

# Education, Art, and The Black Public Sphere

by

Stephanie Anne Johnson, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Visual and Public Art Department  
California State University – Monterey Bay  
stephanieannejohnsonphd@gmail.com

## Abstract:

The Black Lives Matter Movement has communicated the issue of violence against Black people in The United States to a broad spectrum of the North American public as well as the global community. With strategies ranging from grassroots organizing to their presence on the Internet, the Black Lives Matter discourse around Black survival has been relocated from the culturally specific realm to the center of national consciousness. This collective of activists has provided public education on the connections among political policies, racist ideologies, and the deliberate killing of Black people. The Black Lives Matter Movement is an antidote to the silence that has been the primary response to this centuries old destructive pattern. The type of grassroots, person-to-person education provided by The Black Lives Matter Movement is also demonstrated in the form of Black public artists as “street scholars” and the work they create in our neighborhoods. In this essay, I propose that art in the public sphere and public commons is another means by which we can identify, reclaim, and appreciate Black culture.

Due to economic conditions and racialized policy decisions, “higher education” has become increasingly inaccessible for many Black people in the United States. Given the deliberate and systemic exclusion from all levels of the formal educational systems, where are the places to educate one another, gather, share discourse, and organize for the survival, greater good, and well being of Africans in the United States? The Black Public Sphere theory, proposed in 1994 by The Black Public Sphere Collective, offers a vision for an accessible, “social imaginary” (Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995, p. 2) in service to Black agency. Originally defined as operating in barbershops, beauty parlors, churches, street corners, schools, markets, coffee shops, radio programs, through genres such as music, literature, and poetry, almost 25 years later, locations for the Black public sphere have grown to include pop up galleries, storefront performance venues, community centers, Black businesses, and the Internet in the form of blogs, chat rooms, websites, and other forms of social media.

The resurgence of an active Black public sphere in all of its forms is essential as a strategy for education, communication, and organization in an era when people of African descent have been targeted from the highest levels of government to the city streets. I argue that art is an important tool for Black agency. From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement and continuing in this postmodern era, visual art in the Black public sphere has played a critical role in educating, exploring, and (re) defining what it means to be Black locally, nationally, and globally. Sculpture,

public art, neighborhood arts centers, and shrines are explored in *Education, Art, and The Black Public Sphere*. Using examples of Black public art, Black generated neighborhood renewal and public memorials, this article explores the intersections among education, resistance, and self-definition in the context of The Black Lives Matter Movement. It is my thesis that those of us both inside and outside of “the academy” need to promote, honor, and elevate Black public art. The topic of public art in the Black public sphere necessitates significant time and space as a stand-alone research area. This essay is limited to a few examples of artists and public art whose work represents the nexus among the Black Public Sphere, Black Lives Matter, Movement and the education of Black people.

## Introduction

this present was once the future  
fought for sacrificed for  
planned  
prayed over and envisioned  
strong arms  
and struggle

For those of us who are pursuing strategies that result in more socially just outcomes in all areas of human life, inequities in access to goods and means are evident. In addition to its appearance in the public commons and neighborhoods, the division between those who are privileged and those who are targeted and purposefully disadvantaged runs through every aspect of daily life. This disparity can be seen in employment, housing, education, food security, the arts, and most pervasively in visual culture through the mediums of television, the Internet, and films. Public art is a genre that provides the same kind of 24-hour access that defines the Internet. A theoretical examination of the radical potential of Black public art as a tool for social justice in the Black public sphere is a subject that has captured my attention. “... public art from those in the ‘margins’ has a unique ability to build bridges and galvanize neighborhoods and communities” (Johnson, p. 91). One of the challenges in doing this research is the limited information about Black artists who work in the public realm and Black scholars who write about them / us. *Education, Art, and The Black Public Sphere* represents a contribution in this area and it provides an invitation for additional research and scholarship in the area of the Black public art in the Black public sphere.

## Public Sphere Theory

Jurgen Habermas is a German philosopher who developed the Public Sphere Theory. In this theory governmental, religious, and law-making bodies are accountable and subordinate to the beliefs and needs of the citizens in the decision-making activities of participatory democracy. “By ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every

conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.” (Habermas, p. 49).

Habermas’s Public Sphere Theory is a reaction to the European feudal system in which the lords as self-appointed higher powers provided no active role for the people who constituted the proportionately larger base of this “feudal pyramid” (Habermas, p. 50). His theory is directed toward the bourgeoisie, or property owning class of that period. Although somewhat useful as a counterbalance to autocracy, Habermas’s theory centers around public discourse conducted by literate, privileged, and café-attending French men. In fact, this type of profile as defined by gender, economic assets, nationality, race, linguistic and educational experience provides limited resistance against the politicians, nobility and church authorities which form the elitist social structures that endanger participatory and representative systems of democracy.

The Black Public Sphere Collective refined and expanded Habermas’s Public Sphere Theory to serve the needs of African Americans. The term “Black Public Sphere” describes places where people of African ancestry can gather and discuss important matters related to their/our political status. The Black public sphere is different from the Black public commons. Black public commons are places where Black people meet for leisure and pleasure. Although I argue that Black people gathering together in public places is an inherently political act, The Black Public Sphere Theory is differentiated from the Black public commons by the type of discourse that focuses on organizing and educating for political agency.

The postmodern Black public sphere’s rhizome-like structure includes in-person as well as online communications. It allows for the community to participate on a larger scale and a more geographically diverse way regardless of physical proximity. Multiple ways to effectively conduct intra-racial communications is necessitated by the displacement of Africans in North America and the gentrification of Black neighborhoods. Legislatively mandated urban renewal policies began in the 1930s in the United States. These destructive housing practices have accelerated since the 1970s with disastrous collective consequences for Black people including family displacement, community fragmentation, economic hardship, and unprecedented levels of homelessness. Barbershops, beauty shops, and far too many Black owned businesses have disappeared, being replaced by corporate stores, national chains, and businesses that are owned by people outside of the Black community. On an individual level, manifestations of this loss include emotional, physical, and economic distress. The consequences of lost resources are amplified cross-generationally. Without consistent intra-racial discussions about wealth and plans for business succession, the seduction of seemingly “fast cash” outweighs a sense of racial allegiance, neighborhood consistency and cultural continuity. This disappearance is deeply registered by our psychic and physical senses. We live in a culture that prioritizes the sense of sight. If something is not seen, it does not exist. Where are visual signifiers that mark African American presence in the United States? This is a role that can be played by African American art in the public commons. “In my world art is not only part of history – even a living history – it is part of and makes community, it is part of and makes family.” (Jones, p. 1).

Black artists pass on aesthetic traditions as well as creating new forms of expression that educate viewers. Following the African tradition of griots and storytellers, these visual artists use

their work to highlight the indigenous wisdom that is embodied within Diasporic communities. Art in public view is a tool for education, cultural cohesion, and political organizing. Walter Hood and Melissa Erikson remind us that this is a very challenging endeavor. “The shifting urban landscape, by its very nature, makes difficult the accretion of collective memories. Sites are scattered and lost, leaving the concentration of shared memories diluted.” (Hood & Erikson, p. 182).

## **Public Art**

Public art can be seen without cost. It can be viewed independent of time constraints, class status, entry fees, or formal education. Conversely, many art galleries are tied to commerce and most museums require an entry fee. This is the difference between art that is publicly accessible and art institutions that serve a very narrow segment of the population. The site for public art is architecturally, thematically, culturally and/or socially taken into account when locations are chosen. Public art can be commissioned, self-funded, and/or spontaneous. Historically, the most common form of public art in the United States is in the form of monuments and statues that are seen in parks, on streets, and in government buildings. Art in public places and its representation as a signifier of power should not be underestimated. Recently in the United States there have been on-going discussions, examinations, and interventions in regard to the presence of historical public art that celebrates white supremacy, Native American genocide, and/or patriarchal oppression. A number of these monuments have been removed from public sites; some are being replaced by art that better represents a diverse population. New York is leading the way in this area. “Currently, 90 percent of such statues in the city pay tribute to men, according to Alicia Glen, the city’s deputy mayor for housing and economic development.” (Weinberg, June 20, 2018) In a public proactive move, The City of New York, under the guidance of Chirlane McCray, First Lady of New York, has announced *She Built NYC*, an initiative for public art that celebrates women.

For Africans, public art is a valuable part of history, cultural expression, and education. The creation of art that is accessible to all community members dates far back in our history. Cave drawings, hieroglyphs, wall carvings, mural paintings, pyramids, public altars, totemic structures, and monuments honoring the Pharaohs all constitute intermediaries between the living and the dead. African art continues a legacy of communication across generations, time, and states of existence. Modern African American public art includes murals, sculptures, yard art, graffiti, site-specific installations, memorials, pop-up exhibitions, performances, projections, and other forms of creative expression that occur in public places. The work of artists Elizabeth Catlett and Theaster Gates represents the resonance among public art, the Black Public Sphere Theory, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and education.

## **Elizabeth Catlett**

“Elizabeth Catlett is certainly the most prolific, well-known, politically radical and socially engaged African American woman artist of our time.” (Guy-Sheftall, p. 77) “One of the most important American artists of the past century, Elizabeth Catlett is honored as a foremother by subsequent generations.” (Herzog, 2012, p. 105)

Elizabeth Catlett’s life and work represent the intersection among Black public art, Black self-definition, and African American education. The Black Lives Matter collective states that: “Our continued commitment to liberation for all Black people means we are continuing the work of our ancestors and fighting for our collective freedom because it is our duty.” Many, many

decades before the foundation of Black Lives Matter, artist/educator Elizabeth Catlett dedicated her life to Black people. In Catlett's words: "We can make a decisive contribution to the struggle for full social, political, and economic equality of the Negro people in the United States of America." (Samella Lewis, p. 101).

Elizabeth Catlett was born to John Catlett and Mary Carson Catlett in Washington, D.C. in 1915. Her parents were both trained to be educators in the Washington, D.C. public school system. That legacy provided the path for her future as an artist. John Catlett, who taught mathematics at Tuskegee Institute and in the Washington, D.C. public schools, played multiple stringed instruments as well as drawing and woodcarving. Though he died before she was born, her father's creative work inspired Elizabeth Catlett. She had a long history as both student and teacher. As a young student she skipped two grades and demonstrated considerable talent in art. She attended the Lucretia Mott Elementary School and in 1931, she graduated from Dunbar High School in Washington D.C. Catlett was denied access in 1931 to Carnegie Institute of Technology (later renamed Carnegie Mellon University) because she was Black. This early injustice was rectified 77 years later when she was given an honorary doctorate from Carnegie Mellon in 2008. Catlett studied art as an undergraduate at Howard University from 1931-1937. After graduating from Howard with a B.S. *cum laude*, she received an M.F.A. in sculpture by the University of Iowa in 1940. Catlett was the first student to be awarded this degree. The designation of being first was repeated in 1958 when Catlett became the first woman professor and sculptor at the National School of the Arts, Autonomous University of Mexico from 1958-1976. Catlett's long career as an educator began outside of the college system. Between 1937-1938, she taught high school in Durham, North Carolina. Catlett taught sculpture and dressmaking at the George Washington Carver School in Harlem in 1944. The Carver school provided night classes for the working class community. For Catlett, it was an affirmation about the power of education, particularly for those from a less privileged class. Catlett was never to forget this lesson and it guided her direction as an artist/educator. On the university level, she was a professor at Hampton Institute, and Dillard University, both Black institutions. In 1941, she married the African American artist Charles White.

Elizabeth Catlett has had over fifty one-person shows and her work has been exhibited at numerous venues including the Studio Museum of Harlem, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the June Kelly Gallery, Museo de Arte Moderno, Howard University, Carnegie Mellon University and many other institutions. Her work is in permanent collections at The Metropolitan Museum (New York), The Museum of Modern Art (New York), The Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, D.C.), the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York), and The National Museum of Art in Mexico City.

The focus of this study is Elizabeth Catlett's public art. Her history of doing public art extends back to the Franklin Roosevelt Administration's New Deal. She was hired as a mural painter for the Work Progress Administration (WPA) while she was a student at Howard University. Catlett recalls: "... I didn't know anything about painting murals in the first place because I was a design major. I checked out a book on Diego Rivera's murals from the library because I was going to do a little mural that would run around a lobby of Minor Teacher's College." (Samella Lewis, p. 10). Catlett provided weekly work-in-progress sketches for the Public Works Art Project and was compensated with twenty-five dollars a week. Unfortunately,

her output was judged as insufficient and she was fired. “But it taught me a lesson: when I have a contract, I ought to fulfill it and get the project out on time. I never forgot that lesson. I had been given a wonderful chance to do murals and to get off to a great start in art.” (Samella Lewis, pp. 10-11).

In addition to studying Diego Rivera’s art, Catlett was also acquainted with Miguel Covarrubias, another contemporary Mexican artist. Covarrubias has the distinction of being the only Mexican artist who was part of the Harlem Renaissance. This began a life-long connection between Catlett and Mexican artists. “It was not an entirely unfamiliar world: Harlem was a first cousin to Mexico City’s bohemian section, where Miguel had grown up. Both were gathering places for intellectuals, artists, and personalities of the day, and during the period in which Miguel knew them, both were centers for a renaissance of spirit that had to do with cultural rediscovery, with a search for the elemental self.” (Williams, p. 37) Painting with Covarrubias’s *Caricatures of Harlem* as an inspiration, Elizabeth Catlett completed a private commission for a doctor’s recreation room. “So I painted directly from his book—years later, when I met Covarrubias and told him what I did, he was very flattered.” (Samella Lewis p. 10). Catlett had a deep desire to elevate the position of African American art and artists, and encounters with Mexican artists bolstered her political direction. “In the 1930s, the Mexican muralists were among the most visible proponent of a form of social realism grounded in the experiences of the poor, the working class, and others left behind by capitalism and the entanglements of corrupt governments.” (Williams, p. 122)

In addition to her paintings and sculptures, exhibited in museums nationally and internationally to great acclaim, there are her prints, which represent the publicly accessible side of her career. “But if we are to reach our audience on a large scale --- our potential audience in the United States, in Latin America, in Africa, and in other receptive sections of the world – we must develop a public art, that is easily transported, easily exhibited, and easily reproduced. I suggest as a means linoleum and wood blocks, silkscreen, lithographs, etchings, and engravings.” (Samella Lewis, p. 101).

In 1946, Elizabeth Catlett traveled to Mexico after winning a Julius Rosenwald Foundation Fellowship, which allowed her to create a series of fifteen linoleum prints honoring Black women at the studios of *Taller de Gráfica Popular* (People’s Graphic Workshop). “Having been greatly influenced by the progressive politics of Mexican artists, she executed prints in which the primary subjects were women and children, workers, freedom fighters, and historical figures.” (Wardlaw, p. 74). While studying in Mexico, she met and married Francisco Victor Mora a prominent Mexican artist. After living in Mexico for an extended period, Catlett became a Mexican citizen. There are three surviving sons.

The public commons represent the increasingly rare places in The United States where the public can gather and occupy space for an extended period of time for free. In the context of the Public Sphere Theory, publicly accessed locations may be some of the last forums for democratic discourse in an increasingly privatized culture. The public commons becomes “the public sphere” when it functions as a meeting ground for community members to discuss, organize, and educate one another about the political figures and policies which govern their lives

The placard reads: “ I am an invisible man ... I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Ralph Ellison, 1952 *Invisible Man* -- Elizabeth Catlett, Sculptor, May 2003.” Located in a park adjacent to an historically Black neighborhood, Elizabeth Catlett’s *Invisible Man* sculpture raises questions about the connection among creativity, public space, and the power of art to serve public well-being, foster community revitalization and provide a pleasurable and educational experience at no cost. A shared focus on African American history, and legacy connect Elizabeth Catlett and Ralph Ellison. “One of Catlett’s last public sculptures, the bronze cast *Invisible Man: A Monument to Ralph Ellison* (2003) in Harlem reinforces the mandate Catlett maintained throughout her career: the necessity for African American artists to control the representation of African Americans.” (Williams p. 131). A placard in front of *Invisible Man* reads (in part): “The very idea of being in New York was dreamlike for many young Negroes of the time. I thought of it as the freest of American cities, and considered Harlem as the site and symbol of Afro-American progress and hope... - Ralph Ellison *An Extravagance of Laughter* - 1986.” Elizabeth Catlett was commissioned to create *Invisible Man* in 2003. *Invisible Man* was the last public sculpture she created before her death in 2012 at the age of ninety-six. Adjacent to Ralph Ellison’s former residence in Harlem, this towering fifteen-foot high sculpture stands as an icon of Black creativity in the center of a rapidly changing city, country, and world. Ralph Ellison, the African American author, his *Invisible Man* novel, Elizabeth Catlett, the African American artist, and her *Invisible Man* sculpture have intersecting thematic narratives.



Sculptor Elizabeth Catlett shown in front of her *Invisible Man* sculpture in New York City in 2003.  
Frank Franklin II/AP

“Like Ralph Ellison’s nameless protagonist in the 1952 classic *Invisible Man*, Elizabeth Catlett knows what it’s like to be socially invisible. ‘Being a woman and being Black’ often reinforced alienation for the eminent sculptor and printmaker, she says.” (J.K. Williams, 2013)



Photo by Joseph Michael Lopez for the New York Times

Catlett's *Invisible Man* is monumental in scale. I had the privilege of seeing this piece in person. *Invisible Man* has many symbols in operation. With an uplifted head, the figure is walking with a gesture that seems to be expressing a welcoming greeting, perhaps waving "hello." Another interpretation of the hand positioning is that he is pushing against the edges of the rectangle, seeking release from the continuous metal line that holds him inside the frame. Much like the apartments and trees that surround the figure, the viewer is forced to look upwards to appreciate its beauty and magnificence. Between the cityscape and the natural environment, this is a figure in action, striding forward. Catlett's work has a connection with other Black figurative works of art across the ages. *Invisible Man* has the presence of an Egyptian Pharaoh. However, unlike the monumental Egyptian sculptures dedicated to kings and rulers, Catlett's *Invisible Man* represents not just one man, but all humans.

*Invisible Man* is an artistic product that illustrates Catlett's philosophical endeavor to honor the displaced, the unseen, the seemingly powerless who represent the vast number of human beings who have populated the earth. In writing about Catlett's earlier works, the words of art historian Lowery Stokes Sims can also be applied to *Invisible Man*. "The simplified planes and forms convey a heroic and dignified image of African Americans." (Sims, 2002, p. 22). *Invisible Man* offers an architectural vista through which towering apartment buildings can be seen. When seen from the other side in the same urban environment, one views lush green trees in summer and spring, bare branches in fall and winter. In the context of the surrounding environment, *Invisible Man* offers a visual metaphor for humankind's cycles of change - transition, birth, and death. As a totemic object, *Invisible Man* operates as a metaphor for urban life in the twenty-first century public commons. For passersby, the sculpture simultaneously provides a public view of nature while offering a public view of private property and elite architectural investments that are not representative of the Black inhabitants who were once situated in "The Capital of the Black World." (Huggins, p. 13) As a visual signifier for African American presence in Harlem, this large-scale sculpture says, "I am still here."

Harlem has been a center for Black creativity and culture. As a muralist in Harlem, Elizabeth Catlett was the beneficiary of the creative output that characterized the Harlem Renaissance and the New Deal that supported the arts. During the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-

1930s) and the New Deal (circa 1933-1936), Harlem was the site for numerous arts activities and organizations including Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts, the Harlem Art Workshop, the Harlem Community Art Center, the Salon of Contemporary Art the Harlem Artist Guild, the Vanguard and the “306.” At the Harlem community centers, art and literacy were tied together. Gwendolyn Bennett, director of the Harlem Community Art Center remarked upon the center’s data.

“What did the Center’s cumulative report show? First, and possibly the most important fact: 70,592 people by actual count had attended the Center’s activities during the sixteen months it had been in operation. And who are these people who have been reached by the Center? Exactly 2,467 children and adults have registered in the art classes. More than 23,989 people have participated in the Center’s extension activities, lectures, and demonstrations.” (Bennett, 1975, p. 214).

“Before the Harlem of despair, there was the Harlem of James Baldwin’s gleaming cornices, shining windows, and open doors.” (Adams, p. 266). Signage for *Invisible Man* reads: “Ralph Ellison – 1914-1994. American Writer. Longtime resident at 730 Riverside Drive. His pioneering novel *Invisible Man* (1932) details the struggle of a young African-American man in a hostile society.”

Artist educators such as Elizabeth Catlett and Theaster Gates have been essential in the representation and education of Africans in the Diaspora. Elizabeth Catlett has an exemplary record of serving African Americans through her art and teaching in Black communities. Her career is illustrative of an intersection between art and education. There is a resonance between Catlett’s long career and contemporary artist Theaster Gates whose work demonstrates the integration of art and education for the benefit of African Americans. Combining studio art, community organizing, and urban planning, Gates’s public art projects manifest a seamless connection between art making and public education.

### **Theaster Gates**

A Chicago born artist, Theaster Gates continues to live and work in that city. Mr. Gates has a B.S. in Urban Planning and Ceramics from Iowa State University, and an M.A. from the University of Capetown, South Africa with a Fine Arts and Religious Studies focus. Since 2011, Gates has been the Director of Arts And Public Life, and he collaborates with the Harris School of Public Policy. Both are part of the University of Chicago. Gates has been the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships including: the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, the Graham Foundation, Creative Time, the Joyce Foundation, Artes Mundi, Kurt Schwitters Prize, and United States Artists.

He has exhibited at the Studio Museum of Harlem, Whitechapel Gallery (London), Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Documenta 13 (Germany), National Gallery of Art (Chicago), and Art Chicago among other exhibition venues. Mr. Gates was hired by the Chicago Transit Authority to locate public art for the transit system and in 2014 they commissioned him to design an installation for the 95<sup>th</sup> Street subway terminal.



Photo – Chicago Art Magazine

After completing his formal education, Gates’s endeavor to reclaim abandoned architectural sites was fueled by a desire for independence. In speaking about *Plate Convergences* (2007), an art installation based on a fictitious story about the marriage between a Black Civil Rights Worker and a Japanese ceramics artist he stated:

“I realized that if I had the courage to make work outside the institution, then institutions might actually be interested in the work. I was ready to be an outsider and have an outsider practice.” (Wei, p. 122)

Gates’s artistic focus is two-fold – object making and community organizing. The community engagement strategies of this multifaceted artist align with The Black Public Sphere Theory to support “... a self-interested and politically engaged black public sphere in the United States.” (Black Public Sphere Collective, p. 8). Gates offers an active, effective, and reciprocal approach to using public art as a tool for social and political discourse among African Americans. His work represents a strong contribution to the idea of “Black Villages”, a Guiding Principle of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Gates traverses the worlds of art exhibition and neighborhood development.

“His particular magnetism moves fluidly between the seemingly polar spheres of his practice: African American neighborhoods and communities in the Midwestern United States, where he is deeply invested in site-specific cultural transformations, and exhibitions across the international art world, with major upcoming projects at both dOCUMENTA (13) and the cavernous new White Cube space in the London area of Bermondsley.” (McGraw, p. 89)

The Rebuild Foundation was created by Theaster Gates. This socially profitable organization’s projects include: Smart Museum, Black Cinema House, the Stony Island Arts Bank, Archive House, Listening House, the Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative. The Dorchester projects are not public art galleries, they are publicly accessed private residences which host art events, music concerts, films, and performances. This impressive set of architectural/art projects began with a

personal contribution when Gates initiated an artist's residency program in his home in the summer of 2008.

"After starting a position at the University of Chicago in 2006, where he is now Director of Arts and Public Life, Gates sought a home he could afford. He bought a former candy store for \$130,000, in the South Side's Grand Crossing neighbourhood, which although only two miles from President Obama's house, is a culturally neglected area where boarded windows are common and economic disadvantage is entrenched." (McGraw, p. 91)

The first newly renovated home/community studio located on Dorchester Avenue in Chicago's South Side included a kitchen, ceramics studio, performance rehearsal space, and a place where artists and community people could come together for creative pursuits. It is important to note that this occurred during a year in which the banking and housing crisis created an unprecedented loss of Black assets. In a bold and forward thinking move, Gates bought the Stony Island Bank, which had been abandoned for years. Two years later, it reopened as The Stony Island Arts Bank. For this project Gates and his collaborators amassed significant collections from the Johnson Publishing Company's collection of Ebony and Jet archives, slides from the University of Chicago, the Edward J. Williams collection of "negrobilia" art, architectural books from the Prairie Avenue Bookshop, and vinyl records from Dr. Wax, a local record store that had gone out of business. Functioning very much like a public library, materials in the Rebuild Foundation's studio/buildings are open to the public, local community members, and diverse scholars for their education. "He reinforced the structure to support the weight of the slides, and reconceived the building<sup>[SEP]</sup> as a home to 'bodies of knowledge' that would be made public as a neighbourhood research centre." (McGraw, p. 92)

In particular, the reclamation of African American archives, objects, and neighborhood buildings for the use of local citizens represents a counterbalance to the type of gentrification of Harlem examined in the Elizabeth Catlett *Invisible Man* example. Providing a culturally supportive environment for creative expression and discourse in Black neighborhoods dovetails with:

"... a wider sphere of critical practice and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute a challenge to the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States." (Black Public Sphere Collective, p. 3)

This fusion among site, narrative, culture, and African American history is central to Gates's future projects. In 2009, the Pulitzer Foundation invited him to participate in a program of community engagement. Gates's work responded to the Pulitzer Foundation's art sanctuary in St. Louis with a mandate for spatial reuse. "I {went} to the north side of St. Louis and I saw these buildings, and I thought, I could take the whole building, slide that motherfucker off, put it in the Pulitzer and be good!" (McGraw, p. 94).

Gates consulted with the Washington University architecture program in 2011 on a three-week design intensive. This project was housed in a renovated house in St. Louis. This is an example of Gates's unique ability to re-turn academic spaces into places that educate a broad spectrum of the public. His educational strategy is hands-on. Alongside his reclamation of abandoned

buildings, Gates reuses castaway objects such as blackboards, desks, shelves, and educational materials as tools for inquiry, examination, mapping, organizing, and revitalizing under-resourced communities, as well as engaging silenced and disempowered people.

### **The San Pablo Park Memorial**

In traditional African culture, objects can operate as intermediaries between the living and the dead. Deliberately chosen and carefully placed materials in public areas are a form of communication. They function as ancestral memorials, invitations to the unborn, and guidance for the living. Objects as testimony can function as an educational tool for those who cannot read the written word. African American yard art, also known as ‘yard work’ is especially relevant. Yardwork includes routine maintenance of the landscape around the home. For a smaller group of participants, yardwork also encompasses activities that purposefully invest landscape with visual and material testimony to moral, ethical and spiritual values: the same values that inform appropriate relations with people who pass in and out of the yard, including strangers, neighbors, kin, the infirm and the dead.” (Gundaker, pp. 188-189).

There are questions and challenges regarding the Black Public Sphere and yardwork. With the neighborhood displacement of Black people, what is a redefinition of the term “Black Public Sphere”? Many Black people have lost their homes before, during, and after the financial crisis of 2008. This means that there is a significant decline in the number of homes and yards that are privately owned by African Americans. Black counter-strategies to this diminishment of resources include community gardens, land trusts, worker co-ops, and making frequent use of public parks. The latter activity is a fascinating phenomenon in the context of rapidly changing demographics. Such is the case in the West Berkeley neighborhood where I live. When I bought my house in the 1980s, the neighborhood was populated by African Americans who had moved to California from the South, Midwest, and other parts of the country.

As the original homeowners have died and property values have skyrocketed, their families have sold the properties. Once a proud, prosperous, and organized Black neighborhood, with the arrival of younger people of European descent who have the resources to buy this expensive property, the area around San Pablo Park has become less Black. And yet, many Black families come to San Pablo Park to cook out, celebrate special occasions, and enjoy community events. Upon casual observance, the number of Black park users seems to outnumber the percentage of Black people who currently live in West Berkeley. In a postmodern sense, this means that unlike earlier characterizations of the Black Public Sphere Theory in which it was assumed that Black people gather where they live and own businesses, I propose that a new Black public sphere is defined as anywhere Black people gather to engage in discourse and organizing. I would argue that: the very act of Black people gathering in a public place is “political”; educational discourse is often conducted informally at Black gatherings; these gathering places represent enormous potential for strategizing and organizing national, regional, and neighborhood political activities. This latter latent possibility is resonant with Habermas’s theory and the Black Public Sphere Collective’s vision.

Black organizing for socio-political agendas has become more mobile. There is a shift in the relationship between location and function from a sense of enduring and longstanding architectural/neighborhood permanence to a more fluid, less static, and less location-bound

definition of the Black public sphere. In simple terms, the act of Black people choosing to organize and come together in significant numbers anywhere in public constitutes a new definition for the Black Public Sphere Theory. This on-the-ground in public view presence is punctuated by my final example of Black public art.

### **The San Pablo Park Memorial**

As I was driving home one evening, I noticed candles glowing in the park across from my house. A configuration of small votive candles spelled out “R.I.H.” Rest In Heaven. Right above the letters was a heart. I immediately associated this spontaneous and anonymously created memorial with the recent death of Nia Wilson. Another sister gone...

On Sunday, July 22, Nia Wilson, an eighteen year old African American woman was on the way home from a family event with her sister. She was standing on a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) train platform when she was stabbed by a white man. After being identified on Monday evening by a BART rider, he was apprehended. Officials are still determining the cause of the seemingly random knife attack on Nia and her sister Lahtifah who was later released from the hospital and interviewed as an eyewitness. Nia Wilson was known to be generous, sensitive, and inspirational by those who knew her. In the days that followed there were marches and spontaneous memorials all over the San Francisco Bay Area. Ms. Wilson’s heartbreaking death is part of a continuous pattern of unarmed African Americans being killed by white citizens and police.



Photo by Rashon Briggs

The San Pablo Park memorial had many lit candles: some in tall glass containers, others were small votive candles on the pavement. Two clusters of candles were at the top. From a birds-eye view, the small candles looked similar to buttons or bottle caps, common objects found in urban environments. On the left, the wax from a large candle had melted (or been poured), adding a two dimensional, painterly aspect to the overall composition. Smaller increments of spilled wax were placed in other areas. There were a few ribbons tied to the fence. Viewed the next morning in daylight, it was poignant to see the children’s playground directly behind. Who made this art? On the evening when I first encountered the art, I saw a number of Black youth near the work. My neighbor, an African American park attendant had no idea about the creators. We were both silent in the presence of this public expression of deep mourning.



Photo by Stephanie Anne Johnson

Untouched by the City of Berkeley staff, the candles glowed for three days. Yard art holds a significant place in African American art. The presence of art in yards signifies personal, cultural, and ancestral codes. On private property, these unique configurations can be interpreted as a public offering when placed in front of the house, and a private sanctuary when located in the back. When sited and maintained publicly in Black neighborhoods, objects, and plants stand as memorials to the people who once lived there. Sites of mourning, growth, and remembrance, places of emotional connection or solace, the visual presence of yard art in general and this memorial in particular, runs counter to the disappearance of the Black families who once populated the San Pablo Park neighborhood. In their act of public mourning, the artists who created this memorial were consciously acknowledging the untimely death of a young African American woman and signifying Black presence in the public commons.

The San Pablo Park Memorial demonstrates the power of public art to educate, invite reflection, and encourage active resistance to events that affect our community. The founding of The Black Lives Matter Movement began as a response to the death of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and violence against Black people. The San Pablo Park memorial continues this legacy of remembrance and organizing in the face of violence and loss. Using the San Pablo Park memorial piece as an example in this essay is a complicated matter. Unlike the work of Elizabeth Catlett and Theater Gates, the creators of The San Pablo Park memorial are anonymous. I have made the assumption that it was made by a group of Black people and that it was a memorial for Nia Wilson. As a researcher, it is important to state that neither of these assumptions is currently verifiable. Because of the acceleration of violence against Black people in the United States and the connection to the Black Lives Matter Movement's origins, The San Pablo Park Memorial example is culturally and physically close to home for me.

My three examples of Black public art and their relationship to the Black Lives Matter Movement and the Black Public Sphere Theory are tied together by a focus on history, racial challenges, and ways to promote African American political agency and action using public art. All three examples illustrate Black creative expression, highlight the challenge of African American neighborhood displacement, and foster inter-racial communication as a form of education. Images function as signposts, markers that say, “I am still here.” The locations of Black communities in America are increasingly tectonic when viewed through past, present, and future lenses. Nonetheless, there is a vibrant and persistent cultural voice that states, “I belong here.” Art in the Black public commons and the Black public sphere illustrates that Africans in America remain “Unapologetically Black” (Black Lives Matter).

## References

Adams, M.H. (May 27, 2016). *The End of Black Harlem*.

Retrieved August 12, 2018 from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-black-harlem.html>

Adams, M.H. (2002). *Harlem Lost and Found: An Architectural and Social History, 1765-1915*. New York: Monacelli Press.

Alexander, B.K. (2003). Fading, twisting and weaving: An interpretive ethnography of the black barbershop as cultural space. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(1), pp. 105-128.

Andone, Dakin & Simon, Dan.(July 28, 2018). Officials Still Don't Know Why A White Man Allegedly Stabbed a Black Woman to Death In A Subway Station. CNN

Retrieved July 30, 2018 from: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/27/us/nia-wilson-murder-bart-stabbing-trnd/index.html>

Bennett, G. (1975). The Harlem Community Art Center. In F. V. O'Connor (Ed.), *Art for the millions: Essays from the 1930's by artists and administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (pp. 213–215). Boston: New York Graphic Society.

Black Lives Matter. *What We Believe*. Retrieved June 7, 2018 from: <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/what-we-believe/>

Black Public Sphere Collective (Ed.). (1995). *The Black public sphere: A public culture book*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

*Theaster Gates Speculates Darkly* - Chicago Art Magazine – Image of Theaster Gates

Retrieved August 12, 2018 from: <http://chicagoartmagazine.com/2010/03/theaster-gates-speculates-darkly/>

Christian, M. A. (April 4, 2012). R.I.P. Elizabeth Catlett: Sculpting and printmaking the beauty of Black women. *Ebony Magazine*. Retrieved June 25, 2018 from: <https://www.ebony.com/black-history/ripelizabeth-catlett>

Fullilove, Mindy. (2013). *Urban Alchemy: Restoring Joy in America's Sorted Out Cities*. New York: New Village Press.

Fullilove, Mindy. (2005). *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About it*. New York: One World, Ballantine Books.

Gregory, S. (1995). *Race, identity and political activism: The shifting contours of the African American public sphere* In The Black Culture Sphere Collective, *The Black public sphere: A public culture Book*, pp. 151-168. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Gundaker, G., & McWillie, J. (2005). *No space hidden: The spirit of African American yard work*. The University of Kentucky Press.

Gundaker, G. (2012). African American history, cosmology, and the moral universe of Edward Houston's yard. *The Journal of Garden History* 14(3), pp. 179-205.

Guy-Sheftall, B. (2004). Elizabeth Catlett: Making What you Know Best. In Wardlaw, A. J. (Ed.), *Something All our Own: The Grant Hill Collection of African American Art*, pp. 71-77. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Harlem One Stop. *Riverside Park Conservancy*

Retrieved June 25, 2018 from:

<https://www.harlemonestop.com/organization/281/riverside-park-conservancy>

Habermas, J., Lennox, S., Lennox, F. (trans.), (1974) The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedic Article. In *New German Critique* (1), pp. 49–55.

Harrison, Bonnie C. (2002). Diasporadas: Black Women and the Fine Art of Activism. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 2(2), pp. 163-184.

Harvey, A.M. (2005). Becoming Entrepreneurs: Intersections of race, class, and gender at the Black beauty salon. *Gender & Society* 19(6), pp. 789-808.

Herzog, Melanie A. (2000). *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Hood, Walter J., Erikson, Melissa. (2001). Remaking Poplar Street, The Shifting Black Cultural Landscape. In C. E. Barton (Ed.), *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race*, pp. 171–189. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Jeffries, Michael. (2008). Do Barbershops Matter? Disaggregating and Demystifying the Black Counterpublic. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Sheraton Boston and the Boston Marriott Copley Place, Boston, MA, Jul 31, 2008 Online [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p242978\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p242978_index.html)

Johnson, Stephanie A. (2008). Toward a Celebratory and Liberating System of Teaching Public Art. In Cameron Cartiere, Shelley Willis (Eds.), *The Practice of Public Art*, pp. 91-102. New York: Routledge.

Jones, Kellie. (2011). *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Lewis, Samella. (1984). *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett*. Los Angeles: The Museum of African American Art and Claremont, California: Hancraft Studios.

Marstine, Janet. (2013). Cultural Collisions in Socially Engaged Artistic Practice. *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*, pp. 153-178

McGraw, Hesse. (Summer 2012). Theaster Gates: Radical Reform with Everyday Tools. *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* Summer (3), pp.86-99.

New York City Government Parks. *Invisible Man: A Memorial to Ralph Ellison*. Retrieved June 25, 2018 from: <https://www.nycgovparks.org/art-and-antiquities/monuments/black-history-month/invisible-man>

Oats, T. (September 10, 2015). No Lies Told Then: Fully Realized Female Characters of Color and their Importance to Hollywood Equity and Diversity.

Image of *Invisible Man* marker Retrieved July 21, 2018 from: <http://agnesfilms.com/female-filmmakers/no-lies-told-then/>

Sims, L. S. (1998). Elizabeth Catlett. *American Visions* 13(2). Pp.20-26.

Sims, L.S. (2002) Foreword. In Adams, M.H., *Harlem Lost and Found: An Architectural and Social History 1765-1915*, pp. 12-13. New York: Monacelli Press.

Viveros-Fauné, Christian. (January / February 2012). Theaster Gates. *Art Review* 56, pp. 66-71.

Retrieved July 30, 2018 from: [https://artreview.com/features/jan\\_feb\\_2012\\_feature\\_theaster\\_gates/](https://artreview.com/features/jan_feb_2012_feature_theaster_gates/)

Wardlaw, A.J. (Ed.). (2004). *Something of Our Own: The Grant Hill Collection of African American Art*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Weinberg, Abigail. (July 20, 2018). She Built NYC launches as city seeks to commission public art for women's history. *AmNewYork*

Retrieved August 8 from: <https://www.amny.com/news/she-built-nyc-public-art-1.19327821>

Williams, A. (1994). *Covarrubias*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Williams, Hettie V. (2017). The Realisms of Elizabeth Catlett. In *Bury My Heart in a Free Land: Black Women Intellectuals in Modern U.S. History*, pp. 121-135. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC.