safe space.

When Michael Harris writes about African Americans seeking refuge and retreating into their own cultural patterns and practices, where they can express themselves without external controls or judgments, one discerns not only a scholar's understanding of a community formulating its own social and artistic preserve: One also intuits from Harris's text an artist's insights and his firsthand sense of this soul-saving cultural experiment. Indeed, when Harris writes that this book is "written figuratively from within the sanctuary of the Africana diaspora experience *and that phenomenological way of being*" (my emphasis), it casts his visual analyses of works by pioneering black artists such as Romare Bearden and William H. Johnson in a fresh light (p. 5). Compositional breaks (or "jump spaces") in mixed-media collages and in paintings created with a collage sensibility have their equivalent in mid-twentieth-century jazz's notational modulations and percussive structures: aesthetic theories learned during Harris's years studying painting with artist Al Smith at Howard University and later elaborated on under art historian Robert Farris Thompson's tutelage at Yale University. These aural/visual intervals perform multiple roles in Harris's text: They characterize a black or African diaspora aesthetic, and

they are schematic "retreats," or what Harris describes as "places to find, exchange, modify, and enhance African and, eventually, African American identity and culture" (p. 66).

At the outset of *Art as Sanctuary*, Michael Harris announces that this book is a continuation of a more-than-half-a-century-old discussion "about the creation of a vocabulary for talking about . . . a black aesthetic founded within those New World sanctuaries where we reimagined and reinvented ourselves" (p. 17). Referring to the historically significant Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art (CONFABA), held at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in the spring of 1970, Harris's "New World sanctuaries" were not simply geographic places like the Black Arts Movement cultural capital of nearby Chicago. Harris's cerebral, self-inventing abodes were CONFABA's flesh-and-blood attendees, African American luminaries like the art historians Sylvia Boone and Samella Lewis, the curators Edmund Barry Gaither and David C. Driskell, and the visual artists Margaret Burroughs, Elizabeth Catlett, Aaron Douglas, Jeff Donaldson, Lois Mailou Jones, and Charles White. These and the other CONFABA attendees were repositories of knowledge and, in addition to imparting valuable lessons and modeling lives of artistic edification and cultural celebration, embodied the philosophical tenet that, as outlined by Donaldson and highlighted by Harris, the "function of art is to liberate man in the spiritual sense of the word, [and] to provide more INTERNAL space."[1]

Michael Harris's articulation of this objective for *Art as Sanctuary* is the key to its greater mission: a text whose goal is the realization of the aesthetic nature, or higher self, of peoples of African descent; a liberatory perspicuity leading to a state (or "space") of inner peace, enlightenment, and transcendence beyond the material world. While students of art history, African and African American studies, and visual studies more broadly will find *Art as Sanctuary* quite useful, scholars of religion and religious cultures of African and African diaspora peoples will be especially interested in Harris's book. What *Art as Sanctuary* proposes is an entrée into an Africana spirituality and ethos, by way of the African diaspora's ever-present but rarely consulted "Rosetta stones," or the works of visual art, music, and literature that contain the designs, colors, and textual codes that, once elucidated, open the doors onto a sanctum sanctorum, or a metaphorical holy place.

Art's ability to create a spiritual refuge, or at least an atmosphere of heightened attention to a people's interior world, was not regarded as sanctuarial by Michael Harris alone. Think of the saxophonist Wayne

Shorter's composition "Sanctuary," most famously performed and included on jazz legend Miles Davis's 1969 record album *Bitches Brew*. The music historian Ted Gioia has described "sanctuary" as covering a range of emotions, "from pointillistic introspection to electronic brutalism before emerging as a smoky groove tune."[2] Perhaps the song's haunting character, first surfacing in a duet by trumpeter Miles Davis and keyboardist Chick Corea and culminating in several intermittent crescendos and counterstatements by Davis's full band, have an analogue in Harris's *Art as Sanctuary*: a text that takes readers through historical thickets and cultural groves and concludes with the ancestral benedictions and praises of "Bebop Ghosts and Freedom Songs." Harris's photograph in *Art as Sanctuary*'s conclusion of fellow AfriCOBRA members Jeff Donaldson, Murry DePillars, and James Phillips, like Miles Davis's spare repetitions of Wayne Shorter's imploring ballad, bring to the fore Harris's debt to ancestorism, where intimates and eventual forefathers form corporeal patterns whose creative contributions not only canopied and nourished a vast, barren landscape but anchored and harbored the scholar/artist Harris.

Posthumous publications have an elegiac aura surrounding them, and *Art as Sanctuary* is no exception. But Professor Michael D. Harris's death in 2022 and our feelings of loss and bereavement in no way subtract from *Art as Sanctuary*'s resounding paean to black spirituality and its indelible presence in the arts and cultures of peoples of African descent. Rather than dark, funereal draperies and silent tears, these pages are infused with triumphant voices, unconstrained laughter, and colorful flashes of Yoruba *adire*, Kongo pile weave, and Asante kente cloths. And moans too, sorrowful, full-throated intonations that in time and the brief span of a disremembered generation become a humming sound, an Aretha Franklin melisma accentuated by inferential vocalizations, rhythmic handclapping, and ecstatic amens. Instead of sitting passively on a mourner's front-facing church pew, we are enlisted in *Art as Sanctuary* to celebrate a people's passage out of slavery and other racialized indignities and, in Harris's phraseology, to conjure an aesthetic: not merely an intellection concerning the arts or beauty per se but a social philosophy of artistic invention, or erudition-in-action. Harris's call to invoke an alternative aesthetic may have manifested itself after his premature passing, but his message nevertheless rings loud and clear, and it wholly resonates at a time when, in a hyphenated, post-black-everything era, one shouldn't lose sight of the gift that black spirituality offers us all.

Michael D. Harris

Cultural Theorist of Africana Identity, Art, and Spirituality

Dianne M. Stewart and Theophus H. Smith

Our late colleague Michael Harris (1948–2022) has gifted us with a masterwork of artistic display—and not only that. His mastery includes aesthetic discrimination and coherent theory. The display features carefully selected works of art and depiction that comprise the "autobiographical" journeys of "Africana" peoples from the continent to the diaspora. The theory maintains that the significance of these artworks is not reducible to the artists' "racialized" identity. Rather, the art substantiates the theory—a philosophical and aesthetic theory—that the universal is best discovered in and manifested through the particular. In this case Harris painstakingly shows how the universality of cultural creativity in human experience finds expression through the artists' particular identities. To substantiate that theory, sustained throughout the book, he enlists the terms *sanctuary* and *black interior*. As Africans were dispersed from their homelands, their "lived experience in the Americas had an exterior and an interior; a sanctuarial, protected space to counter the exterior racialized reality" (p. 4). In synchrony with the artists' existential journey, from home continent to other lands, Harris conveys the reader from one "sanctuarial interior" to another.

To chart that journey Harris adopts Elizabeth Alexander's concept from the title of her book *The Black Interior* (2004). In that interior space, he argues, "the kinds of expression emerging from it, rather than being trapped in the dynamics of race, more often reflect the complexities of culture" (p. 6). Here the reader remains in Harris's reliable hands through every milieu of cultural formation. From the slavery period to the

present, he keeps outwitting our conventional tendency to collapse into merely race-based assessments. At the same time, reflecting "the complexities of culture," he vividly displays expressions and performances based on racialized experience: "My reading of culture extends beyond a parochial African American, or black, circumstance to include Old World African cultural syntax—syntax that might be foundational for linguistic, spiritual, or expressive responses to New World formations, experiences, and developments" (p. 6).

The sanctuaries of these protected spaces range from churches to dance halls, from political rallies to barbershops and beauty parlors, from burial grounds to family reunions. But the artworks themselves also constitute sanctuaries and interiors. In charting the way that black art variously conveys the interior sanctuaries of particular cultures, Harris eloquently depicts the experience and condition of being black as "the geologic pressures that formed black culture" (p. 18). But he insists that such pressures (and fissures) "are not the culture itself" (p. 18). Rather, he offers a universal definition of *culture* as "the matrix humans form to organize and codify their relationships to themselves, each other, nature, and the divine, and perhaps . . . ultimately a form of humanism" (p. 178). In arriving at that perspective, he refers to particular interlocutors who have engaged him in exploring culture as patterns of "human-centered expression and intention at the heart of such an aesthetic" (p. 178). Those conversation partners include Robert Farris Thompson (1932–2021).

Thompson is well known for the magisterial manner in which he advanced scholarly reception of a black Atlantic visual tradition, and its aesthetic significance, from West Africa to the diaspora. But equally influential for Harris was Paul Carter Harrison's pursuit of a phenomenological approach to aesthetic theory. Harrison (1936–2021), an African American playwright and theorist, skillfully applied to Africana aesthetics the phenomenology elaborated by the Austrian German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). That approach enables data to disclose themselves as subjects in their own right while "bracketing" our prejudgments and projections as matters extrinsic to the data's fundamental manifestations.

> This book is written figuratively from within the sanctuary of the Africana diaspora experience and that phenomenological way of being. I use the term *Africana* to elude the racial implications and history of the term *black*, though the term denotes the real experience of being black in a racial context and the confinement of that term generated, in

> part, by the need for cultural sanctuary. This book has been conceived around both a literal and metaphorical use of *sanctuary* to describe places of safety in the black experience and the condition of psychological security as well as locales of spiritual expression, self-renewal, and cultural celebration. (p. 5)

In chapter 1, "The Moan: Calling Forth Culture," Harris provides a first case study in such a phenomenology of black aesthetics. Beginning with the pressure chamber of the slave ships during the notorious Middle Passage, he elaborates the experience of moaning as embodied expression that involved both form and function.

> Folk with dialects and languages unintelligible to one another understood the moan. It marked a misery they shared. . . . [Ed] Spriggs says:
>
> > They couldn't speak to each other. And they couldn't speak to the master. But what they had in common was the fact that they were in pain and they were fearful of what was going on. You put your own imagination to *that*. And they moaned. And they moaned. And that moan became syncopated. You had the boat moving. You had a whole different rhythm of life that kept that moan going.
> >
> > Then they got to shore, and living in the plantation setting, the moan became a hum. What they could remember, that song they had in them. And they still had the language problem. It's the moan. And their moan became a hum. (pp. 28–29)

So syncopated moaning gave birth to rhythmic humming, and group humming led eventually to musical expression. Admittedly it is difficult to document the transition from moaning together, to humming together, to singing together. "The moan in the slave ship hold and its link to verbal and musical expression on either side of the Atlantic is as difficult to document as it is to quantify that thing in black music" (p. 40). Nonetheless, we may extrapolate how the transition from group humming to shared singing, and later forms of communicative and coded expression, may have occurred in examples such as work songs and church singing. As enslaved Africans became plantation workers and domestic servants in the colonized Americas, "other cultural dynamics were in process at the same time as black cultural re-formations were evolving in black homogeneous spaces" (p. 48). Those "other cultural dynamics" include the arts,

as Harris details in subsequent chapters. Here he is concerned to show how such "cultural re-formations were evolving" (p. 48) in concert with racialized identity: "As Enwezor claims . . . '[T]he remaking of African memories and reconciling them with the Euro-American experience of their new home . . . gives form to an entirely new self-understanding, one neither purely African nor wholly European or American . . . [as] the black subject negotiated the cultural boundaries between Africa, Europe, and America'" (p. 48).

To show the complex, hybrid, or creole nature of black racialized identity, Harris adopts a metaphor from Édouard Glissant. The rhizome metaphor unsubstantiates the claim that slavery entirely eviscerated or dispossessed enslaved persons of their African cultural heritage. Rather, that heritage persists, in Glissant's terms, as "an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently" (p. 48). Moreover, Glissant emphasizes, that similarity of black cultural identities to a rhizome consists in the remarkable phenomenon of rootedness without "a totalitarian root" (p. 48). Thus, chapter 1 concludes with a summary emphasis on the multivalent nature of "an Africana aesthetic," an emphasis that includes sanctuaries as havens for "insider experiences" resulting in complex versus monolithic cultural identities:

> Insider experiences in sanctuary settings, both secular and sacred, often affirmed new kinship bonds. Those experiences can be found through references, codes, signifiers, symbols, gestures, and all sorts of indicators in the music, language, performance practices, and visual expressivity of Africana cultures. This matrix of meaning and creative expression is the basis of an Africana aesthetic. (p. 49)

From the slavery period highlighted in chapter 1, Harris proceeds to display aesthetic formations through black musical expression in chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 2, "Etymologies and Black Love," he embeds an implicit phenomenology of art itself as an agent or actor, and people—the artists and their communities of reference—as its collaborators. More specifically, the arts manifest themselves as a lover performing care and consolation and providing resources for collaborative works of love. In that regard the chapter shows how music and visual expression constitute (a) the syntax of (b) diverse love languages. On the one hand, (a) the "etymologies" of songs, dance, and images are parsed and displayed. Citing Robert

Farris Thompson in that regard, Harris refers to "'organizing principles' of African musical performance in song and dance" as they "mingled with New World and European elements to create . . . a black Atlantic visual tradition" (p. 51). On the other hand, (b) love is the significance of that communicative relationship between the arts and the community they serve.

Here artistic genres and media provide sanctuaries of love and care in the face of oppression and trauma. As Harris notes in chapter 4, "perhaps the blues," for example, "can be thought of as . . . a transformative lexicon, born of shared misery and oppression, giving hope and catharsis" (p. 89). Later Harris exults in that transformative power as he joins Jim Perkinson in quoting Paul Gilroy's aesthetic tribute to "blues, jazz, gospel, reggae, soul, funk, and hip-hop . . . as complex re-creations of communal identities under duress of modern structures of oppression that *transfigure violence into beauty*" (p. 67). That beauty of the arts, and the love that creates and exults in such beauty, provides sanctuarial spaces in Harris's phenomenology. Attentive to the affective power of love conveyed through the arts, chapter 2 concludes with an appreciative expression of endearment: "Visual art relevant to these people often referenced their music, folkways, and religious practices. Often it [visual art] spoke to them and for them and with them. And it loved them" (p. 69).

Chapter 3 offers a case study of a particular sequence of continuities, "From *The Banjo Lesson* to *The Piano Lesson*: Reclaiming the Song." Here Harris expertly conveys the reader from Henry Ossawa Tanner's 1893 classic painting *The Banjo Lesson* to Romare Bearden's 1983 collage *The Piano Lesson* and then to August Wilson's 1987 play of the same name: "Tanner's important painting opened a new discourse in African American art and began the formation of a new artistic vocabulary of black visual representation. Ninety years later Romare Bearden was a master of that vocabulary, and he articulated a blues and jazz version of Tanner's *Banjo Lesson*" (p. 80). That genealogy culminates with August Wilson's Bearden-inspired *The Piano Lesson*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1990. These periods of cultural formation, from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century, likewise demonstrate Harris's concern to articulate aesthetics beyond focusing on racialized identity.

In chapter 4 he shows, for example, that by "defining the blues culturally . . . the racial stigmas, dogmas, and strictures that the postblack idea seeks to evade are relegated to a contextual significance instead of being a part of an essentialist identity" (p. 93). Then another one of Harris's

interlocutors, Dwight Andrews, offers a comparably disruptive claim: "The roots of black music lie not only in the adaption and synthesis of various African musical practices but also in the African conceptualization of music as power" (p. 93). In conversation with Andrews, Harris argues, "When the black preacher rises to his singsong cadence in preaching, he is, in effect, singing the sermon and exploiting the metaphysical powers of sound as perceived within an African and, by extension, African American ontological and cosmological framework" (p. 93). These reorienting perspectives are consistent with the entire framework of Harris's book and the aesthetic discernment that he maintains throughout.

Chapter 4 further explores the cultural dynamics that undergird black aesthetics by highlighting Romare Bearden's avowed reference to African-derived spiritual elements such as conjuration. While exploring that connection, Harris cites Rachel Delue's claim of a "special relationship" between Bearden's collage series *Conjur Woman* and "the very medium of collage" (p. 112). Here we are invited to imagine how the arts participate in ritual and spiritual phenomena: "In moving to collage in the early 1960s, not only was Bearden evoking his own experiences and memories, but 'he understood the medium to have value beyond the artistic'" and "believed that as an object, a literal *thing*, a collage might do powerful, transformative work" (p. 112).

That synergy between African spiritual continuities and artistic creativity culminates in chapter 5, "Gospel, *Tongues*, and Bearing Witness," which begins with a narrative account of Oprah Winfrey's now-classic Legends Ball in May 2006:

> At the Sunday event wrapping up the three-day weekend, BeBe Winans started singing the gospel song "Changed." He then passed the microphone to Shirley Caesar, then to Dionne Warwick, and on to Yolanda Adams, Chaka Khan, and Gladys Knight while the choir on the stage sang the chorus. Oprah said, "Jesus came!" . . . It was unscripted, completely improvised, and those who knew what was happening gave amens, moaned, clapped, stood and shouted, and sang along. . . . Black religiosity, ecstatic expressiveness, came out into the light as the very famous and nearly famous alike rode the spirit of the moment. Later, newswoman Diane Sawyer said, "For the rest of my life that may be the most transcendently spiritual moment I've ever been part of." What Sawyer experienced was "going to church." Black church. (p. 114)

With that account Harris illustrates how elements of African heritage spirituality continue to be expressed in contemporary performance and production. Chapter 5 thus encapsulates the entire book by demonstrating that such elements remain a hallmark of cultural continuities from precolonial African creativity to the worldwide creativity of black people today. To substantiate that claim, chapter 6, "*Undone*: Bottle Trees, Charms, and Flashing Spirits," and chapter 7, "Talking in Tongues: Revisiting/Reflecting Kara Walker," describe those continuities with vivid displays of art and in compelling formulations of theory. In these two co-resonant chapters, Harris analyzes alluring and haunting depictions within the visual artworks and installations of Renée Stout, Alison Saar, and Kara Walker. These artists unapologetically explore black female embodiment under captivity and/or black female autonomy and empowerment within the sanctuaries of Africana spiritual cultures.

In chapter 6 Harris examines spiritual themes that bridge African and African diasporic sacred worlds in the works of Stout and Saar. He astutely identifies cosmological, somatic, and sensorial dimensions of an Africana aesthetic inspired by the physiological, corporeal, and sociocultural experiences of black women in the United States and the wider diaspora. Through art pieces that lead viewers into the seclusion of black women's "sanctuarial spaces," including those on and within the body (coiffed hair, the womb, the eyes, etc.), Harris explains how Stout and Saar creatively incorporate Yoruba and Kongo visual and symbolic vocabularies. Both artists deploy these and other African spiritual and aesthetic technologies to evoke themes pertaining to the life cycle, kinship, the natural world, the crossroads, and invisible powers.

Situating their works within a broader African aesthetic repertoire, Harris also engages feminist rejections of androcentric traditions in their installations:

> Several African American female artists . . . have created images and sculptures that . . . resist the masculinist tradition of the reclining nude and subvert its assumption of the consumption of the female body by the male gaze of the viewer. Saar and Stout both used signifiers of spiritual and cultural systems and practices in their works to turn potentially sensuous nudity into a ritual form resisting the colonizing male gaze. Ritual nakedness is symbolic of the removal of secrets and agendas, and examples abound in African art, including the male and female Ogboni or Oshugbo figures in Yoruba art representing the secret society of ruling elders. (p. 139)

Stout's and Saar's "body works," as Harris describes them, are simultaneously teeming with lucid and opaque messages, amplified by depictions of Africana material religion, such as bottle trees, Kongo *minkisi* figures (sing. *nkisi*), African-styled masks, and other elements. Their artistic innovations compel viewers to consider the historical horizon of black female captivity and resistance while inviting them to ponder dimensions of black female interiority within that violent and traumatic horizon.

Many motifs from chapter 6 bleed into and undergo intensification in chapter 7's discussion of similar themes. Harris devotes this chapter to a nuanced analysis of the artistic work and installations of Kara Walker. Here, however, he argues that Walker's visual and film projects can be interpreted as a provocative and rageful resistance to racist structures and histories through perspectives from outside the black interior. She consciously indicts intersecting networks and architects of racist-sexist violence in her own life and other black women's lives, depicting horrifying scenes and tropes of black female subjugation, trauma, and powerlessness. Thus, Harris maintains that "Walker expresses the rage of the black experience and the psychic injuries seldom visualized but commonly present among sensitive people. Her audience is not primarily a black one, but like so many before her, she seems to be speaking to power from a public space. . . . In a shamanic sense, she visually takes us on a journey through chaos, disfigurement, and discord toward a re-membering of her/our fragmented (dismembered) psyche. Her journey through the deluge and racial apocalypse is also our journey to wholeness and healing and potential transformation" (p. 170). By expressing the rage stemming from black women's and the wider black community's experiences, Walker makes public her own and her viewers' private pain and challenges them to take uneasy journeys of re-membering what has been dismembered and denied in America's racial and sexual nightmare.[1] Harris resolutely and deftly includes Walker's art in this study as a counterexample to the book's prevailing theme. He demonstrates how her collections, located outside the sanctuarial spaces of the Africana experience, interrogate the continuing existence of those spaces.

From one time frame to the next, from the slavery period to the present, we see how the diverse creativity of black people can be "interpreted through the cultural syntax of African cultural foundations and their rootedness in a spiritualized or inflected reality" (p. 177). Harris's conclusion, "Bebop Ghosts and Freedom Songs," reiterates that "black as an identity has been ground into the epistemological frame for so long that

it has naturalized a racialized reality (and ontology) that is a fundamental assumption" (p. 187). Accordingly, he does not deny that "racialized identity" persists and will persist in lived experience as well as artistic creativity. Nonetheless his more nuanced claim is twofold. On the one hand, he allows that creative works and performances are "not separable from racialized experiences and structures" (pp. 187–88). On the other, he insists and demonstrates that universal human forms of culture and racialized identity formations "are linked but not equally exchangeable" (p. 188). With that resolution Harris concludes, "Africana cultural expression in today's world often finds sanctuarial spaces within which to grow and evolve," with "verbal expression" and "human voicings" often animating and linking "old spiritual etymologies to contemporary creative practices" (pp. 188–89). Readers of *Sanctuary* are thereby invited to experience Africana cultural aesthetics in its interior continuity that spans the ancient and the present, the invisible and the visible, in ways both culturally recursive and creatively innovating.

INTRODUCTION

Sanctuary and the Black Interior

> My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth, my voice the freedom of those who break down in the solitary confinement of despair.
>
> AIMÉ CÉSAIRE, *NOTEBOOK OF A RETURN TO THE NATIVE LAND* (1939)

> If black racial identity speaks to all things done to people of recent African ancestry, black cultural identity was created in response to them. The division is not neat; the two are linked, and it is incredibly hard to be a full participant in the world of cultural identity without experiencing the trauma of racial identity.
>
> TA-NEHISI COATES, "MY PRESIDENT WAS BLACK" (2017)

Race is a persistent signifier so deeply ingrained within the everyday of America that it quietly inhabits almost all concepts and definitions relating to people of African descent, coloring them in a way that traps both black and white identities within a process that renews the condition of race. What do I mean? The identities of black or white exist only within a racialized context. Each notion requires a tacit acknowledgment of the other to have any meaning. Race is not a biological or genealogical reality, but it is a social reality. Toni Morrison asks, "What is race (other than genetic imagination) and why does it matter?"[1]

The experience of race has been one fraught with danger and violence on many levels. African Americans historically and culturally have sought safe spaces, private spaces to be, express, or invent themselves. These sanctuaries, or safe havens, might imply ritual spaces where affirmations of spirit and culture could take place and often were actual sanctuarial

spaces—churches or religious gatherings—or safe communal or familial spaces like barbershops, family reunions, dance halls and roadhouses, and the like.

In this volume I argue that art by African American artists, still defined in practice racially, and often generated by the artist's racialized experience, offers additional richness if we explore cultural elements and signifiers embedded consciously or unconsciously in the artist's work. Often these signifiers reference practices or aspects that are found in their lived experiences within the communal commonality of sanctuarial safe havens. Symbolic or codified references, like the concept of conjuring, which we find appearing periodically in the work of Romare Bearden, and more recently that of Renée Stout, evoke kindred identification from those who share the intimate understanding of the language of these spaces and their practices.

The *experience* of race is real and can be ubiquitous for African-descended people in the Americas, and it has varying levels of prominence in the lives of African Americans, Cubans, Brazilians, and others in the African diaspora. However, the richness of cultural practices to be found in the lives of people when they turn inward can be discovered within creative expression and within the cultural syntax of their lives. In the hostile, often racialized or differentiated environments that emerged from slavery, people created sanctuarial spaces, places of respite from oppressive and demeaning experiences. This is what Elizabeth Alexander has called the *black interior*. That interiority includes symbolic, gestural, implicit and explicit references to or excavations from this sanctuarial place. Whether it be the sacred with churches or ring shouts or prayer meetings, or African-derived rituals and ceremonies, or the secular with dance halls, family reunions, house parties, barbershops and beauty parlors, sanctuarial spaces can be excavated from artistic expression to reveal this richness, and might offer a more appropriate logic for the discussion of African American art.

For example, Kerry James Marshall's 1993 painting *De Style* (figure I.1) roots itself in a barbershop with a linoleum floor and offers details that evoke familiar elements from that cultural space. Notice the shifting details of black hair and personal style; the black-and-white shoes of the main figure; the tall natural hairstyle of the woman on the left edge of the work; the partial photograph on the wall of a boxer, presumed to be Muhammad Ali; a bowling trophy to the right; and the large bling ring worn by a partially seen male on the far left of the work. All of these elements set a conglomeration of familiar tropes and signs. For many African American males, the barbershop is a safe space with its own rituals and cultural cues.

1.1 Kerry James Marshall, *De Style*, 1993. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 8 ft., 8 in. × 10 ft., 2 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Beverly Robinson has written that many African cultures had ritual practices solidifying a person's sense of self and belonging. These practices were the basis of a person's sense of cultural self, not their pigmentation. Reconfigured ritualized spaces and practices resisted the dehumanization of enslavement and the subsequent forms and practices of race. Robinson writes, "These rituals, sacred and secular, would include knowing the names of your gods, your ancestors, and yourself, and knowing your community and clan affiliation. . . . You would understand your place in a culture where oral traditions prevailed over written ones. An awareness of communal traditions—language (including gestures), tales, games, humor, music, dance, religion, riddles, food, and other forms of folklore—was part of the human knowledge carried by the men and women transported across the Atlantic."[2]

Artists want to make art that excels in whatever artistic and cultural context they live within. They must master what passes for excellence in

their frame while adding, particularly in contemporary times, their own unique voice, virtuosity, insight, and freedom to be. This volume seeks to be a part of a conversation about looking at art by Africana artists in the African diaspora in ways unbound by the assumptions and conventions of race. It is possible that race and racism are linked, self-renewing phenomena reincarnated daily by acknowledging them; speaking them back into existence by making them the assumptions that are to be opposed.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, in writing about President Barack Obama, describes the situation in this way: "Historically, in black autobiography, to be remanded into the black race has meant exposure to a myriad of traumas, often commencing in childhood. Frederick Douglass is separated from his grandmother. The enslaved Harriet Ann Jacobs must constantly cope with the threat of rape before she escapes. . . . Black culture often serves as the balm for such traumas, or even the means to resist them."[3] However, the title of an online article by Jennifer Baker suggests that "Art Must Engage with Black Vitality, Not Just Black Pain." Baker argues, "While the violence isn't new, the medium has evolved. It's available on a loop, on screens of varying sizes, in texts of all kinds."[4] In the Americas the vitality is contextualized by the pain, but black existence is more than trauma.

Consider also that this discussion, though built around many works of art and visual culture, is not object based. It is more formed on the idea of art as a verb, as doing something, and with its meaning involving more than its objecthood, genesis, or provenance.

Robert Farris Thompson says, "Theories make sense of collisions of culture, ancient to modern. But the lived experiences of African and African American artists provide sources for understanding too." That lived experience in the Americas had an exterior and an interior; a sanctuarial, protected space to counter the exterior racialized reality. Thompson goes on to say, "Their lived experiences are equal to any ideology, anytime. Lived experiences stem from the people, choice memories of improvisation, choice memories of moral decision. They radiate common sense."[5] One interpretation of this aesthetic approach can be defined as phenomenology. As playwright and scholar Paul Carter Harrison describes this: "These are not necessarily conscious decisions. This is really, in your cultural experience, how you perceive relationships (unless it has been tutored out of you). It's not *doing* aesthetics; aesthetics emerge from your perception of reality."[6] So the response to differing experiences is interpreted through

the cultural syntax of African cultural foundations and their rootedness in a spiritualized or inflected reality, whether consciously or not.

This book is written figuratively from within the sanctuary of the Africana diaspora experience and that phenomenological way of being. I use the term *Africana* to elude the racial implications and history of the term *black*, though the term denotes the real experience of being black in a racial context and the confinement of that term generated, in part, by the need for cultural sanctuary. This book has been conceived around both a literal and metaphorical use of *sanctuary* to describe places of safety in the black experience and the condition of psychological security as well as locales of spiritual expression, self-renewal, and cultural celebration.

Coates described his assessment of a sanctuarial space in *Between the World and Me*:

> But I would watch how black people moved, how in these clubs they danced as though their bodies could do anything, and their bodies seemed as free as Malcolm's voice. On the outside black people controlled nothing, least of all the fate of their bodies, which could be commandeered by the police; which could be erased by the guns, which were so profligate; which could be raped, beaten, jailed. But in the clubs, under the influence of two-for-one rum and Cokes, under the spell of low lights, in thrall of hip-hop music, I felt them to be in total control of every step, every nod, every pivot.[7]

It could be that the foundation for this writing was a childhood trip that seemed, without my knowing, to use the *Green Book* (a guide developed in 1936 for black travelers to help them negotiate the racialized topography of the United States safely) as we drove from Cleveland to Kinston, North Carolina, to see an uncle and, for the first time, encountered real segregation, and then to St. Augustine, Florida, and on to the Sir John Hotel in Miami, where black folk could stay, and then to sit embarrassed on an orange crate in a restaurant kitchen in Macon, Georgia, during the return journey.[8] Unlike the subtle racism and residential segregation of Cleveland, it was during this journey that I saw segregated bathrooms and water fountains—both usually in vastly different conditions—and we spent time at the designated black beach or were denied food at certain stops because of our color. We always were watchful and guarded.

Though racial antagonism and conflict born of slavery is the context for the seeming ubiquitous need for sanctuary among people of African

descent in the Americas, we cannot overlook settings where humor and music and food were shared. This is Elizabeth Alexander's black interior. And the kinds of expression emerging from it, rather than being trapped in the dynamics of race, more often reflect the complexities of culture. Alexander defines these interior spaces as "black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination. The black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of." She suggests that tapping into this black imaginary "helps us envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty."[9]

African American art still lingers near racialization in art historical investigations and art museum categorical designations, and work by African American artists often is contextualized as American or contemporary art in ways that can miss important factors for reading intention, perspective, and even biography in the work. My reading of culture extends beyond a parochial African American, or black, circumstance to include Old World African cultural syntax—syntax that might be foundational for linguistic, spiritual, or expressive responses to New World formations, experiences, and developments. Notions of the postblack or postracial seem, in this sense, to be markers on a continuum of terms and interpretations more than overwhelming realities.

A cultural/experiential reading of artwork, either categorically or interpretatively, can open up layers of meaning and might complicate and enrich some of the ways work is examined. As Romare Bearden expressly told art scholar Mary Schmidt Campbell about his work, "I seek connections, so that my paintings can't be only what they appear to represent."[10] African and African American life is filled with spiritual intonations, symbolic gestures, stylized expressive forms, verbal shifts and semantic play, social and communal awareness, and music. Often this is embedded, implied, or alluded to in the art. So much of this effects transformation, spiritual evocation, and temporal and spatial transcendence in the lives of people. As Thompson writes, "Spirit does not date. Spirit needs no visa."[11]

Dianne Stewart has written about how African people used their spiritual foundations and "the preservation of their heritage." She says African practitioners in Jamaica "were actively engaged in the processes of transmitting to posterity a culture and spiritual outlook that imbued human existence with meaning and gave purpose to a people's collective

consciousness. In spite of exile, enslavement, and the psychosocial disorientation they cause, oppressed Blacks in contemporary Jamaica are still able to 'journey' to Africa for empowering and sustaining resources to resist annihilation."[12]

Stewart argues that resistance to dehumanization manifested in African-derived religious systems in the Americas that were developed "systems of thought, ritual, and social ethics."[13] This conflicted with self-serving European misconceptions that African scholar and theologian Engelbert Mveng attributed to the creation of "anthropological poverty." "It consists in despoiling human beings not only of what they have, but of everything that constitutes their being and essence—their identity, history, ethnic roots, language, culture, faith, creativity, dignity, pride, ambitions, right to speak."[14]

The conflict between African cultural ways of being and the forces of erasure explained by Mveng is a crucial aspect of W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of double consciousness as the shifting conflict black people have with being American.[15] Has the tension between those two yet unmerged identities taken a new placidity in the twenty-first century? The election of Barack Obama as president seemed to offer evidence of a changing racial dynamic, but the vitriolic, disrespectful, and often overt racist responses to him by many white people seem to reflect clearly that antagonism, while diminished from earlier eras, persists. Calls for President Obama to provide his birth certificate resurrect the slave codes and subsequent black codes of the nineteenth century and the power dynamic of white people being able to demand that black people show their papers to prove that they fit into the social spaces organized to maintain white supremacy and power. To return to Coates: "Whiteness in America is a different symbol—a badge of advantage. In a country of professed meritocratic competition, this badge has long ensured an unerring privilege, represented in a 220-year monopoly on the highest office in the land."[16]

The codes of racial definition and control are examples of what Michel Foucault posits in a discussion of panopticism. This is a system of constant surveillance that Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, describes as measures to be taken against a plague of leprosy in the seventeenth century when houses were closed off and a system of constant inspection and registration were put in place; a process of quarantine and purification began to operate. Around this time blackness was defined similarly by Europeans as either fundamentally dangerous or as a diseased condition threatening the social order.[17] Defining blackness as an abnormality allowed an image

against which techniques and institutions were organized to measure and supervise abnormality, whether the plague or the social abnormality of the black Other. As Foucault theorized:

> Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere: "A considerable body of militia, commanded by good officers and men of substance", guards at the gates, at the town hall and in every quarter to ensure the prompt obedience of the people and the most absolute authority of the magistrates, "as also to observe all disorder, theft and extortion". . . .
>
> This surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration.[18]

The acceptance of this disempowered abnormality ever under scrutiny can be an insidious underlying assumption in efforts to theorize escapes from the racialized category of blackness. Martha Schwendener wrote during a January 2016 review of several exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem that Romare Bearden "looked to Picasso, who he felt honored and validated African art rather than merely using it for his own artistic ends."[19] Given Picasso's denials for many years about having been influenced by African art, I wonder how this artist could *validate* the art of all the varied cultures, or even the art recovered from colonial enterprise in the Francophone areas of Africa feeding Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, by his borrowings. Must the panoptic white gaze be approving before art and culture of the African diaspora is to be valid? Could it be that the inadequacy of the peripheral vision of that gaze is the abnormality? Toni Morrison argues:

> How hard they work to define the slave as inhuman, savage, when in fact the definition of the inhuman describes overwhelmingly the punisher. . . .
>
> The necessity of rendering the slave a foreign species appears to be a desperate attempt to confirm one's own self as normal.[20]

Consider figure I.2 as an example of the approving white gaze and black assimilation as "a desperate attempt to confirm one's own self as normal." Historically, black people in the United States have used codes and cues in public spaces when white people were present to suggest a cultural and experiential solidarity. Media scholar Christine Acham calls this a "dual address" awareness of two audiences and the production of a

1.2 M. Darly, *A Mungo Macaroni*, 1772. Hand-colored etching, approx. 7 × 5 in. (plate mark); approx. 10¾ × 5½ in. (sheet). Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Folio 72 771 D37 v.4 plate 14. *Macaroni* became a term to mean a person of any rank who exceeds the ordinary bounds of fashion, usually distinguishable by his tight-fitting clothes, oversized sword, delicate shoes, and large wig. They often were mocked for excessive, "effeminate" concern with outward appearance. The subject of this one is Julius Soubise (ca. 1754–98), a freed Afro-Caribbean who became a well-known fop at the time. Courtesy of Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

"hidden transcript" outside of the perceptual realm for white people.[21] Ta-Nehisi Coates, contributing editor at the *Atlantic*, writes about codes used by Mr. Obama as president to signal the black community. "These cultural cues became important during Obama's presidential run and beyond. Obama doesn't merely evince blackness; he uses his blackness to signal and court African Americans, semaphoring in a cultural dialect of our creation—crooning Al Green at the Apollo, name-checking Young Jeezy, regularly appearing on the cover of black magazines, weighing the merits of Jay-Z versus Kanye West, being photographed in the White House with a little black boy touching his hair."[22]

Not long before the 2008 election, the phrase *postblack* gained traction in New York media, followed by the illusion of a postracial America heralded by the election of President Obama.[23] What does it mean to be black or, for that matter, postblack? Is postblack merely a rearticulation of New Negro aspirations from a century ago? Is it the same inchoate plea for a validation or recognition of one's humanity outside essentialist ethnic caricatures and characterizations? Does it allow an exit from the

panopticon sense of a permanent visibility (and its accompanying invisibility) that is a part of the power of whiteness that has benefited from this panoptic structure?

Double consciousness and other black Atlantic investigations often look at hybridity and creolizations to explain their subject, but there is a dimension to the formations emerging from the cultural collision of Europeans and Africans during the Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath in the Caribbean and the United States rooted in insularity, seclusion, secrecy, and protection.[24]

Two of the major social spaces for the enacting of collective privacy were the dance hall (roadhouse, or wherever people gathered to play and hear music) and the church; secular and sacred spaces for gathering and expressing the communal and spiritual self. To these spaces we might add the barbershop, the beauty salon, the family reunion, and the kind of common experiences found through *Green Book* travel. Fahamu Pecou (figure I.3) has taken the barber chair a step past Kerry James Marshall and signified it with the Asante (of Ghana) gold stool of royal iconography by upholstering it with African cloth and adorning the chair with gold leaf. He has given the barbershop a figurative ancestral link. Onaje Woodbine has introduced the argument that the basketball court has become a sanctuarial space in some ways for young black men.[25] It was in these out-of-view social spaces turned into ritual spaces that authentic identity could be formed safely and performed and that visual/verbal signs and signifiers from those practices and sanctuaries might signal one's membership in that beloved community.

Here we will build on Richard Powell's articulation of a visual blues aesthetic, religious and spiritual performance references, and add to it a pattern aesthetic that includes quilt and cloth forms and their eventual translation into visual art, especially after 1960, when black artists began traveling to Africa and encountering a visual aesthetic that was more symbolic and conceptual than representational.[26]

Does a blues aesthetic ignore jazz and hip-hop as indicators of culture? The short answer is no. Krista Thompson has written a remarkable book, *Shine*, about the visual notion of shine, or light (bling), in African diasporic aesthetic practice. She explores how contemporary consumer culture "dominate[s] how people in the African diaspora experience culture, music, their sense of the world, and their places within."[27] According to Stuart Hall, popular consumer culture, greatly influenced by black American expression, is firmly rooted in capitalism, its assumptions, cir-

I.3 Fahamu Pecou, *Watch the Throne*, from *Of Crowns and Kings* collection, 2019. Mixed media barber's chair, dimensions unknown. Courtesy of Fahamu Pecou Art/Studio KAWO, Atlanta.

I.4 Still from Beyoncé's halftime appearance in the 2016 Super Bowl at the San Francisco 49ers' home stadium near San Jose, California. "Beyoncé and Bruno Mars Crash the Pepsi Super Bowl 50 Halftime Show," YouTube, February 11, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDPITj1wlkg.

cular references, and transactions in ways that deeply root us in the system that produced the panoptic relationship and the racialized structures so many seek to escape.[28] Thompson observes strategies of visibility and play with visual technologies in the United States and the nearby English-speaking Caribbean islands of Jamaica and the Bahamas, including new rationales for bleaching the skin. She writes, "Dancehall attendees even bleach their skin (which purportedly prepares them for the video light), all in an effort to become visible—to be made spectacularly present in the lens of the video camera."[29] Youth culture and an emphasis on style and currency seem, to some extent, episodic and of the moment more than they seem foundational. As Thompson observes, "In the 1980s, as hip-hop gained visibility and commercial success nationally and globally, rappers increasingly turned their attention from politics to pleasure and focused on earthly and bodily gratification, hedonism, and even nihilism. . . . Hip-hop artists in the post soul period unabashedly celebrated materialism or a 'radical consumerism,' draping themselves in symbols of wealth from gold chains and medallions to all manner of brand-name goods."[30]

Resistance to and critique of a system that oppresses through outsider status seemingly has become a strategy for visibility and inclusion. During

the February 7, 2016, Super Bowl, Beyoncé performed during halftime the song "Formation" while wearing an outfit that seemed to pay tribute to the Black Panthers (figure I.4), prominent in the Bay Area during the 1960s, where the Super Bowl was being hosted in 2016, and to Michael Jackson's outfit worn during his 1993 Super Bowl halftime performance. Her dancers wore black berets or large Afros to further identify with the Panthers. The bandolier of bullets on the singer's arm is reminiscent of those collaged onto AfriCOBRA founding member Wadsworth Jarrell's (b. 1929) notable 1971 painting inspired by Angela Davis, *Revolutionary* (figure I.5). Jarrell was further inspired by his wife, Jae Jarrell, also a founding member of AfriCOBRA, and her 1969 *Revolutionary Suit* (figure I.6). Beyoncé's song and performance implied allegiance to the Black Lives Matter movement, prompting immediate backlash from (panopticonic) authoritarian voices, like former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, as being disrespectful to the police.[31]

Perhaps this is as serious as the searing Max Roach 1963 album, *We Insist (Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite)*, his collaboration with Oscar Brown Jr. begun in 1959 with a view toward a 1963 performance to commemorate the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. A *New York Times* article about Beyoncé and Jay-Z points out that her performance was "the most widely seen act of political art in recent memory" and that Jay-Z and Beyoncé "increasingly use their outsize platform as a tool of social agitation."[32] Her songs have the potential impact of James Brown's 1968 political anthem, "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud."[33]

Beyoncé's outfit also included high heels, a swimming-suit-like short top only reaching her hips, fishnet stockings, a leather garter on her thigh, and a blonde hair weave down to her waist, somewhat graphically illustrating the double voicing often present in Africana expression. The surprise release of the music video two days before the Super Bowl performance did nothing to convince that the song and performance were rooted expressions of deep cultural practice or sincere activism rather than savvy marketing. In the current context, however, using a media platform is an effective complement to the street activism of the Black Lives Matter movement and other media-savvy political strategies. The subsequent video project *Lemonade* was an hour-long musical essay about personal pain, black womanhood, and the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and was populated with a phenomenal series of deep cultural references; in fact, it was brilliant and political in a less direct way. It tied ancestors, African cultural imagery and fragments, black popular cultural

1.5 Wadsworth A. Jarrell, *Revolutionary*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 64 × 51 in. Collection of Brooklyn Museum, NY. Used by permission of Wadsworth Jarrell.

1.6 Jae Jarrell, *Revolutionary Suit*, 1969. Black-and-white wool tweed, suede, silk, wood, and pigment. Collection of Brooklyn Museum, NY. Used by permission of Jae Jarrell.

expression, family and babies, heartbreak and redemption, to what is at stake in personal relationships.

Beyoncé and her husband, Jay-Z, through Tidal, his music streaming service, are trying to build a level of autonomy and self-control through their business while addressing social activism in their expressive work. For example, her Super Bowl performance risked alienating part of her crossover audience with unruly references instead of pandering to them. Can a savvy use of popular culture, social media, and mainstream musical performance—an effective use of the system—actually change that system? Can something based within the system resist or step outside of its panoptic gaze and control? Can it change from within, as the civil rights movement (with complementary pressure from the Black Power movement) accomplished in some significant ways in the 1960s?[34]

Many old West and Central African cultures, such as the Yoruba, the Akan, the Fon, and the BaKongo, are foundational to black (or Africana) cultural formations in the Americas, and those earlier societies were integrative. On the surface, the rhythmic cadences, lyrical asymmetry, performative improvisation, and call-and-response characteristics of African expressivity are present in hip-hop and other Africana expression. However, spiritual ideas were not unconnected to visual forms, public masquerade performances, and musical expression, so the sacred-secular dialectic of a Western Christian epistemology and linear notions of time in the Christian eschatology differ in many ways from the circular and rhythmic structures often found in an African ontological frame. Therefore, vernacular notions of the spiritual often forge connections between blues music and gospel expression. A passage from a novel by Nigerian author Ben Okri perhaps illustrates the fluidity between spiritual and physical realms in a West African conceptual context still a part of its culture's imaginations and assumptions:

> Not far from me, like a skull sliced in half and blacked with tar, was a mask that looked frightening from the side, but which was contorted in an ecstatic laughter at the front. It had eyes both daunting and mischievous. Its mouth was big. Its nose was small and delicate. It was the face of one of those paradoxical spirits that move amongst men and trees, carved by an artist who has the gift to see such things and the wisdom to survive them. . . . Then I picked it up and wore it over my face and looked out from its eyes and something blurred the sun and the forest became as night.

> When I looked out through the mask I saw a different world. There were beings everywhere in the darkness and the spirits were each of them a sun.[35]

It is likely that I am continuing a conversation that surfaced over forty-five years ago about the creation of a vocabulary for talking about and articulating a black aesthetic founded within those New World sanctuaries where we reimagined and reinvented ourselves.[36] In May 1970 Jeff Donaldson organized CONFABA (the Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art) at Northwestern University, and conference material stated:

> When we addressed ourselves to the problem of the function of art, it was explicit that the function of art is to liberate man in the spiritual sense of the word, to provide more INTERNAL space. . . .
>
> The heart of the Black Artist's ideology is the dedication of his art to the cultural liberation of his people. It is in this sense that Black art is decidedly functional, politically and spiritually, and it is not to be confused by the alienation concept of "art for art's sake" rather than art for people's sake.[37]

Barred from attending the conference by the US State Department, Elizabeth Catlett gave a telephone presentation (which Jeff Donaldson taped) from Mexico to the conference.[38] Among those in attendance were Margaret Burroughs, Aaron Douglas, Sylvia Boone, Larry Neal, Samella Lewis, Nelson Stevens, Ethiopian artist Skunder Boghossian, the members of AfriCOBRA, A. B. Spellman, Edmund Barry Gaither, Charles White, Sterling Stuckey, Dana Chandler, John Biggers, Lois Mailou Jones, Hughie Lee-Smith, Ed Spriggs, Floyd Coleman, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and David Driskell.

Though the emphasis here is on the United States, the so-called syncretism of African-derived religions behind Catholicism provides evidence of practical continuities across the black Atlantic. Perhaps this is a contemporary chapter in Alain Locke's 1925 discussion of a "Legacy of the Ancestral Arts" that Alvia Wardlaw renovated with her 1989 exhibition and publication, *Black Art—Ancestral Legacy*.[39]

Ultimately, this book emerges from dissatisfaction with the persistence of race as an underlying and unquestioned means of talking about African American art, and the notion of its inclusion in a Western canon often being dependent on an embrace of the panoptic assumptions of

exclusion. As musician and scholar Dwight Andrews wrote in 1989, "It would be ridiculous to base an aesthetic model simply on race. To do so would inevitably lead to the same ludicrous assertions and conclusions of other racist cultural theorists and demagogues. . . . We must acknowledge the limitations of race as an appropriate criteria for the formulation of an aesthetic."[40] Within the larger body of work by artists of African descent, we can find insider *cultural* references that speak, or signify, to audiences authenticated by membership inside those protected spaces; those dance halls and churches (and barbershops, beauty parlors, family reunions, basketball playgrounds, backyard barbecues) and places where people gathered safely within their identity and social practices. And, over time, a million more concerns, expressive forms, and elements of artistic freedom found their way into the art. The experience and condition of being black are the geologic pressures that formed black culture, but they are not the culture itself.

> A black face didn't make me kin.
>
> SAIDIYA HARTMAN, *LOSE YOUR MOTHER* (2008)

Why meditate on culture? Because it provides opportunities for understanding black (or Africana) creative expression in ways that racial categorization does not. Composer and musician T. J. Anderson says, "All black music is based upon black speech. That's why the preacher is so important. All of it comes from the church and the bars and all of that, so it is environmental. This is an extension of who we are as a people."[41] The job of the artist, he says, is to do something with that. To this we can add Dianne Stewart's suggestion of prayer as "power speech" to reinforce the generative force of speech as a concept within African and African diaspora cultures.[42]

African American art presently is most often defined racially even when the intention is not to do so. Schwendener's *New York Times* discussion of a "cultural conversation" at the Studio Museum in Harlem is filled with formal, art historical, and racial references, but no cultural terminology or explanation is excavated from the art. Questions found in the exhibitions such as "Is there such a thing as black abstraction?" have little to do with black culture. She also asks, "What does it mean in art to represent bodies that have been marked as property and by racist violence?"[43] These questions can be found in racialized conceptions of being and where the black (racial) body is a signifier of disease and discretization. It is only

within a racial concept that the black body exists and must be defended or redefined or reimagined. Questions about racial tension, exclusion, or social histories tend to preserve the assumptions of a racial context and, therefore, are active in continuing the existing racial assumptions.

Culture and ethnic practices would appear to be a better foundation for examining and defining African American (or African diasporic) art as an idiom (or a series of idiomatic expressive forms) instead of the label *black*. It is within culture that we find the lived experiences of expression Robert Farris Thompson mentions above. There are references, subjects, practices, and shared understandings within black cultural/ritual spaces that affect and effect the work of many artists of the African diaspora and, whether intentional or not, provide markers that differentiate that art and, importantly, offer insider evocations allowing black audiences to find emotional and experiential responses to the work. It is within culture that we find normality.

Building on previous brilliant and insightful work by Powell, Alvia Wardlaw, Jeff Donaldson, and others like David Driskell and Samella Lewis, this volume intends to explore Africana diasporal visual expression from some slightly different angles and emphases. Because musical and religious performance have acted as containers and transmitters of African and African American culture and identity, it is worth considering the appearance of those references in the visual expression of Africans in the Americas and the reasons that Amiri Baraka identified us as "blues people" and that Powell rearticulated the notion of a black aesthetic as a blues aesthetic.[44]

Artistically, expression seeking to be a part of the canon, the mainstream of H. W. and Anthony F. Janson's *History of Art*, and even the critique of race and racism, seems to be welcome in the mainstream art apparatus more than art with assumptions and codes of a black audience.[45] Admittedly, this can offer enviable financial rewards and personal recognition. With racial critiques, like those by Kara Walker, white people are a part of the conversation. So Kehinde Wiley's reimagination of classical European paintings, similar to Bob Thompson's paintings of the early 1960s, sometimes called restaging histories or resignifications of the black body, or even Robert Colescott's satirical restatement of Vincent Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*, *Eat Dem Taters* (1975), seems to find more support and patronage than work by Jeff Donaldson, John Biggers, or Renée Stout that has been directed more toward a black audience's sensibilities and experiences. Pleas for inclusion in the Western canon are dependent

on a position of exclusion being the norm and can reinforce that condition. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in 1948, "When the Negro declares in French that he rejects French culture, he takes in one hand that which he has pushed aside with the other."[46] This is not to suggest that counterhegemonic production and critique are without utility, but they can carry the risk of reinforcing on one level what they oppose on another level.

I find Colescott's parody of Willem de Kooning, *I Gets a Thrill Too When I Sees De Koo* (1978; figure I.7), to be endlessly fascinating, inventive, witty, and intellectually savvy. The double entendre of the title implied by the Aunt Jemima/mammy head he has attached to a violently rendered body in the sense of de Kooning's female portrait abstractions ties the mammy stereotype to misogynist interpretations of women, and with tongue firmly in cheek, he signifies about undoing coon stereotypes. Directing such statements at mainstream art targets reinforces one's place in the margins, but Colescott twists and satirizes the mainstream in almost mocking gestures—like a visual cakewalk. He successfully places his work within the genre of artistic social critiques by canonical artists like William Hogarth, Francisco Goya, Käthe Kollwitz, Pablo Picasso, and Andy Warhol while rooting himself in traditions of signifying and the sarcasm and irony of African trickster figures. Though Colescott is addressing the art mainstream, he often does so with an Africana cultural syntax.[47]

I am left wondering if a part of Kehinde Wiley's success is because, in addition to the arresting visuality of his paintings, behind the imagery is the assumption of the primacy of classic Western painting traditions and his institutionalizing of the aspirational position of black people toward inclusion within that tradition. The foundational social critique is the recognition of black humanity and the jarring effect of recontextualizing the classic scenes by repopulating them with contemporary black figures. Wiley's work at the same time disrupts the prevailing narrative with pattern and hip-hop imagery, a strategy that potentially invades the Western canon and transforms it from within. This visual transmutation, at its best, is fascinating and offers a layered agenda that seems effective in a work from his global series inserting black and brown men from other nations as subjects.

Three Wise Men Greeting Entry into Lagos (2008; figure I.8) is effective because it is embedded, intentionally or not, with layers of cultural implications. Three young Nigerian men wearing contemporary African shirts with patterns we associate with African cloth are placed on a similarly patterned background as they make gestures with their fists. This

1.7 Robert Colescott, *I Gets a Thrill Too When I Sees De Koo*, 1978. Acrylic on canvas, 84 × 66 in. Used by permission of Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA. Gift of Senator and Mrs. William Bradley, 1981.25. Photograph by Charles Mayer Photography.

work suggests the work of Yinka Shonibare, the Yoruba artist living in England who has used African cloth to invade and resignify Victorian iconographic imagery and dress. *Three Wise Men*, at first, seems to have a familiar intimation from European canonical art. However, Sophie Sanders writes that this work instead is inspired by a monumental sculpture, the *Welcome to Lagos Monument*, designed by Bodun Shodeinde in 1991 (figure I.9). Wiley's painting duplicates the gestures of the three figures in the Lagos sculpture, which depicts three Yoruba *babalawo* (diviners or healers).[48]

Sanders appropriately considers Wiley's work in regard to the "colonial textile and decorative arts of Asia, West Africa, and Europe," as well as the common connections to hip-hop style and canon invasion.[49] The background pattern emulates the plant and floral motifs of factory print fabric, but the cloth the men wear draws from the resist dye wax prints that gained a market in West Africa.[50]

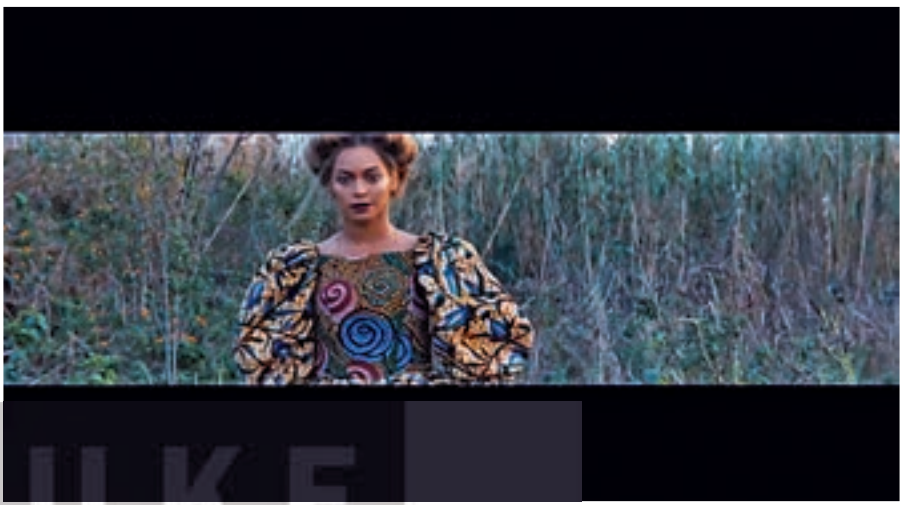
The histories behind printed patterned cloth beneath Shonibare's social/political commentary conceptually critique England's colonial history and the invisibility of its subjects by inserting African cloth into Victorian style. The brightly patterned cloth now seen as African in fact is printed in fabric mills in Holland and England and emerged from the colonial period as a replacement for the older narrow loom strip cloth, called Mande day cloth, and is best known in the form of kente cloth. Using this cloth on headless mannequins in works like figure I.10 from 2006, *How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Ladies)*, creates a double voicing speaking outwardly about the invisibility of colonial subjects during the height of empire but also has implications about the destruction of the local industry by imports from Europe. Interestingly, this ties into a scene from Beyoncé's *Lemonade* video when she quietly employs Shonibare's transmutation vocabulary by wearing what seems to be an antebellum-styled dress made of African cloth (figure I.11).

Wiley's usual patterns do not deploy the asymmetry found in African cloth or African American quilt tops, or what Robert Farris Thompson has called "offbeat phrasing."[51] Yet there can be something comfortably familiar about Wiley's strategy because it operates from the assumption of black marginality and repeats an old plea for inclusion. It offers no radical proposals for restructuring the Western canon, but it can call for a reassessment of the canon for abnormality, "disorder, theft and extortion."

I.8 Kehinde Wiley, *Three Wise Men Greeting Entry into Lagos*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 72 × 95¼ in. Accession Number: 2009.20. © Kehinde Wiley. Courtesy of Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Frances and Joseph Nash Field Fund.

I.9 Bodun Shodeinde, *Welcome to Lagos Monument* (Lagos, Nigeria), 1991. Fiberglass, 12 ft. high. Creative Commons Share Alike 4.0 International, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en. Photo by Yomi Dauda.

I.10 Yinka Shonibare, *How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Ladies)*, 2006. Two fiberglass mannequins, Dutch wax-printed cotton textile, two guns, shoes, leather riding boots, and plinth. 5 ft., 3 in. × 7 ft., 9½ in. × 4 ft. © Yinka Shonibare. Courtesy of Davis Museum, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA. All Rights Reserved, DAC/ARS, New York 2025.



I.11 Still from Beyoncé's "All Night" video from her 2016 visual album *Lemonade*. "Beyoncé—'All Night' (Video)," YouTube, November 30, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gM89Q5Eng_M&list=RDgM89Q5Eng_M&start_radio=1&t=3.

I've wrestled with alligators. I've tussled with a whale.
I done handcuffed lightning. And throw thunder in jail.

MUHAMMAD ALI, "THE RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE" SPEECH (1974)

The notion of a black or a blues aesthetic conflicts in some ways with younger artists and writers having a perspective rooted in popular cultural references and more stratified class experiences having been born after the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., the passing of the civil rights movement and the Black Arts Movement, and the conservative (and neoliberal) recalibration of American political culture given full motion by the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan and the political forces behind him. In his 1989 essay "The New Black Aesthetic," Trey Ellis calls himself a "cultural mulatto," a term he defines as "educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures" and the ability to "navigate easily in the white world." He suggests that the Cosby girls (of the wildly popular *Cosby Show* of the 1980s) were "equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother."[52]

Ellis's term, *cultural mulatto*, is one of many categorical adjustments in the long search for mooring by folk with uncomfortable fittings in the base stereotypes. It must be considered that black people always have had a clear sense of the "white world" and how to navigate it from various relationships to it because survival has always depended on this knowing.

In a recent *New York Times Magazine* essay, "Can Black Art Ever Escape the Politics of Race?" Vinson Cunningham examined the conundrum of black art and black artists: "How do you make sense of the widespread inability to allow social consciousness and other species of sensitivity to reside within the confines of the same person?"[53] Perhaps the persistent recurrence of black artists wishing to express their existential and human concerns free of racial designations is a by-product of Cunningham's suggestion that "tribal pride has too often meant solidarity with sorrow." He writes, "There exists—there has always existed—a tragic conundrum in the making of black art. The qualities most closely associated with high aesthetic accomplishment, at least in the West—transcendence, a preference for the beautiful over the blunt—are in some ways irresolvable with the details of black life."

African American artists always have negotiated artistic virtuosity and the nature and function of their craft. Cunningham's prescriptive solution is for artists and writers to "split the difference between Enlightenment-era detachment [the idea of art for art's sake] and grim social realism, showing through work and music and love—even laughter,

even tears—exactly what a black life might be." Blues music signified its function in the lives of black people in the United States, but within that tradition, there were standards of craft. Form and function cooperated.

In 1963 bluesman Muddy Waters was invited by the Chess brothers of Chess Records to record an acoustic album, *Folk Singer*, to ride the popularity of folk music in popular culture shown by the success of groups like the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul, and Mary. Not having had a successful song since 1958, Waters was willing to try the Chess brothers' suggestion for a reinterpretation of some old blues classics. Willie Dixon was on bass, Clifton James on drums, but the producers wanted Muddy to go to Mississippi and find an older guitarist to join the session. Muddy told them, "Set the session up for tomorrow, I got him." He brought young guitarist Buddy Guy to play. Guy recalled, "When I walked in the studio, Leonard and them was cursin' at me. Muddy told them, 'Shut up!' and he looked at me, 'Just don't say nothin'." When I sit down and was playin' the sh__ with Muddy, they looked at me, 'Mother_____, you didn't tell me you know that! You older than you say you are!'"[54]

In a world emphasizing the individuality intrinsic to art for art's sake, Africana artists continue to struggle with the lure of that nonracial individuality, what Cunningham calls "the basically illusory imperative for the fine artist to privilege the aesthetic and personal over the social and political."[55] The social realism and racial commentary of many artists can place them within a racialized social position as part of a marginalized group making a plea for inclusion. The racial critiques of artists like Kara Walker, or the creative reimaging of canonical Western art with the presence of black people, are compatible with the existing social structures and can reinforce them.

This book is an attempt to give voice and increased visibility to the experience of the black interior, but as a metaphor rather than a monolith. I wish to relieve it from the panoptic assumptions of the white gaze and its disciplines while acknowledging the presence of this gaze. The book explores the idea that the autobiography of cultural identity and experience, however defined, affects one's art, and recognizing the presence of cultural codes and cues—the dual address—can provide insight into the art and the artist, the intended audience for the work, and provide a much clearer reading of African American art than a racial designation of the artist's identity. In other words, African American art and art by African Americans are not always exactly the same thing. The latter is a racialized definition. The descendant of Baraka's *Blues People* is hip-hop culture, and it is rooted within a racial context, but it is not a racial entity.

Notes

Foreword

1 Donaldson, *CONFABA*. Appendix 3, "Task Force 5 Philosophy Recommendations," 103.

2 Ted Gioia, "How Wayne Shorter Transformed Jazz Composition in the 1960s," *Honest Broker*, March 3, 2023, https://www.honest-broker.com/p/how-wayne-shorter-transformed-jazz.

Editors' Introduction

1 James Baldwin uses the term *racial nightmare* in his essay "The Fire Next Time" (379).

Introduction: Sanctuary and the Black Interior

Epigraphs: Ta-Nehisi Coates, "My President Was Black: A History of the First African American White House—and of What Came Next," *Atlantic*, January/February 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/my-president-was-black/508793/. Muhammad Ali, "'The Rumble in the Jungle': Muhammad Ali vs George Foreman 30.10.1974 (October 30, 1974)." Classic Boxing Matches, September 30, 2016, accessed July 17, 2025, https://youtu.be/ElWMImS6K78?si=CUhpBwI8dG7dMjGP.

1 Morrison, *Origin of Others*, 15.

2 Robinson, "Sense of Self," 332.

3 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "My President Was Black: A History of the First African American White House—and of What Came Next," *Atlantic*, January/February 2017.

4 Jennifer Baker, "Art Must Engage with Black Vitality, Not Just Black Pain," *Electric Literature*, September 21, 2017, https://electricliterature.com/art-must-engage-with-black-vitality-not-just-black-pain-d39b7cd690c1.

5 R. Thompson, "Communiqué from Afro-Atlantis," 68.

6 Paul Carter Harrison, taped interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, April 17, 2018.

7 Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 62.

8 Postal worker Victor Green published the *Green Book* guide beginning in 1936 to help African American travelers find restaurants, auto shops, and accommodations as they traveled. Green said that he was inspired by the Jewish press, "which had long published information on restricted places." Ana Swanson, "The Forgotten Way African Americans Stayed Safe in a Racist America," *Wonkblog*, *Washington Post*, January 8, 2016.

9 Alexander, *Black Interior*, x.

10 Romare Bearden to Mary Schmidt Campbell, postmarked September 22, 1973, quoted in Fine, "Spaces Between," 33.

11 R. Thompson, "Communiqué from Afro-Atlantis," 70.

12 Stewart, *Three Eyes*, x.

13 Stewart, *Three Eyes*, 6.

14 Mveng, "Third World Theology," 220, quoted in Stewart, *Three Eyes*, 5–6.

15 "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 44.

16 Coates, "My President Was Black."

17 Compare the surveillance and separation of black people undergoing legalized segregation to Foucault's description of leprosy as an alleged threat to the social order:

> If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects. Rather than the massive, binary division between one set of people and another, it called for multiple separations, individualizing distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power. The leper was caught up in a practice of rejection, of exile-enclosure; he was left to his doom in a mass among which it was useless to differentiate; those sick of the plague were caught up in a meticulous tactical partitioning in which individual differentiations were the constricting effects of a power that multiplied, articulated and subdivided itself; the great confinement on the one hand; the correct training on the other. The leper and his separation; the plague and its segmentations. . . . The exile of the leper and the arrest of the plague do not bring with them the same political dream. The first is that of a pure community, the second that of a disciplined society. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 198.

18 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 196.

19 Martha Schwendener, "At the Studio Museum in Harlem, 4 Shows Engage a Cultural Conversation," *New York Times*, January 7, 2016.

20 Morrison, *Origin of Others*, 29.

21 Christine Acham, "Shifting Shonda: The Evolving Politics of Shonda-Land." Public presentation, Emory University, January 28, 2016.

22 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Fear of a Black President," *Atlantic*, September 2012, http://theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/09/fear-of-a-black-president/309064/.

23 For a repudiation of this idea *before* the murder of Trayvon Martin and the almost weekly police shootings of unarmed black males in the two years after that, see Wise, *Colorblind*.

24 Du Bois, in his text *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), suggests a Hegelian argument of hybridity in a thesis-antithesis dialectic leading to synthesis, or something new. Also see, for example, Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*.

25 Woodbine, *Black Gods*.

26 Powell, *Blues Aesthetic*.

27 K. Thompson, *Shine*, 2.

28 Hall, "What Is This 'Black.'"

29 K. Thompson, *Shine*, 5–6.

30 K. Thompson, *Shine*, 221.

31 See Andrew Rosenthal, "Beyoncé's Halftime Show Inspires Ridiculous Criticism," *Taking Note* (blog), *New York Times*, February 8, 2016.

32 Jon Caramanica, "Jay Z and Beyoncé: Activism Gone Vocal," *New York Times*, July 8, 2016.

33 Interestingly, Brown's song paraphrased the lyrics of the spiritual "I've Been 'Buked," as follows:

> I've been 'buked an' I've been scorned, children
> I've been 'buked an' I've been scorned
> I've been talked about, sho's you're born.

Those lyrics became in Brown's song,

> We've been 'buked and we've been scorned
> We've been treated bad, talked about as sure as you're born.

This double voicing must have resonated powerfully with those familiar with the gospel song.

34 The recent music video by Beyoncé and Jay-Z, "Apeshit," filmed in the Louvre in Paris, caused attendance at the museum to rise 25 percent since its release, according to the museum's December 27 press release. (Nate Freeman, "Beyoncé and Jay-Z helped the Louvre break the all-time attendance record for a museum," *Artsy*, January 3, 2019.) The video had over 147 million views. [*Ed. note*: by the time of this book's publication, the number of views had topped 287.5 million. "THE CARTERS—*APESHIT* (Official Video)," YouTube, accessed July 15, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbMqWXnpXcA.]

35 Okri, *Famished Road*, 244–45.

36 See, for example, Gayle, *Black Aesthetic*. During CONFABA fifty historians, educators, scholars, and visual artists met to "organize the study of African American Art."

37 Program for CONFABA, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, May 1970, published in Gaither, "Heritage Reclaimed," 25.

38 Nelson Stevens, personal conversation, and confirmed in a telephone conversation, May 11, 2019.

39 Locke, "Legacy."

40 Andrews, "From Black to Blues," 37.

41 T. J. Anderson, taped interview with the author, Atlanta, Georgia, November 11, 2012.

42 Dianne Stewart, personal conversation with the author, June 22, 2016.

43 Schwendener, "4 Shows."

44 Baraka, *Blues People*.

45 Janson and Janson's *Short History of Art* has been the canonical text in many schools and colleges for decades and often is a site for debates about inclusion because the book is more precisely a history of Western art. Originally coauthored in 1962 by H. W. Janson and his son, Anthony F. Janson (until the sixth edition in 2001), the seventh (2006) and eighth (2010) editions are newly authored by Penelope J. E. Davies with five other art historians and billed as a history of "the Western tradition."

46 Sartre, *Black Orpheus*, 23.

47 Richard Powell has published a recent book exploring the way Colescott and other African American artists have used satire in their work to make commentary. Powell, *Going There*.

48 Sanders, "Spirited Pattern and Decoration," 70–71.

49 Sanders, "Spirited Pattern and Decoration," 36.

50 Sanders writes that the Dutch encountered "wax-resist dyed textiles in the seventeenth century on the Indonesian island of Java, and by the nineteenth century, Dutch textile manufacturers had found a way to imitate Javanese hand-drawn batik by roller printing a resin resist on the cloth prior to dyeing." West Africans appreciated "the slightly off-register effects and asymmetry of pattern that made the images seem to dance and sparkle." Sanders, "Spirited Pattern and Decoration," 73.

51 Thompson indicates that African narrow-strip textiles are "enlivened by rich and vivid suspensions of the expected placement of the weft-blocks . . . thus characterized by designs virtually to be scanned metrically, in visual resonance with the famed off-beat phrasing of melodic accents in African and Afro-American music." These textiles "[introduce] to the history of art an extraordinary idiom, unique to the black world." He also suggests that the asymmetrical, complicated uses of patterning work are for spiritual protection. R. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 207–22 (quotation from p. 207).

52 Ellis, "New Black Aesthetic," 235.

53 Vinson Cunningham, "Can Black Art Ever Escape the Politics of Race?," *New York Times*, August 20, 2015.

54 Aldin, liner notes to *Muddy Waters*.

55 Cunningham, "Can Black Art Ever Escape."

Chapter 1. The Moan: Calling Forth Culture

Epigraph: Amiri Baraka, "Why's/Wise," and Rob Brown (saxophone), February 21, 2009, Media Sanctuary, December 9, 2009, https://youtu.be/mKfQNO66GPk?si=8tuypeFk-MIchijq.

1 Moyo Okediji, personal communication with the author, May 2014.

2 Clarke, Introduction, n.p.

3 Ethnic rivalries and economic incentives, family or clan lineages, and the complicity of Africans in the slave trade, capturing people from other groups for various goods bartered by Europeans, would have worked against a sense of commonality before the Atlantic voyages despite the captives having embarked from the same port. See Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas*.

4 Phillips, *Slavery from Roman Times*, 174, quoted in Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas*, 24.

5 Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

6 Ed Spriggs, taped conversation, Atlanta, Georgia, May 17, 2012. Spriggs, the second director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, was one of the instigators at San Francisco State University in the late 1960s of what is now the academic field of black or African American studies.

7 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 5.

8 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6–7.

9 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 7.

10 Taylor, "'Salt Peanuts,'" 2.

11 Taylor, "'Salt Peanuts,'" 3.

12 The Yoruba began to be captured and taken into the slave trade in great numbers during and after their civil wars in the first decades of the nineteenth century, a period after US law prohibited the direct importation of slaves from Africa. See, for example, Ajayi, "Aftermath of the Fall"; and Ajayi and Smith, *Yoruba Warfare*.

13 Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas*, 21.

14 Abiodun asserts that *òrò* is more than just speech. "Rather, it means 'a matter, that is, something that is the subject of discussion, concern, or action.'" Abiodun, "Verbal and Visual Metaphors," 252–55.

15 Abiodun, "Verbal and Visual Metaphors," 255.

16 Abiodun, "Verbal and Visual Metaphors," 253. I am grateful to Rowland Abiodun for referring me back to this passage. Telephone conversation, January 31, 2014.