

May 15th, 2026

ARHA243-01-Sp2026 - American Modernisms, 1900-1945

Reproducing Violence: Mary Turner as a Subject

Remembering Mary Turner: A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence, sculpted by Black artist Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller in 1919, depicts a stoic Black woman rising from a mound of disembodied hands that grab at her lower body (figure 1). The plaster sculpture painted in a copper patina depicts Mary Turner, a 19 year old Black woman from Georgia who was lynched by a violent mob in 1918.¹ After her husband was murdered the day before, Turner publicly denounced the violence and was subsequently hung, burned, and dismembered.² Her unborn baby was then removed from her body and crushed by the mob.³ Despite her violent murder, Fuller depicted Turner unharmed, holding her child, and rising to heaven as the fragmented mass of mob members descend towards hell. The scholarship on this work is starkly divided, with authors such as Julie Buckner arguing that in an attempt to empower Turner, Fuller silences her.⁴ Conversely, scholars such as Caitlin Beach argue that Fuller's work productively reckons with the violence acted upon Turner.⁵ Beach's claims are supported by Shawn Michelle Smith's, *Lynching Photographs*, which discusses the problematic nature of lynching photos, and "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," which focuses on the historical erasure of Black motherhood. Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire's discussion of classical sculpture situates Fuller's work within a broader history of monumental sculpture, and rationalizes many of Turner's

¹Beach, Caitlin, "Meta Warrick Fuller's Mary Turner and the Memory of Mob Violence," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 36 (2015): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-2914284>

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Armstrong, Julie Buckner, "'The People... Took Exception to Her Remarks': Meta Warrick Fuller, Angelina Weld Grimké, and the Lynching of Mary Turner," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 61, no. 1/2 (2008): 113–41, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26476644>.

⁵Beach, "Meta Warrick Fuller's Mary Turner and the Memory of Mob Violence," 20.

creative decisions.⁶ By depicting Turner unharmed, with her baby in hand, and maintaining a calm disposition associated with classical beauty, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller deviates from exploitative renderings of Black mob violence, resists dismantling Black motherhood, and elevates Turner into a historically legible heroic figure.

Graphic lynching photography from the early 1900's positioned Black subjects in a state of fixed victimhood and weaponized the Black body for political means. With the popularization of photography in the early 1900s, photos of lynched Black people were mass distributed.⁷ Photography, unlike sculpture and painting, was associated with scientific documentation.⁸ Thus, lynching photos acted as a form of empirical data.⁹ These photos almost exclusively depicted Black subjects after their deaths and were used as souvenirs and postcards across America.¹⁰ Because photography was associated with truth, lynching photographs reinforced the idea that Black individuals were by-nature victims.¹¹ While these photos were used by racist groups to permanently link the Black subject with violence and passivity, they were also used by anti-racist groups such as the NAACP.¹² However, even these groups enacted a form of violence on the Black lynched subjects, using the gore of their deaths as shock value to incite protest.¹³ Thus, regardless of intention, the widespread reproduction of lynching photos reduced the Black subject to a fixed victim status.

⁶Lifschitz, Avi, and Michael Squire, *Rethinking Lessing's Laocoon: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the "Limits" of Painting and Poetry*, Classical Presences, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, accessed May 15, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198802228.001.0001>.

⁷Smith, Shawn Michelle, "The Evidence of Lynching Photographs" In *Lynching Photographs* edited by Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, 15, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520941250-002>

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid, 64.

¹²Beach, "Meta Warrick Fuller's Mary Turner and the Memory of Mob Violence," 18.

¹³Ibid.

Following her death, Turner began to enter the public memory as a spectacle of violence, in line with the thousands of lynching victims before her. Fuller rejected this memory of Turner, while critiquing the broader issue of lynching photography, by depicting her subject unharmed. Turner was featured in civil rights activist Walter White's NAACP report, "The Work of a Mob."¹⁴ The title of his work foregrounds the central issue with his report, as he named the mob rather than the victims. In doing so, White stripped lynching victims of their individuality by defining them by the violence others acted upon them. White communicated the brutality of Turner's lynching by repeatedly referencing aspects of her dismembered body, such as her "womb," "abdomen," and "breasts."¹⁵ In drawing attention to Turner's physical attributes, White reenacted the violence acted upon her in graphic terms. Furthermore, he described her using exclusively passive language, detailing how she was "hung" "burned" and "dismembered."¹⁶ His description of Fuller reinforced her victimhood and passivity.¹⁷ In contrast, Fuller depicted Turner standing and unharmed, looking down at her captors in what she described as "disdain" (figure 1).¹⁸ The sculptor's earlier work, such as *Silent Sorrow* 1900, was overtly violent (figure 3); thus, her depiction of Turner as unharmed reads as a deliberate choice.¹⁹ Fuller's intentions can be further clarified by the fact that she saw White's report in *Crisis Magazine* before beginning her sculpture.²⁰ Turner's intact body and expression of emotion make her appear active, and thus distance her from White's characterization. Fuller further diverges from classic depictions of Black subjects by showing Turner with her baby (figure 2).

¹⁴Ibid, 19.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid, 20.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid, 18.

By depicting Turner holding her baby, Fuller rejects the historical tendency to strip Black women of their motherhood. Fuller reimagines Turner's unborn fetus as birthed. The mother holds her child close to her chest and almost fully covers them in a blanket that stretches over her left shoulder (figure 2). Her positioning shields the baby from both the abstracted mob below and the viewer. Her protective gesture visually merges her with the baby, as the separation between blanket, child, and Turner is made unclear. This melding visualizes Turner's connection to her child. As scholar Caitlyn Beach writes, this depiction challenges the frequent separation of Black enslaved women from their children.²¹ In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers asserts that "'femininity loses its sacredness in slavery...,' so does motherhood."²² By this, Spillers means that "the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the mother" because enslavement separates mothers from their children.²³ By dismembering Turner and removing her unborn child, the mob re-enacted the "ungendering" of motherhood discussed by Spillers.²⁴ Fuller rejects this separation in her sculpture by binding her subject and her child. While Fuller diverges from the historical tendency to strip Black women of their motherhood, scholars argue that in the process she may silence the Black female subject.

By portraying Turner with a calm disposition, scholar Julie Buckner Armstrong argues that Fuller contributed to a reductive portrayal of the Black victim. Sculpted with a lowered gaze, closed lips, and cocked head, Turner is depicted as emotionally reserved (figure 1). Her modest dress and coiffed hair further emphasize her demure nature. Armstrong writes, "Fuller...could tell Mary Turner's story only by taking her voice away."²⁵ She continues by arguing that Fuller

²¹Ibid, 20.

²²Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987), 75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

²³Ibid, 74.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

depicts Turner as calm in order to make her a sentimental figure for viewers.²⁶ In doing so, Fuller reinforces the idea that only the quiet Black women are sympathetic to the public.²⁷ Armstrong suggests that Turner's calm disposition was not historically accurate; as articles from *The Crisis* suggest, Turner was openly angered with the mob that killed her husband, threatening to press charges on all of them.²⁸ She contends that by depicting her as calm, Fuller both rejects the reality of Turner in her final moments and reinforces the idea that an angry Black woman is unsentimental.²⁹ Armstrong argues that this rendering demonstrates Turner's own status as a middle class Black artist; she writes that the sculptor had to "distance herself from Turner's anger from her own emotional response" in order to legitimize her work.³⁰

While her calm disposition may contribute to a problematic representation of the Black female subject, it also legitimizes Turner by aesthetically aligning her with classical sculptural conventions. According to Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire, the first law of art in classical Greek and Roman sculpture is the law of beauty.³¹ Intense emotional agony was thought to distort the face to a point of ugliness.³² Thus, when depicting the battles of heroes such as Hercules and Laocoön, classical sculptors softened the emotional intensity of their subject's faces.³³ Lifschitz and Squire write that "wrath was tempered into severity" and "anguish was softened into sadness."³⁴ The scholars diverge from Armstrong's understanding of sentimentality, arguing that softness can inspire compassion and "beautiful pity."³⁵ They take this argument one

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Lifschitz and Squire, *Rethinking Lessing's Laocoon*, 11.

³²Ibid, 20.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid, 12.

³⁵Ibid, 14.

step further, claiming that if a figure such as Laocoön was depicted with his mouth open and face disfigured with agony, viewers might feel an aversion to his ugliness.³⁶ Thus, Lifschitz and Squire argue that depicting the ugliness of extreme agony discourages sustained viewer contemplation. When a subject reaches a point of total anguish that cannot be softened, as was the case for Thimantes in his depiction of a grieving Agamemnon, the subject is concealed.³⁷ In the case of Agamemnon, Thimantes depicted him covered in a veil, in order to hide the ugliness of his misery.³⁸ In the depiction of Turner, Fuller employs both softening and concealment in order to depict her subject's beauty. As established, Turner is reserved in her expression. She is also somewhat concealed, as her downward gaze and tilted head obfuscate the viewer's visibility of her face (figure 1). Thus, by depicting Mary Turner in a state of reservation and partial concealment, Fuller elicits a sympathy for her subject, retains viewers attention, and legitimizes her subject as a heroic figure by sculpting her using the rules of classical monumental sculpture.

Turner's work uses the visual language of classical sculpture to represent the issues facing 20th century Black Americans. This unique amalgamation deviates from the mass produced images of lynching victims, used by both racist groups and anti-racist organizations alike. As established, these photos of graphic violence fixed Black subjects in a state of passive victimhood. In an attempt to counter this visual culture, Fuller reimagined Turner as an autonomous woman, unharmed by mob violence, and protecting her child. By depicting Turner holding her child tight, Fuller resists the "ungendering" of Turner's motherhood. In so doing, she rejects the historical erasure of Black motherhood discussed by Spillers.³⁹ Turner's calm gaze has

³⁶*Ibid*, 13.

³⁷*Ibid*.

³⁸*Ibid*.

³⁹Beach, Caitlin, "Meta Warrick Fuller's Mary Turner and the Memory of Mob Violence," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 36 (2015): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-2914284>

prompted conflicting interpretations. Scholars such as Armstrong argue that Fuller silences her subject in an attempt to render her sympathetic. However, drawing on Avi and Squire's discussion of softened emotion in classical art, Turner's reserved demeanor legitimizes her within the conventions of European monumental sculpture. The comparison between Armstrong and Lifschitz/Squire highlights the fundamental tension within this work that remains unresolved. Whether Turner is rendered with child or without, angry or muted, in plaster or by the camera, the violence enacted upon her will always remain inescapable. Perhaps that tension is evidence in and of itself of the difficulty of reckoning with the reality of such inhumane acts of violence. Thus, even in the most compelling renderings of Turner, such as Fuller's, there persists an unresolved unease and a continual risk of reproducing harm through representation.

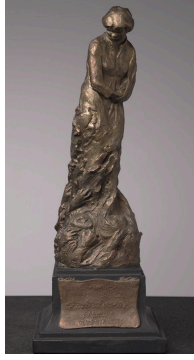


Figure 1:

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *In Memory of Mary Turner: As a Silent Protest Against Mob Violence*, 1919, painted plaster, Museum of African American History, accessed via JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.29507516>.

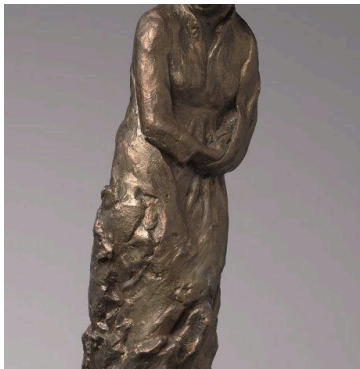


Figure 2:

Detail of Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *In Memory of Mary Turner: As a Silent Protest Against Mob Violence*, 1919, painted plaster, Museum of African American History, accessed via JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.29507516>.



Figure 3:

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *Silent Sorrow*, ca. 1900. Painted plaster. Danforth Art Museum. Accessed via JSTOR. JSTOR image record

Bibliography

- Armstrong, Julie Buckner. “‘The People... Took Exception to Her Remarks’: Meta Warrick Fuller, Angelina Weld Grimké, and the Lynching of Mary Turner.” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 61, no. 1/2 (2008): 113–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26476644>.
- Ater, Renée. *Remaking Race and History: The Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
<https://www.ucpress.edu/books/remaking-race-and-history/paper>
- Beach, Caitlin. “Meta Warrick Fuller’s Mary Turner and the Memory of Mob Violence.” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 36 (2015): 16–27.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-2914284>
- Lifschitz, Avi, and Michael Squire. *Rethinking Lessing’s Laocoon: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the “Limits” of Painting and Poetry*. Classical Presences. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Accessed May 15, 2026.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198802228.001.0001>.
- Smith, Shawn Michelle. "The Evidence of Lynching Photographs" In *Lynching Photographs* edited by Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, 10-41. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520941250-002>
- Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.
- Timreck, Lee Ann. *Pieces of Freedom: The Emancipation Sculptures of Edmonia Lewis and Meta Warrick Fuller*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2023.
- Wood, Amy Louise. “The Spectacle of Lynching: Rituals of White Supremacy in the Jim Crow South.” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 77, no. 3–4 (2018): 757–788.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12249>.