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Review of the Doctoral Dissertation
Tangible Memories. Black Photographic Self-Portraiture and the Strategies of Redefinition and Empowerment
submitted by Ms. Julia Stachura
written under the supervision of Prof. Filip Lipiński
and submitted for evaluation to the Faculty of Art Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Ms. Julia Stachura's excellent dissertation is the product of extensive research, intellectual curiosity, and a carefully selected methodological framework. The author has constructed a logical and coherent study grounded in an in-depth exploration of the topic, a broad and up-to-date body of literature, visits to exhibitions, and interviews with artists. The subject of the dissertation is formulated with noteworthy precision: it offers, on the one hand, a broad panorama of contemporary art in the United States and, on the other, a clearly delimited scope that prevents excessive expansion into peripheral themes. The chronological frame, sensibly limited to the years 2000–2020, yet enriched with substantial historical background, allows for the multifaceted presentation of Black self-portraiture. Significantly, the analysis reaches back to Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), a formerly enslaved abolitionist who was among the first to recognize the emancipatory potential of photography and photographic self-representation. As the dissertation demonstrates, this democratic medium has retained its power to challenge racial stereotypes and caricatures.

Ms. Stachura's research stays in the United States enabled her to make independent choices of the analyzed artists and informed comparisons among them by engaging with current exhibitions rather than relying exclusively on books and archival sources. Among the study's broader strengths, one should also highlight the author's attentiveness to her own position: although she spent many months conducting research in the United States, she remains closely attuned to the Polish art scene and, when appropriate, incorporates references that facilitate a more global perspective. The selection of illustrations is equally thoughtful, allowing for a productive confrontation of text and image and enabling the reader to follow

Ms. Stachura's argument with ease. Many photographs included in the dissertation were taken by the author herself. The dissertation is meticulously prepared, and Ms. Stachura has already published parts of her research in *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens*, *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, and *Artium Questiones*. Importantly, she does not simply reproduce in her dissertation arguments developed elsewhere; instead, she deepens and extends her earlier analyses.

The introductory section outlines the conceptual and methodological framework of the dissertation. Its foundation lies in the notion of *tangible memories*, understood as a form of cultural memory of African American and Black identity shaped by contemporary artists who reimagine the past. The focus on historical constraints that shaped and distorted in derogatory ways the representation of Black culture is here combined with an examination of contemporary artistic practices that contest those constraints. As Ms. Stachura shows, the tangibility of memory links archival research with performance and embodiment. Photographic self-portraiture is thus approached as an act of self-care and self-love, grounded in the body, intimacy, and sensuality. In this dissertation, memory appears as something stolen and therefore something that must be reclaimed in order to understand one's identity. For artists engaging with the traumatic history of slavery, both memory and performance before the camera function as acts of redress – mechanisms for imagining justice and social repair. Tangibility, importantly, encompasses both physical and digital interactions with memory, since the process of identification unfolds through multiple senses that exceed the strictly physical.

The presented methodology is not a superficial display of erudition; it remains functional and productive throughout the entire study. Ms. Stachura's dissertation participates in the broader field of decolonial discourse, which has in recent years been the subject of intensive work by scholars and curators in countries that historically exploited the peoples and environments of Africa. In Poland, for obvious reasons, this research is less developed, which negatively affects public understanding of colonial history. It is worth recalling that not long ago the Wrocław Zoo proudly celebrated record attendance at its exhibition on a so called human zoo, boasting that 41,000 visitors came to see the "newcomers from Tunisia." More recently, the Ethnographic Museum in Poznań (a branch of the National Museum) staged an exhibition titled *EXotica* that failed entirely to address colonial practices. It is striking that the exhibition was consecrated by a Catholic priest. In this context, dissertations such as Ms. Stachura's are

especially valuable, and it would be desirable for her findings to be made available in a more popular form in Polish.

Photography, and specifically portraiture and self-portraiture, is central to decolonial discourse, as it enables the descendants of enslaved people and those who remain subject to discrimination to articulate their own narratives, historically denied to them. At the same time, this discourse allows for a critical deconstruction of modernism and its rhetoric of progress, which has too often been intertwined with naturalized social injustice. Although the dissertation draws widely on the humanities, it firmly belongs within the discipline of art history, both through its formal analyses and its engagement with the field's key theoretical figures, from Alois Riegl to Amelia Jones.

The first chapter, *Archival Bodies*, examines the work of three artists from different generations: Ayana V. Jackson (b. 1977), Lorna Simpson (b. 1960), and Adama Delphine Fawundu (b. 1971). Its central focus is the artists' engagement with archival materials. Hal Foster – whose seminal article "An Archival Impulse" (*October*, 110, 2004) is invoked by Ms. Stachura – argues that the *artist-as-archivist* succeeds the *artist-as-curator*. The goal of the archivist-curator is to "distribute ideas," "liberate activity," and "radiate energy," endowing the archive with affective charge so that its elements may rework and redirect established interpretive frameworks. This practice, Foster contends and Ms. Stachura convincingly demonstrates, supports social transformation. The archival impulse demands a practice of counter-memory and seeks to transform "excavation sites" into "construction sites", to move beyond melancholic culture by confronting trauma. In artistic engagements with archival material, the partial legibility of surviving sources can be reanimated through alternative forms of knowledge or counter-memory. Awakening the past requires that history be made alive in a way that aligns with a sense of justice and with aspirations toward redress. Counter-history, as Ms. Stachura's analyses reveal, exposes the racist assumptions embedded in dominant narratives.

Ayana V. Jackson, in a series of works titled after Foster's article, appropriates historical photographs by restaging their compositions and poses. By offering her own body in place of the figures immobilized in the original images, she symbolically liberates them from violence. Jackson becomes a spectral presence – an afterimage – suggesting that the emancipation of her "ancestors" is a prerequisite for her own emergence. Her work thus stages an anxious return to the past motivated by a desire for self-reclamation. The archival impulse is, as Derrida famously noted, an archival "fever": *arche*, the root of *archive*, denotes both origin

and authority, the site where social order is constituted. For this reason, artistic work with archives entails wresting them from the control of the *archons* – the guardians who claim exclusive rights to interpret them.

Ms. Stachura not only analyses individual works but also offers productive comparisons among the three artists. She rightly observes that Jackson and Simpson employ distinct strategies of engaging the archive. Jackson exposes the mechanisms of colonial propaganda and dismantles the white colonial gaze, while Simpson works with personal and local histories, sharing a vision shaped by private photographs of African American women. Jackson asserts control over her image, simultaneously a model and photographer, a perpetrator and victim, in a gesture that disarms the violence of the past. Simpson, by contrast, in her series *1957–2009*, faithfully re-creates photographs from half a century earlier, situating them within a broad socio-political framework while reflecting on the intimate sphere. Fawundu, meanwhile, inscribes her silhouetted figure into photographic prints and documents, "inhabiting" archival materials. Her use of a silhouetted, back-facing figure – known as the *Rückenfigur* – invites viewers to identify with the subject and engage in historical analysis. At the same time, her presence foregrounds historical exclusions and strives to restore women to their rightful place.

The second chapter, *Re-Pairing the Canon*, examines well-known works of art whose meanings are "repaired" through their juxtaposition with contemporary paintings and photographs. Through these interventions, artists confront and negotiate the past. Ms. Stachura analyses acts of appropriation and structural intervention in two canonical paintings by Édouard Manet, *Olympia* and *The Luncheon on the Grass* (both 1863), and considers their subversive reinterpretations. In the case of *Olympia*, the central issue is the hierarchy between the white Olympia and her Black servant, Laure (incidentally, we only know her name, and Manet described her as 'une très belle négresse,' a very beautiful black woman). The question of her subjectivity finds particularly visionary expression in the work of Lyle Ashton-Harris (b. 1965), as Ms. Stachura demonstrates.

A key concept in this chapter is *suture*. In film theory, suture describes how cinematic techniques position the viewer within a narrative, producing the sense of a coherent subject situated in the world of the film. These techniques "stitch" the viewer into the story so that gaps in continuity or perspective become imperceptible; the viewer forgets the presence of the camera, adopts the protagonist's point of view, and experiences themselves as an internal rather than external observer. As Kaja Silverman, on whose formulations Stachura draws,

writes: “The operation of suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says, ‘Yes, that’s me,’ or ‘That’s what I see,’" (*The Subject of Semiotics* 1984, 205). Ms. Stachura begins her discussion with Renée Cox’s (b. 1960) 1996 photographic paraphrase of Leonardo’s *Last Supper*, in which the artist portrays herself as Jesus – a gesture that provoked a media scandal. This reaction is crucial to the logic of Ms. Stachura’s argument, for such acts of religious transgression opened paths for subsequent artists engaged in cultural critique. Cox’s later reinterpretation of *Olympia* (*Olympia’s Boyz*, 2001), though less controversial due to its lack of religious reference, also proved influential for many Black and queer artists.

Among them is Golden, who describes themself as “a Black gender-nonconforming photographer.” Golden reinterprets Manet’s painting through a non-heteronormative lens, and, as Ms. Stachura aptly notes, the title of their work, *I’m Human After All*, functions as both supportive and empowering. Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971), another queer artist featured in this chapter and one of the most prominent figures in contemporary art, will soon become the first African American artist to hold a solo exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris (17 December 2025 – 5 April 2026). Its title, *All About Love*, signals her commitment to an affirmative reimagining of Black women’s visibility. Ms. Stachura examines Thomas’s photo-collage *Afro Goddess Looking Forward* (2015) as part of this tradition.

Ms. Stachura also considers reinterpretations of Manet’s *The Luncheon on the Grass* exhibited in *Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition* at The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. (2020), including works by Ayana V. Jackson and Renée Cox. As Ms. Stachura argues, the very depiction of leisure constitutes a radical gesture, while the more profound intervention lies in the reconfiguration of power structures, foregrounding how colonialism and slavery shaped modernity. Ms. Stachura’s final example in this sequence is Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s (b. 1982) *Darkroom Studio Mirror*, which mobilizes the double meaning of “darkroom” – both a space for developing analogue photography and, colloquially, a queer cruising space. In Sepuya’s composition, the representation of queer men reconfigures gender dynamics and, as Ms. Stachura contends, disrupts entrenched power asymmetries.

Another iconic work addressed by contemporary artists in Ms. Stachura’s analysis is Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* (1930), a painting that depicts alienated figures constrained by repressive social norms on the eve of the Great Depression. Ms. Stachura examines Lola Flash’s (b. 1959) reworking of this image, in which the artist portrays herself wearing a prison jumpsuit and an astronaut’s helmet – an assemblage that invokes multiple temporalities,

geographies, and diasporic national, cultural, and gender identities. Flash both reformulates the past and speculates about alternative futures.

The chapter's final section, *Re-Figuring the Museum,* turns to artists such as Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953), a pioneer of institutional critique addressing racial prejudice and systemic injustice. Weems explores the relationship between self-portraiture, landscape, and architecture, often employing the Rückenfigur motif, as Fawundu does. This device is crucial to her *Museums* series, which interrogates racial and gender hierarchies embedded in museum collections and their colonial histories. Weems adopts a reparative and decolonial approach, questioning institutional absences and structural inequalities, while also entering into dialogue with Caspar David Friedrich's *Woman before the Rising Sun* (1818–1820). Helina Metaferia, by contrast, intervenes directly in museum spaces through performance, engaging physically with canonical artworks. Together, Weems and Metaferia exemplify two distinct strategies of institutional intervention – one from outside of the museum, the other from within.

The third chapter, *Family Frames,* takes its title from Marianne Hirsch's influential study *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Hirsch argues that "familial gaze situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology of the family as institution, and projects a screen of familial myths between camera and subject. Through this screen the subject both recognizes and can attempt to contest her or his embeddedness in familiality," (1997, 11). Her interest lies in how individual subjectivity is constructed within the family, and how the family itself is constructed within visual culture – and, further, how familial structures operate within broader systems of representation. Hirsch thus intertwines the private and the public, tracing shifts in discourses surrounding the family, including mentalities that once legitimized violence. She maintains that "Photographs offer a prism through which to study the postmodern space of cultural memory composed of leftovers, debris, single items that are left to be collected and assembled in many ways to tell a variety of stories, from a variety of often competing perspectives" (1997, 13). Ms. Stachura adopts this perspective, and her analyses reveal multiple such competing viewpoints.

As in Hirsch's work, the study of the relationship between historical photographs and their contemporary reinterpretations destabilizes social hierarchies and familial power structures, encouraging self-reflection. Theory thus becomes an ethical practice, exposing the hegemonic nature of cultural texts. It is this very strategy that Hal Foster in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, drawing on Edward Said, termed a "counter-practice of interference" (1983, XIV), enabling "a recovery of (the history of) others" (XV). Both Hirsch's book and Ms. Stachura's dissertation

rely on this approach. Ms. Stachura also employs Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's concept of the *allo-portrait* (from Greek *allo* – "other") – the double estrangement of the self-portrait, combining multiplicity with otherness – adapted by Hirsch to the analysis of family photography (1997, 83–85).

Ms. Stachura's readings of LaToya Ruby Frazier's *The Notion of Family* (2001–2014), Rahim Fortune's *Sources of Self-Regard* (2020), and Jonathan Mark Jackson's *The House Servant's Directory* (2018–2019) foreground their critical examination of myths and ideologies surrounding both the white middle-class family and the Black working-class family. One key point of reference is the influential exhibition *The Family of Man*, curated by Edward Steichen at MoMA in 1955. Its projection of a universalized family album became, as Ms. Stachura observes, a challenge to Frazier, who – coming from a poor working-class background – fuses family album and autobiography to create a form of self-presentation that functions simultaneously as intimate testimony and as an assertion of agency for herself and her family. Her work's political implications hinge on its matriarchal narrative.

Ms. Stachura also analyses Rahim Fortune's 2020 self-portrait series, shaped by the combined heritage of his parents, his mother being from the Chickasaw Nation and his father African American, and Jonathan Mark Jackson's *The House Servant's Directory*, which reimagines the memory of enslavement experienced by his ancestors.

The fourth and final chapter, *Studio*, is devoted to the artistic studios of queer creators, understood broadly to include the metaphorical conception of darkrooms as spaces of queer cruising. Within this framework, the studio becomes a site for examining the politics of identity, deconstructing normative masculinity and femininity, and challenging the binary hierarchy that positions the masculine subject as active and powerful and the feminine subject as passive. As Ms. Stachura demonstrates through historical and contemporary examples, the act of fantasizing within photographic studios has long enabled forms of self-expression that resist stereotypical public images and strengthen one's sense of agency. The works of Lyle Ashton-Harris, Carrie Mae Weems, Rashid Johnson, Omar Victor Diop, Lola Flash, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya are analyzed in this context.

Turning to critical remarks, though they are better understood as suggestions for potential revisions should the author decide to publish her dissertation (a step I strongly encourage), I would like to raise several points. These should not be read as diminishing the author's

outstanding scholarly achievements; rather, they are offered in the spirit of constructive dialogue.

First, the chronological scope of the dissertation is highly ambitious, extending back to the earliest decades of photography. Yet, given the emphasis placed on pioneering nineteenth-century work, a brief outline of developments between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries would have been valuable. I am not, of course, proposing to write a history of Black photography, but rather to incorporate additional references and comparative examples Most notably, I missed a discussion of the counterculture era, during which Black artists absorbed and transformed countercultural ideas to forge a revolutionary visual language that served as a tool of resistance – creating counter-archives and critically addressing questions of visibility and its modalities in public space. One could argue that this represented a counterculture within, or even against, the dominant counterculture of the period. Its central imperative – to create new Black-centered worlds of art and meaning along with the insistence on controlling the means of representation – resonates strongly with the dissertation's major themes.

This is not to say that artists of the 1970s are absent. For instance, the dissertation mentions the painter Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955), who came of age in California during the transformative years of the Black Power movement. It is debatable whether other painters should also be included, such as the older Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) or Barkley Hendricks (1945–2017), since they did not work primarily in photography. Nonetheless, their influence on subsequent generations, irrespective of medium, was profound. More importantly, the dissertation does not offer a generational systematization or examine key collectives, foremost among them the Kamoinge Workshop (founded in New York City in 1963 under the leadership of Roy DeCarava (1919–2007), active since the period commonly associated with the Harlem Renaissance). The Harlem Renaissance is mentioned only briefly on p. 206 and again in a footnote on p. 207, and in connection with the exhibition *The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism*.

Similarly, Shawn W. Walker (b. 1940), featured in the Brooklyn Museum of Art's landmark 2001 exhibition *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers*, curated by Barbara Head Millstein (referenced on p. 110), could have enriched the discussion. His incisive engagement with the American Dream and his striking self-portrait in the series *Shadows and Reflections* may have been omitted because the author discussed him previously in her article "Double Index: The Self-Shadow in American Photography of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century" (*Artium Questiones*, 2022). Emma Amos (1937–2020), although

not a photographer, might also have been worth mentioning: apparently the only Black woman editor in the New York *Heresies* Collective journal, she offered a foundational critique of racism within second-wave feminism – a theme that could be gently highlighted in the dissertation.

Second, it would be useful to note that Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Renée Cox are located within the third-wave generation. The fourth (fifth?) wave – effectively defined by the Black artists discussed by Ms. Stachura (Mickalene Thomas, LaToya Ruby Frazier) – is missing several key figures working in photography, notably Deana Lawson and Juliana Huxtable. One might also consider including the painter Tschabalala Self and the sculptor Simone Leigh, both of whom frequently post photographic self-portraits on Instagram; the latter, recently the first Black woman to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, has achieved exceptional prominence. Among women photographers, Zanele Muholi deserves particular attention. Although South African, Muholi has had a profound influence on contemporary Black activist photography in the United States, with major recent exhibitions such as *Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance* (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, 2022) and *Zanele Muholi: Eye Me* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2024). Her international recognition has also been shaped by touring presentation of *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail the Dark Lioness)* – including at Harvard's Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art – a series also published as an award-winning photobook. In this body of work, Muholi uses self-portraiture to confront homophobia, transphobia, colonial legacies, and the politics of Black embodiment.

Third, in relation to theorists who have significantly shaped discourse on the representation of Black subjects, the author rightly emphasizes bell hooks, Saidiya Hartman, and Audre Lorde. However, the absence of Alice Walker (b. 1944) and Barbara Smith (b. 1946) is somewhat regrettable.

Fourth, while important exhibitions on Black art are discussed, it is notable that *Projects: Ming Smith* (MoMA, New York, 2023) – featuring the first African–American female photographer whose works were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art – is not included. Other significant exhibitions are also absent, even though they did not focus exclusively on photography: *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–1985* (Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2017, curated by Catherine Morris) and *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver; Part I, New York University's Grey Art Gallery, 2013; Part II, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2014). It is

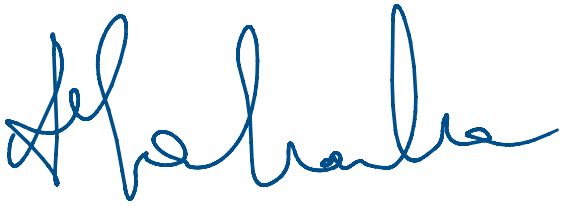
entirely understandable, however, that *Photography and the Black Arts Movement, 1955–1985* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., is not mentioned, as it only opened in September 2025; the exhibition will remain on view next year at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

A minor factual error should also be noted: “Rosette Lubondo” should, of course, read “Gosette Lubondo”.

In conclusion, the dissertation resonates strongly with i.a. bell hooks’ assertion that cameras offered Black people from all backgrounds a way to engage directly in making images. For this reason, any discussion that examines how Black life connects to the visual world and to artistic creation needs to place photography at its center. Because it has always been widely accessible and popular, photography has long served as an important space for shaping a Black aesthetic that pushes against dominant narratives. Before racial integration, Black communities continually worked to build their own visual world – one that resisted and confronted racist representations (*Art on My Mind* 1995, 57).

Ms. Stachura convincingly reveals and analyses this counterhegemonic visual world, which constitutes a form of resistance undermining racist ideologies. What bell hooks describes as “a struggle over images” becomes, for both her and Ms. Stachura, a struggle for rights and equal access. The dissertation illuminates this struggle through its sensitive examination of embodied memory, visual appropriation, familial connections, and the traces that shape identity. Its focus on photography serves to redefine the medium’s democratizing promise and to critique the exclusivity of the artistic canon. It shows persuasively how the Black gaze interrogates power and subjectivity in their historical dimensions, and how self-portraiture articulates complex modes of self-representation.

I am fully convinced that Ms. Julia Stachura’s dissertation meets the standards specified in Article 187 of the Act of 20 July 2018 on Higher Education and Science (Polish: Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce). I therefore recommend that she proceed to the subsequent stages of the doctoral procedure and be awarded the doctoral degree. I also recommend that the dissertation be awarded with distinction.



Signed by /
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