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Four Women, For Women: Caribbean Diaspora Artists Reimag(in)ing the Fine Art Canon

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Four Women, For Women: Caribbean Diaspora Artists Reimag(in)ing the Fine Art Canon

This article examines changing representations of women of colour within the realm of the visual arts, and considers the aesthetic qualities, historical significance and cultural impacts of a diverse body of image-making spanning several centuries. The research focuses on selected works from the portfolios of the following four, early to midcareer artists of Caribbean heritage, whose nuanced depictions of black and brown womanhood in the twenty-first century have achieved international acclaim: American interdisciplinary artist Aisha Tandiwe Bell; American collagist Andrea Chung; French figurative painter Elizabeth Colomba; Danish photographer, video artist and performance installationist Jeannette Ehlers. The complex diasporic identities and imagery reflected in the oeuvres of these four contemporary artists are contrasted with fine art from earlier eras. The compositional, technical and social modalities of a number of notable works are assessed to determine why some have become celebrated images within the international canon and others have been deemed problematic.

Introduction

When reviewing the international canon of figurative fine art – particularly high-profile portraiture collections exhibited in the most celebrated cultural institutions around the world – significant disparities, diminutions, absences and erasures become evident regarding who the featured sitters and subjects have tended to be throughout art history, how they are portrayed and where they are positioned (if present at all) relative to other individuals, objects of nature or non-figurative content shown within the frame. A long-standing tradition of figuration in Europe has resulted in an over-representation of images featuring wealthy elites from land-owning families, particularly those able to commission the finest artists to memorialise their lives and the trappings of high status rendered in the most favourable light. It is these types of paintings that have held dominant positions within classical fine art collections dating back hundreds of years, and whose compositional characteristics have influenced the adoption, proliferation and prevalence of European portraiture techniques and styles of figuration in other continents.

Centuries of occidental expansion and colonialism throughout the Global South imposed Western figurative practices on nations across Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas and increased the prestige of the West's aesthetic conventions in these areas of the world. This meant that European artists became integral to the way representations of diverse cultures and communities were visualised and discussed internationally. Within the context of the Caribbean, and the multiplicity of ethnic groups in the islands and nations of the region, representational works dating back to the advent of colonialism often illustrated aspects of the socio-economic, cultural and political stratifications inherent to the imperialist project in the Americas. For example, Barbadian heritage scholar Alissandra Cummins and art historian Allison Thompson

(2016) make the following observations regarding representations of women of colour in paintings and printed images of Barbados during this time period:

> While its position in the colonial world was established in the mid-seventeenth century, it was with the accelerated emergence and dissemination of images a century later by itinerant European artists, and the rise of the early print culture, that representations of Barbados and the rest of the New World gained widespread currency in Europe. These images illustrate the newly evolving creolized society, a hybridization of European, African, and Amerindian cultures, and the complex hierarchical structure that was established in order to accommodate, articulate, and manage this phenomenon. (Cummins and Thompson 2016, 112)

Consequently, historical works of fine art have often reinforced the racialized tropes, stereotypes and archetypes used to denigrate black and brown people as a result of the combined impacts of enslavement, colonialism, racial prejudice and discrimination. Significant challenges to the widespread normalisation of stereotyped image-making only occurred once the numbers of Caribbean artists of colour, including those within the diaspora, increased and then became more internationally prominent from the early to mid-twentieth century, following the advancement of anti-colonial struggles for self-determination and the postcolonial turn towards artistic modernism. Some of the most important transformations in the way black and brown people of Caribbean descent have featured in works of fine art are considered below. A particular focus is placed on how gendered and racialized stereotypes of women of colour emerged during the enslavement era, persisted throughout the colonial period, metamorphosed and began to be contested in the twentieth century, and were further ameliorated by contemporary artists via alternative, corrective and avant-gardist counter-visualisations.

The portfolios of a selection of twenty-first century women artists of Caribbean heritage are introduced and foregrounded below to specifically illustrate how

contemporary approaches to figuration have counteracted false and dehumanising representations of black and brown women's lives, identities, ontologies and corporealities. Each of the featured artists' oeuvres present aspects of what Michel Laguerre has described as the emancipatory, yet unsettled, 'postdiaspora condition' (Laguerre 2017, 8). When critiquing these bodies of work from this perspective, the women's creative outputs can be interpreted as existing outside the 'stigmatizing labels' of subalterneity and otherness (Laguerre 2017, 16), as well as the various forms of 'collective enclosure' commonly reproduced when diaspora status is considered as an end point (Ngong Toh 2014, 53).

American multidisciplinary artist and performance installationist Aisha Tandiwe Bell (b. 1974, New York) is the first of the four featured artists whose work is analysed in this article. Although born in Manhattan, she spent much of her early childhood in Jamaica and was raised within the cultural traditions of the Bobo Hill Shanti Rasta community of Bull Bay. Consequently, her highly self-referential works about identity, myth creation and ritual consistently reflect aspects of her African Caribbean heritage. She is self-defined in her artist's statement as 'first generation Jamaican and ninth generation traceable Black American' (Bell 2013).The second portfolio I discuss features the work and creative practices of American mixed-media conceptual artist and collagist Andrea Chung (b. 1978, Newark, NJ), whose Jamaican Chinese and Trinidadian heritage informs and inspires her artistic representations of people's histories and lived experiences throughout the island nations of the Caribbean and also the Indian Ocean region. A particularly striking aspect of her compositions is the way she often experiments with sugar as a key material, thus poignantly aligning her contemporary artworks to histories of enslavement, indenture and other forms of coercive labour associated with sugar production as a cash crop over many centuries

(Chung 2008). The oeuvre of figurative painter Elizabeth Colomba (b. 1973, Épinay-sur-Seine, France) is also discussed. In this section I examine the way her French and Martinican heritage is reflected in artworks that address the hybrid histories and African influenced spiritual practices of the Caribbean region. The artist's biography acknowledges how this cultural duality positively impacts on self-perception and identity, when she states: 'This dual background has pushed me to explore the totality of social experience and fuse my two worlds (French and Caribbean) in my work' (Colomba 2011). Finally, attention is given to the work of photographer, video artist and performance installationist Jeannette Ehlers (b. 1973, Holstebro, Denmark), whose Danish and Trinidadian heritage is referenced throughout a body of internationally acclaimed works featuring sculptural, photographic and performance-based practices (Ehlers 2015; Belle and Ehlers 2018). Using analytical techniques that consider the compositional, technological and social 'modalities' of selected works from all of the above-mentioned portfolios (Rose 2012, 20-21), I argue that the complex and diverse diasporic positionalities of these women artists contribute towards a reimag(in)ing of what constitutes canonical fine art excellence today.

Stereotypes and controlling images of black and brown women

Decades before influential black feminist scholarship on the impacts of stereotyped or controlling images came to prominence and filtered into mainstream social and cultural discourses on intersectional forms of discrimination, jazz musician, composer and songwriter Nina Simone wrote *Four Women* (Simone et al. [1964] 2003), which was first recorded live in New York in 1964, and released two years later on the album *Wild Is the Wind* (Philips Records 1966). The heart-rending, melancholic narratives presented in this song convey a genealogy of the most commonly recurring racial stereotypes, archetypes and tropes that have been used to negatively characterise black and brown

women's lived experiences, bodies, identities and ancestral heritage as deviant, inferior and abnormal. Tracing the emergence of these false representations, from the era of enslavement and colonialism through to more recent struggles for human rights, citizenship, equality and social justice, Simone's four verses discuss the genesis and endurance of the most prevalent false categorisations of African heritage and black and brown womanhood as aberrant (hooks 1989; Hill Collins 2000; Henderson 2010).

In the opening verse, Nina Simone introduces 'Aunt Sarah' as a 'Mammy' or Aunt Jemima figure, typically associated with servitude, docility, and subordination (Simone et al. [1964] 2003; Wallace-Sanders 2008, 58-60). The second verse casts 'Siffronia' as the Tragic Mulatta character, whose light-brown skin tone connotes histories of sexual violence during enslavement and the denigrating codifications of colourism that emerged from it (Simone et al. [1964] 2003; Gyssels 2008, 333). 'Sweet Thang' is characterised in the third verse as the hyper-sexualised and morally deviant Jezebel, while the last verse mentions 'Peaches' in reference to the Angry Black Woman and Sapphire stereotypes regularly caricatured via the visual arts as well as in literature, TV programmes, print media, and advertising promotions (Simone et al. [1964] 2003; Hill Collins 2000, 78-85; Holland 2000, 41; Powell-Wright 2010, 111). In each case, Simone acknowledges the corporeal violence and psychological pain experienced by women who have been totalized and dehumanized in these ways, using the structure of an eight-line stanza to document the trajectory of each stereotype's progression from the initial naming externally imposed in the public realm, to the affective/emotional trauma of those labels becoming internalized to destabilize a person's sense of selfhood and well-being, as illustrated (below) in the lyrics of the first verse:

My skin is black

My arms are long

My hair is woolly

My back is strong

Strong enough to take the pain

Inflicted again and again

What do they call me?

My name is Aunt Sarah

My name is Aunt Sarah.

(Simone et al. [1964] 2003)

All the invented grotesqueries discussed in this song, along with a broader range of antecedents and successor terms circulating in the present day, have tended to be socially constructed and discursively considered in binary opposition to more favourable stereotypes of white women. The latter are typically idealized as being refined in manners, classically beautiful, sexually chaste, and morally virtuous, according to the dominant and privileged 'male gaze' (or 'phallocentric gaze') of Western spectatorship (Berger 1972, 49). By ascribing negative traits to blackness and positive ones to whiteness over centuries, this stereotyping has served to reinforce racist beliefs in hierarchically gendered, West versus the Rest, white supremacist categorisations of humankind (Hall [1996] 2018, 92-93).

Nina Simone's repetitive use of the question, 'What do they call me?' as the refrain in *Four Women* draws attention to how the power relations within this constructed ranking of people and cultures ultimately evolves and results in what bell hooks describes as the 'commodification' and 'consumption' of blackness as otherness, where the parameters of what it means to be 'the black Other' are solely determined and defined by white people (hooks 1992, 31-39).

Historical depictions of Caribbean women of colour in fine art imagery

Although enslaved, indentured and free people of colour regularly appeared in paintings

of plantation landscapes, townscapes and ports throughout the Caribbean region prior to full emancipation, most frequently in works by Europeans such as the eighteenth century Italian painter and illustrator Agostino Brunias (c.1730-1796), through to the nineteenth century British engraver and aquatint artist William Clark (fl. 1823, Antigua), only a small number of single-figure, centrally positioned artistic representations have achieved significant recognition within the Western dominated, global art-historical canon. Those that have received accolades and wide-spread circulation within the public domain have tended to depict famous male anti-slavery revolutionaries, freedom fighters and military leaders, such as the paintings and prints of Haiti's Toussaint Louverture (1743-1803) and Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758-1806).

In contrast, women of colour rarely appeared as the preeminent subject or solitary sitter within figurative fine art works prior to the early twentieth century. However, one of the earliest exceptions to this from the Georgian era that does foreground a Caribbean woman of African descent is *Portrait of a Haitian Woman* (1786) by the French-Canadian artist François Malépart de Beaucourt. Originally titled *Portrait of a Negro Slave* (1786), this oil on canvas shows a young woman seated at a marble table in the process of setting down a bowl of tropical fruits. Her dark-brown complexion contrasts with a loosely tied, red-and-white headscarf and a white, off-the-shoulder blouse that both illuminate and draw attention to her skin tone (de Beaucourt 1786). In addition to featuring enslavement and servitude as its subject matter, what also marks this image out as controversial is the overtly sexualised, partial exposure of the woman's right breast, painted in close proximity to the fruit bowl (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 – to be inserted near here]

Canadian art historian Charmaine Nelson has described this work as being part of a system of colonial cultural production and an 'oppressive repository' of globally

distributed images of black and brown people, 'fundamentally invested in the differencing of bodies and the production of marginalization' (Nelson 2010, 4). Not only has this insightful scholarship helped to interpret the allegorical symbolism of this particular piece, but Nelson's detailed archival research also helped to identify the un-named sitter as likely to be Marie-Thérèse-Zémire, one of two enslaved Dominguans in François Malépart de Beaucourt's household, documented as the 'property' of the artist's wife (Nelson 2014, para. 9). Another rare, full-body portrait featuring an African-descended Caribbean woman during the enslavement era – additionally considered as a *nonpareil* because it was painted by a white female artist – is the Musée du Louvre's *Portrait d'une femme noire* [Portrait of a Black Woman] (1800) by French aristocrat Marie-Guillemine Benoist (1768–1826). Similar to de Beaucourt's work, this oil on canvas was originally titled *Portrait d'une négresse* and also features partial nudity (Benoist 1800).

The sitter's gender, ethnicity and state of attire are said to be allegorical and have been interpreted by several art historians as symbolising the turbulent international politics and changing power dynamics within post-revolutionary France and the French Empire at the turn of the nineteenth century (Smalls 2004, 13-15; Fend 2015, 205). While some hold the view that Benoist used this portrait of a black Antillean woman to draw parallels between the struggles against enslavement and colonialism in the Francophonie, and white women's demands for liberation in the Hexagon after 1789, others suggest that this image also typifies the Western convention of fashioning exoticised, orientalist representations of colonially subjugated black and brown women portrayed as accepting of inferiorization (Honour and Fleming 2009, 642-643; Childs 2016, 140). So, while the presence of an '*ancien régime*' chair, luxurious fabrics and a semi-naked black woman could all allude to the longevity, economic wealth and global

reach of the French Empire, they might also more simply be reflective of an orientalist predilection for rendering black and brown bodies in turbans and opulent silk costumes to satisfy white imperialist fantasies and desires to 'control, contain and otherwise govern… the Other' (Said [1978] 2003, 48).

Given that the creator of this image was a white woman, Benoist's own positionality and sense of identity in relation to how the sitter's femininity was (or was not) acknowledged and conveyed at the time of production further complicates the gender dynamics associated with this painting. Art historian James Smalls suggests that the image was deliberately eroticised and exoticised to appeal to largely heterosexual and elite white male audiences who were its primary spectators in the salons of the French capital during the early 1800s, noting in his analysis how the Guadeloupian woman's 'transplantation' from a colony in the Caribbean into Benoist's Paris studio 'easily allowed for the "negress's" transformation into useful symbolization—from the colonial/imperial to the feminist/erotic' (Smalls 2004, 13).

At a time when many white male artists were receiving accolades in Western Europe for their group portraiture of estate-owning eighteenth century elites in the Caribbean, some of the wealthiest families deliberately sought to be portrayed with Africans in attendance to signify the extent of imperial fortunes made from the profits of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and plantation enslavement. Invariably, these ornately dressed men, women, and children of colour were shown on the periphery of group scenes as decorative props, often in kneeling or crouching positions that equated with the placement of domestic pets. Positional parity with white people was only deemed acceptable at this time in the overtly caricatured settings of satirical works by artists such as William Hogarth and George Cruikshank, where the titles and images openly suggested a world order out of kilter as a result of the descent of the 'civilized' into

barbarism and chaos (Dabydeen 1987, 97; Phillips-Pendleton 2019, 579). High status, single-figure portraits of (predominantly male) sitters of colour, painted by the most accomplished European artists, constituted the rarest fine art representations, with the oil paintings *Ignatius Sancho* (1768) by Thomas Gainsborough and *Portrait of a Man* (ca. 1770) by Sir Joshua Reynolds standing out as aesthetically pleasing and elegant renditions amongst only a very small number of exceptional examples.

Women of colour depicted as maidservants in *odalisque* settings, like Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), or rare, fine art representations of theatre and circus performers – such as *Miss La La au Cirque Fernando* (1879) by Edgar Dégas – reflect the types of scenarios that characterised how black and brown women were portrayed throughout the 19th century, still bearing the stereotyped inclinations towards the normalisation of servitude, otherness, and alterity. However, as the proliferation of these works also occurred alongside the exponential rise in Western audiences' access to photographic images of people of colour – taken, in the main, by European explorers, anthropologists and colonial administrators – it was the most biased and sensationalist of representations that tended to be mainstreamed and widely circulated to negatively influence the Western European spectatorial gaze. Not surprisingly, once women of colour began to emerge in numbers as creators of fine art during the 20th century – occupying positions of autonomy, authority and self-determination in artists' studios and behind camera lenses – then opportunities followed to challenge past misrepresentations, counter-visualise alternative image-making, and contribute towards greater diversification of non-stereotyped aesthetic practices in the art world.

Despite the strides made by some male and female modernists and avant-gardists from the Caribbean region and its diaspora prior to decolonisation – from Wifredo Lam (1902-1982) and Sybil Atteck (1911-1975), through to Gloria Escoffery

(1923 - 2002) and Aubrey Williams (1926-1990) – the most progressive, wide-spread and transformational change came during the postcolonial era of contemporary visual arts. Even at a time when male artists continued to occupy the greatest proportion of display space in the most prestigious fine art museums and commercial galleries world-wide, this era did see a number of innovative women artists with Caribbean heritage achieve international prominence, notably, *inter alia*, Renée Cox (b. 1960, Jamaica), Sonia Boyce, OBE, RA (b. 1962, United Kingdom), Nicole Awai (b. 1966, Trinidad) and, more recently, Ebony G. Patterson (b. 1981, Jamaica).

Beyond these highly celebrated contemporary art portfolios, there are many other women of Caribbean heritage actively contributing towards a re-imag(in)ing of the international fine art canon in the twenty-first century. Among those presenting what could be described as complex diasporic perspectives, are the four women selected for discussion in the next sections. For different reasons, discussed below, these artists' portfolios all eschew the contradictions, ambiguities and perpetual outsider nature that is typical of conventional 'diaspora status' which, according to Michel Laguerre, 'paradoxically downgrades the holder as a subaltern other *vis-à-vis* the host land and as a subaltern extraterritorial compatriot *vis-à-vis* the homeland' (Laguerre 2017, 2). In place of this more conventional form of diasporic articulation these four artists and their works convey a more secure sense of belonging and surety of self – a state of being that neither projects nor carries any immutable or fixed positions of subalterneity or otherness, but rather represents a more fluid and emancipatory sense of self that operates along a positively 'transformative trajectory' (10). This expression of diasporic belonging is, therefore, not only concerned with issues of identitary citizenship and being connected to a community (irrespective of whether this is seen as concentrated in one territory, spatially distributed over many sites or perceived spatio-temporally as

spanning regions and generations), but it also relates to how belonging manifests ontologically through individuals and is reflected structurally within societies in emancipatory ways.

Aisha Tandiwe Bell (b. 1974, New York, USA)

Brooklyn-based interdisciplinary artist Aisha Tandiwe Bell produces works of fine art across a range of genres and media that include ceramics, drawings, mixed-media collages, videos and performance installations. The prominence of sculpted and drawn masks in Bell's portfolio alludes to the importance of masquerade and other carnival arts traditions in the Caribbean region. These masks are often combined with additional, symbolic and feminised references to African-inspired Jamaican folkloric characters, such as 'Anancy' the trickster, or the spectral figure of the 'Duppy' who interacts like a spirit from an unseen world (Tomlinson 2017, 23-24). In her drawing titled *Me Head Back Gawn, Duppy a Ride Me an a Me Put Ar De* (2009), for example, Bell's 'duppy' is rendered as a burden in the shape of a woman with a fragmented mask for a face carried on the female protagonist's back. The laden, kneeling figure also has a moulded mask in place of a head that is positioned staring down at a mirror image of herself (Bell 2009). In a similarly styled work, titled *Lady with Hat and Duppy* (2012), Bell's standing female figure is shown dressed in late-Victorian attire, with her headwear and the bustle of her gown fashioned from a collection of moulded masks cast in her image. As before, the protagonist stares at an ethereal, ghost-like, mirror image of her shape, rendered in gold (Bell 2012).

The multiple masks, ropes, cords and gilt-embossed mirror images presented in these works, as well as in several other drawings and mixed-media compositions by Bell, offer artistic representations of how fragmentation manifests and recurs within the lives, histories and collective memories of African Caribbean people spanning many

generations, geographical locations and socio-cultural contexts. The artist's awareness of and responses to fragmentation are not only visualised in relation to histories of enforced family separation, but are also represented in terms of one person's embodiment, expression and signification of many differenced identities. The artist's own personal experiences of fragmentation are explained as follows:

> My work is an exploration of individual burdens, insecurities, and self-prescribed traps, walls, armour, masks, stereotypes that are worn/carried out of habit, comfort, fear, sloth and shame. However the work also explores our ability to transform, resist and escape these traps. …[W]e have many identities and like chameleons they shift according to our surroundings. (Bell 2013)

Andrea Chung (b. 1978, Newark, NJ, USA)

American mixed-media artist Andrea Chung's body of work incorporates collage, cut-outs and other artistic techniques involving the layering and manipulation of archival and contemporary images of black and brown women. A particularly strong thematic focus within her expansive portfolio is a continuing examination of the effects and legacies of colonialism on generations of black and brown women's bodies, often reflected in the use of images from photography collections, book illustrations, newspapers, magazines and travel guides produced and published during the late-colonial period (Chung 2009).

Chung's intricate approach to layering positively signifies the importance of hybridity and creolization within her Trinidadian and Jamaican-Chinese cultural background. However, the use of layering as a visual technique also connects to the way contemporary audiences reflect on more negative aspects of cross-cultural heritage, including the devastating impacts and traumatic legacies of enslavement, indenture and colonial oppression on people's physical health, well-being, collective memory and sense of self. For example, in the collage-based series *Domino Cotta* (2008) Andrea

Chung examines the health impacts of fibroids on the lives of black women, whom international clinical studies have identified as experiencing disproportionately higher incidences of fibroids than other ethnic groups (Taran, Brown, and Stewart 2010, Stewart et al. 2017). Chung's own historical research into people's diets, working conditions and access to health care in the Caribbean spanning several generations led her to respond to these revelatory findings by juxtaposing cut-outs of archival images of black women of African descent with medical diagrams illustrating the physical effects of exposure to certain foodstuffs – such as, for example, sugar cane – on the reproductive system. So, in place of the traditional 'cotta' (or 'catta'), a piece of cloth, or dried banana leaves, shaped like a ring-donut and placed on the head to help carry heavy loads, Chung instead places disproportionately larger than life-sized drawings of fibroids in the uterus and fallopian tubes on top of women's heads to symbolically represent the burdensome impacts of colonial exploitation, hard labour, and poverty. Significantly, Chung also replaces some of the pictures of leiomyomas, originally shown as two-dimensional, black-and-white diagrams, with tumour-shaped spheres made from brown sugar to stand out more prominently on the otherwise untextured, paper-based assemblages of archival images (Figure 2).

[Figure 2 – to be inserted near here]

In some of Chung's other, photo-based collage work a selection of portraits from British colonial administrator Sir Harry Hamilton Johnston's early 20th century photograph collection of the Caribbean region is used as the foundation of the innovatively layered contemporary pieces (Johnston 1910). For example, the mixed-media, stop animation *Agatha Tears* (2009) features Johnston's image titled *Woman selling Jackfruit, Trinidad* (ca. 1908) as its base, with additional, touristic images of Trinidad from later decades layered on top and then torn to reveal a distorted and

fragmented version of the original portrait (Figure 3). A century on from Johnston's published photograph, in which the central figure was not identified by name, and the breadfruit was incorrectly labelled as 'Jackfruit', the artist's contemporary adaptation makes a titular reference to the name 'Agatha.' In this way, it is almost as though Chung is openly correcting the historical silencing and erasure of the featured woman's identity, whilst also using the tearing technique to illustrate a continuing, complex relationship with the historical archive of colonial images of the Caribbean region. The word 'Tears' in the title is also deliberately ambivalent, being equally suggestive of tears of emotion as well as the physical tearing away of layers.

[Figure 3 – to be inserted near here]

Insightful research and analysis by the British Jamaican artist-curator and cultural historian Petrine Archer-Straw (2002) discusses how textured, layered and collaged surfaces, as well as masks, feature strongly as recurring techniques and themes within black feminist art by many Caribbean and diasporan women. In her published diaries from the years 1980-1990, Archer-Straw suggests this is a reflection of what she aptly termed the 'patchwork' nature of Caribbean women's creative practices, visualised as piecing together the many (often competing) facets of complex lives so as to achieve harmony and balance (Archer-Straw 2002, 471).

Elizabeth Colomba (b. 1973, Épinay-sur-Seine, France)

Elizabeth Colomba's Martinican heritage informs all aspects of her oeuvre as a fine artist. Her oil paintings regularly foreground full-body representations of women of colour, depicted in visually poetic and highly symbolic surroundings. The intricate intermixing of elements of the island's history, mythology, religious traditions and spiritual practices combine in these works to create what the artist defines on her website as the aesthetics of 'the feminine sacred' (Colomba 2011). For example,

Elizabeth Colomba's contemporary oil painting *Mama Legba* (2011) is a classically styled work featuring a feminised representation of a traditional, African Caribbean ceremonial deity conventionally referred to as Papa Legba, and typically characterised as an intermediary, interlocutory spirit who stands at the doorway between 'Ioa'/God and humanity (Colomba 2011). In Colomba's representation, her protagonist is painted in a traditionally elite European domestic setting of opulence and prestige, so as to provoke questions and inspire re-interpretations concerning how African-descended women have historically been portrayed via the fine arts. To a number of theorists, this central placement and upright stance for black female bodies, supplanted within historically reimagined fine art settings as well as the contemporary settings of pop culture (such as bill board advertising), creates a powerful 'inverse articulation' of white masculinities and the male gaze as normative standards, achieving both liberating and recuperative effects (Filling 2010, 104-105; Griffith 2017, 11). When writing about this re-imagining of Legba, and other works within her 'Feminine Sacred' series, Elizabeth Colomba mentions that the technical modalities of her compositions are strongly influenced by both classical and modern European painters, from Caravaggio and Velázquez, through to Dégas and Picasso, but that she deliberately subverts and re-purposes the styles of these artists to enable her centrally-placed, elegantly posed and exquisitely rendered female protagonists of colour to be surrounded by meaningful objects reflecting their backgrounds, imagined life experiences, personalities and achievements.

Monique Long, curator of the artist's first major portraiture survey in the USA, *The Moon is My Only Luxury* (Long Gallery Harlem, New York, 2016), interprets and appraises the distinctive aspects of Colomba's oeuvre as follows:

Characteristically in contemplative solitude, her subjects (both fictional and historical figures) are placed within sumptuous environments, metaphors for their own interiority and rich narratives. Colomba creates a space for her protagonists to inhabit the re-writing of their history. Through portraiture, she explores the way history is constructed and the interconnectedness between the past and present. (Long 2016, para. 2)

Jeannette Ehlers (b. 1973, Holstebro, Denmark)

Danish artist Jeannette Ehlers' high national and international profile has been achieved through the creation of poignant works that foreground representations of people of colour with African and Caribbean heritage (Ehlers 2015).Of the many celebrated installations within her portfolio, from the digital image-based series *Ghost Rider* (2000-2003) to the monumental public sculpture *I Am Queen Mary* (Belle and Ehlers 2018), the work that helped her break through to achieve wide-spread, mainstream recognition was the UK performance of *Whip it Good!* (Ehlers 2015) presented at Rivington Place, London. In this c.fifty-minute performance installation, presented in two parts, Ehlers enacts a series of carefully choreographed movements within a minimalist, white-walled gallery setting that also has a large expanse of white fabric suspended from the ceiling and stretched taut across part of the room's length to create a vast canvas. The artist's contemplative and ritualistic movements include crouching to dip and coat a braided leather bullwhip in crushed charcoal, before rising and then rushing at speed to crack the whip against the pristine surface of the canvas, using the full force of her body's weight. This dramatic sequence is performed several times to leave a matrix of dark, irregular, criss-crossed cicatrices marked on the fabric. The force of the movements cause the tribal markings applied to her body with white body-paint to glisten and stand out in contrast with her brown skin tone, as the loose *tignon*-like white headscarf used to cover her dreadlocks becomes dislodged by the sheer force of

her painstaking labour. The prominence of the whip, the ragged clothing worn during the performance and the artist's head-covering are instantly associated with the enslavement era, *Code Noir* punishments, and additional social restrictions linked to the enforced wearing of the *tignon* to differentiate light-skinned women of colour from white women within some eighteenth century Caribbean societies.

Through this powerful and poignant performance, Ehlers draws on aspects of her Caribbean and Danish heritage to juxtapose historical artefacts, contemporary imagery and physical movements, that combine as catalysts for audiences to reflect on how legacies of enslavement continue to impact on present-day experiences of economic marginalisation, racial discrimination and social exclusion. *Whip it Good!* (2015) and other works featured in Jeannette Ehlers' cross-cultural oeuvre are illustrative of the visual syntax other modern and contemporary women artists of colour have used over several generations, and continue to reference, to articulate shared perspectives on corporeality, collective memory, and sense of self as acts of resistance and resilience. The visualisation, articulation and performance of such resistances can function as a healing force to protect women from dehumanization and despair, as bell hooks explains:

> For us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless… Moving from silence into speech is – for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side – a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is this act of speech, of "talking back," that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice. (hooks 1989, 8-9)

Conclusion

This article has illustrated ways in which twenty-first-century contemporary

visual artists of the Caribbean diaspora are using their creativity to challenge deeply entrenched racist stereotypes and biases that have distorted depictions of black and brown women throughout art history. The socio-cultural and art-historical tracings of negative image-making, from the era of enslavement through to the late-colonial period, and the continuing legacies of the accumulated visual archive in more recent decades, have raised awareness of the enduring impacts stereotyped, controlling images can have on the lives and ontologies of black and brown women. However, by also foregrounding how selected contemporary artists of colour have presented powerful counter-visualisations of black and brown womanhood via their innovative portfolios and aesthetic practices – particularly through the use of self-representation – this article highlights the important role of the visual arts in helping women establish alternative, transformative ontologies of existence.

Aisha Tandiwe Bell, Andrea Chung, Elizabeth Colomba and Jeannette Ehlers' use of inverse articulation – placing themselves, and other women of colour, as central protagonists in their art – actively disrupts long-established conventions of Western portraiture and figuration that have traditionally privileged whiteness and the male spectatorial gaze. Similarly, Bell and Colomba's creative reinterpretations of Caribbean folklore and African-inspired spiritual practices also demonstrate, in very different ways, how such re-imaginings can successfully challenge and contest canonical conventions. The use of complex layering, fragmentation and patch-working techniques within both Chung and Bell's collages, along with their respective symbolic foci on re-naming and masquerade, demonstrate aspects of politically aesthetic, socially conscious image-making that has the power to provoke attitudinal changes and transform mind-sets just as much as its capacities to stimulate the senses.

As art historian Samantha Noel has discussed in relation to the highly celebrated self-portraiture of Renée Cox and Sonia Boyce OBE, RA, all four of the featured contemporary portfolios within this article also demonstrate an active refusal on the part of the women artists to be 'seduced by narratives reproducing [their] negation' (Noel 2014, 176). Irrespective of the different technical and compositional modalities exhibited in their oeuvres, what remains clear is that all four artists' approaches offer innovative, insightful and alternative representations, which have healing potential and, importantly also, the capacity to re-establish what Carol E. Henderson refers to as 'the integrity of the black female self' (Henderson 2010, 6).

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Figure 1: *Portrait of a Haitian Woman* (1786) by François Malépart de Beaucourt. Oil on canvas, 69.1 x 55.6 cm. McCord Museum of Canadian History collection ref: M12067. © McCord Museum. Image reproduced by permission of McCord Museum.

Figure 2: *Domino Cotta V: Tell She* (2008) by Andrea Chung. Collage, charcoal and brown sugar, 148 x 106 cm. Klowden Mann gallery collection ref: AC019. © Andrea Chung. Image reproduced by permission of the artist. Photograph provided by Klowden Mann.

Figure 3: *Agatha Tears* (2009) by Andrea Chung. Stop animation, 43 seconds. Klowden Mann gallery collection ref: AC095. © Andrea Chung. Image reproduced by permission of the artist. Photograph provided by Klowden Mann.