African American Visual Representation: From Repression to Resistance

by

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The United States of America was born in slavery and its prosperity was built upon a foundation of racism. The major political, economic, and legal institutions of the nation advanced Black subordination; only after the Civil War were most people of African origin freed from legal servitude, formalized in the 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution. But long after their liberation, millions of African Americans suffered egregious economic, social, and political discrimination, the legacies of which have continued into the early 21st century.

Throughout the nation's history, visual art and culture have also promoted public perceptions of Black subordination. Depictions of Black women, men, and children were highly stereotypical and demeaning. These images conformed to the dominant ideology of white supremacy in the United States. Black people were typically shown as buffoons and as persons incapable of serious intellectual or artistic accomplishment. As Albert Boime persuasively demonstrated in *The Art of Exclusion*, even the American "high art" tradition reflected deep-seated white attitudes of Black subordination. The renowned genre painter William Sidney Mount (1807-1868), for example, produced numerous images of African Americans with toothy grins that reinforced widespread racist perceptions. Especially from the late 18th century through the mid-20th century, popular cartoons, posters, advertisements, and other visual forms reflected the Jim Crow and minstrel visions of African Americans as lazy, irresponsible, sexually promiscuous, and prone to disease.

These representations were far from benign; they were much more than mere visual accompaniments of a racist institutional structure. Instead, they reinforced that structure and added additional barriers to genuine racial equality and social justice. By conveying the view that African Americans were childish, irrational, and buffoonish, it logically followed that they should be excluded from full citizenship, including the right to vote, to serve on juries, and to participate fully in the economic and social life of American society.

The retreat from Reconstruction in the South and the growing use of Black Code laws effectively bypassed the 13th Amendment and subjected African Americans to cruel and discriminatory laws that closely mimicked slavery itself. By 1896, the United States Supreme Court, in its infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, legalized racial segregation through its ludicrous "separate but equal" doctrine, ensuring second class citizenship for Blacks for the next six decades.

During this time, hundreds of thousands, even millions, of racist products and images were produced and distributed. Many were images of grinning "darkies," watermelon eating "picanninies," servile mammies and older "jolly nigger" African American men and similar racist stereotypes. Some were presented in advertisement posters, postcards, cereal and other product labels, sheet music covers, and other printed visual forms. Still others were three-dimensional products including toys, salt and pepper shakers, ceramic knickknacks, vases, figurines, and similar products.

More perniciously, some cartoons and advertisements even used Black bodies to promote overt contempt for or even violence against African Americans. Examples are legion: "Picaninny Freeze" (Figure 1); "Nigger Head" golf tees (Figure 2); "Coon Inn" Restaurants (Figure 3); and many more. The Picanniny product was typical: using caricatures to sell a prosaic dessert product and, in the process, use a word widely regarded as a racial slur. The effect was to further legitimize derogatory language while simultaneously promoting a vision of African American children as stupid creatures whose entire human needs are satisfied by a large slice of watermelon.

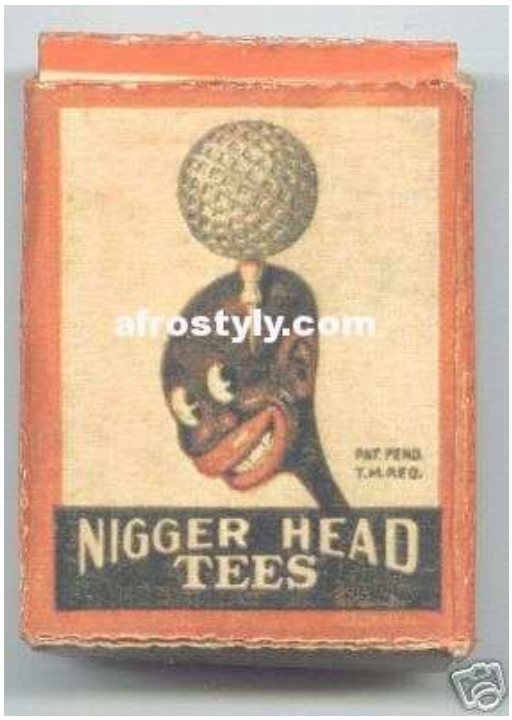

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

"Nigger head" golf tees are more pernicious. Repeating the caricature of an imbecilic Black male with exaggerated lips, the image suggests that like a golf tee itself, an African American head is worthy of little more than a physical assault with a golf club. It is irrelevant whether patrons of such a repulsive product actually engage in any such physical brutality; the deeper impact of such representation is to reflect and further legitimize the violence against African Americans that has been intrinsic to America since its origins. The overt use of "nigger," moreover, reinforced the common use of racial invective that dominated American language throughout much of the 20th century.

The Coon Chicken Inns were a chain of restaurants in Salt Lake City, Seattle, and Portland, with extremely racist facades, napkins, plates, tablecloths, and stationary featuring the "coon" motif, which served as the establishment's mascot.

Once again, popular culture, with its fusion of derogatory language and imagery, appealed to a clientele who were typically amused by these surroundings. Like other racially insulting terms, "coon" (derived from raccoon) insulted and dehumanized African Americans by equating them with an animal species.

Perhaps the most egregious example of racist representation was the 1915 film "Birth of a Nation," by D. W. Griffith. Based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*, this highly celebrated film "classic" depicted African Americans as brutes, thieves, gluttons, and rapists, while simultaneously glorifying the Ku Klux Klan, America's most long lasting domestic terrorist organization. President Woodrow Wilson, at a White House screening, remarked that the film was "like writing history" and that "it [was] all so terribly true."

All of these examples were designed for a white population that rarely encountered contrary images of African American dignity. They were fully part of a racist visual culture, viewing such imagery as nothing more than humorous depictions of obvious racial truths. These racist pictures and objects confirmed what most white audiences already believed. Any suggestion that these posters, postcards, toys, figures, film clips, and other objects, had repressive political consequences would likely have led to puzzled or even incredulous responses.

African Americans, naturally, had entirely opposite reactions. Black visual artists consciously determined to use their prodigious talents to resist and reverse this visual racism. They chose to appropriate their own imagery, refusing to cede representation to a white majority whose record of oppression, including in the visual arts, rendered their representations of African Americans untrustworthy, with a few notable exceptions.

African American visual resistance has taken several forms. The initial response, which continues into the present, involved representations of images of Black dignity—a dramatic repudiation of white stereotypical depictions. Such artists as Henry Ossawa Tanner, Meta Fuller, Augusta Savage, Jacob Lawrence, Charles White, Richmond Barthe, Lois Jones, Ernie Barnes, William Pajaud, Richard Wyatt, among hundreds of others, have portrayed African Americans in many settings and professions in deeply respectful ways, countering the dominant negative depictions of the past.

An early example of this artistic resistance is Tanner's "The Banjo Lesson" (Figure 4). This famous 1893 painting depicts a grandfather and his grandson deeply absorbed in a musical lesson. Viewers immediately note the intense concentration of both figures, revealing a profound pedagogical seriousness and exchange that contradicts conventional notions of Black frivolity and lack of educational commitment.

The grandfather's careful attention to his grandson's finger picking and placement on the banjo's frets underscores the precision of his instruction. Moreover, the lesson reveals a deep love between the two figures, another visual response to racist stereotypes about the purported African American absence of intimate family values. At bottom, "The Banjo Lesson" is a profoundly political artwork in light of the times—a judgment rarely made even now in conventional art historical accounts of that iconic painting.

Figure 4 credit: Hampton University Museum Collection
Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia.

Another major strain involves representations of Black protest activity. Going beyond images of African American dignity alone, many artists from this tradition effectively sought to use their talents more aggressively to resist white racism in the United States. Especially throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, many African American artists have produced paintings, prints, sculptures, photographs, and other visual forms to advance the Black freedom struggle.

Militant imagery from Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, John Biggers, Faith Ringgold, David Hammons, Dana Chandler, Noni Olabisi, and scores of others represent this dimension of resistance art.

This militant visual tradition, in fact, is one of the major strains of African American art history. Los Angeles artist Lavialle Campbell's commitment to the continuing struggles of her people found vigorous expression in one of her most dramatic artworks from the 1990s. "Throne" (Figure 5) is a witty and engaging soft sculpture that combines magnificent technique with trenchant historical social commentary. It follows the vigorous efforts of the modern civil rights movement and the advent of the Black power movement and reflects a profound African American commitment to eliminate racist practices and institutional barriers to full equality and dignity in America. Artistic supporters of these objectives, including Campbell, are integral components of the continuing struggle; they are not mere visual adjuncts to the historical movement for racial liberation.

"Throne" rests on a painted wooden base and replicates the "Afro" hairstyle that Black men and women often sported during the late 1960s and 1970s. This representation was itself a powerful repudiation of repressive representations of the African American populace. Large enough to sit in, the work enabled many viewers to take delight when they reclined in the large curly black Afro, adding a participatory dimension to artistic resistance. Several Afro picks, which were used to shape the actual hairstyle, surround the base of the work. Significantly, the bottoms of the picks are the familiar "Black Power" symbol of the clenched fist, which also appears dramatically in Elizabeth Catlett's iconic sculpture "Black Unity" from 1968 and several other African American artworks.

Like the Afro hairstyle it emulates, "Throne" uses a fashion statement to make a more fundamental political point. Repudiating white America's demand for straightened hair, millions of African Americans determined to accentuate their own natural hairstyles, with authentic pride in determining their own physical appearances without submission to the standards of the dominant culture—representing *themselves* instead of their oppressors. The "black is beautiful" message of the Afro signified a developing racial autonomy.. Lavialle Campbell employed her artistic talent to reiterate and reinforce that perspective. Keenly aware that personal choice is an essential component of a genuinely multicultural democracy, she elevated "Black Power" symbols in showing the continuing vibrancy of African American to control their own visual representation.

Figure 5 credit: Courtesy of the artist.

Finally, and most controversially, some Black artists have appropriated formerly racist representations and transformed them into resistance imagery. Joe Overstreet, Robert Colescott, Murray DePillars, Camille Billops, Betye Saar, Ramsess, Kara Walker, and many more represent this strain of Black resistance visual art. Their goal is to transform classic racist imagery into a satirical critique. In the process, they "defang" the harmful (mis)representations of African Americans and communicate a message that such caricatures will not only be rejected, but that they will actually be used as symbols of visual resistance.

This appropriation process has been common among oppressed groups, in both language and imagery. Gays and lesbians, for example, have used the words "queer," "dyke," and "even "faggot" as symbols of pride, whereas in the past, they were labels of disgust and hostility.

This process has occasionally taken artistic form, adding a new dimension of resistance to oppression and discrimination. African Americans sometimes use the word "Nigga" in speech, music, and art to replace repression with resistance. In another dramatic example, English Jewish artist Alan Schechner inserted his own image, with a Diet Coke can, into a famous photograph of Buchenwald Concentration Camp by Margaret Bourke-White. Many other examples reflect this provocative feature of resistance visual art.

Debate rages about whether racist images are transformed when the artists are themselves Black (or other historically oppressed group) and when they express clear and unambiguous anti-racist agendas. The answer may be partially generational; older viewers often note the pernicious impact of racist collectibles and memorabilia, which evoke painful memories of personal and social oppression. Some younger viewers applaud the contemporary African American appropriation of racist language and imagery, seeing this as an effective strategy to contain and disempower racist expression. The latter view is stronger, although contemporary audiences should remain sensitive to their elders whose personal experiences with overt racism remains raw and debilitating.

Renowned Los Angeles African American artist Betye Saar created one of the most widely known works in this tradition in 1972. "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima" (Figure 6) is her most famous political effort that has become an icon of modern African American visual social commentary. The 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King especially angered Saar, further inspiring her to forge an appropriate visual response. She had earlier begun collecting derogatory images of African Americans from various cultural and commercial sources.

Figure 6 credit: Collection of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum; purchase with the aid of funds from the national Endowment for the Arts (selected by the Committee for the Acquisition of Afro-American Art). Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY. Photograph by Joshua Nefsky.

She understood that these repulsive visual stereotypes were ubiquitous, allowing millions of whites to hide their racist sentiments and actions under the guise of humor. She found imaginative ways to integrate such images as Aunt Jemimas, "picanninies," grinning "darkies," and watermelons into her work. In the process, she managed to express her personal pain and rage while simultaneously transforming racist caricatures into symbols of racial liberation.

Several levels of visual detail in this mixed media construction combine to produce its powerful message of resistance. The background contains repetitive images of the "modern" Aunt Jemima, a slimmed-down and less burlesqued vision of the "old" Jemima, the longtime commercial symbol for pancake mix and other food products. The figure in the front *is* the old Jemima, the fat and sexless stereotype shown holding a white baby. This image was typical of the portrayals of Black people as dark, childish, and happy—fully content to serve their white superiors without complaint and cheerful about their subordination in the unequal power relations of American society.

In the middle of the construction, an even more exaggerated version of Aunt Jemima dominates the work as a whole, providing the primary basis for its deeper political content. Saar deliberately placed a broom in one hand and a rifle in the other. Not yet truly liberated, she is still caught in the middle of traditional racial and gender roles and the emerging transformation promised by the militant social protests of Black people in the United States. Both the title and the imagery, however, leave viewers with few doubts about the eventual outcome. Jemima's weapon is a clear signal to her oppressors that the time has come to cast off her symbols of servility and join the continuing struggles of her Black brothers and sisters. In reversing the historic passivity of Aunt Jemima in her art, Saar joins a larger and effective tradition of African American visual resistance.

Race and ethnicity still matter in contemporary America. Even as people of color make advances in various fields, a deeper, often unacknowledged racism persists below the surface, pervading every feature of life. Today, more than ever, the most intractable racism in America is institutional even as overt representations fade into the historical record. A function of that reality is that so much of this racism is unconscious and so much remains unacknowledged in the media and in public discourse. But the long battle against racism on the streets and in the paintings, prints, photographs, installations, and films of resistance artists must continue. The late 19th and 20th century expressions of a resistance visual culture were merely the beginning of a long and complex journey to genuine racial equality and social justice. That development will—and should—continue for decades into the future.

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