Critical Genealogies:
Writing Black Art

When I first begin to talk with folks cross-class about the place of art in our lives, I was surprised by the number of folks who just did not think about it. Contrary to stereotypes, class, though important, was not always the major factor determining quality of interest, appreciation, and engagement. Some of the individuals I spoke with, who have tremendous access to art through family members (some of whom were or are well-known artists), were as uninterested in an engaged relationship with the visual as those individuals who have no art in the intimate spaces of their lives. Certainly a distinction must be made between having access to art and being willing to engage the visual on an experiential level—to be moved and touched by art. Many of us see art every day without allowing it to be anything more than decorative. The way art moves in the marketplace also changes our relationship to it. Often individuals who collect art spend more time engaged with issues of market value rather than experiencing the visual.

Class politics definitely inform the way we think about aesthetics, the way we respond to art. Shaping how we see what we see when we choose to look at art, class often overdetermines our relation to art—while talking about race and gender in relation to the art world has become more acceptable. Class is still a taboo issue, although it is often the subtext in many discussions about art practices. Issues of class are most evident in the realm of critical thinking and writing about art. While individuals from marginal groups—from non-materially privileged backgrounds—often find a way to make art, writing about art continues to be the domain of those who have some degree of class privilege. Rarely are there public discussions about the way in which class informs which black artists, critics, etc., will receive attention both in segregated black cultural spaces and in the dominant culture where such spaces are most often controlled by nonblack individuals.

So much attention has been focused on the relationship of black artists to the mainstream white art world, in ways that highlight the relative disenfranchisement of these individuals in that sphere, that no attention is accorded to the politics of class as it shapes and informs the work of African-American artists and critics. Often the black people who receive a degree of attention in the mainstream art world—whether as artists, critics, or both—come from privileged class locations within their ethnic groups. Among blacks, as among other groups in this society, class standing is not determined solely by material possession; it is informed by family background, education, values, geographical location, and so forth. For example, the politics of racial apartheid in relation to housing has meant that poor and privileged black folks often live in close proximity to one another, in locations that an outsider might perceive as low-income or ghettolike. Yet inside these segregated neighborhoods, a class structure remains intact that often mirrors the dominant culture and influences both who makes art and who will write about art.

Privileged individuals within these segregated locations, who control cultural locations where artistic production is encouraged, are often as hierarchical and dominating when relating to poor and working-class folks of their own race as are their white counterparts in the mainstream art world. Throughout the history of postslavery African-American art making, class hierarchies both within and outside black communities have shaped the nature of art practices, controlling the way art by African-American artists is critically considered. The standards of valuation used in white-dominated art circles were and often still are applied in segregated black culture. As a consequence, the black poor and working-class did not and do not have a primary voice in shaping black aesthetics. Even when black liberation movements of the 1960s and early 1970s extolled the virtues of laboring classes, the folks who defined what our relationship to art and aesthetics should be were still primarily the black bourgeoisie.

Autobiographical writings by the critic Michele Wallace document her experience growing up in Harlem surrounded by artistic black people, many of whom were her relatives. Their aesthetics were often informed by mainstream notions of high culture. Faith Ringgold, Wallace’s mother and a celebrated modern artist, confronted racism and sexism every step of the way as she pursued her commitment to making and
teaching art. While race and gender were factors that impeded her development, class positionality positively mediated her relation to art making. She was raised in a family where art was valued. Wallace’s autobiographical work and her insightful critical pieces provide a unique perspective because she starts from a critical standpoint that examines the interplay of race, gender, and class. Similarly, the African-American artists Emma Amos and Lyle Ashton Harris both speak about coming from families in which class privilege informed their relation to art. Though generations apart, these two artists both draw on the work of elder family members who make or made art. By focusing on these legacies, their intent is to establish a cultural genealogy where aesthetic traditions that have been shared generationally are passed down, remembered, noted, and documented. This documentation serves to counter that form of racial tokenism and cultural stereotyping that almost always represents black artistic talent and genius as residing solely in a lone individual who, against the odds, strives to create. Like Wallace, both Amos and Harris write and speak about growing up in solid middle-class backgrounds where they were immersed in a world that deemed art important.

African-Americans coming from poor and working-class backgrounds have usually relied solely on schools to teach and legitimize our interest in art. In segregated Southern schools art has traditionally been taught from a perspective informed by the class and racial biases of Eurocentric traditions. This is an accurate description of the way art continues to be taught in many predominantly black schools, including colleges and universities. Usually African-American scholars who focus on art are trained in both predominantly black and white institutions to think about art solely in Eurocentric terms. As a consequence, African-American art critics, both inside and outside the academy, have made few progressive critical interventions that fundamentally change the way work by African-American artists is critically received.

Significantly, the recent Time magazine cover story “Black Renais-
sance: African American Artists Are Truly Free At Last” (October 1994) assessed the development and public reception of works by black artists without engaging, in any way, the ideas and perspectives of African-American scholars who write about the visual arts. The blatant absence of this critical perspective serves to highlight the extent to which black scholars who write about art, specifically about work created by African American artists, are ignored by the mainstream. Ironically, the insistence in this essay that the “freedom” of black artists can be measured solely by the degree to which the work of individual artists receives attention in the established white-dominated art world exposes the absence of such freedom. And, of course, no efforts were made in this piece to critique or challenge the pervasive racism in the mainstream art world, the way it constructs a system of exclusion and inclusion that not only limits the career development of African-American artists but also fosters a system of tokenism that pits individuals against one another. The progress of African-American artists in contemporary society cannot be measured solely by the success of individuals. It is also determined by the extent to which this work is critically considered.

An overall examination of the way in which work by African-American artists is critically received would reveal a tremendous lack. Much of the critical writing on the work of African-American artists is limited in vision and scope. Black academics writing about art within a conservative educational hierarchy that is deeply mired in white-supremacist thinking about aesthetics and art practices often choose traditional ways of approaching the work of African-American artists. As a result, little critical work from a more progressive standpoint emerges. Outside the academy, the world of art criticism continues to be dominated by the voices of white males, many of whom come from economically or educationally privileged backgrounds. There are very few black critics writing about art who are not academics. Since art criticism is certainly not a moneymaking enterprise, such writing is usually done by individuals who have some degree of class privilege. Even though race can now be considered in contemporary writing about art, there is still a lack of progressive critical writing by African-Americans.

Often individual progressive white critics have taken the lead in making necessary critical interventions that disrupt conventional ways of seeing and thinking about the work of black artists in the diaspora. Certainly the terrain of cultural conservatism and Eurocentric chauvinism, particularly in relation to African and African-American art, was powerfully disrupted by the work of the art historian and critic Robert Farris Thompson. While it was certainly less threatening to the art establishment for a privileged white male scholar to challenge the system, Thompson’s willingness to challenge Eurocentric biases set a powerful example.
Like many readers, I was thrilled by my initial encounter with Thompson’s work, especially Flash of the Spirit: African and African American Art and Philosophy. Many of the ideas of progressive black critical thinkers, who questioned Eurocentric biases in all disciplines, were mirrored in Thompson’s work. It was more than evident that, within the context of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, a privileged white male professor’s “take” on “the black Atlantic world” (Thompson was one of the first scholars in the United States writing about art to use this term) would have a greater chance of receiving academic validation than that of insurgent black thinkers. It is useful to focus on Thompson’s work when thinking critically about the absence of a large group of African-American critics writing about art, because Thompson’s visibility is, in part, a reflection of the way that systems of race, gender, and class privilege continue to create a social context in which it is difficult for black critics to gain visibility and regard. Concurrently, the combination of race, class, and gender privilege often makes it more acceptable for white male scholars to successfully transgress boundaries.

I first met Robert Farris Thompson when I went to teach English and African American Studies at Yale University. Fondly called Master T. because of his administrative role at head of Timothy Dwight College, Thompson was also in the African American Studies department. His role as “critical diva” of African and African-American culture must be critically interrogated in light of new progressive thinking about issues of cultural appropriation, about race, gender, and class hierarchies, and in light of our growing awareness that we need to create a cultural context that will allow more critical writings about the work of black artists in the diaspora to emerge, and that will allow the voices of African-American critics to be heard. In his classes at Yale, Robert Farris Thompson is the incarnation of Norman Mailer’s “white Negro.” Thompson’s teaching style turns on its head Malcolm X’s assertion that black people love white people more than they love themselves. Thompson’s love affair with blackness was and is far more passionate and intense than that of most of his black academic counterparts. Unlike them, he has been willing to let his passion change his pedagogical practices.

Thompson attempts to make the diasporic connections in the black Atlantic world come to life in the classroom. His teaching is performance art. Whether imitating black vernacular speech, percussive style, or style and response, Thompson attempts to engage students. To critical onlookers, Thompson’s work may appear to be just another minstrel show, another way of “eating the other”—a conventional white ethnographic mode of cultural appropriation. At times such criticism is justified. A critique of Thompson need not diminish the fact that he brings to any discussion of art and aesthetics in the black Atlantic world a wealth of knowledge and experience.

When he began this work, Thompson’s standpoint was unique in the mainstream academic world. The African-American art critic Rick Powell has said that he went to study at Yale after hearing Thompson lecture in 1977. Powell recalls that the lecture was “ostensibly on Hairian art, but he discussed people like Ntozake Shange and Gwendolyn Brooks.” To the young student onlooker, Thompson’s approaching black creativity in a holistic manner was fascinating. From Powell’s perspective as a student, this white male art professor was “the only scholar with whom [he] would have some simpatico in terms of thinking about black culture in a broad way.” Most professors and critics who worked with Thompson when they were students are reluctant to critique his work because he has been so helpful to them. It is unfortunate that criticism is often seen as negative. Constructive critical interrogation can enhance and illuminate our work.

While I found Robert Farris Thompson to be an ally as a colleague, I also observed that he functioned within the concrete hierarchy of Yale like most other senior white male professors, particularly in relation to gender issues. I mention this because it is not a radical disruption of racism and racial hierarchy, of sexism and gender hierarchy, when white and/or male scholars, in general, whose own careers are well served by their focus on black and/or gender issues, do not also work at changing their habits of being in ways that repudiate domination. Many white males in the academic context in which Thompson and I worked, particularly those individuals who focused their attention on marginal groups, acted as though their theory and practice should not be critically interrogated. Not only were they rarely critical or self-reflective, they usually acted punitively towards individuals who dared to raise critical questions. It was the norm that these men (as well as men of color who occupied similar positions of power and authority) did not regard women as peers, did not value our thoughts or opinions, or did not acknowledge our intellectual commitment and seriousness.
I was reminded of this recently when I was asked to participate in a project, jointly organized by the San Francisco Art Institute and the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, called “The Global Presence of African Spirit in Contemporary Art.” One of the conference planners had informed me that probably would not want to share a panel with Thompson because I “did not like him.” I countered that all my personal interactions with Thompson had been positive, that I appreciate his work, and that although he is critical of his theory and practice, this did not mean that I did not like him. I share this anecdote because it exposes the extent to which intellectual and academic communities in the United States are often unable to distinguish between a critique of ideas and a personal attack. The fear of being perceived as personally attacking colleagues, or of making personal enemies, effectively censors meaningful critique and closes off the possibility that there will be meaningful, dialectical, and critical conversation and debate among colleagues. These critical dialogues must take place if progressive commitment to ending domination on the basis of race, gender, and class within the academy is to become a reality on all levels, in our teaching, our writing, and our working relations.

Indeed, a major absence in Thompson’s work is any indication that he engages in ongoing critical exchange with black critical thinkers who find his work and/or pedagogical practices problematic. Within the academy, Thompson was challenging Eurocentric biases long before the age of multiculturalism and the age of postcolonial and anticolonial cultural studies. He is to be praised for breaking new ground back in the day when certain standpoints were deemed unacceptable. Yet this praise should not usurp the place of meaningful critique. The theory and practice that inform Thompson’s work should be rigorously and critically interrogated. For example, Thompson rarely talks about the behind-the-scenes labor and investigation that inform his work, his relation to sources, the impact of his white male presence and all the privilege that embodies. As the black male critic Greg Tate, a self-proclaimed fan of Thompson’s, attests: “He never deals with his own alienation in the material — alienation from black folks. He does not deal with himself as a white man in his work.” The point of dealing with himself in this way would not be purely confessional but, rather, a sign of progressive critical engagement with the issues of white supremacy, cultural appropriation, and the new politics of anticolonialism.

Those of us who have had the opportunity to engage in private dialogues with Thompson know that he does deal with the hard political issues and that he is willing to discuss these issues. I’d like to see more of this exchange in the work. Critically discussing issues of power and access in relation to race, gender, and class politics within the art world is all the more crucial at a time when narrow nationalism, fundamentalism, and fascism are gaining new momentum. When I asked Robert Parris Thompson about the experience of being one of the first white male scholars to break with racist conventions and engage in a critical decentering of the West, the groundbreaking intellectual border crossings on African and African-American art that his work affirms, he replied: “I feel like it’s a struggle and I can’t let my guard down. I have a smile on my face and a militant posture.”

Many white critics feel their position of “authority” challenged as more people of color claim a critical voice. All too often these individuals are defensive when asked to discuss issues of cultural appropriation or to talk about the way in which the existing social structure creates a cultural context where what white people have to say about blackness continues to be deemed more relevant than other voices speaking on the same issues. Concurrently, it is crucial that progressive white critics be vigilant both in the critical interrogation of their work and in the way that work is represented. For example, the paperback edition of Thompson’s Flash of the Spirit carries a one-sentence endorsement from the New York Times Book Review: “Convinces the reader there is a real and important significance in the term African American.” This quote is not counterhegemonic. It does not decenter the West. It reaffirms Eurocentric thinking and, as a consequence, perpetuates white-supremacist biases. Given Thompson’s astute critical facilities, it would be counterhegemonic for him to critique the way this quote undermines his antiracist standpoint. While it is always a useful and necessary intervention for white scholars to address issues of race and creativity, of art and aesthetics in the black Atlantic world, if that work is merely providing yet another way for white folks to “eat the other” (i.e., appropriate nonwhite cultures in ways that diminish) structures of racist hierarchy and domination remain intact. This work then becomes part of the colonizing apparatus. Concurrently, when individuals in power represent that they have divested themselves of any allegiance to racism, while clinging to the desire to be uncritically
accepted and affirmed in a manner that blocks and censors critique, the process of decolonization is incomplete. Bluntly put, as long as white scholars feel that they are doing black folks a favor when they critically engage black culture or that they necessarily know more than any black could ever know, then racism remains unchanged.

Issues of appropriation and standpoint as they relate to neocolonialism are addressed more directly in discussions of ethnography and anthropology than in critical scholarship on art and aesthetics. In *Radiance from the Waters*, the art historian and critic Sylvia Andyn Boone is openly critical and self-reflective about her positionality as an American black woman seeking to learn from the Mende people. Subverting those racist conventions within an art history that repeatedly acts as though the issue of aesthetics is relevant only to white culture, Boone simultaneously interrogates this assumption and counters it by offering a detailed interpretation of the relationship between art and philosophy in this Third World community. Significantly, her work has only recently begun to receive wide recognition and attention. Although her approach to African art and philosophy mirrors and at times surpasses Thompson's, it is rarely evoked, even by scholars and critics who draw on it. In other essays I have written in detail about the ways structures of racism, sexism, and class elitism function in the academy to minimize, if not to obscure entirely, the work of individuals from marginalized groups. This is especially true for black women.

In our many conversations about the art world, Sylvia Boone and I talked about the way in which the interplay of race, class, and gender hierarchies work to ensure that the critical voices of individuals from marginal groups are always subordinated to those of their white peers. Frequently, our talks were orgiastic celebrations of the concrete ways black folks in the diaspora subvert strategies of neocolonialism both in our art-making practices and in critical writing. These conversations were clarifying moments when subjugated knowledge surfaced with elaborate critical excavation. They prompted me to critically reexamine issues of aesthetics in the everyday life of the segregated black communities where I lived as a child. In that world, art was always offered as a marginal location where issues of race, gender, and class were subordinated to the mystery of talent or genius. Our aesthetics were informed by religious experience. Within our all-black churches we were taught to value talent, what old folks called "the gift." We were taught that no matter the circumstance, class, gender, or race, if the divine spirit had given one the "gift"—the capacity to create art—then one had to yield, to surrender to that calling. In *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde reminds us "that the task of setting free one's gift was a recognized labor in the ancient world." Within those racially segregated, mostly poor and working-class communities of my childhood, spaces of oppositional cultural intervention were formed to make a place for the creation of art. Yet there was no recognition of the need to create spaces for the affirmation of critical thinking and writing about art.

The will to honor one's artistic gifts or the gifts of others was maintained despite dire circumstances of exploitation and oppression. It was believed that the soul suffered irreconcilable loss if gifts were not developed, used, shared. Hyde contends: "The genius of daemon comes to us at birth. It carries with it the fullness of our undeveloped powers. These it offers to us as we grow, and we choose whether or not to accept, which means we choose whether or not to labor in its service." No doubt it was this recognition of the gift that compelled enslaved Africans to express their artistry, their capacity to make pictures and elaborate designs, even as they constructed instruments of punishment or torture that would be used against them or their brethren. When I first encountered such objects, adorned with carvings, in a museum, I stood in awe, weeping. Crying in the face of a will to make art so intense as to lose oneself in a rapture of forgetfulness. How to imagine the mind of the artist then—how to articulate the aesthetic beliefs informing this creativity? To be bound and yet not bound—this was the paradox: the slave liberated for a time in the imagination, liberated in that moment of creative transcendence.

The culture of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy seeks to remove all traces of this subjugated knowledge. It seeks to contain art and suppress the will to create in the interest of neocolonialism. In such a context the poor and underprivileged are meant to have no relationship to art practices, to the art world. More than at any other time in our history, African-Americans embrace notions of victimhood that deny the power of the imagination, that block our capacity to create. No wonder, then, that this is a time when our collective interest in art wanes. To counter this threatening cultural genocide, artists in all groups marginalized by structures of domination must engage in ongoing acts of resistance to form opposi-
tional spaces where art can be made, where we can gain and sustain visibility, where progressive critical thought about art can emerge.

This culture of resistance must be manifest in critical writing. Unless there is collective recognition that there is an ongoing need to create contexts where more black folks from diverse class backgrounds are able to think and write about art, not enough African-Americans will receive the critical consideration their work merits.