



Graduate Student Scholarship

Reverberations of a Black (Queer) Woman's Gaze in the Art of Mickalene Thomas and Deana Lawson

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Abstract

Expanding upon bell hooks's concept of the "oppositional gaze," I examine works by African American artists, Mickalene Thomas and Deana Lawson, to consider nuances of queer Black female spectatorship. This analysis explores how Thomas and Lawson's work offer complex perspectives on the Black female body that embrace queer desire while navigating and renegotiating the white male gaze. The article emphasizes the importance of expanding the discourse around the gaze to include queer perspectives that enrich the understanding of Black female identity and representation in the arts. Thomas's richly layered compositions challenge heteropatriarchal depictions of Black femininities and integrate moments of dazzling beauty and lush eroticism that create unapologetic spaces for Black queer women's visual pleasure. Her appropriations of classic artworks from the Western European art historical tradition situate her Black women sitters as empowered and self-possessed agents resistant to subjection by the white male gaze. Similarly, Lawson's photography traverses dynamics of race, gender, class, and sexuality while depicting

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her sitters as beautiful, self-possessed individuals navigating their proximity to racial and gender stereotypes and objectification. By analyzing specific artworks, I demonstrate how both Thomas and Lawson confront and engage with the historical limits on Black women's self-definition and self-articulation. Ultimately, this article emphasizes the importance of the recognition and visibility of (queer) Black women's agency, desire, and pleasure within the historically marginalizing context of white supremacist heteropatriarchal culture.

Keywords

Black feminist art, queer spectatorship, oppositional gaze, Black female subjectivity, visual culture

Introduction

In the essay, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," Black feminist scholar, bell hooks (1992), theorized a critical gaze that interrogates white¹ supremacist patriarchal representations in Hollywood film and television and engages with the counternarratives of independent Black cinema. hooks located the roots of the oppositional gaze in African American's experiences in the Jim Crow era U.S. South where racist social customs demanded punishment for Black adults and children who dared to fix their gaze upon white people (hooks, 1992). hooks noted that Black southern families continued a similar prohibition by disallowing their children to look any adult in the eye (hooks, 1992). Her theory of the oppositional gaze cogently counters this historical denial of African American's right to gaze freely. hooks's essay was an important intervention that brought needed attention to the ways Black women engage with visual culture. However, hooks's critique does not consider nuances of queer Black female spectatorship where same-sex longing and desire have great potential to unsettle heteronormative readings of a range of visual images. Through analysis of works by artists Mickalene Thomas and Deana Lawson, I expand the scope of hooks's implicitly heterosexual oppositional gaze and examine resistant Black female spectatorship nuanced by queer desire. I argue in this essay that Thomas and Lawson center Black women in evocative compositions that

create spaces for queer Black female visual pleasure while navigating and renegotiating the white male gaze.

Thomas is a queer Black multidisciplinary artist whose richly layered paintings often feature ornamental materials such as rhinestones and Swarovski crystals, combined with acrylic, enamel, and photo-based imagery. Her compositions frequently remix the styles of well-known artists from European art history, such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso (Crooks, 2018). Thomas's artwork navigates and renegotiates the white male gaze by referencing Cubist visual approaches and reworking classic art historical works by various male European artists, as seen in her Black feminist takes on French artists Édouard Manet's (1863) *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* and Gustave Courbet's (1866) *L'Origine du Monde*. Thomas weaves queer Black feminist aesthetics and sensibilities into her reinterpretations of masterpieces of the Western art historical canon, confidently asserting a powerful, sovereign Black feminine embodied presence.

Thomas captures the multifaceted self-possession and sensuality of her sitters in works that boldly communicate her lesbian subjectivity and desire (Murray, 2016). Speaking about the roles of beauty and lesbian attraction in her art during an interview, Thomas stated:

It's about visual play, and it's about visual manipulation, desire. And women are beautiful; I'm attracted to women. It could be my libido lust...but yes, sexuality, desire, all of those things that I put in my painting are very important to me because that's how I see the women in my life; it's how I want the world to see them. It's putting them on the same platform of the ideology of beauty. Also validating and allowing people to see us. So we can be seen so we can represent ourselves and say we are here....it's a way of celebrating who we are (Wosuartzine, 2018).

Thomas makes central the eroticism of the Black women sitters in her work, often depicting them in the nude. The presence of the Black female nude in art, however, has historically been fraught with tension due to the ongoing objectification of and violence toward the Black (female) body in white supremacist, ableist, heteropatriarchal visual culture. Art historian, Derek Conrad Murray (2016),

explained that “...the nude has been an enduring taboo in the history of African American art, a condition that was motivated by a desire to forego the fetishization and objectification of black bodies: a remnant of the ravages of slavery” (p.123).

Thomas’s artwork unapologetically reveals her subjectivity as a queer Black woman artist and makes visible her “desiring gaze” (Murray, 2016, p. 116) for the feminine, conventionally attractive Black women she features in her work. Her mother, lovers, and friends are some of the most important sources of inspiration for her artmaking, serving as sitters when Thomas is not using herself as a model. Thomas’s work often features nuanced full-figure portraits of Black women that reveal her intimacy with her sitters, an intimacy the viewer is invited into through the artist’s queer interventions into the representation of Black femininities. As Thomas stated in an interview, “It’s not just me choosing... a woman from some obscure place and thinking about them...these are relationships that are built” (Wosuartzine, 2018).

Carrie Mae Weems, Carla Williams, Xaviera Simmons, Renée Cox, and other Black women photographers, who, like Thomas, have been active from the late 20th century to the present, have helped to redefine imagery of the Black female body. These artists and others have powerfully countered the conventional framing of the Black female body and sexuality as inherently threatening and pathological through their work (Gilman, 2010). It is important to note that queer Black women are triply marginalized within this sort of pathologization. As writer and critic, Antwaun Sargent observed, Thomas “breaks from an aesthetic that has privileged not only the way white men look at Black women, but also the gazes of Black men and white feminists over the way Black women see themselves” (Sargent, 2018, p. 69-70).

Gazing “Against the Grain”

I build upon hooks’s articulation of resistant spectatorial practices to examine how Thomas and Lawson’s art offer spaces where Black queer women² can experience visual pleasure without having to gaze “against the grain” (Kuhn, as cited in hooks, 1992, p. 123). As hooks explained, “Given the context of class exploitation, and racist and sexist domination, it has only been through resistance, struggle, reading, and looking ‘against the grain,’ that black women have been able to value our process

of looking enough to publicly name it” (hooks, 1992, p. 126). A queer Black woman’s gaze, when seen in the work of Thomas and Lawson, is a way of looking that navigates and renegotiates the ubiquity of the white male gaze. Thomas and Lawson’s art challenge stereotyped conceptions of Black women’s bodies and sexualities through evocations of queer desire that affirm the agency, self-possession, and eroticism of their sitters. Black lesbian poet, Cheryl Clarke (1983), in her essay “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” articulated the decolonial feminist autonomy of lesbian subjects:

And the lesbian—that woman who...has succeeded in resisting the slave master’s imperialism in that one sphere of her life. The lesbian has decolonized her body. She has rejected a life of servitude implicit in Western, heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential of mutuality in a lesbian relationship—roles notwithstanding (p. 128).

Queer African American women have largely overcome the historical denial of their right to freely look, to gaze, while claiming a potentially decolonized and liberated self, by heeding their desire for other women and rejecting compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). The resistance of queer women to the norms of proper female comportment underscores their defiance of heteropatriarchal control. Viewing visual culture against the grain and reappropriating imagery from the dominant visual culture have been powerful forms of spectatorial resistance for queer women. Thomas and Lawson’s art offer queer women viewers the pleasure of looking at images constructed through a lens of dynamic queer or queer-positive Black subjectivity without having to gaze against the grain.

Analysis of Thomas’s Works

Thomas’s multidimensional and fragmentary Cubist inspired portraits resist singular readings and work against the one-point perspectival vision established during the Renaissance period in Western European art. This one-point perspectival view “sought to make the world comprehensible to the powerful figure who stood at the single point from which it was drawn” (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 8). No single point of view of the subject reigns supreme as the fractured perspectives in Thomas’s paintings

offer multiple points of entry into the scene, disrupting the authoritative position of the viewer. Furthermore, the Cubist fracturing of space invokes a Conjure Feminist³ sense of temporality that makes Thomas's sitters appear as if they emerge from a "conflation of time as the past, present, and future coexist together" (Brooks, et. Al, 2021, p. 456).

In the 2015 composition, *Maya #7*, Thomas's emotive photographic rendering of the intense gaze of her former partner, Maya, is particularly compelling amid the fragmentary depictions of her body and the pictorial space she occupies. Thomas's imagery communicates the power of the erotic, as understood by Black lesbian feminist pioneer, Audre Lorde. In her classic essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde (1984) asserted, "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (p. 53). Maya's demure posture contrasts strikingly with her defiant gaze and suggests that she is not available to just anyone; rather, it is her choice whom she allows into her personal space. Maya's gaze confronts, while her partially nude figure seduces the viewer, creating a complicated ground for the displacement of the white male gaze and the visualization of Black lesbian desire.

The combination of neutral tones with a grey scale palette lends a sense of historicity of time and place to the artwork. Half of Maya's body is rendered in a flat, crystal encrusted painted style while the other half is depicted with a black and white photographic aesthetic. The image, composed in a collage style, plays with expectations that a bare breasted, sensual Black woman, should inherently connote the Jezebel stereotype, which would likely confine Maya to the realms of objectification and abuse. The emotional weight of Maya's gaze, and the imagined interaction between Thomas and her sitter, becomes transferred to the encounter between Maya and the viewer.

Thomas's artwork, *November 1971* (2019), features a photo appropriated from *Jet* magazine's "Beauty of the Week" feature that is transformed by large swathes of pixelated imagery that obscures more than half of the model's face, her right breast, right upper arm, and part of her torso and hip. The top and left side of the model's head and her left eye and breast are exposed and rendered in the style of a black and white photo. In this artwork, Thomas interrupts the objectifying white male gaze and conceals the *Jet* magazine beauty behind partial anonymity, by pixelating areas

of the model's body with small blue and brown skin toned squares. This difference between the black and white photographic style of the revealed parts of the model's body, and the color pixelated squares that conceal other parts of her body, brings temporality to the fore, again, since black and white photography and color digitally manipulated imagery, emerge from distinctly different time periods. Thomas has sourced this *Jet* magazine "Beauty of the Week" from the by gone era of the 1970s, dramatically reimagining the image through her artistic interventions. The background of this artwork is multitextured and multipatterned and includes a bed with leopard print pillows, a subtle acknowledgement of the white male gaze and its exoticizing white supremacist, heteropatriarchal associations of Black women with animality. The pixelated portions of the image also suggest that there are parts of this woman that are beyond reach, that she is not as available as she might be expected to be. The pixelation causes the woman's body to recede as though portions of her form have become part of the background, blending into the rhythmic pattern of the small vulva-like designs scattered throughout the background behind the model. The pixelated areas of the sitter's figure in *November 1971* create a vacillating figure/ground relationship, inviting perception of the model as both subject and object⁴. Despite the model's pose signaling sexual availability, keeping with the centerfold aesthetics of *Jet* magazine's "Beauty of the Week," Thomas complicates access to the sitter's body through the painting's fragmentary and illusionistic rendering of a figure in an interior space.

Shinique: Now I Know (2015) highlights a half-nude, full-length reclining figure that echoes French Neoclassical painter, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's masterpiece painting, *La Grande Odalisque* (1814). The large blue and green colored eye shape that partially covers the sitter's right eye, brings attention to the significance of her gaze. Shinique looks as though she was caught by surprise. The surprise with which she greets the viewer unsettles the objectifying white male gaze, as Shinique looks directly at the viewer with a slight smirk; she is captured in a self-conscious moment of lifting her skirt or perhaps readjusting it to modestly cover her thighs. There is an empty chair positioned at the lower right of the composition, inviting the viewer to join in the scene.

Deana Lawson

In a manner complementary to Thomas's, Black woman photographer, Deana Lawson, creates imagery that navigates and renegotiates the white male gaze while offering spaces of identification and desire for queer Black women viewers. Deana Lawson, born in 1979 and based in Brooklyn, New York, names the inspirations for her work as:

Vintage nudes, Sun Ra, Nostrand Ave., sexy mothers, juke joints, cousins, leather bound family albums, gnarled wigs, Dana Lawson, purple, The Grizzly Man, M.J., oval portraits, Arthur Jaffa, thrift shops, Breakfast at Tiffany's, acrylic nails, weaves on pavement, Aaron Gilbert, the A train, Tell My Horse, typewriters, Notorious B.I.G., fried fish, and lace curtains (Wender, 2017).

These creative inspirations are queer, diverse, and multifarious, naming elements endemic to Black communities and influences essential to the life story, personality, and tastes of the artist. These influences are infused in the Black working class aesthetic that Lawson often features in her photography. I recognize a queering of the representation of the Black female body in Lawson's work, even if she identifies as heterosexual (she was formerly married to the artist Aaron Gilbert). German philosopher Antke Engel (2014) suggested:

...[Q]ueer is not primarily about sexuality, but is about challenging power relations that can never be separated out in relation to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or class. The acknowledgement of entwined power relations means that people always embody this complexity simultaneously, as social beings that encompass a spectrum of abilities (and debilities) (p. 4).

Lawson's gaze, when seen through her photography, presents erotically charged Black female figures resistant to objectification and easy co-optation. The artist does not deliver a contained, compliant female figure, ready for consumption by the white male gaze.

When I first became acquainted with Lawson's photography, it was upon seeing *Sharon* (2007) in a photography publication. I was struck by the beauty of the statuesque Black woman standing nude before sheer white curtained windows and a radiator with her back to the viewer and her torso and head turned slightly to meet the lens of the camera (thereby, meeting the gaze of the viewer). *Sharon* can be appropriated as an object of desire for the Black lesbian gaze and potentially become an image of both desire and identification. In *Sharon*, Lawson highlights the sitter's posterior as her back is to the camera while she turns her body and head slightly to acknowledge the viewer. The sitter commands the empty physical space like a stage as the curtained windows become backdrops for the evocative display of Sharon's nude body.

The legacy of Sarah Baartman, pejoratively known as the Hottentot Venus, looms large in much of Lawson's photography of Black women. Baartman was a South African Khoisan woman who was publicly exhibited in a cage as a curiosity in 19th century Europe. After Baartman's death, her physical remains (including her preserved skeleton and genitals) were displayed in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until 1974 (Kendi, 2016). Baartman's remains were finally repatriated and buried near her birthplace in South Africa in 2002 (Willis, 2010). Europeans fetishized Baartman's physical features and perceived her *derrière* and genitals, in particular, as unusual and titillating. Baartman's victimization in life and after death bears parallels to Black women's pervasive objectification and hypersexualization in popular culture today. Baartman's legacy is still relevant for contemporary Black women artists. As writer and critic Antwaun Sargent pointed out, "The need for images of Black women by Black women takes on considerably more urgency considering the ways their image has been abused throughout history" (Sargent, 2018, p. 67).

The exposure of Sharon's body, her vulnerability before the camera, and the sense of reality conveyed by the photographic image connects Lawson's nudes with Baartman's history as an examined body that European spectators treated as a sideshow attraction. Histories of dehumanized representation of Black women haunt this 21st century image of Black beauty; Sharon's body cannot be wrenched away from centuries of misrepresentation. Nonetheless, Lawson's confident intervention

into the history of imagery of the Black female body beckons the viewer. Lawson, in an interview, discussed her relationship to her sitters:

Most of the subjects were initially strangers. I'm drawn to seemingly 'ordinary' individuals who I might pass while shopping in downtown Brooklyn, or whom I observe on the subway train. This is the person, the woman, who I want to use as my muse. Many subjects have expressed that because I am a woman they have felt comfortable posing for my camera. I am always honored and appreciative to be let in. I understand it is a privilege (Wender, 2017).

It is important to note that many of Lawson's female sitters feel comfortable before her camera. The safety and comfort of Lawson's sitters is secured by her appreciation for the women who often disrobe for her camera. Lawson's respect for the privilege of access to her sitters also refutes the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal sense of entitlement to access to Black female bodies, routinely exerting rights of ownership over them. Although Lawson certainly has a distinct, documentary aesthetic, her imagery self-consciously bears the residue of the real, prompting the viewer to believe that they are being offered the truth about the sitters in her photography. However, Lawson's scenes are carefully constructed.

Lawson's *Diva at 73 Years Old* (2009) highlights an elegant older Black woman sitting on a couch with legs crossed surrounded by an intriguing collection of paintings and sculptures. The sitter is nude except for a fashionable jacket draping her shoulders. The photo shows the woman as an object of desire and beauty, refuting a youth obsessed heteropatriarchal culture. Simply depicting a 73-year-old Black woman as desirable queers the conventional image of feminine beauty as young, white, thin, and blonde in a culture where elder Black women are made invisible, and rarely, if ever, shown as sexually attractive. The fit and youthful appearance of the sitter, who appears younger than her 73 years, allows her to conform to a normative standard of African American female beauty. Meanwhile, the diva's confident self-presentation upsets conventional notions that due to her age, she is not worthy of being upheld as an object of desire.

In Lawson's *Eternity* (2017), the Black female sitter appears in dark blue lingerie in the quotidian setting of the living room of a working-class home. The sitter's

shadow projects slightly in front of her standing figure in the photograph. Her curves are evident in the shadow as the light source bounces light from the upper right of the picture plane. The lack of extensive image editing on the woman's body subverts easy consumption by the white male gaze. The varied pigmentation on the woman's skin, interrupts the perfect skin, as seen in pornographic or advertising images, making her body easier for Black women viewers to identify with as an image of attainable beauty.

Conclusion

In “The Oppositional Gaze,” bell hooks frequently referred to the status of women in Hollywood film, stating that when Black women were present in movies “our bodies and being were there to serve—to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallogentric gaze” (hooks, 1992, p.119). Thomas and Lawson center and reframe Black women within the contours of a queer(ing) Black female gaze that celebrates their sitters' beauty, eroticism, and self-possession. Thomas and Lawson's art also welcome new audiences to the art museum. Having their work on display allows Black museum goers to see reflections of themselves within elite white cultural spaces. The inclusion of Black (queer) woman creators in the collections of an array of contemporary cultural institutions is important to diversify the range of perspectives that museum goers may experience and to document the presence of diverse identities in the population.

The work of Thomas and Lawson challenges centuries of depictions of the Black female body in Western art and reposition Black women as self-possessed subjects with agency, resistant to co-optation and possession by the white male gaze. Thomas and Lawson open space for Black queer female visual pleasure and present images of Black women with which other Black women viewers can identify and empathize. Taking hook's oppositional gaze a few steps further, I assert that Thomas and Lawson hold space for (Black) queer women to experience desire freely through their artworks, without having to gaze against the grain.

In the case of Thomas, her presentation of queer imagery and desire bring visibility of lesbian ways of loving into the public realm. Her work is significant in its complex views of queer Black women brought forward as “bod[ies] of desire” (hooks, 1992, p. 120). The sense of rightness of fit is also relevant to Lawson's work in which

her depictions of Black women's beauty and sexuality may feel comfortably familiar to some (queer) Black women. heralding shifts in the artistic representation of Black women's bodies in the 21st century, Thomas and Lawson are provocative leaders in envisioning new spaces for queer women's desire in the realm of contemporary art.

Notes

¹ I write “white” with a lower case “w” and “Black” with an upper case “B” here and will elsewhere in my writing to indicate my privileging of Black experiences and identities amidst the vagaries of global white supremacist domination. I use the lower case “w” in “white” to decenter whiteness and shift focus away from the conventional privileging of white bodies, identities, and social structures.

² I use the term “Black queer women” to refer to cisgender and transgender women of African descent who are romantically and/or sexually attracted to women.

³ Conjure Feminism is a Black feminist theory developed by scholars Kinitra Brooks, Kameelah Martin, and LaKisha Simmons that validates Black women's epistemologies and connections to African derived practices of spirituality and religion, the supernatural, and community.

⁴ In an earlier iteration of her website in 2021, Thomas described the women sitters in her images as oscillating between the positions of subject and object (Thomas website, n.d.).

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