

# Artist interviews and revisionist art history: women of African descent, critical practice and methods of rewriting dominant narratives

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## I. Introduction

Artist interviews are an important method for historicising, capturing the nuances of the artist's experience, practice and voice. The experiential knowledge of the artist can provide clarity to various historical, social and cultural underpinnings that inform the artistic process. When exploring the experiences of women artists of African descent, artist interviews document hidden, subjugate knowledge that describe the ways in which artists on the margins of the art world navigate their artistic careers. In this paper, I will reflect on over ten years of conducting and collecting interviews with and by women artists of African descent in a variety of formats (e.g. narrative arts writing, academic research and documentary film/video) to note the specific ways that artists' interviews help to rewrite art-historical narratives. In addition to interviews in my personal collection, I compare the ways that artists' interviews in national archives within the United States similarly uncover counternarratives within African American culture and across the African diaspora. While I will focus primarily on artists in the US in this paper, I also draw from experiences of interviewing women artists throughout the African diaspora to explore the importance of artists' interviews within a global context.

Though there are several frameworks that can be used for artists' interviews, I will explore the significance of using critical methods found in black feminist thought, African art and curatorial history as models for interviewing artists who exist on the margins of society. Artist interviews approached in these ways are embodying the project of moving people from the margins to the centre. Furthermore, artist interviews that are strategic and transformative in their production and analysis do what black feminist bell hooks describes as 'talking back' to dominant narratives within art history.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Critical methods and practice

### A. Black feminist thought

Just as art history has focused on the voices of white male artists, art-historical analyses that include a gender-based and/or feminist framework tend to prioritise the works and contributions of white women artists. As a result, a black feminist

<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, 'Talking Back', *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, Boston: South End Press, 1989, 5–9.

framework has become imperative to ensure that the experiences of women of the African diaspora are included within art history and to critically engage with the cultural aesthetics and practices that inform their work.<sup>2</sup> Black feminism also expands the representation of black women artists that are explored within art circles to include voices that may not be mainstream within the international art scene but who are important contributors no less.

Black feminist thought is a framework that has been defined by scholars like sociologist Patricia Hill Collins to allow researchers, especially self-identified black female scholars, to use their personal knowledge of the black experience as a method of uncovering hidden cultural knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Collins calls this the 'outsider within' perspective, a status that provides a special standpoint on self, family and society for black women.<sup>4</sup> According to Collins, 'many Black intellectuals, especially those in touch with their marginality in academic settings, tap this standpoint in producing distinctive analyses of race, class and gender'.<sup>5</sup> As a black artist, curator and scholar, I employ Collins' 'outsider within' perspective when conducting artist interviews with women artists of African descent because of the 'interrelatedness' of engaging in 'research surrounding black women and their experiences'.<sup>6</sup> In other words, I acknowledge, as Collins suggests, that while there is a collective consciousness amongst black women, the experiences of black women are also diverse both individually and collectively as other forms of identity influence their reality, such as through socio-economic status, sexuality, ability and other forms of difference. Collins' 'outsider within' framework allows black women researchers to be sensitive to those nuances amongst black women that are often unknown within dominant cultural narratives. In this respect, when interviewing women artists of African descent during my research and creative work, my interviews are very much like in-depth conversations, allowing me to pull on related cultural knowledge that is shared amongst black women. There are rare cases where I know an artist personally while I am interviewing them; however, there are instances of deep cultural knowing and awareness that emerge within these dialogues, allowing perspectives and experiences specific to black women artists to become more

<sup>2</sup> Alice Walker and Layli Maparyan's womanism is an equally comparable framework for analysing the experiences of everyday black women, which I have championed in other writings. While womanism and black feminism are sometimes used interchangeably, I use black feminism within the context of this article because I identify with Patricia Hill Collins' use of black feminism within the context of conducting qualitative research interviews. See Alice Walker, *In Search of My Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, London: The Women's Press, 1984; Layli Maparyan, *Womanist Idea*, London: Routledge, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> In her seminal text *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins describes the underpinnings of the personalised knowledge of black womanhood as a 'black woman's standpoint', suggesting that one's personal experiences as a black woman provide a particular situated knowledge. From Patricia Hill Collins, 'The Politics of Black Feminist Thought', *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, London: Routledge, 1999, 1–19.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought', *Social Problems* 33: 6, 1986, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within', 14.

<sup>6</sup> Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within', 530.

crystallised. These occurrences during interview conversations reveal shared understandings of being black women that transcend generational and geographical background, and bear witness to Collins' expression that black women have situated understandings of being both black and women that are a reflection of their experiences in everyday life.

By bringing my full experience and reality as a black woman to my interviews with other black women artists, our conversations become exactly what Collins describes as reflective of black feminist researchers: the ability to 'move themselves and their disciplines closer to greater humanist visions'.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, texts such as Lisa Farrington's *Creating their own image: the history of African-American women*; Phoebe Farris's *Women Artists of Colour: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook to 20th Century Artists in the Americas*; Leslie King-Hammond's *Gumbo ya ya: anthology of contemporary African-American women artists*; and Jontyle Theresa Robinson's *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists* have provided me with an advanced knowledge of the black aesthetic and black art history as it relates to women artists of colour. These art-historical frameworks written by black women scholars have become helpful tools to pair with black feminism, allowing me to be knowledgeable of the language, terminology and cultural discourses expressed within the artistic practices of those I interview. Such an advantage allows my scholarly understanding to be enhanced by each interview, and my field of knowledge to expand. While Collins describes this phenomenon in the context of sociology, I see relevance for black feminism within the field of art history.

A black feminist perspective towards the artist interview allows for new questions to be asked and creates the opportunity for culturally relevant reflections from the artist. As Patricia Hill Collins suggests, black feminist methods require the creation of new 'standards for evaluating Afro-American womanhood' and 'the necessity for Black female self-definition and self-valuation'.<sup>8</sup> In this way, I see my interviews with women artists of African descent as setting the tone for innovation in the field of art history by allowing the histories that we create to acknowledge the ways in which the black cultural experience translates to the creative process. While academia often calls for a homogenous 'socialisation process' for both academics and artists, black feminism requires both the researcher and the artist to call on 'Black women's experienced realities, both prior to contact (with the academy) and after initiation'.<sup>9</sup> Reflecting on one's experiential knowledge as a black woman, provides 'insights ... available to that category of outsiders who have been systematically frustrated by the social system'.<sup>10</sup> To become insiders, Collins argues that black women 'must assimilate a standpoint that is quite different than their own', making it difficult to communicate and relate to the experiences of their community.<sup>11</sup> In short, Collins' theory suggests that like the field of sociology, sometimes studio and art-historical training may limit the artist or scholar from

<sup>7</sup> Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within', 530.

<sup>8</sup> Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within', 18.

<sup>9</sup> Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within', 25.

<sup>10</sup> Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within', 25.

<sup>11</sup> Collins. 'Learning from the Outsider Within', 25–26.

accessing the personal and cultural experiences that are most familiar to them within the paradigms of the profession. For me personally, critical discourses outside the field of art and art history in black studies, ethnic studies, black feminism and womanism became more important knowledges to rely on to better understand the cultural contexts within the work of women artists of African descent. The insufficiency of art history to tell the full story of the black experience requires black artists, curators and scholars to consider different methods, knowledges and ways of being to make important contributions to the field that are distinctive and revisionist in nature. In this way, I see a black feminist approach to artist interviews as not only a method for expanding the field of art history but also an act of resistance against the racism and pillars of white supremacy that place the lived realities of artists of colour outside the cultural narrative.

## **B. African art and interviews as bodies of knowledge**

In the field of African art, interviews allow researchers to prioritise different perspectives and approaches in order to uncover new and hidden knowledge as well. Africanist Patrick McNaughton describes this reality as having a specific 'background and bent of mind' that allows one to 'flag objects, events, and ideals about the world' that reflect different aspects of the human condition.<sup>12</sup> Similar to Collins' theory of the 'outsider within', the Africanist perspective of interviews allows for a means to better understand the interconnected cultural influences that inform the experiences of African artists and artists of African descent.

McNaughton's notion of a 'bent' perspective means that there are certain aspects of one's personal experience that prompt certain questions that might not be relevant to the next person. I see this reality as reflective of my own experiences interviewing black artists. My specific experience as a black woman and interest in the relationships across the African diaspora informs the way that I come to the interview experience.

In my interview experiences, my interest in Africanisms and African-inspired relationships between the black experience across the African diaspora have allowed me to capture moments of diasporic identity within the art practices of women of African descent. African ancestry, for instance, is a key framework within my own art practice and therefore I am always curious as to how other black women artists might be interested in similar questions in their work. While I certainly enjoy learning about the ways that African ancestry informs the work of women artists of African descent that I interview, an interest in or knowledge of one's African ancestry is not essential for a meaningful interview. Instead, an Africanist approach to the artist interview allows for certain levels of cultural consciousness to emerge and become more defined, and illuminates the ways in which some black artists may or may not be connected to certain cultural communities for a myriad of different reasons, including the limited access and

<sup>12</sup> Patrick McNaughton, 'Talking to People About Art,' Eds. Joanna Grabski and Carol Maggee. *African Art, Interviews, Narratives: Bodies of Knowledge at Work*. Indiana University Press, 2012. 18.

awareness of African history across diaspora communities and the different interrelationships between people of African descent.

### C. Conversations and curatorial historicising

Curatorial research and practice uses documented and undocumented conversation as key sources for historicising exhibitions, artists and artistic practices. These curated conversations may be either formal or informal but are critical methods for capturing the curatorial process. Most importantly the documentation of formal and semi-formal interviews or conversations are not only strategies that curators use to build the context for their work but document the development of curatorial history, the narratives and experiences that make up curatorial ideas and programmes over time. Popular international curator Hans Ulrich Obrist is famous for his expansive archive of documented artist conversations, suggesting that books are not the only way to preserve the past.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, conversations or interviews are both archival and tell a story about process and ideas considered valuable. To put it another way, Obrist argues that curatorial history *is* 'oral history' under development.<sup>14</sup> For Obrist, ongoing conversations or interviews with artists illustrate the people, experiences and ideas that inform art-making.

While Obrist is a white, male curator, I believe that his framework for the use of interviews and conversations is useful and informative not only for curatorial history but for art history as well. As a black curator, documenting the ongoing conversations I have with artists both informally or formally within the curatorial process both tells a story about the ideas that drive my practice as well as the artists and the art scene that exist in the world. Furthermore, I would like to expand Obrist's connection of the curatorial to oral history because of the ways in which African-based oral narratives have been critical methods in documenting the histories of Black people, such as African American oral traditions past and present.<sup>15</sup> In this way, I believe that Obrist's theory for curatorial conversations can be drawn from to look more closely at the documented interviews and curatorial conversations between black curators and artists, such as those conducted by Thelma Golden (director of The Studio Museum in Harlem) and Kellie Jones (art historian and curator) with artists of African descent. Like interviews championed through the lens of black feminism and African art, curatorial conversations also uncover new information that is important to the artist. Golden's and Jones' interviews, specifically, expose practical realities that artists of African descent experience while building careers in the arts, like being limited to shows featuring only black artists or never getting questions about their specific contributions to artistic technique. Most importantly, since curators are often interested in the relationship between art, space and display, their interviews with black artists

<sup>13</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Infinite Conversations', *Ways of Curating*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2014. Kindle file.

<sup>14</sup> Obrist, 'Infinite Conversations'. Kindle file.

<sup>15</sup> Darwin T. Turner. "African-American History and the Oral Tradition." *Books at Iowa* 53, 1990. 7-12. Web. <https://doi.org/10.17077/0006-7474.1186>

expose the politics of exhibition within the life of an artist that is not typically expressed within a traditional qualitative interview or interview within arts publications.

### **III. Conversations with African American women artists: rewriting dominant narratives**

I have been interviewing artists of African descent both formally and informally for over ten years. Some interviews were collected as a result of seeking feedback from other artists, while other interviews were captured in order to prepare for specific creative projects I was working on, from film, arts writing to curating exhibitions and panel discussions. The critical methods that were employed depend heavily on the purpose of the interviews and what they might produce. As mentioned, my interviews overall use a black feminist and/or womanist perspective consistently where I draw from my concerns as a black artist, curator and scholar when interviewing other women artists of African descent.<sup>16</sup> My goal in practicing a black feminist standpoint is to identify the patterned commonalities, differences and nuances that exist amongst women artists of colour. Additionally, interviews with women of African descent that exist within archives identify overarching trends that expand the history of African American women artists and women of African descent. Archival interviews remain comparable to my personal archives with African American women artists. To demonstrate this, I will compare themes surrounding the history and experiences of women of African descent based in the US that come out of the artist interviews in my own personal archives as well as comparable interviews within the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. These interviews are particularly important because they feature interviews and conversations with artists who do not necessarily have mainstream status but are deserving of attention because they expand the understanding of African American contemporary art, history and practice. I will analyse first the experiences of Vicki and Annette Lawrence as African American women contemporary artists living in the South and how their experiences expand notions of African American women artists living outside of mainstream art and cultural centres like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Additionally, I will compare the interviews compiled within an excerpt from *The Skin Quilt Project* with two oral history interviews located in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art for Carolyn Mazloomi (featured in *The Skin Quilt Project*) and Peggy Hartwell to explore the ways my conversations with African American fiber artists continues to illustrate the impact of early African American women artists on contemporary art and culture.

<sup>16</sup> While some scholars use the terms black feminist and womanist interchangeably, I support the idea that black feminism and feminism at large are different frameworks from womanist thought. Layla Phillips Maparyan has outlined the distinctions between these frameworks in her texts *The Womanist Reader* and *The Womanist Idea*. For the purposes of this paper, I use black feminist thought as a key perspective because its 'outsider within' position most accurately describes the realities of being a black artist, curator, scholar engaging in artist interviewing.

## **A. An analysis of archives: a comparative view of Cross' artist interviews and the Smithsonian Archives of American Art**

### **1. African American women artists living and working in the South (Texas)**

My personal archive features recorded interviews as well as documented and undocumented conversations with African American artists Annette Lawrence and Vicki Meek, who are both from the East Coast and who enjoy successful artistic careers while currently living in the state of Texas. The significance of my ongoing conversations with these artists is informed by a black feminist standpoint: my own experience as a black artist, curator and scholar who was born, raised and is currently living in Texas, and who has lived and received artistic training both in the East Coast of the United States (Boston, Massachusetts) and abroad (London, England).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, my ongoing conversations with these artists both formally and informally have given me a deeper understanding of their practices than perhaps a standard public-facing artist interview or typical interview for academic research. I have also known them both personally and professionally for over six years, therefore informing the nuances of how our ongoing conversations have grown overtime. As a result, any given interview can weave in and out of a black feminist 'outsider within' framework where I may have personal information about each artist while at the same time continuing to learn more about them at the same time.

Initially, my conversations with Annette Lawrence and Vicki Meek were far more formal. I was fascinated by their particular stories because they outlined the ways in which their careers blossomed in Texas, more specifically in the city of Houston (my hometown) and have experienced continued growth both in the Greater Dallas/Fort Worth and Denton regions and beyond. In my conversations with these artists it has been important to trace common arts institutions that link artists together, namely Project Row Houses, Community Artist Collective and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) in Houston, Texas; as well as arts institutions and cultural figures in Dallas, such as the public art programme for the Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) stations, the Dallas Museum of Art, and the Nasher Sculpture Center, which carved out spaces for their professional success. While my own artistic career did not begin in Houston, it was interesting to see that the same art institutions that framed Lawrence's and Meek's formative success as

<sup>17</sup> A black feminist standpoint from the perspective of Patricia Hill Collins suggests that one's situated knowledge or various positions/roles within society inform how you see or understand the world. For me, the various experiential realities that I embody inform how I think about the specific questions I want to ask in an artist interview. It is an acknowledgement that as a researcher there are life experiences that inform my questions that reflect the questions I ask of myself. In this way, my interviews are in relationship with others. I am learning about other artists of colour while also learning about myself and my own position. See Patricia Hill Collins, 'The Politics of Black Feminist Thought', *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, London: Routledge, 1999, 1–19.

artists were also the same institutions that I had access to regularly as a child and that showcased artists from across the African diaspora who would later inform my own artistic practice. Additionally, both artists found regional and national success while practicing art in Texas, having works collected by important museum and private collections in the region. Their success, along with the documented success of other African American artists who have emerged from the art scene in Houston, illustrates the ways in which this city, among other targeted cities throughout the US outside typical cultural centres like New York and Los Angeles (such as Chicago and Atlanta), has cultivated the careers of artists across the African Diaspora.

It is significant to note how the artists' black identity impacts their work differently. While Annette Lawrence's work is autobiographical, often translating data and information from everyday life into visual representations in time and space, Vicki Meek's installations and serial works can be seen as proclamations on the social and cultural realities of people of African descent. Yet it is also apparent how the relatively low cost of living in Texas, and its small artist communities, has informed and enhanced both their experiences as artists. While living in Texas might be interpreted to some artists living outside major art epicentres as a disadvantage, artists like Lawrence and Meek see the accessible economic price point within Texas to have served their careers well, providing the ability to maintain a studio practice and to afford travel: two resources that highly enrich the life of the studio artist. Furthermore, living in Texas where the artistic communities are relatively small means that they can benefit from the access to cultural and professional networks both locally and beyond, which makes the development of professional relationships both inside and outside the region highly manageable and sustainable. Their professional realities as African American women living and working in the South, while overall positive in nature, are also impacted by the racial bias that exists while living as black women within a racist society, especially within the South; the limitations of not living and working directly in large art and cultural geographical centres, and the professional bias towards the specific cultural and visual aesthetics present or not present in their artistic practice.



Figure 1 Vicki Meek, *LifePath 5: Action/Restlessness*, 2009. Installation, variable dimensions. Houston: Project Row Houses. Courtesy of Vicki Meek.



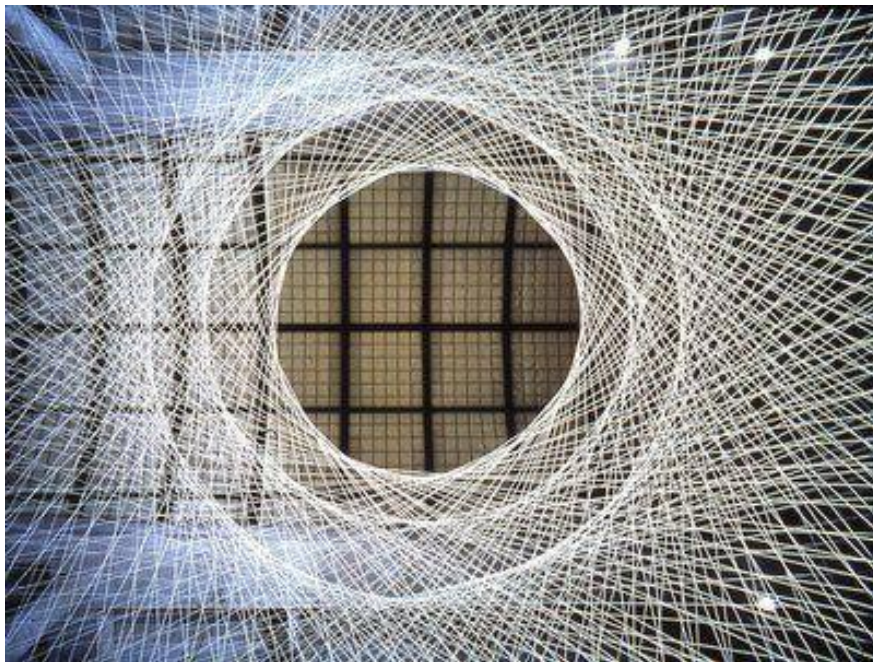


Figure 2 Annette Lawrence, *Theory*, 2003. Paper, string, tape, glue, 11.9m x 7.3m x 0.6m. Houston: The Glassell School. Courtesy of Annette Lawrence.

Comparing the interviews with Lawrence and Meek, there are also important distinctions in artistic process and practice that come to the surface. Both artists are informed by different variations, artists and cultural players within the black aesthetic; specific areas of consciousness and artistic interests within African American art history; and had access to different generational figures and artists within the African diaspora. Lawrence, an African American artist from New York, had grown up with a very limited knowledge of African American art history during her undergraduate education, requiring her to learn about artists and art history across the African diaspora on her own. She did, however, have access to important African American curators, artists, and scholars, both during her graduate education and professional career, to see herself as a valuable contributor to art and cultural discourse. As a university professor, Lawrence has had the opportunity to mentor artists of colour who are trained through the university system and introduce black artists to the local cultural scene across the Dallas, Fort Worth and Denton, Texas region. Lawrence's artistic style is informed by the minimalist tradition; however, it incorporates the cultural and historical narratives of difference that are informed by her individualised experience.

In contrast, Vicki Meek grew up in Philadelphia with parents who were black activists, cultural workers and collectors of black art, exposing her to some of the most important African American artists of the twentieth century at a very young age. Upon the completion of her undergraduate and graduate degrees, Meek was mentored by African American artists like Elizabeth Catlett and had access to artists like Romare Bearden, as well as members of the Chicago-based African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA). Meek was impacted by these

artists and an upbringing rooted in serving the African American community, which informs the site-specific, African-inspired work that has been consistent throughout her practice. Additionally, Meek was an arts administrator for over twenty years of a cultural centre for the African diaspora in South Dallas, a board member and board chair for a national arts network organisation, and adjunct curator for a regional African American museum. Like her mentor Elizabeth Catlett, Meek's artistic career has included extensive mentoring of younger African American artists and providing opportunities for artists of colour nationally.

In interviewing, both Lawrence and Meek, one also gets a sense of the specific inequities that African American women artists experience from under-representation and exploitation to mis-categorisation and tokenism.<sup>18</sup> The narratives that Lawrence and Meek share mirror the analyses of Linda Nochlin's essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', detailing the limited access women artists have to equitable opportunities, as well as the most recent studies that show that white males still remain at the centre of the art world.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Lawrence and Meek's stories show that there are very few examples in academic scholarship that provide non-hegemonic and diverse discourse to describe African American women artists. With the exception of a few exhibitions and a limited body of research, a small collection of artists is continuously used to describe the entirety of black womanhood.

While exhibitions like *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965-85* (Brooklyn Museum, 2017) highlight the works and experiences of women artists of African descent, they still prioritise artists that resided inside large art and cultural centres. As important as these exhibitions are, solely relying on them as representations of African American women artists operating within radical traditions would miss important players living and working in other parts of the world. This is not to discredit artists who brave the major cultural scenes in New York but to say that artist interviews allow researchers to learn about the artistic activities and communities that exist within a global context. In contrast, exhibitions within regional art institutions such as *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women and the Moving Image Since 1970*, held at the Contemporary Art Museum Houston in 2008, highlighted artists from local and global communities in conversation with one another in order to capture the various experiences that exist across the African diaspora. For artists like Vicki Meek and Annette Lawrence, regional galleries, museums and cultural institutions offer spaces to expand the canon and document

<sup>18</sup> Charleen Touchette, 'Multicultural Strategies for Aesthetic Revolution in the Twenty-First Century', in Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven, eds, *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, New York: HarperCollins, 1995, 182–215.

<sup>19</sup> Maura Reilly. 'Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures and Fixes', *ArtNews*, 26 May 2016. Web. 13 September 2018; Chad Topaz et al. 'Diversity of Artists in Major US Museums', *Public Library of Science*, 2019, Web. 13 September 2019; Eleanor Bader, 'Women Artists Still Face Discrimination', *Truthout.org*, 20 May 2012. Web. 12 September 2013; Roger Schonfeld et al, 'Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey', New York: The Andrew Mellon Foundation, 2015, PDF file. Web. 20 September 2015.

their activity through exhibition catalogues and recorded programmes. Interviews with these artists also uncover the exhibitions in their regions that were defining markers in their careers in comparison to the typical exhibitions credited within art history. Ultimately, these types of interviews offer important opportunities to rewrite art-historical narratives, which include the experiences and historical events that shape the practices of African American women artists living and working in Southern United States.

## **2. African American women artists & fiber traditions: interviews from *The Skin Quilt Project* and beyond**

In 2009, I produced an eighty-eight-minute documentary entitled *The Skin Quilt Project*, from nearly 100 hours of video-recorded interviews with over a dozen African American fiber artists and quilters, discussing the ways in which skin colour politics are implicated in the production of their work and how participating in the African American fiber traditions produces cultural pride and positive self-image.<sup>20</sup> I came to interview this community of African American women as a result of literature chronicling the history of African American women artists. From the late nineties to the early 2000s, seminal writings by black women scholars charted new territory by historicising the differentiated knowledge of African American women artists collectively. The writings of Lisa Farrington, Phoebe Farris, Leslie King-Hammond and Jontyle Theresa Robinson, as listed earlier in this text, about women of colour are prime examples of Collins' 'outsider within' framework, rewriting the art-historical canon with new players – while also tracing the origins of a black woman's standpoint towards art-making to African enslaved women whose only creative outlets existed within domestic practices: quilting, weaving and dressmaking.

While quilts and other fiber-oriented domestic practices were not traditionally considered fine art, scholars of colour asserted that these creative works were also marked with transformative social and cultural discourse. Art historian Lisa Farrington describes the power of domestic practices for African American women during the slave era in this way, noting that they 'specialized in textile design, weaving, dyeing, quilting, basketry, and landscaping' as 'avenues of self-definition, self-expression and psychological respite from the hardships of daily life' given their limited opportunities for creative practice.<sup>21</sup> While African American quilts – whether everyday quilts, homemade fashion or fiber-based art and design – can be discussed in terms of 'women's work' and craft-making (within a fine art context), Jontyle Theresa Robinson argues that they are, moreover, 'part of an important continuum of Africanisms practiced by Black women in this country', which continue to be re-examined 'as important sources of women's social, cultural,

<sup>20</sup> This excerpt is hosted by the UNT Digital Library and can be viewed here:

<https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1725758/>

<sup>21</sup> Lisa Farrington, *Creating their own image: the history of African-American women artists*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 26.



and art history'.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, narratives that claim African American created quilts as iconic messages of freedom have illuminated powerful juxtapositions about the position of quilts within African American history and culture whether the stories are true or not.<sup>23</sup> Other art-historical documentation highlights the work of African women like Harriet Powers, who was born a slave in Athens, Georgia, and is one of the earlier examples of the African American story quilt tradition.



Figure 3 Harriet Powers, *Bible quilt*, 1885–86. Washington DC: Collection of Smithsonian Institution.

Learning more about the connections that scholars were making regarding African American quilting as early art led me to seek out the historical, cultural and social interrelationships of quilting within African American culture. From a black feminist perspective, being the great-granddaughter and granddaughter of African American quilters meant that the story of African American women quilters as artists particularly appealed, and posed important questions about how quilting could relate to other questions I had, such as colourism within the African American community. During interviews for *The Skin Quilt Project*, the artists discussed their knowledge of historic quilt traditions and skin colour politics within their creative decisions, including their rationale for representing or not representing the wide

<sup>22</sup> Jontyle Theresa Robinson, *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists*, New York: Spelman College and Rizzoli International Publications, INC, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Stacie Stukin, 'Unravelling the Myth of Quilts and the Underground Railroad', *Time Magazine*, 3 April 2007. Web. 22 May 2017; Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, New York: First Anchor Books, 2000.

spectrum of skin colours within African American culture. In an excerpt of interviews from the documentary, the viewer can see a range of different responses: from the first interview with Carolyn Crump, who has a very open interpretation of skin colour politics within her work, to quilters like Dorothy Montgomery and Brenda Kinner Sandles, who try to represent the spectrum of colours within African American culture. In contrast, Catherine Lamkin and Bunnie Rodriguez see the necessity of representing blackness in dark brown and black as a result of their belief in the Black is Beautiful movement and Pan-Africanism.



Figure 4 Lauren Cross, screen still from *The Skin Quilt Project*, 2010. USA: Mae's House Productions. Courtesy of Lauren Cross.

While interviewing Dr Carolyn Mazloomi, an aerospace engineer turned quilt historian and quilter, for *The Skin Quilt Project*, I uncovered hidden knowledge about how African American quilters were being represented within historical and cultural analyses of African American art. Mazloomi had spent over twenty years researching and writing books on African American quilting, curating exhibitions, and creating her own quilts about the African American experience. While other fiber artists I spoke with were knowledgeable about their own personal reasons for adapting the African American quilt tradition, Dr Mazloomi was a rare gem in her active engagement with working with curators and scholars on African American quilt exhibitions both in the US and abroad. Dr Mazloomi's interview highlighted three specific approaches to African American quilting commonly practiced within contemporary visual culture: improvisational techniques (such as the Gee's Bend quilters), story quilt or narrative-oriented quilts (e.g. Women of Colour Quilt Network), and fiber art and quilting used as a narrative and/or technical reference in contemporary art (e.g. Letitia Huckaby and Bisa Butler). The Smithsonian Archives of American Art also features an interview with Dr Mazloomi in their collection where she outlines the distinctions between African American quilters and the ways in which the improvisational style has been privileged within art history and art



museums.<sup>24</sup> Dr Mazloomi uses both the Smithsonian interview and her interview for *The Skin Quilt Project* to champion the African American story quilt tradition even as she has had to fight for its preserved authenticity in the field. While Dr Mazloomi's interviews for *The Skin Quilt Project* and the Smithsonian Archives are grounded in an appreciation for the improvisational style, she challenges the erasure of the story quilt narratives and encourages the recognition of different approaches and skill-levels.

The Smithsonian Archives of American Art also features an interview with Peggie Hartwell, who, like Dr Carolyn Mazloomi, is one of the founding members of the Women of Colour Quilters Network.<sup>25</sup> Like Dr Mazloomi, Hartwell champions the story quilt tradition, and came to quilting as a result of her Southern heritage. Hartwell created an important quilt inspired by a popular photograph of African slave Harriet Powers, featuring illustrations from Powers' 'Bible quilt', which is currently located in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. As an African American quilter and artist, Hartwell's interview, like Mazloomi's, uncovers her experiences of living in the South, the influence of family on her quilt practice, and her access to art education as reflections of her identity as an artist. Furthermore, Hartwell chronicles the rise in exhibition and artist residency opportunities she received over the years, which allowed her to perfect her craft and consider herself an artist.



Figure 5 Peggie Hartwell, *The Ode to Harriet Powers*, 1995. Courtesy of Peggie Hartwell.

<sup>24</sup> Joanne Cubbs, 'Oral history interview with Carolyn Mazloomi', *Smithsonian Archives of American Art*, 17-30 September 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Patricia Malarcher, 'Oral history interview with Peggie L. Hartwell', *Smithsonian Archives of American Art*, 3 June and 10 July 2002.

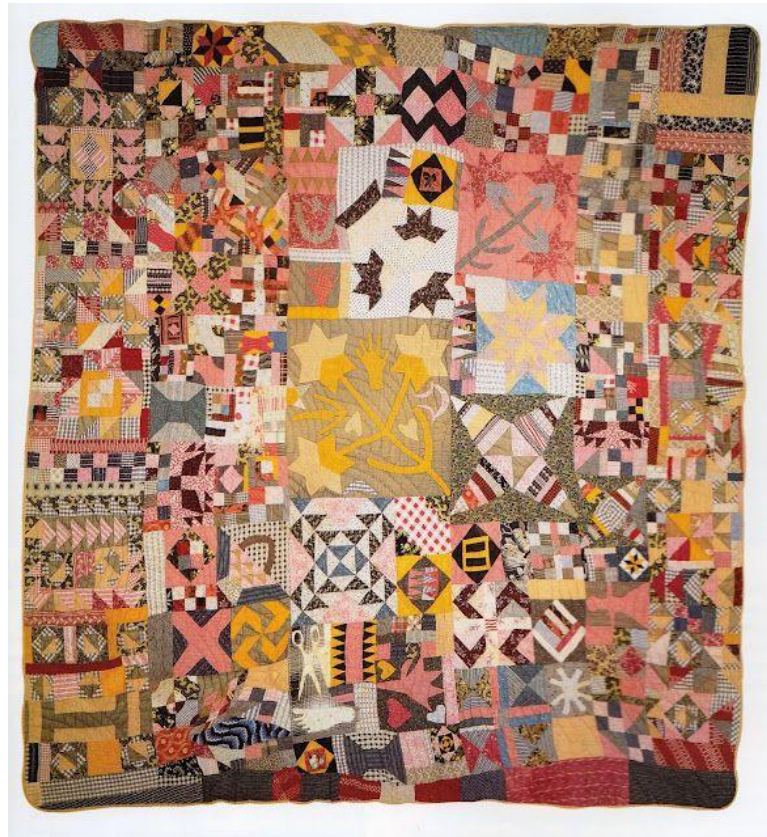


Figure 6 Josie Covington, *Album quilt*, 1895. Quilt, 205.7 x 203.2 cm. Courtesy of Maude Southwell Wahlman.

Dr Mazloomi's interviews highlighted the preference within Western art history to highlight African American improvisational quilts because of their aesthetic similarities to abstract paintings. From the early documentation of quilts by African American women like Josie Covington, historians often favour improvisational quilts for their spontaneous creative impulse and proposed African-inspired aesthetic. The popularity of Gee's Bend quilts out of Gee's Bend (Boykin), Alabama in the 2000s saw improvisational quilts rising to a kind of mainstream status as well as an important reference within the works of other contemporary African American artists. In 2018, Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition winner Amy Sherald was selected by the former First Lady Michelle Obama to create her portrait for the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC. When interviewed about her commission of Michelle Obama she said the following about choosing the dress featured in the portrait:

But once I saw her in that one, I knew that that was the one that, you know, she needed to be frozen in time in. It has a connection to, you know, the art canon. But then it also speaks to black culture. And it reminded me of the

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Gee's Bend quilts that women made over the course of their lifetimes and were discovered later on in life. But quilting is a huge part of black culture.<sup>26</sup>

In short, Sherald's interview unpacks not only her desire to make her work significant from an art-historical standpoint but also as a culturally relevant art-historical gesture: quilting is 'huge' in black culture. Interviews with African American women artists who engage with the fiber tradition affirm Sherald's notion that quilting is not only important within black culture but also an important reference for Michelle Obama, whose paternal family lived in the low country of South Carolina where fiber traditions such as quilting and basket weaving were strong cultural traditions. In an interview with Bunnie Rodriguez, quilter and founder of the Gullah Museum in Georgetown, South Carolina, during *The Skin Quilt Project*, she referenced the relationship between Michelle Obama and Georgetown, making Sherald's connection to quilting's legacy particularly important.



Figure 7 Amy Sherald, *First Lady Michelle Obama*, 2018. Oil on linen. Washington DC: National Portrait Gallery.

<sup>26</sup> 'All Things Considered, Artist Amy Sherald Discusses Portrait of Former First Lady Michelle Obama', *npr*, 12 February 2018, Web. 13 September 2019.



#### IV. Arts research: interviews as critical practice

Arts researchers have noted that artists' interviews are useful for filling the gaps within art-historical knowledge.<sup>27</sup> Where art educators have been interested in uncovering the key influences in lives of women artists of colour due to limited scholarship, Jessie Whitehead points to the need to diversify the way that we create knowledge as a result of historical exclusion. She argues that 'women naming and describing their experiences is an important epistemological act that contributes to women and other marginalised groups achieving subjectivity'.<sup>28</sup> Whitehead concluded that ethnicity had a greater impact on each artist's work than feminism, and empowerment through art and art as a teaching tool.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Harriet Walker asserts 'I knew that all the art and history I had uncovered could never give me the insights about race that I could get by talking with and listening to African American people'.<sup>30</sup> Walker uses a feminist poststructural framework that recognises the asymmetrical power relations in society to uncover some of the layers of meaning in the work of these artists. Poststructuralists take the position that all knowledge is partial and historically situated, and feminist methods of understanding social and political relations begin with the study of personal experiences. She acknowledges that feminist theory is usually not considered a basis for the investigation of racial issues, but believes it can help to illuminate the interconnected relations of oppressions.<sup>31</sup> After interviewing husband-and-wife photographers Chandra McCormick and Keith Calhoun, she concludes that 'these artists describe the historical, spiritual and uplifting function of art in their community'. Walker suggests that making students aware of the important work of artists in their local community allows teachers to expand beyond the limited representations of diverse artists in course textbooks to connect with artists with whom they might share personal experiences.

Artist interviews, therefore, are important tools for art-historical research in order to better understand both individual and collective artist experiences, practices and trends. Because the African diaspora includes a diversity of different artistic, cultural traditions and preferences, interviews allow historians to examine how these realities have changed over time or stayed the same. Furthermore, artist interviews in archives like academic and museum libraries, in digital media collections, and in publications can help historians to piece together knowledge that has been historically hidden or in need of reinterpretation. New critical strategies also allow researchers to come to interviews with fresh eyes and uncover new areas of analysis.

<sup>27</sup> See Jessie Whitehead, 'Theorizing Experience: Four Women Artists of Color', *Studies in Art Education*, 50:1, 2008, 24; Harriet Walker, 'Interviewing Local Artists: A Curriculum Resource in Art Teaching', *Studies in Art Education*, 2001, 42: 3, 249–265.

<sup>28</sup> Whitehead, 'Theorizing Experience', 24.

<sup>29</sup> Whitehead, 'Theorizing Experience', 32.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, 'Interviewing Local Artists', 249–265.

<sup>31</sup> Walker, 'Interviewing Local Artists', 252–253.

## V. Conclusion

In conclusion, as the art, cultures, histories and experiences from across the African diaspora continue to be excluded from knowledge production, the value of artist interviews to fill in the gaps becomes increasingly important. As my own interviews with women artists of African descent illustrate, there is much to gain by including the voices of underrepresented artists into historicising. The strength of using interviews with women artists of colour as a source not only embodies new areas of knowledge but also enhances the pedagogy of art history. Jessie Whitehead argues 'that the experiences of women of colour strengthen the field of art education by a) helping us reshape the material we present to students b) continue to challenge monolithic white and patriarchal modes of authority, and c) presenting role models for others who challenge the status quo'.<sup>32</sup> I would argue that the same argument can be made for the field of art history, to challenge hegemonic notions of art and ultimately push the field forward.

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<sup>32</sup> Whitehead, Jessie, 'Influences of Feminism and Ethnicity on Selected Women Artists of Color', The Florida State University. Dissertation, 2000. Web. 20 February 2013.