

ARTS AND CULTURE STUDIES

## **Constructing the Black Female**

The Construction of Race in Representations of Black Women in Visual Art

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## Introduction

The depiction of black women, and black people in general, in Western art is inextricably linked to colonialism. As art historian Charmaine A. Nelson argues in her book *Representing the Female Subject in Western Art*, “It was through colonization and one of its central mechanisms, slavery, that Africans came to be in and of the west in significant enough numbers to begin to become frequent in Western art” (4). In this thesis I will investigate the representation of black women in Western art and the influence that this representation might have had on society’s perception of them. I will do so by analyzing two works of art, namely Andrea Mantegna’s *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492) and Mickalene Thomas’ *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010).

I chose these works of art since the former dates to the Renaissance, which is a period that shaped the European perception of black Africans as it was during this era (from the 1440s onward) that the first sub-Saharan Africans were enslaved by white, European colonizers and taken from the west coast of Africa to Europe. The latter work of art is a contemporary painting by which will provide a basis of comparison to investigate how representations of black women in art have changed throughout art history and what influences these representations have had on society.

The research question that I will attempt to answer in my thesis is “How is race constructed in Andrea Mantegna's *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492) as opposed to Mickalene Thomas' contemporary *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010)?”

I will use critical theorist Stuart Hall’s representation theory and literary and cultural critic Edward Saïd’s postcolonial theory, in particular the idea of “Orientalism” in order to provide a theoretical framework for my research on the embedded ideology or message behind the

representation of black women in my case studies. In the analysis of the two works of art, this thesis will employ the method of discourse analysis. The relation between power and knowledge which is embedded in the practice of representation, lends itself well for the method of discourse analysis, since discourse similarly refers to particular knowledge which shapes our understanding of the world. I will employ a form of discourse analysis as explained by cultural geographer Gillian Rose in her book *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* which focusses on discourse articulated through a variety visual images and texts.

The reason I choose to focus on representation of black African women is that their appearance in visual art in the Renaissance was less common than the depiction of black African men. This is noteworthy since the majority of enslaved African peoples was female, however, they were often assigned a place in domestic settings which were less common to appear in paintings at the time (Simons). As argued by Nelson, the black female body embodies the complicated connections between race/colour (blackness) and sex (femaleness) (20). This makes the black female body in Renaissance art an interesting case study to examine the power dynamics and colonial discourses at the time.

Lastly, I want to note that in this thesis, especially in the discussion of representation of black women during the Renaissance, I use the term black Africans to describe dark-skinned people of African descent who were enslaved and shipped to Europe and the America's from the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Black people or black Africans are by no means a homogenous group; however, this term does indicate the loss of national and cultural identity of enslaved Africans once they were taken from their native land to other parts of the world. I emphasize the term "black" since non-black Africans, mainly from northern African countries, were not 'othered' or seen as inferior to white people as much as black Africans, mainly from Sub-Saharan African countries.

## Chapter 1

In this thesis and in its discussion of representation of black African women in Western art, I focus on the Renaissance era in European art history. As Renaissance historians T. F. Earle and Kate Lowe and argue, in their book *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, the Renaissance period in Europe is “a crucial early episode of black African diasporic history” (6). This chapter will provide historical context for the Renaissance traditions in the representation of black Africans in visual art.

### *1.1 Tracing Stereotypes*

Lowe states that it is appropriate to research this era for “the beginnings of individual and institutional prejudice and discrimination [...] and the first attempts at formulating black perspectives and creating black identities among communities in Europe” (6). In her book, Nelson also traces the main origin of racial stereotypes of black people to the Renaissance era. She even argues that colonial stereotyping of black peoples was a “necessary extension of European imperialism” intended to morally justify and provide a reasoning behind the horrid enslavement and trading of African people and colonization of “foreign” land (Nelson 19). Art historian Peter Erickson explains in his paper “Representations of Blacks and Blackness in the Renaissance,” that despite the absence of our contemporary understanding of “race” in the Renaissance, there was a racially informed discourse about color in the sixteenth and seventeenth century (503). He argues that visual representations of black people in Renaissance paintings conveyed “a sign system of racial meanings not completely explained and encompassed by ornamental or religious values,” suggesting that a modern understanding of racial prejudice and racism was actually already present in the Renaissance psyche (503). The representation of black Africans in visual art from the Renaissance era can therefore provide insight into the contemporary view on black African peoples and race and ethnicity.

## *1.2 Hohenstaufen Iconography*

As argued by Nelson, black women have been positioned as the “antithesis of idealized white womanhood” as a result of the colonial image of black people (20). This colonial binary opposition that posed black womanhood as the exact opposite of white womanhood is particularly visible in the iconographic type of the black African attendant to a white European figure, which was already prominent during the Middle Ages. However, Isabelle d’Este, Marchioness of Mantua, and Andrea Mantegna, the major artist at her court, produced an influential female version of this composition of subordination that generated a “new role” for black women in European art.

This development was due to aristocratic practices and geo-political changes at the time and can be traced back to the era of the Hohenstaufen emperors. The Hohenstaufen was an aristocratic dynasty that came to power during the Middle Ages from 1138 until 1254 in the Holy Roman Empire and ruled over Italy, amongst other countries. During their rule, Afro-European attendants became popular in noble entourages (Earle 127). Consequently, the common use of black attendants was reflected in visual art (Kaplan 29-36). The imperial empire of the Hohenstaufen became notably fascinated with black people in 1180, when Italian and Northern European artists became occupied with depicting racial variation and black Africans in particular (Kaplan 29). This increase in popularity of images of black people in Western art of the 1100s was partially due to the first three crusades in which European knighthood and Islamic armies, consisting of many black soldiers, battled from 1097 onward (Kaplan 29). While south Italy and Sicily were already familiar with dark-skinned Muslims, the invasion of Sicily by the Normans in the late 1100s undoubtedly prompted more direct contact between black people and white Christians, this is thus a probable cause for the artistic interest in depicting racial variation (Kaplan 29).

The common depiction of black servants in art from the Hohenstaufen empire was not only due to the simple fact that the emperors encountered more dark-skinned people. The Hohenstaufen emperors considered the display of black people to be an efficient means to convey “the potentially universal reach of imperial power” (Earle and Lowe 127). This Hohenstaufen political iconography had a considerable impact, which can be found in Andrea Mantegna’s drawing *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492). It is one of the most widely known Renaissance drawings and marks the first black servant to the biblical figure of Judith in European art (Earle and Lowe 127).

### *1.3 The Court of Isabelle d’Este*

In chapter 6 of T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe’s *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, art historian Paul H. D. Kaplan discusses the reasons behind Mantegna’s depiction of a black servant in this particular drawing, which depicts a scene from the biblical story of Judith. At the end of the story of Judith in the bible, it is revealed that the maidservant who aids Judith in killing Holofernes is a slave. Since the drawing was made at the time of the transatlantic slave trade, when Europeans took enslaved black Africans, predominantly female, to Europe in large numbers, a depiction of a female black slave is not preposterous. However, Kaplan argues that there is more deliberateness to the choice for a black maidservant and points to the influence of the Hohenstaufen political iconography. Mantegna made this drawing under the patronage of Isabelle d’Este, a Marchioness of Mantua, who showed interest in the political trends and actively enquired after imperial voyages of her time (Earle and Lowe 138-139). Similar to the Hohenstaufen emperors, Isabelle d’Este was intrigued to buy and employ black servants at her court, due to their symbolism of imperial reach and interest in the “extra-European lands” (Earle and Lowe 139). Commissioning artists to represent black Africans in

paintings meant publicly displaying her aspirations to participate in the “European expansion” (Earle and Lowe 139).

Isabelle’s commission of paintings depicting black servants can be argued to exemplify the aforementioned “new role” for black African women in visual art. As Kaplan argues, as opposed to the evil characterization of black people in the Middle Ages, “by the 12<sup>th</sup> century a more positive view [of dark-skinned people] began to gain ground” (Kaplan 29). The black maidservant in Andrea Mantegna’s *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492) has been argued to exemplify a new and supposedly more positive view of black women in Renaissance art. However, this new role in art sadly did not reflect black women’s actual position in Renaissance society. Peter Erickson states in his paper that the general proposition that “what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central,” can help to explain the iconographic type of the black female attendant and her white mistress (506). He argues that “the paradoxical combination of the socially peripheral and the symbolically central [...] helps to explain why the black woman often exerts a more powerful force than her marginal status could account for” (Erickson 506).

#### *1.4 Exoticizing the ‘Other’*

Black women in Renaissance art were solely represented through a white European perspective, resulting in these inconsistencies with black women’s position in visual art and their position in everyday Renaissance life. As Charmaine Nelson argues, “many white artists have deliberately sought out their black subjects, going to great lengths and with great effort, travel and expense, because of what they perceived the black body to represent for them in their art, culture and society” (7). This explains Mantegna’s interest in painting black subjects during his time at the Mantua court. Isabelle d’Este, his patron at the time, was “one of the more obsessed devotees” for the trend of having black servants (Earle and Lowe 135). In

1491 she commissioned for the purchase of a young girl, “as black as possible” (Spicer et al. 43).

In their book *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, Joaneath A. Spicer et al. argue that this could be interpreted as “a wish for the maximum exoticism, from the southernmost reaches of the Land of the Blacks” (43). The commission of the purchase of black servants and their documentation in art by Isabelle d’Este is reflective of the tendencies at many courts during the Renaissance. The black female subject became more frequent in Renaissance art; however, their portrayal goes hand in hand not with their consideration as equal to the white (female) subject, but with their significance as a representation of Europe’s imperial expansion. Their representation had a hidden agenda and black women were almost exclusively portrayed as enslaved servants, not as free individuals. Black African women *were* represented in art, however their representation still reflected white and European dominance and power.

The European Renaissance was an era in which visual art was concerned with identity and emphasizing individuality. It was in this era that the identity of European “white” people was formed in contrast to the identity of black African people, the latter of which was considered inferior. The European Renaissance and the art that it generated thus consequently constructed the identity of black Africans on the basis of racial stereotypes and, in the case of black African women, in terms of gender stereotypes as well. In her book, Nelson argues that “Black bodies have been allowed into the realm of art almost exclusively as subjects of representation, where the power to construct and to name belongs always to an ‘other’” and stresses that, historically, this power of gazing and naming has been white male heterosexual privilege (Nelson 19).

Mickalena Thomas’ art, which I will further discuss later in this thesis, is therefore innovative in the sense that her art places black women in the canon of western art history and

reclaims the control over black female identity and its representation in art. She utilizes the canonical art of the white oppressor which took away black peoples' ownership over producing their identity, to reclaim that right and represent black womanhood and black (female) identity.

## Chapter 2

In this chapter I intend to provide a theoretical framework for my analysis of Andrea Mantegna's *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492) and Mickalene Thomas' *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010). As previously mentioned, representation is linked to the production of meaning, and therefore crucial in analyzing how things acquire their meaning and associations. In this thesis I will use Stuart Hall's representation theory and Edward Saïd's idea of "Orientalism" to research the representation of black women in Renaissance and contemporary visual art and its implications as well as its effects in Mantegna's and Thomas' works of art.

Stuart Hall's theory is based on the idea that subjects or objects do not possess a definitive meaning until they are represented (Hall, *Media* 6). Representations are meaning-makers of things that occur or exist in reality (Hall et al. 7). The "meaning" of for instance a person with black skin is not fixed, however once a black person is continually represented as a servant and/or notably inferior to a white person in art, it does gain meaning which is tied to the meaning of white skin. This results in the representation of black skin as "other," in contrast with the "norm" of white skin, since its representation includes a power imbalance, a supposed superiority of white people. Those who can 'make meaning' thus possess a lot of power since they are able to influence society, as they attempt to fix a particular meaning to a certain thing in reality. Consequently, visual representations often reflect the ideology of hegemonic institutions, which mostly renders the white heterosexual male in power of meaning-making. The resulting limited variety of representations generate stereotypes which can narrow society's perception of, as in this case, an ethnic minority (Hall et al. 20).

This idea of an "Other" connects Stuart Hall's representation theory to Edward Saïd's idea of "Orientalism", which I want to discuss more elaborately in order analyze the effect of the common representation of the black female subject in renaissance art on contemporary

culture and society. I will focus on how this meaning-making by the hegemonic institutions, such as the court of Isabelle d'Este, has been able to influence the public's perception of black women and has perpetuated the normalization and acceptance of the enslavement of black people.

### *2.1 Representation and the 'Making' of Meaning*

In chapter one, I explained how the tradition of representing black women in art at aristocratic courts had a hidden agenda of displaying imperial reach. Thus, employing this representation of black women as servants and inferior to white women to justify the taking of African land and enforce the idea of white dominance and power. Stuart Hall discusses a similar relation between power and visibility building on Michel Foucault's work in his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge includes a theory of visibility, in which he argues that rather than a natural or automatic process, 'being seen' is connected to what power or knowledge directs us to see. Hall explains that "being made visible is an ambiguous pleasure, connected to the operation of power" (Hall 195).

In the fourth chapter "The Spectacle of the Other," Hall focusses on the visual representation of racial and ethnic difference in popular culture and mass media and pays special attention to the representational practices which he calls "stereotyping" (225). He states that meaning cannot be finally fixed. However, that is exactly what a representational practice attempts to do, as it "intervenes in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one" (228). Hall goes on to note that images each carry their own specific meaning. However, they amass meanings through other sites of representation and by being read in the context of these other images which Hall refers to as "inter-textuality" (232). When it comes to the representation of 'difference' and 'otherness' within a certain culture

and period, one can usually distinguish a repetition of representational practices across texts or other media (232). Hall defines this as a “regime of representation”: “the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which ‘difference’ is represented at any one historical moment” (232).

In Andrea Mantegna’s *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492) for instance, we see a black woman represented as a maid/servant. This image by itself does not immediately signify the inferior position to white women that black women had at the time, however when we see that this representational practice of stereotyping black women as maids was repeated in many works of art at the time, it does accumulate this meaning. I will elaborate on this argument in the next chapter.

## 2.2 Representing the ‘Other’

In the fourth chapter of his book, Hall discusses several theoretical accounts of questions on how and why ‘difference’ is often the subject of popular representation. He first notes linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s explanation of the essential role of difference to meaning: “We know what *black* means [...] not because there is some essence of ‘blackness’ but because we can contrast it with its opposite – *white*. Meaning [...] is relational. It is the ‘*difference*’ between *white* and *black* which signifies, which carries meaning” (Hall 234). Meaning thus depends on the difference between opposites.

When it comes to *binary* oppositions such as black/white however – they are a “reductionist way of establishing meaning” (Hall 235). Moreover, philosopher Jacques Derrida has argued that between binary oppositions “we are not dealing with [...] peaceful coexistence [...] but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs [...] the other [...] or has the upper hand” (Derrida 41). The physical trait of having black or brown skin only began to carry meaning when it was contrasted with the physical trait of having

white skin. Black skin began to carry meaning, or was assigned meaning, because it was ‘different’ from white skin. Through colonialism, and the ‘voyages’ of white colonizers to the African continent, one pole of the binary opposition of black/white was established as the dominant one, namely white. As white colonizers intruded African land and enslaved its peoples, they encountered people with notably ‘different’ physical characteristics from them, to which they assigned meaning on the basis of comparison to their own physical characteristics. As Charmaine Nelson argues, the enslavement of African peoples and the subsequent creation of Black Diaspora “helped to produce the new colonial order of race that categorized them simply as Negro/black and thereby sub-human; a category dichotomously bound to Caucasian/white as always already pure, moral, beautiful, rational and above all civilized” (Nelson 3-4).

Hall mentions another anthropological perspective for the interest in representing ‘difference’. He argues that culture relies on placing things within a classificatory system which gives them meaning: “The marking of ‘difference’ is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture” (Hall 236). Classification demands binary oppositions since it is based on the marking of clear difference between things (236). Representing or marking ‘difference’ thus symbolically defends and upholds culture and dismisses all that is considered abnormal (237). This is also giving ‘difference’ power since its threat to cultural order and forbidden and taboo character, is exactly what makes it appealing (237). For precisely this reason, as mentioned in chapter one, “what is culturally peripheral is often symbolically centred” (qtd. in Hall 237).

### *2.3 The Origin of Racial Representation*

Hall marks three notable moments in history of encounters between the ‘West’ and black people which greatly formed the Western perception of race and visual representation of

racial difference (Hall 239). The first and most relevant moment to this thesis' focus is the mid-fifteenth century encounter between European merchants and West African kingdoms whose peoples were enslaved and shipped to the rest of the world for nearly four centuries. Hall argues that during this period of plantation slavery and its wake, slave-owners and their supporters did not fully develop a racialized ideology until slavery was actively contested by nineteenth century Abolitionists (Hall 242).

The racialized discourse that dominated around this time was based on earlier fleeting and undeveloped arguments formed by a group of binary oppositions which where rapidly formed into a problematic argumentative tendency once the propaganda war between Abolitionists and slavery defenders began (Hall 243). The binary oppositions were based on physical characteristics and the supposed way of living of 'white' and 'black' 'races' such as the opposition of 'civilization' (white) and 'savagery' (black) (Hall 243). Another important binary opposition was based on "the rich distinctions which cluster around the supposed link, on the one hand, between the white 'races' and intellectual development [...] all of which are associated with 'Culture'; and on the other hand, the link between the black 'races' and whatever is instinctual [...] all of which are linked to 'Nature'" (Hall 243).

In the period of plantation slavery, the popular representation of black people was based on their supposed characteristics such as, subordinate and lazy, primitive and lacking culture (Hall 244). This "racialized regime of representation" was based on the process of "naturalizing 'difference'", which reduced black culture to nature and rendered the differences between them and white people natural and fixed (as supporters of slavery believed), rather than cultural, which would mean they were open to change (Hall 245). This representational practice was intended to eternally secure 'difference' and 'fix' its meaning (Hall 245).

This is exactly the reason why power intervenes in representation at all since those in power want to naturalize the link between an image and one powerful definition of it “so that that is the only meaning it can possibly carry” (Hall et al. 19). Black people were “represented in terms of their essential characteristics. They were *reduced to their essence*. Laziness, simple fidelity, mindless ‘cooning’, trickery, childishness belonged to the blacks *as a race, as a species*” (Hall 245). That is essentially what stereotyping does, it “reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’” (Hall 258). Stereotyping is a play of power and knowledge and “classifies people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as ‘other’” which is an attempt of those in power to shape a society according to their values, ideology and world view, establishing their supposed natural and inevitable wide-ranging leadership, in other words: hegemony (Hall 259).

#### *2.4 The Creation of the Orient*

Hall discusses another major moment when the ‘West’ and Africa encountered, namely the period of high imperialism when European powers colonized the African continent and contended for the control of its territory. Hall states that during the Middle Ages Europe’s image of Africa was positive, despite the mystery surrounding the continent, which was mainly due to its ancient Christian communities like the Coptic church (Hall 239). However, this image did not last, and the evolutionary scale of the Enlightenment classified the continent as a contrast to the civilized world, barbaric and primitive due to its association with nature (239). By the nineteenth century as the imperialistic exploration and colonization of African land began to increase rapidly, Africa was considered a continent with no ability of development, and its peoples were considered more animal than human (239). This European image was visualized in accounts of the white explorers’ encounters with the ‘exotic’ African peoples and through racialized advertisements (240). As a result of the emergence of the

popular press and mass commodity production, images of British domestic life and commodities reached the African colonies while raw materials and images of the imperial 'mission' flooded British homes (240).

As argued by Edward Saïd, it was during this period that European culture started the political, sociological, military, ideological, scientific, and imaginative production and management of the Orient through the discourse of Orientalism (3). Orientalism was a way of exercising symbolic power over the Orient, through representational practices, with stereotyping as a core element. It exemplifies the relation between power and knowledge and how discourse works; it produces racialized knowledge of the 'Other' or Orient (Orientalism) through representational practices which are involved in the functioning of power, namely in imperialism (Hall 260). As defined by literary and cultural critic Edward Saïd,

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short. Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (3)

Saïd defines the Orient as "the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilization and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" and also contributed to the definition of Europe/the West as its contrasting image (2-3). When it comes to the representation and naming of the Oriental, the Orient itself has no say in it, that power lies with the Orientalists (Saïd 246). This is what makes the discourse of Orientalism so effective and powerful since it works through the European or 'Western' "positional superiority"; its assumption of having a superior identity to all non-European cultures (Saïd 7). Our knowledge of the world is based on how we see it represented, and if the representations of a particular culture or place or

always created and decided by a culture that assumes a superior position, then our knowledge of this place is colored by the subjectivity of this representation. Therefore, it is so important for images of certain cultures or ethnic group to depict a variety of representational practices, each from different perspectives so that it is not possible for one meaning to become fixed to an image' subject. As Hall states "to increase the diversity of [...] the possibilities of identities which people have not seen represented before – it is very important; that is 'the politics of the image'" (Hall et al. 20).

### 2.5 Method

To investigate the production of meaning and the discourse embedded in Andrea Mantegna's *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492) and in Mickalene Thomas' *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010), I will employ the form of discourse analysis as explained by cultural geographer Gillian Rose in her book *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. Rose distinguishes two methodological approaches derived from Michelle Foucault's work on discourse, one of which she named discourse analysis I, which "tends to pay rather more attention to the notion of discourse as articulated through various kinds of visual images and verbal texts than it does to the practices entailed by specific discourses. [...] it uses 'discourse' to 'refer to all forms of talk and texts'. It is most concerned with discourse, discursive formations and their productivity" (Rose 140). This is the form of discourse analysis that I will employ in my thesis.

Rose defines discourse as "a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it" (136). She states that "the dominance of certain discourses occurred not only because they were located in socially powerful institutions – those given coercive powers by the state, for example, such as the police,

prisons and workhouses – but also because their discourses claimed absolute truth” (138). The dominance of Orientalism as a discourse can be explained in a similar manner.

Representations of the Oriental and, with regards to this thesis, the black female subject in particular have proven to attempt to fix a certain meaning, thus claiming an absolute truth.

Based on this, I will investigate the iconography of both Mantegna’s and Thomas’ works of art to analyze the elements used in their representation of black women, the associations that these elements establish and what meaning they carry within their context and from an intertextual perspective. I will analyze what claims of truth are embedded within the works of art and how the discourse works to persuade. Moreover, I will investigate what the works of art make visible and what they do not show as well as what contradictions lie within the work’s discourse. Finally, I intend to consider the source and audience of the discursive formation within these works of art to trace how productive their discourse is and what effects it might have (had).

## Chapter 3

As I have argued in the previous chapter, representations are meaning-makers of the subjects they depict, producing knowledge. This knowledge is closely tied to power since those in power of representing a subject, are in power of the knowledge one has of this subject or what meaning one assigns to it. That knowledge/power relation lends itself perfectly for the method of discourse analysis, since we can understand discourse as “a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it” which can be “articulated through all sorts visual and verbal images and texts, specialized or not, and also through the practices that those languages permit” (Rose 136). Works of art such as Mantegna’s *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492), and Thomas’ *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010) thus articulate knowledge about black women which shapes our understanding of them.

In this chapter, I intend to investigate what knowledge these works of art produce and how, in other words, how they articulate discourse. Since the concept of power is imbedded in the notion of discourse, I will also investigate what power relations are at play in the discourses produced by Mantegna’s and Thomas’ works of art and what the effects of these discourses are on society’s understanding of black women then, and now. I will first investigate the discourse produced in Mantegna’s drawing to investigate the origin and effect of the representation and meaning making of black African women in Renaissance Europe. Then, I will analyze Thomas’ work of art and how its representation of black women and the discourse that it articulates is a result of and response to past representations of black women.

### *3.1 Black African Women in Renaissance Art*

For the analysis of Mantegna’s *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492), I will first look at the iconography of the drawing (see fig. 1.). First, the viewer

can recognize the maid's African descent by Mantegna's treatment of the nose, lips and hair, depicting "black" and "African" physical features which are rather stereotypical (see fig. 2.). In her book, art historian Ruth Mellinkoff investigates the use of graphic signs such as costumes, jewelry, and bodily features such as skin color and hair to represent and disparage people that were considered as outcasts in the late Middle Ages. Among those were people of African descent and Mellinkoff argues that "Some of the physical features associated with blacks, such as dark skin, a flat, broad nose, large and widely spaced nostrils, thick lips, and frizzy or tightly curled hair, were adopted and stereotyped for use in the visual arts as deprecation" (127). As Hall similarly argues, black people were "represented in terms of their essential characteristics. They were reduced to their essence" (Hall 245). We can see this tendency in Mantegna's drawing as the maid is depicted with distinct facial features like full lips, curly hair, and a broad nose, which convey a stereotypical 'African' appearance despite the difficulty to convey dark skin through the Renaissance graphic convention of chiaroscuro, (Earle and Lowe 137).

In the drawing, the maid's depiction is smaller in scale than that of the white women next to her. The maid is also placed behind the white woman, who is centered in the drawing. The pose of Judith differs from the servant's pose, resulting in the latter shown in profile, and the servant shown in a three-quarter pose. The servant's clothes are draped in a way that masks parts of her figure while Judith's dress is a bit more revealing and flattering to her figure (Earle and Lowe 136).

Due to the marginalized position in which the black maid is placed, she appears both physically smaller and younger than Judith. This signifies the black maid's position as subordinate (Earle and Lowe 136). Moreover, Judith's face depicted in profile face is a rather formal pose while the servant's face three-quarter pose is more informal (Earle and Lowe 136-7). The dress of Judith is also more elegant compared to the maid's dress and reveals "her

handsome physique” while the maid’s wrinkled gaiters appear “unfashionable” (Earle and Lowe 136-7). The maid’s headdress is also a common element used in Renaissance depictions of enslaved black women (Erickson 49) and, as art historian Griselda Pollock argues, it is “a sign of the exotic” and a common trope for Orientalist representation of the African ‘other.’ (285).

Moreover, the maid is depicted with an earring which according to Elizabeth McGrath and Jean Michel Massing, could be seen as a sign of virtue to a master (to Judith, in this case) since enslaved black Africans’ ears were pierced if they stayed with their “owner” after being freed (McGrath and Massing 17). This sign of the maid’s virtue is already present within the biblical myth of Judith, as she allies herself with the maid to kill Holofernes, however this virtue gains a deeper meaning when we consider Mantegna’s relationship with his patron Isabelle d’Este. Circumstantial evidence has been found that suggests that Mantegna’s drawing was meant to symbolize Isabella and one of her black maid’s (Earle and Lowe 134-136).

As I have mentioned in the first chapter, Isabelle d’Este was one of the devotees of the “trend” of buying and keeping black slaves at her court to convey her interest in the European expansion. Mantegna’s choice for a black maid in this drawing is thus solely in service of the favorable image of a powerful Isabelle whose imperial reach is exemplified in her ability to buy an “as black as possible” enslaved African (Spicer et al. 43). As historian Sally Mckee states in her article “Domestic Slavery in Renaissance Italy”, “the scarcity of Black Africans in Italian cities undoubtedly reinforced the exotic quality that some contemporary Italians attributed to them. Nevertheless, [...] they were few enough to be exotic but common enough not to look out of place as servants in a painting” (312). The role of servant or slave was simultaneously the *only* role ascribed to black African women in Renaissance painting, thus perpetually ‘fixed’ in a position of subordination and inferiority to the white subject.

The rendering of enslaved black Africans as a symbol of power for white ‘owners’ similarly appeared in later portraiture practices. As Erickson states, “It has been postulated that the black slaves incorporated into portraits of their owners beginning in the 1500s were included as a foil for the whiteness of the owner” (42-43). The theme of ally ship in the myth of Judith seems a conscious choice for the setting of a drawing meant to evoke the marchioness, since it depicts a black African woman who willingly (signified by the black maid’s earring) serves a white woman and takes on an inferior position to her.

As American studies scholar Carol E. Henderson argues, “The value of the individual human body has been so important to the Western social, cultural, and political agendas that its perceived corporeal value (based on race, national origins, and gender) inevitably translated into its perceived ideological value” (Henderson 23). We can recognize this in Mantegna’s drawing in which the maid’s black body is presented as a racialized “Other” through which the white body of Judith, or Isabelle, is defined and empowered. This exemplifies how the ideologically inferior black body was represented to affirm the ideological value of the white body as superior, and capable of “owning” the black body. This informed a tradition in the representation of black African women in visual art. As Hall states, “The representation of ‘difference’ through the body became the discursive site through which [...] ‘racialized knowledge’ was produced and circulated” (Hall 244).

As I intended to demonstrate in this analysis, Mantegna’s representation of race is constructed within the colonial/imperial discourse of the Renaissance. The drawing is part of the discursive formation around black women in the Renaissance as it positions the black woman as inferior to a white female subject which conveys the same sentiment as was seen in numerous other works of art and writings about black women at the time. The power of this discourse lies in the Orientalist regime of truth (“The particular grounds on which truth is claimed”) which is based on the assumption of western superiority over the Orient which is

established through the knowledge produced by Western representations of the ‘Other’ (Rose 138). Mantegna’s drawing is a part of the representational practice which positioned black African women as the inherently inferior Oriental ‘Other’ to the white subject, which articulated orientalist discourse of Western, and white superiority.

### 3.2 African American Women in Contemporary Art

The effects of the Orientalist representational tradition of black African women in Renaissance art are substantial and can still be traced in contemporary images of black women, though this is not frequently addressed. As Bell hooks states in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, “Representations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19th-century racism and which still shape perceptions today” (62). Contemporary multimedia artist Mickalene Thomas, references both art history and pop culture in order to investigate how ideas of womanhood are informed by visual representation” (“Mickalene Thomas: About”). Her work, *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010) (see fig. 3), addresses and critiques the representation of black women in earlier works of art and their general place in the visual arts.

The most prominent way in which Thomas’ work of art poses critique on prior representation of black women in visual art is through its use of intertextuality. The title of work of art *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010) as well as the composition reference Édouard Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863) (see fig. 4). Manet’s painting has been widely discussed for the centred naked woman’s ‘gaze’ at the spectator. In her work of art, Thomas has replaced the two men and two scantily clad women with three black women who form a composition similar to Manet’s painting and all three of them “return the gaze of the spectator” (Smith 55).

This return of the gaze is noteworthy since black women have often been subjected to the gaze rather than having held its power. The power to gaze lay mostly with the Western white heterosexual male. As Kara Walker argues about Thomas's art in her article "Artists on Artists: Mickalene Thomas", "A formerly exploitative gaze [...] becomes the frame for a kind of post-womanist self-consciousness" (73). Thomas' painting reclaims the gaze to which black women have so often been – and still are – subjected to in order to empower black female identity rather than exploiting or fetishizing it. As Walker argues, "Thomas allows her photographic compositions to spiral inward, away from the superficial tropes of exotica, toward the complex sexuality of her models" (73).

An important element in Thomas' painting which renders its representation of black women so powerful a critique on earlier images of black women, is its depiction of natural hair. Tabora A. Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead discuss the meaning and history of black women's hair in their article "Hair It Is: Examining the Experiences of Black Women with Natural Hair". Johnson and Bankhead draw a direct link between the oppression and enslavement of African peoples and the oppression of black hair, which was often shaved off upon arrival in the Americas and Europe (87-88). They state that this act functioned as "a symbolic removal of African culture" since European colonizers were aware of the social, cultural and symbolic value of hair for African identity (87). After nearly four centuries of enslavement, the 1960's and 70's Civil Rights movement evoked a sense of racial pride among African Americans, which was marked by "Black hair worn in its natural state. In particular, the Afro" (89). The inclusion of the Afro in Thomas' painting forms a positive contrast to the Orientalist headdress seen in Mantegna's drawing, which masked this element of African culture.

*Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010) actively reclaims visibility of this African heritage and culture and reclaims agency of black women's representation in

art. The painting does so by positioning black women in a canonical work of Western art history, a position they have not often been granted. In the article “Surface Play: Rewriting Black Interiorities through Camouflage and Abstraction in Mickalene Thomas's Oeuvre” Sarah Stefana Smith notes how the use of enamel, rhinestones and glitter against an abstract background of silhouetted tress foregrounds the three black women in the painting and “heighten [their] presentation” (55). She notes how these materials simultaneously “act as a reflective surface that juxtaposes what is represented and repressed” and states that this asks the spectator to “negotiate the illusion of the self and the alter-ego of the self” (Smith 55). As we observe a representation of a black female self, Thomas’ use of these reflective materials confronts the viewer with Western art’s tendency either mask or appropriate the historical presence of black women in order to define the white Western self.

### *3.3 Politics of the Image*

As an African American artist, Thomas has the agency to represent, produce knowledge about and make the meaning of the black female subject. As Juana Williams argues in her master’s thesis, “As a black woman depicting black women, [Thomas] exemplifies the black feminist idea of self-definition and self- representation” (36). This results in a representation of black women which explores new subjectivities regarding black female identity. Kara Swami discusses Thomas’ focus on the surface in her art in her master’s thesis, and argues that “For Thomas, the surface serves as the medium through which identity is revealed” (48). She states that the combination of flatness, rhinestones, vibrant patterns and costumes in Thomas’ work “signify the countless influences formulating an individual’s identity” (49).

Thomas’ painting reveals the multifaceted character of black female identity which orientalist discourse in representations such as Mantegna’s *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* has attempted to eliminate and ‘fix’. *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe: Les*

*Trois Femmes Noires* could thus be considered as an attempt to reverse the stereotypes surrounding the black female subject in art. Hall argues however, that the problem with reversing stereotypes lies in the fact that ‘fixing’ positive representations in places where stereotyped representations existed is just as difficult as attempting to finally ‘fix’ negative representation (Hall et al. 20). He therefore advocates new strategy which he calls the politics of the image, which

has somehow to occupy the very terrain which has been saturated by fixed and closed representation and to try to use the stereotypes and turn the stereotypes in a sense against themselves; [...] because what closure in representation does most of all is it naturalizes the representation to the point where you cannot see that anybody ever produced it [...] The very act of opening up the practice by which these closures of imagery have been presented requires one to go into the power of the stereotype itself and begin to, as it were, subvert, open and expose it from inside. (Hall et al. 21)

I would argue that Thomas’ work of art adapts Hall’s strategy and has succeeded in opening up several stereotypes of the black female subject through post-colonial discourse which acknowledges and problematizes the lasting effects of imperialism and colonialism on depictions of black women in visual art but also popular media.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has set out to investigate the representation of black women in Andrea Mantegna's *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492) and Mickalene Thomas' *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010) and the effects of the meaning that these works of art construct.

The research question that I intended to answer in this thesis is “How is race constructed in Andrea Mantegna's *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (1491-1492) as opposed to Mickalene Thomas' contemporary *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010)?”

I argue that in Mantegna's drawing, race is constructed through Western colonial discourse, which assumes white superiority over the Oriental ‘Other’. This achieved through the paintings attempt to ‘fix’ the image of the black African woman in the position of the servant, a subordinate position while serving as foil for the powerful white colonizer.

Next, I argue that Thomas' painting constructs race through a post-colonial discourse acknowledging the effects of imperialism and colonialism on visual images of black women while attempting to open up the stereotypes surrounding the black female subject.

I hope that this paper has helped to emphasize the importance of recognizing the subjectivity in representation and preventing the fixing of images since “an attempt to keep representation open is a way of constantly wanting new kinds of knowledges to be produced in the world, new kinds of subjectivities to be explored, and new dimensions of meaning which have not been foreclosed by the systems of power which are in operation” (Hall et al. 22)

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Appendix



Fig. 1. Mantegna, Andrea. *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*. 1491-1492, Le Gallerie Degli Uffizi, Florence.



Fig. 2. Detail: Mantegna, Andrea. *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*. 1491-1492, Le Gallerie Degli Uffizi, Florence.



Fig. 3. Thomas, Mickalene. *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*. 2010.



Fig. 4. Manet, Édouard. *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. 1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.