

Abjection and Intersectional Identity
in King Cobra's *Red Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting*

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Abstract

Brooklyn-based artist King Cobra's (documented as Doreen Lynette Garner) (b. 1986) sculptural assemblage, *Red Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting* (2018) visually reiterates the history of inhumane medical experiments on Black enslaved women's bodies in the United States from 1845 to 1849. In many website contents that deal with King Cobra's oeuvre, the term 'abjection' frequently appears. The motive behind this overuse of the term mostly comes from the sculpture's mode of presentation that is difficult to look at and evokes the improper/unclean defilement that becomes the site of contestation of 'I.' Similarly, works of other contemporary women artists who use grotesque, bloody imagery, are often labelled as "abjection." Approached from a feminist perspective, their works are understood to be a confrontation to white male norms, shaking the boundaries of patriarchal 'I,' as described in Julia Kristeva's abjection theory. Instead of taking a different theoretical approach to King Cobra's work, the paper rather takes up the term in order to determine the applicability of the concept. By doing so, King Cobra's work is situated in the theory, expanding our interpretation of the historical representation of Black women that she hopes to discuss with her audience today. However, the history surrounding this theory discloses the limit of application leading to larger questions of claiming the artist's subjectivity.

Disclaimer of Language Use:

Due to the subject matter of this paper, it contains some of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century's terms such as "Hottentot," "uncivilized," "apelike," and "savage" that are offensive to contemporary readers and modern sensibilities.

The sculpture *Red Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting* (fig. 1) by Brooklyn-based African American artist King Cobra (documented as Doreen Lynette Garner) creates an uncanny experience while observing its formal composition. Twelve red fluorescent bulbs are joined together to form a metallic, skeletal cube structure of 162.6 x 288.9 x 81.3 cm, with twelve red fluorescent bulbs installed around the borders of the three-dimensional rectangle.¹ Projecting inward, the red fluorescent light surrounds seven elongated objects hung at the centre of the prism from steel hooks attached to the top steel bars. This arrangement with the steel bars and red fluorescent bulbs simulates meat-hanging practices at local butcher shops and meat factories in North America, where processed animal meats are hung with metal hooks to improve tenderness and be displayed as products to customers.

Unlike the animal meats whose blood, internal organs, and inedible tallow were removed, the carcasses presented here are unusual. The fat and bloody innards are still intact, presented through meticulously arranged pearls and colouring on the silicon and insulation foams with yellow and red paints. The carcass is abruptly handled to the extent where it becomes challenging to recognize different cuts. The most perplexing thing about this sculpture is the remains of skin imprinted with human hands. Along with the hair and breasts, it is the skin—brown and black—that grabs the viewer's attention. Human hands appear on the skin of body pieces, exerting their strong presence as if crawling out from a crevice in the carcass. This strange representation of “meat” opposes our expectation leaving us to ask: *What are these animals? Whose bodies are these if this carcass was human?*

This visual ambiguity is a deliberate choice made by the artist as she re-literalizes the history of medical exploitation on enslaved Black women's bodies by American physician, Dr. James Marion Sims (1813-1883) in the 1840s.² In the medical field, Sims had been designated as the “father of gynecology,” with his research on surgical techniques for the repair of *vesicovaginal fistula*, an abnormal opening between the bladder and vagina that obstructs childbirths. To honour Sims' discoveries, three statues of Sims were erected in recognition of his contribution: one at the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery (1939), another at the South Carolina State House in Columbia (1929) and the last one in Central Park in New York City (1894).³ Over recent decades, this commemorative view of Sims has been repudiated by many - It is because Sims' experiments were mostly conducted on enslaved Black women, including those named as Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsy. Sims' choice not to use anesthesia on

¹ The size and materials of *Red Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting* (2018) for my visual analysis are referenced from the website, Basel: <https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/70989/Doreen-Garner-Red-Rack-of-Those-Ravaged-and-Unconsenting>.

² Martia Graham Goodson, “Enslaved Africans and Doctors in South Carolina,” *Journal of the National Medical Association* 95, no. 3 (March 2003): 225. The detailed history of Dr. James Marion Sims can be found in this article.

³ Goodson, “Enslaved Africans and Doctors,” 229.

the Black women he performed his experiments on has exacerbated the controversy of his legacy. This decision was premised on Sims' belief that Black women are better able to withstand pain due to their "coarser constitution" compared to white men and women.⁴ It became clear that his medical distinction was achieved at the expense of vulnerable individuals.

The years 2017 and 2018, when King Cobra produced this sculpture and other sculptures with the similar form and subject matter, mark the momentous downfall of Sims' reputation in the United States. In August 2017, Steve Benjamin, the mayor of Columbia, called for its removal in light of ongoing protests.⁵ In February 2018, the Medical University of South Carolina, which Sims had attended, quietly renamed the endowed chair honoring him.⁶ The bronze statues in New York became a site for protest by an activist group, Black Youth Project 100, against the continued commemoration of Sims.⁷ On April 16, 2018, the statue was removed from Central Park under the New York City Public Design Commission and relocated to Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, where he is buried.⁸ Amidst growing backlash against Sims, King Cobra's *Red Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting* sculptured in 2018 can be read as a participation in this series of protests, honouring those who were victimized by the colonial violence of the nineteenth century. Other works made in 2017 and 2018 were executed in a manner similar to *Red Rack*. King Cobra's *A Fifteen Year Old Girl who would never Dance Again; A White Man in Pursuit of the Pedestal* (figs. 2 and 3) presents a leg whose skin is partially flayed and is placed on a stainless-steel medical table, referencing physician W.H. Robert's unnecessary amputation of a fifteen-year-old Black girl's leg. Her performance, *Purge* (2017) is more explicit in condemning Sims for his unethical, racist treatment on enslaved people. During the performance, King Cobra and other six Black women conduct a *vesicovaginal fistula* repair on a silicon model of Sims' skin. A gallery description of the piece describes the piece as showcasing "King Cobra's commitment to portraying an *abjection* of the Black body."⁹ Her work is often grouped together with other women artists regardless of the cultural or racial background who present discharging and visceral motifs and which are accompanied by the term "abjection."¹⁰ How does this term operate in relation to King

⁴ Goodson, "Enslaved Africans and Doctors," 229-230.

⁵ Cynthia Roldán, "Steve Benjamin Says Monument at SC State House 'Should Come Down at Some Point,'" *The State*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.thestate.com/news/local/article167458697.html>.

⁶ Sarah Zhang, "The Surgeon Who Experimented on Slaves," *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/04/j-marion-sims/558248/>.

⁷ Mirian Zoila Pérez, "New Target for Statue Removal: 'Father of Gynecology' Who Operated on Enslaved Black Women," *Colorlines*, August 30, 2017, <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/new-target-statue-removal-father-gynecology-who-operated-enslaved-black-women>.

⁸ William Neuman, "City Orders Sims Statue Removed from Central Park," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/nyregion/nyc-sims-statue-central-park-monument.html>.

⁹ My emphasis. "Red Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting, 2018," ArtBasel, accessed October 2, 2021, <https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/70989/Doreen-Garner-Red-Rack-of-Those-Ravaged-and-Unconsenting>.

¹⁰ Tess Thackara, "Why Contemporary Women Artists Are Obsessed with the Grotesque," *Artsy*, January 19, 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-contemporary-women-artists-obsessed-grotesque>. The author includes

Cobra's piece? And why should King Cobra's work be understood through "abjection"? The concept of abjection was developed by psychoanalytic philosopher Julia Kristeva in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980), published in English as *Powers of Horror* (1982). According to Kristeva, abjection is a feeling of physical revulsion and disgust that the subject/"I" experiences when confronted with anything that cannot be clearly distinguished as neither inside or outside of oneself such as spoiled food, bodily fluids, and/or other corporeal wastes.¹¹ In attempting to maintain a stable sense of self by expelling such experience, the boundaries between the subject/"I" and objects/"Other" that constitute oneself are unsettled.¹² Therefore, it "disrupts the identity, system, and order" of society and impacts the social and political constitution of inclusion/exclusion which establishes the foundations of social existence.¹³

A significant amount of academic scholarship in English-speaking countries, mainly the United States, Britain, and Australia, has adopted Kristeva's theory of abjection.¹⁴ Scholars in gender studies in particular have used the theory as an enabling concept for feminist research owing to Kristeva's premise of psychic matricide.¹⁵ For Kristeva, to be a subject is not only to embody lived experience but also to establish oneself as a constitutor of meaning.¹⁶ For individuals to function as subjects and to claim subjectivity, it is necessary for them to separate from their infantile and corporeal attachment to the maternal body/origin and then identify with the father-figure for socialization with

Garner's Red Rack piece, Jana Euler's *detail of Global warnings (people who are over 100 years old)* (2018), Cindy Sherman's Instagram posts, and Jala Wahid's *Broken Lining* (2017).

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2-3.

¹² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

¹³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4. On page 4, Kristeva elaborates how the abject causes disruption in "identity, system, order" by stating, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order... The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior... Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject... Abjection, on the hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady." In addition to this, Kristeva writes, on page 136, "any political commitment [for others] ... it settles the subject within a socially justified illusion" These two Kristeva's phrases acknowledge the abjection's influence in the structuring of the social predicament of what is immoral and unlawful.

¹⁴ Imogen Tyler, "Against Abjection," *Feminist Theory* 10, no. 1 (April 2009): 78. The author quotes Winfried Menninghaus's writing *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (2003:365) to explain the sudden stardom of Kristeva's abjection theory in the theoretical discourse of the 1980s: "In the 1980s, a new buzzword entered political and critical discourse... The word is 'abjection,' and it represents the newest mutation in the theory of disgust. Oscillating in its usage, between serving as a theoretical concept and precisely defying the order of conceptual language altogether, the term 'abjection' also commonly appears as both adjective ('abject women,' 'abject art') and adjective turned into a substantive ('the abject')."

¹⁵ Tyler, "Against Abjection," 81. In terms of Anglo-feminists, Tyler listed theorists who appropriated Kristeva's abjection theory in their writings from the feminist perspective, including Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (1993), Kelly Oliver's *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double Bind* (1993), Christine Bousfield's *The Abject Space: Its Gifts and Complaints* (2000), and Rosemary Betterton's *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (1996).

¹⁶ Stone, "Against Matricide: Rethinking Subjectivity and the Maternal Body," *Hypatia* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 120. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41328901>. In order to better understand how/why Kristeva considers matricide as a necessary step for becoming a subject, the author also references Kristeva's other publications, mainly her *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984).

others.¹⁷ The father is signified as the symbolic moment of separation from one's affective, instinctual bond with mother, and therefore he is regarded as the signifier of autonomy and agency.¹⁸ Thus, that bodily and psychic dyad of the mother and child must be abjected in order for a child to be born as an independent speaking subject. Reading maternal bodies as the primary site of abjection, scholars have not only attempted to probe the origins of misogynistic representations of women and women's bodies but also to disrupt patriarchal social structure by subordinating the paternal role under a maternal one.¹⁹ The work of woman artists that engage with grotesque, nauseating, violent and gory representations of female bodies have been read in conjunction with Kristeva's abjection as a feminist strategy in order to deconstruct the Western patriarchal notion of femininity and to reclaim their own embodied subjectivities.²⁰

This paper examines King Cobra's *Red Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting* through Kristeva's theory of abjection. My engagement with abjection theory in reading King Cobra's work is neither because of the representation of abject material nor locating abjection in the supposed otherness of Black and female bodies. Rather, I consider the term's parameters by testing if abjection is the appropriate term and theory to use in representing King Cobra's work. I argue that the application of Kristeva's abjection in reading King Cobra's piece helps us navigate through the work and the artist's motivation. She wishes to demonstrate contemporary issues associated with her race and gender that have been developed through the colonial enslavement of Black individuals. It reveals, however, that it is challenging to further interrogate her own claim of agency and subjectivity due to the limit of abjection theory, whose fundamental premise was to foster white western subjectivity by dehumanizing Black people and disrupting the quest for a free subject position.

¹⁷ Stone, "Against Matricide," 120. Again, the author references another of Kristeva's works published in 1996, *Interviews*.

¹⁸ Stone, "Against Matricide," 121.

¹⁹ Tyler, "Against Abjection," 84. For instance, Australian feminist theorist Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1993) questions the depiction of maternal bodies, often her womb with blood, as alien and horrific in Hollywood horror films. In her analysis, Creed argues that images which show women as monstrous and violently punished are "to reinforce the phallogocentric notion that female sexuality is abject."

²⁰ Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78, (Autumn, 1996): 112-114. In this article, Hal Foster did not state himself that his analysis is based on a feminist perspective in investigating Cindy Sherman's artworks ranging from 1975 to 1991. He approaches Cindy Sherman's abject photographs such as *Untitled #190* from Kristeva's notion of abjection. Here, he argues that such extreme conditions of disaster and damages by Sherman may read as the impulse of the observer's subjective gaze and attempt to question the representation of the human figure as a subject in western art practice. However, his article is leaning more toward criticizing the slippage of Kristeva's abjection. Yet, this article provides the ways in which the art historians in the 1990s viewed feminist abject art.

Black Slave as *Flesh*

To fully delve into King Cobra's work, we must have a proper understanding of the social context of the nineteenth century during which Sims and other medical practitioners performed their experiments on enslaved Black people. During the thirty years prior to the Civil War (1861- 1865), there was a huge demand of human bodies from medical institutions throughout the United States in order to train students, experiment with new techniques, and perform autopsies to reveal the effects of diseases.²¹ Due to this rising demand for human bodies as teaching specimens, enslaved people were targeted for medical demonstrations and surgical practice. As "the greatest and most important part of [the owners'] property" and labour force, maintaining the physical health of enslaved people was a top priority for owners of plantation fields and small farms as one of the rules enforced on the rice estate of P.C. Weston of South Carolina in 1857 demonstrates:

The Proprietor, in the first place, wishes the Overseer most distinctly to understand that his first object is to be, under all circumstances, the care and well-being of the negroes...

Sickness – All sick persons are to stay in the hospital night and day, from the time they first complain to the time they are able to go to work again.²²

Therefore, enslaved people unable to work due to "sickness" provided a source of patients for medical students and practitioners. Medical and academic institutions had incentive to secure a source of enslaved people for research purposes since successful medical studies leading to publications and institutional prestige required test subjects. A number of American medical schools in South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Alabama, and Virginia—even encouraged owners to send sick and injured Black people in for use as experimental subjects through newspaper advertisements.²³

The underlying impulse that had permitted such a reciprocity between American medical institutions and slave owners was grounded in the racist, systemic dehumanization of Black people. Considered to be part of property of owners, the Black body was treated as a commodity, with enslaved people being deprived of agency and legal personhood. The decision made by Chief Justice

²¹ Todd L. Savitt, "The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation and Demonstration in the Old South," *The Journal of Southern History* 48, no. 3 (August 1982): 322. Savitt argues that this rising interest in human bodies in the Southern states of America as the medical use was inspired by the "ideas of the French school of hospital medicine," quoting Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York, 1973). See also Martha Carolyn Mitchell, "Health and the Medical Profession in the Lower South, 1845-1860", *The Journal of Southern History* 10, no. 4 (November 1944): 431, where the author claims, contradicting to Savitt that the rise of the medical profession in the South was due to the rising health concerns followed by various diseases including yellow fever "appeared on the plantations."

²² J. D. B. De Bow, "Management of a Southern Plantation—Rules Enforced on the Rice Estate of P. C. Weston, Esq., of South Carolina," *De Bow's Review* 22, no. 1 (January 1857): 38.

²³ Savitt, "The Use of Blacks," 334.

Roger Taney of the United States Supreme Court in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) codified this commodified status of Black people:

[African Americans] had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order ... so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold and treated as an *ordinary article of merchandise* and traffic, whenever a profit could be made by it. This opinion was at that time fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race.²⁴

Under constitutional law, Black people were labeled as a *thing*, conflated with the colonial ideas of natural resources as extractable, replaceable, and exchangeable. Blackness was associated by the colonial worldview with a supposedly animalistic nature.²⁵ Through the propagation of these racist stereotypes, Black peoples were dehumanized and silenced by Western colonial ambitions. The corporeality of Black peoples was encoded with meaning, the Black body came to be defined as inherently commodifiable and other-than-human by a Western colonial worldview that would then ruthlessly exploit generations of African people and their descendants. Returning our attention to King Cobra, I will incorporate Hortense J. Spillers' distinction between "flesh" and "body" made in her seminal essay *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*, to infer what such notion of corporeality outlined above meant for Black women. Additionally, Selamawit D. Terrefe's interpretation on Spillers' "flesh" in relation to Kristeva in her recent article, *Speaking the Hieroglyph*, will be taken into consideration for my argument on how King Cobra's work can be situated within abjection theory. For Spillers, the "body" is integral in imposing symbolic meanings and ideological paradigm from a subject position whereas the "flesh" exists in captivity, constituting an antithetical position to the "body."²⁶ The "flesh" is a "primary narrative" which tells physical wounds that are marked through violence. It is also marked for violence, as if "a kind of hieroglyphics" that the skin color of the flesh determines what sort of violence would come. Black male and female flesh, according to Spillers, are thus ungendered in the New World and that the violence of the transatlantic slave trade separates them from "motive will" and "active desire."²⁷ In an interview with *Art21*

²⁴ Cecil J. Hunt II, "Feeding the Machine: The Commodification of Black Bodies from Slavery to Mass Incarceration," *University of Baltimore Law Review* 49, no. 3 (2020): 324[e]. *Dred Scott v. Sandford* is the court case in 1857 which an enslaved Black man, Dred Scott, sued for his freedom, claiming his free status since his owners brought him into Illinois where slavery was forbidden. The Supreme Court of the United States, however, ruled that he and other African Americans should not be considered as 'citizens' under the U.S. Constitution. Therefore, Scott lost in the case and was not able to claim for his freedom.

²⁵ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 2002), 17. See also Jennifer L. Morgan's "*Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder*": *Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770* featured in the same book.

²⁶ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 67.

²⁷ Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.

magazine, King Cobra explains what she hopes for her audience when engaging with her work. “If Sims could see me, a young Black woman, cutting up [a silicone cast of his statue] as a means of entertainment for not only Black people but also White people, I think he would be horrified.”²⁸ King Cobra addresses her act of giving pleasure— “as a means of entertainment *for* not only Black people but also White people”—in regard to her performance *Purge*. The enjoyment that King Cobra conjures up comes from mutilating the body of the target of the audience’s hatred (Sims). Then, how can this act of cutting bodies be read in *Red Rack*? Her interview from a YouTube video made by *Art21* helps us further:

I try to create a traumatic experience. I want the audience to walk away feeling like they can’t unsee what they just saw. Something that is burned in and lasts, and you can never get rid of it. I use the body in my work mostly because of the trauma that I have, watching how one small thing can make the entire body fail.²⁹

In contemplation of *Red Rack*, the audience would be empathetic to Black women’s bodies who were abused for Sims’ and the medical profession at large. It is certainly shocking to see such fragmented pieces of the body. But what makes a “traumatic experience” or “feeling like they can’t unsee what they just saw” is King Cobra’s strategic positioning of viewer relative to the perspective of Sims: the audience of *Red Rack* is to look at the bodies of nameless and dismembered Black women hung like chunks of meat, commodified as purchasable and replaceable flesh. The presentation made by King Cobra forces us to absorb the position of Sims. And there, Kristevan abjection comes into play. For Kristeva, the abject possesses the properties of both subject and object and through the abjective process, the subjectivity is formed:

The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I ... I experience a gagging sensation ... all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire... “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire; “I” do not want to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself out*, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*.³⁰

‘I’ (the audience) expels, spits, and abjects *myself* (Sims).

²⁸ Brian Redondo, “Teaching History by Sculpting Experience: An Interview with Doreen Garner,” *Art21*, March 16, 2018,

<https://magazine.art21.org/2018/03/16/teaching-history-by-sculpting-experience-an-interview-with-doreen-garner/#.YXwyk9nML0t>.

²⁹ Art21, “Doreen Garner Sculpts Our Trauma,” YouTube Video, 0:15 – 0:31. February 21, 2018,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjOUk4p3bo8>.

³⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

Those who continue to praise and defend Sims' medical experimentations to the present day in the medical journals or other media platforms are further implicated in this perspectival shift to Sims. In spite of their acknowledgement of the pain that enslaved Black women had to endure, they justify his practice base on his personality of which "Sims was known by colleagues and patients alike as a kind-hearted" or they blame the history of European colonialism so that he is "a product of his time."³¹ Those who neglect the violence inflicted by Sims in an attempt to preserve the status of Sims as "one of the most gifted of American surgeons" now face this reality and question Sims and his monuments as the artist intends.

My work helps me to question why White men are on pedestals. Sims's monument stands as a symbol of acceptance of hate and of racism. It's as if his horrific acts don't matter because we have benefited from his medical advances. But it's not healthy to ignore the horror. I like the idea that we can deconstruct his statue.³²

For her Black audience, the re-enactment of Sims' practice that deprives the victims' own sense of agency over their own bodies through the viewership complicates Spillers' notion of 'flesh.' The idea of 'flesh' on Black bodies proposed by Spillers is now unsettled. If the 'flesh' is a site of marked violence, marking of violence is enacted on 'flesh' by the hands of the artist, a young Black woman. The distinction between the captive/captor – that is body/flesh - becomes a murky terrain. Such disconcerted feeling functions as a mnemonic device for recalling the history. For contemporary Black people, the history of slavery in America may feel distant to them like Saidiya Hartman's confession early in her journey along the Atlantic slave route:

"Of course, I knew Black people had been enslaved and that I was descended from slaves, but slavery was vague and faraway to me, like the embarrassing incidents adults loved to share with you about some incredulous thing you had done as a toddler but of which you had no memory. It wasn't that you suspected them of making it up as much as it concerned some earlier incarnation of yourself that was not really you. Slavery felt like that too, something that was part of me but not me at the same time. It had never been concrete before, not something as palpable as my great-grandfather in his starched

³¹ MJ West and LM Irvine, "The Eponymous Dr James Marion Sims MD, LLD (1813-1883)," *Journal of Medical Biography* 23, no. 1 (2015): 43. This article by West and Irvine gives a biography of Sims and his practice. Though the authors acknowledge the controversy surrounding his use of slave patients, the language they used here is worth to note as it seems to defend his practice. In page 43, it requires our critical attention and speculation when reading their wording, including "Sims at least demonstrate his preparedness to try to alleviate the slave women of a miserable existence, leaking urine and frequently faeces. Their lives would have been even more wretched without surgery and the knowledge and skills gained have subsequently been applied to achieve successful fistula repairs for thousands of women ... Surely Sims was motivated, at least in part, by a desire to improve the life and wellbeing of his slave patients and later the poor women of New York, equal to many nineteenth century pioneers who have laid the foundations of current surgical practice ... Sims clearly expressed his compassion for the young slave women, already segregated and shunned."

³² Redondo, "Teaching History."

cotton shirt sitting next to me in a brown Ford, or a parched red clay country road, or a horse trader from Tennessee, or the name of a girl, not much younger than me, who had been chattel.”³³

Hartman reminds that the contemporary issues on Black people such as “limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” are residue of slavery as what Hartman coined as “the afterlife of slavery.”³⁴

Black Female Sexuality

During an interview with King Cobra organized by Berlin Art Link in 2016, an interviewer, Penny Rafferty raised a question in regard to her portrayal of the painful history of Black enslaved women: “You said in a recent interview that you wonder if the works would be read the same if a white woman made them. Can you elaborate on that?” In reply, King Cobra responded as following:

“Well, if I was a white woman I could create work about my race, but it would never be talked about because being white is seen as neutral, normal and standardized. Because I’m a Black woman, my work is often seen to be sexual and illicit and that becomes my practice.”³⁵

In the same interview, she pointed out that “the art world and society are making Black women into sexualized objects: just look at the media for confirmation.”³⁶ What is implicit in both of her responses is her concern over the *representation* of Black women in contemporary art and visual culture. According to King Cobra, being a Black woman causes her and her work to be read in sexualized terms and then perceived in that way. Indeed, this has long been a collective concern among Black women in America. Numerous Black intellectuals in various fields of study have – investigated the origins of such sexualized projection/gaze on Black women and worked against these currents towards empowerment. Therefore, it is important to trace their studies in order to examine how this scholarship has influenced King Cobra’s sculpture and whether or not the theoretical apparatus of abjection can be applied in relation to her work.

³³ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 10.

³⁴ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6. In her book, Hartman addresses that contemporary American society is still affected by the slavery system by stating, “If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery – skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.”

³⁵ Penny Rafferty, “Body//Re-Examining the White Supremacist Gaze: An Interview with Doreen Garner,” *Berlin ArtLink*, April 06, 2016,

<https://www.berlinartlink.com/2016/04/06/body-re-examining-the-white-supremacist-gaze-an-interview-with-doreen-garner/>.

³⁶ Rafferty, “Body.”

In case of Black enslaved women, their corporeality was bound together with female sexuality that was marginalized as a sexual object of men as what Lisa Collins remarks as “exoticism frequently meshes with eroticism.”³⁷ Treated as animal, Black women were used as pornographic images, depicted as having an animalistic sexual appetite.³⁸ According to Patricia Hill Collins who referenced Alice Walker’s distinction between “object” and “animal,” it is necessary for western colonialism to place the Black female as animals and white women as objects. Objects are ‘creations of culture’ from the subject position of white men. Operating on the binary of culture (civilization) and nature, the connotation of animals strengthened whiteness to be a symbolic representation of civilization and total conquest over nature.³⁹ The beginning of such pornographic treatment of Black female intertwined with this ideological movement can be identified with Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman born in 1790, famously known as “Hottentot Venus.”⁴⁰ Her physical body and images of her were not only circulated and exhibited as a study of scientific enquiry but portrayed in an overtly sexualized manner that served as a source of entertainment and wonder to a public audience.

With this racial and sexual displacement, both white Western male and female artists of the nineteenth to early twentieth century established visual conventions on Black female body. Surviving images reveal a persistent attitude that reinforces the frame of a savage, bestial and oversexed Black female body. Art historian Charmaine A. Nelson identifies some conventions that artists utilized to portray the Black female nude in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by examining Canadian artist Dorothy Stevens’s *Coloured Nude* (1933). First, it manipulates pubic hair to signify Black women’s “animal sexuality and carnal desire.”⁴¹ Second, the pose of unwillingly revealing her breasts and pubic area as sexual spectacle highlights her obedient position under master/owner.⁴² Created in 1877, a marble statue by the Italian artist Giacomo Ginotti, *Abolition of Slavery*, exhibits these visual topoi. While rendering a recently freed young Black woman, her hands are still bound together with irons. Her position of bounded hands accentuates the presence of her breasts. Avoiding eye contact by gazing downwards, the “sexual availability” of the young Black woman’s body is emphasized through

³⁷ Lisa Collins, “Economies of the Flesh: Representing the Black Female Body in Art,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 2002), 103.

³⁸ Sander L. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 212. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343468>.

³⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 138-139.

⁴⁰ Guy-Sheftall, “The Body Politic,” 18-21. See also Anne Fausto-Sterling’s *Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of “Hottentot” Women in Europe, 1815-17* featured in the same book.

⁴¹ Charmaine A. Nelson, “Coloured Nude: Fetishization, Disguise, Dichotomy,” in *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art*. (London: Routledge, 2010), 113.

⁴² Nelson, “Coloured Nude,” 115-116.

the bodily positioning, allowing the viewer to contemplate the nubile body unabashedly.⁴³ Another painting, *Black Girl in a Stream* (1867-70), by the Swiss artist Frank Buchser depicts a young Black woman like that of Ginotti's statue. She is looking sideways. Her body fully exposes her breast and belly and is turned towards the viewer. The model is presented in the middle of a forest, marking her closeness to nature. Besides those artistic conventions, the colonial gaze through which "Black women are defined *by* their sexuality and *as* their sexuality" also produced the hypersexualized stereotypes on Black women such as the Jezebel.⁴⁴ Originated during the slavery, the image of Jezebel, which branded Black woman as a seductive and promiscuous was constructed by white owners to claim complete ownership over their agency and sexuality through rape and other sexual assaults.⁴⁵

These tropes continued to dictate the representation of Black women in the twentieth and twenty-first century. In a 1995 study Carolyn M. West addresses how stereotypical images of Black women result in a greater risk for sexual victimization. Black women were more vulnerable to attempted sexual violence than white women and often the myth of Black women's supposed lewdness justified their victimhood.⁴⁶ The recent research by Leath and others examines the influence of the Jezebel stereotype on Black women's sexual agency. The authors suggest that most participants of their interview who are Black women believe the Jezebel stereotype to be a contributing factor to negative representations of Black women's sexuality and experiences of sexual violence.⁴⁷ The portrayal of Black women in media also has become a site of scrutiny among intellectuals. Collins, West, and hooks criticize the oversexed display or exploitation of Black women's bodies.⁴⁸ Others,

⁴³Collins, "Economies of the Flesh," 105.

⁴⁴ Akeia A. F. Benard, "Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism: Feminist and Human Rights Perspectives," *Sexualization, Media, & Society* (October-December 2016): 3. DOI: 10.1177/2374623816680622.

⁴⁵ Carolyn M. West, "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Their Homegirls: Developing an "Oppositional Gaze" Toward the Images of Black Women," in *Lectures on the Psychology of Women*, ed. Joan C. Chrisler and Carla Golden (Illinois: Waveland Press, 2018), 294.

⁴⁶ Carolyn M. West, "Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women and Their Implications for Psychotherapy," *Psychotherapy* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 462-3. In referencing a community sample reported in Wyatt's 1992 study, "The sociocultural context of African American and white American women's rape," *Journal of Social Issues*, 48 (1), it shows that the rate of attempted sexual assault on Black women was 27 % whereas 17% for white women. As well, West provides that the conviction rates of Black-on-Black is far lower than White victims based on the studies from 1985.

⁴⁷ Seanna Leath, Morgan C. Jerald, Tiani Perkins, and Martinique K. Jones, "A Qualitative Exploration of Jezebel Stereotype Endorsement and Sexual Behaviors Among Black College Women," *Journal of Black Psychology* 47, no. 4-5 (2021): 261 – 262. DOI: 10.1177/009579842199721. Their project investigates the socialization experiences by interviewing fifty individual Black women (ages 18-24 years old), enrolled at predominantly White U.S. universities. The participants were asked to answer whether a list of questions deemed relevant to them or not.

⁴⁸ This point has been addressed by many Black scholars. In West's "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire," she addresses the challenges when the artists in music industry have attempted to express sexual liberty or subjectivity by stating in page 295, "The difficulty, however, lies in telling the difference between representations of Black women who are sexually liberated and those who are sex objects. Are rappers like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown victims of the hip-hop industry, examples of repackaged Jezebels, or savvy businesswomen who freely exploit their sexuality for personal financial gain?" One of the participants with her pseudo-name as Gabrielle in Leath and others' study also demonstrates her issues with

however, address a positive aspect that their control over their own bodies and sexuality provides a sense of personal empowerment and sexual agency to young Black women.⁴⁹

Then how can we interpret the history of Black women's representation in relation to Kristeva's abjection theory? In the sculptural assemblage, *Red Rack*, King Cobra enlists the materiality of silicone, fiberglass insulation, beads, artificial pearls and Swarovski crystals that are used for the presentation of bodies in the work (detail 1). According to her, the glossy silicon surfaces "conjure up ideas of masturbation and sexual fetishization" akin to sex toys while beads and crystals catch one's eyes because of their reflective surfaces and association with wealth.⁵⁰ At the same time, King Cobra shows the utter destruction of bodies to the point where the bodies were dehumanized to the fullest extent, signaling the inability to return to the wholeness. Such treatment signals the extent of the violation as they endure this merciless dismemberment that reveals gory remains of blood and innards. Only the bony fingers and its tightened grasps refuse to be relegated to obscurity. Then, the bodies rearranged in a serial manner. The practice of assembling fragmented bodies recalls Lorna Simpson's Polaroid images of a Black model, *Guarded Condition* (1989). Combined with the repeating texts of "Sex Attack" and "Skin Attack" under the images, the artist depicts a serialized image of the back of the model whose hands are held behind her. In comparing King Cobra's work with that of Simpson, the physically fragmented bodies obscure the viewer's identification of the bodies' gender and even our identification of them as human beings. The organs that make up the female anatomy such as uterus and vagina, or female attributes such as hairstyle or dress are lacking. It is only King Cobra's work's historical context that allows us to identify them as female through their identification with the violent medical experiments performed on Black women. In addition, the hanging of bodies with red

rap videos in page 265: "Rap videos emphasize the Jezebel thing . . . because when they rap, that is what it sounds like. Some people might say it makes being expressive with your sexuality and being open to having sexual relationships is okay. Some people might say that it encourages people to be focused on those things and to think about those things and not really value their body as they should, but to just let other people intrude all the time. You see a lot of domestic violence in these movies and broken families. Even though they were good movies, I don't think that they had the best representation." See also Chapter 4 of Patricia Hill Collins' book, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, which provides a similar line of argument.

⁴⁹ Leath, Jerald, Perkins, and Jones, "A Qualitative Exploration," 246-247. The authors reference Nylah Burton's post, *Megan Thee Stallion's Hot Girl Summer is A Movement, Not A Meme*, published on Bustle magazine on July 17, 2019.

<https://www.bustle.com/p/megan-thee-stallions-hot-girl-summer-is-a-movement-not-a-meme-18200567>. See also Akeia A. F. Benard, "Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism: Feminist and Human Rights Perspectives," *Sexualization, Media, & Society* (October-December 2016): 1-11. DOI: 10.1177/2374623816680622.

Benard talks about the feminists who argues for "Hip Hop Feminism." They celebrate public Black women such as Nicki Minaj and Rihanna for their creative work which invites new interpretation on representation. See Durham, A., Cooper, B. C., & Morris, S. M. "The stage hip-hop feminism built: A new directions essay," *Signs*, 38 (2013): 721-37.

⁵⁰ Doreen Garner, "Sculpture artist Doreen Garner on vanitas still life and the history of medical experimentation in America," interview by Jasmin Tsou, JTT, September 29, 2020, audio, 7:58-9:44,

https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/jtt/sculpture-artist-doreen--BI_YMhf4Cp/#transcript.

fluorescent bulbs and steel bars reminds the viewer of animal meat at a market that confuses our expectation of proper burial or treatment for dead human bodies.

King Cobra's piece thus hyper-visualizes binaries that have been imposed on Black women: ungender/gender, animal/human, and life/death. This reckons with Spillers' notion of Black female flesh as "ungendered" during enslavement, objectified as property equal to chattel, lived under the constant threat of death and exposure to sexual violence.⁵¹ However, those binaries also reflect the causes of individuals' abject response in Kristeva's theory of abjection. She states that the corpse that is prone to decay is "the utmost of abjection" because individuals' ultimate "Other" is death which signifies the end of one's identity and integration into the symbolic order of language as living, human subject.⁵² When seeing the corpse, it makes a viewer's own death palpably real, on the border of "I" and "Other." In addition, Kristeva discusses the role of animal as the main source of abjection that makes the importance of borders fragile. According to her, the animal was once more powerful than humans in early human societies.⁵³ Thus, this primal confrontation with the animal threatens human subjects who distinguish themselves from the realm of the animal by defining the symbolic order of law. By stimulating an abjective response through visual presentation, King Cobra's work acts as an oppositional gaze, deflecting and resisting a white scopophilic, fetishizing, and controlling gaze. Engaging with her work through abjection theory demonstrates the possibility of subverting the theory from within rather than being subjugated into it.

Kristeva's Abjection as an Appropriate Methodology?

In a conversation with *Dazed* magazine in 2016, King Cobra explains her style of art: "It seems that feminism mostly represents the white female experience. I think Black feminism has a lot more issues to be discussed and dissected because we have very unique experiences that aren't being

⁵¹ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67-68.

⁵² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3-4. I am referencing here Kristeva's passage on page 3 and 4 to support my interpretation: "The corpse (or cadaver: cadre, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance... refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live... The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life."

⁵³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 12-13. We can find her understanding of animal in abjection with her statement: "The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the *territories of animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals of animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder. The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling."

represented properly.”⁵⁴ Having acknowledged this, I would like to take a warning from Corrie Claiborne. For Claiborne, academic theories fail to take into account the lived experience of Black people because their coded languages are born out of white “European modes of knowledge in order to understand themselves.”⁵⁵ This position has been discussed by a number of Black women thinkers and writers. The feminist studies propagated by Anglo-feminist theorists has put an emphasis on claiming female subjectivity through applying theories. Their practice, however, has been problematic for non-white scholars. It is because their demands for a subject position have hinged on rights and civil liberties that only white men have been allowed to embody and retain.⁵⁶ According to Sabine Broeck, during the period of enslavement in Europe, the free human citizen subject—defined by “mastery of his destiny by the creation of a mental, physical, political, economic, legal, and social border around the free human”—was made, marked, and maintained through “the existence of the slave/Black.”⁵⁷ Moreover, the “master-slave dialectic” moved into Lacanian theory upon which Kristeva’s abjection is based, translating into the masculine “subject” and feminine “object.”⁵⁸ For Clairborne, Black subjectivity claimed through theories such as Kristeva’s abjection can repeat and reinforce stereotypical representations of Black women that have historically been marginalized for the white subject. Therefore, leaving abjection behind to distance from this “Otherness” on Black women can create spaces for their voice over centuries of silence.

As we have seen, her piece serves as a reminder of brutal atrocities that Black women underwent to her audience, as a forum to critically respond to the appraisal of Sims’ practice in our time, and as an oppositional gaze that resists the conventional representation of Black women in an overtly sexualized manner. Now, we need to think further about other questions as well: what does it mean for the artist herself and her Black audience to create and engage with dismembered Black bodies? Is King Cobra reproducing and reinforcing such stereotypical imagery on Black women like what Clairborne says when understanding her piece through the theory of abjection? The fundamental problem lies from reading contemporary works easily through Kristevan abjection. It disregards *who* is making and *what story* is embedded. Nevertheless, Claiborne urges the future generation of scholars to explore a way to bridge the gap between theory and reality of Black people: “where we are excluded in the discourse, we should include ourselves, wherever we are misrepresented we should set the

⁵⁴ Anna Freeman, “Should art created by women be called feminist art?” *Dazed*, April 6, 2016, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/30552/1/should-art-created-by-women-be-called-feminist-art>.

⁵⁵ Corrie Beatrice Claiborne, “Quiet Brown Buddha(s): Black Women Intellectuals, Silence and American Culture” (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2000), 3 – 4.

⁵⁶ Sabine Broeck, *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness*. (New York: State University of New York, 2018), 39.

⁵⁷ Broeck, *Gender*, 68.

⁵⁸ Broeck, *Gender*, 69.

record straight.”⁵⁹ It is not to say the approach itself is problematic. Indeed, it is to say we must be careful in applying any theoretical concept, recognizing an interwoven complexity of gender, race, and history that constitutes intersectional identity.

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⁵⁹ Claiborne, “Quiet Brown Buddha(s),” 15.



Figure 1. King Cobra, *Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Pioneer Works. Photo by Dan Bradica.

[*Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting*, 2017, is not the same artwork discussed in the paper, which is *Red Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting*, 2018. — Eds.]



Detail 1. King Cobra, *Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Pioneer Works. Photo by Dan Bradica.



Figure 2. King Cobra, *A Fifteen Year Old Girl Who Would Never Dance Again; A White Man In Pursuit of the Pedestal*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Pioneer Works. Photo by Dan Bradica.



Figure 3. King Cobra, *A Fifteen Year Old Girl Who Would Never Dance Again; A White Man In Pursuit of the Pedestal*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Pioneer Works. Photo by Dan Bradica.