

Exposing Hidden Realities: How Visual Art Reclaims Black

Women's Bodies from Medical Abuse

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Abstract

This paper explores how visual art exposes the historical and ongoing medical abuse inflicted on Black bodies, focusing on the period from the 19th century to the present day. Using Critical Race Theory and Black feminist frameworks, the paper examines how artists like Wangechi Mutu and Doreen Garner critique the dehumanizing medical practices rooted in scientific racism. By analysing specific works, this research highlights how visual art serves as a counter-narrative, reclaiming Black identities from the violence and exploitation of Western medical history.

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A slave named Renty, a native of the Congo, from the plantation of B.F. Taylor of Columbia, South Carolina. Daguerreotype taken by J.T. Zealy for Louis Agassiz, March 1850.

Figure 3:

Doreen Garner, *The Surgeon and the Slave* (2017) – A visceral sculpture that confronts the medical abuse inflicted on enslaved women by Dr. James Marion Sims.

1. Introduction

The intersection of race, medicine, and visual representation is a historically charged domain where Black bodies have been objectified, medicalised, and dehumanised. This essay investigates how visual art serves as a counter-narrative, revealing the hidden abuses inflicted on Black bodies, particularly Black women, through the lens of systemic racism. Historically, Black individuals have often been reduced to experimental subjects, stripped of autonomy, and viewed through the "white gaze," which frames whiteness as the norm and Blackness as "other" (Yancy, 2016). This racialised perspective facilitated the unethical exploitation of Black bodies in the name of medical progress, pathologising Blackness and treating it as a site for clinical study rather than human care (Washington, 2006).

Contemporary artists like Wangechi Mutu challenge these deeply ingrained racial biases by using visual art to subvert and reclaim narratives of Black identity. Mutu's work, characterised by its hybridity and fragmentation, critiques the long-standing tradition of scientific racism, particularly the medicalisation of Black women as inherently inferior and biologically different (Adasi, 2023). In works such as *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumours* (Figure 1), Mutu combines medical imagery with ethnographic and pornographic references to expose the ways in which Black women's bodies have been dehumanised and sexualised in both medical and cultural contexts (Fleming, 2024).

This essay argues that visual art not only deconstructs these entrenched biases but also creates spaces for Black agency and re-humanisation. By examining the historical exploitation of Black bodies in medical contexts, the role of the white gaze, and the interventions of contemporary artists,

the essay will demonstrate how art reclaims and reconstructs Black identities, confronting both historical and ongoing medical injustices. Through a nuanced analysis, it will highlight how art serves as a medium of resistance and empowerment in the face of these legacies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The White Gaze and Objectification

The white gaze refers to a racialised perspective that positions whiteness as the normative standard while objectifying and dehumanising Black bodies. This concept is crucial in understanding the historical treatment of Black individuals within medical contexts, where their bodies were often regarded as objects of study rather than as patients deserving of care. The white gaze not only facilitated medical exploitation but also constructed Blackness as inherently different and inferior (Yancy, 2016). In the medical field, this dehumanisation was especially apparent in the treatment of Black women, who were often subjected to unethical experiments without consent or care, as seen in the work of Dr. James Marion Sims (Owens, 2017). Sims's experiments on enslaved Black women exemplify how the white gaze enabled racialised objectification. Sims's work, conducted without consent or anaesthesia, framed Black women's bodies as experimental sites, reflecting broader trends in Western medical history that pathologised Blackness while erasing individual autonomy (Owens, 2017). This system of dehumanisation extended beyond medicine, contributing to the development of scientific racism—a framework that portrayed Black individuals as biologically different and inferior, thus justifying their exploitation (Washington, 2006).

Visual culture and photography also played a role in reinforcing the white gaze. An example of this is the infamous **daguerreotypes commissioned by Louis Agassiz** in the 1850s. Agassiz, a proponent of polygenesis, used these images of enslaved Africans to support his pseudo-scientific theory that races were biologically distinct and hierarchical (figure 2). The photographs of enslaved individuals like “Renty” and “Delia” were intended to illustrate their perceived physical differences. These images starkly dehumanised the subjects, stripping them of any personal identity and presenting them as objects of study. The positioning of the subjects—starkly posed, nude, and expressionless—emphasised their supposed primitivism, denying their humanity and reducing them to specimens for the advancement of white-dominated scientific knowledge (Wallis, 1996).

These daguerreotypes served not only as ethnographic records but also as visual manifestations of medical and racial objectification. In the context of medicine, this dehumanisation is echoed in the treatment of Black bodies as disposable and expendable. The photographs were taken for scientific study, yet they reduced Renty and Delia to objects of racial discourse, much as medical experiments on Black individuals reduced them to instruments of knowledge production rather than patients deserving of care. The photographs thus link to the broader history of medical exploitation, where Black bodies were systematically devalued and dehumanised under the guise of scientific progress. Agassiz’s daguerreotypes, much like Sims’s experiments, thus reflect the broader pattern of exploitation in both medical and visual discourses of the 19th century.

3. Discussion

3.1 Wangechi Mutu: Fragmentation and Reclamation

In *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumours* (2004-2005), Wangechi Mutu's use of collage is not merely a visual strategy but an embodiment of the violence she critiques. As Elza Adamowicz discusses in her book on collage, the process itself carries within it an inherent violence—ripping, fragmenting, and reassembling disparate materials. In Mutu's work, this violent fragmentation mirrors the historical dismemberment of Black women's bodies within medical and cultural discourses. The act of reassembling these fragments represents both a reclaiming of identity and an assertion of agency amidst the medical and societal forces that sought to dehumanise and commodify Black bodies (Adamowicz, 1998). By adopting collage, Mutu disrupts traditional representations of the Black female body, reconstructing it on her own terms. This form of visual violence parallels the physical and psychological violence endured by Black women in the medical sphere. The use of collage as a medium, thus, becomes both an aesthetic and political tool, breaking apart the visual and historical narratives that have long pathologised Black women. Through this process, Mutu's work not only critiques the history of medical abuse but also serves as a visual reclamation of the body, one that refuses the objectifying gaze of both medicine and culture.

Mutu's work also engages deeply with the notion of the grotesque, a term historically used to describe both bodily distortion and cultural transgression. The grotesque in *Histology* is not merely a commentary on physical abnormalities but a critique of the very systems that define Black bodies as grotesque or "other." The unsettling, non-linear arrangement of body parts in Mutu's collage

destabilises the viewer's expectations, inviting a reconsideration of what is considered "normal" and exposing the racist and sexist frameworks that have medicalised Black bodies. By using this aesthetic strategy, Mutu aligns with Black feminist critiques that argue for the reclamation of the Black female body as a site of resistance rather than subjugation.

3.1 Doreen Garner: Confronting Medical Trauma

Doreen Garner's *A Fifteen year Old Girl Who would Never Dance Again* (2017) (figure 3) offers a visceral critique of the medical abuse perpetrated by figures like Dr. James Marion Sims, who experimented on enslaved Black women without anaesthesia. Garner's use of materials such as silicone, glass, and prosthetics creates an unsettling, tactile representation of the trauma endured by these women. The surface of her sculptures, marked by incisions and stitched wounds, symbolises the literal and metaphorical violence inflicted on Black women's bodies in medical history. Garner's work invites viewers to confront the brutality of this history, making visible the suffering that was often erased from medical narratives.

Garner's engagement with the body in her sculpture reflects a nuanced understanding of the abject, a concept introduced by feminist theorist Julia Kristeva to describe the visceral reaction to bodily fluids and boundaries. The abject is central to Garner's practice, as her sculptures evoke both fascination and repulsion, forcing the viewer to grapple with the physicality of pain. By rendering the trauma of medical experimentation in tangible, tactile form, Garner not only exposes the historical realities of medical abuse but also critiques the continued dehumanisation of Black women in modern medicine (Owens, 2017). Her use of silicone, a material associated with medical prosthetics, further blurs the line between healing and harm, emphasising the dual role of medicine as both a tool of care and a vehicle for violence.

Both Mutu and Garner use their art to challenge historical narratives and reframe Black women's bodies within a Black feminist context. Their works expose the ways in which Black women have been disproportionately subjected to medical abuse and dehumanisation, reclaiming their narratives from the margins of history. Through their use of fragmented forms, grotesque imagery, and abject materials, these artists create counter-narratives that reject the white gaze and offer new ways of seeing Black female bodies as powerful and autonomous.

By aligning their artistic practices with Black feminist critiques of systemic racism and sexism, Mutu and Garner foreground the importance of centring Black women's experiences in the discussion of medical exploitation. Their works are not only visual critiques of historical injustices but also powerful reclamations of Black women's bodies as sites of agency, resistance, and healing. In this way, visual art becomes a critical tool in exposing the hidden realities of medical abuse while advancing the goals of Black feminism.

3.3 The Role of Art in Reclaiming Black Identity

This section will explore how contemporary artists, particularly Wangechi Mutu and Doreen Garner, engage with this reclamation, grounding the discussion in scholarship on race, representation, and visual culture.

Challenging Historical Representations

Black feminist scholars, such as bell hooks, have long emphasised the need for Black women to reclaim their bodies and identities from the oppressive gaze of Western culture. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks (1992) argues that representation is inherently tied to power dynamics, with Black women's bodies historically portrayed through the lens of both racial and

gender subjugation. Visual art offers a space for resistance, a platform for Black women to construct their own narratives, thereby reclaiming their subjectivity and countering dehumanising portrayals that have persisted for centuries.

Wangechi Mutu's work directly engages with this concept of reclamation. In *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumours* (2004-2005), Mutu's fragmented and hybrid forms reflect the complex identities of Black women, torn between medicalisation and sexualisation. Through her use of collage, Mutu reassembles these disjointed images into powerful forms that challenge the viewer to see beyond the limitations of the white gaze. Her work aligns with bell hooks's assertion that the act of looking itself is political; by controlling how Black women are seen, Mutu reclaims the agency that has been historically denied to them (hooks, 1992).

Art as a Space for Healing and Reconstruction

Doreen Garner's sculptural work similarly engages with the reclamation of Black identity, specifically by confronting the medical trauma inflicted on Black women. In *The Surgeon and the Slave* (2017), Garner reappropriates medical materials like silicone to recreate and symbolise the bodies of enslaved women subjected to medical experimentation by figures like Dr. James Marion Sims. Garner's work forces viewers to engage with the physical and emotional scars left by such historical abuses, turning the Black female body from an object of exploitation into a site of resilience and resistance.

Garner's focus on the body as a site of historical violence aligns with Black feminist theory, particularly the work of scholars like Saidiya Hartman. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman (1997) argues that the history of Black bodies in the context of slavery and medical experimentation has

been one of dispossession and dehumanisation. By confronting this history through art, Garner creates a space for healing and reconstruction, reclaiming the Black female body as a space of subjectivity and agency. The materiality of Garner's sculptures – the tactile, physical presence of silicone and glass – makes the pain of Black women tangible, but it also symbolises a reclaiming of power over how these bodies are represented and remembered.

Reclamation through Visual Reimagination

The act of reclaiming identity through visual art is also connected to the idea of reimagination. By reimagining what Black identity can be, artists like Mutu and Garner transcend the boundaries historically imposed upon Black bodies. Mutu's use of surrealist techniques, for example, allows her to reimagine the Black female form not as something constrained by racialised and medicalised categories but as fluid, powerful, and transcendent. Her work draws on Afro-surrealism, a framework that highlights the ways in which Black artists utilise fantastical elements to explore the tensions of identity and freedom (Adasi, 2023). By presenting Black women in ways that defy easy categorisation, Mutu reclaims their identity from the reductive images imposed by white medical and cultural systems.

In a similar way, Garner's use of visceral, abject imagery disrupts conventional representations of Black bodies. By confronting the viewer with the physicality of trauma, Garner challenges the sanitised narratives of medical progress that have historically erased the suffering of Black women. Her sculptures, by invoking both the past and present traumas of medical racism, create a space where Black women's stories can be reclaimed and centred in the discourse of medical history. This act of visual reclamation, as scholars like Christina Sharpe argue in *In the Wake*, is essential

to acknowledging and resisting the ongoing impacts of slavery and racialised violence on Black bodies (Sharpe, 2016).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, visual art plays a critical role in exposing the hidden realities of medical abuse and reclaiming Black identity from centuries of dehumanisation and exploitation. Artists such as Wangechi Mutu and Doreen Garner use their work to critique the historical objectification of Black women's bodies and disrupt the narratives that have been perpetuated by the white gaze. By engaging with theoretical frameworks such as Critical Race Theory and Black feminism, their works serve not only as acts of resistance but also as tools for reimagining and reclaiming the Black female body. Mutu's use of collage and fragmented forms, alongside Garner's visceral representations of medical trauma, invite viewers to confront the violence that has been inflicted on Black bodies in the name of medical progress. These artists reclaim Black women's identities as powerful and complex, offering pathways for healing, resistance, and re-humanisation. The intersection of art, race, and medicine continues to be a contested space, but through the works of contemporary Black women artists, new narratives are being written, centring Black subjectivity and agency.

Figure 1



Figure 2

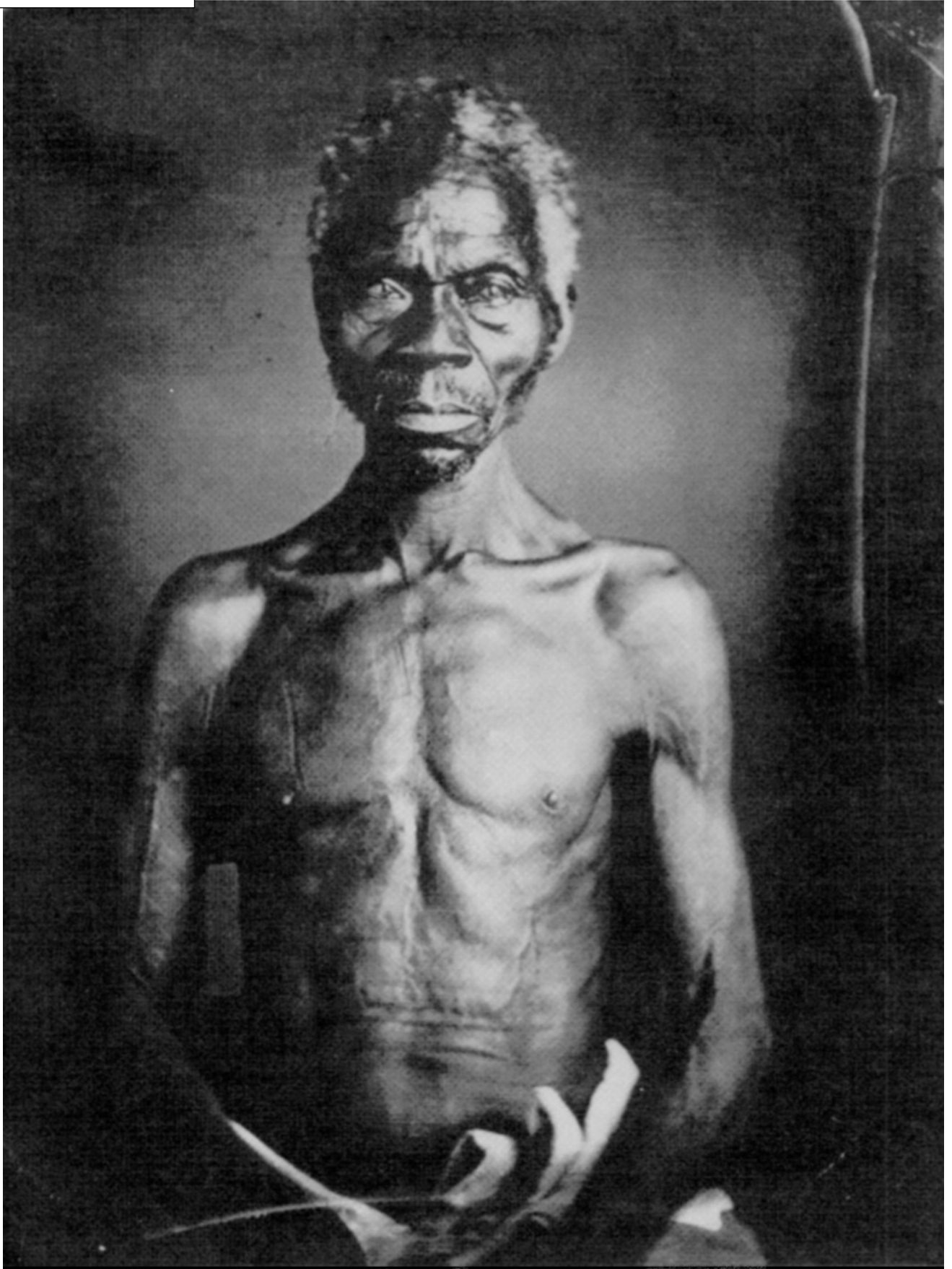


Figure 3



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