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## Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s

Abney Louis Henderson  
*University of South Florida*, [ahender9@mail.usf.edu](mailto:ahender9@mail.usf.edu)

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Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry and Activism of Black Women  
in the Black Arts Movement, 1960's–1980's

by

Abney L. Henderson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Liberal Arts  
with a concentration in Africana Studies  
Department of Africana Studies  
College of Art and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Cheryl Rodriguez, Ph.D.  
Kersuze Simeon-Jones, Ph.D.  
Navita Cummings James, Ph.D.

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## DEDICATION

“Listen to yourself and in that quietude you might hear the voice of God.”

-Dr. Maya Angelou

April 4, 1928-May 28, 2014

For my mother, **Germaine L. Lorelus**, a beautiful Black Haitian woman who overcomes her struggles one day at a time and expresses her love with a mighty, yet graceful force.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project honors and recognizes the art and activism of four Black woman—Nina Simone, Nikki Giovanni, Elizabeth Catlett, and Ntozake Shange that contributed to the revolutionary movements of the 1960s through the early 1980s. This thesis examines the works and political challenges of Black women by asking what elements in their artistry/activism addressed issues specifically related to Black women’s unique position in America during the Black Revolution and feminist movements? Both primary and secondary sources such as literature from advocates of the Black Arts Movements and the lyrics, poetry, and visual art of the four Black women artists were used to gain perspectives to answer the thesis major questions. The creative visions and activism of these Black women expressed the dire need for the issues of Black women to be heard and also to address all forms of oppression that Black women experience with race, gender, social or economic status, and even cultural identity. The works of these Black women were radical and were also cultural reflections of Black women embracing their idiosyncratic position as Black women despite the climate of perpetual deceptions used either by White Western ideologies or Black male chauvinism. This thesis concluded that when the concerns of Black women are attended to by their own strengths of character and merits, they are also able in return to contribute to their own self-empowerment as well as to the development of racial, gender, and community uplift.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about the creative expression of four Black women and the political implications of their work. These four women—Nina Simone, Nikki Giovanni, Elizabeth Catlett and Ntozake Shange—were prominent artists during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s through the early 1980s. They were also activists during the revolutionary years of the black freedom struggles. Art and politics came together in these women’s lives in unique ways to produce music, visual art, performance art, and poetry that reflected the political, social and economic status of Black people in America. This project highlights the significance and distinctive expressions of Black women who desired and struggled to find their own voice despite the difficulties and varied oppositions during the Black Revolution.

During the 1960s -1970s art and politics played a role in African Americans’ resistance to Jim Crow segregation and other forms of racial oppression in the United States. A paradigm shift occurred in the way African Americans perceived themselves, especially how they viewed themselves as American citizens. According to Hoyt W. Fuller the shift was “a rediscovery of heritage” and “a method to defeat the power of prolonged and calculated oppression” (Gayle 1971). For Fuller the artists of this era were at war with White American society and anticipated self-expression through a new shift that allowed them to identify themselves as Black artists with the use of the “Black Aesthetic, a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of Black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of the black experience” (Gayle 1971). They sought a way to combat their struggles by combining distinctive art forms and politics. This thesis recognizes four individual women of this time who used art as a medium to question and confront forms of social and gender subjugation.

More specifically, the purpose of this research is to illustrate how art and politics was and can be used to educate, motivate, and depict a visual and/or an auditory history of a group of people and their political efforts towards power and liberation. This research also identifies the contributions of these four women to three specific movements: the Black Arts, Black Power and the Black Feminist movements. Another purpose of this study is to acknowledge some of the challenges and their subsequent these four women overcame to express themselves through art and activism. Consequently, this contributes to the knowledge about Black women's genius in Black Studies and American History.

This research also contributes new knowledge on the Black Female Aesthetic, by first identifying four specific Black women activists who used forms of creative expression to explore methods of creating a female revolution and who acknowledged Black cultural identity to empower the rights of Black women. And second, this research provides knowledge on the works of these four women that are not commonly known to their current audiences or are not addressed in the history of the various Black movements. Many know Nina Simone as a singer but not many people are aware that her music was influential during the Black Arts Movement. One can look at the sculptures and lithographs of Elizabeth Catlett, but many do not know there is a reason why she depicts the images of poor Black women. For this project, the theoretical framework of the Black Female Aesthetic explores the different forms of these Black women's identities that were expressed visibly and invisibly in the cultural aspects, ideas and expressions of their creative works that in turn reflected the many voices and struggles of Black women during a revolutionary era.

Essentially, both art and politics were used to address the objectives and goals of these four women against forms of oppression. As there is no clear historical definition of the Black



Arts Movement, this introduction reviews the published studies that have addressed the broad vision and purposes of the movement. This project also discusses the connections to art and politics of the time.

Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal are the editors of *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968), which is a collection of essays, poetry, fiction, and drama that first depicted the artistic and political works of literary artists of the Black Arts Movement. This anthology provided a space for artists to confront their issues with Western politics, social views, and artistic values. The anthology represented a creative response to White oppression and also addressed how the artists used various art forms to advance their political agendas. In search of a Black culture, these artists such as Sun-Ra, Carole Freeman, and Sonia Sanchez also expressed the need for social and political change in America. In the essay, “The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artists” James T. Stewart’s said, “Art is change like music, poetry and writing are, when they are conceived” (Collins and Crawford 2006). These artists sought out change for their community through political and social means, and conveyed their messages through various art forms like music, poetry, and drama. Therefore one may ask: what is the purpose of the artist in relations to politics? Larry Neal emphasized that the artist and political activist are one. He also indicates that they are both shapers of a future reality and that, together, they work towards the liberation of black people (Jones and Neal 1968). Neal affirmed that the black artists and the political activists, together, shared an interest in the lives and well-being of Black people and as a result, they created new visions of the Black community.

In another book, entitled, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, James Smethurst examined the ideas and activities of Black artists during the movement’s existence and their importance to the Black community, and the relationship to the Black Arts

Movement and other movements such as Chicano/a or Asian movements. This study reviews the connection between the Black artists and intellectuals at a grassroots level and the different and significant regional variations of the movement. Smethurst also examined the establishment, techniques, cultural, and the differences between Black arts and White Western art. Smethurst described the traits of Black art as literate but simultaneously oral, functional, entertaining, and even as celebratory art forms. Haki Madhubuti argued, “Black art like African art is perishable,” this too is why it is functional. The work becomes perishable, but the style and spirit of the creation is maintained and is used and reused to produce new works. Madhubuti used the mechanics of a black poem as an example to explain that it serves more than one function, which is to be read and then become part of the giver and receiver. In other words, the poem must serve as a function “to move one’s emotions, become part of a dance, or simply make one act” (Smethurst 2005). In the case of the movement, Black art served the function of motivating men, women, and youth to join in the political struggles during the revolutionary era.

### **Major Research Questions**

In order to gain an understanding of the art and political activism of these four women, this thesis will answer the following questions:

1. What elements in the artistry of Nina Simone, Nikki Giovanni, Elizabeth Catlett, and Ntozake Shange addressed issues specifically related to Black women’s unique position in America during the 1960s-1980s?
2. How did the work of these four women reflect the interaction and intersection of cultural nationalism and Black feminism?
3. What impact did these four women have on the Black Arts Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Feminist movement?

By answering these questions this thesis will accentuate the importance of their mission as Black women artists. It will also identify the political activism in the artistry of these women. These

women used art to cultivate political change in the U.S during 1960s-70s. The music, the words, and the images of these women were forms of political activism with multi-dimensional components used to advocate positive and political information to the masses. It is unfortunate that Black women's voices did not reign as high as black male voice during the Black Arts Movement. Additionally, this project will examine feminist perspective of the cultural, political, and gender issues of Black women during the Black Arts Movement that were not recognized during that time period. Lastly, this project will recognize a historical significance that has brought to the present generation several key factors including that women and female youth can learn from these four women's methods of activism. As a result, new generations of women can contribute such artistic and unique gifts to continue this universal act of revolutionary change. These examples of Black women's artistry and activism will allow other women to embrace the beauty of their cultural identity and recognize the significance and unique potential of their womanhood.

## THE CRITICAL CONNECTION BETWEEN RACE, ART, AND POLITICS

*After I decided to be an artist, the first thing that I had to believe was that I, a black woman, could penetrate the art scene and that I could do so without sacrificing one iota of my blackness, or my femaleness, or my humanity.*

Faith Ringgold, 1985

### **Black Women's Art, Politics, and Racial Uplift**

In making this statement, Faith Ringgold, a visual artist, felt no need to be apologetic or fearful for taking her stance as a Black female artist. If anything, she desired to use her talent and her blackness, not as a deficiency, but a tool to be part of the art scene that did not recognize the works of Black women. According to Bonnie Claudia Harrison, author of the article *Diasporadas: Black Women and the Fine Art of Activism*, gender and racial struggles propelled Black women artists to express themselves artistically and politically in part to resist the gender and racial discrimination they experienced, but this art also provided these women with a channel to express their resistance (Harrison 2002). Regardless of the art form used to take a stand against oppression, the artistic tools of music, literature, dance, or photography can provide a way to reject social subjugation. In the case of Black women artists they took a stance against rape, murder, racial discrimination, and gender injustices. Harrison also believed that Black women through the expression of art were able to disrupt the notions of culture, race, gender, and any notions that demarcated their own lives (Harrison 2002).

*Diasporadas* also examined the artistic expression and political deportment of these women recognizing that they defied the conventional notions of U.S. leadership during the past two centuries (Harrison 2002). For example, Black men as such Paul Cuffee, Alexander

Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey have been acknowledged for their work in racial uplift, yet there is recorded history to indicate that women provided the same forms or different methods to empower Black people. Black women did provide leadership in the Black community and they also created the first signs of black consciousness in the symbolism of their artistry both on national and international levels (Harrison 2002). As mothers, wives, artists, activists, feminists, and supporters of their communities Black women contributed to a certain consciousness and yet their gifts went unnoticed. The words and the visual arts of women utilized both the methods of art and activism, creating dangerous binary mechanisms and new possibilities (Clarke 2005). Therefore the contributions of these Black women artists must be recognized and will be acknowledged in this project, which brings attention to their unique and inspiring efforts towards liberation.

### **Black Women's Political Art and Activism**

In the essay, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Alice Walker asked the question, "What did it mean for a Black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time?" (Walker 1994). The essay discusses the women who were mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers and at the same time they were musicians, quilters, gardeners, poets, and visual artists. These very women were also "saints" who were mislabeled and criticized based on their gender and race. Despite the cruelty these foremothers endured they were spiritual creators sharing their artistry with the world. Through their art they made liberating statements that inferred that Black women were more than the labels that marked them as inferior beings—they were Black women and gifted artists. Walker identified such forms of Black women's artistry through various time periods in American history, from slavery to the present time of her essay. Yes, these women

were enslaved but they created melodies to sing through the agony they experienced as enslaved women.

Although they were repressed through slavery, racism and/or gender oppression they found liberation through creative expression. Walker also acknowledged that another reason these women sought creative expression was to liberate themselves from the strains and burdens of the daily tyranny they faced by being categorized as the “mule of the world” (Walker 1994 44). Walker’s question illuminates the fact that these foremothers provided their art as a gift of legacy and their ability has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them (Walker 1994 48). Those who would grab these possibilities were the offspring or individuals inspired by the music, the paintings, and the poetry of these women artists.

As a result of our foremothers’ artistic efforts, Black women throughout U.S. history have used various art forms to express their political messages and activism using music, visual art, poetry, and even dance. For example, spirituals played an important role in the lives of enslaved people. During slavery, Black women and men “recorded the circumstances of their daily lives in song just as assuredly as if they had kept diaries or written biographies” (George 2006). These spirituals were a way to express the “sentiments of sadness” and also expressions of the joys of their limited freedoms.

### **The Art and Activism of Black Women: Historical Foundations**

During the enslavement of Africans in America between 1619-1865 several women were noted as influential artists. These women included Harriet Powers, quilter and storyteller, Frances E.W. Harper, poet, author, and abolitionist, and Harriet Jacobs, the author of the slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Harriet Powers’s quilts reflect a West African

influence. Through her “primitive” pictorial folk art, she provided depictions of the historical events of African iconographic traditions in America and also quilted images of biblical stories. Powers was unable to read or write but with the use of Negro spirituals and sermons she was able to depict a visual story of “Adam and Eve Naming the Animals.” This work was important because after hymnal spirituals, quilt-making was one of the first art forms during slavery that consisted of needle work and clothing that was highly considered the work of women. Quilt-making was essential to both her creativity and also her survival. By sewing these quilts Powers was able to make her artwork useful. The quilts kept her family warm during cold winter nights, therefore such creations were also functional. Like Powers, Harper artistic ability also provided her perspectives of Black life and the endeavors of her people in sewing and quilting.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, another foremother, also knew the techniques of sewing, yet Harper’s talent during this era and beyond the emancipation of those enslaved was recognized in the genres of writing and public lectures. Harper was an abolitionist who also spoke about women’s issues and is “perhaps the most prominent active and productive Black woman speaker of the 19 century” (Hubbard 2012). Harper’s lectures and writings represent a range of issues such as human rights and dignity, racial and social justice, racial uplift, and women’s rights. Harriet Jacobs writing in her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life a Slave Girl* (1861) brings attention to the historical “plight of black women and their strategies to resistance” (Guy-Sheftall 1995). Black women sought resistance towards beatings, sexual exploitation by White masters, family separation, horrible work conditions, and bearing children who would be slaves. Jacobs stated that “slavery is terrible for men; it is far more terrible for women” (Guy-Sheftall 1995 3).

The Reconstruction Period 1865-1877 was also a time in U.S. history when Black women

such as Edmonia Lewis provided political directions and activism through art. Lewis was one of the first visual artists that sculpted the images of Black people after emancipation in images such as *The Woman and Her Child (1865)* and *Forever Free (1867)* (Jerrilyn & Madeline Jacobs 2013). Lewis was an African and Native American woman who was also sympathetic to the struggle of women. She once stated, “ I have a strong sympathy for women who have struggled and suffered” (Patton 1998 97). This empathy she felt towards women is sensed in her realistic work of sculpture entitled *The Death of Cleopatra (1876)*. It is a depiction of the queen dead and yet powerful sitting on her royal throne; she chose to commit suicide to escape death at the hands of her enemies. Through Lewis’s depiction of Cleopatra, one can gain a visual image of the queens overpowering demise without being there to have seen the real event unfold. Evidently, Lewis’ sculptural depictions of women are the visual but historical portrayal of women’s political awareness, strengths, and liberation (Bernier 2008).

Many years after the emancipation of African Americans, the pressures and issues of racism and gender discrimination did not cease. In fact the Jim Crow era, from 1876-1965 was horrific and dehumanizing for Black people in the U.S. just as it was during slavery. Yet the art and political activism and messages of Black women continued to make contributions to racial uplift. There were many women that were influential during this time period. Anna Julia Cooper: was a writer, educator, and feminist who once said:

“The Colored Woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both” (Guy-Sheftall 2009 11).

Cooper’s intellectual contributions did not go unnoticed. In fact as the leading voice for women’s rights, her writings are referenced even today to relate to the historical struggles of black women



and their modern day issues in America. Authors such as Lousie Daniel Hutchinson's *Anna J. Cooper: A Voice From the South* (1982), Sharon Harley and, Rosalyn Terbog-Penn's *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (1997) and Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (2007) have written essays and published books using Cooper's writing to underscore both the suffering and triumphs of Black women. Through her writing, Cooper captured the distinctive social positionality of Black women during that era. Other Black women depicted this positionality through visual representation.

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller was a poet, sculptor, and painter who drew heavily on folk tales and Afrocentric themes to capture the images of Black people. Her sculptures *Mary Turner*, *Mother and Child*, *The Awakening of Ethiopia*, and even her series of diodramas, images or depictions that are used to tell stories, were used as representations of the black experience. Alice Dunbar Nelson too was a poet, like her husband Paul Laurence Dunbar, but she was also a journalist, and political activist whose talents contributed to the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance (1920-1930s) was a significant time period in African American literature and culture. Various qualities of African and African American culture were captured not only in writing but also identified in music, visual art, dance, and theater. A few names worth mentioning for this time period are Zora Neale Hurston, Lois Mailou Jones, and Billie Holiday. Hurston was a writer, folklorist, and an anthropologist during the Harlem Renaissance. A few of her famous works include, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Mules and Men*, and her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Hurston traveled mostly on the Eastern side of America going from the South to North and back. She also traveled in the Caribbean and from these locations she found inspiration to create art and ethnographies that expressed the everyday

experiences of Black people. While in search of the individual self, Hurston, also found the untold and tyrannous realities of the Black community and what she discovered is that there were common forms of oppression. One of those common forms of oppression she faced herself was in the social and political dynamics of being a lone Black woman in white supremacist environments (Plant 2007 73). Hurston made it her mission to define herself and create her own rules regardless of the constant and reinforced implications of racism, sexism, and criticism of her artistry. Although she faced many criticisms from both Black and White critics she opposed these critical forms of oppression and continued her political voice through the art of writing (Epstien 2004).

A different mission was set for the famous painter Lois Mailou Jones who was honored in the United States, Haiti, and France. When Jones lived in America her identity as a Black artist was hidden. At many of her exhibitions many people did not know that Lois Jones was black. Her work was displayed at museums but they would not purchase her artwork because of her Black identity. One can infer this resulted because she was a Black woman artist. She was urged to go down south to help her people. Jones' artistry depicted French landscapes, colorful and festive portrayals of Haitian culture, and expressed significance in African symbolism. As a Black female artist, Jones considered herself to be part of a movement "that celebrated cultural identity and change" (Potter 2009 361) not only for African Americans but also for the African Diaspora. As a creative visual artist she made many style transformations over the length of her career by "remaking herself, revising herself, and seeking new levels of perfection" (Potter 2009). Without a doubt, this transformation was very significant.

Another female artist of the Harlem Renaissance was Billie Holiday, a jazz songstress also known as "Lady Day". She is iconically depicted with a flower in her hair, singing in front

of a microphone. One of her famous songs released in 1939, titled “Strange Fruit”, addressed the horrific crime of lynching committed against Black men and women in America. This song highlighted the abuse and mistreatment of a country that bragged about the liberties of its citizens but at the same time permitted the murder of people on the basis of their skin color. Holiday, like Hurston and Jones inspired both men and women in a new movement that would transpired thirty years after the Harlem Renaissance.

Finally, during the Black freedom struggles of the Civil Rights Era, the Black Arts and the Black Power movements also held the presence of essential and instrumental Black women who fought against social and political forms of oppression, but found ways to deliver their political messages through their artistry. The bravery of Marian Anderson singing at the Lincoln Memorial in front of 75,000 in 1939 was a political act that led other women into other forms of artistic and political methods to fight for freedom. Women like Mavis Staples; a singer and activist, Audre Lorde; a poet, activist and feminist, Faith Ringgold; a visual artist, activist and feminist, Lorraine Hansberry; a playwright and activist; and Sonia Sanchez; a poet and activist all took part in the liberation of Black women. These women spoke out for human and civil rights and their words were echoed through the media in America and also on a global scale. Many women attended rallies and were involved in political activism that changed the lives of Black people in America. These movements during the 1950s-1970s were just as important as the previous years with all the names of the women mentioned in this introduction. These women were not only mothers; they were also sisters, wives, and community leaders. These women were gifted artists who chose to use their talents to express themselves.

## **Four Women: Simone Giovanni Catlett and Shange**

In order to explore the politics of Black women's creative expression, this thesis will focus on the art of four Black women whose works contributed to the Black Arts Movement. These women were not just artists but they held multiple positions as artists, therefore this project will examine the various factors and talents that made these women so vital to various and important movements during the 1960s and beyond.

The first artist that will be examined in this project is Nina Simone. Simone is known for her musical talents as a genius of jazz and she is also celebrated as *the priestess of soul*. In Simone's music career she addressed several topics such as love, self-reflection, and political awareness. As a pianist and vocalist she performed both on a national and international level. The significance of her political activism rests in her ability to recognize the mistreatment of her people. She voiced her concerns through her talent; letting no one determine the way she voiced her political concerns. Through the genres of music: gospel, blues, jazz, and folk Simone vocally advocated for the revolution. It was seen and felt in the way she performed her art. Simone was a teacher; she took her audience to class. She wanted them to pay attention to what she described in her lyrics. She wanted the crowd to feel the melodies that portrayed the experiences of her people.

The second artist is Nikki Giovanni. Giovanni as a poet defined and titled herself by stating during the Black Arts Movement, "I am a female black revolutionary poet" and her audience confirmed her stance when they too titled her as "a revolutionary poet". As a writer and poet during the time of the movement, she published poetry and children's books, wrote essays, and hosted TV shows and read her works at public venues. Giovanni addressed many topics such as family, individuality, love, womanhood, and politics. Giovanni political stance was viewed as

individualistic, confrontational, and at the same contradictory, yet these factors were vital to her growth as “a revolutionary poet”. As an independent voice in poetry, Giovanni chose by her own right to be and/or not to be in the movement but then she also questioned others on the importance of being part of a movement. It was because Giovanni emphasized the importance of the individual voice that her poetry was able speak to her audience as if she was engaging them into a poetic dialogue. Her works provoked the question: where do I fit in the revolutionary design for change.

The third artist to be studied here is Elizabeth Catlett. Her sculpture and lithograph depictions inspired Black women to reflect on the history of their foremothers’ struggle and also the difficulties of present Black women due to the historical implications of white supremacy. Catlett’s visual works were created in Mexico, but they reflected the lives of Black women of North and South America and even women in Africa. Catlett’s artistry produced images that gave women reasons to be proud and recognize their strength and willingness to overcome a multitude of injustices. Catlett’s art illustrates a culture of a people, but especially women who overcame many obstacles and triumphed through various historic conditions.

The fourth woman to be recognized in this project is Ntozake Shange. During the Black Arts Movement she was a poet, playwright and self-proclaimed feminist most known for her choreopoem, *for colored girls who considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*. This choreopoem is composed of music, poetry, and dance. These diverse genres were used to reflect feminine perspectives — they were the voices, emotions, and in depth circumstances of Black women’s identities and political struggles in the United States. Shange’s work advocated self-reflection and the principles of love and reinforcement of self-definition.

These particular women were selected for several reasons. First, these women reflected the

activist traditions of Black foremothers who racial uplift, empowerment, and sociopolitical changes for both Black women and the Black community in America. Another reason these specific women were selected for this project is because of the artistic methods used during the movement that illuminated the needs of women in the Black community. These women provided the visual, auditory, and kinetic expressions that identified the individual Black woman's voice that was often silenced by racism and gender discrimination. This research will look at these different genres and identify how each one specifically illustrated the political stance of these four women. These women uniquely expressed themselves in their own voices through different genres of art, which permitted them the ability to reach a wider audience and also provided them with the ability to address their sociopolitical concerns through their political forms of art. Ultimately, the works of these four women contributed to the Black Arts Movement and fifty years later these works continue to relate to the experiences of Black women today.

## **THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT – Historical Background**

During 1960s to 1970s in various cities in the U.S. such as Harlem, Brooklyn, Newark, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Oakland several artists and political activists advocated the revolutionary and inspiring expedients for Black survival through art and political consciousness in an organizational effort that later became known as the Black Arts Movement. Artists and activists that contributed to the Black Arts Movement had used art as means of communicating their issues, needs, forms of empowerment, and socio-political rights as citizens in America. These artists and activists included men and women like, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Larry Neal, Emory Douglas, Gwendolyn Brooks, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Toni Morrison. Each of these artists/activists provided their artistic messages through different channels and media like theater, performance of spoken-word, venues, or in novels, poems, and/or in visual displays like paintings or posters. These creative and political individuals expressed the need to change and find new forms to diminish the imposed overt/covert systematic forms of injustice endured by Black citizens of America.

The Black Arts Movement “as a cultural and political movement” was established in a time period of a continuous push for political consciousness and was also a cultural awareness effort to change the unmanageable living conditions of Black people in the ghettos of America. As individuals became conscious artists and activists of the movement, they examined their lives through a continuous scrutiny and were aware that Black people were involved in a constant struggle to end their oppression. James Stewart in the essay *Black Fire* (1968), evoked the notion of a new black cosmology, one that expanded on the notion of a Black nation and a fresh way of

“looking at the world” (Collins and Crawford, 2006). This perspective was definitely a different outlook from the previous publication during the 1920s *Fire* of the Harlem Renaissance. This new cosmology in fact censured “White models” and “White forms” whereas the Harlem Renaissance imitated few of the Western perspective to gain rights to publication or permission to perform on stages. Both Black men and women advocates of the Black Arts Movement denounced the White models and forms of negative stereotypes that enforced racial oppression afflicted on their identity, self-esteem, and individuality. The models they sought had to be consistent with a Black style, natural aesthetic styles, and moral and spiritual style (Collins and Crawford, 2006), these styles were used as tools to obtain new perspectives on creating change and profound acceptance of the Black identity. As a result of a new paradigm, Black people joined forces to attest their rights against White supremacy and to push the agenda of the Black liberation struggles throughout various local cities and on a national level. Black people combined efforts to express their political rights as well as their creative rights in the process to produce and promote community uplift and political access to improve Black neighborhoods. Artists and activists provided awareness of Black social conditions to portray and tell the stories of the historic struggles and triumphs of Black people in America through different means of visual, auditory, and kinetic art forms, yet they used the power of politics at lectures, marches and rallies to gain the attention and the recognition of their agenda at their social gatherings or through the media either on TV or even newspapers and magazines. Their objective was clear: they decried the White-models and proclaimed that their Black models were more than enough—these Black models were sufficient to provide the survival needs of Black people. Although the Black Arts Movement provided these forms of cultural knowledge and community uplift, this was not the first time in history that Black people gathered together as a force to tell their stories



against the suppressions of White dominate control. The next section will discuss the origins of the Black Arts Movement looking at its predecessor the Harlem Renaissance and also the influence of Civil Rights Movement.

### **The History – The Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement**

These two eras were the fundamental matters of change and identity, which were imperative to their social and political expressions for their time. The need for attention in sociopolitical and cultural issues in the arts for Black people in America was not a new phenomenon during the 1960s. In fact, the intensive spotlight on black arts began with its ancestral example the Harlem Renaissance. In a ten year span between the years of 1920s-1930s, the Harlem Renaissance too was inspired and also aspired to alter the conditions of African Americans in the United States. Carl D. Wintz, a renowned scholar of the Harlem Renaissance, affirmed that as a "self-conscious literary movement" the Harlem Renaissance affected African American culture and intellectual life from the end of World War I to the Great Depression of the 1930s (Wintz, 1996). Like the Black Arts Movement, the Harlem Renaissance affirmed the need to end the misconceptions of Black identity while they also aimed towards self-awareness and the right to self-expression. Therefore several of the characteristics of the Black Arts Movement were rooted in the history of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance accentuated Black lives in the transformation of literature, critical writing, music, theater, and the visual arts of various artists (Wintz, 2007), and so did the Black Arts Movement. The Harlem Renaissance was a “period of artistic explosion” and the art was their vehicle of expression to bring attention to the cultural realities of Black people in America in several popular unsegregated venues or locations in Harlem and Chicago (Ogbar, 2010).

During a time of new advancements and signs of modernity, James Weldon Johnson had predicted Harlem to be the headquarters of what became the intellectual and cultural center for Negroes in the United States. The ventures of the Harlem Renaissance had brought awareness to Black people particularly of the middle class, and had given them the opportunity to express their talents and culture to White and mixed audiences in various places such as museums, playhouses, and concert halls (Ogbar 2010). This form of exposure where Black people performed to racially mixed audiences was one of the major differences between the two eras of artistic expression. The Black Arts Movement was calling out to and demanded the attention of Black audiences only because it was Black audiences and communities that needed to be empowered by the artistic reflections that depicted their struggles and the strength of the Black aesthetic.

Before the Harlem Renaissance officially began various issues dealing with race and political justice made it possible for the movement to take center stage in the city of Harlem. These problems were based on factors such as equality, pride within a race, and recognition for Blacks in the United States (Rodgers, 1998). After WWI Black men as well as Black families dealt with racial injustices, such as the horrific forms of lynching and then the agricultural failures in the South. In 1919, race riots erupted in 25 cities, indicating the need for social change. In the process of searching for new developments through a movement, Black people had the choices between Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" and Black Nationalism, or the philosophy of W.E.B. Du Bois' efforts for social justice and higher education as means to equality. These varied but tangible options were given to Black populations as measures to find new approaches to survive against the oppressive and intolerable conditions inflicted by White American ideals. In this time period the Great Migration too played a role in the contributions of

various participants from the South joining in what became the Mecca for the Arts in Harlem, New York (Rodgers, 1998).

Because of these transitional moves to a northern city, and the visible depressive issues of racial and social-political oppression in America, these artists of Harlem's "Mecca" were labeled at the time as the "New Negroes," but the endless judgment and criticisms they faced were just as negative as the treatment of regular Negroes in any city in the nation. This category title was used to mark the virtuous artistic talents of several artists of the Black population, but it did not remove the pain or oppression these artists suffered as the "New Negroes" of Harlem, NY. These artists had excelled in theatrical and musical performances. They also produced fine literary works in poetry and novel writing that were greatly supported by White financiers and publishers. Yet these artists received negative criticisms from both Black and White people. Regardless of their supporters, these artists had found a means of sharing their talents with their fans that included both White and Black audiences in jazz clubs like the famous *Cotton Club*, or the varied publication of political articles, short stories, and photos in *The Crisis*. To emphasize the need to share their artistry with others regardless of their interests or revulsion of the time period, the famous poet Langston Hughes once said:

"We Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark skinned selves without fear or shame. If White people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful and ugly too. If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

(The Nation, 1926)

In making this statement Hughes confirmed the need of the artists to create his/her art in spite of the criticisms the artists faced from both the White and Black critics. Within the ten-year span both men and women shared their talents with the world at the same time expressing themselves

through art and letting the world know about the conditions of Black people in America. As stated in the introduction, few of these women, Hurston, Dunbar, and Jones during the era were artists and activists and they addressed issues of the conditions of the Black community. They also shared their inspirations to create art for their people to see themselves and understand these conditions that Black people historically endured in the hardships and the repercussions of slavery.

The unique opportunities the artists and activists gained during the time were essentially important in producing African American literature and cultural distinctions during the twentieth century. These forms of art and activism did set them apart from their White counterparts of entertainment or literary works. The literary works of White artists: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Virginia's Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, in comparison to Black literary artists such as: James Walden Johnson, poet, *God's Trombones*, Angelina Weld Grimke, author of the drama, *Rachel Nella Larsen's Quicksand* which were distinguishable forms and realities expressed in literature.

The artistry and examples expressed in the works of these Black artists were closely related to addressing the issues and reality of African Americans verses the works of White artists who completely ignored the existence and the historic and present influential contributions of Black people in America. Eventually, the products and publications of the movement did decline and was brought on by various factors such as the Great Depression, artists relocating and moving to other states, or the lack of funding or interests to support unknown artists. These factors played a role in the degeneration of the artistic contributions of the Harlem Renaissance but the legacy and spirit eventually did find its way thirty years later in what was considered during the 1960s-1970s the "new Harlem Renaissance", known officially as the Black Arts

Movement.

### **The Civil Rights Era**

A generation before the Black Arts Movement, the Civil Rights Era during the 1950s-1960s was also opening new doors in a social political struggle to fight against discrimination and segregation. The movement included many non-violent boycotts, protests, and marches, which aided in the results of American judicial changes in government decisions and legislations for African Americans but also for the overall diverse citizens of America. This section examines the influences of the Civil Right Era on America and the Black Arts Movement. It also discusses the reasons why advocates of Black Arts and Power proposed racial separation.

The Civil Rights Movement was an era that dealt with multiple issues of racial discrimination, poverty, civil rights, human rights, and opposition to war. Unmistakably, it was these same issues that led to the development of the Black Arts Movement. To combat these issues the Civil Rights Movement was an era of demonstrations, massive protests, political struggle, and varying forms of social actions (Conyers, 2007). During this struggle, Black people desired to have the same rights as White citizens in America. The movement was a push for integration and equality by various groups and leaders— that included both men and women. The movement was led by both prominent and grassroots leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer and their efforts were organized with groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). These leaders and groups spoke on the behalf of the organization and the people who faced not only discrimination but also various forms of social and political oppression. As a result of the intense boycotts, marches,

rallies, the sit-ins, and the protests of the era, a number of anti-discrimination laws were passed.

Consequentially, the various movements of the Civil Rights era brought attention to the mistreatment of Africans Americans through the constant and disheartening social injustices of Jim Crow segregation. The objectives of the organizations were in the nonviolent paths of endorsing integration in public places such as schools, restaurants, museums, and theaters. Another goal for the era was for Africans Americans to receive the opportunity to vote as citizens of U.S. The 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* court case decision and the 1965 *Voting Rights Act*, were two pivotal factors that were used to change de jure segregation and laws preventing Black citizens from voting in the United States. Even with these legislations in place, the hostility and unfair circumstances for African Americans did not come to a immediate halt. In the years of 1964 to 1968 many riots and rebellions took place in various cities like Harlem, Brooklyn, Chicago, Newark, and in Tampa. As a result of these revolts in urban cities, President Lyndon B. Johnson issued Executive Order 11365 that established a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. This advisory's role was to investigate the "racial disorders" (Collins and Crawford, 2006). The 425-page Kerner Report was to answer what happened and why did these riots occur? If America had new legislations of social order why were there so many riots that arose across the nation? What were the conditions that caused such anger and urban manifestations? By 1968 Kerner Commission Report concluded that the current course of America at that time was: "Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one Black, one White—separate and unequal (Collins and Crawford, 2006)." It was determined that the issues of poverty, prejudice, segregation, discrimination, and feelings of powerlessness propelled the causes in these afflicted civil disorders (Collins and Crawford 2006 2). Although it is not stated directly, it is clear to state that "the solution was to eliminate the barriers to decent jobs, quality

education, and affordable housing” specifically for African Americans, especially, due to the reasons that they were highly deprived of these very same liberties as poor White citizens. The goal for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders was to create “one union—a single society and a single American identity” (Collins and Crawford 2006 3). Unfortunately, this utopian goal did not take place.

Different factors played a part in the inability of the two nations, one Black, the other White, to join forces during this time in America. First, in 1965 the prominent leadership of Malcolm X, before his assassination, had advocated for Black Cultural Nationalism. Second, in the summer of 1966 the call for “Black Power” by Stokely Carmichael had already reigned highly in the minds and hearts of many African Americans. With these two objectives—Cultural nationalism and Black Power, the Black Arts and Black Power Movement took hold of African Americans that advocated on the struggle for Black revolutionary change. The choice not to link their cultural goals and objectives with the White society at the time was a considerate and thoughtful decision for the African Americans. Desegregation was key for some, but not all Black people wanted to join forces with the race that had placed the Black people under tyrannical, exploitative, and horrific conditions. Black people did not favor such injustices on their existence, yet it is this very struggle that led them to understand the power and strength of overcoming the shame and abuse of a country that limited the liberties of its darker pigment citizens. The section below identifies the complexities of two movements that erected a new paradigm in the Black Revolution of the 1960s-1970s.

## **The Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement**

The relationship between the Black Arts and Black Power Movement was a bond associated by art and cultural politics; together these organizations had influenced the perspectives and methods of Black people towards forms of artistic and political liberation. The Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement gradually merged forces after the call of Malcolm X's speech on cultural nationalism and the chants of Stokely Carmichael's initiation of "Black Power". Both of these movements were supported in the middle class and the low-income Black communities of America. This unification of these two groups was essential to the revolution because together they could conceptualize the ideals, purpose, and goals of the revolution on their own terms. Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), also known as the father of the Black Arts Movement, "became the foremost among the leaders who linked the fate of the black freedom movement to the political momentum generated by the African American urban uprisings of the 1960s" (Woodard, 1999). Because Baraka witnessed both speech of Malcolm X and Carmichael respectively, he led a merger for the concepts of Black self-determination, cultural identity, and the power for a new generation of both Black Arts and Power in organizations and different forms of leadership. Baraka's first role in leadership was in 1967 when he founded the United Brothers—an organization for men and women, that struggled for power in the cities of America, especially, where African Americans had grown over half the population (Woodard, 1999).

Unfortunately for many African American youth, the death of two of their prominent leaders was the final straw leading to the youth to re-evaluate in their methods to fight against the mistreatment and subjugation. After the numerous urban revolts and the death of Martin Luther King Jr in 1968, these tragic events were the very "ethnic conflicts that shaped Black



consciousness and spread the demand for African American self-determination” (Woodard, 1999). The assassinations of both Malcolm X and King was a wake up call for African Americans to organize efforts together to combat their struggles as a group facing the oppressions of racial discrimination and cruel injustices. These men used different strategies; King who represented non-violent protests and Malcolm X who understood the purpose of self-defense through militant means, but both of these men wanted peace, love and the opportunity to provide for their family and communities, and were abruptly removed from the presence of their pupils, colleagues, and family that loved them. Although these men were murdered in the process of desiring and creating change, after losing their leaders, the struggle for Black people had changed its face once again and the battle was undeniably far from being over. Their conscious methods of rebellion were not about revenge. These men and women chose to achieve pride in Black cultural identity and then enforced militant defense as their strategies to survive against the racial storms of oppression pushed by the affliction of White supremacy.

From a militant but political and artistic stance, its sister movement, the Black Arts Movement would know the Black Power Movement as the brother movement—a political and cultural family was born. Art, politics, and militant forces were the very means of the revolution which were used in other movements as well. There were two groups with the same objective, on two different sides of a coin bringing about Black consciousness and empowerment to create change in urban cities. This prospective union between Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement was distinctively different from the previous movements of the 1920s to the early 1960s.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Harlem Renaissance were two movements that dealt with the assimilation of Black people in public places interacting with mix audiences on the

terms and conditions that White people permitted African Americans to behave in the establishment owned by Whites. During *de jure* and *de facto segregation* in the 1950s, Black people continued to face forms of White oppression. How was the African American artist able to perform or create in his/her own likeness, if the time and place he/she was permitted to express oneself was controlled by a domineering factor outside of his/herself? Clearly, advocates of the Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement may have tried to work and enjoy their lives under such conditions but they continually found themselves broken under the same realities of the previous years of gender, racial, cultural, and social political forms of oppression. Despite these forms of discrimination African Americans faced these challenges and entrusted in each other to find solutions to these many aggressive and life-altering circumstances. Consequently, it was through the creative expressions of their art and activism they permitted them to fight against these injustices.

### *Conflicts that Challenged the Movements: Racial Discrimination, Cultural & Gender Issues*

The types of discrimination African American artists and activists faced during the revolutionary area were comprised of various forms of inequities, limitations, and complications. The black revolution sought out solutions to the problems of sociopolitical issues in relations to race, gender, economical, and cultural ideologies. The Black Arts Movement is briefly discussed below to illustrate the emergence of the Black Aesthetic paradigm, a tool to combat white racism.

#### **Racial Discrimination**

Since the time of US slavery, the Africans and their descendants faced, in addition to racial discrimination, the denigration of their African physical features and culture. As a result, Black people sought out various solutions to end these injustices and resulting .feeling of inadequacy in

self-identity. Even after the emancipation of slaves, such forms of racial injustice were found in the areas of Jim Crow, segregation, and institutional racism and were also found in the structures of internalized colonialism. Each form of racial discrimination had its own level of intensity and was dependent on the geographic location, time of day, and laws of each state, and the people of the community within a city. Stokely Carmichael, author of the book, *Black Power*, recognized the dilemma of Black people: “From the time Black people were introduced into this country, their condition has fostered human indignity and the denial of respect. Born into this society today, Black people begin to doubt themselves, their worth as human beings” (Carmichael, 1967 29). Carmichael’s statement identified the consequences of the tragic occurrences of racial discrimination experienced by Black people in America and through these different phases of intolerable acts either, by bullet, lynching, separate use of facilities based on color, and even limitations on voting policies, African Americans fought against the inhumaneness forced upon them. Black people that sought change used both methods of violence and nonviolence as a solution and had even used forms assimilation into the White society distinctively through each era since they arrived to America. Unfortunately, these tyrannous restraints from White America did not cease; in fact during the 1950s-1970s new forms of harassment were being reconstructed into the black ghettos of both northern and southern cities. As a result, Black Americans were distraught from these new conditions and treatment and yet they were optimistic for a change, hence the reason why Black Power came to rise. The oppressed people desired change, no longer looking to the ones who oppressed them for solutions, they turned to Black people to search for acceptance, and they yearned for those who understood and valued their need to survive—many Black Americans decided to confide in each other to solve the racial problems and gain access to noble victories. Various Black grassroots leaders during the black revolution

were credited with ideas such as Black community development. Works of Aimé Césaire, Marcus Garvey on the ideals of Black Nationalism, and WEB Du Bois and Kwame Nkrumah on Pan-Africanism and Black Internationalism influenced the Black Arts Movement. Before his death, Malcolm X, as a philosopher of Black Nationalism, appealed for African Americans to develop self-knowledge, self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense for Black people by Black people. Malcolm X once stated in a speech, “The political philosophy of Black Nationalism means: we must control the politics and politicians of our community” (Simeon-Jones, 2010). This was the very objective Amiri Baraka desired for growth of the Black Arts Movement. By considering the plea of Malcolm X, Baraka as a leader of the movement had thrived to push the organization through cultural and political means. It is significant to understand that as the black community struggled to end racial discrimination, its objective was to empower and elevate Black Americans through cultural awareness; their purpose was to eliminate the structure that hindered their ability to be functional human beings in the American society. Upon this awareness of possible political liberation, Black Arts and the Black Power movements received White backlash with accusations of “racism in reverse or Black supremacy” which were professed by misguided observers (Carmichael, 1967 47). It was not the goal of the Black advocates to be racist against White Americans, in fact, one of their main objectives was the “call for Black people to consolidate behind their own, so they can bargain from a position of strength” (Carmichael, 1967 47). According to Carmichael “Black Power” is not racism in reverse, it “is full participation in the decision-making processes affecting the lives of black people and recognition of the virtues in themselves as Black people” (Carmichael, 1967 47) and this was inevitably addressed by the Black Arts Movement to elevate the expressions of Black culture and the political empowerment of the community.

In the book, *African Roots/American Cultures* Sheila S. Walker, examines the various scholarly perspectives of Africa's influences on Western society and other global societies, languages, and customs through what has come to be known as the African Diaspora (Walker, 2001). Walker recognized the arguments between scholars and cultural leaders of the 1960s-1970s were based on the culture of U.S. African Americans that reflected its African heritage, which was similar to other African descendants in the Americas (Walker 2001). Understanding the traces of the African approach in the Black culture of America was essential in establishing relations dealing with the customs, beliefs and lifestyle of the Black community.

### **Cultural Issues**

Although the Black Arts Movement's aim was to accommodate the needs of Black people in America, and also on a global scale to aid the people of the African Diaspora, the group faced several challenges agreeing on the concepts for both the cultural and political solutions to end the constant sociopolitical inequalities in the U.S. and abroad. One of the problems they faced was the influence of African culture on Westernized concepts of art and politics. The Black Aesthetic was a reflection of the African approach to creative expression. If the Black community was to see itself in a positive light, it was evident that Black Aesthetic paradigm would assist in forming a Black identity. Yet, one must question the authenticity of a Black identity in America. How much of the Black identity was pure African and was it impossible not to have some bits of Western deposits in the process of creating this Black identity? This is what made the ideologies of Cultural Nationalism and the Black Aesthetic fundamental to the black revolution; it was up to the community to decide what was permissible for the group. With Black unity as a goal for cultural nationalism, leaders had to determine which African perspective against the process of western politics could empower the community to

obtain solidarity. Walker examines the African American anthropologist St. Clair Drake use of the term “vindicationist perspective” and suggests that this term can be viewed as part of the mission of Black intellectuals. It involved correcting stereotypes, setting the record straight, and substituting a more accurate picture of reality” (Walker, 2001) of the Black experience. This “vindicationist perspective” could be applied to the 1960s-1970s inclusion of Africa’s influence on the black conscious movements. This time period was a high point of African American resistance, self-redefinition, and affirmation that radically modified U.S. society (Walker, 2001), and these factors were brought on by the need to identify with the African identity and history.

As a group of people in a movement leaning towards cultural nationalism, the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement were aiming towards solidarity, but unity among these two groups and even within the individual groups was not an easy task. In fact, Woodard acknowledged that “the politics of cultural nationalism was born in a period of extreme racial conflicts, struggles that penetrated into the urban political arena and also expressed that one of the basic functions of social conflict is group identity formation and solidarity” (Woodard 1999). Was there complete solidarity during the revolutionary era, if so why did the rise of gender issues displace the process of unity within the Black Arts and the Black Power Movements? The next section examines the roles of women and the displacement, and forms of discrimination they endured during the era.

### **Gender issues**

The leaders at the forefront of the Black Arts Movement were males, and although the group was the Black Power Movement’s “spiritual sister” the male dominated movement was not feminine in its arrangement. The males whose voices reigned high and were heard among the masses were Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Addison Gayle, Jr., and Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti).

These men used art, music, and poetry to their advantage to develop the Black Power Movement's militant message. With the usage of the phallic symbol: "the pen, the gun, the penis, and the microphone (Collins and Crawford, 2006)"; these men were able to pronounce their masculine existence in various art forms to define and substantiate the supposed revolutionary Black male identity. For example, *Black Fire: An Anthology of African-American Writing (1968)*, was one of the first anthologies that presented the Black Aesthetic and had expressed this male domination to a great extent. Edited by two male poet-critics, Larry Neal and Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), the voice of women in poetry were heavily overshadowed by Black manhood in this literature source. The voices of women during that time span were recorded but not revered in the same manner as the voices of Black men. In the year 2006, "After Mecca", by Cheryl Clarke, a scholarly work investigated the role of Black women poets/writers within the ten-year period of 1968-1978. So where did this leave the poetic literary power in the Black women's art and political voice? Two women who vocalized their perspectives on the life of women and men in poetry were Sonia Sanchez's *Homecoming (1969)* and Nikki Giovanni's *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment (1970)*. These two women were also among other women who voiced their concerns on womanhood, in *The Black Woman (1970)*, by Toni Cade Bambara. In this anthology readers gain the female perspectives of the difficulties and triumphs of women dealing with womanhood, motherhood, individuality and liberation in poems, prose and essays. During this time on the roles, beliefs, and the femininity of Black women were questioned and answered by everyone but the Black woman.

What did it really mean to be a Black and woman during all these concerns of racial injustice and oppression, where did the Black woman seek her help? Who was listening to her concerns? According to Bambara, neither the Black male nor the White male psychologists,

psychiatrists, and researchers, nor did White women did not understand the struggles of Black woman (Bambara 1970) . In 1965, “the Moynihan report”, a 78-page document was released and used to explain the conditions of Negro families in the black ghetto communities in urban cities. The problem of the Negro community according to this report was determined at the fault of broken families, illegitimacy, matriarchy, economics, dependency, delinquency, and crime as evidence of the Negro family pathology (Geismar and Gerhart, 1968). This report clearly did not fully recognize the problem for the Black community because it placed the matriarch as one of the major problems to the development of the Black family. This was the error and misunderstandings of the White male perspective and yet the feminist literature of Anais Nin, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, and etc. did not voice the concerns or express the life experience of the Black women either. Who during this time was listening to the concerns of black women? Hence the reason Giovanni, Sanchez, Cade, and other women such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Nina Simone, Elizabeth Catelett, and Ntozake Shange felt the need to detail the life experiences of Black women through literature music, dance, sculpture, and in creative expression and in their activism. The real problems and concerns of the Black woman was heard from her, the black feminist/womanist perspective and not by the inappropriate or miscalculated concepts of both Black and White men or White women.

The artistry and activism that developed during the Black Arts Movement was a result of different sociopolitical issues dealing with race, culture, economic and gender issues. Although the movement developed through hardships, brutality, abuse and forms of neglect, the reaction to the oppression was fundamental to the growth, creative expression and political voice of not only Black men but also Black women. Art and politics were used as tools to explain the Black



experience in America during the 1960s-1970s. The Black Arts Movement was not an advocate of Black racial discrimination, western idolization, nor was it completely masculine. Through an array of the genres including, music, dance, poetry, spoken-word, literature, theater, painting and sculpture, Black men and women were able to express to America their concerns, demands, and as well as their rights to live as citizens and chose to do so “by any means necessary”, not just on the militant force of metal weaponry. The choice of weapons was in a sense limitless, and with the Black Aesthetic as the paradigm the African culture sprang forth in ways that America had yet to experience it before. The Black Arts Movement and its creative voice and political stance was a wake-up call to America; Black people wanted to be heard one way or another by propaganda, or by force, and the role of the movement was to enforce its will against those who sought its inferiority. In the following chapters, this thesis will examine the importance of determination and liberation through the concept of the revolution in the artistry of Nina Simone and Nikki Giovanni and then will also examine forms of cultural identity in the creative works of Elizabeth Catlett and Ntozake Shange.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### **Revolution and Cultural Identity**

In order to understand the creative expression and activism of the four women artists, this thesis uses four major concepts: *revolution*, *cultural identity*, *Black Aesthetic*, and *Black Female Aesthetic*. The terms *revolution* and *cultural identity* relate to the goals and mission of the Black experience in America during the 1960s-1970s. The “Black” revolution courageously exposed destructive forms of social and political oppression imposed by White Supremacy. This revolution was grounded in Cultural Nationalism. In *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power (2004)*, the “Black” revolution is defined by Christine Acham as “a period of much turmoil and political protest” (Acham 2004). What brought on the revolution was the need and desire for Black people to take more control over their lives. The slogan “*Black Power*” was more than a motto or chant, it was an urgency for Blacks to define themselves, to also define their goals and to support and lead their own organizations, while rejecting racist institutions and values of American society (Douglas 2008). Activists at one of the 1968 Black Power conferences stated, “Black control is Black nationalism: control and chosen by Blacks for the benefit of Blacks” (Austin, 2006 84). According to Dean E Robinson “Black Power became synonymous with black nationalism” (Robinson, 2001 73), and was used by various representatives to express a variety of meanings to different social objectives. Two scholars James Turner and Alphonso Pinkney suggested that Black Nationalism reflected the “desire of Afro-Americans to decide their own destiny through control of their own political organizations and the formation and preservation of their cultural, economic, and social institutions” (Robinson

2001 72). Pinkney concurred with Turner that all Black nationalist groups promoted black solidarity, pride in cultural heritage, and self-determination” (Robinson 2001). As a group, Black people during the revolutionary era represented a culture that was distinguished from White Americans. For scholars of nationalism in general, “cultural nationalism” “ refers to the assertion, celebration and rejuvenation of cultural difference in intellectual and artistic movements” (Austin 2006 76). On the other hand for the leaders and advocates of “the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, the idea of escaping mainstream culture was fundamental” (Robinson 2001), and it brought “a tremendous proliferation of black art – poetry, plays, fiction – writers and artists, organized cultural workshops which taught writing, photography and graphic arts in every major city in the United States” (Robinson, 2001 84). These genres of art were cultural forms that represented “Black” cultural identity in America, which aided the progression of the Black Revolution. During this revolutionary era, the terms Black Revolution, Black Power, Black Nationalism, Black Cultural Nationalism and cultural identity were all interwoven in the struggles for black liberation. The advocates and participants of Black Arts and Black Power movements specifically made the conscious decision to use black revolutionary tactics and to honor their black cultural identity to identify their strengths, power and will towards self-determination. These terms are relevant to this thesis because the art and activism of Simone, Giovanni, Catlett, and Shange, focuses profoundly on the concepts of the *black revolution* and *cultural identity*. Their creative works and messages of the four women were also expressed contrarily from the paradigm of the Black (male) Aesthetic. In fact these women significantly and rebelliously chose to voice the concerns and accomplishments of the Black woman through a Black Female Aesthetic.

## **The Black Aesthetic**

In the beginning Black art during the 1960s-1970s was developed through the concepts of the Black Aesthetic. Later the Black Female Aesthetic evolved in both the arts and politics. The term *Black Aesthetic* was a framework that analyzed Black art and is descriptive of a paradigm shift, which challenged the normative White artistic model and also altered the perceptions of the functional intersection of art and politics. Several scholars examine the Black Aesthetic and its role in the Black Arts Movement. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford's *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, is a collection of articles that addressed new perspectives of the history, the significance, and the influences of the Black Arts Movement during the 1960s to the present generations of the current century. James Smethurst, Alondra Nelson, Lorrie Smith, and other writers wrote on the history and contributions of the Black Arts Movement. These new perspectives provided the understanding of how and where the Black Arts Movement traveled within the United States and those who were affected by its existence in the Black community. The topics discussed in the study range from black unity, feminism to hip-hop and are reflective of the role the movement played concerning the Black experience. Melvin Dixon a supporter of the movement argued, "*Black Art by definition, exists primarily for black people. It is an art which combines the social and political pulse of the black community into an artistic reflection of that emotion, that spirit, that energy*" (Collins and Crawford 2006 189) and it was the emotion, spirit, and energy—three vital sources used to motivate Black people to engage in social and political change. Crawford described the Black Aesthetic of this period as a bold re-visioning of life itself and as a work of art dedicated to the advancement of Black people. Blackness had emerged as a veritable liberation theology; in order to be free, one had to love their blackness (Collins and Crawford 2006). Crawford's perspective provides an essential

purpose of the Black Aesthetic for Black people. According to Hoyt Fuller the Black Aesthetic permits the Black individual to rediscover their heritage and their history with focused eyes (Gayle 1971). Through the use of art the Black Aesthetic framework for Black art unlocks the history and acknowledges the present or prophecy for Black people. These visual and auditory expressions were significant to the black experience, because they were a gateway towards self-awareness-- a unique Black culture and also a means of political liberation.

The Black Aesthetic is described as a system that isolates and evaluates the artistic works of Black people that reflects the special character and imperatives of the black experience (Gayle 1971). It is through the creative descriptions and details of the black experience that Black people can share their goals and purpose to change the conditions of their lives through radical and political art. Authors Linda Dittmar and Joseph Entin argued that art aims to liberate the imagination and alter the way we see the world and how we think about art, but for political artists and their audiences, the need is also to bring people together in thought and action that go beyond individualized experience (Dittmar and Entin 2010 8). The experience of the arts and politics were communal, hence, art was shared in the Black community for the use of social and political empowerment. In the essay *Diasporadas*, Hazel V. Carby, feminist-scholar of the African Diaspora, wrote that the politics of representation for Black artists was twofold, “as it is formally understood in relation to art and creative practices, and as it applies to intellectuals who understand themselves to be responsible for the representation of ‘the race’” (Carby 1987, 1984 165). What was the motive of the Black Aesthetic and how did it function for the Black Americans?

Larry Neal's *Visions of a Liberated Future* (1989) states:

*The motive behind the black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world...  
The question the black aesthetic ask is whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors? What is truth? Whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors? (Neal 1989 4)*

By asking these questions Neal brought the purpose of art and politics to the attention and the necessities of the Black community to the paradigm shift that transpired during the era. Together art and politics are important factors to an individual or to various groups because together they can provide a means of creative expression to address political issues and aid towards political liberation. During the Black Arts Movement the voices of Black men like Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Haki Madhubuti were highly visible in the movement's purpose and objectives, but this was not the case for Black women who were very much part of the movement and also used different art genres such as music, painting, and poetry to address their concerns about social and political issues such as racism and sexism.

The contributions of Black women artists added to the framework of the Black feminist aesthetic, a system that outlines the significance of both Black feminist theory and the productions of Black female art and activism. According to Anderson in *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (2008), the "black aesthetic attempted to remove the gender forms of a codified blackness or black experience," while "feminist theory and aesthetics imagined a female identity uncomplicated by race or class" (Anderson 2008 2) yet these two frames marked the invisibility of Black women in both art and politics, hence the reason it became necessary for the Black feminist theory to formulate the Black feminist aesthetic. The development of Black feministic theory began with the writings and works of women like Anna J. Cooper, Alice Dunbar, and/or Alice Walker. These women provided the Black feminist perspective in writings

and in political concerns for Black women before and during the 1960s, therefore their contributions laid the foundation for Black feminist aesthetics to develop in other forms of arts and politics.

### **The Black Female Aesthetic**

Through the ideals of Larry Neal's Black Aesthetic and Haki Madhubuti concepts of functional art, the Black Arts Movement along with the Black Power Movement pushed the momentum for the Black revolution and Black cultural identity. Unfortunately, the male-dominated voices of the movement either neglected or purposely chose not to understand the significance of the feminist perspective in the arts of the *black female aesthetic*. The creative and political expression of the individual Black woman was just as important to the struggle against the various sociopolitical issues that Black men or youth endured in America. Black Consciousness argued that the Black man had become a shell, a shadow of a man—and attempted to make him and through him, the entire Black community—a man once more (Magaziner 2011). Although there were different groups within the Black Arts / Black Power Movements that were based on gender, age, sexuality, shade of darkness, and genre of practice in the arts, there was still an awareness of the common oppression of gender and other social factors for Black women. Obviously, it was not fair to uphold the liberations of one part of the group above the political and social liberties of the other. This is what the demand of the black female aesthetic had called out against—the characterization of male chauvinism, patriarchal, and heterosexual perspectives of Black men. Why should the Black woman cater solely to the needs of a man and a child and neglect her own needs? The relationship and contributions of Black women in the Black Arts / Black Power Movements is almost a silent and also an invisible

factor. The Black woman was just as present to the movement and she had plenty to contribute to the movement just as much as men who voiced their political views and creative forms of art, yet her voice was either diminished purposely or simply ignored. Black women disagreed with the notions of cultural concepts produced by Black men and White America, these Black women also disagreed with the ill-treatment or the negligence of the roles that Black women were portrayed to have in the home, the Black community, or within the artistic and political agendas of Black Arts / Black Power Movements. Black women desired to have a voice for themselves and many used the black female aesthetic to voice their concerns in music, literature, or in visual arts.

During the second-wave of the White, middle-class feminist movement, the female creative perspective remained solely on White aesthetics. Black women's creative needs were overlooked, hence the strong desire for the black female aesthetic not only in drama, but it was also in poetry, literature and other forms of visual arts like painting or sculpture. The roots of the black female aesthetic are found in the activist publications of 19th century black feminists. Women like Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett were all contributors to the theories of black feminism and their contributions to the Black female perspective which were explored in the anthology of Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. It was during this critical time in history that the intersection of the subjects of race and sex were related to the conditions of Black women in America. Anna Julia Cooper discussed the unique position of the Black woman in America that was confronted by both a woman question and a race problem and was an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both (Guy-Sheftall 1995). During the Harlem Renaissance woman like Angelina Weld Grimké, Elise Johnson McDougald, Alice Dunbar Nelson, and Amy Garvey



would continue to discuss oppression based on race and gender (Anderson 2008). Through the use of literature—whether in drama, poetry, or fiction, these women were able to express opinions about critical issues such as womanhood, birth control, voting rights, and education. All these women who were mentioned are a few examples of the many Black women who used the black feminist perspective in some form to identify and address the conditions of the mind and body of the Black woman. Yet these women fought a battle all on their own through the power of being a Black woman.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to complete this project both primary and secondary archival sources of the 1960s- to the present were used to examine the contributions of Simone, Giovanni, Catlett and Shange. I used primary sources of autobiographies, biographies, interviews, and magazines that discuss the works of these artists. Secondary sources were also used such as articles and books on the music of Simone, the collection of poems of Giovanni, the sculpture pieces of Elizabeth Catlett, and the theatrical work of Shange. The various artistic genres of the four women were reviewed from the Internet, in films, and documentaries to understand the archival and present records of these women's experiences.

This thesis organizes the women studied in two conceptual groups: revolution with Simone and Giovanni and then cultural identity with Catlett and Shange. All four women were revolutionary and artistic visionaries. They used different creative expressions of revolution, cultural identity, Black Aesthetic and the Black Female Aesthetic, and mixtures of various artistic genres and media to compile their unique forms of expression. Simone's visual stage performance was both soulful and theatrical. Giovanni's poetry performances at lectures or poetry venues allowed her audience to hear her poems in addition to reading the words of her collection. Catlett's depictions of Black militant leaders such as Harriet Tubman, Angela Davis, and even Malcolm X made her revolutionary because she was bold and courageous to identify and express the stories of these important people's lives. Shange as a revolutionary openly acknowledged the Black woman as godly. Each woman also had to face a struggle that brought her closer to her own self-recognition, determination, and defense to be a Black woman artist.

## FEMALE REVOLUTIONARIES: THE RADICAL EXPRESSION AND ACTIVISM OF SIMONE AND GIOVANNI

*“Nobody can fight your battles for you: you have to do it yourself.” Black women, at least the black women I have come in contact with in the movement, have been expounding all their energies in “liberating” black men (if you yourself are not free, how can you “liberate” someone else?)*

- Mary Ann Weathers (1969)

### **The Black Revolution and the Roles of Black Women and Activism**

The Black Revolution was part of a positive reinforcement for Black art and politics that were used to create and produce new perspectives for the Black community during the 1960s-1970s. These new perspectives were significant to the people of the Black Arts and the Black Power Movement as well as the Feminist Movement because it permitted the group to look at the Black individual inquiring and searching for self-determination that was heavily advocated by the movement’s leaders. Through the creative arts in different forms of publication, venues, and conferences the gathering of Black people coming together as a force brought awareness that they had the power within themselves to direct outcomes of their lives. The revolution also required Black officials to represent the people’s political voice in America’s government. The objective of the was to gain a form of political influence that assisted in the route of their communities to advance out of the conditions of the “ghetto” while they gathered resources for better housing, employment, and education. The advocates of the movement used Cultural Nationalism as a tool for their desires and needs to politically empower the Black community and the Black revolution was the momentum to enforce these beneficial possibilities and productive changes into lower economic cities of America.

Who were these advocates? Were Black men the only supporters of Cultural nationalism? What about the perspectives of Black women and their views and ideals on the Black revolution? As stated in the introduction of this thesis, Black women have voiced themselves against various forms of oppression, and many of them, despite the hurdles they had to leap high to express themselves by voicing their concerns either in activism and/or in artistry. The voice of Black women in the revolution was just as important as the voices of Black men. As Mary Ann Waters states in the quote at the beginning of this section:

*“Nobody can fight your battles for you: you have to do it yourself.” Black women, at least the black women I have come in contact with in the movement, have been expounding all their energies in “liberating” black men (if you yourself are not free, how can you “liberate” someone else?)*  
(Mary Ann Watters 1969)

The voices of Black women during the Black Revolution in America was very important because like any Black man, the Black woman too, faced the struggle of racial injustice, and economic difficulties, but they as women also endured the unpleasant acts of gender discrimination. Waters point of view distinguishes the fact that women can support the battle of Black men, but in the process of fighting with them in their rebellion against America, women must not forget the pain and frustrations that America has too inflicted upon them because they were Black women. This study examines the concerns and expressions of Black women during the 1960s through the 1970s. The following section discusses Black women’s roles in the Black struggle for justice in America. The female artists, Nina Simone and Nikki Giovanni were among a group of influential Black Women whose creative work contributed to the social movements of the time including, the Black Arts, Black Power, and the Feminist Movement.

## **NINA SIMONE**

Eunice Kathleen Waymon (Nina Simone) was a musical child prodigy before the age of six and her love for music grew throughout her lifetime as she addressed political issues and celebrated in the ideas of love for self and others. Simone before the age of four once played her mother's favorite hymn, "God Be with You Til We Meet Again," without making a single mistake (Cohodas 2010 16). From this point she was considered to be a genius at the age of three by her parents Kate Waymon and John Davan Waymon. As a child, she played piano for her mother's sermons at church services. Simone's musical talent, directed by her White tutors Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Muriel Mazzanovich (Miz Mazzy), was the actual knowledge and lessons that enriched her career efforts in fusing the genres of gospel, classical, jazz, blues, folk music and songs together in her exceptional performances. Of all the genres Simone used, gospel music inspired her most and moved her to find her own voice. She grew up in the segregated town of Tyron, North Carolina and was a child in a household of six children who were all inclined to music. Everyone and everything that surrounded Simone's life involved music (Simone 1991). She was expected to be respectable in community and church and was also expected to behave with modesty and humility—simultaneously she was to be the best at everything. The philosophy given to her by her parents was: "you didn't outshine anyone; you developed the talent you had, but it was there to be shared with everyone" (Simone 1991) and she was not to be competitive with her talent for it was a god-given gift and not something she took for granted or abused. These principal factors affected Simone's growth in her talent as well as the being she revealed to the world.

Simone's interaction with the world began first in her community in North Carolina, and there unfortunately, she encountered racial discrimination. At the age of eleven she was asked to

give a recital in the town hall, then after being announced to the audience, she noticed her parents were being uprooted from their seats which were given to a White family. Simone refused to play a single note unless her parents were moved back to the front where she could see them, and the host, so shocked by her outburst, obliged her request. Her action, although it embarrassed her parents, she stood up for her parents' rights to be respected as human beings. This form of discrimination was an eye opener for Simone as well as her first step in her ground in self-defense against racism. She did not have much interaction with White people except with Miz Mazzy and Mrs Miller, who in her mind were "all kind, and elegant, all polite" (Simone 1991). After such an experience, prejudice had been made real for Simone and for her "it was like switching on a light" (Simone 1991). Simone once said, "Nobody told me that no matter what I did in life the color of my skin would always make a difference (Simone 1991)."

Simone discovered more about the issues of racism and gender discrimination through various stages of her lifetime and these incidents and events made an impact on her life, both as artist and an activist. While pursuing her education, Simone was the treasurer of the Allen chapter of the NAACP, and she helped organize a presentation by the poet Langston Hughes for students from the area's Black schools (Cohodas 2010). Simone faced another disheartening form of prejudice when she applied for school to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and although she never knew for certain her gut instinct assumed she was denied entry based on racial implications; her chances of entry were very slim being a "nobody" who was poor, Black, and female (Simone 1991). Being refused entry to this school only set Simone on a different route to success, it was by far not the factor that made her who she was to become as an artist.

After graduating she moved to Philadelphia on her own and later on, she started her career in a bar called the Midtown Bar and Grill first as pianist and later forced to sing songs

otherwise she would have lost the job. Simone officially by then became Nina Simone singing the hit song *I Love you, Porgy* to her admiring audience. That song along with other tunes such as *Little Girl Blue*, and *Black is the Colour*, and *Lovin' Woman* were songs that audiences were entertained by this folk singer as she preferred and referred to herself as an artist, at this time Simone did not favor being called a jazz artist (Simone 1991 68-69). As an individual, Simone, made efforts to stand out on her own, but there were times she required assistance in finding her identity. By 1963 Simone's biggest influences towards her contribution in finding herself and her duties to the Black movement came with the help from her friends Langton Hughes, James Baldwin, and Lorraine Hansberry. Simone spent time in bars late nights with Hughes and Baldwin making political jokes, and she had even followed the development of the civil rights movement, but it was a special kind of friend that really pulled her into the ideas of the Black Movement and forced her to accept that she had to take politics seriously. That friend was Hansberry. Simone could see that her friend was very dedicated to the movement and as a dear comrade she assisted Simone in her political education. Hansberry once asked Simone, "What are you doing for the movement?" and as a result of this question and Simone's edification, the artist started thinking of herself "as a Black person in a country run by White people and a woman in a world run by men" (Simone 1991). From Hansberry's teaching Simone's creative expression allowed her to begin her activism as a female revolutionary.

### **The Revolutionary Music of An Influential Songstress**

The revolutionary activism of Nina Simone sprang forth from the resentment and disgust she discovered she had towards the injustice and oppression experienced by African Americans in the United States, and as a result, of such discontent, her creative expression that she produced

in her music was inspiring, thought-provoking, and empowering for her listeners and the advocates during the black freedom struggles. The church bombing with the death of four girls: Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins and also the slaying of the NAACP member, Medgar Evers in Mississippi was the wake up call for Simone, she stated, “I suddenly realized what it is to be Black in America in 1963,” for her it was an intellectual awakening (Cohodas 2010 144). With this revealing consciousness there also came the feeling of anger, hatred and determination. Simone desired to do something and her first impulse was to pick up a weapon, but she was advised her music was her best tool to combat against the issue of discrimination. With those emotions, thoughts, and her own call to action within an hour of time Simone wrote the lyrics to the song “Mississippi Goddam” (1963) to commiserates and avenge the death of the four girls and Medgar Evers.

Simone intersected her music career with the sociopolitical issues of the 1960s-1970s by taking the initiative to be involved in the Black freedom struggles and she used her creative expression to voice her concerns and protest against different forms of prejudices. She was once quoted “as saying that she wanted to be remembered as a revolutionary who served her people with her music” (Bratcher 2007). The song “Mississippi Goddam” was the first example of her political and aesthetic protest to the nation. In the song “Mississippi Goddam” according to Bratcher, Simone lamented that the physical imprisonment was punishment for Black protests against racism (Bratcher 2007). The examples of the physical imprisonment are expressed in Simone’s lyrics that addressed issues of superstition and paranoia, inconsequential crimes, imprisonment of school children, feelings of disappointment and frustration, and shouts of demands for change and an end to oppression. The lyrics in the song are good and functional “because their statements point to the connection between vice and petty crimes and physical



imprisonment in the Black community, from a Black woman's perspective" (Bratcher 2007). There are traits of the Black aesthetics in Simone's lyrics that are "functional, collective, and committing". These traits are found in the words and music sounds particularly for this song, and other songs of Simone's revolutionary stance which served as a functional method of protest against deceit and oppression, it collectively shared a history of a people, and it was also committing because it identified the brave spirit within a people to overcome the struggles of the black experience.

As a Black woman who is a female vocalist and pianist, Simone did address the gender issues experienced by Black women, especially in her song titled "Four Women" (1965). Even before the second wave of the feminist movement took place, Simone had already begun to address issues of gender and sexuality, which were in fact central to the outset of her career (Feldstein 2005). The song "Four Women" is a song compressed in two centuries of Black history in the form of four compact verses. Each stanza describes a woman who was an archetype of an era: Aunt Sarah, the mammy; Saffronia, the light-skinned mulatto; Sweet Thang, the young prostitute/jezebel; and Peaches, an aggressive matriarch (Cohodas 2010). Each woman's story identifies an issue of either shades of blackness, hair-types, rape, sexuality, promiscuity, betterment and retaliation, power and capacity all which were experienced by Black women historically from slavery and up until 1960s-1970s, but today this very song can relate to the women of modern times. Below is the animated song and storyline of the two real life-like characters, Saffronia and Peaches sang live by Simone:

My skin is yellow; my hair is long and straight like some of yours  
Between two worlds, I do belong  
My father was rich and white  
He forced my mother, late one night-they  
Call it rape (she shouts it)  
So here I am, they call me, they call me

Saffronia

My skin is brown, my manner is tough  
I'll kill the first mother I see, my life has been rough  
I'm awfully bitta these days  
Because my parents, God gave 'em to me,  
Were slaves-and it's crippled me (she shouts it).

What do they call me, my name is Peaches!!!

(Simone 1977)

Through the musical vocals and expressions of Simone in this particular song, the storyline refers to the experiences of Black women in America. The song addresses issues of gender, femininity, and abuse. As it states in the lyrics, “My father was rich and white... he forced my mother late one night,” it identifies an abusive White male—this line is a prime example of the historic White male sexual oppression forced upon black women, and through the raping of her mother as a result Saffronia was conceived. On the other hand the story of Peaches sung as the last verse of the song, “refers to the legacy of enslavement” of Black people (Bratcher 2007). As Peaches tells her experience through Simone’s voice she expressed anger and also invoked the demonstration of her growing awareness and self-definition of the historic situations. For the listener these lyrics entice emotional reactions such as resentment and the desire to want to act out, which was the power behind the revolution during this time period—the feeling and need for something different, something empowering to change the conditions of the lives of Black people in America. The emotions, the acknowledgement, and the desire for change is what caused people to join in the Black Revolution. What is significant about all the four women in the song is the antidotes that tell the story of the legacy of slavery, the struggle of Black women to identify themselves, and the limitations that women fought against to embrace their womanhood. During the time that Simone wrote these lyrics she felt that “black women didn’t know what the hell they wanted because they were defined by things they didn’t control,

and until they had the confidence to define themselves they'd be stuck in the same mess forever—this was the point song made” (Simone 1991). Simone, too, battled with her sense of identity as a woman during the end of the 1960s she detailed, “I’d look in the mirror and see two faces, knowing that on the one hand I loved being Black and being a woman, and that on the other hand it was my colour and sex which had fucked me up in the first place” (Simone 1991). The song “Four Women” was/is a form of affirming the unique and difficult experiences that Black woman had to overcome to in order to find a sense of self-identity and they also had to find ways to combat the issues of gender, femininity, and abuse. The song, “Four Women” exclaimed the right for the Black woman to identify herself and address her personal needs for change for herself and at times for the community.

In the year 1965, a year before the song was released, Lorraine Hansberry had died of cancer and to remember her dear friend, Simone wrote a song to honor the life of the playwright artist and activist. The song titled, “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” became an anthem for the Black youth of America. This very song made Simone proud because it proved that she was succeeding as a protest singer and it was also a sense of victory because she wrote songs people remembered and were inspired by to make vital changes towards empowerment (Simone 1991 109). In the third section of Hansberry’s play titled the same as the song, she stated: “I can think of no more dynamic combination that a person might be” (Nemiroff 1969). What the playwright/activist was referring to is the combination of being “young”, “gifted”, and “black”. The term “Black” is key term in this thesis for it identifies a people and actions of these people. Bratcher addressed that Black singers have historically placed heavy emphasis on action words and an example is in the song, “To Be Young, Gifted and Black”. According to Bratcher, Simone placed great “emphasis and attention on the word ‘Black’ and turned the proper noun into a

verbal action word, as if to say ‘Black is’ to perform the state being Black” (Bratcher 2007).

Nina Simone was once asked why she placed so much emphasis on the word “black” and in response she boldly said:

That black power that black pushing them to identify with black culture...I have no choice.... We have a culture that is surpassed by no other civilization but we do not know anything about it...My job is to somehow make them curious enough or persuade them by hooker crook to get more aware of themselves and where they came from and what they are into and what is already there and just to bring it out and this is what compels me to compel them and I will do it by whatever means necessary.  
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6oP06L3OEE>)

Simone’s perspective identifies that she was very clear and firm on her stance as a Black female artist, and she was also aware of the advantage and privilege she had as an individual to express herself on the issues and desires of Black people. In this play that was a dedication to and an advisory to the Black youth of America, Hansberry spoke to them that they must use their talent to tell their story in their own words about the ways of the world to the world. Simone’s song in a lyrical formation gave this same inspiration to the Black youth with these very words:

In the whole world you know  
There are a billion boys and girls  
Who are young, gifted and black  
And that’s a fact

You are young, gifted and black  
We must begin to tell our young  
There’s a world waiting for you  
This is a quest that’s just begun

When you feel real low  
Yeah, there’s a great truth you should know  
When you’re young, gifted and black  
Your soul’s intact

(Nina Simone 1970)

“To Be Young, Gifted and Black” is a song that is optimistic and self-affirming for the youth and those who are young at heart. In the fifth stanza, “When you feel real low / Yeah, there’s a great

truth you should know / When you're young, gifted and black / Your soul's intact", Simone's words inspired a direction of innocence experienced in childhood and youth; she acknowledged that they have a "spirit and soul that is pure and strong" (Bratcher 2007). Unfortunately, during this time period issues of racism and poverty hovered over the dreams of such young spirits, these issues restricted their creative growth. This song inspired the youth to know racism is something they can overcome when they believe in their talented selves. What was direly needed was the belief in themselves, these gifts, and the power to overcome their struggles, but in order to overcome these conflicts, the revolution had to take place in self and in the community and that is what Simone addressed in her song, "Revolution (Part 1&2)".

As noted before, Simone did not grow into automatically knowing about racial discrimination, most her interactions with the "other" were with her music tutors Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Mazzy, but her knowledge of White people's behavior towards Black people were identified in the process of her developing herself as an artist as she sang about various subject matters such as love, self-change, and social change during the revolution. She was unaware that she could take a stance in the Black revolution. With the help of her dear friend Lorraine Hansberry, she was able to acknowledge that whether she liked it or not, the fact was still true as a Black woman artist she was involved in the struggle. (Simone 1991). How Simone would choose to voice her political concerns also reflects a process of change. She went from singing gospel music, to "real music" which was in reference to her mother called secular music, to singing protest songs of non-violent tactics and being involved with the NAACP, to than strongly expressing her militant stance in song like "Mississippi Goddam" and "Revolution" all of this change occurred during the Black freedom struggles.

Melanie Bratcher believed Simone's lyrics promoted racial freedom through rhetoric

manner and that she expressed herself as a Black female archetype who restated the need for political change by directly challenging and protesting against the US government (76) Praise and protest went hand and hand being used as tool to combat against oppression and empower the cultural identity of Black people. In the song “Revolution” Simone sings: “The only way that we can stand in fact, Lord / Is when you get your foot off our back” her song was demanding that America acknowledge what it is doing to the conditions of Black people and assists in making these changes occur and if Black people are to receive true equality then the nation itself would have to completely change from top to bottom. She even asked in the chorus “don’t you know, get back?” The question interrogates America’s behavior; does America know what it means to remove the various levels of pain it has caused, does it know how to settle down its forms of cruelty so that others may live and find their own methods of abundance in a land of so-called freedom? Simone believed America knew of such possibilities and answered in the same line of the chorus ... “well alright, get back.” So the next process of course, what is the next move, “(chorus: What to do Nina? What to do now?)”, and she tells her listeners:

I’m tellin’ you  
Soon you’ll know  
It will be through

1-2-3, what do you see  
4-5-6, I’ve got my stick

Do your thang  
Whenever you can  
When you must  
Do take a stand  
It will end, well alright,  
We’ll get by  
Stay alive  
WELL alright

(Simone 1969)

The various methods of self-defense, self-determination, and self-definition all which were factors requested by Malcolm X for the foundation of Cultural nationalism were all the elements sung throughout Simone's lyrics with the greater purpose to ignite power in the Black revolution. Simone's creative expression and protest influenced the movement and she was fully aware of her contributions:

My music was dedicated to a purpose more important than classical music's pursuit of excellence; it was dedicated to the fight for freedom and the historical destiny of my people. I felt a fierce pride when I thought about what we were all doing together. So if the movement gave me nothing else, it gave me self-respect.  
(Simone 1991 91)

The creative works and activism of Nina Simone, "Priestess of Soul" were fundamental to the audience and the political movements between the 1960s-1970s, and this was possible because of her willful and strong message, her astounding performance, and her love for her people. She used different African and African-American music styles, elements, and instruments to share her god-given gift with others. "Music is an integral aspect of the arts in African culture" (Bratcher 2007). Music is used as "vehicle for history, love work, sadness, joy celebration, philosophy, belief, ritual, and as a method of communication. Although Simone sang and played music for her audience, she had also communicated with factors of the Black Aesthetics. Simone's work was functional through the use of music; her songs were methods of story telling. These stories shared and spoke of the past and present issues of Black people during various eras. It was collective because it joined the audience in the performance through the use of the African-American foundation of call and response. Lastly, her gift also provided goals and objectives for people to aspire to in the empowerment of the Black revolution. Songs like *Mississippi Goddam*, *Four Women*, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, and *Revolution (part*

1&2) were only four examples of the tremendous talent that Simone shared with her fans and the Black Arts / Black Power Movements and the Feminist Movement. Nina Simone was a revolutionary female artist and she was able to travel the world expressing herself in locations such as Paris and the African continent. When she traveled no matter where she went her self-awareness and her ideas of Black unity remained with her. One night in America she received an opportunity to share a stage with the poet Nikki Giovanni in an event called “Operation Get Down” put together by Barry Hankerson. The two women along with Myrna Summers, a conductor for a choir known as Interdenominational Singers. All three women represented a different aspect of the Black community and Black femininity, but they were there to raise money for research on sickle-cell anemia, a hereditary disease that struck with particular force in the Black community (Cohodas 2010). It was upon this night that night Simone opened show in her revolutionary stance singing the song “Four Women”.

### **“I Am A Revolutionary Poet” – Nikki Giovanni**

*“We (I) can’t really be revolutionary anything without a revolution... All black poets, writers, etc. are revolutionary in the sense that they are read in print, seen in film, work in television. We’re in places and doing things we’ve never done before. That’s revolutionary. “My role as a black women is to be free...by any means”*

*(Fowler, Hobson, & Smith 1969)*

Yolande Cornelia Giovanni Jr. (Nikki Giovanni) was born to her parents Gus Giovanni and Yolande Giovanni on June 7, 1943 in Knoxville, Tennessee. She was heavily raised with the influence of her family; Gary her older sister who named her “Nikki” as an infant and her grandmother Louvenia Terrell who played a large role that pushed Giovanni to arrive to her status as a revolutionary poet. Her grandmother was not afraid to combat the forms of



harassment and racism she faced from White people, in fact she was “terribly intolerant” towards their forms of disrespect. This information was shared with Giovanni who in return obtained much respect towards her grandmother for standing her own ground against oppressive behaviors. Thus, Louvenia’s experience was an example of a method for Giovanni to settle her own disputes with not only with White people but also with the behaviors and beliefs of Black people.

She is a Black female graduate from Fisk University year of 1967, even as a student that also pursued a career as a poet, Giovanni was very influential to several services to the community. These services included social work in Pennsylvania and she also received grants from both Ford Foundation Grant, and the Harlem Cultural Council of Arts in New York. By taking these positions Giovanni allowed her growth to reflect her interactions with others in her writing and also her physical disposition to help others in creative expression and cultural issues of the Black community. Where there are examples in songs of social protest, an example is the previous artist of subject, Nina Simone; clearly poems of social protest can be expressed as a form of poetical protest to identify the issues and resolutions for self and others, but especially for woman in the case of Giovanni’s poetry. The artist was known during the era as “the princess of Black poetry” and she was during the Black Arts Movement, a messenger for the experiences of her people (Fowler and Litterine 1973). This thesis reviews the work of the poet in her publications, her revolutionary writings and activism, her ideologies on individualism, and her perspectives on feminism.

Before and even at the wake of Black consciousness, the artist Giovanni has written based on what she saw, felt, and experienced as a Black female poet. When the revolutionary poet wrote her literary art she chose to focus and address her own experiences—which also

happened to be the experiences of Black people (Fowler and Peter Bailey 1972). What did make Giovanni a revolutionary poet? The poet once said:

“I’m a revolutionary poet in a prerevolutionary world”... “And dealing with Blackness as a cultural entity can only lead to revolution” (Giovanni 1976).

According to Virginia Fowler, the Black Arts Movement’s challenge to existing assumptions about poetry found one of its most vital and most famous embodiments in the poet Nikki Giovanni. She raised funding for her first publication for her first volume of poems, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1970) which had sold more than 10,000 copies (Fowler 1992). The book set the tone of Giovanni’s career as an artist. With the commitment to be a devoted artist, Giovanni took her poetry to the people in various locations such churches, radio and television programs, coffeehouses, clubs, school and college campuses—wherever there was a demand the artist appeared and delivered her revolutionary perspectives. During the time of the Black Arts / Black Power Movements and the Black Feminist Movement Nikki Giovanni published the following works: *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1968), *Black Judgment* (1968), *Night Comes Softly anthology of poetry, Re: Creation* (1970), *Gemini* (1971), *Spin A Soft Black Song* (1971), *My House* (1972), *The Women and the Men* (1975), *Cotton Candy on A Rainy Day* (1978). Within this time period she also released CDs *Truth is On Its Way* with the New York Community Choir *The Way I feel* (1975), *Legacies* (1976), and *The Reason I Like Chocolate* (1976). She made several TV appearances and hosted the program *Soul*, an entertainment-variety-talk show that promoted Black art and culture and allowed black political expression (Fowler 2003). Through these publications, TV and even magazine appearances, Giovanni did not limit her audience, she spoke directly to and about Black women, men, and children and their experiences in America.

In her attempts to create her career venture her voice first reigned in *Black Feeling, Black*

*Talk*. These 26 literary poems explained the historic events and spirit of the times at the early beginnings of the Black Arts Movement. The book addressed the perspectives of identity; the differences between being labeled “black”, “negro” and a “nigger”. It questioned the possibility and power of militancy—“nigger can you kill”. It identified the lives and roles of prominent leaders of the revolution such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, Amiri Baraka, and Rap H Brown, and this book of poems definitely spoke about the Black community and the women and men who were entitled to be part of the revolution because it was their struggle and desire to overcome America’s forms oppression. In the first poem “*Detroit Conference of Unity and Art*” (1968) it describes the discussions “possibilities”, “inevabilities”, and “resolutions” of Black people in America combating oppression and achieving tangible dreams of Black Leaders, Black women, and Black men. Her creative report about the conference explains the needs of a people to overcome their struggles using the example of “Malcolm X’s ladder”, which was in fact his ideal on cultural nationalism, as a key method to find solutions. From the first four stanzas, Giovanni acknowledges the needs of her and her people, but in the fifth stanza of the poem she makes her existence and individuality the core subject when she stated that the most valid resolution of them “all was that / Rap chose me”. According to Fowler the poem made an important philosophical statement about the poet’s hierarchy of values; the poem asserts the preference of the individual over ideology, which was one of the most consistent and important themes throughout Giovanni’s work (Fowler 1992). Other poems in the book address the clash between the individual’s desires and identity verses the ideology of the revolutionary times. Giovanni’s methods to contest this conflict of individuality vs. the ideology of the movement were expressed heavily in *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk*, but her individual stance was also expressed and identified in her other progressive works. “*Word Poem*” is the last poem of the 26

literary pieces and it reads:

as things be /come  
let's destroy  
then we can destroy  
what we be /come  
let's build  
    what we become  
    when we dream

(Giovanni, 1968)

This poem addresses the needs to destroy, build, and then again destroy to rebuild from dreams that allow visions to create possibilities. There are times of necessity that in order for things to become possible factors of certain ideologies, certain structures must be abolished in the process in order for the substantial to be achieved. In these 26 poems Although Giovanni's perspective of the movement's revolutionary aspirations were expressed distinctively in her own voice and delivered analytically, but simultaneously she as an individual found herself both in agreement or in complete disapproval towards the leaders of the movement's specific ideological goals and objectives for the Black community. This was a conflict of individuality vs. the male ideology of Cultural nationalism that Giovanni experienced during the Black revolution.

Giovanni believed that the fight of the world during this time period was the fight to be an individual and also believed in a nation that built on individualism. The poet, herself once said during an interview, "If I allow you to be yourself and you allow me to be myself then we can come together and build a strong nation" (Fowler and Bailey 1972). Some agreed with Giovanni stance while others criticized her for her views. Black critics for her perspectives on individualism criticized her as a poet; such critics believed the Black poets should have a community or collective view of art (Fowler and Terrell 1972). Giovanni was very adamant about her feelings and felt that no one can tell her how she felt without expressing her feelings or her emotion first, this was the reason especially that the poet felt the voice of the individual was

just as important as the group. Within in a year later Lorraine Dusky acknowledges that it was Giovanni's "comments on Black individualism that made her a heroine in ghettos, middle class homes and on college campuses around the U.S. Literary critics who referred to her genius" (Fowler and Dusky 1973, 1992). On one scale the artist was praised for her stance to be individual, but on another scale both Black men and women, for example Amiri Baraka, Don L. Lee and even Michelle Wallace, ridiculed her. Such perspectives on her work were that she "sold out", because she "refused to write didactic poetry on the behalf of the revolution" (Fowler 1992), or she was critiqued on her growth as an artist, feeling that if she was a truly a revolutionary her perspectives would stay the same towards the movement, which in reality this thought process is exactly what slow the movement down. The traits of change, growth, and flexibility were very important to the movement and without these factors how could the goals and objectives of the movement succeed. From this personal and group conflict between Giovanni and the perspectives of the leader's of the movement, this identified there was also a conflict within the movement, unity was the objective for the group but how could they be unified if they silenced the concerns and voices of individuals within the group? Although her stance and title of revolutionary poet was questioned by critics and her peers the factors that made her who she was still had to be defined by her the individual.

What made Nikki Giovanni a revolutionary poet was not only for the fact that she claimed it as her title, nor was it because she addressed the word "revolution" x amount of times in her poetry, but she was a revolutionary poet because she understood and lived the change and progression of her individuality. Giovanni knew as a Black female poet who understood that her conflict was also the conflict of her people and that if she desired to change anything, she first had to change who she was as an individual in order that she could aid her people into the right

direction evolving into empowered leaders of the Black community. This indeed was the key to Malcolm's objective for Cultural nationalism: self-definition, self-determination, self-defense, and self-respect, which all traits that Nikki Giovanni repeatedly expressed as a revolutionary poet. Indeed individualism was one of her many interests as an artist and activist, but other subjects she placed much attention to was her role as a Black woman and a being single parent. The next sections will discuss the activism and feminist perspectives in the work of Giovanni's poetry.

“I started as a writer concerned about the black situation in America and have grown to be a writer concerned about the black situation in the world. I have come to realize that gender bias is a real problem. It's difficult to be a woman, but being black and female produces a double blind.” – Nikki Giovanni (Fowler 1992 127)

This quote addresses the growth and changes of Giovanni as a Black woman, as an individual, and also as a writer who had observed the conditions of Black people in America during the growth of the Black Arts Movement. Her subject matters for the most part have always been the same but her perspectives changed slightly or completely due to her life experiences and her development as an individual. This section focuses on Giovanni's attention on Black woman, identity vs. roles, and feminism. Giovanni works also have a reflecting tone towards her connection and celebration towards women, especially mothers and grandmothers. In 1970 Giovanni made the decision to try to deal with Black woman because that is what she is a black woman and she knew that she could define herself in terms of like Nikki, in terms of other people, and any number of other Black women she knew (Fowler 1992). She also believed that men should do the same thing. Giovanni greatly believed that it was the individual's responsibility to define them selves appropriately, therefore not to be confined to the opinions and views of others outside of ones vision or space. In her works, *Black Judgment* (1968) Fowler

has connected three of Giovanni's poems titled, "My Poem" to "Revolutionary Dreams" and "Woman Poem" because they were all concerned with female identity, but thesis will look at the flowing poems "My Poem" "Woman Poem" and "Revolutionary Dreams" in *Re: Creation* and see the change and growth of Giovanni's perspective of Black female identity. In "Woman Poem" it was the first to address the relationship between Black women and Black men, marking the relationship hostile and unstable. The poem revealed the suppression of trust and of the volume for intimacy between the methods of harsh and rough ways Black men perceived Black women (Fowler 1992).

it's a sex object if you're pretty  
and no love  
or love and not sex if you're fat  
get back fat black woman be a mother  
grandmother strong romantic woman love needer  
man seeker dick eater sweat getter  
fuck needing love seeking woman

This poem identifies that the value of the Black woman is ranked on the scale of her "strength and scarifies that she can offer to others", therefore as a woman of no self-preservation who is in need of love she falls into the conceptions of gender roles. These gender roles are not based on her own concepts but the notions of Black womanhood by those she truly does not believe are willing to love her, therefore, she takes on these concepts as her identity to fit the mold. Yet Giovanni is against fitting the mold, because she believes the individual woman must mold her own identification and act out her responsibilities to such an identity.

In the poem, "My poem" she upholds her identity: "I am 25 years old / black female poet" she identifies herself therefore it cannot be mistaken for who and what she represents. Upholding her stance was important to Giovanni because as a female artist she refused to be controlled by leaders of either the Black Arts Movement or the Black Power Movement because she refused to

be controlled by the men to whom both of movements seemed to belong (Fowler 1992).

Giovanni had a strong stance, it was contradictory, she was for the Black Arts / Black Power Movements but her voice also went against the Black Arts / Black Power Movements—because Black men were the voice of the movement because they controlled the movement. Yet Giovanni was not so quick to identify herself as an advocate of the feminist movement either, but as a woman she understood the connections and concerns of Black women and she addressed these concerns in her poetry. Giovanni also did not agree with gender roles. Roles are more concerned with carrying out responsibility towards jobs and careers, so when someone asked her in an interview or a lecture “what is the role of a woman?” her views simply were that her life was not a job and the reality is “one has to do what has to be done” (Fowler and Stokes 1981, 1992).

In *Re: Creation* the poem, “Revolutionary Dreams” accentuates the changes that occurred in the artist’s dreams and goals. First Giovanni had visions of militant dreams, then secondly she envisioned radical dreams, wanting to express the traits of militancy and radical missions, then eventually she realized that if she awoke to a higher consciousness and dreamt “dreams of being a natural woman / woman doing what a woman does when she’s natural / i would have a revolution”. This awakening of her gender consciousness and stance as a “natural woman” was not a feeling but a dream that was self-generated. Making such a choice to be a “natural woman” does not derive from the implications that society places on individuals to follow gender roles like in the examples that were set in place by the gender concepts in “Woman Poem”. At a specific point of Giovanni’s life she did not believe that gender roles calculated by others outside of self was a way to identify one’s existence. In fact, she believed because no one chose the circumstances under which they were born, nor the place, nor the parents to whom they were born, nor their gender, therefore, if one was going to identify themselves with anything it should



be with positive forms of identification (Fowler and Elder 1982, 1992) hence, here were attributes to ones character that were controllable but only at the expense of the person who was defining their identification, as it was expressed in both the poems, “My poem” and “Revolutionary Dreams” which in fact had identified self-definition which permeated the acts self-determination.

Giovanni’s personal identification had changed on August 31, 1969, when she became a Black single parent to her son Thomas (Gus) Watson. Giovanni accepted her positive identification as single mother despite the gender roles imposed on the lives of many Black women. These women were ridiculed by the White and Black society for not being married to the father of their children—they conceived out of wedlock. Although Giovanni was still publishing her works and participating in political activism her perspectives towards responsibility to the movement had changed, as a mother her first priority was her son. The one person she felt she needed to change for was not any movement but her own child, “I can’t imagine living without him. But I can live without the revolution, without world socialism, women’s lib... I have a child. My responsibilities have changed” (Fowler and Litterine 1973,1992 66). It was her stance as mother that helped Giovanni understand the struggle of Black womanhood and motherhood. Giovanni’s poetry celebrated women, especially mothers and grandmothers (Fowler 1992). In fact, during the time when her contemporaries, for example the revolutionaries wanted to reject the older generations (i.e. the generation of the Harlem Renaissance or Civil Rights Movement) and their strategies for negotiating a racist world, Giovanni’s insistence on claiming and valuing the mothers and grandmothers was one more instance of her individuality and in the same process she acknowledged and honored women, mothers and grandmothers. Several of Giovanni’s poems throughout her career during the three

movements rested on the subjects of individual woman like Phillis Wheatley, Rosa Parks, Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin, Lena Horne, Angela Davis, and even women of her own family and women who's history is as commonly know as the Black celebrity stars or Black historic female figures. Each woman had a struggle to deal with on a personal level and Giovanni took the opportunity to share the struggle with her readers giving them her creative expression of each of these women's experience and how they connected to her own struggle as a Black woman in America. Consequentially, she was saying through her poetry that each woman had their own personal movement, change, and revolution that they had to build, destroy and rebuild to their own levels of liberation.

### **Nikki's Rebellion**

How did Giovanni explain the revolution during the 1960s-1970s? It is important to understand the poetical protest in Giovanni artistry and comprehend such works from her perspective of what it meant be revolutionary during this time period. For Giovanni as she have stated herself and also reflected in her poetry, lectures, and discussions, "the revolutionary poet" acknowledges to everyone without fear her individuality: ... "I am an individual first. I understand the problems of being a woman; I am a woman. I understand the problems of being black; I am black. " The poet refused to be controlled by her gender or also to submit her life to any cause, which she was referring to the Black Arts / Black Power Movements and the Feminist movement. Her position once she became a mother was to survive for her the life of her offspring depended on her rationality to care for him. Giovanni would not give her life to any movement outside of herself and her son, but from her perspective she made a valid point when she acknowledged the achievements of both movements by stating that the success of "the black

movement was that we freed White America from having to hate, from having to hold down the aspiration of other people. And one of the achievements of the women's movement was that it has freed men" (Fowler and Rigney, 1986, 1992).

Giovanni's perspective on the revolution was different from other leaders and advocates of the movement generally because her stance was very individualistic but her points were effective. Giovanni understood the power and voice of the individual and the responsibility that the sole person had to understanding their personal agenda that made contributions to a movement. Without obtaining knowledge of self what help was the individual to any movement? Useless. This is the reason why self-definition was an important factor to not only the Black Arts / Black Power Movements but also the Feminist movement. One must know who they are in order to know when and where they do and do not fit into a group. This is the reason why every Black person in America was not part of the black movement or the reason why all women were not placing themselves in the feminist or womanist movement; people have different perspectives on their individuality. Why should they be oppressed for such perspectives or preferences? With knowledge of self, one can fight against the oppression that attacks them and detains them from the infinite possibilities of achieving a dream, goal, or the content way of living their own life based on their process of change and growth. This was by far what Giovanni had always expressed since the moment she landed on the scene as a "revolutionary poet".

This chapter examined the impact of the revolutionary factors of two artists a musician; Nina Simone, and a poet; Nikki Giovanni. These two women were revolutionary artists during the black freedom struggles and the black feminist movement and had experienced ideas of a revolution on various levels that concretely and/or vaguely defined and contributed to the cultural ideas of black empowerment. As revolutionaries they contributed by using specifically

their particular genre of art that to express their stance in the battle for liberation. Simone's artistic genre was music and she was a vocal protester. She used her skills in writing, singing, and visual performance to inform and educate her audience on the pains, afflictions, and aspirations of Black people. Simone was a rare musical artist with a deep and matchless voice and she was also a genius at playing the piano. With her mixture of African and African-American music styles, such as the spirituals and gospel tunes, blues, and folk songs, she was able to use these gifts and tools to her advantage to help her people overcome the conflicts inflicted "again and again" upon them on American soils; the ghetto streets, classrooms, and public venues. Through her distinctive artistry she was able to produce changes in her work and as a result her level of consciousness and awareness had risen to new heights, which allowed her to defend the rights of her people to be their true selves.

In contrast to Simone, Nikki Giovanni's work was a representation of lyrical poetic protest. Giovanni's poetry sprung forth from the black revolutionary female poet that she was first for herself and secondly to black cultural nationalists and her audience. Her art form of poetry as she describes is a creativity expressed "through the metaphor of a spider who, out of her self, generates something new, delicate, and beautiful (Fowler 1992)." The artist also identifies herself and her work with the traditional African *griot*, an oral historian, which was an appropriate role to the possibility of kinship between Africans and Black Americans and this was articulated in her poem "Africa" (1973) (Fowler 1992). The next chapter will examine the dynamics of cultural identity even further in the artistry of Elizabeth Catlett and Ntozake Shange during the Black Arts / Black Power Movements and Feminist movement.

## **ARTISTIC VISIONARIES: THE CREATIVE & LIBERATED EXPRESSIONS OF BLACK WOMEN IN VISUAL ARTS**

*If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive. - Audre Lorde*

*Every people should be the originators of their own designs, the projectors of their own schemes, and creators of the events that lead to their destiny the consummation of their desires.  
- Martin Robinson Delany (Betts 1971).*

The culture identity and the arts of Black woman during the 1960s-1970s was certainly a battle against silence and invisibility. Black woman were titled with various names to explain their status and control in America. Such names included: “Mammy”, “Jezebel”, “prostitute”, “bitch” and “Welfare Queen”. Audre Lorde’s quote could easily have been her response to one of these illegitimate titles used to label a Black woman. Lorde was a poet and feminist during the Black Arts Movement who refused to be conceived by anything other than what she believed of her own identity. To be Black and a woman was a hassle for those who unconsciously took the title of the oppressor’s description of what it meant to be a Black woman. Yet, if you had aspired to rebel against these negative connotations and stereotypes the levels of one’s repercussions varied, but the awareness that overthrew these deceptive titles placed a Black woman closer to the routes of self-determination. Like other female writers, poets and singers, Black woman artists such as Edmonia Lewis, Maliou Lois Jones, Josephine Baker, and Emma Amos have used their cultural identity with the use of visual arts as a tool to spread a message about the capacities of the Black woman that have been either ignored or repressed since the year of the American emancipation of those who were enslaved. This chapter examines the implications of cultural identity, both the culture aspects of Black women and the black feminist aesthetics in the arts and

activism of Elizabeth Catlett and Ntozake Shange during the Black Arts Movement.

### **Cultural Identity**

“Black is Beautiful” was the motto shouted with fists raised and afro-heads held high among the youth and advocates of the Black Arts Movement. If life is art and art is life; does calling a subject beautiful automatically make it art? During the 1960s-1970s, was black life considered an art form? Being “black” was more than a title; it was an identification that many African-Americans were proud to uphold. In order to gain high levels of self-esteem and reach full human potential African Americans urged their brothers and sisters to “become black”, grounding them in a collective identity which they recognized by their own unique group history and culture (Van Deburg 1992). The slogan was related to the self-identity for not only the individual, or the group, but also the struggle that came with the process of accepting the validity of such a courageous statement, especially against the constant forms of oppression that said, Black was not beautiful, but stated that it was inferior. The statement, “Black is Beautiful” was a form of self-affirmation and a form of protest against those who assumed that to be Black and human was an error of the gods. To identify with one’s blackness one must understand the cultural implications of the term. In Harold Wright Cruse essay, “An Afro-American’s Cultural Views”, it highlights that “several decades after the emancipation it was possible for one to say that Afro-Americans had a distinct culture and it produced a distinct body of social art embodied in music, song, dance, folklore, poetry, formal literature, and craftsmanship” (Betts 1971). He acknowledge the “folk quality” of this culture and he continued to state along with the sophisticated expressions of this culture they produced novelists, poets, journalists, historians, a few dramatists, painters, and sculptors. The previous sections of this thesis has affirmed there were works of arts from Black woman and men artists, even before the emancipation that were

either visual, kinetic, or auditory forms of art. The art of the past identified a troubled history either in music, spiritual songs, quilts, or even in clothing style. As a result despite the separation from Africa, Black people as a group produced a culture that is distinctively its own and “for the most part, American in milieu” (Betts 1971), but on the other hand certain characteristics of West African culture had not been totally destroyed by slavery, fundamental components of Africa survived the slave experience (Van Deburg 1992). After 400 years of enslavement, the separation of various traits of the African culture was evident in this group, but the characteristics that did remain created a new sense of culture for the Africans who inhabited in America.

To further illustrate the emphasis of culture to blackness, David Gross’s definition of culture is a “commonly held set of beliefs, values and norms which bind a group together and give it a sense of identity” (Reed 1986). Gross also believed to obtain space to develop culture’s distinctive characteristics was essentially relative to the awareness of one’s freedom (Reed 1986). To be able to relate to one’s own culture permitted a sense of otherness that related to the self and also attracted the self to other individuals in resemblance to these factors of distinction. In order to relate to one another Black people created a culture apart from White America that had both distinguishing African and African American characteristics, which included style of language, style of clothing, hair, music, dance, foods, and even a specific order to social groupthink that was against the oppressive mannerisms of White America. There were also individuality and gender issues that included sexism and/or the mistreatment of Black woman as another lower class of citizens in America. To be Black and woman during the Black Revolution of 1960s-1970s meant a woman fought not only for her blackness but also for her rights to womanhood and self-expression.

## **Elizabeth Catlett: the Foremother of the Black Arts Movement**

*“The great artist is a consummate magician, and Elizabeth Catlett is a great artist. She reads our dream and fashions them in sculpture, in paintings, in drawings and words. She boldly used media to make public the best our most private selves.” – Maya Angelou*

(Alice) Elizabeth Catlett was a painter, lithographer, printmaker, and sculptor whose work was considered by the art historian Melanie Herzog the makings of a transitional artist. Catlett’s work depicted the Black women and working class people of the United States, Mexico and even Africa. Catlett’s artistry had an interest in women of color and also a heavy concentration on the issues of lack of access and lack of relevance for those who had less admittance to enjoy the significance of visual arts. Catlett once wonder why the presence of Black people was not prevalent in museums or symphony halls. She realized that it was because either they were denied entry or the subject of the art did not relate to Black people, therefore their presence was not felt in these forums. Catlett from a young age began her work in the interest of art; her first sculpted object was an elephant from a soap bar. Catlett grew up from a middle-class and once stated that she “always felt that poor people, ghetto people were inferior”, it was then that she realized she was inferior because she did not understand them. From this point she made them her business to study the lives of these people (Bernier 2008).

Catlett was born on April 15, 1915 to Mary Carson Catlett and John Catlett. Her father was a professor of mathematics at the Tuskegee Institute and a teacher at the Washington’s public school. He was also an accomplished musician and a woodcarver and he died several months after Elizabeth was born. One of her greatest influence and interest in art came from the support of her mother, a truant officer in Washington public schools. She let Elizabeth embrace creativity at a young age and as her mother supported her daughter's desires towards higher



education. After graduating from Dunbar High School, Catlett went to Howard University, and then earned her Bachelor of Science in Art. Upon completion from the university she then wanted to attend school at Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh but would not receive the opportunity because she was a woman of color—she was denied entry. It was this type of rejection and dismissal that allowed Catlett as an artist to appreciate the struggles of Black woman. Catlett finished her educational pursuits later on at the University of Iowa. As an art student she had many influences both men and woman, artists or art professors. Some of her male influences were her professors James Vernon Herring and James L. Wells, Ossip Zadkine; a Russian born modeler and carver, Diego Rivera; a Mexican muralists, and Henry Ossawa Tanner; an African American painter. Some of her female influence included her professor Lois Mailou Jones, Edmonia Lewis, an African American sculptor of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and also Emil Nolde a German Expressionist. According the Celeste-Marie Bernier, she was able to recognize that “Edmonia Lewis paved the way for Catlett and others in their exploration of a mythic Africa, a history of slavery and rural poverty” (Bernier 2008). Regardless of her influence Catlett’s interests in African or African American art, her sole project was her definitive storyline of creative work; it was the depiction of the life of Black women and the strife and triumph of working class individuals.

As the work of Catlett matured throughout her life, her interests of her subject stayed the same but her location varied depending on where the demands for her art were needed. From 1946 to 1971, Catlett spent 25 years of her artistic work in Mexico asserting her art mission to be of service to people (Gedeon 1998). It was during her time in Mexico that Catlett’s’ images of Black women, for example, the series “The Black Woman Speaks” which was originally titled, *I Am a Negro Woman* (lithographs, 1946-47), according to the art historian and critic Freida High

Tesfagiorgis was seen as:

“ a landmark in the pictorial representation of black women for it liberated them from their objected status in the backgrounds and shadows of white subjects in the work of white artists and from the roles of mother, wife, sister, other in the world of black male artists” (Guy-Sheftall 2004).

These images were of domestic and agricultural workers and cultural icons such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and effectively conveyed the courageous determination of these women against the face of overwhelming odds (Gedeon 1998). Catlett’s ability extended her personal experiences into a clear sense of solidarity with struggles of all peoples fighting social, economic and political oppression (Gedeon 1998). Essentially during her time in Mexico, Catlett created more images of Black woman in various earth elements during the years of Black Arts Movement. Other carvings were either created with the media of wood, black marble, terra cotta, limestone, bronze, or cedar. These sculptures not only celebrated the woman but they also reflected the melanin pigmentation of Black people. The darker elements were used as a symbol or indication of black skin. The woman she depicted ranged from the ages of 25-35 years old and “seem mature but new, old enough to have been tested by circumstances and weighed down by memory but young enough to be capable of assuming an identity neither they nor others can imagine” (Gedeon 1998).

Indeed Catlett’s depictions of Black woman argued for the persistence of Black female struggle and survival. Her works have attracted sincere praise from critics that saw her work as non-stereotypical, aesthetically self-conscious, dignified and communicating the message that ‘black is beautiful’” (Bernier 2008). The artist once said “I am interested in women’s liberation for the fulfillment of women... not just for jobs and equality with men and so on, but for what they contribute to the enrich the world, humanity” (Bernier 2008). Catlett’s visual depictions of Black women have altered the image of caricatures, like “Mammy”, to a representation of an

individual Black woman that is not a character to be laughed at or mimicked for her power, but respected for her contributions to the world. Catlett's work of Black women represents the strong and committed character that desires life and by different means will seek skillful opportunities to achieve a reality of survival. Her works signifies "the desire to work, to create, to nurture, to love, to listen, to resist, to transform, to survive" (Gedeon 1998). Catlett's artistry was definitively an example of the life and triumphs of Black women.

### **Catlett's Women Art**

In her art she communicated the importance of personal and social history for women and the working class. Michael Brenson in the essay, "Elizabeth Catlett's Sculptural Aesthetics," believed such images retained the stamp of "psychological encounters, the drama of race and class differences, the longing both for privacy and for solidarity." One can visual see "the past is ever present in Catlett's figures". Brenson also saw the affirmation of the reality of the necessity for the struggle of the people she depicted. These figures of abstraction are unbroken and they acknowledge the continuity of the right of the past and the force of the present—these works also point toward the hope and importance of the future (Gedeon 1998).

According to Lowery Stokes Sims in the essay, *Elizabeth Catlett: A Life in Art and Politics*, she recognized Catlett's career was distinctive because she had embraced the implications of not only her race but also her gender in her work (Gedeon 1998). For example, the *Dancing Figure*, 1961 (bronze) is a depiction of a standing woman with her weight shifted to her left hip, her head is up, and both of her arms are raised with her hands behind her head. This sculpture was one example that demonstrated the changes that evolved in Catlett's portrayal of women. Sims perceived that the changes may in fact, reflect the artist's own state of being after

twelve years living away from the United States, and in a country (Mexico) where she was for the most part accepted and respected as a woman, an African American, and an artist (Gedeon 1998). Artists and their mediums go through a process of change that is at times a reflection of their own lives and this change may in fact be reflected in their work.

### **Art Forms: Realism and Abstract**

As a transitional artist one change that Catlett experienced herself that was distinctively different in her work was her perspective of modernism that eventually changed to her joining together in images the depictions of realism and abstraction. Catlett believed that realism and the abstract could be combined, they did not have to be separate, and therefore her works were both forms of realism and abstract images. She said “art is very interesting to me ... abstract style is simply a way of speaking ...and in her point of view abstract did not alienate Black audiences as patronizing and/ or a gross distortion of African or Black art, in fact in her opinion she believed that “after all, abstract art was born in Africa” (Bernier 2008). She allowed her audiences to gain an understanding of her images on their own, letting the image speak for itself and the mind of the individual viewing the image gained a perspective that connected to a time in history that reflects the present and clearly enticed a sense of optimism for the future.

### **The Body of the Female Sculpture**

Catlett’s own description of her creative process involved the use of models and close observation, but perhaps more importantly, the use of her own body: “ I use my own body in working... I never do sculpture from a nude model...mostly I watch women” (Hill 2004). Her observation as she watched herself and other women allowed her to pay attention to the

similarities and individual differences of Black woman identity. These differences relied heavily on the age, shape, size, height, and complexion of the women models. For the 1960s-1970s such depictions and examples were: *Woman*, 1964, *Female Head*, 1966, *Olmec Bather*, 1967, *Pensive Figure* 1968, *The Black Women Speaks* 1970 and *Nude Torso*, 1974. There are aspects of Black facial physiognomy that are heavily seen in her artistry—dark skins, coarse and curly hair, broad noses, and full lips—to unprecedented heights of aesthetic observation and admiration. These characteristics of her art reflected the representation of what made the exterior view of Black peoples “beautiful”—it is the exterior beauty of the essence of Black women. According to Guy-Sheftall “Her images of women—as workers, social activists, creative individuals, scholars and intellectual, and, of course as mothers—stood in sharp contrast to the often one-dimensional representations of women created by many visual artists” (Hill 2004). These are the same characteristics that have been stated to be visually inferior by Western standards of beauty, yet Catlett’s perspective of Black people recognizes essential attractiveness of a people that is distinctive and unapologetic towards their natural appearance or the reality of their existence in relations to others. Yet in her works that are “empathetically marked by non-Western traditions, her modernism identified an African or pre-Hispanic presence.” This mark related to the aesthetic power within Catlett’s sculpture work politically, which significantly emphasized the realities of these non-Western peoples and cultures. Brenson recognized in Catlett’s work that there was an “internal relationship between modernist and non-Western traditions that were essential both to the esthetic impact and the political message of Catlett’s artwork (Gedeon 1998). According to historian Darlene Clark Hine, Black women created a “culture of dissemblance,” a politics of silence, evasion and displacement, and were needed in attempts to protect women from sexual exploitation or marginalization (Collins 2002). Hines argued that

Black women's desires to protect their bodies, escape sexual exploitation, and secure reasonable employment are central to understanding protest and movement in African American history (Collins 2002). Catlett's visual works were also political messages and representation for Black women protecting themselves against the historical exploitation of their bodies and identity as Black women. Her works as well as other female artists created the possibility of space and for reflection and change towards concept of the Black female body. According to Collins works of the visual artists create a visual language that continues to address the legacies of the past while encouraging the possibility of a self-determined Black female presence (Collins 2002). This political message was always reflected in Catlett's work and will be discussed in the next section of her political activism and her feminist perspectives throughout her career.

### **Catlett's Activism in Three Movements**

Catlett once asked the question, "How do we go about opening the door to get Black people, who have been principally involved in survival, interested in arts? In response to her question, she herself would make black art accessible to Black people. She replied, "I want to do large, public works, which will have meaning for Black people, so that they will have some art they can identify with and will be encouraged to explore what the museums and galleries have to offer them" (Bernier 2008). Her sculptures and prints urge Black audiences to identify with her the content of her work but also to explore art and the purpose it can serve to make political statements or create new incentives to see one's self in a positive manner. The themes of the artist's work included "black history, politics, slavery, civil rights, female heroism, mother-child relationships, resistance, labor, poverty, exploitation and black struggles for survival in African American and "third world' contexts" (Bernier 2008).

Catlett's activism began before the revolution of the Black Arts / Black Power

Movements, in fact her political activism started before the 1940s, and her commitment to education and activism was continued out her lifetime towards the political and social betterment of Black people. By 1942-1946 her work were images that displayed the life of African American women workers, the physical and psychological tolls imposed by labor force and her own experiences in her fight for teachers rights. Either as a teacher or an artist her devotion to depict the historical and present realities of Black people were seen both in the US and in Mexico. This thesis focuses on the activism that she participated in during the 1960s. As the keynote speaker at the Third Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Negro Artists in 1961, Catlett called out to other artists of color “to spur the inherently racial exclusionary network of American museums and galleries and to organize their own “all-black” exhibitions (Farrington 2005). According to art history Harry Henderson and artist-scholar Romare Bearden, Catlett’s speech marked a turning point for many Black artists. In fact the formation of groups such as Spiral in New York, was an all-Black exhibition. Members of this group included artists like Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis, eleven other men and only one woman, Emma Amos. It was the political activism that Catlett had towards fighting for her people to have the exposure of such visions of creative liberation that was brought forward by the group Spiral and such forms of all-black exhibitions across the country. Catlett although she was in Mexico her works were her dedication to the BPM and to its visual arts equivalent, the Black Arts Movement, and through her devoutness, she became the movement’s primary visual arts spokesperson and her imagery became its icons (Farrington 2005). For example such images included *Black Unity*, 1968, *Malcolm Speaks for US*, 1978, and *Target*, 1970. Her imagery of the movement also reflected the liberation motives of women of color also during the era of the Black Arts / Black Power Movements, yet this perspective leans more towards the black feminist perspective in art.

As the “Foremother of the Black Arts Movement”, she indeed spoke on the behalf of her people in words, but she definitely spoke through her imagery that were essentially centered towards the contributions of Black women to the world. During the 1970s-1980s Catlett found her place in the Feminist Movement, and although it provided her with a new motivation and energy towards her artistry and career, she did distance herself from the mainstream feminism in the United States. She confirmed her views of importance to the needs of the lower socioeconomic class:

“I am a feminist, but I get the same feeling about the feminist movement that I get when I hear the very sad problems that middle-class women in the U.S. have in their need to be themselves. When I put it beside what is going on in the Black Ghetto and the Chicano ghetto and in countries in Latin America and Africa—especially South Africa—and the Far East, middle class feminism doesn’t get to be that important to me.” (Gedeon 1998 22).

Catlett did not have anything against men, but as she stated, “ I am woman, I know more about women and I know how they feel”, and she also knew about and cared deeply to express the beauty not of the middle-class, but “ I think there is a need to express something about the working-class Black woman” and that is what she did throughout her career. For this statement as well as her artistry feminist radicals continued to label Catlett as a “feminist artist”. In her works such as *I Am the Negro Woman* (1942-1946 series), *The Black Woman Speaks* 1970, *Political Prisoner* (1971), *Harriet*, 1975. The lithograph image of Harriet (the Black female Moses) is a depiction of her pointing her finger to the North leading her people to freedom. According to Robert Henkes this image of Harriet also represents Catlett’s own struggle of her own personal fight for artistic freedom (Henkes 1993). It was through her artistic freedom that these images of Black women paid tribute to contributions of Black women and it moved with ease to into the politics of feminist art. Not only was this feminist perspective of women



reflected in her work but it was also recognized in her own contributions as a spokesperson for the National Union of Mexican Women, a coalition of women's organizations with the goal of serving the needs of Mexican working class and peasant women (Farrington 2005). She participated in this form of feminist activism with the group for twelve years between the years of 1963 to 1975, her point of retirement from teaching.

One of Catlett definitive examples of her work towards the feminist perspective was in her interest in the mother and child figures and this was due to her connection towards her own of being a woman and a mother. She once said the implications of motherhood, especially Negro Motherhood, "are quite important to me, as I am a Negro as well as a woman. "Many years later, she explained why she continued to explore the theme of parent and offspring: Because I am a woman and know how a woman feels in body and mind I sculpt, draw and print, generally Black women. Many of my sculptures and prints deal with maternity, for I am a mother and a grandmother" (Hill 2004). For Melanie Herzog, a Catlett scholar that identified that Blackness and femaleness intersect in Catlett works (Hill 2004). Her mother-and-child images speak of a protective love that is tender and fierce, of intergenerational continuity, and of the determination of strong women to hold their families together (Hill 2004). Her sculpture *Mother and Child*, 1969 (Black marble) is an expression of a female from her abdomen to the top of her left hand sitting on top of her head, and she is also holding the child with her right hand. Upon the subjects in Black marble there are whitish-blue lines that create an image of the subjects being shattered, marking a form of distress. This version has visible lines but the lines and expression of the subjects are not as visible as *Mother and Child*, 1972 (Mahogany) which has a full body female subject seated, head erect looking straight ahead and holding a child in her hand. The sculpture is shiny and smooth, with distinctive lines and curves expressing the body and clothing of both

subjects, mother and child. The female subject (mother) appears to be in contemplative thoughts as if she is examining the possibilities of tomorrow.

Elizabeth Catlett began her work as a visual artist in the 1930s with the responsibility of being a “cultural worker” making art for a popular mass audience to improve the social and political plight of African Americans (Herzog 2000). By the 1960s Catlett’s artistry continued to be unequivocal towards her conviction that African American artists were “part of a worldwide struggle to change a situation that is unforgivable and untenable” (Gedeon 1998). Her works examined the incriminating effects of poverty, destitution and racism, and it was of her artistic approach that fought to examine the psychological effects of Black violence and urban impoverishment (Bernier 2008). The works of Catlett question, “Isn’t it sad the oppressed often find themselves grotesque and ugly and find the oppressor refined and beautiful?” (Bernier 2008). Her intentions as an artist were always positive and reflected the significance of keeping the relevance of Black art present for the purpose of cultural survival. Who other than the Black individual can offer the depictions and storyline of the Black culture? Repeatedly Catlett answered this question through her artistry of prints, sculptures, or paintings that creatively expressed the plight, ambitions, and victories of Black women, men and children that she depicted throughout her career as a visual artist. These works reflected her determination not only to represent the visual validity of African American history, social and political realities of Black women and men, and the working class life, but also to emphasize with her individual subjects (Bernier 2008 148). Bernier also recognized that the artist as one of the female pioneer of Black woman’s rights also experimented with forms of abstraction to generalize the Black female figures to inspire identification from her audience who were invited to project their own emotions and experiences on to Catlett’s human forms. Overall, the works of Catlett reflected the

beauty of the Black experience by making the historical reality of such experience of Black people present in her silent but visible forms of abstract art. Such works are visibly seen throughout museums, parks, in the homes of her audiences, and are also documented in books throughout the world for people to view the life of Black women and the working class that survived in the visual depictions of Catlett's unique artistry. The significance of her creative expression is seen where the brutality of the oppressed was hushed or silenced Catlett made the voices of women, men, and children heard and visible throughout her work and career—Catlett was a truly a artistic revolutionary who exposed the cultural identity of a beautiful people.

### **Ntozkae Shange's Visions of Rainbows, Love, and Triumph**

Paulette Williams (Ntozake Shange) is another visual artist during the Black Arts / Black Power Movements and Feminist movement that used factors of silence and visibility to creatively express the dilemmas and success of Black women specifically through a choreopoem titled, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. She is a poet, playwright, dancer, actress, author, and a Black feminist. Shange was born October 18, 1948 in Trenton, New Jersey to her parents Eloise, her mother a educator and social worker, and her father, Paul, a sports physician. Shange during her childhood was exposed to and attended poetry readings; she analyzed and critiqued the poetry she heard. 1956 her environment change when she moved to Missouri with her family. There at a non-segregated school Shange dealt with various forms of overt racism and harassment as a student. This experience would be the motivation behind her writing, “ I started writing because there's an absence of things I was familiar with or that I dreamed about. One of my senses of anger is related to this vacancy—a yearning I had as a teenager...and when I get ready to write, I think I'm trying to fill that...”

(Lyons 1986). In 1966, as undergraduate student she attended Barnard College in New York and during this time period she dealt with issues of divorce and several suicidal attempts. Yet also during this time Shange also found a yearning desire in Black literature. For years Shange tolerated the chastisement and denigration in American literature and other kinds of literature that were expressed harsh reality towards women. She graduated with a B.A. in American Studies, and moved to California where she felt she could find a voice for women. Upon her arrival Shange taught writing and kept close ties with other poets, teachers, performers and feminist writers. She intended graduate school and made her official name change to Ntozake Shange, from Xhosa, a Zulu dialect that signifies “she who comes into her own things (Ntozake) and she who walks like a lion” (Shange). In taking this new identity Shange saw herself as an enraged roaring lion, determined to be heard distinctly as a Black feminist poet and determined to be explored and present with penetrating honesty and accuracy by depicting the lives of Black in her theater poetry, fiction and also in her established art or “built metaphors”. By changing her name Shange denounced the European/Western name given to her taking on a Zulu name, one that reflects the identity of Black people. Not only did Shange receive the opportunity to enjoy the processes of finding herself and methods of expression through the art, but she also taught the arts in humanities, women studies and writing courses at various colleges. During her venture of meeting other creative artists at venues performing poetry, music, and dance in San Francisco, Shange met a writer named, Paula Moss at Hailfu Osumare’s dance company. The two women, Shange and Moss collaborated on the poetry, music and dance that became part of Shange’s first choreopoem, *for colored girls who considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*.

By 1975 the choreopoem: *for colored girls who considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, had found a new location on the east side of the continent starting first being performed in

Soho Jazz Lofts and then later on the lower East Side of New York. With the viewing of the producer Woddie King Jr. and the help of the director, Oz Scott the choreopoem was then staged at the New Federal Theatre off-Broadway. In 1976, the choreopoem was then performed on Broadway at the Booth Theatre. The choreopoem won several awards including an Obie Award and Outer Circle Award in addition to Tony Award nominations in 1977.

### **The Choreopoem: *for colored girls***

Shange as a creative artist developed a new term to theatre, choreopoem: “It is an innovative theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, dance and music. It combines these elements distinctively Afro-American heritage to arouse an emotional response in the reader or viewer (Lester1988). The form of the choreopoem is structured upon her role first as a poet able to make words twist, jump, prance, or saunter across the printed page and into reader’s emotional consciousness. This emotional response felt in one’s consciousness is dealing with the repressive and oppressive realities of racial and gender issues caused by behaviors of “the other” who are the white fe/male or Black male. The choreopoem offers “a keen awareness of socio-political and historical images from a Black culture perspective that is in the theatrical mode of poetry and performance with the use of music, poetry and sensual movement (Lester 1988).

The choreopoem that originated in the form of series of monologues, allowing seven women, actresses and dancers an the account of these seven Black women who come together to discuss their ambitions, fears, pain, losses, and joys. Shange allowed each woman to bring her own story, “the varied experiences collectively become the single voice of the black female” (Lester 1988). There is a sense of possible universality that is captured in the story for all females as they deal with loss of virginity, rape, pregnancy, abortion, motherhood, and rejection.

Through these issues of loss, physical and psychological abuse, these women emerge celebratory and complete with the excitement of independence and self-knowledge (Lester 1988). The 20 poems are the written elaborate details of the experience of many Black women in America and they also transcend race and gender boundaries to comment on the general realm of human experience (Lester 1988).

Her relationship with the theater was developed by her versatility in the arts, she was during this time a poet and a dancer, a playwright, and the term *choreopoem* was made up, but because of her drive to contribute her artistry she became a progeny of the Black Arts Movement. As an artist within this movement she became concerned and passionately committed to the idea of creating rituals and new mythologies for people of color. She had two reasons for this development, one to alter the negative, but not false images of “the other” that were created by men like James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, or Claude McKay. Shange believes their images, which were not concerned with “ourselves” referring to African Americans, but were more concerned with pleasing a White audience. Secondly, she thought the one of the primary goals assign to young Black writers of the late 1960’s was to direct the attention of themselves inward, in a introspective fashion, that recognized when things were either going well for Black people or not functioning well for Black people (Lester1988). What Shange desired during this time was complete separation from Westernized associations, just like the advocates and leaders of the Black Arts / Black Power Movements. She wanted and knew that Black people were capable of creating their own social activities and their own sort of elite motifs of occasions that were important to Black people. According to Martin Delany, his perspective revealed his belief that “Every people should be the originators of their own designs, the projectors of their own schemes, and creators of the events that lead to their destiny the consummation of their desires”

(Betts 1971). Like Delany, Shange believed that Black people should have the opportunity use the tools and resources that accompany them to creating the lives that they want to have in the world. Creative expression is one way to seek and achieve such desires and in the case of Black people this process of success required one to examine the culture of Black people, from style, beliefs, art forms, and even language as a tool and form of communication to transpire between each person and share their ideals of the Black experience, hence the creation of the choreopoem. It was a method of her own creation that she wanted to express to her people.

### **Language and A Black Woman's Song**

Evidently, language is important for communication, to tell an experience or to even express an emotion. When it comes to language, Shange uses an untraditional form to present the essence of the lives of people of the African American culture (Lester 1988). According to Lester the creative poetic lyricist rejects standard English through her characteristics use of the black vernacular (Ebonics) and declares war on the patriarchy, finding language or her skilled manipulation of a language told for combating "the other" which include the White male majority, this is a way to battle with her personal and shared cultural experience (Lester 1988). Shange believed that language allows us to function more completely and more wholly in a holistic sense as human beings once we take hold of it say what we want it to say" (Lyons 1987). With Shange's innovative use of language she is able to create a space for Black women to create for themselves. Yet this use of language in the choreopoem is not new to the Black women of the ghetto or some of the Black middle-class women of America, the language use was new to theatre.

Shange's *for colored girls* "altered the course of dramatic and dance history in America".

With the use of “dance, song or music conjoined not to entertain or to amuse”, she was able “to communicate truths about the Black human experience” through the choreopoem, a way that was not used previously on the stage to address the Black audience. According to Shange, “we can with some skill virtually all of our physical senses/as writers committed to bringing the world as we remember it/ imagine it/& know it to be the stage”, she believed Black people should use everything they got (Lester 1988). Shange’s creativity also introduced a new form to the stage that became an overt gesture of her literary and political goal to redefine her own identity and the identity of Black people culturally and racially, therefore the choreopoem was her method to communicate and sustain such concepts (Lester 1988).

In the choreopoem these women deal with the issues of race and gender, and also gain the love and triumphs that define their individual identities as women (Kossesh-Kamanda and Zavialova 2005). Each actress-dancer recites her poem as she gestures and moves to the meanings and feeling of her words while the rest of the ensemble is immobile and silent. Then, in response to the individual poem, the ensemble changes and moves together (Kossesh-Kamanda and Zavialova 2005). These women with the use of language and body movement increased the knowledge of the Black experience into the minds of the audience. There is a sense of energy being pulled from the women actresses but this energy is also being pulled in from the audience. “People were crying hysterically and unleashing so much of their stored anguish (hooks 2005),” bell hooks recalled when she was an audience in the first showings of Shange’s “*for colored girls*”. This energy may very well be a sense of connectedness to the issues discussed in the poems. Many of these women in the audience can relate to these experiences in these poems and Shange’s choreopoem gives them an opportunity to release certain negative energies in hopes to find positive ones and change their lives.



*For colored girls* is intense with a lot of emotions that range from sadness, grief, to joy and content and as reader or audience member one is heavily drawn into the poems and/or acting of the females. The choreopoem speak directly to the hearts and history of many Black women. It addresses issues of pain and awareness of such pain to be released for a process of healing. Regardless of the issue, whether it is deception, rape, abortion, or divorce, any woman is bound to know the experience herself or know another female who has experienced one of these life experiences. Shange's choreopoem also addresses not only the colorful and emotional realities of African American women and their relations to women in America and other women in the African Diaspora, by identifying the harsh existence of these issues she addresses the fact that they are universal, because many woman can relate and also desire to find solutions to these dilemmas. Shange's first poem addresses the need to tell the story of the Black woman:

    sing a black girl's song  
    bring her out to know herself  
    to know you  
    sing her song of life  
    she been dead so long  
    closed in silence so long  
    she doesn't know the sound  
    of her own voice  
    her infinite beauty                      (Shange 1975)

Seven women each in one of the seven colors: red, brown, purple, yellow, orange, blue, and green. All the colors of the rainbow are present which was a representation of each individual woman and her own issue or event that she individually reacted to and had to overcome on her own or with the aid of her sister(s). An example of a Black woman in a n interaction with another being is expressed between the three women in the poem, "pyramid", an example of women choosing sisterhood versus being competitive women allowing one man to break a bond. This was a connection that Shange expressed with tears and affection for lady in

purple who among her sisters, “ she held her lap/ the lap of her sisters soakin up tears/ each understandin how much love stood between them...love like sisters” (Shange 1975). Shange’s recognized that women are the best advocates to understanding each other’s’ problems, especially with these rainbow of issues that are so common among women. Shange’s attempts were to creatively express ways that women can identify other women. The recognition of the individual Black woman in the example of the “metaphysical dilemma” of lady in yellow, which identified a specific issue that comes with being a Black woman. Shange with these expressions in spoken poetry, also recognized the identity of lady in red who expressed that she is a “brown braided woman/ with legs & full lips/ reglar”, and lady in orange who opposed the idea of being a colored girl evil woman, a bitch, or a nag, or a slut. Recognition plays a key role in understanding the conditions of Black woman for several reasons. First, by reading or listening to the words of these women, one can understand that the power of these women being able to name themselves and to have a method of self-defense against those who label them inappropriately and incorrectly. Second by being attentive and observant a person can understand the methods to the healing process of these women, who were self-determined to get out of the deception they received from both men and other women, Black and White. At the end of the choreopoem lady in red addresses her own recognition of self as she expressed it aloud for the other ladies that surrounded her and also the audience. Lady in red’s acknowledged her self, her pain and her ability to express herself “screamin / crying” no longer being silent. She was aware of her need to be out of her misery and also aware of the numbness she felt from the experience. Then she was captured into a temperature of hot and cold, a child once more and expressing the divinity that lies within her, “i found god in myself & i loved her / i loved her fiercely”. Where she was once silent and invisible, her voice became verbal and then her body, her dilemma; as

well her hunger for self became visible to the world. Shange was able to identify her own voice as a woman and also as a poet by expressing the issues and problems of Black women in America. This choreopoem was her activism, her contribution to the Black Arts / Black Power Movements and the Feminist Movement.

### **Shange's Activism**

Shange's fiction of real life issues focuses on the metaphysical dilemma of being alive, being a woman, and being a person of color and her technique also focuses on the development of personalities, interpersonal reactions, and relationships (Voices). In the dissertation, "Ntozake Shanges's development of the choreopoem", acknowledges that Shange is considered a purist only in the sense that she writes as a Black person particular about Black people and the black experience using black mannerism and black vernacular as her vehicle of oral communication (Lester 1988). This process is a way to voice the expression of Black people, their thoughts, their emotions and actions towards their struggles and victories, removing the silent factors and making their reality of life visible for others to acknowledge and recognize the humanistic traits of culture.

Shange's *For colored girl* is an example of how African American women have used representations of the Black womanhood and the physical setting to resist the sense of invisibility and create a broad setting within which Black women's subjectivity becomes possible. This of course is used to also debunk the writings or depictions of Euro-American representation of the archetypal figure that are used to define and publicize notions of identity in the US (Mance, 2007 19). According to Mance:

the subjects, issues and location of that late-twentieth-century black women poets treated in their depictions of African American women's lives fell far outside of the limits that

defined womanhood not only in the popular imagination but also among the artistic and academic considerations of womanhood where, based on their historically troubled relationship to ideal womanhood and the pastoral homescape, black women's poems of testimony and resistance were often tokenized and exoticized as glimpses into "the other womanhood." (Mance 2007 126)

Mance also added that Black women poets attempts were to write beyond the traditional boundaries that maintained Blackness as male, therefore introducing the African American womanhood at the attention of the choreopoem created by Shange that discussed the issues of sexual harassment, rape, marriage as an institution, the roles of woman as a mother, sister, or daughter, which in the past were consistently framed by the positionality of "the other": White men and women, and then later on also by Black men (Mance 2007). Many feminist women, and or artists aim was to go beyond the Black male perception and the White ideal of what Black womanhood should entail. Who other than the Black woman can express herself based on her own reflections of self to detail the sufferings and triumphs of her own life? Surely only the Black woman can, and that is what many of these Black creative artists as woman and/or feminist expressed in their art or activism.

Shange along with women like Audre Lorde and Lucille Clifton were three of the prominent figures of creative expression, and as African American women poets for whom the reappraisal of the Black female body is both the goal and means in a line of artistic inquiry that emphasized the counterhegemonic position of the Black female subject. These women go against the social norms used to expound the Black female identity, voice and body, and then they "point to a vision of womanhood that depends on the female subject's willful transgression of traditional settings and roles" (Mance 2007). The goals of Shange and many other black female artists during the revolutionary era was to create and maintain the visibility of Black woman's voice and body from the defying notions of White womanhood and male blackness of the

previous social order, demanding that the identity and body of Black women became visible from the obscured state, no longer accepting the defiance of the institutions and discourse that have supported the exclusion of African American women (Mance 2007).

### **The Feminist Perspective**

The Black Aesthetic made attempts to remove the gender from a codified authentic blackness or the black experience, but the feminist theory understood the purpose for not only giving attention to the female aesthetic, but also the purpose to bring attention to the blackness of a feminist theory for African American women. According to Lisa Anderson in *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, the two of the key elements of the black female aesthetics was the explorations of the Black women's lives and also the creation of a consciously Black woman-identified art (Anderson 2008). Both the black feminist theory and the emergence of the womanist theory and the contributions of woman feminists, womanists, and activists such as Anna J. Cooper, Alice Dunbar or Alice Walker who were enabled by the possibilities of a black feminist aesthetic. Anderson addresses that the black female aesthetic challenges the monolithic constructions of black femininity and highlights the multiple encounters and existential choices that are part and parcel of the intersectionality of gender, race and class (Anderson 2008). The black feminist aesthetic is concerned with the image of the Black woman in both the popular imagination and popular culture. How others perceive her also dictates how others treat her as a "black woman". This is why the project of reinventing Black identity is continuous, and remains a project for black feminism. Shange believes that in order for Black women to be "represented at all, they must themselves do the writing" that depicts the lives of Black women through creative and realistic means. Black women have to address their need to survive through the

process of agency and must do so against the constant struggles thrown back in their faces on a daily basis. The black feminist theory and aesthetic are used as tools to identify that the historical knowledge of the story of the Black female and her struggle that were passed down her daughter(s). It was necessary for the daughter to remember the story, the trials and tribulations of her mother so that her struggle would not be the same or that it would be less challenging for her to experience. She will recall of her mother's plight and say she made it through, then it is also possible for her to believe in herself to know that she can do the same—survive.

The importance in the work of Ntozake Shange was truly revealed in *for colored girls who considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*; it was during the Black Arts / Black Power Movements Shange's voice, songs, music, and dance. Her creative expression had a purpose and within these forms of interacting with the outside world, outside of the individual Black woman, it was essential for her to relate to this to the world through her thoughts and actions, and also through her artistry and activism, therefore her expression became her own method of survival. According to Neal Lester, he agreed that her choreopoem presents a playwright whose ideas are as revolutionary as her form is groundbreaking and powerful (Lester 1988). A choreopoem, but a story that supersedes the limitation of time, for there is always an internal and exterior struggle to overcome to find oneself and heal oneself, this is what makes Shange's choreopoem universal.

Indeed both the visual works of Elizabeth Catlett and Ntozake Shange were remarkably similar and unique, yet and they continue to reflect cultural identity of the lives and history of women of color and also the working class. Catlett's genre of visual art was different from Shange because her art form depicted the identity of Black women in a stand still almost permanent position for future generations to examine and review the history of their foremothers and mothers. Catlett's art although the physical depiction is silent, the frozen expression is

visible through the expression of the body and is then interpreted by the viewer. The realism and the abstract of Catlett's art voiced the concerns of many women whose expressions are ignored because the oppression of "the other" that does not recognize the errors they inflict on those who are Black and part of a lower socioeconomic class. Shange's method of theatrical art expresses the struggle and victories of Black women who have been abused and seek peace of mind in knowing that they can express pride and find value in having the identity of a Black woman, an identity that they must too define themselves and freely express to others.

Shange's choreopoem is a colorful and multidimensional art piece, with poetry, song and music, dance, and movements that express the emotions of pain and joy. Her creative pieces allowed different realities of women to be at the center of observation. The choreopoem permits the woman to express herself naturally with all that pain to shout and cry, "I am here, too and this is my story". In fact, Shange's choreopoem did just that it tells herstory, the story of the Black woman without any apologies to anyone's ego that might find offense to the realities of the oppression of Black women in America and even around the world. During the Black revolution in America Catlett lived and created her works in Mexico, but this did not change the knowledge in the reality that Black people not just in America, but also around the world struggle in the misery of sociopolitical issues and various forms of oppression.

## CONCLUSION

*Listen to the voice for liberty that sings in all our hearts.* – Boukman  
(Boukman's Prayer at Bwa Kayiman Vodun Ceremony, 1971)

Dutty Boukman was one of the prominent leaders of the Haitian revolution. In his prayer at the Bois Caiman ceremony, Boukman advised the enslaved African peoples to eliminate the image of the white men's god as their ruler and to find the god within himself or herself. He also said, "*Listen to the voice for liberty that sings in all our hearts*". Meaning that each person is responsible for their destiny when they chose to determine the fate that they must seek for themselves and not governed by someone else. Nearly 190 years later four specific women during the Black Revolution in America each made the choice to listen to the voice for liberty that sings in their own hearts by using art and politics to contribute to the Black community and several movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These four women: Catlett, Simone, Giovanni, and Shange disconnected from the perspectives of White men and women and even Black men and chose to define themselves as Black women and artists. During the Black Revolution of 1960s through the 1970s people of the Black community sought solutions to alter the conditions of oppression that continued to disenfranchise their right to live as free Black citizens in America. Fortunate for the Black community many leaders both Black men and women stood up against the oppression that denied Black individuals to express themselves through the identity of Black culture and chose to define, defend, determine, and respect their rights to be Black and productive in their own community. The works of these four women went beyond their community, in fact these women were known on a national level, and the art and activism of these women artists was influential to three movements of the Black Revolution: the Black Arts



Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Black Feminist Movement in America.

The artistry of these four women: Elizabeth Catlett, Nina Simone, Nikki Giovanni, and Ntozake Shange during the 1960s through the 1970s were unique, valuable, and necessary contributions of creative expression and were also various forms of activism. These women created new realities that embraced the power and possibilities of political liberation with feminist or womanist perspectives about their own individual identity as a Black woman—who am I? What is my purpose? What do I want to do and who do I want to be? Because these very four women may have asked these vital questions about themselves they were able to create a process that expressed their aspirations, objectives, and dreams towards self-fulfillment.

Through the use of art and politics, the artistry and activism of Catlett, Simone, Giovanni, and Shange revealed sociopolitical issues such as race, gender, culture, economics, politics, and sexuality in America. These sociopolitical issues were creatively expressed in song, music, poetry, dance, and sculptures—supplied to people through various forms of social media in music records, live performances, books, and in art museums. The artistry of these four Black female artists were accessible to women and men in public venues, conferences, lectures, and also imprinted in the minds of those who sought new methods towards liberation. This conclusion is an analysis of the major questions for this thesis, the reflections of what I learned from the artistry and political activism/messages of these four women, and comments on the contributions to not only the movements, but to also the academia of Africana/Black Studies, and the artistry and activism of the 21st century.

The concepts addressed in this thesis were *revolution* and *cultural identity*, and these Black woman artists used art and politics to identify and recognize the power of the revolution, which was the possibility of change, and the possible definition(s) of Black identity. These

women's forms of protest to their all-Black or all-White and at times—mixed--audience members, did not change or alter their message to the Black masses. These four artists revealed to themselves and to leaders and advocates of the revolutionary era that they were able to creatively express Black art through the frameworks of multi-dimensional aesthetics, which also included the *black aesthetic* and some forms the *black female aesthetic*. They vocalized and demonstrated that “Black is”...art, beautiful, it can be ugly too, and even powerful. Black Art through the works of these women and many other women and men were vocal and not hushed. The art was visible to the higher consciousness of those who sought liberation against different forms of oppression.

Overall, the songs of Simone, the poems Giovanni, the visual art of Catlett, and the choreopoem of Shange were influential to the Black freedom struggles and the black feminist movement. The objectives for all the women were to use their tools, talents, and gifts, mouthpieces and intellect, wisdom, gender, and sociopolitical experiences as a way to express themselves through music, poetry, and/or visual demonstration. They addressed issues of sociopolitical and cultural issues and their work also recognized the issues of individuality, family concerns, economics, education, youth, community awareness, cultural identity, and black unity in the ultimate goal of Black Cultural Nationalism. They demonstrated traits and advocated for positive character, love, responsibility, flexibility, and liberty. All of those factors were essentially part of the process in changing and rebuilding oneself and feeding the possibility of power in the black mind, therefore exposing it to the body and performing new desired realities through creative expression for not only Black people in relations to Whites citizens, but also any other cultural or ethnicities in America.

This thesis examines four different genres of art. The first genres of art examined were

music and poetry. Both genres are parts of the Black Aesthetic that were used to identify the functional, collective, and committed characteristics in the works of Simone's songs and Giovanni's poetry. Although Giovanni believed that the term Black Aesthetic could not define the arts of the Black Arts / Black Power Movements or even the Feminist movement, this thesis does recognize that the works of these women were not limited to these traits. In fact, the artistry of Simone and Giovanni also had a female aesthetic that addressed both the feminine aspects to the essential factors to both the female movement and the black freedom struggles. In other words the dominant force of males in the scene of black nationality and culture nationalism during the 1960s-1970s was missing the identity (i.e. the black female aesthetic) of the Black woman's voice about her own concerns and contributions to these movements. Definitely, identity is a key factor to understanding the individual, as Nina Simone had learned through her career. This reality was also confirmed progressively through Nikki Giovanni's reiteration in her poetic works. These Black women artists proved that the identity of the Black women in America is not a cookie-cutter persona, nor should the voices of these women be ignored or taken for granted.

Catlett and Shange both contributed to the black arts, black power, and feminist movements by giving those who were silenced the opportunity to voice themselves to be heard, using the body as a tool to express the issues, struggles, and triumphs of Black women. Catlett and Shange both also provided solutions with their unique and creative expressions to depict and detail the identities of a group of people—black people, by identifying the beauty of being Black, being specifically a Black woman, and being a human being, and they did so vibrantly and with a sense of black pride which indeed was also revolutionary, especially, in a time when people of color were despised in America.

### **Three Major Questions**

This thesis asked three questions to gain an understanding of the art and the political messages/activism of these four women. Question 1 asked about the elements in the artistry of Nina Simone, Nikki Giovanni, Elizabeth Catlett, and Ntozake Shange that addressed issues specifically related to Black women's unique position in America during the Black Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. The unique position of Black women during the 1960s and 1970s was faced by several challenges for Black women to obtain self-recognition and flexibility to alter their perceptions of self to control their own lives. Black women differ from one woman to the next. Yes, they are individuals, but they also represented the Black community, and how they chose to represent the Black community was up to their individual influences that were sometimes favor or disapproved by the community. Black women were mislabeled, misrecognized, and misrepresented in and outside of the Black community. The Black woman was blamed as the "matriarch" who destroyed the potential growth of the Black family. She was invisible and when she became visible she was seen as an error, and forced to be silent, as if she had nothing to contribute to the empowerment of the Black community. Through this silence she could not address her problems nor find the proper solutions to remove her own cultural and sociopolitical issues in America. The works of these four women addressed the issues that Black women endured daily in the Black community. Black women sought recognition and solutions to survive. Nina Simone's songs like, "Four Women", "To Be Young Gifted and Black", and "Revolution Part 1 & 2", addressed the opposition of the misconceptions of Black female identity and also gave a light of hope that such gruesome conditions had the possibility to change. Nikki Giovanni's poems focused on issues of Black womanhood, motherhood, sisterhood, and the

power of the individual Black female voice. The ability for a woman to voice herself against different forms of oppression meant that she made the effort to change her outcomes and become the ruler of her own destiny. Catlett's sculptures and lithographs are visual images of historical Black women and women of 1960s and 1970s representations of being a Black woman/ a mother/ a daughter: were expressing the unyielding cycle of life and female expression to bring life into existence through the womb of a woman or through her potential creative expression in being a Black female artist. Shange's poem is a lyrical story that expresses an array of women's joy and frustrations with the battle to overcome both the trials of the female self and the influencing control others, yet with self-determination one could overcome the various forms of oppression and seek methods towards liberation.

These elements in the artwork of Catlett, Simone, Giovanni, and Shange were based on the Black aesthetic and black female aesthetic and other multi-dimensional aestheses that were individually found in each artist's gifts, talents, and genius. . For example such aesthetics were found in Simone's multi-genre music styles and song, and also found in Giovanni's revolutionary poetry and lectures. In her creative expression, Catlett's sculptures/lithographs were aesthetic forms of realism and abstraction. These forms of expression were also found in Shange's choreopoem. The work and messages that these four women promoted were elements of revolutionary ideas towards the possibilities of change and the power of the Black individual. These elements also expressed the possibilities of Black identification and the growth of cultural identity among Black people.

This thesis also asked, "How did the work of these four women reflect the interaction and intersection of cultural nationalism and black feminism?" The interaction of these four women was their reflection of communication to the leaders and advocates of both cultural nationalism

and black feminism. Through their art and activism/messages that these women brought to the people's attention and the reality of the sociopolitical issues that inferred or objected the ideas and possibilities of cultural nationalism and black feminism existing in Black America. Their works spoke against the silence and invisibility of Black people, especially Black women. It was important that the voice and visibility of Black men and Black women were heard during the revolution, otherwise liberation would not have been their objective. These women created a purpose to revolutionize Black people with their of these women was art and activism and they made no mistakes or apologies for their work and activism because they understood the reason why their voices and visibility to the nation was key to empowering themselves and Black people. Consequentially, through the different forms of artistic mediums that they delivered in their art and sociopolitical messages, they created an interaction that declared and confirmed the power of Black women in the black revolution. The works of these women also created an intersection between black feministic views and black cultural nationalism by expressing the issues of the individual Black woman in the Black community; she had issues that were complex and not just one-sided, or Black/White male-dominated. A Black woman also faced issues and if any Black man desired any support of the Black woman, she too had to address her problem in order to help him and others in the community with their problems or the possibilities of their advancements. These four women understood the power of the individual Black woman and her abilities and capacities to educate and uplift the Black community, therefore the works of these women did just that—educated and uplifted the individual Black woman about herself through reflective mediums so that she in return would educate and empower the Black community. The works of these women understood the objectives of black cultural nationalism and black feminism, which were in fact the emancipation of Black people through the new ideas of cultural

identification and the revolutionary methods of liberation from the oppression of White supremacy. The works of these four women/artists honored the goals and objectives of both missions of black cultural nationalism and black feminism, and completed the task by their own methods of creative expression and political activism, which in result was for the benefit for all in the Black community in America.

The last question addresses the impact these four women had on the Black Arts Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Feminist movement. There were several imprints, and the first influence was the artistic impression of these four women in the black freedom struggles and the feminist movement that freed and had undermined the concepts and disruptive actions of male domination and the superficial ideals of beauty of White woman. The artistic contributions of these four women inevitably freed Black/White men from being chauvinistic; men do not always have to dominate the lives of others. The works proved that Black women, willing by choice can and are able take care of themselves. The art of these women also freed White women from the superficiality of being the most beautiful human beings in world, Black women and men are beautiful too and they should have the ability to see their beauty for themselves.

The second impact was that their art permeated new and creative possibilities to combat the sociopolitical issues that hindered the possibilities of liberation. Every poetic line, every musical note, every single created surface, every objection was a factor to each movement, and these women had expressed the infinite possibilities of human expression within these political movements of the 1960s-1970s. Last but not least the impact of these four women gave a voice to the individual Black woman to stand and be counted for in the black freedom struggles and the black feminist movement. These women were courageous, bold, and were empowered enough to

say with their creative work and activism, “I am a Black female voice, I am here and this is what I can and will do in the fight against oppression.”

I learned many things from the artistry of these four women, in fact, too many to mention here, but I will address the significance of their artwork and activism in my life and the influence of their work to my own creativity as an artist. Few of the many things that I learned from these artists: Elizabeth Catlett, Nina Simone, Nikki Giovanni and Ntozake Shange are the power of recognition & self-affirmation. Recognition of self is important because in order to understand one’s purpose one must first recognize their ability to function in a specific space, time, and environment. Location is everything, but so is the ability to recognize the factors of altering one’s conditions through the process of awareness and higher consciousness. The creative expression and activism of these women have allowed to me to recognize within myself that I too have an opportunity to overcome many obstacles in life, career and in relationships, but one of those key factors to achieving a positive revolution is through the power of self-determination.

The words of Catlett in the 1961 speech at the Third Annual Meeting of the National Conference of the Negro Artists affirmed her allegiance to Black life and Black art requested the organization of Black people to create their own “all-black” exhibitions (Herzog 2000). This statement was made four years before Malcolm X’s speech that advocated the paths to black cultural nationalism, again Catlett through her speech proved that women can take the lead in the revolution.

What I learned through the use of Black creative expression from these women is not to be afraid to stand alone and not to be afraid to be different and embrace that uniqueness of myself. Malcolm X requested that Black people, which included Black women to be self-defined, self-determined, to have self-respect and to self-defend their beliefs in Black culture and



in the Black community. These factors are the principles I use in the formula (sd3 + sr1 = self-affirmation) to obtain, confidence, empowerment, and overall self-affirmation. Self-affirmation through this formula is defined as: a human being as individual who uses a process to gain for self the power of knowledge, purpose, esteem, and protection as methods to animate actions of affirming their existence in the world.

The examples of self-affirmation were in the works of each of these four women during and after the black revolution and also in the rise of the feminist movement. Simone was able to sing songs written solely by her or with the aid of White men and then turn those songs into her own flavor just by using her genius, either by changing and adding one note or one word to a song. One example is “I did it ‘My Way’”, recorded in 1972. This song affirmed that she can use her talents and alter details of her own story, but then she also created her own lyrics to the song, “Four Woman (1964)” which firmly expressed the details of the various identity of herself and many other Black women: “My name is Peaches...“Saffronia, ...or Aunt Sarah”. Nikki Giovanni affirmed her identity and revolution by reciting her words of poetry and brought the forms of African oral history back to the present realm of her reality. She expressed in the her poems the truth of her own experience, and explained how she was “Ego-Tripping” and was so fly because “I turned myself into myself and I was jesus”—her works are bold, unashamed, and fierce just like Elizabeth Catlett’s depictions of Black women. These women that Catlett portrayed stood at different statures throughout history and do so now in the present as artifacts of Black life. She also expressed how these women influenced her to be an artistic visionary using all of her senses to find herself at the end of her rainbow of elements and colors and still she decided that her story is important and that she must continue to visualize herself at the end of a rainbow instead of a pot of gold. Self-affirmation is also found in the quote“ i found god in myself/and i loved

her/ i loved her fiercely”—these are the very words expressed by the spirit of Ntozkae Shange. Self-affirmation indeed was vital to the movements that took place in the 1960s through the 1970s and beyond. The higher consciousness of the empowered Black woman helped her to self-define, self-defend herself with self-determination, and it assisted her to remember to respect her laws of her freedom that enabled her to witness and tell her own story, time and time again through her creative expression and activism.

I also learned through the artwork and activism of these women that the existence and power of dichotomy is very influential in the process of creating and demanding new possibilities. Dichotomy is a division or contrast between two opposing factors. The movements of the 1960s-1970s was not as observant or perceptive to the possibilities and contributions that Black women provided because of the underlining and consistent struggle that indicated that they were not essential, but that was totally a form of deception. The work of these four women and other women of this time period were indeed influential and was needed in each of these movements. Understanding a struggle requires an individual to understand that you are overcoming the deception that states that “you cannot” especially, when you know your freedom says, “you can, you have, and you will again”. These women artists expressed the realization of dichotomy in their artwork and activism, withstanding the deception of multiple factors that also included themselves. One may say they were errors in these movements, yes it is true, but I learned that these deceptive factors were part of the struggle that was needed so that these women can express themselves and say, “I know I am able to overcome any obstacle, trial or tribulation, or forms of oppression and I know it is because I am a self-affirmed being who is seeking my freedom and nothing will stop my revolution, my growth, my creativity, and my activism all which are needed for my liberation”. These women may have not uttered these

words directly, but they revealed it through their creative expressions and activism.

The struggle of recognition, self-affirmation, and dichotomy are essential realities that I have learned personally from the artistry and political messages of these four women, but I know that these contributions can be added on to the historical knowledge of women studied in the academics of Africana/Black Studies. These four women have added to the possibility of “Herstory”, the story of the Black woman in the world. This thesis has examined the artistry of over 20 Black women who contributed to the history of Black women. These four women, although two are deceased—(Simone, Catlett) Giovanni and Shange, all will live forever in the minds, hearts, and the experiences of many Black women and future generations who are exposed to the spirit of their works. Giovanni continues to write today and her latest contributions to the world are *Chasing Utopia: A Hybrid* (2013), *Bicycles: Love Poems* (2009), and *Harlem Stomp!: A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance with Laban Carrick* (2009). Her poetry and lectures continue to affect women and men alike throughout the country. Shange latest support to the growth of the Black woman’s story is a novel titled, *Some Sing, Some Cry* (2010) and a children’s book titled, *Coretta Scott* (2009). Shange’s choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* was released as movie in theaters titled, *For Colored Girls* (2010), directed by Tyler Perry. Having the same elements as Shange’s original written poem and co-directed screenplay in 1982, it too displayed the colors of the rainbow that revealed pain and joy of Black women. Although the movie was slightly different from the original written play, Perry delivered another opportunity for Black women to express the reality of their lives in a story that is universal.

So indeed the responsibility of storytelling is inevitable. It is the responsibility of the artist to choose whether or not to tell a story and choose the medium in which they express

his/her story. Catlett, Simone, Giovanni, and Shange chose to tell a story—many stories that expressed Black female life in America. Because the artistry of all these women addressed the universal issues that women face daily: womanhood, the loss of one's virginity, abortion, rape, marriage, sexuality, economical, cultural and social implications, and even the pursuits of happiness. Women all around the world will continue to witness the way Catlett, Simone, Giovanni, and Shange were all able to overcome some of the dichotomies of life, in that constant war between oppression and freedom, and they will recognize how these four women were triumphant. Different forms of technology played a big role in the “African”, “Negro”, and the “Black woman” knowing herself through pre-historic and historic times, with her use of rhetoric methods and the use of multi-dimensional aesthetics such as: oral history, written publications, radios, tvs, microphones, cds, dvds, and today; mp3's, and internet websites for social media life, like Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram, the incline of how and why she reveals her story to the world is no longer limited to one method. So if the world is able to view her at all through these different mediums it is just as important for her to be studied at universities and colleges and other forms of educational institutions around the world. The process of how she created and why she created Black Art can be studied allowing the academics of Africana/Black Studies to have new insight on the contributions and methods of creative expression that were in fact created by Black women. The students of academics in Africana/Black Studies can also learn from the contributions of Black women's activism through not only the marches and speeches but also through creative expression of art that included music, dance, visual fine arts, and poetry. What these students will learn is that a revolution can be produced by the individual who seeks the power and ability to change their circumstances and that determines the power of change and how they chose to change these circumstances that which is not limited to the acts of

violence, but in fact can produce change through art and activism.

“Herstory” is essential to my life and the lives of many Black women today, but it is also important to Black men, because it is also his mother, his foremothers that are being referred to here. This is the same woman and story that assisted and brought his existence to reality. If the Black man wants to know his history and seek his freedom it is vital that he knows the story of his foremothers, and grandmothers so that he can relate to his mother and his sister to aid them in the dichotomies in the battle of survival. Her story will help understand that if he limits her, he also limits himself; therefore, growth is also limited.

After reading, studying, analyzing and comparing the materials of these four women I came to the reality that these creative works served a great purpose to Black Studies. This project is very important to the studies of Black women, primarily because it affirms the artistic activism of Black women during different time periods in Black history, but specifically the time period of Black women artists during the 1960s-1970s. Furthermore, this study is vital because as a student who is a Black woman, and also a lover of the arts, I desired to understand the struggles of these Black women as creative activists that were empowered by challenges during the Black revolution. Lastly, this project is significant and resonates with me not only as a student, but also as an artist, who sometimes feels the pressure of societal issues and expectations that silences the expressions of my identity as a Black woman. The creative works of these women have proven to me that the inner voice of the individual Black woman is just as important as any White man or woman and also the voice of any Black man. Their struggles encouraged me as a multi-genre artist to know that my own photography, poetry, and painting, have a purpose but it is in the process of accepting self and being determined to express myself that I can overcome the trials of

these societal expectations that sometimes hinders my ability to express myself artistically or politically.

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