To Be is to Dream is to Be Free

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**Abstract:** Malone talks back to the legacy of exploitation of Black slave labor and the system of racial subjugation and sexual political economy that places demands on the Black female body, themes that are found in Alison Saar’s artwork entitled *Cotton Eater II* (2014).

**Keywords:** Alison Saar, Cotton Eater II, intersectional conflict analysis, art, arts approaches to conflict, Agnes Scott College

A Reflection on the Problem

*Figure 1: "Cotton Eater II" by Alison Saar, Agnes Scott College permanent collection*
Blue skin. Blank eyes.

These were the eerie elements of Alison Saar’s *Cotton Eater II* (2014) that led me to research this piece for the semester. Its intrigue only deepened as I continued to uncover its history and meaning through analyses of the Site of the Image, the Site of Production, and the Site of Audiencing. From each of these sites, explored in more detail in my earlier assignments, I gained an appreciation for Saar’s artistry. First, she skillfully leverages visual tension to mobilize her commentary on the unsettling nature of Black Americans’ positionality in the U.S. social hierarchy as well as inspire a convicting discomfort within her audience members. Second, she invokes the simultaneously exploitative and democratizing history of wood carving to add nuance to the ways her audience members engage with the legacy of exploitation of Black slave labor. Third and most impressively, she makes conspicuous the often-overlooked history of American slavery as more than a system of racial subjugation but a sexual political economy that places certain demands on the Black female body. All of Alison Saar’s creative and intellectual choices position *Cotton Eater II* as a transgressive powerhouse: Saar is unrelentingly clever and awe-inspiringly talented: her artwork is an eloquent point of dialogue, a painstakingly thought-out denunciation of white supremacist racism, anti-blackness, and continued state sponsored subjugation.

*Figure 2*: Acrylic and collage on foam by Kennedi Malone
While I appreciate Saar’s artistic candor, I found — and still do find — myself dissatisfied with her artwork. Her activist-visionary genius is nonetheless a product of the prevailing system of values, beliefs, symbols, and stories that concerns itself with Black subjugation. Her work is the manifestation of an anti-Black, white supremacist culture that employs a narrative of victimhood and perpetual inferiority to obscure the liveliness and humanity of Black experiences. It is precisely this larger culture that I attempt to talk back to through my own artistic conversation with Saar’s Cotton Eater II.

My own personal commitments to a life beyond mere survival and victimhood conflict with Saar’s invocation of the culture that demands our victimization. To be truthful, I am no longer interested in enabling, however unintentionally, the ideals that propagate Black oppression or rely on cotton as a symbol to explore our experience. I became interested in investigating how I could create my own work of art, my own point of dialogue from which I respond to Saar’s work, to address the conflict between her artistic approach—articulating Black experiences in the context of oppression—and my desire to think about and articulate Black experiences in the context of liberation. In other words, I wondered how artists could use their art to talk back to moments of conflict that they have endured. In seeking an answer to this research question, I must recognize that both Saar and I are artists who leverage their work to speak to the lives lived through Black bodies.

Creative Statement

I felt called to enter such a conversation through creation, as this was how I was first introduced to Saar. Taking issue with her symbolic use of cotton, I knew that I wanted to create an artwork that centered a more liberatory plant. Since I am a long-time reader of Alice Walker, it felt natural for that plant to be lavender. The color purple is a cardinal symbol of Alice Walker’s novel bearing the same name, as it represents the oft overlooked blessings from God—as housed in the lavender fields through which Walker’s characters Celie and Shug Avery roam—and the strength to be found in authentic self-expression.

Both symbolisms resonate with a Black experience, as they invite Black women to reorient our focus from the painful injustices inflicted upon us to the joys of our natural, and therefore sacred, selfhood. By living wholly as ourselves, by engaging in deep appreciation for our natural modes of existence, Black women can not only fashion methods of survival, but we can also foster our thriving. This thriving is the ultimate confrontation to the life-threatening violence of systemic oppression. At the age of sixteen, I found Alice Walker’s invitation to imagine life beyond the cruel status quo paradigm shifting. I still do four years later, so I decided that a talking-back to Saar should incorporate Walker’s invitation by actualizing it. I would prioritize the natural, life-sustaining aspects of Black life and employ lavender, a folk symbol of self-actualization and liberation, to render joy as true representations of a Black experience. To do this, I began doodling my lavender plant and filing through my Pinterest boards to create a collection of photographs capturing the glory of daily Black life. Then I formed a collage of these images to serve as the ideal background of my artwork, for I wanted to ground my work in a landscape of revolutionary joy instead of historic oppression. Next, I adhered the collage to a foam poster board, sealed it with a Mod Podge-water mixture, and painted my lavender stalk atop it. Though I made preliminary
plans for what I wanted my lavender to look like, I took a risk and painted straight on the collage without any tracing or formal rationale for my color palette. This risk, however, was nothing like misguided impulsivity. My spur of the moment decision was well-intentioned, embodying the unbridled, intuitive, and excitingly subversive essence of daily Black life that I sought to prioritize. My vision for how I wanted to talk back to Saar culminated into To Be is to Dream is to Be Free, a work that felt so much more like home to me.

**Relevant Concepts**

Committed to substantiating my efforts and thinking more critically about the implications of my artistic choices, I sought to learn from other artists who were participating in a similar conversation with lived moments of conflict. To my satisfaction, I discovered Damon Davis, a St. Louis based artist, and Faith Ringgold, a renowned activist and folk artist from New York. An exploration of *Darker Gods at the Lake of Dreams* (2021) by Davis and *Atlanta Series: Screaming Woman* (1981) by Ringgold revealed to me the considerations these artists must make as creators who talk back to lived moments of conflict. Most notably, these considerations involved the concepts of culture, intersubjectivity, and transforming relationships.

I understood throughout this research process that I was using my art to talk back to Saar, however, I had difficulty articulating the fact that I was responding to a culture, the wider superior/ inferior, White/Black relationships of power that produced Saar’s piece, until after researching the works of my chosen activist artists. Davis’s *Darker Gods at the Lake of Dreams* undermines the racial tropes of sub- and super-humanness forced upon Black Americans by creating a pantheon of Black deities with textured life histories and layered motivations. In visualizing the complexity of Black Americans, Davis contests racial stereotyping; but beyond this, he challenges the prevailing value system that produced these racial expectations and “cultural ideas of Blackness.” Ringgold’s *Atlanta Series: Screaming Woman* enters a similar conversation. Her life-sized sculpture is certainly a response to the tragic murders of children in Atlanta from 1979 to 1981, but even more compellingly, her work is also a talking-back to the prevailing culture that enables a degradation of Black life and sanctions the murders of twenty-eight young Black Americans without fear of consequence.

My own work *To Be is to Dream is to Be Free* goes beyond responding to Saar’s mobilization of the symbol of cotton and talks back to the essentializing cultural beliefs that truncate the Black experience to one that can only be understood in the context of oppression. My investigation of Davis’s and Ringgold’s artistry gave further direction to my own work by diagramming the intersubjective nature of talking back, the crux of my research question. For both activist artists to respond to the dominant cultural ideologies that produced their lived moment of conflict, they had to first recognize the existence of a dominant culture and reflect on what this culture expected of them— for Davis, it was strictly either inferiority or exceptionalism; for Ringgold, it was expendability and silence.

Continuing the intersubjective process, these artists then recognized the potential to resist that is inherent to their being and sought to use the expectations thrust upon them as their point of subversive dialogue. Ringgold’s work begins this dialogue as it makes clear the consequences of culturally sanctioned violence against Black life: the dually visceral and emotional reaction of the artist herself and, presumably, Black mothers across the nation. Likewise, Davis leverages
intersubjectivity to both recognize the prevailing culturally produced stereotypes of Black Americans and speak against them by creating imaginative mythologies that reinstate the glorious depth of Black Americans. I follow the blueprints of Davis and Ringgold to achieve my own aspirations of confronting Saar’s explication of Black experiences in terms of oppression. Just as they recognized culture as the progenitor of the conflicts addressed in their work, I had to render visible the existing sociocultural structure that expected Black inferiority and thus positioned me as a perpetual subordinate. I continued to mirror the intersubjective processes of Ringgold and Davis by using my own transgressive potential to resist these cultural expectations. I posed an affront to binding the Black experience to a symbol of oppression by offering a new union between Black existence and a symbol of liberation.

The most powerful insight that a consideration of Davis’s and Ringgold’s works yielded me was that an artwork that talks back is also an artwork that transforms relationships. Whether focused on subverting racial tropes or undermining culturally sanctioned violence sanitized of its human toll, both artists employed their work to articulate something that had been unspoken, erased, or otherwise obscured for so long. In doing so, Ringgold and Davis created a symbolic space where viewers can transform their relationship to culture by “shift[ing]” their perceptions and “re-evaluat[ing]” what they consider to be possible realities.\(^1\) Instigating a talking-back-to is more than merely bringing attention to embattled, culturally-produced experiences; this act is an opportunity to imagine reality beyond those tense moments, a chance to “show the audience the [or what was once] invisible”.\(^2\) The talking-back-to that I initiate in my own piece follows this transformative trajectory.

*To Be is to Dream is to Be Free* does not simply make plain the issue with understanding Blackness through the lens of oppression; in articulating a different, decidedly more liberatory way to understand Black existence, I offer this piece as a thoughtfully curated arena in which viewers are “show[n]...the invisible” and asked to expand, and therefore transform, the cultural realities that they consider possible.\(^3\) An examination of other works produced by activist artists gave me the language to more effectively think about the aims of my own work.

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1. Abdullah and Appelfeller 2022.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
Conclusion

My artwork is a culmination of all things that feel like home to me: images of braiders, ramen noodles, and beautiful Black people all framed by a symbol that has called me to seek the joys of our natural, and therefore sacred, selfhood since I was sixteen years old. This piece is my effort to create for myself what I was missing in Saar’s *Cotton Eater II*. In addition to responding to Saar’s creation, *To Be Is to Dream Is to Be Free* more critically engages the concepts of culture, intersubjectivity, and transforming relationships. In so doing, it recognizes a dominant cultural narrative, uses those cultural expectations as a point of resistance, and articulates a social reality beyond one of struggle and subjugation.
References


