

## **Between African Sculpture and Black Diasporic Experiences: Hugh Hayden and Simone Leigh**

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Historical works of African sculpture have become increasingly entangled with the global Black Lives Matter movement. A popular sign that was carried by protestors in the United Kingdom after the police killing of the unarmed African American man George Floyd in May 2020 read: “Don’t like looting? You will hate the British Museum.” Meanwhile, a statement from the British Museum deploring Floyd’s death and expressing solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement sparked thousands of tweets accusing the institution of hypocrisy and insensitivity. In June 2020, Paris Black Lives Matter demonstrators tried to seize artefacts at the Musée du Quai Branly. The material lives of African sculptural objects are today intimately linked with black diasporic experiences, and these connections are made explicit in the work of contemporary American artists, Hugh Hayden (b. 1983) and Simone Leigh (b. 1967). Both Hayden and Leigh draw on African sculptural traditions, largely from West and Central Africa, and sometimes even incorporate the objects themselves in their own sculptures. Their work creates a parallel between the colonial pillaging and displacement of African sculpture to Europe and North America and the forced diaspora of slavery and its afterlives in the United States. In his practice, Hayden utilizes wood as his primary medium, playing with its multilayered histories – African sculpture offers one iteration of this material. His sculptures and installations reflect on the history of social politics in the United States and the contribution of enslaved Africans to American culture and cuisine. Alternatively, Leigh’s practice, which spans sculpture, performance, film, and activist-based work, is concerned with the marginalization of black women and their exclusion from the archive or history. She uses her work to reframe the experiences of black women as central to society. Hayden and Leigh bring these respective concerns to bear on the histories of African sculpture.

The adoption of African sculpture by Hayden and Leigh occurs against a background of twentieth-century engagements with these traditions by European and African American artists and theorists. The Paris avant-garde’s “discovery” of African sculpture, known then as

*art nègre*, or “black art,” effected the constitution of Afro-American modernism. The African American philosopher and art critic Alain LeRoy Locke (1895–1954), an influential figure of the Harlem Renaissance who travelled frequently to Paris, encouraged African American artists to adopt African sculptural traditions as a way to “reconnect” with an ancestral Africa in the creation of a black art. However, African sculpture signifies differently today than it did at this earlier moment in time. There has been a turn toward the material lives of these objects and the contexts of violence through which they were acquired by Western institutions. The global Black Lives Matter movement has renewed calls for restitution as a requirement for a post-racist society. In this article, I argue that contemporary artists have picked up on current debates around African sculpture. Hayden and Leigh make use of these associations to convey experiences of the Middle Passage, slavery, and its afterlives in the United States, but also a past that cannot be reassembled due to these events. Rather than an atavistic return to origins, their work demonstrates the remapping of cultural production in the New World and, in the case of Leigh, these concerns are specifically addressed with regards to the labor of black women.

### **African sculpture and the Harlem Renaissance**

In the early twentieth century, “African art” was synonymous with sculpture. Objects of ritual and ceremonial purpose entered the European market with the onset of colonization and their artistic forms were adopted by modernist painters. The category of “African sculpture” came to include a wide variety of objects, ranging from masks and reliquary figures to commemorative heads. With their elongated features and streamlined forms, these objects played a constitutive role in the making of modernism and its radical break with realism. They were subsequently championed by Alain LeRoy Locke who urged an emergent generation of African American artists to draw on African sculpture in their practices. Locke started writing

on African art in 1924 with the essay “A Note on African Art,” which was published in *Opportunity* magazine. This essay was revised and retitled “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” and appeared the following year in Locke’s *The New Negro* anthology. In the second essay, Locke argues that African sculpture should help stimulate the “lagging channels of sculpture, painting, and decorative arts” among African American artists and help grow “the natural ambition of Negro artists for a racial idiom in their art expression” (1925: 256, 262). Much has been said about Locke’s belief in a “racial idiom” (Bearden 1946, 2003; Schapiro 1936; Porter 1943, 2003), but I want to think more about his notion of an “ancestral legacy.” Locke’s project arguably aimed to invent a classical heritage, or a cultural past, based on photographic reproductions of African masks and statues from the Philadelphia-based Barnes Foundation collection that graced the pages of his essays.<sup>1</sup> In the earlier essay, Locke states: “Nothing is more galvanizing than the sense of a cultural past... This at least the intelligent presentation of African art will supply us” (1924: 138). In the revised essay, he famously asserts: “The Negro is not a cultural foundling without his own inheritance” (1925: 256).

The relationship between African American artists and African artistic traditions can be explicated through Locke’s writings on race and culture. In “The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture” (1924), Locke argues against genetic or biological notions of race, redefining it as a strictly social category. He views race, or what he terms “social race,” as historically determined, the result of “social heredity” (191), or inherited “cultural conditions,” “stressed values,” (194) and a “tradition, as preferred traits” (195). As Locke states: “Instead therefore of regarding culture as expressive of race, race by this interpretation is regarded as itself a culture product” (193). In fact, Locke uses “social race” as a synonym for “nation,” since integral to modern nationalist projects is the identification of common circumstances, tradition, cultural traits, and values that constitute nationhood. He substituted the concept of race for nation as early as 1916, arguing that “what men mean by ‘race’ when they are proud

of race, is not blood race, but that kind of national unity and national type which belongs properly not to the race but to the nation” (1992: 86). Locke tells us that his own “race pride” is a type of “national” pride, based on a sense of unity with other people of his “national type.” In “The Concept of Race,” Locke cites the phrase “the genius of a people” (1983: 425), which, as Joshua Cohen (2020) has noted, suggests a genealogy of ideas about national and racial character that carried implications for framing black culture as a cohesive entity. Race was thus indispensable for conceiving of black culture as more than a random assembly of practices. This framing enabled Locke to implicate African sculpture in the making of what he called a “Negro art,” which marked the instantiation of a collective “genius” among African-descended creative practitioners.

Harlem Renaissance artists’ appropriations of African art suggest a tentative investment in Locke’s ideas, even if they expressed doubts about “reconnecting” with an ancestral Africa. Their attempts varied from the integration of African sculptural elements into figural compositions to decontextualized arrangements of African art. In Hale Woodruff’s *The Card Players* (1930; fig. 1), two male figures with mask-like faces play cards in a Parisian café, a city in which Woodruff had studied from 1927–31. *The Card Players* undoubtedly cites Pablo Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1911) and Paul Cézanne’s paintings of the same title from the early 1890s, but Woodruff at once distances himself from these modernist predecessors, declaring that “black art must begin with some black image” (Murray 1979: 85). He therefore equates, as Cohen (2020) has observed, African sculpture with “black art.” While similarly living in Paris, Palmer Hayden completed *Fétiche et Fleurs* (1932–33; fig. 2), the title of which plays with *vogue nègre*, as in the commodification of African art and cultures in France. In his painting, Hayden incorporates African elements, specifically a Fang reliquary head and a Kuba textile, into a still life, a Western art genre. The artist himself expressed skepticism toward the connection between African American artists and their so-called

homeland (Leininger-Miller 2001). Nonetheless, the work suggests a try at Locke's ideas and an engagement with, or wary regard for, modernism's indebtedness to Africa, an indebtedness which valued African objects over the people themselves.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on a disappointing encounter that the Guyanese artist Aubrey Williams had with Picasso in the 1950s, Simon Gikandi writes: "The fact that Picasso had an intimate relationship with African objects is not in doubt; but there is little evidence of an interest in Africans as human beings and producers of culture" (2003: 456). Comparable to Hayden's *Fétiche et Fleurs* is the work of Malvin Gray Johnson and Lois Mailou Jones, who both executed portraits of themselves that included African sculpture. In *Self Portrait (Myself at Work)* (1934; fig. 3), Johnson situates himself in front of his 1932 painting *Negro Masks*, creating a visual link between African art and the African American artist. Similarly, in *Self Portrait* (1940; fig. 4), Jones look out at the viewer from behind an easel and just over her right shoulder are two wooden African figurines, linking her identity as an artist to these objects. Not only does the inclusion of African art in both of these paintings operate as a sign of artistic modernism, but also a self-referential blackness (VanDiver 2013).

The question of diasporic identity was central to the Harlem Renaissance. "For black artists," Cheryl Finley has argued in regard to Harlem Renaissance engagements with African sculpture, "theirs was a metaphorical return that glorified Africa as an ancestral home with the artifacts of classical African civilization as their memory aides" (2018: 122). As Finley further notes, "the act of imaging Africa through the depiction of ritual objects became a way of imagining Africa" (2018: 118). Even though many knew it was an impossibility, Harlem Renaissance artists and writers attempted to restore a continuity that had been eroded by slavery and racism (Cohen 2020). Notions of an ancestral legacy endured in the following decades. The Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s developed out of the achievements of the Harlem Renaissance. Several collectives formed a vibrant part of this movement, including

AfriCOBRA and Weusi. These artists found a new resonance in their African ancestral heritage. As African states gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s, the global decolonization movement created a sense of solidarity across the African diaspora. These sentiments were given shape by major pan-African forums such as First World Art Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar in 1966 and FESTAC '77 in Lagos, Nigeria. The African continent became a home and a place of pilgrimage for many African American artists who embarked on a journey to study and reclaim their African heritage. In keeping with this trajectory from the Harlem Renaissance onwards, Tobias Wofford has described the use of African art by African American artists in the 1980s and 1990s, including Houston Conwill, David Hammons, and Renee Stout, as a strategy for “mending the rupture of the Middle Passage and the trauma of slavery with its lost histories and untold stories” (2017: 161).

### **African sculpture now**

If African sculpture once signified a connection to or continuity with an ancestral Africa, these objects today often connote a sense of violence, loss, and displacement. Questions around the troubled provenances of African sculptural objects and the brutality through which they were acquired have come to the fore in recent years as calls for restitution have surged. During the colonial era, groups of looters, including missionaries, scholars, security forces, and fortune hunters, carted away huge quantities of Africa’s artistic heritage. The original owners and creators of these objects were lost through this violence and so were details about the objects themselves, from their date of execution to their production and patronage. Many of these historical works of African sculpture are now located in major private and public collections in the West where they are displayed behind glass, lightyears away from their original contexts of creation. Here it is worth noting that black intellectuals during the Harlem Renaissance advocated collecting as a mode of activism that would, in Jesse Hoffnung-Garskoff’s

summation, “inspire the racial patriotism necessary for building an international Negro alliance” (2001: 26). Moreover, if Harlem Renaissance artists largely worked in painting, the contemporary sculpture discussed in this article is aligned with concerns around African sculpture as a physical entity in the world, as objects created by African peoples that were pillaged and subsequently traded as property, collected, and exhibited in Europe and North America.

Titled in reference to Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel, Hayden’s sculpture *Invisible Man* (2019; fig. 5) began with a found African *nkisi* wood carving that he had silverplated and polished to a high reflectivity. Found throughout Central Africa in a variety of forms, a *nkisi* (pl. *minkisi*) is the physical container for a spirit. *Minkisi* are commissioned, owned, and activated by *banganga* (s. *nganga*), ritual specialists, who are called upon by clients to embody and direct a spirit toward a range of purposes, including healing, divination, protection against misfortune, success in trade, and occasionally punishment. *Minkisi* are activated through the addition of *bilongo*, or medicines, which consist of animal, vegetable, and mineral matter, sometimes with metaphorical significance, that link the world of the ancestors, the client, and the empowering spirit. Conceived as a twenty-first century *nkisi*, Hayden added a trove of Truvada, the HIV-prevention drug, to the stomach of his found wood carving, where a *nganga* would traditionally place the *bilongo*. He left the base of the sculpture untreated to reveal the figure’s original material and positioned it on a packing crate (fig. 6). This crate-cum-plinth alludes to the trade in antiquities and, by extension, the violence and displacement intrinsic to the acquisition of African sculpture. Although superficially suggestive of Songye style and likely created for trade, Hayden’s silverplated wood carving is of unclear provenance. “How African is it?” he asks, rhetorically, “how real is it, how old is it, is it a tourist object, is it fake?” (Adamson 2020). Hayden describes the process of silverplating the wood carving as producing



“a loss of information” (Adamson 2020), echoing concerns around the object’s provenance and prompting a further displacement from its original condition.

Turning to the questions posed by Hayden – “How African is it?... How real is it, how old is it, is it a tourist object, is it fake?” – Sidney Kasfir (1992) has played an important role in highlighting the political, economic, and cultural power relations inherent to the construction of meaning around African art. As Kasfir asserted, it is imperative to critically re-examine who has authority in giving meaning to and defining African art. James Clifford (1988) has noted that prior to the twentieth century African artifacts were not “art” in either African or Western eyes. In Western museums, these objects underwent a series of taxonomic shifts from exotica in “cabinets of curiosities” to scientific specimens in the natural history museums of the late nineteenth century. Following their “discovery” by modernist painters in the early twentieth century, they were promoted to art and entered museums and galleries where they were recontextualized as such. With this promotion, the value of African art to curators, dealers, and collectors has largely been determined by the concept of authenticity, which, as discussed by Kasfir (1992), is based on a series of flawed Western assumptions about traditional African society as precolonial, isolated, timeless, and homogenous. This fiction of a “traditional society” that produces “traditional art” has created distinctions between “authentic art” and copies, replicas, or fakes, as well as the category of “tourist art,” hence the questions posed rhetorically by Hayden. The latter category of “tourist art” includes all art made to be sold to a foreign market, and it is derided by Western connoisseurs as the antithesis of authenticity.

In *Invisible Man*, Hayden connects the West’s imposition of meaning onto African objects to black diasporic experiences in the United States. To further consider the title of the work, Ellison’s 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, chronicles the journey of an unnamed black protagonist from the segregated American South to New York City’s Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s. He receives a scholarship to college from a group of white men in his town after

engaging in a blindfolded boxing match with other black boys, to the delight of the white spectators. In New York, he is pulled out of poverty and given a prominent position in a communist-inspired “Brotherhood” only to realize that his comrades are using him as a political pawn. Reflecting on these experiences, Ellison’s protagonist declares in the opening paragraph of the novel: “I am an invisible man... I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (1995: 3). For Ellison, the visibility of the African American man’s blackness blinds the white onlooker to the complexity of the man’s subjectivity. This hypervisibility of epidermis is echoed in the shiny silver surface of Hayden’s sculpture, where viewers can see themselves in its reflection. As Ellison’s protagonist observes, when white onlookers “see him,” they see “themselves, or fragments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me” (1995: 7) – a process which is echoed in the creation of meaning around African art. Both enter visibility only through the white order’s projections.

There is a link to be made here with the history of modernism. In the autumn of 1906, Henri Matisse purchased a small African sculpture – today identified as a Kongo-Vili power figure, another *nkisi* akin to Hayden’s own, from the French Congo (now Republic of Congo) – at a curio shop on his way to visit Gertrude Stein. Picasso was present at Stein’s home and Matisse showed him the sculpture. Based on this encounter, Picasso produced the first of a group of drawings that became important for *Les Femmes d’Alger* (Blier 2019). In response to the object, Matisse painted *Still Life with African Statue* (late 1906–early 1907; fig. 7), which presents the Vili statuette surrounded by a wineglass, glass pitcher, glass flask, and metal pitcher. This painting offers critical insight into early modernist engagements with African art. For Matisse placed the statue alongside a group of vessels. Though *Still Life* is essentially a study in constructing volume in paint on canvas, there is something to be said about his choice

of objects. The purpose of the depicted vessels is to be filled up, and we can extend this analogy to the Vili figure, which acts as a vessel for Western fantasies and epistemologies around Africa. These projections continue in the art market today where, as observed by John Warne Monroe (2018), it has become increasingly common to designate African sculptors by the names of Western dealers and collectors who owned notable examples of their work. For instance, there are sculptors who worked in the Baule style known as the “Himmelheber Master, the “Rockefeller Master,” and the “Vérité Master.” As Monroe has argued, these objects serve as a flattering mirror, giving participants in the Western art market an image of themselves. This experience of seeing oneself in someone/thing else is played out on the surface of Hayden’s sculpture. Writing on an experience comparable to Ellison’s protagonist, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon asks, “A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence” (1986: 139). Invisibility is a type of ontological and epistemological violence that arises from, apropos Ellison’s protagonist, “the construction of their inner eyes with which they [white people] look through their physical eyes upon reality” (1995: 4). Much like African sculpture, the black man operates as a surface for mere projection.

Describing a feeling of nonexistence or nonbeing that results from invisibility/hypervisibility, Ellison’s protagonist states: “You often doubt if you really exist... You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world” (1995: 3–4). This experience of nonbeing offers another parallel with African sculpture: many scholars and curators have sought to minimize or even evacuate its role in the history of modernism. Writing on Picasso in 1942, Christian Zervos stated, “The artist formally certified that in the era when he painted the *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, he ignored the art of black Africa” (Sweeney 1941: 191). Picasso biographer Pierre Daix declared the same sentiment in a 1970 article entitled “There Is No Negro Art in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*”. In 1948, Picasso’s dealer, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler wrote: “I must, once more, dispute the validity of the thesis of a direct

influence of African art on Picasso and Braque... The real question was one of convergence,” that is, “in Negro art, the cubists rediscovered their own conception of the work of art as object” (Chave 1994: 605). Even with the controversial “*Primitivism*” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art exhibition at MoMA in 1984, Picasso’s adoption of African art tended to be dismissed by many Picasso scholars (Blier 2019). To “*Primitivism*” curator William Rubin, African and modernist works were simply seen to derive from “complementary” cultural mindsets of individuals. The focus was placed on the natural “affinities” between modern art and “primitive works,” rather than a direct artistic engagement with them. In the case of both Kahnweiler and Rubin, modernist appropriations of African sculpture were redefined as serendipitous encounters through words such as “convergence” and “affinities.” This constant erasure of African sculpture from the history of modernism is echoed in Ellison’s protagonist who is always on the verge of complete nonbeing.

In order to shed further light on the connections between African sculpture and black diasporic experiences in the United States, I want to turn to another sculpture, *Ark?* (2019; fig. 8), that Hayden created at the same time as *Invisible Man*. In *Ark?*, West African souvenir sculptures – here Hayden again plays with questions of authenticity – are packed with ethafoam into a coffin-sized crate emblazoned with transatlantic shipping stamps. The work evokes the widely known diagram of the slave ship *Brooks*, which was used by those campaigning to abolish slavery in the late eighteenth century. In the diagram, human cargo are shown lying side by side, with little space between them. The diagram depicts 482 enslaved men, women, and children, the number permitted by law for a ship of that size, but, in actuality, the *Brooks* sometimes carried as many as 740 enslaved people. In Hayden’s *Ark?*, the mirrored interior of the crate reflects the sculptures ad infinitum, conjuring both the number of people who crossed the Middle Passage and the extent of slavery and its deaths.

In *Ark?*, Hayden adopts African sculptural objects and their concomitant associations of violence, loss, and displacement as emblematic of the Middle Passage. Édouard Glissant has famously described the Middle Passage as a multi-layered abyss. For Glissant, the slave ship signifies a “womb abyss,” as it is paradoxically “pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death” (1997: 6). His description of the abyss is evocative of Hayden’s *Ark?* in which souvenir African sculptures are packed together in a coffin-shaped shipping crate. As Glissant states, “the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out” (1997: 6), but the belly of the boat is simultaneously a site gestation and digestion, one that births and expels Caribbean, Afro-Brazilian, and African American people in the New World. Hortense Spillers has described the Middle Passage as a process of “unmaking” for the African subject: “Those African persons in the ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic’... removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not yet ‘American’... we could say they were ‘unmade,’ thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that ‘exposed’ their destinies to an unknown course” (1987: 72). For Saidiya Hartman (2002), this process of “unmaking” engenders a loss of natal affiliation, as well as claims of kin and community, that continues to haunt the descendants of the enslaved whose ancestors remain anonymous. As previously mentioned, the basis of Hayden’s *Invisible Man* is a found African wood carving whose provenance is unknown, and the artist himself furthers these lost origins by silverplating the object, taking it one more step away from its earlier context. In doing so, Hayden creates a parallel between the anonymity of African artifacts as a result of the way they were collected, as in stolen or negotiated through the mediation of traders or other outsiders, and the loss of familial connections and ancestors that occurred through enslavement.

Following Glissant, Spillers, and Hartman, the events of the Middle Passage and slavery shut down the possibility of return to an ancestral home. As Hartman (2002) contends, the journey “home” is always a journey back in time as it occurs after these events. It is a

belated return: “one has come too late to recuperate an authentic identity or to establish one’s kinship with a place or people” (Hartman 2002: 762). Hartman argues that this belatedness is an essential feature of the diasporic, as the homeland is that which is always already lost. This loss underlines the impossibility of return. However, Hayden’s *Ark?* suggests the promise of return for the sculptures included in the work. The title of the work, apropos Noah’s ark, suggests salvation, as many Western museums take steps toward repatriating looted goods. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron triggered a movement taken up by museums and authorities across Europe with his pledge to permanently restitute African patrimony in France to Africa. A year later, Macron said that his country would give back 26 looted treasures to the state of Benin. In 2019, Germany’s sixteen states approved guidelines creating the conditions for the repatriation of artefacts in public collections that were taken in ways that are legally or morally unjustifiable today from their former colonies. In 2021, the Netherlands pledged to return unconditionally any objects in the national collections found to have been stolen from former Dutch colonies. In the United Kingdom, the Institute for Art and Law is drawing up guidance commissioned by Arts Council England for museums on repatriating colonial-era plunder.

Both Hayden’s *Invisible Man* and *Ark?* connect African sculpture, the Middle Passage, slavery, and black diasporic experiences in the United States. In *In the Wake* (2016), Christina Sharpe addresses the way black lives are swept up and animated by “the afterlives of slavery,” a phrase she borrows from Hartman, who writes: “Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (2008: 6). Discussing black maternity, Sharpe takes up Glissant’s description of the “womb abyss” in which the belly of the boat dissolves the slave into the nonworld, as he writes: “the boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you” (1997: 6). Here the site of mothering is inextricably linked to death. Drawing on the violence experienced by black people around the world, Sharpe

contends that the birth canal of black women, or women who birth blackness, is another kind of Middle Passage that ushers black children toward death. Their skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment are the afterlives of slavery, or what Sharpe also calls “the afterlives of property” (2016: 77). This phrase is particularly evocative in terms of Hayden’s work, which connects African sculpture, as in objects pillaged by colonialists and traded as property, to the Middle Passage, which marked African people as property.

Predating Hayden’s *Invisible Man* and *Ark?* is another series of sculptures created by Sanford Biggers (b. 1970) that share the same set of concerns. In *BAM* (2015–17), Biggers addresses the steady onslaught of police shootings of unarmed African Americans, echoing Sharpe’s solemn proclamation of the birth canal as another kind of Middle Passage. For the series, Biggers sourced African sculptures from flea markets and tourist shops. These objects, like the ones deployed in Hayden’s *Invisible Man* and *Ark?*, are of unknown origins, evoking the loss of ancestors that occurred through enslavement. For the series, Biggers dipped the sculptures in wax, which removed their unique characteristics, producing the same loss of information as Hayden’s silverplated wood carving, and then had them shot with guns. He subsequently cast the damaged figures in bronze, a material which invokes statues conventionally designed to memorialize significant people and events. Some of Biggers’ sculptures refer to specific victims: *BAM (for Philando)* commemorates Philando Castile, a 32-year-old African American man who was fatally shot by a police officer during a traffic stop. Roughly coated in bronze and painted with a black patina, in *BAM (for Philando)* (2016; fig. 9), a pronounced head sits on a broad columnar neck, while the figure’s arms are bent at its elbows, extending in front of its body. The sculpture’s pose and sizable head is evocative of a Fang reliquary sculpture, but it has been disfigured by Biggers: the figure is missing both of its hands and one of its legs. Other sculptures in the series function as a more general tribute. In

*BAM (Seated Warrior)* (2017; fig. 10), a prominent chunk is missing from the arm of a bronze cast Senufo sculpture, once used for divination in Côte d'Ivoire. *Seated Warrior* is a symbol of power for those who have died, as well as those whose lives are under threat every time a police car pulls them over. If African sculpture is emblematic of the Middle Passage, Hayden and Biggers also deploy these objects to consider its afterlives of dehumanization in the United States.

### **Rhizomatic identity**

As part of an ongoing body of work, Hayden molds African masks onto cast-iron skillets, combining cultural object and cooking tool. For a solo exhibition at Princeton University Art Museum in 2020, Hayden worked with the museum's collection of African masks to create 26 of these sculptures. In *Jazz 10* (2020; fig. 11), Hayden cast an oval, heart-shaped mask onto the bottom of a square bronze skillet. The mask has a high forehead, downcast eye slits, a short straight nose, and a small open mouth. In *Jazz 15* (2020; fig. 12), Hayden appended a mask with a birdlike beak, evocative of Ge Gon tradition created by the Dan people in Liberia, to the bottom of a black circular pan. Alternatively, in *Jazz 18* (2020; fig. 13), he combined a mask with small round eyes, a long rectangular nose, and a large square mouth with sharp teeth – reminiscent of the *nsembu* masks used by the Kumu people in the DR Congo during initiation rites – to the bottom of a wide oval pan. Hayden worked with 3-D technology to scan and replicate the surface of the masks and to subsequently print their molds (Bacon 2020). These mask molds were then merged with the skillets through sand casting, a metal casting process characterized by using sand as the mold material. Hayden adopts this rudimentary means of manufacture as a way to recognize “the imperfectness of the materials, their colonial histories, and the inherent loss of detail in the reproduction process” (Lisson Gallery 2019). He parallels the sculpting process to the diaspora, considering the ways in which the original object is



obscured. Any pattern, painting, decoration, hair, or headdress on the mask disappears from Hayden's final product. The sculptures accordingly operate as a trace; they stand in for an echo of Africa that cannot be retrieved, but the ground from which to create something new.

Returning to Glissant, the event of arrival after the journey across the Middle Passage is defined by the plantation, a site of mixed languages, beliefs, practices, values, and expressions. The plantation gives birth to what Glissant (1997) calls, apropos Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, rhizomatic identity. Multiple roots, none of which are generative of a whole, entwine to create a composite culture (Glissant 1997). In this vein, Paul Gilroy (1993) has argued that the origin of racial terror and dislocation shared by black communities throughout the Atlantic is simultaneously the root of a productive syncretism, wresting what has been cast as wholly negative. He maintains that a number of different moments of connectedness might emerge from this network known as the Black Atlantic, building up a complex picture of cultural exchange and continuity. Instead of foregrounding difference, Gilroy takes into account aspects of sameness that nevertheless surface in diverse and complex ways and in different contexts as "the changing same" (1993: 15). Alternatively, Saidiya Hartman (1997) argues against such continuity narratives, or a more general continuity with the African past. She contends that we should emphasize the everyday historicity of African survivals or retrievals. For Hartman, these survivals exist only in relation to the violent discontinuities of history introduced by the Middle Passage, the contradiction of captivity and enslavement, and the experience of loss and affiliation, and they are called upon in response to these conditions. Memories of Africa therefore operate "in a manner akin to a phantom limb, in that what is felt is no longer there;" "it is a sentient recollection of connectedness at the site of rupture" (1997: 73). The status of the past is experienced most significantly in terms of loss and discontinuity. Rather than retrieving the prehistory of the captive, Hartman advocates Glissant's concept of

“nonhistory”: “the experience of shock, contradiction, painful negation, and explosive forces which make a totalitarian philosophy of history an impossibility” (1989: 62).

Hayden’s series of cast-iron skillets pays homage to Southern food with its origins in slavery. As we have seen, Hayden titled several of the skillets created in Princeton “jazz” with the addition of a number, for example, *Jazz 10*. Jazz is emblematic of the concept of the rhizome theorized by Glissant, who discussed the musical genre in conversation with Manthia Diawara: “Black Americans had to recompose, through memory and through extraordinary suffering, the echo of what Africa had for them” (*Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation* 2009). African musical traits and cultural practices played a major role in the development and elaboration of jazz. Sterling Stuckley (1987) argues that the ring shout, a religious ceremonial dance with its origins in West Africa, was a unifying element of Africans in American colonies, from which work songs and spirituals evolved, followed by the blues and jazz. The ring shout was of critical importance to jazz, as it preserved an assortment of West African musical characteristics, from rhythms and blue tonality, through the falsetto break and the call-and-response patterns, to the songs of allusion and even the motions of African dance (Stearns 1956; Lloyd 1996). However, following Hartman (1997; 2002), these survivals do not denote restored affiliations, but rather an identification with Africa mediated by way of the experience of enslavement, an identification that is always after the rupture of the Middle Passage.

Like jazz, Southern food is suggestive of Glissant’s concept of the rhizome. Many people who were cooking this type of food in the pre-Civil War years were enslaved Africans and their decedents, and they were using cast-iron skillets, an early cooking technology. Some of the skillets that Hayden worked with for the series were over 200 years old, connecting the sculptures themselves to the origins of Southern food. As demonstrated by scholars such as Jessica B. Harris (1995; 1999; 2003; 2011), Anne L. Bower (2007), and Frederick Douglass Opie (2010), Southern food came to include many of the flavors, techniques, and ingredients

prevalent in African cuisine. After plantations were founded by colonists in the early seventeenth century, cooks were hired as indentured servants, workers who toiled without pay for a contractually agreed-upon period of time before eventually earning their freedom. By the late seventeenth century, enslaved laborers, captured from Central and West Africa, were involved in the cultivation of crops and were placed in charge of their enslavers' kitchens. They created a mixture of European, African, and Native American cuisines that are today the staples of Southern food, including gumbo, an adaptation of a traditional West African stew, and jambalaya, a cousin of Jolof rice. However, enslaved cooks have largely been erased from antebellum cookbooks, and they have had their contributions to American cuisine diminished (Deetz 2017). There is a gendered component to this erasure, and the establishment of Southern food more generally, as cooking was typically performed by black women. Romanticized and commodified today, these women often only exist in popular memory through the character of Aunt Jemima who is based on the figure of the mammy, a racist caricature of a simple-minded, sexless female domestic servant that was projected onto African American women. This caricature was used to create a false narrative of black women being happy within slavery or within a role of servitude. Rejecting this stereotype, in *The Jemima Code* (2015), Toni Tipton-Martin surveys 300 African American cookbooks from the days of slavery up until the end of the twentieth century, chronicling women of African descent who contributed to America's culinary traditions. She details the skills and creativity of these women who were effective at transmitting their craft orally, transferring cultural traditions from one generation to another. While not explicitly addressed by Hayden, his *Jazz* sculptures subtly foreground the labor of black women in the process of cultural authentication, as in the assimilation of elements from one culture to another (Erekosima and Eicher 1981), a subject explored in further detail by Simone Leigh.

## Vessels

Leigh's work draws together the various themes discussed thus far, from the forced diaspora and displacement of slavery to black women's labor. In *Topsy Turvy* (2013; fig. 14), a mixed-media installation created for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fowler Museum at UCLA, Leigh suspended hundreds of plastic dolls, a type found across West Africa and used by the Yoruba as a modern *ere ibeji* replacement. Yoruba people have one of the highest incidents of twin birth in the world, and the attendant high rate of infant mortality has led them to develop distinctive ritual strategies for forestalling the death of one or both twins and for appeasing the spirits of those who departed. Known as *ere ibeji*, the carved memorial figures that represent the deceased twin are central to these practices, and the plastic dolls signify the changing material forms of this enduring belief. In *Topsy Turvy*, the once colorful dolls are rendered in faded washes of black and white. They hang upside down from the ceiling around a cluster of giant cowrie shells cast in porcelain by the artist. Cowrie shells were used for thousands of years as currency in West Africa. Starting in the sixteenth-century, the shells were sourced by Europeans from the Maldives to purchase people in the West African slave trade for export to the New World (Hogendorn and Johnson 2003). This trade has been described by Akimwuni Ogundiran as a "human-cowry conversion" (2002: 443). Cowrie shells were also the basis for a Yoruba divination system known as "sixteen cowries" that crossed the Atlantic and gave birth to several Afro-American variants (Bascom 1993). In Leigh's installation, the dolls that surround the giant cowrie shells appear weathered as if they had washed up on the shore; their discoloration suggests a journey across oceans from which they emerge the same but different. The shells similarly evoke the Atlantic crossing and the traditions that were adapted to the circumstance African people found themselves in the New World. Hanging above viewers, *Topsy Turvy* suggests a past that is out of reach, that cannot be reassembled in its totality after the Middle Passage.

Although comprised of plastic dolls based on the modern *ere ibeji* replacement, Leigh's installation was named after "topsy-turvy" dolls. These dolls have two heads, one at each end – one white and the other black; a skirt flips back and forth so only one head is visible at a time. Creating a connection between the two types of dolls, Leigh asserted: "So like the *ibeji* in the Fowler collection, topsy-turvy dolls also act as a foil for another, hidden identity" (Davidson and Esslinger 2017: 27). According to Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (2008), the first topsy-turvy dolls were made by black wet nurses in the early nineteenth century as a reflection of the division of caregiving that African American women encountered as they cared for white children during the day and their own children at night. This labor performed by black women has been described by Hartman as the "impossible domestic" in which "the care extracted from her to tend the white household is taken at the cost of her own:" "she is the best nanny and the worst mother" (2016: 171). The division of care described by Hartman has been stereotyped in the figure of the mammy whose own children are portrayed as dirty and ill-mannered. Returning to black wet nurses, as Wallace-Sanders notes, the two-sided toys were the creative expressions of these otherwise silent women. Leigh's title fancifully suggests that traces of the *ibeji* can be found in the topsy-turvy dolls, where one child is always out of view.

Like Hayden, Leigh is interested in rhizomatic identity, specifically with regards to the material forms that arise from African survivals in the New World. Her recent work has explored these mixings through the figuration of the black female body as vessel, one element of which is glazed, salt-fired stoneware "face jugs," connected to early African American pottery traditions (fig. 15).<sup>3</sup> In *Head with Cobalt* (2018; fig. 16), Leigh renders a head, with a wide, flat nose and full lips, but without eyes or ears, set on a thick neck with a footed base. A curved handle emerges from the back of its skull, and a flared opening at the top turns the object into a vessel. The head is glazed black with spatters of milky white and cobalt blue. Created by enslaved people, the tradition of face jugs emerged in the mid-1800s in the

American south where many potteries were dependent on slave labor. In the 1909 edition of *The Pottery and Porcelain of the United States*, Edwin Atlee Barber recounted his conversations with South Carolina plantation and pottery owner Colonel Thomas Davies who recalled that in 1862 local enslaved people made “homely designs in coarse pottery,” including “weird-looking water jugs, roughly modeled on the front in the form of a grotesque human face – evidently intended to portray African features” (Barber 1909: 466). Davies also noted that face jugs were regarded by the white population in nineteenth-century South Carolina as having African precedents. Most enslaved people in South Carolina at this time were second, third, or fourth generation African Americans, making the connection with Africa a stretch. However, in 1858, the *Wanderer*, a luxury yacht turned slave ship, landed illegally on the coast of Jekyll Island, Georgia, carrying more than 400 enslaved Africans, many of whom were Bakongo people from present-day Democratic Republic of Congo (Vlach 1978). Over 100 of these people were transported to the Edgefield District of South Carolina and some were even sent to work in the potteries (Vlach 1978). Scholars have speculated that face jugs were the product of dynamic interactions between enslaved African American potters and the newly arrived Bakongo people (Vlach 1978; Mooney, Hynes, and Newell 2013). For the objects gave new material form and rituals to the Central African practice of *minkisi* that was combined with an already existent local belief in conjure, which helped enslaved people cope with plantation life by providing them with a degree of power (Thompson 1969; Vlach 1978; Thompson and Cornet 1981; Mooney, Hynes, and Newell 2013; Cooksey, Poynor, and Vanhee 2013).

Aruna D’Souza has described the cosmic glaze on Leigh’s *Head with Cobalt* as “a metaphor... for the realms of knowledge and imagination, as plentiful as the stars, that black women have carried with them over generations and across oceans in order to persist and survive, to maintain cultural traditions and ensure community” (2018). Writings on Leigh have often connected the vessel to the black woman’s body in racist culture as a site of many

conflicting projections, “a vessel of white fears and fantasies” (D’Souza 2018). This connection brings to mind my earlier discussion of Ellison’s protagonist and Matisse’s rendering of the *nkisi* grouped with a series of vessels. D’Souza contends that Leigh’s eyeless sculptural figures decline to return the viewer’s gaze, refusing to be cast in others’ terms. Opening up an alternate thread, I argue that Leigh’s vessels, which draw from African sculptural traditions, are emblematic of an endless outpouring of black women’s labor in the remaking of the world after the Middle Passage. Considering the relationship between water, vessel, and woman, Amber Jamilla Musser (2019) has linked Leigh’s sculptures to Oshun, the Nigerian, Cuban, and Brazilian deity associated with water and love. Highlighting the violence of water in the context of the African diaspora, John Mason has argued that Oshun operates as a healer who helped her people survive the Middle Passage and come out of the death ships to see the light of day again: “In the midst of circumstance, she keeps tradition flowing like the depths of the river in which she dwells” (Thompson 2001: 251). Here I am reminded of the enslaved women who drew on African cuisine in the making of Southern food and the black wet nurses who created topsy-turvy dolls that, apropos Leigh, contain a trace of the *ibeji*. Following Hartman, these women transformed the space of captivity into one inhabited by “the revenants of a dismembered past,” produced by a nostalgia that expressed a longing for a home that most could only vaguely recall or that lived only in the imagination (1997: 72).

To consider one final work, in *No Face (Bronze)* (2018; fig. 17), Leigh cast a hollow head on a dark columnar neck, reminiscent of commemorative bronze heads from the Kingdom of Benin. In comparison to the latter, which are often detailed with an elaborate headdress and coral beads, the surface of *No Face (Bronze)* is completely smooth, like a pebble washed over by ocean waves. This loss of information or detail is suggestive of the sculptures created by Hayden and Biggers, emphasizing the ancestors and familial connections effaced through enslavement. In the Kingdom of Benin, commemorative heads were traditionally placed on

altars in the Royal Palace from the fourteenth century onwards to honor the ancestors, as in the previous kings or *obas*. The first obligation of a new king was to create a shrine dedicated to his predecessor, ensuring dynastic continuity, and these shrines typically held artifacts, including commemorative heads. The Edo people considered the head to be the locus of a man's character, knowledge, authority, success, and family leadership. Beyond its cultural significance, the commemorative head is today a reminder of a violent colonial history, namely the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 in which a British military operation captured, burned, and looted Benin City. Museums have long maintained that the British assault on the Benin Kingdom was a "retaliatory" gesture to the ambush of a previous British-led party under General James Philips that left all but two men dead. More recent evidence has proposed that it was in fact long planned, implicating museums in the perpetuation of colonial violence today (Hicks 2020). Amongst other stolen artifacts, the commemorative heads were taken back to Britain officially as "reparations" for the supposed assault, and they are today found in many public and private collections, including the British Museum. In her reference to this sculptural tradition, Leigh summons a material practice of commemorating ancestors, as well as an ongoing history of brutality, destruction, and displacement. In *No Face (Bronze)*, the endless darkness of the sculpture's carved out face appears as a kind of abyss, evoking Glissant's description of the Middle Passage, but it also conjures the female form through its long, elegant neck. Faceless, Leigh's sculpture commemorates the anonymous labor of black women who remade the world after the abyss and who continue to grapple with its reverberations in everyday life.

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### ***Image captions***

**Figure 1.** Hale Woodruff, *The Card Players*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 59.7 x 74.5 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. George A. Hearn Fund, 2015. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence.

**Figure 2.** Palmer C. Hayden, *Fétiche et Fleurs*, 1932–33. Oil on canvas, 59.69 x 73.66 cm. The Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles.

**Figure 3.** Malvin Gray Johnson, *Self Portrait (Myself at Work)*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 97.2 x 76.2 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the Harmon Foundation.

**Figure 4.** Lois Mailou Jones, *Self Portrait*, 1940. Casein on board, 44.5 x 36.7 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Bequest of the artist.

**Figure 5.** Hugh Hayden, *Invisible Man*, 2019. Silver plated wooden figure with Truvada and resin, crate, 165 x 84 x 71 cm. © Eden Krsmanovic / Courtesy of the artist and CLEARING New York, Brussels.

**Figure 6.** Hugh Hayden, *Invisible Man*, 2019. Silver plated wooden figure with Truvada and resin, crate, 165 x 84 x 71 cm. © Eden Krsmanovic / Courtesy of the artist and CLEARING New York, Brussels.

**Figure 7.** Henri Matisse, *Still Life with African Statue*, late 1906–early 1907 (unfinished). Oil on canvas, 105 x 70 cm. Private collection.

**Figure 8.** Hugh Hayden, *Ark?*, 2019. Crate, souvenir African figures, ethafoam, acrylic mirror, 74 x 216 x 84 cm. © Eden Krsmanovic / Courtesy of the artist and CLEARING New York, Brussels.

**Figure 9.** Sanford Biggers, *BAM (For Philando)*, 2016. Bronze with black patina, 76.2 x 22.9 x 22.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Sanford Biggers. Photo credit: Davin Lavikka.

**Figure 10.** Sanford Biggers, *BAM (Seated Warrior)*, 2017. Polished bronze, 198.1 x 25.4 x 25.4 cm. Base plate: 61 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Sanford Biggers. Photo credit: Object Studies.

**Figure 11.** Hugh Hayden, *Jazz 10*, 2020. Cast iron, 42 x 30 x 8 cm. © Hugh Hayden; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

**Figure 12.** Hugh Hayden, *Jazz 15*, 2020. Cast iron, 43 x 29 x 16 cm. © Hugh Hayden; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

**Figure 13.** Hugh Hayden, *Jazz 18*, 2020. Cast iron, 50 x 24.5 x 13 cm. © Hugh Hayden; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

**Figure 14.** Simone Leigh, *Topsy Turvy*, 2013. Installation view at the Fowler Museum, UCLA.

**Figure 15.** Face jug, 1850–1870. Edgefield, South Carolina. Alkaline-glazed stoneware with kaolin inserts, 16.83 x 13.02 cm. The Chipstone Foundation 2012.4. Photo credit: Gavin Ashworth.

**Figure 16.** Simone Leigh, *Head with Cobalt*, 2018. Salt-fired porcelain, 38.1 x 17.78 x 29.85 cm.

**Figure 17.** Simone Leigh, *No Face (Bronze)*, 2018. Bronze, 44.45 x 17.78 x 15.24 cm.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1923, Locke met the American collector Albert C. Barnes in Paris. Their encounter led to an extended correspondence on African art and a tumultuous friendship (Helbling 1982). The two collaborated on the May 1924 issue of *Opportunity* magazine, which was devoted to African art and contained Locke's first critical essay on the subject. In 1925, the Barnes Foundation opened its doors in the Philadelphia suburb of Merion, becoming the first permanent display of African art in the United States. The Barnes Foundation played a critical role in enabling African American artists to engage with African art forms. Christa Clarke (2003) has written on Barnes' contributions to American understandings of African art, specifically his role in defining African art for the American public.

<sup>2</sup> Mia L. Bagneris alternatively reads Hayden's work as mocking "the superficial nature of black Americans' appreciation of African art, while the work's pretentious French title underscore the European-mediated mechanisms from which such appreciations originated" (2017: 19).

<sup>3</sup> The face jug from the Chipstone Foundation illustrated in figure 15 is an incredibly rare example in that the African American potter who created the vessel inscribed it with the name of its African American owner (Toussaint 2020).