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Tangible Memories.
Black Photographic Self-Portraiture and the Strategies of
Redefinition and Empowerment

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INTRODUCTION. AMERICAS

Men of all conditions and classes can now see themselves as others see them, and as they will be seen by those [who] shall come after them. What was once the special and exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now the privilege of all. The humblest servant girl may now possess a picture of herself such as the wealth of kings could not purchase fifty years ago. The progress of science has not been more logical than that of art.

Frederick Douglass, *Pictures and Progress* (1861/1864-65)¹

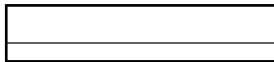
The word *remember* (*re-member*) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye.

bell hooks, *In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life* (from *Art on My Mind*, 1995)²

Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world. It is a marvel too little noticed that every movement of my eyes – even more, every displacement of my body – has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them, as, conversely, every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space. There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968)³

In the following study, I focus on contemporary Black self-portraiture and strategies for empowering the self through what I call *tangible memories*, both cultural and



¹ Frederick Douglass, “Pictures and Progress,” in *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, ed. John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, Celeste-Marie Bernier, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 165. Douglass wrote two versions of this speech, the first in 1861 and the second in 1864–65. Along with *Pictures and Progress*, Douglass wrote several lectures on photography: *The Age of Pictures*, *Lecture on Pictures*, and *Life Pictures*.

² bell hooks, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” in *Art on My Mind. Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 64.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 134.

personal.⁴ In my analyses of contemporary photographic projects, I will examine the different ways such tangible memories can be expressed through embodiment, visual appropriation, familial relationships, and traces. The examined works by Renée Cox, Adama Delphine Fawundu, Lola Flash, Rahim Fortune, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Lyle Ashton Harris, Ayana V. Jackson, Jonathan Mark Jackson, Helina Metaferia, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Lorna Simpson, and Carrie Mae Weems explore self-portraiture through genre-bending and innovative practices for working with memory and the past that also directly relate to contemporary visual culture. However, in focusing on the self, I do not ignore the collective experiences that are crucial to African-American art, which is rooted in social and political awareness and community-based practices. Self-portraiture provides a compelling entry point for exploring historical, cultural, personal, and collective memories. Throughout the text, I will examine how photography is used in Black self-portraiture as a political and social tool to redefine both the medium's democratizing promise and critique the exclusivity of the artistic canon. Though focused on the practice of photography, this study will address both the history of photography and the social relations and cultural bonds associated with the medium.

I propose that from the 1990s onwards, Black photography has been particularly focused on self-portraiture, re-working images of the past in the history of art, photography, and American iconography, and using the notion of redefinition as a tool for empowerment. As societies become increasingly globalized, diasporic, and hybrid, lens-based practices have brought together not only artists but also international curators, critics, and researchers, who have come to accept the inclusion and visibility of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) art as a regulative norm in the art world. As Kobena Mercer states: "Taking control of the black image, which for centuries had been seen primarily through white eyes, the living presence of black artists in Western art institutions began to change the rules of the game. What was once a monologue about

⁴ Capitalized letter B in Black will appear throughout the dissertation, respecting the cultural history and identity behind this word.

otherness became a dialogue about difference”.⁵ This dialogue opened a discussion not only on identity and representation but also on the accessibility of resources for artistic and cultural production.

In that sense, I am interested in the photographic Black gaze that expands the notion of the materiality of photography and memory. Tina Campt defines the Black gaze as a particular position of putting oneself in a relationship with blackness and anti-blackness, of looking alongside how blackness was made precarious and disposable.⁶ At the same time, Campt encourages both artists and viewers to recognize their own privilege.⁷ Following what Mercer described as “taking control of the black image,” both scholars point to the transformative role of art and visual culture. In this context, critically dismantling images of anti-Black violence, both from the past and contemporary times, is crucial. For many artists, this work is emotionally laborious, but it is also empowering. The gaze signifies an awareness of perception, both active and passive, and is inherently entangled in the politics of looking. The Black gaze explores these power dynamics within their historical context, putting Black subjectivity at the forefront, speaking from and of its unique position.⁸ What would it mean for the Black gaze to expand the notion of the materiality of photography and memory? Firstly, it indicates that the works of Black artists analyzed in this study exceed the rudimentary paradigm of photography as a predominately visual medium. The materiality of photography, regardless of whether it is analog or digital, is explored by contemporary Black artists through bodily experiences. The Black gaze is reflected in the way the colors are fixed in the photograph, how tactile elements of bodies such as hair or skin are depicted, and how the harmful and distorted physical

⁵ Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices Since the 1980s* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 2–3.

⁶ Tina Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021), 7.

⁷ See Mark Anthony Neal’s interview with Tina Campt, *Left of Black*, John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute, YouTube video, published November 18, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZocnDEOXuuQ&t=2047s> (accessed January 28, 2025).

⁸ Campt poses an even more radical question of what it would mean to see oneself through the complex position of blackness. Campt, *A Black Gaze*, 7–8.

exaggerations of early caricatures are exposed.⁹ Secondly, in its referential position to the Black gaze, the analyzed notion of self is concerned with the tangibility of the past, affecting how we perceive blackness. The memory addressed by the artists analyzed in this study is both individual and collective, concerning personal experiences as well as archival knowledge and historical narratives. Equally crucial in this study is the analysis of how the Black gaze disrupts the discipline of art history and reclaims space for BIPOC people in the visual realm of the portrait genre. The analyzed self-portraits represent how artists have delved into the realities of being a narrator and protagonist, revealing complex modes of seeing and being seen, the perplexities present in art history and memory studies, and experimental means for investigating the visual culture of the past.

This project connects with several research discussions around Black art and memory and is not limited to the American context. I am inspired by the reflections of Black pioneers of abolitionism and decolonialism, such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Frantz Fanon, further developed in contemporary studies by Deborah Willis, Kobena Mercer, Cheryl Finley, and Bonaventure Son Beijing Ndikung, among others. This latter group of scholars has written about the importance of intersecting memory studies and studies on blackness in visual, literary, audial, or tactile contexts, providing a multilayered and multi-sensory approach to the topic. Worth mentioning are Peter Brathwaite's pandemic project *Rediscovering Black Portraiture* (2020–) and Francesca Priori's and Cristian Di Mattia's documentary *The Black Italian Renaissance* (2022), which explore scholarly and artistic interventions aimed at restoring and reclaiming the presence of Black portraiture in art history. My study strives to serve as a conceptualization of tangible memories and offer a new framework for conceiving Black self-imaging. The

⁹ When mentioning how color is fixed in the photograph, I am addressing the racism of early color photography, e.g., Kodak's standardized "Shirley card" depicting a white model used by photographic labs to calibrate skin tones, shadows, and lights; the Polaroid's company supporting apartheid in South Africa by providing the ID-2 cameras and the inability of its film to accurately render dark skin. See David Smith, "'Racism' of Early Colour Photography Explored in Art Exhibition," *The Guardian*, January 25, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jan/25/racism-colour-photography-exhibition> (accessed January 28, 2025). In 2013, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin created a project called *To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light*, using outdated chemical processes and expired 1950s Kodak film to photograph Bwiti rituals in Gabon. The project provided a critical perspective on the relationship between photography and race, foregrounding the political weaponizing of the medium. It also highlighted how photography's physical and material qualities can conceal ideological interests.

analyzed works from contemporary photographers draw references from iconic and canonical imagery, archives, and vernacular photographs and introduce new approaches to the self-portraiture genre, which is no longer limited to the individual self, but also connected to the collective.

A key element in the ongoing conversation on blackness in the United States is the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM, 2013–), a decentralized collective organizing in communities in the United States and abroad. One of the most recent mobilizations of the movement was in 2020, following the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis. During this challenging time for Black communities across the U.S., many artists actively participated in protests, launched initiatives supporting the movement, and created works responding to police brutality and the prison-industrial complex system. In my work, the American perspective is used to reference and geopolitically position the equally important, ongoing discussion on race and migration in Poland. During a solidarity protest against police brutality in the United States in 2020, the picture of young Afro-Polish activist Bianka Nwolisa holding a sign with the statement “Stop Calling Me Murzyn” brought to attention the common usage of this racial slur in the Polish language.¹⁰ The photograph was taken in Warsaw by Rafał Milach and became wildly discussed in the

¹⁰ The word has its roots in “Maur,” in English “Moor.” It is often used in a derogatory and racially loaded way. On the unraveling of the Black Lives Matter movement in Poland, see Bolaji Balogun and Konrad Pędziwiatr, “ ‘Stop calling me Murzyn’ – how Black Lives Matter in Poland,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49, no. 6 (2023): 1552–69. The article follows both the in-person social mobilization during protests and the online debacle under the video *#DontCallMeMurzyn* published on YouTube. The video is currently taken down. For the description in Polish, see Oliwia Bosomtwe, “#DontCallMeMurzyn. Afropolki tłumaczą dlaczego to słowo boli,” *Noizz*, June 11, 2020, <https://noizz.pl/spoleczenstwo/dontcallmemurzyn-afropolki-tlumacza-dlaczego-to-slowo-boli/gwstnl8> (accessed January 29, 2025). For more context on the history of Africans in Poland, see Natasha A. Kelly and Olive Vessell, *Mapping Black Europe. Monuments, Markers, Memories* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2023).

mainstream public and social media in Poland and worldwide¹¹. The portrait depicts a mixed-race girl wearing a face mask and holding a banner as she crosses the street near the U.S. Embassy in Poland in Warsaw (**fig. 1**). In the background we can see fragments of the portico of the classical building of the Association of Veterans of the Republic of Poland and Former Political Prisoners (Związek Kombatantów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej i Byłych Więźniów Politycznych) and other people, some with face masks and banners. The proximity of the governmental buildings and classical architecture evokes iconic images from the Civil Rights March on Washington. Moreover, the presence of the U.S. Embassy reinforces the transnational character of the protest and emphasizes the connection between Polish and American politics. In the photograph, Bianka is wearing her hair in an afro, a symbol associated with pride and political resistance in Black culture. Regarding the long history of the hairdo in American iconography, Angela Davis has pointed out how natural Black hair became associated with criminality, exemplified by the Free Angela movement, and made her and other women a target of harassment by the media in the early 1970s.¹²

Despite her young age and the ongoing pandemic, Nwolisa found the courage to participate in the protest and be at its forefront. She is the only person in the photograph walking toward the camera; the people in the background are walking in the opposite direction. It gives the impression that the girl is the lone sign of change. One of her feet is close to the bottom frame of the photograph, suggesting she might walk past the photographer at any given time. She is not looking at the camera and not paying attention to Milach; her eyes are turned downward, and the face mask covers her mouth – a sign of

¹¹ For the Polish coverage on Nwolisa, see Dorota Wysocka, “Dziewczynka z protestu: Zmieniam świat! Stop calling me Murzyn!,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 11, 2020, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,82983,26023342,dziewczynka-z-protestu-zmieniam-swiat-stop-calling-me-murzyn.html> (accessed January 29, 2025). For the foreign coverage of the protest, see Olga Mecking and Ruth Terry, “#DontCallMeMurzyn: Black Women in Poland Are Powering the Campaign Against a Racial Slur,” *Time Magazine*, August 7, 2020, <https://time.com/5874185/poland-racism-women-murzyn/> (accessed January 29, 2025). The same year, the girl was on the cover of Polish *Vogue* magazine, photographed by Michał Kempski for the September issue entitled “Hope.” See Oliwia Bosomtwe, “Młoda aktywistka Bianka Nwolisa na okładce ‘Vogue Polska’,” *Noizz*, August 27, 2020, <https://noizz.pl/fashion/mloda-aktywistka-bianka-nwolisa-na-okladce-vogue-polska/jsh0sck> (accessed January 29, 2025). For updated discussion on the BLM movement in Poland, see Piotr Kocyba and Piotr P. Plucienniczak, “Diffusion Processes and Unfavourable Opportunity Structures – The Case of Black Lives Matter Mobilisations in Poland,” *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 10, no. 4 (2023): 632–52.

¹² Angela Y. Davis, “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia,” *Critical Inquiry*, *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 37–39, 41–43, 45.

the time that was the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The message she communicates in her poster is mostly in English, with the harmful word in Polish standing out from the rest of the sentence. The racial slur is set against a red background, a color evoking harm or even danger. Nwolisa's activist (participating in the protest), visual (holding the sign), and linguistic (the writing on the sign) intervention documented in Milach's photograph has contributed to new regulations on the usage of this derogatory term in public spaces.¹³ What is crucial to my evoking this portrait in the context of this study is how photography here triggered a social change despite the regressive right-wing government at the time.¹⁴ Bianka has become a symbol of resilience for the younger generation. In the context of the solidarity protest with African Americans, her portrait channeled the imagery of the Civil Rights movement and figures like Angela Davis, redefining what these tropes mean in an ethnically homogenous country like Poland. Moreover, in the summer of 2020, more of the historical Afro-Polish legacy was uncovered. Examples are the stories of two Africans, Józef Sam Sandi (based in Poznań) and August Agboola "Ali" Browne (based in Warsaw), who played significant roles in, respectively, the Greater Poland uprising (1918–1919) and the Warsaw Uprising (1944). I have purposely connected Bianka's image with American iconography to showcase how struggles against racial injustice are intertwined globally, as well as how visual representation can impact public consciousness and inspire changes.

Another important context for my research is the socio-political shift in the 1990s in the exploration of spectrums of identities in photography on a larger and more international scale. Examples of exhibitions that testify to such a shift are the 1993 Whitney Biennial, curated by Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, Lisa Phillips, and Elisabeth Sussman; *Black Male*, curated by Thelma Golden, in the Whitney Museum of American Art (1994); and *In/Sight: African Photographers 1940 to Present*, curated by

¹³ See "Polish Word 'Murzyn' Describing Black People Is Officially Discouraged by The Polish Language Council," *Remix News*, March 5, 2021, <https://rmx.news/article/polish-word-murzyn-describing-black-people-is-officially-discouraged-by-the-polish-language-council/> (accessed January 28, 2025).

¹⁴ During 2020, the Polish government's right-wing party, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), has politically instrumentalized minorities multiple times during a hate-driven campaign, dividing Polish society and causing social havoc. See Dariusz Kalan, "In Poland's Upcoming Election, the Law and Justice Party Is Demonizing the LGBT Community to Win," *Foreign Policy*, October 9, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/09/poland-pis-demonizing-lgbt-community-win-upcoming-elections/> (accessed January 28, 2025).

Okwui Enwezor, in the Guggenheim Museum (1996). The Whitney Biennial, which came at a moment of increased social divisions, highlighted issues of identity and the representation of diverse communities in a manner that extended far beyond the art world, as David A. Ross recounts.¹⁵ Years before the biennial, the heightened discourse around the political and social implications of imagery, fueled by the culture wars and repressive censorship of erotic art, had targeted marginalized identities and put them in the spotlight.¹⁶ This period also coincided with the televised arrest and beating of Rodney King in 1991, which subsequently ignited the Los Angeles riots.¹⁷ All of the aforementioned exhibitions constructed narratives countering the predominately white art scene, focusing on diverse cultural identities, and filling gaps in the politics of representation. The work of curators, art historians, and artists of color became much more recognizable and visible in the American landscape. This was also a time of discoveries of Black artists who had been forgotten by history. One stellar example is Deborah Willis's groundbreaking research on the history of African-American photography. Her book *Picturing Us: African American identity in photography* from 1994 provides one of the first comprehensive studies on the social role of Black photography in the United States.

Following the philosophical movement of post-blackness formulated by Thelma Golden in the late 1990s and conceptualized by artists like Glenn Ligon, the narrative around the Black subject in America has expanded beyond the framework of race. According to critics like W.J.T. Mitchell or Richard J. Powell, the social colorblindness was neither achievable nor desirable.¹⁸ Powell's *Cutting a Figure* provides a

¹⁵ David A. Ross, "Know Thy Self (Know Your Place)" in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, eds. Elisabeth Sussman et al. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1993), 9.

¹⁶ One of the most discussed cases of culture wars on the cusp of the 1990s was Robert Mapplethorpe's obscenity trial regarding the pornographic and sadomasochistic character of his work. See Judith Tannenbaum, "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Philadelphia Story," *Art Journal* 50, no. 4 (1991): 71–76. For more context regarding art and pornography, see: Linda Williams, *Hard Core. Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1989.

¹⁷ See Elizabeth Alexander, "Can you be BLACK and look at this?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)" in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 91–110. The case of Rodney King was discussed in the *Black Male* exhibition. In her essay, Alexander writes about the concept of videotaped national memory and its cultural and social impact.

¹⁸ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure. Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

comprehensive theoretical compendium of strategies and engagements in visual culture centering on the body. Taking the acts of looking and perceiving as a main social tool for interacting with one another, Powell criticizes colorblindness and counters post-Black optimism. He claims the historical experiences of Black people within caste and class-defying realities were marked by centuries of social, cultural, and corporeal degradation that produced a different and more complex relationship with one's body.¹⁹ As Powell writes:

The subject-specific images under consideration in this study were selected just as much for this interventionist function as for their historical distinctiveness. Understanding this instrumental use of self requires not only an appropriate way of describing these incisive cultural incursions, but a language for the corporeal and stylistic inventions that fashion catalytic portrayals capable of signifying more than pride, and displaying more than an indexical cluster of physical and sartorial traits.²⁰

The trope of corporeal for Black portraiture has to be contextualized within the social and political array that framed emancipation and self-empowerment. Here, I am referring to the stereotypical and fetishizing imagery that reduced BIPOC bodies to properties or spectacles. With Black self-fashioning comes interventions, subversions, and redefinitions, actions with a reparative and healing quality that matters not merely historically but, most importantly, contemporarily in the light of the most recent social upheaval associated with the BLM movement. I am critical of terms such as colorblindness, which assume that the issue of race in the United States has lost its relevance. This is evidenced by recent tragedies, such as the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, which reflect systemic injustice, negligence, and police brutality targeting people of color. The most recent projects (2020 onward) that I will analyze explore socio-political changes in the self-portrait genre, influenced by the COVID-19 global pandemic and the engagement of artists in the BLM movement.

The time frame for the material I intend to analyze spans the last three decades, with a focus on projects from 2000 to 2024. This period is characterized by African-

¹⁹ Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, xv–xvi.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xvi.

American artists' unique interest in self-portraiture, which I noticed during several years of my in-depth research, following most recent exhibitions and publications, first-hand encounters with artists and their works in New York City and other places.²¹ From a historical perspective, Black self-fashioning has been a crucial emancipatory practice among African Americans. Photographers such as Lyle Ashton Harris, Carrie Mae Weems, and Lorna Simpson, focusing almost solely on self-portrait photography in the 1980s and 1990s, are pioneers in introducing the interception of race and gender to the larger global audience. Today, the images of African-Americans portrayed by Black artists – Barack Obama's presidential painting by Kehinde Wiley, Beyonce's *Vogue* magazine cover shot by Tyler Mitchell, or Oprah Winfrey's portrait by Shawn Michael Warren, just to name a few – gained visibility both in fine arts and popular culture. Exhibitions held over the last several years at the major museums in the United States made the issue of self-representation, the struggle for freedom, and the celebration of Black culture their central themes. The examples include: *Mastry. Kerry James Marshall*, the first survey of Black living artists at Met Breuer in New York (2016), *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* held at several venues across America (Arkansas, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco; 2018–2020), *Black American Portraits* and *Afro-Atlantic Histories* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art²² (2022; 2023), *Henry Taylor: B Side* at Whitney Museum of American Art (2023), and most recent, *The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism* held at Metropolitan Museum in New York²³ (2024). By researching the development of the history of African-American self-portraiture, learning from Prof. Deborah Willis, and conducting interviews with artists (Lola Flash, Adama Delphine Fawundu, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya among others), I was able to narrow down the material of my dissertation to the years 2000-2020. This period, in my opinion, provided several

²¹ The crucial part of the research I conducted during my Fulbright scholarship residency in New York from 2023 to 2024. I was a visiting researcher at the Department of Photography and Imagery at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and my mentor was Prof. Deborah Willis.

²² LACMA's 1976 traveling exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art* was one of the first comprehensive surveys that drew attention to the cultural contributions of African-American artists.

²³ The exhibition was a revival of the controversial 1969 showcase at MET, *Harlem on My Mind: The Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968*, which faced protests from the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition.

intriguing yet unexamined projects in which the exploration of the self and representation of tangible memories are the main focal points of African-American art.

Tangible Memories

My dissertation focuses on the notion of tangible memories, specifically made plural to emphasize the complexity of memory, which is shaped both by individual and collective cultural practices and by socio-political contexts in which photography is practiced, distributed, archived, and researched. Tangible memories are a mode of cultural memory, in this study, of an African-American, Black identity shaped by a number of contemporary artists reimagining the past. The concept relates well to photography and lens-based practices because of the way it emphasizes the link between the medium and memory and how it grants images from the past the power to return by re-materializing in the photographic pose. The tangibility of memories connects photography and performance, reenactments and embodiments, self-expression and archival documents. It combines a multitude of timelines, resembling a multiverse, where images from the past and present are simultaneously intertwined. This concept, like memory itself, is constantly transforming and adding new connections.

As Jan Assmann writes: “Memory is knowledge with an identity-index, it is knowledge about oneself, that is one’s own diachronic identity, be it as an individual or a member of a family, a generation, a community, a nation, or a cultural and religious tradition.”²⁴ Assmann’s theory of cultural memory presupposes a tangible relationship between the past and present materialized through relationships between people, the carriers of memory, transmitting knowledge to each other. In this sense, a body becomes a vessel, collecting both personal and collective memories, as well as knowledge, passed from one generation to another. By understanding memory as knowledge, Assmann signals that it can be structured, governed, erased, fabricated, and manipulated. However, its

²⁴ Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin–New York: De Gruyter, 2008), 114.

identity-index would suggest that it cannot be fully controlled, neither by the carriers of the memory nor by the government or official power structures.

By identity-index, I understand that cultural memory is primarily shaped and cared for by cultural practitioners. In this study, these cultural practitioners will be photographers sharing the Black cultural memory through tangible memories, and embodying and redefining images, concepts, and stories from the past. Photography gives them access to memories and, ultimately, a tool for redefining the narrative around the Black subject in America(s) – both as a geopolitical power and a socio-cultural myth. This doubled spatial relation is crucial when considering the diasporic movements and the rupture of slavery as two important notions that have continued to actively alter and haunt the collective American psyche.

In this study, I will discuss different ways tangible memories could be interpreted through embodiment, visual appropriation, familial relationships, or traces. Just as bodies can hold trauma, they can also preserve memories. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung observes, “If the body is the mind, then it has the capacity to learn and memorize. Every movement in space and time—be it a walk, a dance, or otherwise, every gesticulation, every exercise of the muscles and the cells that make up the body—is possibly remembered.”²⁵ From this perspective, memory can be viewed as a bodily practice and the body as a medium of memory.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, “tangible” has both the substantial/material meaning concerning the capacity to be perceived through the sense of touch and a mental meaning related to the ability for something to be identified or realized by the mind.²⁶ The potential to be touched and affected emotionally by photography is something that interested me in relation to the concept of tangible memories. In this context, we can consider self-portraiture a gesture of touching by means of the photographic image. It

²⁵ Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, *In a While or Two We Will Find the Tone: Essays and Proposals, Curatorial Concepts and Critiques* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2020), 33.

²⁶ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “tangible (adj. & n.),” July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5313082947> (accessed January 28, 2025).

opens the bodily-oriented perspective on photography, as well as intimacy and sensuality regarding self-portraiture as an act of self-care and love. Through the notion of tangibility, I would like to explore the tactile, corporeal, sensuous, material, haptic, substantial, affective, textural, and indexical dimensions of memory – all of these aspects will be “touched upon” at different fragments of this study.

The concept of tangible memories, developed on the theoretical backbone of memory studies, places photography and tangibility at its center, allowing these two notions to function as primary means for analyzing contemporary Black self-portraiture. In Valentina Stella’s and María E. Sabatella’s book *Memorias de lo tangible: Lugares, naturalezas y materialidades en contextos de subordinación y alteridad* [*Memories of the tangible: Places, nature and materialities in contexts of subordination and otherness*] the term “memorias de lo tangible” roughly translated to “memories of the tangible”, brings together Indigenous material practices of remembering and a socio-anthropological perspective, providing insight into Argentine Patagonia’s diverse culture.²⁷ Another example of using the term “tangible memories” in such a framework was Jolien Gijbels’ article on Waterloo relics in the nineteenth century, followed by an exhibition project on it at the Rijksmuseum. The author’s approach to tangible memories was highly object-oriented, detailing the provenience of the relics as well as retracing witnesses’ statements from that period.²⁸ My understanding of the term does not completely depart from either; it concerns equally both the past and materiality. However, my research is body-oriented, dedicated to returning imagery and allowing memory to resurface through photographic self-imagery. Ultimately, such strategies for reenacting or embodying the past, viewed through the lens of the history of depicting bodies of color in visual culture, emphasize the role of tangibility in contemporary Black photography. Central to my argument will be showing how the presence of the Black body can intervene in both historical and contemporary imagery. To achieve this I will focus on the historical limitations affecting

²⁷ Valentina Stella and María E. Sabatella, *Memorias de lo tangible: Lugares, naturalezas y materialidades en contextos de subordinación y alteridad* (Viedma: Editorial UNRN, 2022).

²⁸ Jolien Gijbels, “Tangible Memories: Waterloo Relics in the Nineteenth Century,” *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 63 (3), 2015: 228–57.

the representation of Black culture and the contemporary possibility of disrupting inaccurate narratives.²⁹

The collectiveness of memory has been widely discussed, disputed and researched by many, from skeptics like Susan Sontag to defenders like Aleida Assmann.³⁰ The latter provided a comprehensive argument on the topic, and has written extensively about it in books and articles dedicated to the notion of the plurality of memory, where she contextualizes the entangled relationship between history and memory and the process of sharing memory between people: “Autobiographical memories cannot be *embodied* by another person, but they can be *shared* with others. Once they are verbalized in the form of a narrative or represented by a visual image, the individual's memories become part of an intersubjective symbolic system and are, strictly speaking, no longer a purely exclusive and unalienable property”.³¹ Within this framework, an image allows memory to enter the area of social exchange and circulate within it. An image that embodies memory makes it accessible to others, but also vulnerable to appropriations, redefinitions, or distortions.

Artists often reference haunting visual imagery from the past to achieve emotional and spiritual healing and, as hooks said, to “reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds.”³² Following a material trope, we can say the framework of tangibility draws attention to the means of production of the analyzed photographic projects, the technology chosen, and the print technique in order to enhance evoked or embodied memories. In many ways, tangibility reflects the material status of memory itself, as well as the specific spaces where memory can be addressed, performed, or cherished, and how the body that can act as a medium or a container that keeps the images in place.³³ However, materiality is not the

²⁹ The research focus was fully developed after attending the *Black Body & The Lens* fall 2023–2024 seminar conducted by Prof. Deborah Willis at the DPI at NYU.

³⁰ The term collective memory was introduced by Maurice Halbwachs in 1925. Sontag explicitly stated in her 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of Others* that “all memory is individual” and “What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating [...]”. Those statements were scrutinized and criticized by Aleida Assmann, among others. See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 85–86; Aleida Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 49–72.

³¹ A. Assmann, “Transformations...,” 50.

³² hooks, *In Our Glory*.

³³ Understood after Hans Belting’s image-medium-body triad. See Hans Belting, “Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology,” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2005): 302–19, <https://doi.org/10.1086/430962> (accessed May 18, 2024).

only operative category for thinking about contemporary media and the way the images are distributed to the global audience. To understand why tangible and not material memories are the main focus in my discussion of contemporary Black self-portraiture, we need to consider the important technological changes that have taken place since the early 1990s – the introduction of the World Wide Web, the growing interest in digital cameras, the capturing of photographs in digital memory and the monumentalization of the photographic print.³⁴ Tangibility allows us to think about both physical and digital interactions with memory, as tangibility also describes the process of identification by the senses, which is not limited to the physicality of the discussed subject. As Hans Belting has noted, physicality can no longer explain the medium in the context of modern-day technologies: “Materiality would anyway be inappropriate as a term for today’s media. A medium *is* form, or it transmits the very form in which we perceive images. But mediality equally cannot be reduced to technology. Media use symbolic techniques through which they transmit images and imprint them on the collective memory”.³⁵ The digital shift in contemporary culture has also changed the way memories move and circulate, with Andrew Hoskins addressing these transformations through the term “emergent digital network memory”.³⁶ This allows for an extension of the transcultural and transnational alliances that connect local communities to broader reflections on memory studies.³⁷

A significant part of my theoretical framework draws upon memory studies and its interest in both personal and cultural memory. The projects analyzed herein employ a range of strategies for reclaiming, reframing, or appropriating images as a means of engaging with socially constructed ways of repurposing the visual history of the past. The link between memory and photography was recognized early on and has been written about extensively. One of the crucial early theories about the social impact of photography comes from Frederick Douglass, a renowned orator, abolitionist, and former slave. For Douglass,

³⁴ See Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

³⁵ Belting, “Image, Medium, Body,” 305.

³⁶ Andrew Hoskins, “‘Digital Network Memory’,” in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (Berlin–New York: De Gruyter, 2009), 92.

³⁷ More on this dynamic in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

photography brought the promise of democratizing the accessibility to image-making and image-owning, which he believed was crucial for underrepresented or misrepresented groups, such as African Americans. Douglass saw photography not only as a tool for preserving the memory for future generations (“...and as they will be seen by those [who] shall come after them”) but also as a tool for social change and advancement (“The picture and the ballad are alike, if not equally social forces – the one reaching and swaying the heart by the eye, and the other by the ear.”³⁸). Identified early on by Douglass and later developed by hooks and Willis, the act of remembering (or re-membering) allows for the coming together of severed parts. By reimagining the stories of domestically colonized and subjugated people lost in the grand scheme of historical narratives, the camera acts as a tool for cultural recovery. Memory is a site of resistance: “Within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, forgetfulness is encouraged”³⁹ – and the process of remembering can create new relations with the past, and thereby transform the present.⁴⁰

The medium played a consequential role in Douglass’s life, giving him both visibility and a voice to speak about the importance of self-image and self-presentation in tackling racial stereotypes and caricatures. To evoke Douglass’s words once again: “Men of all conditions and classes can now see themselves as others see them, and as they will be seen by those [who] shall come after them.”⁴¹ Photography, a double-edged sword for people of color, introduced a more realistic image of Black and Native Americans than the one seen in caricatures, which continued to promote the pseudo-scientific idea of an inferior “type.” As early as 1849, Douglass had explained the caricature problem in “The North Star” newspaper: “It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likeness of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features. And the reason is obvious. Artists like all other white persons, have adopted a theory dissecting the

³⁸ Douglass, “Lecture on Pictures,” 129. *Lecture on Pictures* was delivered in Boston’s Tremont Temple on December 3rd, 1861, as a part of the Fraternity Course Lecture. The speech was advertised in the press as *Pictures and Progress*.

³⁹ hooks, *Black Looks*, 191.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 174.

⁴¹ Douglass, “Pictures and Progress,” 165.

distinctive features of Negro physiognomy.”⁴² For Douglass, photography was representative of the era he lived in. He associated pictures with the foundation of progress, evidence of the present, and an assurance of a better future. As Laura Wexler writes: “During slavery, Douglass heard in the click of the shutter a promise of the shackle’s release.”⁴³ The notion of the social impact of photography was later developed in another oratory piece from 1861 – “Lecture on Pictures.” Douglass praised Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre for his photographic invention and placed him in a pantheon of other important scientists like James Watt, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Fulton, and Samuel F.B. Morse, aligning photography with scientific inventions that have heavily impacted society: the steam engine, the lightning rod, bifocals, a system of inland waterways, and the telegraph. Furthermore, Douglass was aware of photography’s global potential and its power to transform the planet into a “picture gallery.”⁴⁴ The accessibility of photographic portraits was another significant factor for Douglass. It was far cheaper than painting or sculpture – media of expression usually reserved for aristocrats or the bourgeois. He expressed his optimistic view on the medium as a universal opportunity, free of race or class issues: “What was once the exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now within reach of all. The humblest servant girl, whose income is but a few schillings per week may now possess a more perfect likeness of herself than noble ladies and even royalty, with all its precious treasures, could purchase fifty years ago.”⁴⁵ Douglass, a former slave and abolitionist portrayed in photographs in his life almost 160 times, was living proof of the word that he was preaching. He circulated images of himself widely, wanting to present legibly through visual conventions. Usually portrayed in 3/4, with a straight face, and dressed in elegant clothing, his pose remained unchanged, as he wanted to engrave this particular image into the public eye. The affordability and universality that he saw in the medium provided an

⁴² Quoted in *Picturing Us. African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: The New Press, 1994), 17.

⁴³ Laura Wexler, “‘A More Perfect Likeness:’ Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation” in *Pictures and Progress. Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2012), 18.

⁴⁴ Frederick Douglass, “Lecture on Pictures” in *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, ed. John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, Celeste-Marie Bernier, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 126–127.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

opportunity to gain control over one's image, to purchase a photograph physically and possess it. Douglass' control over his image was a form of property ownership he had been deprived of for a long time. In 1867, he was photographed by a fellow African-American and abolitionist, James Presley Ball.⁴⁶ Such early examples of collaborations between Black creatives are especially significant in the history and legacy of Black photographic portraiture. These nineteenth-century stories of resilience and self-fashioning still nurture contemporary artists with inspiration and knowledge.

One of the most prominent examples is Isaac Julien's ten-screen installation, *Lessons of the Hour* (2019), depicting the epic story of Douglass's life. A significant part of the film is devoted to Douglass's theory on photography, and includes his visit to J.P. Ball's salon and studio. In a tableau vivant of J.P. Ball's salon, Julien reimagines the social interactions sustained by interest in photographs (**fig. 2**). One of the scenes in the film takes inspiration from S. C. Peirce's *Ball's Great Daguerreian Gallery of the West* (c. 1854), a drawing published in Gleason's Pictorial illustrated newspaper. Like in the drawing, the tableau presents an abundant space, with artworks hanging on the walls, sculptures, and furniture. In the foreground, Douglass and Susan B. Anthony are sitting by a table with different kinds of photographs laid out in front of them. The woman touches one of the photographs in a circular-shaped frame with the intention of picking it up. Douglass's eyes follow her gesture, focusing on the object before him. Here, I would like to point out the material and tangible dimension of social interactions that the photograph mediates. *Lessons of the Hour* focuses on the materialized, embodied history of Douglass, and with Julien's reimagination we discover a new way of perceiving both the abolitionist and the world he was living in. Photography, as Julien addresses in his work, was one of the very tangible indicators of the change in social status for both Douglass and Ball. The latter's gallery was an integrated space of equality, from which the diverse American iconography

⁴⁶ J.P. Ball began photographing very early, in 1845, after meeting with John B. Bailey, a Black daguerreotypist from Boston, as Deborah Willis accounts. The scholar focuses on the importance of the nineteenth-century collaborations between artists of color, pointing out Ball's connections with Douglass and other notable advocates for freedom at the time, such as a painter, Robert S. Duncanson. See Deborah Willis, *J.P. Ball. Daguerrean and Studio Photographer* (New York–London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993).

stemmed.⁴⁷ Through photography, Douglass was able to reclaim the freedom over his own body that had been taken away from him during enslavement. Julien's tableau vivant highlights the abolitionist's "extended" corporeality, imagining how he moved, spoke, and interacted with others.

Parallel to his writings on images and photography, Douglass developed his own theory on subjectivity and vision. As a free man and public figure, he spoke against the pseudo-science of the hierarchy of human races. In his theory of "thought pictures,"⁴⁸ he argued that people not only use their physiological sight but also see socially through certain norms and taught prejudices.⁴⁹ He saw the photograph as a mediator between exterior and interior, the self and the world. With his own image, Douglass consistently made statements as a self-made man, as a stoic intellectual, looking into the camera with pride. Douglass saw the undeniable social potential of photography: as a medium of truth ("fixing" the distorted image of Black Americans), a medium for upgrading the socio-visual status (property of the image and gaining control over representation), and an important actor in the political network of slavery, civil war, and the abolitionist movement. The photograph was a ticket to accessing the public visual sphere and claiming citizenship. Similarly, a century later, bell hooks wrote about why photography is crucial to fully understand and appreciate Black picture-making: "Cameras gave to black folks, irrespective of class, a means by which we could participate fully in the production of images. Hence it is essential that any theoretical discussion of the relationship of black life to the visual, to art making, makes photography central."⁵⁰ Since photography introduced a

⁴⁷ Ibid. For more information on Ball's gallery and Douglass's impact on American iconography, see John Stauffer, Frederick Douglass, "Photography, and Imagination," in *Traveling Traditions. Nineteenth-Century Cultural Concepts and Transatlantic Intellectual Networks*, ed. Erik Redling (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 113–38.

⁴⁸ Ginger Hill, "Rightly Viewed. Theorization of Self in Frederick Douglass's Lectures on Pictures. Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation" in *Pictures and Progress. Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. by Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2012), 41–82.

⁴⁹ As Kass Banning and Warren Crichlow notice, Douglass's theory on photography's relation to truth and appearance shares similarities with those of Siegfried Kracauer, André Bazin, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "Indeed, Kracauer and Bazin echo Douglass with their claims that experiencing a realist image paradoxically leads to enlightened consciousness and is a means to commune with self and the objective world through the revelatory power of contemplating images." See Kass Banning, Warren Crichlow, "A Grand Panorama: Isaac Julien, Frederick Douglass, and *Lessons of the Hour*," *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 4, 2020: 17.

⁵⁰ hooks, *In Our Glory*, 57.

fairly democratic and technically advanced way to participate in picture-making regardless of background, race, or financial status, its contribution to shaping the collective memory and redefining old, stereotypical imagery has diversified the field of picture-making and made it more inclusive and approachable. Quoting hooks once again: “We give ourselves back memory and Memory sustains a spirit of resistance”, meaning that for Black people, the memory was, in fact, something stolen, something they had to reclaim.⁵¹

This statement mirrors what Deborah Willis described as “lifting the veil,” describing her story of encountering photographs by Roy DeCarava, centering on Black beauty, for the first time as a young girl.⁵² The mentioned veil references W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of social mediation between Black and White subjects, emphasizing the role of vision shaped by sociocultural implications.⁵³ Du Bois’ engagement in American visual culture and racial progress has been reflected in his curatorial approach to *The Exhibit of American Negroes* for the Palace of Social Economy at the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris, which according to Willis, created a new and revised self-image for African Americans.⁵⁴ Presenting images of educated children, businessmen and businesswomen in chic attire, scholars, musicians, and proud homeowners, the exhibition was the opposite of the displays of African villages that were well known to the Parisian audience.⁵⁵ The crossover between American racism and racial representation in European countries will be particularly crucial for understanding the link between colonialism and the decolonial practices of contemporary artists working with archival images. In that context, the canonical European references made by African-American artists will expand memory studies to include decolonial theory, providing a critical reinterpretation of the effects of the colonial era, such as an analysis of the role that photography played in the development of early pseudo-scientific studies of race, both in the United States and Europe. This

⁵¹ Eadem, *Black Looks. Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015): 191–93.

⁵² *Picturing Us*, 4. Willis recalls encountering DeCarava’s *The Sweetflypaper of Life* (1955) in the public library. This event, as she wrote, left an “indelible mark” on her mind. (3)

⁵³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

⁵⁴ Deborah Willis, “The Sociologist’s Eye: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Paris Exposition,” in *A Small Nation of People: W. E. B. Du Bois and African American Portraits of Progress*, ed. David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis (New York: Amistad, The Library of Congress, 2003), 51.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 59. More about Du Bois’ contributions to American culture in Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

perspective has a global dimension, and the language and concepts used by researchers like Saidiya Hartman and Sylvia Wynter allow for compelling interpretations of this issue, disrupting the white-centric concept of the Man in humanities.⁵⁶ With this ‘lifting of the veil’ comes the decolonial logic described by Mark Sealy as “Stuart Hall’s method,” used to analyze physical and mental configurations of the political and cultural dynamics operating within the self, image recalling, interrogative history work, consideration of political memory, and sliding in-and-out of multiple identities.⁵⁷ All of these practices which dismantle the past are important to understanding the notion of redefinition and its relation to empowerment.

Is the self in Black self-portraiture a cohesive and essentialist concept? In my research, I am focused on the complexity of the self and a self-ness that is often plural, rooted in community, and representative of many concepts of Blackness. The analyzed works in my dissertation show how subjectivity is navigated and understood by contemporary artists in relation to the history that shaped it and the imagery that enabled certain narratives and assumptions to be made. I am approaching visual material, including close readings of some of the images, within a broader socio-political scope; however, I work to avoid essentialist and formalist analysis and support my argument by analyzing the tangibility of memory and the practice of photography, the social interactions it establishes, and the power dynamic it creates.

Many scholars have been interested in the topic of the self and African-American photography, and as Douglass’s writing prove, it was not a new concept, but one introduced by his contemporaries. A seminal work that has to be included in this account are Deborah Willis’ *Black Photographers 1840–1940: An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography* (1985), *Early Black Photographers* (1992), *J.P. Ball, Daguerreotypist and Studio Photographer* (1993), and *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* (2000) which were some of the first comprehensive accounts on the topic. Her most recent academic work centers on Black femininity, diaspora and migration, the

⁵⁶ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

⁵⁷ Mark Sealy, *Photography: Race, Rights and Representation* (London: Lawrence Wishart, 2022), 30–31.

expanding geographies of the Black experience, and highlighting the plurality and parallels between artists from Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean, i.e., *Women and Migration. Responses in Art and History* (2019) co-edited with Ellyn Toscano and Kalia Brooks Nelson. Similarly, Erina Duganne's *The Self in Black and White. Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography* (2010), where the author argues that the self is a complex and changing concept that has been reflected on, conceptualized, and experienced in many different ways, just like the concept of race, which is a "socially and historically specific set of relations that can change according to the complex and at times contradictory terms of their production and reception."⁵⁸ Another comprehensive study on selfhood is Kevin Everod Quashie's *Black Women, Identity and Cultural Theory. (Un)Becoming the Subject* (2004), in which the author proposes the notion of the girlfriend to understand Black women artists' reframing of the self, memory, and language. According to Quashie, the girlfriend is someone who encourages a Black woman to be herself radically," that is, the other that constitutes an identity of "me" and "not me."⁵⁹ Moreover, the scholar also provides a radical and compelling thesis on memory as a body, arguing that in the context of Black cultural studies. For the sake of my framework of tangible memories, I am providing an extensive quote from Quashie:

[...] memory is a body—either a literal fleshy, self-contained entity, or an attribute of a body. This corporeal imagining of memory bears implication for the process of selfhood and identity articulated in the first section and further argues that, if memory is a body, then the process of coming to a relationship with memory is ontological, a process of being and becoming... a practice. This process of becoming at once constitutes and disturbs notions of home and nation, two concepts that are important locations of Black collective identity and which are therefore central to how a subject experiences and encounters her subjectivity. [...] As an ontology, the practice of memory gives name and texture to a subjectivity that is ultimately unnamable and many-textured; that is, memory is the performance of a selfness that cannot possibly exist but which must exist, a yield that generates from and folds in on itself.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Erina Duganne, *The Self in Black and White. Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography* (Hanover–London: Dartmouth College Press–University Press of New England, 2010), 4.

⁵⁹ Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory. (Un)Becoming the Subject* (New Brunswick–New Jersey–London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 1–13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 13, 111.

If memory is a body, then photography is bound to the bodily experience, and self-portraiture reflects the complex relationship between memory and image, mediated by the body of the artist. Hence, Quashie equates memory and being, understanding both as dynamic and socially constructed categories, reflecting what Wynter called “being human as praxis,” emphasizing subjectivity as an active and transformative process. Similarly, memory, bounded to the self, is performative, developing and expanding within the cultural context. For marginalized bodies often historically subjected to memory loss, retrieving memories through embodiment is empowering.⁶¹ It allows one to gain control over the narrative. On the one hand, the practice of memory is the intimate act of evoking the visual, audible, and olfactory fragments of the past. On the other hand, the body can be reclaimed as a “pivotal arena for the politics emanating from different traditions of the oppressed,” intersecting flesh and law, so the memory becomes a subject of a political discussion.⁶²

In considering self-portraiture as an operative category for tangible memories, I want to emphasize Amelia Jones’s framework of photographic self-performance and technology of embodiment. One of the first indicators of self-portraiture is the sense of conveying to the viewer that the subject of the photograph is also responsible for taking the photograph and staging the image.⁶³ However, as Jones notices, this quality, especially in postmodernity, is questioned, and the viewer’s conception of a self-portrait has shifted.⁶⁴ In examining the changing paradigms of identity in the 1990s and the new millennium, we will see that artists exhibit tendencies to exaggerate performances of the self, to test the boundaries of representation, and to be more aware of the apparatus they use. The photographic “freeze,” implying Barthesian “death” and absence, will actually give life and bring out the performative self, redefining the medium’s power to turn the subject into an

⁶¹ Gregory Hampton provides a compelling study on memory and Black identity within the context of lost memories in Octavia Butler’s fiction, examining the issues of cultural erasure and the trauma of slavery. See Gregory Hampton, “Lost Memories: Memory as a Process of Identity in the Fiction of Octavia Butler,” *CLA Journal* 55, no. 3, 2012: 262–78.

⁶² Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus. Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

⁶³ Amelia Jones, “The ‘Eternal Return’: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment,” *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 949.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

object.⁶⁵ As Jones argues, performative self-portraiture that positions the subjective “I” as other to itself has the power to “come back” to life through the act of interpretation, memory, and desire.⁶⁶ This is crucial to my concept of tangible memories in regard to embodiment. In my analysis, I will elaborate on the return of images brought back to life by artists reenacting scenes from archival photographs. In them, the relationship between the self and other is established by both visual and temporal differences, as well as by the act of mimicking and repeating.

Moreover, photographic self-portraiture was recognized by Jones as a crucial mediator between tangibility and the subject: “[...] I insist that the photograph itself, like the subjects it depicts, is best understood as a screen that displays corporeality-as-surface but also entails its own, and the embodied subject’s, tangibility and extension in three dimensions through deep space. To this end, the photograph is like the skin that envelops our corporeality in that it indicates or presupposes interiority.”⁶⁷ The “corporeal screen” the author is referring to is an iteration of the screen as a site of mediation that appeared in modern psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth century. Screen memory, a term derived from the Freudian theory of childhood memories based on self-analysis, described the relationship between the subject and repressed memories as often containing trauma or desire.⁶⁸ Later on, this connection expanded beyond personal and individual memory, focusing on collective, cultural, and plural memories. One example is the Lacanian theory of the screen functioning as a mediator between *the gaze* and *the subject of representation*.⁶⁹ In Kaja Silverman’s analysis of Lacan’s theory, the author refers to the screen as a “stain,” a “mask,” or “thrown-off skin,” suggesting its disruptiveness, its

⁶⁵ Ibid. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 14.

⁶⁶ Jones, “The ‘Eternal Return’,” 950.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 967. To contextualize this quote, Jones was referring to Laura Aguilar’s 1996 *Nature Self-Portrait*.

⁶⁸ See Sigmund Freud, *Screen Memories*. Standard Edition 3, (London: Hogarth Press, 1899): 301–22. For the contemporary reading of this work, see Madelon Sprengnether, “Freud as Memoirist: A Reading of ‘Screen Memories,’” *American Imago* 69, no. 2 (2012): 215–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26305018> (accessed June 5th 2024).

⁶⁹ See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York–London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981). The Lacanian diagram of image/screen is reproduced and discussed in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge–London: The MIT Press, 1995).

redundancy, and its flesh-like qualities.⁷⁰ The gaze plays an important part in the relation between the artwork and the viewer, and hence, with collective memory as it operates within visual culture. In self-portraiture, the relationship between the viewer, subject, and image-maker is mediated by the camera, screen, and the symbolic absence of the creator behind the camera – they are positioned in front of the camera. In some cases of self-portraiture, the camera is revealed by the mirror, so the illusion of the viewer subconsciously taking the position of the image-maker while confronting the subject in the photograph is lost. In others, it is sustained, while the camera's gaze is synonymous with the spectator's, so in those cases, self-portrait engages us to partake in the active role of creation. When considering Black self-portraiture referencing a difficult past and the historical burden of representation of power asymmetry, this role is not a universal or objective one but rather subjective and built in a socio-political context in which photography is understood as a multilayered praxis.

Here, I would like to extend Jones's thoughts on photography as skin with Silverman's remarks on the pose. Posing for photography is always a form of reenactment or embodying a memory-laden trope. In viewing posing as a crucial tool of reenactment or mimicry, the parallel between the body and the photographic medium becomes even more evident. Silverman notes:

Much has been written in recent years on the topic of the pose, but only Craig Owens has fully grasped its essentially photographic nature, the fact that, in addition to being imitative of a preexisting image or visual trope, it is imitative of photography itself. [...] As Owens suggests, the pose not only arrests the body, hyperbolizing the devitalizing effects of all photographic representation, but it also approximates precisely that three-dimensional photography which Callous associates with mimicry, assimilating proprioceptivity to exteroceptivity, corporeality to the image.⁷¹

The movement from corporeality to the image and back resembles how I see tangible memories as a transformative practice of bodily engagement with images from the past. The concept of a bodily 3D photograph extends the spatiality of the medium and the

⁷⁰ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York–London: Routledge, 1996), 196. See Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁷¹ Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 202.

continuous exchange between materiality and representation. In this sense, photography becomes a mode of seeing and being; it actively shapes corporeal experience. Here, the body arrested in a pose becomes a sculpted photograph, balancing on the edge of photographic death and performative movement.

In her writing, Jones addresses the return of corporeality, or the return of the body, that roots subjectivity in the body art and radical performativity of the 1960s and 1970s.⁷² She writes about figures like Carolee Schneemann and her *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963) constituting the body as a site of visual territory and sensory play,⁷³ and David Hammon's *body prints* (1968-1979), with its photographic, indexical qualities, and how they heavily influenced the shift in the 1990s toward performative identities and tangibility, based on tangible relationships with either medium, memory or both. Despite technological breakthroughs heavily influencing photography, including the introduction of digital cameras and the Internet, the process of imaging the self has not lost its bodily or corporeal significance. Moreover, as Geoffrey Batchen has proposed, photography brought to modernity vision as a form of touch, emphasizing the physical and emotional aspects of photography.⁷⁴ However, considering photography as a medium with tangible qualities allows us to imagine an exchange of touches between the subject, photograph, and viewer, but we should not fixate solely on its indexical qualities, but also its contiguity.⁷⁵ As Batchen argues after C.S. Peirce, instead of looking for a truthful imprint of reality, we should focus on the "hard-to-define" psychological dimension of photography as an index, as well as the exchanges between the materiality of the medium and the body⁷⁶: "Contiguity, the condition of being in contact, is what can give any sign in the present a direct association with another sign in the past, and it is precisely this temporal and historical connection that provides photography with its uniquely 'carnal' knowledge of the world."⁷⁷

⁷² Amelia Jones, "The Body and Technology," *Art Journal* 60, no. 1 (Spring, 2001): 20.

⁷³ Eadem, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 2.

⁷⁴ Geoffrey Batchen, "Carnal Knowledge," *Art Journal* 60, no. 1 (Spring, 2001): 20.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs" (ca. 1897-1910), in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955):108.

⁷⁷ Batchen, "Carnal Knowledge," 21.

It is important to see Batchen's argument within the broader conversation about photography going digital. When his essay was published in the same issue as Jones's article, the discussion around the medium was concerned with its detachment from materiality. Contiguity allows for thinking about photography in proximity to the body and the relations it accommodates, from holding a photograph to posing for one and developing an emotional attachment to one. This core argument resonates with what Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu have described as feeling photography, intersecting the tactile and emotional, after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*.⁷⁸ By using feeling as a framework, Brown and Phu emphasize the role of affect in photography as well as the perception and reception of the body concerning race, gender, and disability, arguing that bodily experiences shape social dynamics, and photography often acts as a mediator between them.⁷⁹

Delving into the racial aspect of the affective turn in academic discourse on photography, following the example of the exhibition *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (organized by Maurice Berger and International Center of Photography, 2010) Elizabeth Abel brought to the attention the notion of skin as a site of mediation between struggle and freedom.⁸⁰ By focusing on the tactile metaphor of the affective wrinkle, Abel extended the conversation of the sound or tone of civil rights photography to textural and material features, reflecting on what Sedgwick called "touchy-feely." These ideas resonate with Tina Campt's concepts of "haptic temporalities" or "quiet frequency of touch," meaning the moments of contact when photographs touch us and stop us in our tracks.⁸¹ However, I want to focus on the part where Abel evoked two thinkers who happened to die in the same year, 1961: the French Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist Frantz

⁷⁸ See *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2014). At the same time, the authors analyze and criticize Victor Burgin's seminal work on *Thinking Photography* (1982), which focuses on the institutional frameworks of producing and circulating images, distancing from the emotional meaning that photography can indicate. For touchy-feely, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁷⁹ *Feeling Photography*, 2–3.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Abel, "Skin, Flesh, and the Affective Wrinkles of Civil Rights Photography," *Qui Parle* 20, no. 2 (2012): 35–69, <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.20.2.0035> (accessed September 25, 2024).

⁸¹ Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2017).

Fanon and the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Following Fanon's theory on epidermalization, Abel emphasizes the similarities between the chemical process of developing photographs and Fanon's description of fixing the gaze on the Other. She continues: "To illustrate the crushing consequences for the objects of this gaze, Fanon materializes the photographic metaphor: instead of the impersonal, invisible gaze of the photographic apparatus, he renders the process that stabilizes the image as a photographic print: 'the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye' (BW, 109)."⁸² Later on, she added Merleau-Ponty's key metaphors of the "visible in the tangible," "tangible in the visible," "chiasmus" and "flesh of things," delving into the relation between the subject and the object, mind and body, viewer and viewed, eye and hand.⁸³ Fanon's and Merleau-Ponty's theories intersect body and perception, developing a framework of embodiment and relational perception: the first, decolonial and based on the racialized experience; the second, less direct and more universal.⁸⁴ Although these accounts differ, both contribute to the framework of the tangibility of memory, complementing what Jones described after Lacan as a "corporeal screen," articulating the mediation site between the subject and the world that is embodied, fleshy, and rooted in the experience of the body.

Another account worth mentioning is Silverman's interpretation of Fanon's unpleasurable identification and the psychic dilemma faced by the Black subject in encountering the *gaze* and *screen* as two culturally constructed forces affecting it. Expanding on the Freudian bodily ego and the claim that every experience of the *self* is derived from the body, Silverman raises the example of Fanon's corporeal multiplicity ("It was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person"⁸⁵), the moment of photographic identification (the white gaze *fixing*⁸⁶), and violent

⁸² Abel, "Skin, Flesh, and the Affective Wrinkles," 41.

⁸³ Ibid., 42.

⁸⁴ On the relation of Fanon's writing to Merleau-Ponty's, see Lewis R. Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

⁸⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamb Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 112. Original in the French language from 1952.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 109.

mutilation (“What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?”⁸⁷). All of these examples of unpleasant and rather brutal depictions of dislocated, dismembered, and disjointed identification serve as both historically and culturally specific descriptions of colonial violence. The theory, however, exceeded the French-Martinique context and gave Silverman a tool to extend the concept of bodily ego with the notion of race and gender (masculinity). For the framework of tangible memories, the Fanonian concept of epidermalization read through Merleau-Ponty’s or Freudian theories emphasizes how the self is mediated between the gaze, screen, image, and bodily-driven knowledge based on the experience of Blackness. This multidirectional relationship is interwoven with the concept of collective memory and historical trauma, actively fighting the historical amnesia imposed on colonized people. As I will examine further in the study, both Fanon’s and Merleau-Ponty’s ideas are compelling entry points for analyzing photography as a fleshy screen, affecting both how the subject sees and how it is perceived.⁸⁸ This active/passive dynamic is significant in discussion of the history of photography and the power relations between the photographer and the subject, which are often subjugated to objectification or voyeurism.

Strategies of Redefinition

The changing mobility of memories, crossing borders and generations, has impacted the way contemporary artists are channeling both cultural and personal stories from the past. For artists evoking the traumatic history of enslavement, these recreations serve as a tool to reimagine justice and social repair.⁸⁹ It also leaves the question of what it truly means to process memory and what kind of memories stay hidden from the eye of history. In that sense, the practice of Black photographic self-portraiture has become vigilant to the nuances of narrations that have shaped the collective understanding of certain historical, social, or artistic breakthroughs. The second part of the title of my dissertation – strategies

⁸⁷ Ibid..

⁸⁸ See Mauro Carbone, Marta Nijhuis, *The Flesh of Images: Merleau-Ponty between Painting and Cinema* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015).

⁸⁹ See Esther Armah, *Emotional Justice: A Roadmap for Racial Healing* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers: Oakland, 2022).

of redefinition and empowerment – indicates that theoretical and socio-political approaches to the analyzed visual material are immensely entangled. In considering the connection between memory and justice, it is crucial to understand that hurtful or stereotypical images are invoked by contemporary Black photographers not as an act of repetition but of redefinition, one that challenges us to develop a new understanding of BIPOC visibility in relation to both the present and the past. In this sense, the act of transforming images from the past (found in archives, the art canon, the collective memory, or popular culture) in order to adapt its visibility to a contemporarily appropriate context and medium (in this case, photography) will explore the possibilities for social change, to repeat Douglass's words, once again.

In considering the importance of the 1990s in transforming the white monolith of the American art world and how this decade serves as a constant reference point in this study, I want to emphasize the significance of artists such as Lyle Ashton Harris. His *Americas* series from 1987–88 (also called *The White Face Series*), with the following 1989 series *Constructs*, are examples of how tangible memories cross the strategies of redefinition.⁹⁰ Harris is a trailblazing queer artist whose photographs appeared in major exhibitions in the 1990s regarding identity politics.⁹¹ *Americas* consists of 8 black and white gelatin silver photographic prints and a black-and-white triptych entitled *Americas (Triptych)* [*Miss Girl; Kym, Lyle & Crinoline; Miss America*]. This series of youthful self-portraits, shot with the artist's friends, is an expressive and theatrical exposition of drama and identity swapping and a vivid example of a breakthrough event in Black (self-)portraiture going into the 1990s. The triptych (**fig. 3**) depicts four characters – Miss Girl, Kym, Lyle, and Miss America, with the humorous addition of Crinoline, which is used in garment-making and was an iconic element of mid-nineteenth-century women's

⁹⁰ See *Early Works 1987–88 (The White Face Series)* exhibition, Thomas Erben Gallery, May 10–June 21, 1997.

⁹¹ Parts of *Constructs* appeared in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (1994), and his collaborative project with Renée Cox was shown at *Rose is a Rose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography* exhibition in Guggenheim Museum (1997). Other notable shows in which Harris took part that are also a testament to the 1990s shift toward identity politics are: *Ciphers of Identity* (1993, University of Maryland, Baltimore, ME, later the exhibition travelled to other six locations), *Masculine Masquerade* (1995, List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA).

fashion. The first in the group, Miss Girl, is a self-portrait of the artist, wearing heavy make-up in ‘white face’, with an enlarged mole on her left cheek (in the photograph – right) and dark lipstick. The artist is striking a pose recognizable to enthusiasts of the Vogue, a dance that originated in queer BIPOC ballroom culture in the 1980s; she is also tipping a top hat that is also used in the *Minstrel* photograph from the same series. A ruffled platinum blond bob wig, with bangs, is nonchalantly sitting on Harris’s head, giving the impression of the artist having been caught just after finishing a performance and waiting for applause. The absolute darkness in the background and the dramatic lighting create an atmosphere of spectacle, resembling Marlene Dietrich’s famous *Shanghai Express* photoshoot from 1932. Harris is looking straight at the viewer, posing seductively, and playing with a camera in the studio. His persona, Miss Girl, is a term from African American Vernacular English and also a nod to queer and BIPOC culture, as it is usually used in the context of addressing a feminine-looking individual. At the same time, Harris is openly expressing his sexual identity as a queer man, while performing an inverted gender (playing female) and racial identity (playing white). According to Okwui Enwezor, whiteface, derived from vaudeville and minstrel show, has served as an American racial archetype.⁹² Minstrel shows sustained stereotypes about Black people, who were portrayed by white actors in blackface, constructing a version of Blackness that was crafted for white audiences’ imagination and, in early examples from the 1820s (and throughout the Antebellum Period), often symbolically justified slavery.⁹³ Whiteface, as a reversal form of racial performance, “borrowed from the blackface its symbolic mask of visual identification” in order to distinguish white Americans from “less-white” migrants, e.g., Irishmen.⁹⁴ José Esteban Muñoz considers Harris’s attempt at counter-identification (as opposed to more complex disidentification) a literal photo negative, criticizing the

⁹² Okwui Enwezor, *Lyle Ashton Harris: Excessive Exposure, The Complete Chocolate Portraits* (New York: Gregory R. Miller, 2010), 19.

⁹³ Jennifer Bloomquist, “The Minstrel Legacy: African American English and the Historical Construction of ‘Black’ Identities in Entertainment,” *Journal of African American Studies* 19, no. 4 (2015): 410–25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44508238> (accessed June 6th 2024).

⁹⁴ James P. Byrne, “The Genesis of Whiteface in Nineteenth-Century American Popular Culture,” *MELUS* 29, no. 3/4 (2004): 133–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4141847> (accessed September 25, 2024).

straightforwardness of the whiteface.⁹⁵ However, as Amelia Jones has pointed out, Harris is playing with the concept of whiteness as if it were an othered identity, consuming it and making it his own.⁹⁶ His strategy is based on what Oswald de Andrade calls “anthropophagy,” or cultural cannibalism, which I only outline here and elaborate on in the first chapter.⁹⁷ This symbolic cannibalism, in Harris’s case, would involve “eating” cultural clichés affecting the African-American community in order to demystify, unmask, and produce a new language. Harris’s “hungry” gaze, as Jones has put it, both consumes the surfacing identities and embodies projections – i.e., blackness through the eyes of whiteness and vice versa.⁹⁸

The central part of the triptych, *Kym, Lyle & Crinoline*, consists of “three” characters portrayed in a wedding portrait manner, with Crinoline serving as a white veil. Both the artist and his friend are naked; Harris is wearing makeup and a wig, just like Miss Girl, although he is addressed by his real name: Lyle. The white woman on the left is standing closer to the camera, revealing her exposed breasts and bringing both of her hands to her mouth in a gesture of prayer. Her head is partially obscured by the tulle veil, seemingly floating in the studio space as if it were starting to lift up to reveal the bride. Harris, in turn, seems to be standing on a pedestal; his torso and part of his thigh are visible in the frame, with the lower edge cutting a line right at the level of his genitalia. Crinoline plays an important part in this scene, transforming the portrait into a wedding photo – the veil acting both as a bridal totem and as the embodiment of W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of *double consciousness*. Formulated in his canonical book *The Souls of Black Folk* from 1903, the term combines socio-political, cultural, and philosophical contexts critical for understanding the history of the formation of African-American identity. Using the veil as a metaphor, Du Bois argues that Black people were born with a veil and gifted with a

⁹⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 109.

⁹⁶ Jones, “The ‘Eternal Return’,” 967.

⁹⁷ Oswald de Andrade, and Leslie Bary, “Cannibalist Manifesto,” *Latin American Literary Review* 19, no. 38 (1991): 38–47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20119601> (accessed June 6th 2024).

⁹⁸ Amelia Jones, *Self/Image. Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (London–New York: Routledge, 2006): 56–57.

second-sight, and as a result, have experienced a cultural and sociological doubleness in predominately white America:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁹⁹

Seeing oneself through somebody else's eyes is also addressed by Harris in his performing whiteface and referencing the history of vaudeville and minstrelsy. Those acts of entertainment, and hence the amusement mentioned by Du Bois, created a caricatural and exaggerated image of Blackness through the eyes of whiteness that infiltrated the collective American imagination. This twoness is also articulated in the title of the photographic series – *Americas* – referencing two geographical entities – North and South – as well as the multiplicity of Americas within America itself – cultural, sociological, and political (the twoness of Republican and Democratic parties, red and blue states).¹⁰⁰

The third photograph of the triptych, *Miss America*, continues the artist's conversation about the formation of American identity, this time through a national symbol: the flag. Depicted here is Miss America, a naked Black woman with her face painted white, dressed in an American flag that is covering her shoulders. The visible canon, with the stars and contrasting stripes captured in the black-and-white photograph, enhances Du Bois's implied doubleness. The model's face is captured in slight motion; her eyes are closed, and her head is tilted to the side. The same effect of motion-caused blurriness is also visible in the flag's stars, which move out of focus. This particular photograph is reminiscent of David Hammon's paintings, such as *Black First, America*

⁹⁹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ On the discursive concept of *America*, see: Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London–New York: Verso, 1988). The in-depth analysis of *America* and its visual mythologies, see Filip Lipiński, *Ameryka. Rewizje wizualnej mitologii Stanów Zjednoczonych* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2021). In the English summary of the book, Lipiński writes: "In most general terms, each chapter focuses on an important area of myth-making in the domain of visuality, a specific work of art, a motif, a form of representation or a model of seeing, which are an element of what I describe as an elusive sphere of **America**, different from the United States as a geopolitical body but inseparable from it, a mythic construction, which belongs to the domain of the images and discourses" (607).

Second from 1970 (**fig. 4**), where we can see body prints depicting Black men holding the American flag. The effect achieved in the black and white image, with its almost photographic negative-like qualities, is due to grease having been distributed onto the men's skin and the flag's material, and later pressed into the large sheet of paper and dusted with black pigment. Hammon's practice of highlighting the printing method is also significant to the original meaning of stereotyping, describing a solid plate or mold used in duplicating typography.¹⁰¹ The socio-political meaning of that term is certainly far more telling than its technical, out-of-use etymology; however, with the parallel in Harris's and Hammons's works, the double connotation of stereotype, clearly visible when looking at the *Americas* series, seems quite accurate. The identity forming implied by the body prints in Hammon's *Black First, America Second* concerns not only the body itself but, most importantly, the imprint or trace that the body leaves. Similarly, in Harris's self-portraits and group portraits, where the heavy makeup and its painting qualities creates the impression of a mask that is inverting Harris's and the model's identities. The differences between the two works supply us with two ways the body relates to a flag: as a material object and as a site of national identity and sentiment. In Harris's work, the flag is tangible, materialized, enveloping the woman. The draping of the fabric makes it look heavy and uncomfortable, almost sculptural. It makes the woman's head turn. At the same time, the flag serves here almost as an accessory, a scarf, a fashion statement, a sash for *Miss America*. The woman's chest and the flag are very close; however, the material is placed at a distance from her painted face. In Hammons's piece, the imprints of the figures and the painted flag are tied. The way the men are embracing it gives the flag the quality of another imprinted body. The title of the piece is a statement itself. In *Black First, America Second*, Hammons places cultural identity before national identity. Harris's title highlights the doubleness of America that we might interpret as the literal two-ness of the American continents, or more metaphorically as its Janus-like face – blackface and whiteface, or Du Bois's *double consciousness*.

¹⁰¹ The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, used this interesting word-play on stereotype while describing Hammons's 1974-75 body prints. See The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, "Body Print, 1974–75," <https://www.moca.org/collection/work/body-print> (accessed 29th May 2024).

A crucial moment of redefinition occurs between Harris's skin and the paint (make-up, mask), between the exchange of layers of pigment and the photographic medium itself, and finally, between the material reminiscent of the racist past – the costume – and present – the gender-bending artist putting on a costume. The connective matter of the two timelines is the white paint, dark lipstick, enlarged mole, and darkened eyebrows, the surface that sticks to the skin, creating a negative of racial identity reminiscent of the photographic process. The tight framing of the photographs leaves virtually no space for our gaze to wander; the heavy, contrasting lighting obscures some of the details, exposing the bodies and enhancing the white makeup, while the dark background completely hides the studio space. Considering the relatively large size of each print (29 15/16 x 19 7/8 inches [76 x 50.5 cm]), a confrontation of this sort gives one the impression of encountering a monument. The triptych itself is a form well-known in art history, practiced since early Christian art and popularized in medieval times. Consisting of three-panel paintings with a religious theme, with the centerpiece usually being larger than the two folding panels, the triptych was a staple altarpiece in churches and cathedrals. In the context of queerness and the reversed traditional roles and themes proposed by Harris, the religious reference is crucial to understanding his radical reiteration of normativity, presumed heterosexuality, and whiteness, categories central to traditionalist American values. Similarly, in *Man and Woman #1* (**fig. 5**) and *#2* (**fig. 6**), the featured inversion concerns gender identity. Having reading the title, one would expect to see Harris and then her female model; however, it is the opposite – Miss America is standing on the left, posing beside Harris standing on the right. The first iteration of the (self-)portrait depicts the pair, turning their bodies close to each other, as well as their faces painted in white. They are looking straight into the camera in anticipation; Harris's posture is straight, and the veins on his arms are visible. The pair looks proud despite their nakedness and does not seem to be ashamed or insecure. The radical decision to paint the face and evoke the racist history of nineteenth-century American entertainment is portrayed by Harris as a critical, ironic, and emancipatory act. Especially when we look at *Man and Woman #2*, where the artist is not only embracing a different gender but also a difficult visual history of racist caricature,

encapsulated here in a makeup mask that is starting to lose its sharpness. His head, captured in motion, with the mouth open, shouting, acquires almost painting-like qualities, just like Francis Bacon's *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. At the same time, the black and white photograph is also reminiscent of the Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* and its key framing of a woman shot in the face, with her glasses broken, the same visual stimulant that inspired Bacon's painting. The heavy makeup of Harris and his peers functions here both as a mask and as a *mark*, in the sense of marking the performers with a cultural and historical burden of representing racial stereotypes.

Harris's formation of subjectivity is based on the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, with Blackness and queerness as the main categories the artist reflects upon. By experiencing the reciprocal relationship between body and memory, body and paint, and body and exaggerated stereotype, the artist has no choice but to break the constructs inscribed into his identity by the past in order to reclaim his own self. Similar issues are raised by another gender-bending artist, Adrian Piper, and her work (**fig. 7**) *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear* (1975), which has a lot in common with Harris's practice. Framed by cultural references associated with the Black male, Piper appears *not quite* white, to use Homi Bhabha's mimicry framework, but also ambiguously Black – (s)he could pass as a light-skinned or mixed person.¹⁰² According to Thelma Golden, the *I* appearing in the statement *I embody* is synonymous with black anger – black rage, seeking a place to make one's voice visible.¹⁰³ When discussing mimicry as a disruptive strategy, Piper's makeup and attire works as camouflage, producing an ambivalent representation of difference, only partially fitting into both Blackness and whiteness.¹⁰⁴ Harris's passing as a white person is not as evident as the ambiguous self-portrait of Piper; however, both artists extensively appropriate certain racially charged features and stereotypes in order to radically shift the conversation of Black masculinity and subjectivity. The resemblance of whiteness in Harris's case is grotesque, over-the-top,

¹⁰² Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125–33.

¹⁰³ Thelma Golden, "My Brother" in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1995), 19–43.

¹⁰⁴ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 127.

and critically enhanced. Harris is becoming something other than himself to regain recognition and power over his own image, mediated by history.

In her analysis of Harris's photographs from the *Constructs* (1989) and *Good Life* (1994) series, Amelia Jones introduces the concept of reiteration, which, similarly to redefinition, serves the artist as a strategy for empowering himself in the face of the normative gaze and whiteness.¹⁰⁵ For Jones, continual reiteration is based on the repetition of regulatory norms,¹⁰⁶ like heterosexuality, within the subject's othered identity; for Harris, it is being a queer Black man embodying femininity and reenacting the traditional wedding photo in the studio, or taking on the mask of whiteface. Jones repeats after Judith Butler that *citation practice* produced the effect that it names.¹⁰⁷ So again, for Harris evoking the memory of racially charged entertainment practices that once constituted an unquestioned norm, while assuming different gender roles and reversing the blackface into the whiteface creates a redefining moment for identity politics in Black photography and American photography in general.

His impact in the 1990s was recognized by Richard J. Powell, among other academics, as a "part-sartorial, part-photographic deconstruction of blackness and gender"¹⁰⁸ that raised critical ire at the time. It is crucial to consider the time when *Americas* and *Constructs* came into existence, to see Harris's self-portraits within the broader landscape of American prudish and religious tendencies to filter culture through a conservative lens. One prime example of this was Robert Mapplethorpe's postmortem obscenity trial in Cincinnati (1990), which attempted to block the homoerotic and sadomasochistic display, in disregard for freedom of artistic expression and the fact that photographs were shown in a cultural institution: Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center. The campaign fueled by The American Family Association's fear of identity politics and the general public's fear of AIDS, the attack found Mapplethorpe's art an easy target. Harris's emancipated self-portraits appeared as a critical commentary contextualizing the

¹⁰⁵ Jones, "The 'Eternal Return'," 964.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁰⁸ Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 198.

controversial artist. Parts of the *Americas* series, like the *Triptych [Miss Girl; Kym, Lyle & Crinoline; Miss America]* were displayed in the exhibition *Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now* at the Guggenheim Museum (2019–2020), along with other Black artists such as Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Glenn Ligon, and Zanele Muholi, among others, providing a dialogue with Mapplethorpe's nudes of black men from his 1986 *Black Book*.¹⁰⁹ The exhibition presented an interesting comparison of the different perspectives and, by creating visual tensions, opened a conversation around re-framing, re-interpreting, and re-defining Mapplethorpe's problematic legacy.¹¹⁰ Harris's work, created at the same time as *Black Book*, reveals the differences between displaying and playing with racial tropes. Mapplethorpe's heavily aestheticized nudes showcase a highly fetishized image of the Black man, catering to the stereotypes of Black masculinity, while Harris flips the reductive imagery while using mimicry and anthropophagy, among others, as strategies of empowerment, engaging in a playful act of theatrical drama of identities.

Harris's *Americas* series destabilizes the categories of gender, race, and stereotype, performing inverted and redefined notions of identities, embodying them, and shifting the collective memory. The artist is re-imaging a nineteenth-century form of entertainment in a completely disconnected setting, revealing the mechanisms of theatricality through visual symbols – makeup as a mask and a mark, the veil as a bridal totem and a racial screen, etc. One could wonder why Harris is embodying an inverted version of a harmful stereotype that targeted Black people for the sake of entertainment. With whom is the artist playing in the studio? With his friends, models, or our collective memory? In a way, Harris is assuming the role of the trickster, breaking norms and juggling multiple identities, mixing

¹⁰⁹ The photographs were first viewed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1988 and were labeled pornographic. It caused legislative threats by Jesse Helms, a Republican Senator from North Carolina. See Yaffa Schlesinger, "Race, Sex, Class: Social Theory, Politics in the Arts," *Race, Sex & Class* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 165.

¹¹⁰ Harris has reflected on exhibiting his early works three decades later: "It is interesting that the earliest self-portraits in that exhibition—mine included—that come out of that early, primal, exploratory state of an artist, and how they, over the last 30 years self-portraiture (or, portraits of the artist), have taken on a different level of agency or potency. It is curious how seeing someone who was born in the age of selfie and social media relates to images and images of themselves." See Caitlin Shamborg in conversation with Lyle Ashton Harris, "Lyle Ashton Harris on Self-Portraiture and Making Man and Woman #1, 1987," Getty, <https://www.getty.edu/news/lyle-ashton-harris-on-self-portraiture-and-making-man-and-woman-1-1987/> (accessed June 7th 2024).

uncertainty with a desire to become the other and thereby escaping the trauma of the past. This particular strategy of redefinition emphasizes a couple of crucial points. One, this critique of stereotypes and historical injustice employs embodiment as a radical and emancipatory act, disrupting the constructs imposed upon Black bodies. Second, asserting a new, critical identity through self-portraiture is entangled with a tangible memory of the past. Finally, mimicry, theatricality, and cultural cannibalism serve as tools for empowerment, for redefining racial and gendered tropes in art.

Structure

The dissertation consists of four chapters, each referring to the past through the act of evoking tangible memories. The first chapter, entitled *Archival Bodies*, will focus on self-portraits of Black artists working with archival images and drawing on the aesthetics of nineteenth- and twentieth-century photography. Artists' interest in this period is related to the relationship between the photographed subject (often objectified), the photographer, and the observer – a distinct dynamic from a Black subject's perspective. This triad is complemented by artists' dual roles as models and image-makers. The analyzed self-portraits explore the archive both as a system of knowledge structured and managed by institutions, archivists, and researchers, and as a reflection of collective and individual memory.¹¹¹ The notion of the archival body I am iterating is entangled with the social, cultural, political, and, most importantly, in this case, the colonial matrix of power. Relevant to the context of the self-portraits analyzed will be the feminist theories of Audre Lorde and bell hooks, as well as the reconstructed history of race and humanity written by Caribbean thinker Sylvia Wynter. Also crucial for understanding the role of memory in this chapter will be the writings of Shawn Michelle Smith on the role and function of photography in the development of the science of race in the nineteenth century, as well as the social usage of archives, found in Alan Sekula's theory of photography.¹¹² Here, the

¹¹¹ See: Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

¹¹² See: Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 3–64.

concept of tangible memory is imagined through the notion of reenactment and interaction with images from the past, bodily engagement with historical documents and images, and, ultimately, knowledge produced by archival practices.

In the first case study, *Eat the Self*, the artist discussed will be Ayana V. Jackson (b. 1977), who specializes in studio photography and digital collaging. In this part, I will analyze the *Archival Impulse* (2013) series, in which the artist is re-imagining and embodying iconic archival photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Titled after Hal Foster's idea of creating a new system of knowledge while confronting archives, Jackson engages in a dialogue with the past, referring to portraits of people of color, historically depicted as curiosities, objects of quasi-scientific experiments, or victims of a colonial regime. In this context of historically located identity rooted in racial discourse, the result of the white man's abuse of power, Achille Mbembe uses the term *autophagy*, a fundamental mechanism of cell survival, also known as self-eating. In the context of the history of colonial photography and imperialism, the image-maker is identified with the white gaze, active through the tool – the camera – as opposed to a passive subject posing for a photograph. *Autophagy* would function as Jackson's embodiment of the historical white gaze in the service of imperialism, preying on the suffering of the Subaltern. The artist's self-portraits include digitally manipulated nudes in which she appropriates archival images and uses them to rework her own relationship with photography, exposing the dangerous line between desire, visual pleasure, and notions of power.

The second case study, *Black Pin-Up Girl*, is from Lorna Simpson's (b. 1960) project entitled *1957–2009*, juxtaposing an amateur album from 1957 purchased on eBay with the artist's recreations of the archival photographs. This is the artist's first work created with the help of found/vernacular photographs. The anonymous snapshots in the album depict a Black woman, styled as a pin-up girl, and a Black man. The artist impersonates both characters, choosing similar outfits, wigs, and props to create a visually accurate material copy of the album. Simpson's project raises questions about the reconstruction of memories, cultural gender, and archival opacity, and by exhibiting the

work in MoMA, the institutionalization of amateur photography. The viewer seeing the project searches for the boundaries between the historical record and mimicry, truth and falsehood, and old and new meanings. I analyze the series using relevant theories concerning the representation of Black artists in museum spaces (D. English) and the contemporary significance of photographic archives (O. Enwezor).

In the closing part of the first chapter, *Freedom Cape*, I will focus on Adama Delphine Fawundu's (b. 1971) projects *In the Face of History* (2017–) and *Freedom Cape* (2020). In both projects, the artist repurposes archival documents, newsprint stories, reproductions of paintings, and advertisements, with origins ranging from the Antebellum American South to the mid-twentieth century. Fawundu's presence is marked by multiple images of the back of her head, transformed into a collage of archival footage. The projects highlight both the struggles and achievements of African-Americans and the Pan-African diaspora, from documents of the Black Star Line and Marcus Garvey movement, Harriet Tubman's archives, manuscripts from the Berlin Conference on Africa, to the records of Black women voting, and the speeches of Sojourner Truth. In her projects, Fawundu looks for sources of self-empowerment, constructing not only new artistic iterations of archival documents but also transforming them into fabric and wearable pieces like capes. During the pandemic, the artist performed wearing the *Freedom Cape* in multiple locations, including Prospect Park in Brooklyn, to commemorate the legacy of Shirley Chisholm, a Brooklynite and the first Black woman to be elected to the United States Congress. The artist's redefinition of the photograph – from a two-dimensional print to a cape that can be worn – is moving and has its own unique weight and texture, impacting both the performative and corporeal aspects of the tangibility of memory.

In the second chapter, *Re-Pairing the Canon*, I analyze contemporary photographic Black self-portraiture that reflects on the Euro-centric art canon, art history, and the history of museums. Various approaches to reframing and redefining canonical images, re-paired in the sense of re-connecting and repairing, are applied by artists in reference to paintings from the eighteenth to nineteenth century in order to interrogate Western exceptionalism, critiquing imperialism, orientalism, and primitivism. Similarly, the analyzed projects

dissect the asymmetry of power created by museums, critics, and the art market, to critique how institutions and art magazines have often providing whitewashed and patronizing narratives. The (under)representation of the Black body in art history, the lack of presence of female artists of color in museums, and the topic of reparations are all explored through the lens of decolonial studies and reparative museology (after C. Sterling and J. Larkin). The notion of repair, considered by decolonial thinkers like A. Mbembe as a defining moment of today, presents another strategy for the empowerment of contemporary Black photographers reflecting on the past. The analyzed self-portraits also make use of the idea of reclaiming space in the portrait genre and (re-)consider the role of portraiture in the collective memory, as well as in social and institutional practices. Tangible memories here are expressed by the return of images of known tropes in art history and (predominantly) Western cultural paradigms. In this sense, the concept of repair generates a redefinition of conventions and traditions known in the arts, norms produced by museums or institutions, and styles and divisions reinforced by critics.

The first part of the chapter, *Dissecting Manet*, focuses on artists' interventions in picturing rest, joy, and leisure in art. The history of art is full of representations of Black people working, while white people are pictured resting. The analyzed works present visual acts of resisting this narrative, while simultaneously referencing and intervening Édouard Manet's infamous painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe/Luncheon on the Grass* from 1862. Photographs from Ayana Jackson, Paul Mpagi Sepuya (b. 1982), and Renée Cox (b. 1960) subvert the gender roles implemented in the original piece, simultaneously queering the image and deconstructing the power relations between the portrayed characters.

The second part of the chapter, *Afro-Gothic*, takes inspiration from Lola Flash's (b. 1959) *Afro Gothic* (from her *syzygy, the vision* series, 2020–) self-portrait, referencing Grant Wood's famous painting *American Gothic* from 1930, as well as Gordon Park's later iteration in the photographic medium. Wood's archetypical depiction of the conservative values of the American family captured in the portrait is challenged by the queer and gender non-conforming Flash, who embodies looking into the American art canon through a Black gaze. Dressed in a space helmet and orange jumpsuit, the artist implicitly expresses

the concept of Afro-futurism and the visibility of imprisonment, being examined here at the intersection of Black culture, activism, and an age of mass incarceration (after N.R. Fleetwood).

The last part of the chapter, *Refiguring the Museum*, will focus on the self-portraits of Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953) and Helina Metaferia (b. 1983). I will analyze the *Museums* and *Roaming* series from 2006, where Weems depicts herself standing in front of major European museums, cultural sites, and statues. In these self-portraits, Weems is embodying her alter-ego, a muse dressed in a long black gown, recalling Caspar David Friedrich's *Rückenfigur*, a priestess, or a ghost. This museum project is distinguished by its global dimension and decolonial context. Weems poses against the backdrop of the British Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, and the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, among others. In doing so, she raises the issue of the representation of Black female artists in the world's major museums, as well as the problem of colonial debt to African countries. Weems' refiguring of museums and its commentary on imperialism, colonialism, and the visibility of Black women in public spaces is rooted in the notion of witnessing history through the lens of Black women and women of the African diaspora. It is important to note that artist uses large-scale prints to monumentalize the photographs and to comment on the concept of the monument itself. A second strategy for refiguring museums is critically engaging how the notions of primitivism and modernism are employed in art-related writing and critique. In her project *Refiguring the Canon* (2018–2019), Metaferia uses found art magazines, combining selected elements from them with photographic stills from her performances to create photo collages. The project highlights both the repurposing and recycling of the paper used in the magazines and the ideas they contains, in particular, the re-introduction of primitivism in American museology in the 1980s, the decade in which the artist was born.

The third chapter, *Family Frames*, explores the notion of redefining portraits of Black families, focusing on portrait traditions and symbolism, self-discovery, notions of home, place, migration, belonging, connecting with ancestors, growing up, and transitioning from youth to adulthood. The selected photographic projects are examples of

artistic activism in the context of growing grassroots, local community initiatives, and the Black Lives Matter movement. This chapter will touch upon portraits of home, including the image of hometown, as well as the labor of workers and photographers as documentarists. The title of the chapter, inspired by Marianne Hirsch's book, indicates how the conventions of family portraits and albums, and the ways ancestral history is preserved and displayed all play a crucial part in the analyzed projects. Tangible memories, intertwined with familial memory, family collaborations, and domestic forms of remembrance, materialize a cross-generational 'haunting.' The cyclic nature of the family structure is one of the most personally transformative forces that affects artists. In this chapter, the resemblance between family members, or the matrix of bodily familiarity, as I would like to call it, will play a crucial role in understanding the way the images of past generations are materialized, quite literally, in the concept of tangible memories.

The first part of the third chapter, *Labor of Love*, delves into a series of photographs by Latoya Ruby Frazier (b. 1982), titled *The Notion of Family* (2001–2014). The artist spent more than a decade documenting the history of her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania, and the story of three generations of her family. Frazier's intimate photographs are juxtaposed with shots of dilapidated buildings, vacant lots, boarded-up stores, and neglected hospitals. The experience of poverty and systemic racism made visible in the decaying town and the humble interiors of the family home are intermingled with the tenderness and joy of moments shared with loved ones. The project is characterized by repetition, for example, in the structure of the family – grandmother, mother, and daughter. Frazier's album can be described as autobiographical, due to the combination of images and fragments of texts, including private anecdotes and memories. The artist links her work to the social documentary of the 1930s and the conceptual-social photography of the second half of the twentieth century. *The Notion of Family* as a title also refers to the canonical *Family of Man* exhibition from 1955 (Edward Steichen, MoMA), and is stylistically tied to the documentation of the poverty of Black families in the South as seen through the eyes of Walker Evans. Frazier thus takes on the historically

male-dominated position of photographer-documentarian, narrating stories about places and people, presenting the gaze of a sensitive observer and participant in events.

The second part, *Homecoming*, analyzes self-portraits made by Rahim Fortune (b. 1994) for the New York Times exhibition *Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America* (2020). The virtual exhibition and the intimate portraits it showed were responses to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the killing of George Floyd. In his self-portraits, made with the help of his sister, Fortune speaks about his hometown, Austin, Texas, the conditions involved in making an intimate portrait public, as well as being a caregiver to his father, who was battling ALS. The self-portraits range from a passport photo to a poster announcing a disappearance and are particularly relevant in the context of the place they were taken: Texas, a state located in the south of the United States, with historically high levels of racial intolerance. Close-ups of hair, back, and face are images we associate both with intimacy and with investigations emblematic of medical study or the police record. The photographs were then placed in public spaces in the artist's hometown, on the walls of stores and on information poles, or ended up as unwanted flyers on the ground.

The last part of this chapter, *Robert's Bedroom*, analyzes photographs by Jonathan Mark Jackson (b. 1996) and will focus on the series of self-portraits in *The House Servant's Directory* (2018-2019). In this work, Jackson delves into the concept of rememory, understood after Toni Morrison as an action of recollecting and reassembling memories into a context of the self. Jackson's project is based on a textbook written by the artist's fifth great-grandfather, Robert Roberts, in 1827, the earliest traceable ancestor in his family. The series was photographed in Gore Place, a preserved mansion in Massachusetts where Roberts worked. Jackson, by creating self-portraits, unravels the traces of the family tree, the labor put into domestic care, and the ghosts of the past – slavery – that still haunt the present.

In the last chapter, *Studio*, I will discuss the depictions of the artistic studio as a site of constructing the identity and selfhood of contemporary Black photographers. The genre of studio photography holds significance within the Black diaspora, which I will showcase

by examining examples from Lyle Ashton-Harris (b. 1965), Carrie Mae Weems, Lola Flash, Omar Victor Diop (b. 1980), and Rashid Johnson (b. 1977). The majority of this chapter will focus on self-portraits by Paul Mpagi Sepuya, who specializes in studio photography. His artistic practice is situated at the intersection of the representation of the photographic studio, performative mirror self-portraits, Black queerness, and picturing the queer community in safe spaces. Sepuya plays with mirrors, reflections, and indexicality, exploring the relationship between the artist, model, and viewer. The overlapping smudges left on mirrors create an intricate puzzle to dissect: who left them, when, and in what setting? Similarly, as with David Hammons's body prints, Sepuya explores the performative and corporeal dimensions of body traces in relation to memory and blackness. The mirror surface both creates an illusion of returning the gaze toward the viewer and exposes the conditions of picture-making in the photographic studio. Brian O'Doherty's theory of studio space, as well as psychoanalytic interpretations of the motif of the mirror (J. Lacan, K. Silverman) prove useful here as tools for analysis.

Each chapter will expand on tangible memories as a practice of transformative bodily engagement with the past, in relation to both personal and collective memory. The issues raised in chapter one, such as re-imagining archival photographs or reenacting images from the past, will also be relevant to chapter two, which emphasizes reparative notions of embodiment and appropriations of iconic imagery. These two chapters, in particular, explore the tangibility of collective memory. In chapter three, in turn, the notion of the familial look will be expanded to the inter-generational shaping of memory and its private and intimate dimensions. Some of the concepts from this chapter, such as the self-portrait and its interior, connect with the last part of the study regarding traces in the studio space and a domestic environment charged with the history of slavery. An analysis of the power dynamics in the history of studio photography will follow up on the issues discussed in chapter one, offering conclusions.



Fig. 1. Rafal Milach, *Stop Calling Me Murzyn*, 2020.
 Photographic print (20.12×16.18 inches/51.1 × 41.1 cm).
 Collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.



Fig 2. Isaac Julien, *J. P. Ball Salon, 1867 (Lessons of the Hour)*, 2019.
 Framed photograph on gloss inkjet paper mounted on aluminum (22.44 × 29.92 inches/57 × 76 cm). Isaac Julien.



Fig. 3. Lyle Ashton Harris, *Americas (Triptych)* [*Miss Girl; Kym, Lyle & Crinoline; Miss America*], 1987-88. Gelatin silver prints (each: 29 15/16 × 19 7/8 inches 76 × 50.5 cm). Lyle Ashton-Harris.



Fig. 4. David Hammons, *Black First, America Second*, 1970. Grease, pigment, and silkscreen on paper (41 1/4 × 31 1/4 inches / 104.8 × 79.4 cm). Collection of Tilted Gallery, New York.



Fig. 5. Lyle Ashton Harris, *Man and Woman #1 (Americas)*, 1987. Gelatin silver print (29 1/4 × 19 1/4 inches / 74.3 × 48.9 cm). Lyle Ashton Harris.

Fig. 6. Lyle Ashton Harris, *Man and Woman #2 (Americas)*, 1987. Gelatin silver print (29 1/4 × 19 1/4 in / 74.3 × 48.9 cm). Lyle Ashton Harris.



Fig. 7. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Embodiment Everything You Most Hate and Fear*, 1975. Gelatin silver print with oil crayon (7 15/16 × 9 15/16 in / 20.1 × 25.3 cm). Art Institute Chicago.

1. ARCHIVAL BODIES

1.1. Eat the Self

The nineteenth century, both in Europe and in the United States, can be described as the age of world's fairs, showcasing the nation's greatest achievements and inventions. A significant element of these events was entertainment, designed to satisfy the emerging demand for spectacle and consumption. Such attractions, however, often involved human exploitation; this included the showcasing of *exotic* cultures in artificial villages which resembled amusement parks, built specifically for the fair's infrastructure. To this day, photographs, postcards, posters, and other souvenirs from the villages remind us of the propagandistic and racist sentiments that surrounded the fairs.¹¹³ Photography, serving in this context as a tool complicit in colonial power, both exposed and sustained the deepest desires of a voyeuristic nature at the turn of the twentieth century.

Held shortly after the famous 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, the California Midwinter International Exposition, organized in 1894 in San Francisco, featured several ethnological exhibits. These displays showcased the effects of salvage ethnography, global trade, and the need to expose viewers to non-Western lifestyles and cultural traditions. As in Chicago, the fair included a Dahomeyan African Village and human zoos,¹¹⁴ exploiting people from Congo, French Guinea, and Benin (until 1975, called the Republic of Dahomey) for the sake of entertainment. The presence of colonial exhibitions and African and Indigenous people in racially divided America met with critiques from prominent African-American abolitionists and orators, such as Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells. When African Americans were excluded from the 1893

¹¹³ In 2023, during my Fulbright residency, I visited the Queens Museum, which owns more than 10,000 objects related to the 1939–40 and 1964–65 World's Fairs and *The Panorama of the City of New York* built for the 1964–65 Fair. The collection, comprising 900 souvenirs featured in the permanent exhibition, presents a diverse array of consumerism strategies and serves as a continual reminder of the market-driven and socio-cultural propagandistic context inherent to the fairs.

¹¹⁴ This form of public display of Indigenous people was a result of the colonial conquest and scientific racism popularized by world fairs.

Columbian Exhibition, Wells and Douglass wrote a protest pamphlet, *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exhibition*. The world fairs were advertised as examples of the peak achievements of civilized nations, highlighting their success, progress, and magnitude. The need to be involved in this venture was expressed by Wells, who saw it as an opportunity to showcase African American excellence after emancipation, particularly the literary achievements and contributions of Black writers, and thereby break away from the image of the uneducated slave.¹¹⁵ In the introduction to the pamphlet, Douglass commented on the Dahomeyan Village from the Chicago fair, condemning the belittling portrayal of these people and addressing the issue of exoticization. According to him, this stereotypical image of people from Dahomey was projected onto how African-Americans were perceived by white Americans, despite the progress that people like him had contributed to.¹¹⁶

The visual documentation produced at these expositions played a key role in sustaining and disseminating this very exoticization. Taken by fair's official photographer, Isaiah West Taber (1830–1912), the photograph *Dahomeyan Girls* (**fig. 8**) depicts four young women holding weapons such as hatchets and knives, referencing the mythical Amazons, female soldiers who formed an all-female regiment. The composition of the photograph is highly aestheticized and is one of two similar compositions portraying this group of women (**fig. 9**). The other nine photographs produced by Taber represent larger groups of women posing with Xavier Pené, an explorer and organizer of the exhibit.¹¹⁷ An inscription on the bottom of the small 13x20 cm albumen print mounted on the card states: *Dahomeyan Girls, Dahomeyan Village, Cal. Midwinter Exposition. 8371. Copyright 1894 by Taber Photo*. The group was photographed against a plain, white background, with one woman standing and three other women lying on a carpeted floor. The image does not

¹¹⁵ Ida B. Wells, *The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World's Columbian Exposition. With contributions by Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), Irvine Garland Penn (1867–1930), and Ferdinand Lee Barnett* (Chicago, Illinois: Miss Ida B. Wells, 1893), chap. 6, “The Reason Why.”

¹¹⁶ Ibid., Frederick Douglass, introduction, chap. 1. In 1894, Douglass mentioned the Dahomeyans for the second time in his “Lessons of the Hour” lecture, delivered in the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁷ One of the photographs is titled *Xavier Pene and his Dahomeyan Amazons, Cal. Midwinter Exposit.*, indicating ownership and power over the portrayed women.

reveal where the scene was shot, unlike the other photographs at the fair taken by Taber, the studio is deprived of any cultural indicators besides the Persian-like carpet. Brought to the United States by Pené, who owned a plantation in Dahomey, the women who residing in the village in San Francisco had traveled to Paris, Brussels, and Chicago in years prior.¹¹⁸ The 60 inhabitants taken from Dahomey to Europe and then to the United States were from the same tribe and most likely related, so there is a high chance that the girls from Taber's photograph were sisters.¹¹⁹

The women in the photograph are bare-chested, wearing long skirts, head wraps, and jewelry, holding weapons. The woman standing is holding a hatchet in one hand while placing another hand on her abdomen, with her head lowered to look at the girls. The pose and the gesture suggest that the woman is pregnant, hence she is the only one standing. The other three women are lying on their sides, propped up on their elbows, two of them looking straight at the camera and the other one looking beyond the frame. The arrangement of women's bodies resembles the structure of the Allegorical Fountain, also photographed by Taber at the fair (**fig. 10**). Due to the striking compositional parallels, it is as if the photographer treated the human bodies almost as construction materials, arranging them with the same calculated precision as the decorative elements of the fountain. The subjects remain anonymous in the photographs, reinforcing the concept of the "exotic" as a representation of savagery and curiosity, and as a colonial trophy.

Exposed to the gaze of the photographer, the fair visitors, and later, archivists, artists, and researchers, the girls' bodies were captured in a manner typical of colonial photography. Excluded from the other members of the tribe, alone in the studio with Taber, performing seductive "others," the girls from Dahomey stand as concrete, physical evidence of the conquest. The rehearsed and theatrically arranged poses differ from the usual ethnographic photographic record of that time, which typically consisted of profile and *en face* portraits, and instead, strongly appeal to the colonizer's voyeuristic and proprietary desires. The reclining women are posed as odalisques, drawing parallels to

¹¹⁸ Christina Hellmich, "'See the Natives': Indigenous Visual Culture at the 1894 California Midwinter International Exposition" (PhD diss., University of California, 2023), 129.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

Orientalist art. The reclining body, as Deborah Willis and Carla Williams aptly note, alluded to the fact that the women were sexually available.¹²⁰ The pose is vulnerable; the nude or semi-nude woman's body lying down was usually framed as passive, stripped of her agency and subjectivity. The girls posing for Taber are holding weapons, which gives them, at least symbolically, a tool for protection and the possibility to take action.

This particular image inspired American artist of Ghanaian descent, Ayana V. Jackson (b. 1977), who specializes in studio photography and digital collaging, to recreate it in her series *Archival Impulse* (2013). In this project, Jackson appropriates and embodies iconic archival photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Titled after Hal Foster's idea of creating a new system of knowledge for use in confronting archives,¹²¹ the project engages in a dialogue with the past, referring to portraits of people of color, historically depicted as curiosities, objects of quasi-scientific experiments, or victims of a colonial regime. In Jackson's project, appropriation serves as an artistic strategy that transforms images of colonial violence into empowered self-portraits. The artist decentralizes her American upbringing and redirects her focus to the Global South, examining her personal and cultural ties to the African continent. It remains crucial to acknowledge that she speaks from a specific perspective as a Black woman residing in the United States, a geopolitical imperialist power, while also highlighting her diasporic identity.

In *Don't Hide the Blade/ How do you think their women dress?* (**fig. 11**), Jackson embodies the Amazons, recreating their image in a black-and-white digital collage by multiplying her own figure fourfold. This self-portrait enabled the artist to assume multiple roles, including those of photographer, model, and editor. Paying attention to the smallest details, Jackson depicts herself wearing a head wrap and a simple, heavy skirt, leaving her chest bare, and carrying various kinds of weapons. The central figure of "standing Jackson," visibly pregnant, is holding her belly and has placed her weapon on top of it. She is looking down at three girls lying on the ground. The only compositional difference

¹²⁰ Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 42.

¹²¹ Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, no. 110 (Autumn, 2004): 3–22.

between the historical record and the contemporary recreation is the lack of a carpet in Jackson's version, as well as a change in the women, who are gazing at the viewer. The artist left the background plain, just like in Taber's photograph, creating a vacuum-like space for the figures to appear. This artistic choice is explained by Jackson in the catalogue, where she states that the separation of the bodies from the background reveals the theatrical and performative nature of colonial photography.¹²²

It is one of a number of archival photographs that Jackson has appropriated and recreated for her project, and it serves as a good example for introducing a key term in this chapter, archival bodies.¹²³ Entangled in a social, cultural, political, and colonial matrix of power, archival bodies are stuck between history and the present, resurfacing in various contexts: academic, cultural, or simply as collectible.¹²⁴ With this term comes a reflection on archives both as spaces where archival bodies can be preserved and contextualized within the systems of knowledge produced during encounters with them, as well as retrieved from the narrative of so-called HIStory.¹²⁵

Archival bodies are produced by systems of governance and preservation, not necessarily to sustain the memory of the portrayed figures, but rather to preserve the visual conventions in which they were depicted. In this context, the body is seen as a representation framed within the system of Western knowledge and classification. We do not know the names of the girls photographed in 1894, but we are informed about their ethnicity. The author of the picture is known, as is the historical and geographical context in which the photograph was taken. The identities of the women remain unacknowledged.

¹²² *Archival Impulse. Poverty Pornography*, ed. Ayana V. Jackson and Joseph-Achille Mbembe (Paris: Baudouin Lebon, 2013), 2–3.

¹²³ The term *archival bodies* appears in an article by Giulia Battaglia, Jennifer Clarke, and Fiona Siegenthaler titled "Bodies of Archives / Archival Bodies" (2020). The researchers used an anthropological framework, challenging the static character of the archive, in favor of seeing history in constant movement. As they state: "The questions tackled here presuppose a notion of archives as something processual, activated, and reactivated by bodies. We argue that archives are not only bodies of documents and knowledge, but also something fundamental to the body; the body is an archive, bodies are in the archive, and researchers intervene in either the material bodies of objects, files, or images that make up the archive." (9). See Giulia Battaglia, Jennifer Clarke, and Fiona Siegenthaler, "Bodies of Archives / Archival Bodies: An Introduction," *Visual Anthropology Review* 36, no. 1 (2020): 8–16.

¹²⁴ Julia Stachura, "Archival Bodies in Ayana V. Jackson's 'Demons Devotees I–IV' / Corpos de arquivo em 'Demónios Devotos I–IV' de Ayana V. Jackson," *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens* 57 (2022): 131.

¹²⁵ The emphasized "HIS" is referencing the patriarchal history.

As Lynda Nead writes in her seminal book on the female nude, the transformation of a female body into a female nude is an act of regulation that includes both the woman and the viewer, whose eyes are disciplined by the conventions and protocols of art.¹²⁶ Archival bodies, then, could be understood as human bodies transformed into archival bodies in an act of historical objectification by regulative protocols of archival systems and knowledge rooted in colonial violence.

Jackson's photograph touches upon these issues, as she situates the representation of her body in the liminal space of present and past, factual and speculative, private and public, objective and subjective, within a discourse involving a post-colonial revision of knowledge.¹²⁷ As Giovanna Zapperi notes: "Woman's reappearance across documentary reconstructions reminds us of the constitutive relationship between time and the image: it is when it is visualised that the past becomes tangible and recognisable."¹²⁸ The notion of the archival body presented here will ultimately concern the tangibility of the colonial past, visualized and redefined through self-portraiture, digital photographic manipulation, and appropriation. Jackson's unique position in this project is crucial: as an artist, a Black woman, and a witness to the past through its photographic images, she channels colonial violence through her own body and personal experience.

Following Foster's diagnosis of the contemporary archival impulse and the figure of the archival artist, the encounter with found knowledge has the potential to produce alternative knowledge or counter-memory.¹²⁹ Concerned with traces left behind, archival art finds points of departure in "unfulfilled beginnings" or "incomplete projects."¹³⁰ In the case of Taber's photographs, the idea of an incomplete project might be misleading. The world fairs were designed as encyclopaedic and organized collections of nations' greatest

¹²⁶ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude. Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London–New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.

¹²⁷ Giovanna Zapperi, "Woman's Reappearance: Rethinking the Archive in Contemporary Art – Feminist Perspectives," *Feminist Review*, no. 105 (2013): 22.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹²⁹ Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 4.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

achievements.¹³¹ This was also the purpose of Taber's photographic documentation and its aims to encapsulate the event through representative and whole images. However, the so-called after-life of the images was much more disruptive and chaotic. For example, the Jardin d'Acclimatation, an imperial garden and amusement park in Paris established in the 1860s and transformed in 1877 into l'Acclimatation Anthropologique, sold photographs of Taber's "natives" as postcards, using images of children and often exposed women. Now available on eBay, the cards are still circulating on the market, advertised as vintage, antique, or rare. Developed by "mutations of connection and disconnection,"¹³² Foster remarks, archival records can hold many meanings as well as produce new knowledge while being examined by artists.

As noticed by Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, the co-evolution of memory and technology now has a global context and synchronized worldwide spectatorship, with viewers around the world witnessing the events simultaneously through the internet.¹³³ Once, passive audiences, and now, active viewers, participate in a constant exchange of thoughts and images. It might seem to some that most of the images from the *Archival Impulse* series require from viewers a degree in historical literacy. However, the references rely on a mode of seeing typical for anthropology or ethnography, a mode that constructed racialized thinking among both academics and the general public, and embedded itself in the American psyche, and that is now also legible to a global audience following the development of postcolonial and decolonial discourse. Just like Sherman's "everywomen" cliché, which was used as leverage to criticize the female stereotypes produced by patriarchal visual culture, and to showcase the endless possibilities for constructing identities and playing with the viewer's imagination, Jackson is using racially stereotypical imagery to fight racism and develop a new and more empowering narrative.

¹³¹ See Barbara Berglund, "'The Days of Old, the Days of Gold, the Days of '49': Identity, History, and Memory at the California Midwinter International Exposition, 1894," *The Public Historian* 25, no. 4 (2003): 25–49. In her article, Berglund states that the Midwinter fair has represented the "ordered vision" of the civilized world, where carefully constructed identities would shape the future. Following the utopian Chicago's White City, the 1894 fair was supposed to provide a similar narrative of the nation's consolidation.

¹³² Foster, "An Archival Impulse", 6.

¹³³ Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, *Memory in a Global Age. Discourses, Practices, and Trajectories* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

As Jackson mentions in the 2015 CCGRS Lecture Series, she began to explore her relationship with her own body around 2010, after learning from Katharina Sieverding about large-scale prints at the University of the Arts in Berlin and completing a residency in Paris afterward.¹³⁴ In an interview discussing the double role of being a photographer and model, while also countering dehumanization, Jackson explained the artistic choice of choosing self-portrait: “[...] I felt that I had to use my body. If I were to expose another woman’s body to the type of violent image that I’m dealing with, I felt that it would be too close to committing a violent act upon her.”¹³⁵ This rule did not apply to the four photographs *Demons Devotees I–IV*, which make up a significant part of the *Archival Impulse* series. In the photographs, Jackson, along with female and male models, recreates Alice Seeley-Harris’s documentation of Congolese people during King Leopold II’s brutal regime in the early 1900s. In my article about *Demons Devotees I–IV*, I introduce the notion of archival bodies, noting how easy it is to reproduce the aesthetics of colonial violence in a contemporary photograph, especially with digital manipulation that allows for the multiplication of figures to achieve the most accuracy.¹³⁶ However, Jackson is always making changes, e.g., a slightly different pose or background, in order to avoid completely mimicking the archival material and to challenge the viewer’s power of perception.

Jackson’s quote about inflicting pain on the others resonates with how Ariella Azoulay described the camera shutter as creating dividing lines in time, space, and body politics, connecting the violence of imperialism and the immediate objectification during the taking of a photograph.¹³⁷ She writes:

Thinking about imperial violence in terms of a camera shutter means grasping its particular brevity and the spectrum of its rapidity. It means understanding how this brief operation can transform an individual rooted

¹³⁴ Ayana V. Jackson, “CCGRS Lecture Series: Archival Impulse,” Washington State University Video Vault, June 15, 2017, <https://videovault.wsu.edu/2017/06/15/ccgrs-lecture-series-archival-impulse/>. Transcript: <https://videovault.wsu.edu/documents/2017/06/ccgrs-archival-impulse-transcript.pdf/>.

¹³⁵ Fiona Greenland, “Broadening the Landscape of Blackness,” *Contexts* 17, no. 3 (2018): 8–9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218792518> (accessed June 15, 2024).

¹³⁶ Stachura, “Archival Bodies”.

¹³⁷ Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism* (London–New York: Verso, 2019), 5.

in her life-world into a refugee, a looted object into a work of art, a whole shared world into a thing of the past, and the past itself into a separate time zone, a tense that lies apart from both present and future.¹³⁸

Similarly, the archival bodies of colonialism, which once had lives, names, families, and personalities, were transformed into classified types for the sake of entertainment or research. With older photographic technologies, the immediacy of the shutter effect that Azoulay writes about took more time. The poses had to be more calculated, with those posing having to stay completely still for longer periods. However, this did not change the fact that the act of violence carried out upon people like the girls from Dahomey took place in the photographer's studio. A question I want to pose here is how to consider the redefinition of the original image through a re-imagining of the colonial visual legacy of pain and power imbalance as a practice of empowerment. How, in this context, do tangible memories operate as a mode of cultural memory?

As revealed by Jackson's motto of "fighting photography with photography,"¹³⁹ she is using two strategies of cultural empowerment, *anthropophagy* and *autophagy*. Both terms exist at the intersection of sociology, biology, and cultural studies, providing a unique approach to memory and archival records of colonial origin. The first term, never previously applied to Jackson's oeuvre, indicates similar qualities to *autophagy*, a concept used in an essay by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe,¹⁴⁰ written for Jackson's catalogue,¹⁴¹ where he emphasized the interlocution of race, sex, and fantasies. In terms of both Taber's portrait and Jackson's recreation, these three notions are crucial to understanding how the act of appropriating colonial photography can be empowering today. Photography played a role in establishing and legitimizing the idea of racial

¹³⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹³⁹ James Estrin, "Honoring the Legacy of African-American Women," *Lens* (blog), The New York Times, May 26, 2016, <https://archive.nytimes.com/lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/05/26/honoring-the-legacy-of-african-american-women/> (accessed June 15, 2024).

¹⁴⁰ Achille Mbembe used this term in multiple publications, in *Necropolitics* (French version from 2016, translated later to English in 2019), *Brutalism* (French version from 2020, translated to English in 2024), and in the article *The Universal Right to Breathe* (2021). Victor Peterson II proposes an interesting iteration of this term, applying it to both Blackness and Whiteness and to the logic of identity. See Victor Paterson II, "Autophagy," *Journal of Black Studies* 51, no. 5 (2020): 433–457.

¹⁴¹ Achille Mbembe, "Forbidden Pleasures. Exercises in Autophagia," in *Archival Impulse. Poverty Pornography*, ed. Ayana V. Jackson and Joseph-Achille Mbembe (Paris: Baudouin Lebon, 2013), 16–21.

hierarchy, particularly in the nineteenth century, by objectifying and fetishizing women of color. Photographs such as Taber's catered to a patriarchal white male fantasy. The Amazon's weapons are used as theatrical props or mythological attributes, not as the tools reflecting their labor and skill. The women hold virtually no power in the depicted scene. Jackson addresses these problems by taking control over the image, as the model, photographer, and editor of the digital collage. In the context of what Jackson has said about committing violence by recreating colonial fantasies, embodying both the photographer and the models might be seen as a self-destructive or even self-harming gesture. As I wrote in a previous article on *Demons Devotees I–IV*, autophagy functions in her project as an impersonation of the historical white gaze in the service of imperialism, preying on the suffering of people of color. Self-eating in this sense is an act of symbolically and visually consuming the sexualized representation of the colonized, while simultaneously taking the position of the colonizer.

Anthropophagy, on the other hand, was a term introduced in 1928 by the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade that describes a strategy of cannibalism as an empowering tool of indigenous cultures: “Tupi or not tupi, that is the question.”¹⁴² The witty phrase is an appropriation itself; it *eats* the Shakespearean motto, rooting it in the local context of Brazilian culture. In *Manifesto Antropófago* (*Anthropophagist Manifesto*), the act of consuming cultural substance considered canonical for the old continent is the active practice of a cannibal. This rhetorical figure utilizes appropriation by devouring European culture to empower the native *self*.¹⁴³ It is worth noting that memory also concerns Andrade's writing. In one passage, he states: “Down with Memory as a source of custom. The renewal of personal experience.”¹⁴⁴ The source of custom, in this case, could be understood as a set of aesthetic norms produced by the Western imagination. Jackson's practice, by repetition, is symbolically consuming the images, as well as the memories

¹⁴² One of the iconic lines from the *Anthropophagist Manifesto* is revoking a Shakespearean phrase: *To be, or not to be: that is the question*, words spoken by Hamlet. See De Andrade, “Cannibalist Manifesto.”

¹⁴³ This active versus passive voice of the colonized is critical to understanding empowerment strategies from the power imbalance of cultural hegemony.

¹⁴⁴ De Andrade, “Cannibalist Manifesto,” 43.

attached to them. Just as Jones has noted that dialectic doubleness is crucial to understanding and writing about photographic self-portraits and the relationship to the Other,¹⁴⁵ Jackson does not produce an identical image, but rather re-produces it in a dialogue with the past.

Looking at both Taber's portrait and Jackson's recreation, these three notions are crucial to understanding how the act of appropriating colonial photography can be empowering today. Photography played a role in establishing and legitimizing the idea of racial hierarchy, particularly in the nineteenth century, by objectifying and fetishizing women of color. Photographs, such as Taber's, catered to the patriarchal white male fantasy. Amazon's weapons are used as theatrical props or mythological attributes, not as the tools of their labor and skill. The women hold virtually no power in the depicted scene. Jackson addresses these problems by taking control over the image, being a model, a photographer, and an editor of the digital collage.

In this case, not only is the image sacrificed, but also, symbolically, a part of the artist herself. As Mbembe states in his *autophagy* analogy, by re-tracing someone's footsteps and remaking past gestures, Jackson is rewriting history by "positioning herself on both sides of the looking glass."¹⁴⁶ He is referring here to the camera lens and the fact that the photographer is a model, embodying a multitude of identities. *Autophagy* thus serves as a sacrificial gesture towards empowerment and liberation. By self-eating, or by translating it into the language of photography—self-imaging—the artist disarms the archive and takes up the position of both perpetrator and victim. The image created is still an image of a Black woman sitting in front of a camera, bare-chested and exposed; however, the conditions of the picture-making are controlled by her. In considering *autophagy* and *anthropophagy* as two mechanisms of survival, it is worth asking what they mean for the tangibility of colonial (in this particular case) memory.

¹⁴⁵ Jones, "The 'Eternal Return'."

¹⁴⁶ Mbembe, "Forbidden Pleasures", 19.

By breaking and displaying the codes of colonial representation, Jackson has deprived them of their special and magical “aura”¹⁴⁷ by locating the power imbalance in the medium itself. The artist revealed mechanisms of meticulously arranged composition, as well as the complete decontextualization of space where the act of seemingly cultural but overtly sexual display takes place. Moreover, Jackson’s reenactment of Taber’s photograph has proved her incredible attention to detail. By comparing the two photographs on the surface level, one from 1894 and the second from 2013, the only eye-catching difference is that in the contemporary version, all the girls from Dahomey have the same face. This particular, yet intriguing and disorienting observation emphasizes Jackson’s ethic of image-making once more. By choosing self-portraiture and digital repetition of her own figure, she utilizes new technologies to scrutinize how colonial photography wielded its power in constructing the image of the “Other.”

Another mechanism revealed by the artist is the usage and circulation of archival photographs. The appropriated colonial photograph was a 5.1 x 7.8 inches / 13 x 20 cm print (mounted on a sheet of 8 x 10 inches / 20 x 25 cm paper, possibly added later in the archive). It was reproduced in an album souvenir, along with other photographs Taber took during the fair.¹⁴⁸ Jackson’s iteration monumentalizes the referenced photograph, preventing it from passing from hand to hand. Her version is a print of size 47.2 x 43.4 inches / 120 x 110 cm, making the figures significantly larger. Exhibited in a frame, in the gallery setting, the artist intersects archival reenactment with the traditions of portraiture. The archival body then solidifies as a self-portrait, protected by the walls of a white cube space. In a way, by shifting the focus from Taber’s photographs to herself, she is resisting the traumatic re-circulation of evidence of colonial violence. At the same time, the recreation of the archival images makes me wonder whether Jackson is repeating the colonial gaze or breaking with it. Catherine E. McKinley poses the same question while

¹⁴⁷ More about this issue in Toma Muteba Luntumbue’s “Finding Means to Cannibalise the Anthropological Museum” (2020).

¹⁴⁸ The album is available through UC Berkeley’s library: <https://calisphere.org/collections/3508/> (accessed April 28, 2025).

analyzing other contemporary iterations of colonial photography.¹⁴⁹ Her answer is yes – the colonial gaze can be removed in the process of decoloniality; however, she gives no concrete example of how. Jackson’s strategy of digital bodily multiplication introduces new ways of intervening within the structure of the colonial gaze. On the one hand, Jackson’s self-portrait extends the tangibility of the memory of the girls from Dahomey; on the other hand, it situates the memory of them within a new body and new reality, entangled in the contexts of globalization and contemporary neo-colonialism.

Let’s go back to the question that Jackson asks in the title of her reenactment: *How do you think their women dress?* and the imperative order: *Don’t hide the blade*. The blade and the dress seem to be on two opposite spectrums, one associated with a more masculine energy and the other with a more feminine energy. However, the women warriors combined the two in their everyday lives. The question of the garment also addresses the lack of clothing, the exposed breasts of the women, as well as their simple, plain, and heavy skirts, which lack any cultural identification. It seems that in the question part of the title, Jackson is asking the contemporary fellow, the viewer, to imagine a counter-narrative. This speculative approach to history allows both the artist and the viewer to wonder about the fabrics, prints, and colors, and to imagine the archival record not only through the sense of vision but also through touch. The second part of the title seems to be addressing the Dahomey women. *Don’t hide the blade* could also mean “don’t lower your guard, be ready for war.” However, in the photograph the blades are exposed, and the women are presenting them to the photographer. Does the blade have another meaning in Jackson’s reenactment? Could the camera possibly be interpreted as assuming this role?

1.1.1. Dioramas

In other photographs from the *Archival Impulse* series, *Diorama I–IV*, Jackson specifies two sites: Palais Royal, a Parisian landmark important to the history of the French Revolution, and the already mentioned Jardin d’Acclimatation. She also references

¹⁴⁹ Catherine E. McKinley, *The African Lookbook. A Visual History of 100 Years of African Women* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 32.

archival photographs of three groups of people – the Andamanese, indigenous to the Andaman Islands; the Botocudo, indigenous to Brazil; and the Fuegians, the indigenous inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego. The concept of ‘diorama,’ referenced in all four parts, deeply connects the series to the history of colonialism. Dioramas, which feature three-dimensional figures set against a two-dimensional, illusory, painted background, and have served as tools for both entertainment and educational, utilize theatricality and *mise en scène* to convince the audience of the authenticity of the depicted scene. Dioramas were intended to depict the naturalistic state of things, using sculptures and taxidermy to achieve an effect described by Donna Haraway as “Teddy Bear Patriarchy.”¹⁵⁰ Like dioramas, archival bodies float in the collective memory of the Western Hemisphere, some linked to a specific landmark, and most existing in the liminal space of history. For those reclaiming archival bodies and discovering the related personal histories, individual names, and socio-political contexts, the colonial practice of representing non-Europeans and non-white identity typologically strips minorities of subjectivity and dignity, treating cultural identities as props and bodies as objects.

In *Diorama I* (**fig. 12**), Jackson recreated an archival image produced by John Edward Saché, *Andamanese Group with Their Keeper Mr Homfray* (**fig. 13**), taken around 1865 on a commission from the Asiatic Society of Bengal at the Andamanese Orphanage.¹⁵¹ The photograph depicts a group of seven young Andamanese boys and girls, mostly naked and with shaved heads, in a studio setting with their guardian, Jeremiah Nelson Homfray, who is fully clothed.¹⁵² The photograph was later exhibited at the Paris

¹⁵⁰ Haraway’s article discusses racism in science and colonialism in museums of natural history, dissecting the example of the Hall of African Peoples at New York’s American Museum of Natural History. See Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936,” *Social Text*, no. 11 (Winter 1984–1985): 20–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466593>.

¹⁵¹ Claire Wintle states that the image, among eighty-three archaeological photographs compiled by the Archaeological Survey of India for the India Office, was the only one representation of the Andamanese as a subject. See Claire Wintle, “Model Subjects: Representations of the Andaman Islands at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886,” *History Workshop Journal* 67, no.1 (2009): 194–207.

¹⁵² Identification of the photographer and the man depicted in the photograph after MAP Academy: MAP Academy Encyclopedia of Art, “John Edward Saché,” <https://mapacademy.io/article/john-edward-sache/> (accessed June 10th, 2024). According to MAP, Saché’s photographs are now in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru; and the Alkazi Collection of Photography.

International Exposition in 1867.¹⁵³ In the photograph, the power dynamic between the colonizer and the colonized is amplified by the clothing and its lack, as well as by the composition. Homfray seems to be disjointed from the group of Andamanese, as a result of a significant height difference between them and the fact that he is the only person fully clothed. His body is turned to the side, and he is not directing his gaze at the group of children, but is instead looking into the distance. The photograph is highly orchestrated, and all the gestures feel forced. From the looks on the children's faces, we can only imagine how the dynamic between the photographer and the subjects played out in the studio. The composition is driven by aesthetics, with figures holding each other and posing in a manner that leads up to the tallest figure, Homfray, who serves as a patronizing compositional pinnacle that unites the scene. Saché achieves narrative continuity through gestures and poses, directing the gazes of the Andamanese toward us and engaging the viewers in this act of vulnerability on display. Given that the Andamanese children are orphans, perhaps the photographer aimed to evoke empathy. This information, however, raises questions about whether the portrayed children lost their relatives to British colonial rule. Their guardian, the British superintendent who brought them to Calcutta, exacerbates this power dynamic even further.

Jackson's appropriation contains seven figures in total, instead of the original eight. By using digital manipulation, the artist has multiplied her own figure, seamlessly mimicking all the interactions contained in the referenced archival material. She presents herself posing both naked as the Andamanese, and clothed as Homfray, while also paying attention to the details and making other small alterations that are significant in their value. First, Jackson's portrayal of the guardian focuses more on the gestural dialogue between the photographed subjects. She is looking down at her own figures (mirroring the children), thereby creating an emotional distance between the portrayed, despite the physical closeness, as well as emphasizing the structural violence inherent in the photograph. The second change made by the artist was to portray the figures against a lush green

¹⁵³ In Jackson's catalog, this photograph is described as: Unknown photographer, Paris, 1869, Group of Andamanes. The same description follows in articles analyzing Jackson's reenactment.

background, consisting of tall grass that fills the entire frame. This background makes the composition busy and overwhelming, leaving the figures with virtually no space to breathe. Another alteration concerns the number of figures portrayed: seven instead of eight. We can only wonder what happened to the Andamanese child missing from Jackson's photograph. Perhaps the artist intended to highlight such a loss as something inherently ingrained in colonial pictorial rhetoric. The fact that the missing person makes almost no difference when comparing the two images makes it even more disturbing.

By playing all of the roles herself, Jackson emphasizes the ridiculousness of the situation arranged in the studio, as well as showcasing a symbolic act of anthropophagy, or cultural cannibalism, consuming images from the past in order to redefine them. Technology enables the artist to control the picture fully – from the models to the photographer involved – and also to break with the colonial gaze, parodying and mocking it. As a Black woman (and one coming from the West), Jackson connects two sides of power, “devouring” but also liberating the image of the oppressed. Her body serves as a tangible screen, evoking memories of colonialism while introducing a new layer to the historical picture. In a sense, she is “shielding” the image of children with her own naked figure(s), consciously using the physical body to disrupt historical objectification. Her performative self-portrait intervenes in the original archival material, critiquing it and exposing the violent nature of such a display.

In *Diorama II* (**fig. 14**) and *III from Palais Royal to Jardin d'Acclimatation* (**fig. 15**), the artist poses *en face* and in profile, referencing the anthropological portraits of a Botocudo woman photographed by Eugène Thiesson ca. 1844. The artist situates herself on the right side of the frame. She depicts herself in color, wearing a deep blue skirt and posing against a black and white landscape that consists of trees, weeds, and a tower to the left. The building is significant to the referenced location: this military dovecote built in 1875 for the Jardin d'Acclimatation was managed by the French post office and accommodated pigeons (**fig. 16**). In the digital space of her photo collage, Jackson has achieved a diorama-like effect, distinguishing her figure from the black and white

background, which resembles a time stamp stuck in the past. The landscape presented in the photograph, devoid of any color, seems lifeless, as if turned to stone by a Medusa. It is, in fact, a negative, in which the depicted nature and architecture is significantly brighter than the pitch-black background peeking through the trees. Its grainy texture references the camera's gaze and emphasizes the artificiality of the scene. A shift in perspective makes the artist tower over the dovecote, which resembles a bird cage more than an actual building. The Jackson's silhouette is stoic, and her face does not reveal any particular emotion. In *Diorama II*, she is looking straight at the camera, facing the viewer and returning the gaze, leaving almost no room for the eye to wander, focusing the viewer's attention on herself. In *Diorama III*, the artist is looking at the space out of the frame, blocking the gaze of the viewer with her body, which is turned to the side, revealing an empty hole in the middle of the picture, where the density of the landscape thins out.

These photographs of the Botocudo woman were daguerreotypes (**fig. 17, fig. 18**), and the material qualities of the image, the metal plaque, and the wooden cassette used all played an important role in terms of the medium's tangibility. Similarly, fifteen of J.T. Zealy's daguerreotypes from 1850,¹⁵⁴ portraying Renty Taylor,¹⁵⁵ his daughter Delia, Alfred, Fassena, Jem, and Jack and his daughter Drana, who are all depicted by means of the same formula, one typical of ethnography and sustaining pseudo-scientific racial theories, were beautifully framed, their plush inside hiding horrifying histories. Although lacking the same materiality, Jackson's self-portrait introduced color to the referenced archival photograph, imagining the deep blue of the skirt. In embodying the exact same poses, the artist is also embodying the memory of the Botacudo woman, giving the archival

¹⁵⁴ The daguerreotypes were found in 1976 by employees of Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

¹⁵⁵ In 2019, Tamara Lanier claimed to be a descendant of Renty Taylor and sued Harvard University for "wrongful seizure, possession, and expropriation". That information was verified by genealogists, including Toni Carrier, the director of the Center for Family History, working with the International African American Museum. In her article for The New York Times, "The First Photos of Enslaved People Raise Many Questions About the Ethics of Viewing", Parul Sehgal summarizes the discussion around the claim, the skepticism of researchers, and the shift in paradigms from archival records to family lineage. By the time I finished writing this study, Lanier's lawsuit had been settled, with the daguerreotypes of Renty and his family being donated to a Black history museum in South Carolina. See Clyde McGrady, "Harvard Relents After Protracted Fight Over Slave Photos," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/28/us/harvard-slavery-daguerreotypes-lawsuit.html> (accessed May 28, 2025).

body a new setting and new colors. In both *Don't Hide the Blade/ How do you think their women dress?* and *Dioramas*, the artist used large-scale prints, each over 40 inches, to monumentalize the archival record. By shifting the focus toward women's stories, the act of enlarging the historical images gives the memorized and referenced image a new body, one which occupies much more space, is much more visible, and is thus more noticeable. The photographs made at world's fairs were designed to be held, touched, and easily carried, transported, stored, and distributed, whereas the contemporary prints from Jackson confront the viewer with blown-up new versions of objects that resist such treatment. The daguerreotype of the Botocudo woman taken in Brazil by the French daguerreotypist is now preserved in the collection of the Musée du quai Branly, and is available online to viewers and researchers working on colonial history. Similarly, the documentation of the Dayomeyan women is now digitized and accessible to all.

The tangibility of the medium differs in each of the cases discussed above. With Thiesson's photograph comes the heaviness of the wooden daguerreotype case, the coldness of the metal plate, the reflection of the glass, and the golden shimmer of the frame; with Taber's photograph come the texture of the albumen print, the differences between the image from 1894 and the card that was later added by the archivist, the engraved gold lettering of the studio, and the form of the cabinet card. Jackson's digital photographs evoke a different type of tangibility, one that concerns the monumentalization of the historical image, the physicality of the bodily performance, and the repeating cycle of memory.

In her essay *Venus in Two Acts*, Saidiya Hartman describes the archive as a death sentence, referring to the violence inherent in a grand narrative of history.¹⁵⁶ In one of the questions framing the essay, Hartman asks: "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?"¹⁵⁷ Could retracing the steps of the Dahomeyan and Botocudo women, as well as Taber's and Thiesson's own, be described as a reenactment of violence? Or is it an act of vulnerability and compassion? "The loss of

¹⁵⁶ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed,”¹⁵⁸ Hartman continues. In this context, Jackson’s self-portraits make the “grammar of violence” visible, tangible, and readable to the viewer.¹⁵⁹ Her work actively reclaims agency within colonial imagery by revealing the visual codes and compositional techniques that depicted people as powerless, silent, and passive. Through digital interventions, the artist exposes studio photography as a highly controlled setting where the trauma of colonized individuals was aestheticized for display and entertainment.

What Hartman describes as creating a space for mourning reminds me of what Mbembe noted about archival structure. For him, the archives are made of rifts/slits,¹⁶⁰ which means the material integrity of it can be always questioned and the crevices explored. By revisiting these traces and navigating the narrow openings, this reading of the archive engages with corporeal aspects, allowing bodies and movement to enter the equation. Problematizing archives with bodies represents a critique of the Western, primarily European model of archiving through written language, which often disregards the “scraps”¹⁶¹ or the seemingly voiceless actors who represent other forms of knowledge, such as tribal, indigenous, and oral histories.

Inherent to recreations of colonial photography are questions concerning the (de)contextualization of historical records. Mbembe has expressed his concern about the self-contemplative character of the *Archival Impulse* series, which he worries may have transformed archival images into an egotistic hyperbole.¹⁶² When considering the performance of others’ identities in self-portraiture, the artist’s interwoven “self” enters the

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶⁰ Mbembe mentions a rift/slit in Jackson’s catalog and elaborates on that more in Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

¹⁶¹ After Saidiya Hartman. See Thora Siemsen, “On Working with Archives,” *The Creative Independent*, February 3, 2021, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/> (accessed: April 3rd, 2024).

¹⁶² Mbembe, “Forbidden Pleasures,” 21.

equation as a crucial factor. As an African-American woman of Ghanaian descent, Jackson is working through the imagery of the historical African diaspora, challenging a narrative tied to her identity. She is examining whether colonial photography still holds power today, not in decolonized African countries, but in the United States, from where she speaks. The tangible memories she recollects concern archival bodies, anonymous victims of the colonial regime that stand as representations of injustice.

Another aspect associated with evoking the memory of archival images while simultaneously performing self-portraiture is the act of inhabiting the photograph. The archival body, viewed as an image, is regulated by a set of conventions and colonial fantasies, which simultaneously constitute a fantasy of possession, regulation, and framing set within the system of Western knowledge. The sculptural poses are navigated by a disciplined photographer who shoots multiple angles of the same scene, ensuring that the group fits the relevant indexing and typological protocols. Jackson reanimates archival bodies, wearing these representations like a second skin. Through physical performance, characterization, and pose, she inhabits these archival bodies and, hence, the archival photographs. What comes from this action is a decolonizing of the image from within. By activating certain representations and dissecting the “grammar of violence,” Jackson works with memory as an equal agent to both past and present times.¹⁶³ Her self-portraits become memorials for the anonymous women and children oppressed and silenced in the past.

I would like to compare here Jackson and Abraham Onoriode Oghobase, a Nigerian artist based in Canada. Both artists use digital techniques to inhabit photographs. In his 2018 piece, *Colonial Self-Portrait* (**fig. 19**), Oghobase photoshopped parts of his head and hands onto archival images of Frederick Lugard, a British Colonial administrator in Nigeria during the early twentieth century (**fig. 20**). His fragmented body seamlessly merges with the historical record, challenging the subject’s identity and placing his body in a position of power. This act of inhabiting the body is more literal and straightforward than in Jackson’s approach. In Oghobase’s self-portrait, Lugard’s body serves as a vessel.

¹⁶³ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 4.

Meanwhile, Jackson recalls the memory of photographed subjects through bodily performance.

In this context, it is necessary to reference the convention of the portrait and its agency in world fairs and colonialism. Allan Sekula writes about the double system of photographic portraiture, which operates both *honorifically* and *repressively*, extending and degrading the traditional function.¹⁶⁴ Photography exceeded the honorific roles of painted portraiture and entered the medical field through anatomical illustration and as Sekula states: “[...] to delimit the terrain of the *other*, to define both *generalized look* – the typology – and the *contingent instance* of deviance and social pathology.”¹⁶⁵ This discourse reflects the two appearance-based practices that marked the nineteenth century and created new social stigmata – physiognomy and phrenology – combining nonspecialist empiricism and a proto-medicalized study of the mind.¹⁶⁶ These modes of seeing the body, and most importantly, the head, as a site of signs, representing certain deviations or pathologies, have significantly impacted the social optics of perceiving people of color.¹⁶⁷ The referenced portraits of the Botocudo women, first shot from the shoulders up, posing *en face*, and second from the profile, are examples of anthropometry, popularized in the mid-nineteenth-century, or anthropometric photography, used as a tool for surveying and policing tribes being researched. Similarly, mug shots, branching out from their anthropological roots, were standardized by Alphonse Bertillon in 1888 and introduced at the Chicago World Fair in 1893 (**fig. 21, fig. 22**).¹⁶⁸ Described as *portrait parlé*, ‘speaking

¹⁶⁴ Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (1986): 6.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 11. As Sekula writes, phrenology soon entered the American penal system through Eliza Farnham. She practiced phrenology while managing the women’s ward at Sing Sing Prison and in 1846 commissioned Mathew Brady to make a series of portraits of New York inmates. Published under the title *Rationale of Crime*, the work consisted of photographic portraits, annotated in racial terms, but unlike the portraits of child inmates, was not characterized by race or ethnicity.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* As Sekula adds, this archival promise of the optical taxonomic ordering of the body was not always fulfilled. He states: “If we examine the manner in which photography was made useful by late-nineteenth-century police, we find plentiful evidence of a crisis of faith optical empiricism. In short, we need to describe the emergence of a thruth-apparatus that cannot be adequately reduced to the optical model provided by the camera. The camera is integrated into a larger ensemble: a bureaucratic-clerical-statistical system of “intelligence.” This system can be described as a sophisticated form of the archive. The central artifact of this system is not the camera but the filing cabinet.” (16).

¹⁶⁸ The Bertillon system was adopted first by the French police and later, in 1908, by the American police forces.

images', they came with nine physical measurements (i.e. head, ears, arms) placed underneath two side-by-side portraits.¹⁶⁹ These practices of observation and surveillance in portraiture, rooted in racialized optics,¹⁷⁰ help explain the decontextualization and visual fragmentation of the body during that era, and at the same time, raise questions about the necessity of undressing women to expose their breasts. Jackson played with the idea of standardized surveillance photography multiple times in the *Archival Impulse* series, commenting on the life and death of Saartjie Baartman (Sawtche)¹⁷¹ and the role of the medical field in sustaining stereotypes and dehumanizing practices. In *Dioramas II and III*, the criminological aspect is expressed through the posing and situating of the body within the context of the architectural structure of the dovecote, a symbol of both imprisonment and shelter.

The fourth and last photograph in *Dioramas, Tierra del Fuego* (**fig. 23**), depicts the Indigenous inhabitants of the Land of Fire in South America, portrayed by Jackson in seven digitally manipulated studio self-portraits. Judging by the usage of a wig cut in a bob with bangs, the artist is referencing the Selk'nam, also known as the Onawo or Ona people (**fig. 24**). Jackson is, once again, posing nude, both standing and sitting on the ground. The studio space is vacuumed of any indicators of time and space, leaving us with the subjects' piercing gazes. The two figures standing in the background are covering their genital areas, and the one on the left is also protecting her breasts, which may suggest that the artist is playing the roles of both female and male. Standing back-to-back, the two figures mirror each other, symbolically referencing the present as a reflection of the past. The multiplication of her figures and the sameness of the hairstyles imply the anonymous character of the portrayed subjects, often described in archival records as a "group of...", reflecting the violence of anthropological records and classification. Respecting the distinction between nude and naked, introduced by Kenneth Clark and later developed by

¹⁶⁹ Shawn Michelle Smith, "The Mug Shot: A Brief History," *Aperture*, no. 230, *Prison Nation* (Spring 2018): 30–33.

¹⁷⁰ More on the topic of Blackness intersecting with surveillance in Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015)

¹⁷¹ Baartman was traveling through Europe as a freak show attraction under the name Hottentot Venus. She worked on Dutch farms and in Dutch households in Cape Town (former Dutch colony), hence her name.

John Berger, both Jackson's photography and the records of the colonial past relate to a directed sexual display of the body, seeking attention (mainly from the male spectator).¹⁷² However, the nudity, consistently applied throughout the whole of the *Archival Impulse* series, might also be considered a tool for dismantling these colonial optics. Showing both vulnerability and power, Jackson uses her body as a shield, protecting images from the past by replacing them with new, contemporary versions that are critical of the regime of colonial discourse.

It is important to notice that toward the latter half of the nineteenth century, nude photographs, mostly of people of color, were staples in ethnology, biology, and in early studies on eugenics. The scientific nude, as Philippa Levine notes, was promoted as a practical and nonsexual emblem of truth, yet there were many cases of sexualizing and fetishizing the bodies of natives, especially women.¹⁷³ By incorporating the context of British imperialism, the trope of the "naked native" in Jackson's photographs quickly becomes a symbol of the colonial primitive and savage, reflecting the inherently imbalanced power relations between the colonizer and the colonized, and from reading from the context of Jackson's work – of the photographer and the photographed.¹⁷⁴ Even more important here is the circulation of colonial imagery, and how and where the images of naked natives were distributed. As Levine shows, from geography textbooks, international exhibitions, postcards, and scientific journals to missionary expeditions, such images were widely disseminated in various ways and accessible to both scientific and elite circles as well as to the masses.¹⁷⁵ Now archived and no longer serving colonial politics, today they circulate globally via the Internet, providing material for critical analysis of the past. What does colonial imagery mean for the contemporary viewer, asks Hans Peter

¹⁷² See Kenneth Clark, *The Nude. A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation–Harmondsworth–Penguin, 1972).

¹⁷³ Philippa Levine, "Naked Truths: Bodies, Knowledge, and the Erotics of Colonial Power," *Journal of British Studies* 52, no. 1 (2013), 8.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

Hahn.¹⁷⁶ He proposes turning to the emotions within pictures as a recourse, following a phenomenological approach suggested by Christopher Pinney.¹⁷⁷ As much as the approach of accessing the emotions of the colonial photographer or the colonized subject is utopian and seemingly counter-productive, there is an undeniably humane need to at least speculate on the conditions of picture-making during that time. Jackson does so by asking questions such as: *How do you think their women dress?*

Through multiple references to the bonding of modernity and national identities in the 1800s, the artist explores the roots of photographers' agency and the ways they contributed to the colonial experiment's success and justification of dehumanizing practices, such as exhibiting people like objects. In discussing the responsibility of image-makers during the era of world fairs, the colonial violence of the shutter intersects with the viewers' role as voyeurs, as well as enjoyers of the presented and constructed idea of otherness. As Jackson has noted, these new forms of display – human zoos – provided egalitarian entertainment for the masses: “So even the most poor and impoverished person working in Paris could go and see the Negro village and feel like a queen. And this is something that was in the adverts.”¹⁷⁸ In this statement, the words of Douglass resonate: “The humblest servant girl may now possess a picture of herself such as the wealth of kings could not purchase fifty years ago.”¹⁷⁹ Photography served as a double-edged sword for BIPOC representation, giving both as a tool for liberation, as Douglass preached, and as a tool of oppression, as Jackson emphasizes. The archive, as the “law of what can be

¹⁷⁶ Hans Peter Hahn, *On the Circulation of Colonial Pictures Polyphony and Fragmentation*, in *Global Photographies. Memory – History – Archives*, ed. Sissy Helff and Stefanie Michels (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018), 89–108.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 90. Hahn proposes: “As Christopher Pinney (2007) has stressed, a phenomenology of such photographs must first come to terms with the fact that they do not have a genuine “message”. Their openness to different interpretations is, of course, the main reason why these pictures were able to be used primarily for colonial propaganda at the time. These colonial images were therefore a special variation of the “world as image” that contributed significantly to the imagination of the colonies as being associated with fear and desire.” Fear and desire being the two operative categories of colonial optics are crucial to understanding why visuality and more specifically photography played such an important role in the colonial apparatus of power. Photography allowed the desire to look at the Other to be sustained, while also sustaining the fear of the Other.

¹⁷⁸ A. Jackson, “CCGRS Lecture Series: Archival Impulse,” 13 (in the transcript).

¹⁷⁹ Douglass, “Pictures and Progress,” 165.

said,”¹⁸⁰ implies higher instances of knowledge-producing and image-making, while Jackson redefined this claim as the law of the unspoken, emphasizing the stories that are untold, the names that are anonymous, and the dresses that are speculated.

1.2. Black Pin-Up Girl

Vernacular photography holds great power and a sense of empowerment for Black communities. Bell hooks has noted that the snapshot images covering the walls of African-Americans’ homes were interventions intended to counter racial segregation and race-based dehumanization.¹⁸¹ Photography has enabled *immediate intervention* in the socio-cultural sphere, as hooks continues,¹⁸² following Douglass’s positive attitude towards photography and the power of self-representation. Vernacular photography, essential to a homemade identity that extends beyond these walls and empowers people in their everyday struggles, provides a vast socio-cultural context for the medium’s usage by the Black community. It is crucial to understand these amateur practices as sources of generational legacies and memories that have survived the hardships of historical underrepresentation or misrepresentation. As Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley describe: “Vernacular remembering is at once personal and shared, immediate to self as well as being intersubjectively negotiated and inherited from others across the generations. It draws upon situated and mediated experience, with first- and second-hand forms of remembering acting reciprocally to shape and inform each other within particular social and cultural contexts.”¹⁸³ The immediacy referenced in the quote provides a compelling starting point for exploring how memories in vernacular photography have inspired contemporary self-portraiture.

¹⁸⁰ Michael Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 129.

¹⁸¹ hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 59.

¹⁸² Eadem, *In Our Glory*, 49.

¹⁸³ Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, “Vernacular Remembering” in *Research Methods for Memory Studies*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 97.

In the summer of 1957, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, an African-American couple, a woman and a man from Los Angeles, posed for a pinup-styled photoshoot documented in an album that was later purchased on eBay by Lorna Simpson.¹⁸⁴ The artist is known for working with found images of unknown origin that portray anonymous women, as well as photo-booth strips and photo-collaged beauty shots from *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines. In her project on the pinup series, entitled *1957–2009*, she recreated around 150 photos of the pair from the album, using prompts, wigs, and accurate clothing (**fig. 25**).¹⁸⁵ She combined these with original photographs, so the total number of images in the series is 307. This project marks a significant shift in Simpson's work, as for the first time, the artist herself appears in the pictures featured.

The 1957 photographs showcase various domestic settings—including bedrooms, kitchens, living rooms, gardens, and garage doors. The album's main subject, a woman, is featured in diverse outfits and hairstyles, oftentimes in dresses that highlight her curves, complemented by high heels and bold red lips. She exudes sexiness and confidence, playfully interacting with the camera; at times, her gaze meets the lens, while at other moments, she seems to look beyond the frame, engaging an unseen audience. Her playful and flirtatious demeanor presents an image of liberated women in that era, drawing inspiration from icons like Dorothy Dandridge and Eartha Kitt (**fig. 26, 27**). Throughout the album, these references become evident. The portraits also resemble those of lifestyle magazines such as *Jet* and *Ebony*, which showcased a variety of styled and posed representations, similar to the ones in the album (**fig. 28**). These seductive and slightly fetishistic pin-up photoshoots rejected the traditional 1950s housewife stereotype. Instead, they portrayed an empowered, confident Black woman at ease with her body.

¹⁸⁴ Simpson explained that first, she came across only a couple of images of the woman. Later, the artist was contacted by the seller, who proposed another couple of hundred photos of the woman, all taken in the summer of 1957. See Lorna Simpson in conversation with Bill Powers, "Purple Archives: Nostalgic Delusions of Simpler Times in Lorna Simpson's Pin Up Photography," *Purple Magazine* 13 (2010), <https://purple.fr/magazine/ss-2010-issue-13/lorna-simpson/> (accessed June 18, 2024).

¹⁸⁵ The *1957–2009* project was one of the first series where Simpson posed for her own photographs. She mentions the process and the experience in the interview with Sabine Mirlesse: Sabine Mirlesse, "Interview with Lorna Simpson," *Aperture*, June 25, 2013, <https://aperture.org/editorial/interview-with-lorna-simpson/> (accessed June 28th, 2024).

The male figure appears much less frequently throughout the album as a model. He is dressed in both formal and casual attire, only occasionally posing in a more relaxed manner or engaging the camera. What is important here is that the pair took snapshots of each other. One of the photographs allows one to identify the camera they were using, a twin-lens reflex with a viewfinder situated on the top of the body that requires one to look down at it (**fig. 29**). The man is depicted crouched down, holding the camera and the flash, with a cigarette in his mouth, seemingly taking a self-portrait in the mirror. However, the perspective and the fact that there is no indication of a mirror frame visible in the photograph suggest that the man is in fact the one posing. This means that two cameras were used in the photoshoot. A crisscross exchange of glances occurs between the pair in an intimate setting, evoking feelings of safety and trust. This is particularly significant given that the 1950s were a time of intensified racial segregation in America. Considering the location, Los Angeles, and its proximity to Hollywood, the album could have served as a portfolio, hence the changing backgrounds, outfits, and roles portrayed by those depicted.¹⁸⁶

The settings of Simpson's photographs were carefully chosen to mimic the referenced shots as truthfully as possible, creating an almost seamless visual patchwork of the two timelines. Her approach can be characterized as mirroring, made evident in both the visual layout of the series and the materiality of the medium. She meticulously recreates facial expressions, postures, outfits, wigs, and props, embodying both male and female characters with equal skill. She accurately adheres to the original dimensions of the small black-and-white gelatin silver prints, which measured 5 1/2 × 5 1/2 in. (13.97 × 13.97 cm). Each photograph was framed individually by the artist herself (**fig. 30**). The original layout of the album is unknown; it was most likely disassembled to merge the photographs from 1957 with those from 2009.

¹⁸⁶ In one of the interviews, Simpson speculates about the original purpose of the album: "My assumption is that she is posing in order to create a portfolio for an acting or modeling career, and I reenact her postures." See Adrianna Campbell, "Lorna Simpson Talks About Her Recent Paintings and Solo Exhibition in Fort Worth," *Artforum*, November 26, 2016, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/lorna-simpson-talks-about-her-recent-paintings-and-solo-exhibition-in-fort-worth-231770/> (accessed June 24th, 2024).

Simpson is both the model and the one operating the camera. A playful exchange of gazes takes place both between the camera and the artist, as well as symbolically between the artist and the couple. We cannot separate Simpson's vision from the couple's vision, as it is integrated together in one body of work. I propose the term *throuple vision* to describe the layered relations enacted in this project, wherein the historical couple, the contemporary artist performing both roles, and the viewer are all locked into a triadic gaze. This framework complicates the binary positions of subject/object, male/female, past/present, and invites a more fluid, polymorphous encounter with photographic portraiture, providing a conceptual menage à trois in terms of identity, authorship, and spectatorship.

It is worth noting that the term "pin-up" was originally derived from the posters and photos of girls that were pinned up on the walls and lockers of American soldiers during and after World War II. The act of displaying these types of representation was done mostly in private, where desire was mixed with shame. Pin-up as a trade was underground, exploitative, borderline illegal, and catered to a predominantly Caucasian audience.¹⁸⁷ We could ask to whom Simpson's series as a whole is addressed. With the 1957 album, the projected viewer was one of the pair, a familiar and trusted observer. The album most likely circulated among an intimate circle of friends and family. Given its potential use as a portfolio, it might also have been created with a professional audience in mind. The album sublimely addresses the tangible tension between the private and public appearances of African Americans. At the time, domestic spaces offered a safe haven for the playful exploration of identity and self-expression, while public spaces remained hostile and dangerous. With Simpson's recreation comes a much larger audience, as the album, along with its contemporary iterations, gained institutional visibility. Considering the unknown context of the 1957 album and the anonymity of the couple depicted, as well as the fact that they could still be alive, raises another question, this time of an ethical nature. I will

¹⁸⁷ Chivaka Honeychild, "Black Pin-up History: A Whip, A Chain, A Wink and A Smile," *Medium*, November 29, 2016, <https://medium.com/@chicavahoneychildtate/black-pin-up-history-a-whip-a-chain-a-wink-and-a-smile-27d4fc7d0b71> (accessed June 2, 2025).

expand on this more in discussing the status of the archival bodies present in the project. For now, I would like to focus on the display of the series.

Simpson's approach to exhibiting *1957–2009* is highly contextualized within the institutional framework of the museum. The artist exhibited these snapshots at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, a leading institution in shaping and influencing discourse about modernity and the role of photography within it. Exhibited in the group show *Staging Action: Performance in Photography Since 1960* (2011), the set of 12 photographs was meticulously arranged in a rectangular shape grouped 3 by 4, leaving almost no space between the framed square pictures (**fig. 31**). The selected photographs depicted the woman from 1957 in 9 photos, with Simpson in 3, giving more visibility to the real snapshots rather than to the recreated ones. However, the title of the show applies to both, giving the 1957 album an artistic “upgrade” and a place in institutional discourse and the art history canon. In other instances, the artist's work is more extensive, displaying hundreds of individually framed photographs, often occupying two walls, complementing the crease between them (e.g., *Lorna Simpson*, Jeu de Paume, Paris, France, 2013; *Lorna Simpson*, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK, 2014). The grid-like layout, combined with the unified clean white framing (**fig. 32**), endows the vernacular photographs with a geometric and orderly style.¹⁸⁸ The act of isolating each photograph no longer allows us to see the 1957 album as a whole. The display highlights the autonomy of vernacular photography, which is removed from its original context and presented as a work of art. Although the album (or part of it) acquires institutional visibility, depicting snapshots of African-American life in America's biggest cultural institutions, which have only recently shown interest in BIPOC representation, the decision to present vernacular photography as equally performative and staged, in a sense, denies its social and domestic context. The album purchased by Simpson in an online auction appears to have lost its inter-generational impact due to the loss of inherited memory. There is no evidence of any private notes or writing, typically associated with vernacular photographs, which carry

¹⁸⁸ See Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” *October* 9 (1979): 51–64.

intimate knowledge and can be hard to decipher for those outside the family or circle of friends.

The display differs significantly from how pin-up posters were circulated among soldiers. Hank Willis Thomas's *Black is Beautiful* (1953–2008) addresses this, showcasing thousands of images of Black pin-up models, mostly from *Jet* magazine (**fig. 33**). All of the images are pasted onto the wall, forming a wallpaper that covers the entire space. The project's title directly references Kwame Brathwaite, a photographer who popularized the phrase with his empowering fashion images in the 1970s. Thomas's work captures the chaotic way images are dispersed in the twenty-first century through accumulation and decontextualization, while also referencing how these images acted as posters during the latter half of the twentieth century. These projects by Simpson and Thomas differ in their artistic strategies and presentation, with one exhibiting a more performative and intimate approach to the found material, and the other adopting a more conceptual stance on beauty and politics in the mass media. What connects the two series and invites intriguing discussion is their shared dissemination of pin-up imagery and appropriation of found or vernacular images.

As Catherine Zuromskis points out, vernacular exhibitions held by well-established institutions shape the collective memory surrounding snapshots, and create a set of normative aesthetic parameters within which photography can be defined.¹⁸⁹ The examples she provides are the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present* exhibition, which offered an aestheticized and, in consequence, neutralized insight into America's social landscape; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Other Pictures*, which aimed to create "accidental masterpieces."¹⁹⁰ Due to their scrutiny of the art gallery setting and the modern art paradigm that frames them, and their being preserved in a highly controlled environment, the displayed snapshots lose the power that hooks ascribed to immediate intervention in the socio-political sphere.

¹⁸⁹ Catherine Zuromskis, "Ordinary Pictures and Accidental Masterpieces: Snapshot Photography in the Modern Art Museum," *Art Journal* 67, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 104–125.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

Simpson also exhibited part of the series (123 photographs) at the Brooklyn Museum (*Gathered*, 2011), along with found photo-booth portraits, ink drawings, and a video installation. The presence of the artist's works there is particularly personal. The Brooklyn-born Simpson speaks here to the community that raised her by displaying hundreds of African-American snapshots in the place where she grew up.

In analyzing vernacular photography as particularly active agents of memory that escape institutional, governmental, and archival rhetorics, it is essential to resist aesthetic classification and grant the photographs their material and tangible status. In his seminal essay, Geoffrey Batchen describes the place of vernaculars in photography as Derridian *parergon*, or a margin of history.¹⁹¹ In order to understand these vernaculars, one must consider their conceptual, historical, and physical identity, as well as the quintessential multiplicity they offer in approaches, dissemination, and usage.¹⁹² In many senses, the 1957 pin-up album is an essence of what was outside the frame: a joyful Black pin-up girl being depicted during a time of racial segregation. The artist recognized the importance of this kind of representation, highlighting the figure of a Black emancipated woman who has gained control over her body.

1.2.1. Two Timelines

1957–2009 presents two timelines, separated by more than fifty years, providing a vast sociopolitical context that underwent significant change, from racial segregation to the election of the first Black president. The artist chose to remain faithful to the original material by recreating it as accurately as possible. However, it is crucial to view Simpson's work in the context of these two temporal timelines, marked by photography and memory, which are entangled in starkly different social discussions around blackness and imagery. The 1950s were a time of upheaval in terms of racial issues in the United States, especially in southern states, which imposed segregation on all aspects of everyday life in public

¹⁹¹ Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing on Photography History* (Cambridge–London: The MIT Press, 2000), 58.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 59.

spaces – from buses, restaurants, and bathrooms to schools. The imagery of blackness at that time was, first and foremost, a testimony to violence and racism, with photography providing a means of immediate reaction. Just two years before the album was made, the image of Emmett Till's battered face and his mother enduring the pain of loss as she stood by the open casket of her brutally murdered fourteen-year-old son changed the trajectory of the Civil Rights movement. Following Abel's "affective wrinkle" in civil rights photography, most of the imagery of that time emphasized bruises, cuts, wounds, and breaks, framing skin as a site of struggle that mediated between the bodies of the oppressed and the power of the state.¹⁹³ In that sense, the 1957 album preserves a tangible memory of that era that is free from pain and is instead filled with joy and carelessness. It creates a dream-like illusion typical of the movie industry context in which it may have been created. On the other hand, the album also offers an escape from the horrors and gruesomeness of the visual documentation of racial segregation, resisting the narrative of objectifying or instrumentalizing the Black body.

In comparing Jackson's and Simpson's projects, we can notice two different approaches to the archival material. For one, Simpson is dealing with a private and vernacular memory, while Jackson is excavating a more official memory, one produced by the world fair's colonial propaganda. In this case, Simpson's juxtaposition of the source material with recreations can be justified, as she is evoking much more intimate memories. Both artists operate on different registers of the collective memory: one based on a much smaller group, such as the pair, and the other, on a much larger one, such as the nation. While Jackson is dismantling the white colonial gaze, Simpson shares her vision with two African Americans from the past.

In *1957–2009* Simpson is reanimating archival bodies, inhabiting certain representations that operate on different levels. One is a wider lens focused on the pin-up image in pop culture, while the other is much narrower, concentrating on a specific pair from 1957, embodying what they saw in lifestyle magazines of the time. As I mentioned

¹⁹³ Abel, "Skin, Flesh, and the Affective Wrinkles," 38.

while discussing Jackson's project, archival bodies are situated between the past and present, preserved and governed by institutions, and resurface in an array of new contexts via digital technologies. The pair from the album acquired the status of archival bodies, while the album was decontextualized from its original purpose, sold on eBay, and later displayed in pieces in art institutions to a wider public.

Before the archival bodies in Simpson's work were subjected to institutional visibility, the album went through the hands and dismantling gaze of the artist. As in most of her works, the artist focuses on the powers of observation and the act of surveillance, examining how bodies are depicted and posed, and how they interact with the world. She studies them expeditiously, making sure the hairstyles, clothing styles, and furnishings of the interior appear as accurate as possible. The artist's fixation on the gaze intersects with the tension between the history of depicting Black and POC bodies and the present. The artist elaborates on this in an interview:

I wanted to challenge the idea of subjectivity, how we come to know the subject, and our desire to get to know the subject through details. My mimicry visibly expanded her project as well as challenged my own. I imitate and mirror her poses and expressions, and in the same manner I also imitate the man that appears in the images. Using appropriated images engages my past work and also engages the appropriation of desire, in terms of the legacies of portraiture, and also of visual information. The discomfort I had about appearing in that body of work is similar to how I felt operating outside of the language of my earlier work.¹⁹⁴

By comparing the photographs of Simpson and the pin-up girl sitting on top of a piano, raising a glass in a toast (**fig. 34**), we can observe how the gaze is employed in the series. Positioned at the bottom, the camera captures the women from a low angle, fixating on their bodies, especially their legs and rising skirts. The posing is not casual and does not evoke a spontaneous snapshot. It resembles the photographs of piano performers and singers, just like one from *Jet* depicting a party serenade in Detroit in 1957 (**fig. 35**). In the photo from 1957, the woman is holding a glass of red wine, looking above the camera and smiling widely. The mirror behind her gives the composition dimension, but the frame is

¹⁹⁴ Campbell, "Lorna Simpson Talks About Her Recent Paintings."

poorly executed; A Nat King Cole vinyl record at the bottom right is cut off, as is one of her legs, and the door on the left takes up too much space. Although Simpson's frame seems to fix these flaws – the piano is placed in the center of the photograph, and the vinyl record is more visible – Simpson still has one of her feet cut by the bottom of the frame. There are several other subtle differences between the two photos. Simpson's clothes are different from those from 1957; the mirror is circular instead of rectangular, and she is not drinking red wine, like the woman from the album. But left her shoe, as mentioned above, is out of the frame, and she is holding her pinky out, just like in the vernacular photograph.

Simpson is playing with the throuple vision, addressing the dynamic both between the pair and with the viewer. The cut-off foot and poor framing inform the viewer that they are looking at an amateur photograph. The way Simpson fixes the center of the composition but leaves this one flaw says that she is embracing not only the characters and the style of the photographs, but also its technical execution (or lack thereof). This approach differs from her projects from the 1980s and 1990s, in which the artist's piercing critical gaze, dissecting the history of looking at Black bodies, was focused on carefully crafted frames. In *1957–2009*, she subjected herself to a more playful gaze, allowing herself to act more freely and interact with the referenced photographs. The discomfort the artist mentioned in the previous quote might have been connected with appearing in one's own work. In this sense, it is the act of self-portrayal that challenges the artist and pushes her beyond her comfort zone.

Following Simpson's argument about appropriating desire, the juxtaposition of the two portraits presents a complex relationship of gazes: the throuple vision. Firstly, the artist is aware of the dynamics inscribed into the album – the pair is playing with the concept of the pin-up girl, slightly fetishistic, theatrical, and performative. This sort of representation in popular culture usually caters in its visuality to the male consumer, depicting the figure of the woman through the lens of the male gaze.¹⁹⁵ The play with fetish throughout the

¹⁹⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

series is even more evident when looking at the photos taken outside (**fig. 36**), in which the woman is posing seductively with a car or, in multiple instances, showcasing her legs (**fig. 37, 38**). And while Simpson actively recreated the props and camera angles, reproducing the exact size of the images and the details of the poses, and carefully studying the bodies of the characters, she does not play to the male gaze, but rather to the relations between the pair.

The binary rhetoric of the male in charge and the woman objectified does not necessarily apply to the 1957–2009 series, as both the man and the woman subject themselves to each other's gazes. The politicized position of who is looking at whom is expanded by Bell hooks through the introduction of the Black female spectator, who constructs her presence in this absence, exploring both the negation of Black female representation in cinema and television and her own rejection of over-sexualized images.¹⁹⁶ As the scholar points out, "Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallogentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition [Laura – J.S.] Mulvey posits of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' was continually deconstructed."¹⁹⁷ Looking at the portrait on the piano once again, the viewer's position is at the feet of the woman, who towers over the spectator, looking above the camera. The adopted perspective is that of both the man and the camera. Simpson explores a poly-vision, conceptualizing the playful triangle of the artist and the pair through photography. The pair never meets in the frame; all of the portraits are of singular figures. The camera serves as the mediator and instigator of the performative situations depicted in the series. Additionally, the way the photographs from both timelines are juxtaposed provides a meeting ground for the present and the past. For Simpson, the memories accessed through the album are not only tangible, but also blur the line between two temporalities, showcasing how representations of popular culture, such as the pin-up, remain active agents of contemporaneity. The *menage à trois* of

¹⁹⁶ hooks, *Black Looks*, 118–120.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

identity, authorship, and spectatorship compels one to ask about the significance of such projects today, especially considering how Black pin-up girls have been overlooked in the history of American pop culture. Simpson seemed to let playfulness become both a strategy and a language of resistance.

1.2.2. Playing as White

One of the main motifs visible in Simpson's work is playfulness. There are multiple images from both 1957 and 2009 of people playing the piano, the guitar, or chess. In a few photographs (**fig. 39**), we can see the main characters from the photo album playing chess in a setting similar to a living room. The woman is portrayed sitting on a sofa in a striped shirt, showcasing her bra, wearing no pants to accentuate her legs, and displaying black high heels that contrast with the material of the sofa. She looks flirtatiously at the camera, smiling widely and pointing to the white chess piece, possibly a rook, considering its positioning. Although Simpson reconstructs all the elements of the photograph, down to the wig and the specific arrangement of the legs, she is far more mysterious, not smiling and looking at the camera with a determined expression. Her elbow is resting on her thigh, which is raised in an upward position, her wrist bent, and her hand seems to be holding (and hiding) one of the white chess pieces. Both women are playing white, so Simpson's snatching of the piece seems wrong, as if she were playing black. The confidence emanating from her body position, gaze, and gesture tells us otherwise: she is right and winning the game. This small difference in a hugely symbolic matter allows us to read the 1957 woman's pointing gesture as one of uncertainty, as if she were searching in the gaze of the camera for approval. This particular detail, enhanced by Simpson's change in its repetition, seems to symbolize a transformation in the subjective status of women in the contemporary world, pointing out that they are now active and empowered players. This is especially important when considering the cultural and social significance of chess play. In an art historical context, it is associated with Surrealist and Dadaist artists, such as Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, and in a political context, it also reflects the power play characteristics of the Cold War. In both cases, chess is viewed as a man-played game of

strategy, viewed not only as a pleasurable activity but also as a measure of intelligence. In her version, Simpson not only grants those qualities to Black women but also emphasizes the relationship between head and hand, the orchestrator and executor of the move. For her reenactment of the male version of chess play, Simpson is very precise in recreating the attire, the arranged scene, and the prompts. The differences between the two are subliminal; in the original photograph, the man is leaning over to focus on the game (playing white), while Simpson is resting her back against the wall. Similarly, in the gesture of holding a pipe, the man places it closer to his mouth, while Simpson, in contrast, holds it at a distance.

The game continues in a video piece entitled *Chess* (2013), inspired by the series and exhibited for the first time at the Jeu de Paume (**fig. 40**). This three-channel video installation in black and white depicts the artist, dressed like the pair from the 1957 album, being accompanied by Jason Moran, who is playing the piano (on a separate screen). It seems like the match is unfolding over decades, fractured by the five-way perspective that references Marcel Duchamp's portrait from 1917. The multiplication of figures creates the impression of being stuck in a loop. Who is winning and who is playing with whom seem to have lost their relevance, as the repeating cycle ends and another begins.¹⁹⁸

Simpson's strategy throughout the series and in its later counterparts could be described as mimicry, or what Lacan called an effect of camouflage.¹⁹⁹ Further explored by Bhabha, the concept addresses the issue of postcolonial power structures, emphasizing the "almost the same, *but not quite*" repetitive yet partial quality of mimicry.²⁰⁰ Simpson's vision encompasses her sight, the camera's, and the couple's. Each of her self-portraits

¹⁹⁸ Another reference to Marcel Duchamp is present here. In 1963, Julian Wasser captured a clothed artist playing chess with writer Eve Babitz, who was posing nude. In the back, the iconic artwork of Duchamp's, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* from 1915-23, is visible, adding to the gender dynamic present in Wasser's photograph.

¹⁹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book IX*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 99: "Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare."

²⁰⁰ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 127.

plays with gender roles, desire, and beauty set against the backdrop of blackness and its social, cultural, and political implications. Ayelet Zohar provides a comprehensive study of mimicry, masquerade, and camouflage in relation to photographic portraiture and its manipulation of visual and cultural codes, addressing the problems of representation in an elusive and evasive manner.²⁰¹ Zohar evokes Butler's emphasis on the performative act, positioning self-portraiture along the axis of convention and repetition.²⁰² Through the act of copying, Simpson impersonates both the woman and the man, acting out their gender expressions, which she wears as masks. The assumed norm of the heterosexual couple in the 2009 rendition was broken and deconstructed, showcasing the fluidity of the gender performance. Comparing the two (fe)male figures, frame by frame (**fig. 41**), Simpson's version depicts a more flamboyant-looking man with a thin mustache and slicked-back hair, sensually putting a cigarette to his mouth, breathing in, and closing his eyes. The referenced photo is much more direct; the man looks straight at the camera, sitting across from the photographer, and is holding a lit cigarette that leaves traces of smoke, giving the image a characteristic hue. The implied heteronormativity in the vernacular photograph is sustained through its very direct depiction (**fig. 42**) of the man's sexual interest – the image of the pin-up girl. He is portrayed as enchanted by the drawing, looking straight at it, ignoring the viewer, seemingly unaware of the photograph being taken. He is smoking a pipe, a recurring motif in the series, which is reminiscent of the famous Magritte painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929).²⁰³ This reference is crucial, considering how mimicry is a significant strategy for Simpson. "The menace" of Simpson's photographs is its doubleness – *this is not* the 1957 photograph the viewer is looking at; in fact, they are looking at both.

The tangibility of the memory that Simpson is working through is quite literal and materialized in the album she bought. She is the keeper of the memories of the summer of

²⁰¹ Ayelet Zohar, "The Elu[va]sive Portrait: Mimicry, Masquerade, Camouflage. Conceptual and Theoretical Notes, an Introduction," *Trans Asia Photography* 2, no. 1: *The Elu[va]sive Portrait: In Pursuit of Photographic Portraiture in East Asia and Beyond*, ed. Ayelet Zohar (Fall 2011): <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0002.102> (accessed 24th June, 2024).

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ For the comprehensive analysis of the painting, see Michael Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1982).

1957, continuing the legacy that the pair might have wished to evoke with their photo shoot. Simpson's self-portraits, which take on different roles and clichés, play with both pop cultural and avant-garde references. Like the pair in the album, Simpson flirts with the idea of simulation,²⁰⁴ testing the capacity of self-expression. The recurring motifs of leisure, such as reading newspapers, playing chess, or enjoying a cigarette, provide a moment of escapism from the challenging socio-political climate of the 1950s. As Zoe Trodd points out, the time of the Civil Rights movement was an arena of battle in the spatio-symbolic sphere, manifested in segregation, protests (especially sit-ins), and the margins (as a space of resistance).²⁰⁵ The process of reimagination played a crucial part in artistic and activist interventions of that time, often evoking memories of the past, such as abolitionism, as well as the concept of limbo.²⁰⁶ Similarly, liminality comes to mind when discussing the notion of how archival bodies are locked up in archives, guarded by the institutional apparatus, but also simultaneously moving into the collective memory. The 1957 photo album, in this sense, presents a reimagined moment from the Civil Rights era, offering a counter-narrative to the prevailing media imagery of that time.

In many of Simpson's works, the motif of the game is resolved through clever wordplay, especially in photographs from the 1980s and 1990s that incorporated text. In her *1957–2009* series, the textual counterpart is completely abandoned. It seems that the rules and regulations associated with language are no longer applicable when working with found vernacular photographs. Or maybe it reflects the fact that it is one of the first projects where the artist reveals her face to the audience. That would mean, firstly, that Simpson is presenting snapshots as radical storytelling about a specific time period that diverges from the mainstream narrative about the Civil Rights movement, and, secondly, that self-portraiture is a radical act of seeking subjectivity without saying a word.

²⁰⁴ Jones, "The 'Eternal Return'," 953.

²⁰⁵ Zoe Trodd, "A Negative Utopia: Protest Memory and the Spatio-Symbolism of Civil Rights Literature and Photography," *African American Review* 42, no. 1 (2008): 25–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40301301> (accessed June 24th, 2024).

²⁰⁶ Ibid. Trodd writes: "The politics of memory and the reusable past of abolitionism are often bound in US protest literature to the politics of form: Civil Rights artists adapted a long-established spatio-symbolism to their present era." (28).

Simpson's approach to archival bodies and collective memory can be described as observant. In a way, she is an archivist, image owner, image maker, and model, all at the same time, curating her own body of work while displaying photographs from 1957 and 2009 in the same manner. The artist is refusing to blindly recreate past imagery for the sake of positive representation, which was unusual for the Civil Rights era. She represents what was previously unrepresented, creating defiant images, as Saidiya Hartman describes them.²⁰⁷ Simpson's narrative is not *the* narrative of Black life; hence, she is speaking *through* the body of the Black pin-up girl, inhabiting a memory that was once lost and later found. She is extending an experience of the summer of 1957 through the perspective of a young African-American couple, who are playful and flirtatious. As Hartman emphasizes, Black women historically have been excluded from discourse about femininity and instead have been subjected to the interstices of "pornography, pathology, and criminality."²⁰⁸ The 1957 vernacular album is an example of the counter-documentation of the Black body, seen from the perspective of Black amateur photographers and models.

Simpson uses mimicry and embodiment to reference the experience of the Black pin-up girl, dressing the "terrain of common experiences,"²⁰⁹ and constituting her own identity in relation to the vernacular photographs. The archival bodies that she re-animates with her own body are caught in the role play, time play, and spatial play of "leisure, gender, and California dreams."²¹⁰ She becomes the Black pin-up girl, but *not quite*, making small changes that reveal the temporal doubleness of the series despite the effort put into the recreations. "Simpson is totally incapable of faithfully reproducing the original photos,"²¹¹ Naomi Beckwith writes. She continues: "Yet the *failure* here is less about being able to ascertain a specific midcentury bourgeois milieu or race or gender than it is about

²⁰⁷ Saidiya V. Hartman, "Excisions of the Flesh," in *Lorna Simpson, For the Sake of the Viewer* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1992), 65.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²¹⁰ Naomi Beckwith, "Solo Match: Role Play, Time Play, and Spatial Play in Lorna Simpson's Chess," in *Lorna Simpson*, ed. Joan Simon (Munich–London–New York: Delmonico Books–Prestel, 2013), 59.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

the large, impassable temporal gap between the original source images and Simpson's recent reiterations."²¹²

The "failure" mentioned by Beckwith is something that is characteristic of performative self-portraiture that "comes back" to life through the act of interpretation, memory, and desire.²¹³ However, it does not simply mirror archival bodies, but rather mimics them, repeating while also constantly shifting. Simpson's means of evoking memory makes use of the tangibility of the historical costume, the medium, and her body, as she assumes roles while exploring her own subjectivity as an artist and Black woman.

1.3. Freedom Cape

Finding *fissures* in archives often evokes stories that might have been previously labeled as forgotten or lost. A "reality-generating hallucination,"²¹⁴ as Mbembe describes the state of archival knowledge, provides a framework for fictionality rather than factuality. Contesting the narratives that shape the collective memory is not only the work of historians, but also of creatives. A look into the past reflects the present need to seek answers. To whom do archives belong? How is history shaped by them? Can archives be inhabited? Do archival bodies inhabit them? In her series of works *In the Face of History* (2017–), Adama Delphine Fawundu (b. 1971) has collected hundreds of reproductions of newspapers, paintings, prints, advertisements, and photographs from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The artist's intervention consists not only of working through international archives and choosing the archival materials she wants to examine but also of screen-printing her self-portrait onto the appropriated imagery.

Each of her self-portraits depicts her torso turned away from the viewer, adhering to the visual convention of the *Rückenfigur*. This trope is a common feature in art history, particularly in German Romanticism (one notable example is Caspar David Friedrich), and

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Jones, "The 'Eternal Return'," 950.

²¹⁴ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 173.

encourages the viewer to adopt the role of a spectator. The motif is inviting and has the potential to develop a communal and shared experience in engaging what is depicted in the background. The theory developed on Friedrich's *Rückenfigur* generally concerned the intersubjective status of the human condition, and how it is strictly intertwined with the condition of society as a whole.²¹⁵ In his use of *Rückenfigur* as an artistic strategy, Fawundu criticizes the romanticization of race and the nation while dissecting the history of colonialism and American racism by displaying the structures of white supremacy and anti-black violence. Although the spectator projected by the artist is primarily a Black woman (herself), I will use "we" to address the plurality of the memories the artist addresses. We not only see *through* her, but also see *as* her. This illustrates the concept of the Black gaze, as Tina Campt notes, which allows us to recognize our own privilege and position within the socio-political landscape.²¹⁶ This also serves as an example of intervening in the matter of the archival body, firstly as Fawundu, and secondly as viewers.

Her self-image varies with her hairdos and dresses, as well as her poses: in some images, the artist is looking straight ahead, while in others, she turns her head slightly to the side. Plastering walls with hundreds of images, the artist has exhibited her works in the United States, Ghana, France, and other countries, each time creating a new rendition that incorporated local archives. In 2020, during the global pandemic and the U. S. presidential election, Fawundu added the *Freedom Cape* to the series, transforming photography into a wearable garment. The clothing piece is comprised of fragments from her archival project, as well as certain additions, including a self-portrait of her in a surgical mask—a symbol of the COVID-19 pandemic—reproduced documents on Shirley Chisholm, hair extensions, and a headpiece. *In the Face of History* is a work constantly in progress, evolving alongside the artist as she travels from place to place, transferring images along the way, and creating a diasporic weaving of collective memory and her self-portraits.

The archival materials referenced by the artist delve into the global history of the African diaspora, the Antebellum American South, Black accomplishments, and

²¹⁵ See Nina Amstutz, "Caspar David Friedrich and the Aesthetics of Community," *Studies in Romanticism* 54, no. 4 (2015): 447–75, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43973932> (access: July 5th, 2024).

²¹⁶ Campt, *A Black Gaze*, 7.

generational traumas. The project began with Fawundu's intention to challenge the linear perception of history.²¹⁷ This idea came to life in an installation from her series *Black Magic: AfroPasts/Afro Futures* at the Honfleur Gallery in Washington, DC (curated by Niama Safia Sandy, 2017) in which Fawundu densely covered the majority of a wall in reproduced archival images with her self-portraits transferred onto most of the documents (**fig. 43**). By doing so, the artist created a quasi-photographic installation resembling a poster wall or a patchwork quilt. The prints, layered on top of each other, featured multiple depictions of the artist's figure and easily readable signs and symbols, evoking images of protesting crowds. The trope of public art and collective forms of remembrance have been manifested more prominently in other iterations of the project. The *Black Magic: AfroPasts/Afro Futures* exhibition contextualizes Fawundu's work as a form of observing history and situating oneself within it.²¹⁸

In the exhibition, Fawundu has showcased various references. Notably, she has included newspapers documenting racial violence, such as a 1948 desegregation order from President Truman titled "President Truman Wipes Out Segregation In Armed Forces", a 1955 account in the *Daily News* on Emmett Till's murder, and a nineteenth-century headline from the *Bartlesville Enterprise* about a North Carolina mob hanging a Black person. She has also displayed archival images of racial stereotypes and caricatures, including the 1945 Belgian comic book *Tintin au Congo*, an illustration from the 1945 book *Prisonnier des Etrangleurs*, and minstrel show posters like the 1896 *Primrose & West's Big Minstrels* and the 1899 *William H. West's Big Minstrel Jubilee*. Additionally, she presented a spread from *Harper's Weekly* (1863) depicting "Gordon (Peter)'s scourged back." The exhibition also emphasized narratives of empowerment, featuring Ida B. Wells's 1892 book cover, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, and photographs of protests, including the 1921 St. Patrick's Day Parade in NYC with a sign reading: *A Fearless Indomitable Womanhood – A Fearless Indomitable Race*. These are just a few

²¹⁷ The interview was conducted during my Fulbright residency in New York, thanks to a 2023–2024 Fulbright Junior Research Award I received to carry out research at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. The transcript of the interview is available by contacting Julia Stachura.

²¹⁸ Dominic Griffin, "Art Is A Form Of Survival In 'Black Magic: AfroPasts / AfroFutures' At Honfleur," August 18, 2017, *DCIST*, <https://dcist.com/story/17/08/18/black-magic/> (accessed April 25, 2025).

examples of the archival records the artist has put into her work, compiling dozens of images and messages. The medium of photography is evoked in the series in various forms, including coverage of news stories, documentation of protests, and portrayal of political leaders. Finally, photography is used by the artist to portray herself, captured in the manner of a *Rückenfigur* (back-figure), transforming archival material into a background or landscape at which Fawundu is looking.

The archival body, in the context of the analyzed series, would be understood here differently than in the case of Simpson's and especially Jackson's photographs. Fawundu is not mimicking or reenacting any of the archival photographs or documents, but adding a self-portrait layer onto them. Although her figure evokes certain portrait conventions, such as those of the *Rückenfigur*, the archival body is located elsewhere – in the artist's vision of history. It materializes in the layer of reproduced records on paper, intersecting with the artist's depiction of her own body. Ink fuses together multiple timelines; text from *The Negro Star* peeks through the body of Fawundu, while in other parts it is obscured by her silhouette (**fig. 44**). A reproduced page from a 1920 issue of an African-American newspaper announces the NAACP's declaration of victory in cases related to the 1919 Arkansas riot (The Elaine massacre). The artist's body acts as a filter through which the archival body of history is viewed. She metaphorically enters the newspaper to act as a witness to events she physically has no access to. "BORN A SLAVE, DIED WITH HONORS," one could read in the left corner. On Fawundu's back, like a tattoo, the sentence reads, "ISN'T THIS AWFUL?" The markings of the language cover her whole torso, and descriptions of historical events seep through her skin. Fawundu's self becomes interwoven with the message found in the archival record. The ink intersects the present and the past, making the material layer of memory from the past penetrable and actively changing the present, thereby affecting how we perceive the artist's body. Her left arm (in the image) is cropped, a clean cut contrasts with the curved slope of the right arm, emphasizing the fact that Fawundu's image is layered onto the reproduced newspaper page. Evoking Mbembe's concept of inhabiting the archive's cracks and fissures, the artist is

penetrating, quite literally, through ink, through records of the past.²¹⁹ Her figure in this process becomes fragmentized, deprived of natural color, and multiplied.

Print is visible in the reproduced text, caricatures, and posters. The artist's black and sporadically red printed figure obscures parts of the images, integrated into both the visual and textual matter of the records. One of the most eerie and disturbing images is a red caricature of a man with a wide and exaggerated smile and bone stuck in his nose (**fig. 45**). Fawundu's black and gray figure adds a visible shade to the face of the depicted man, making it more abstract and hard to decipher where the caricature starts and the artist's image intervenes. Moreover, the outline creates a mask-like effect, emphasizing the unnatural and uncanny look of the "face." In another detail from the 2017 display (**fig. 46**), the red outline of Fawundu's figure highlights the portrait of Emmett Till in a spread from a 1955 issue of the *Chicago Defender* newspaper, giving the face of the boy a characteristic red hue. This intervention in the visual layer of the image is symbolic of the context of his murder and the horrific mutilation of his head by two white men. Another example is the reproduction of Abraham Lincoln's tintype, taken possibly during the Civil War (**fig. 47**). The president is depicted sitting with his arms crossed, looking confidently at the viewer. Part of his figure and one side of his face are obscured by the silhouette of a woman; her pointy hairdo splits Lincoln's face in half, evoking the history of his assassination. In such cases, we may wonder about the status of the archival body of the referenced materials. What was the key to compiling all these images together? What do the layers of historical trauma unravel? Is Fawundu carrying the burden of legacies of the past? Or is she witnessing it?

Visible in the details of the 2017 display, each of Fawundu's self-portraits is differentiated not only by the hairdo, dress, or color of the figure, but also by the color saturation. Some of the figures seem to be fading, juxtaposed with more contrasting ones. In this context, the artist mimics the processes of memory, with remembering and forgetting accentuated by the screen-printing technique. At the same time, the appropriated archival records are also fragmentary, selected, and curated by the artist, who subjectively

²¹⁹ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 160, 172.

and intentionally chose each representation of a historical event concerning being Black in the United States and its global context.

It is also important to note that Fawundu exhibits her work in places relevant to her artistic research. One example is a contemporary art community gallery situated in Washington, DC's historic Anacostia neighborhood, an important area for African American history. The location conserves Frederick Douglass's former home, now called the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site. In 1963, Washington also hosted one of the largest civil rights events of that era—the March on Washington. Other iterations of the installation included additional archival materials that were added to reference the context of each location, including exhibitions in New Haven (2019), Accra (2019), Toulouse (2021), and Princeton (2021). These exhibitions combined conversations about American and African relations with a global framing of blackness.

One of the images from the series was displayed in a banner at the Federal Hall Wall Street façade in New York City (**fig. 48**) as part of the public art installation *Women in the Face of History* (curated by Ellyn Toscano and Deborah Willis, 2021).²²⁰ The reproduced image is a 1940 painting by Howard Chandler Christy depicting the signing of the U.S. Constitution at Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 1787, and portraying George Washington among other officials. Onto the appropriated image, Fawundu added her own self-portrait, placing it right in the middle (**fig. 49**). Her monochromatic dark brown silhouette contrasts with the colorful painting. Fawundu's back is turned to the viewer, as if she were watching events unraveling before her eyes. The crowd of painted figures and the placement of the artist's figure create the impression that Fawundu was seated in the audience, with us positioned right behind her, participating in this historical emancipatory act. This engagement is crucial when examining *In the Face of History* as a work that deals with collective and official memory. Similar to the five other banners, this work is positioned between two Doric-style columns. The placement of her self-portrait alongside the Greek Revival architecture of Federal Hall and John Quincy Adams Ward's 1882

²²⁰ The other banners showcased works by Renée Cox, Jennifer Ling Datchuk, Rose DeSiano, Yelaine Rodriguez, and Deborah Willis.

George Washington monument enhances the poignancy of Fawundu's intervention. The artist asks who was excluded from the witnessing of history, and aims to restore women to their rightful place in civic celebrations.

Fawundu created *In the Face of History Freedom Cape* (2020) as part of the same centennial commission. *Freedom Cape* is constructed from historical records (just like in the series) printed on fabric, creating a wearable garment: a cape. The artist performed the piece during the COVID-19 pandemic, additionally wearing Mami Wata shells as a homage to the water spirit, known to the Afro-American diaspora. The performance took place in Prospect Park in Brooklyn and in front of the Lefferts Historic House (**fig. 50**), a place with a difficult past. This site holds particular significance for the artist's identity and upbringing, as she was born and raised in Brooklyn with ancestral roots in the Mende, Krim, Bamileke, and Bubi peoples. The artist chose to honor the memory of the Lenni Lenape people and enslaved people from the Lefferts plantation by standing face to face with the site and bearing the suffering and trauma implicit in it. For her cape, Fawundu chose to focus on the Black women's right to vote, placing activists and politicians like Sojourner Truth or Shirley Chisholm at its center. Additionally, for video documentation of the performance, the artist interviewed women and nonbinary people to get their views on voting in the upcoming 2020 presidential election.

Fawundu's performance in the cape underscored a couple of points that are critical to how she addresses the tangibility of memory. Firstly, the artist framed clothing as a physical memory, a second skin that holds the imprint of the body.²²¹ Second, the archival records compiled by Fawundu through the mediums of photography and print could be transformed into a fabric with a specific shape, weight, texture, and even scent, and interact with the body. Photography, in this case, has acquired all of the listed qualities, as well as the memory of the past referenced in the reproduced documents. We could ask how photographs transform when they begin to assume the body of the fabric, the shape of the garment, and the structure of the textile. Fawundu also pays homage to a long tradition of vernacular photography and clothing, such as pillows, pendants, and brooches, featuring

²²¹ Batchen, "Carnal Knowledge," 22.

photos of loved ones. These social practices of memory held a special place at the turn of the twentieth century. And since photography is incorporated into funerary arrangements in many cultures,²²² the performance in the archival cape facing Lefferts House might also be considered a mourning practice.

1.3.1. The Voyage

A crucial context in understanding the socio-political implications of the archival images used by Fawundu is the motif of voyage and diaspora. In one detail from the series, the artist combines her own image with that of The Black Star Line from Delaware (**fig. 51**). The company and its ship were part of Marcus Garvey's²²³ politics of returning to African roots. The artist evokes the advertisement, featuring a ship at the center, with offices described on the left: Accra, London, and New York, and routes described on the right: to and from West Africa, the U.K., the Mediterranean, the U.S., and Canada. The artist's intervention in the archival record consists of layering her self-portrait in grayscale onto the black-and-white print of the ship, creating a hybrid-like entanglement of images. Her back blends in with the body of the ship, and her head seems to be floating. The extravagant hairstyle, with pointy braids, matches the erected mast. The artist is becoming one not only with the ship but also with the idea that stands behind it, the Pan-Africanist movement.

Paul Gilroy's study of the ship concerns what he calls "the Black Atlantic", defining it as a counterculture to modernity, and highlighting its political and cultural impact. He uses this notion to amplify the aspect of remembrance, describing the ship as chronotope, or a combination of space and time.²²⁴ Let's consider Fawundu's position within the ship once more. Is she a captain? Or a sailor? Or perhaps a mother? Or a great-granddaughter? Out of every fitting description, she might also represent a dialectician, evoked by Gilroy through Walter Benjamin's quote: "What matters for the dialectician is

²²² As one of the examples, Batchen describes Owa practices from Nigeria. See Batchen, *Each Wild Idea*, 72.

²²³ Garvey was an organizer of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

²²⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London–New York: Verso, 2022), 17.

having the wind of world history in his sails.”²²⁵ By collecting glimpses or, to use Benjamin’s rhetoric, flashes²²⁶ of history, the artist is recollecting memories from the past to introduce her concept of modernity and its foundations: slavery, colonialism, and trade. For Gilroy, the ship is a living system of coexisting social, cultural, and political formations, as it is for Fawundu, whose depiction of the self merges with this vehicle.

The figure of the ship, central to the conversation on slavery, trade, and blackness, is crucial to understanding the relationship between bodily experience, memory, and Black subjectivity as presented by Fawundu. Firstly, in the context of the entire series, the ship opens a conversation about Black women and mobility, about how women in the past were subjected to displacement and other forms of “difficult diasporas,”²²⁷ and narrates this migration from a woman’s perspective. This journey is also symbolic, as the artist is traveling through different continents and time periods thanks to archival materials. Secondly, the ship raises the issue of roots and ancestral connection, visualizing what Saidiya Hartman called the concept of “losing your mother” in reference to lost family trees, memory erasure, and the collective trauma of slavery.²²⁸ With speculative history, traveling, and following *scraps* from the archives, Hartman explores the possibility of reclaiming lost stories and remembering lost lives.²²⁹ This approach is similar to what Fawundu is doing in her series, bringing together defining moments in the history of humanity, with all its failures and atrocities, and searching for moments of empowerment, such as the rise of the Marcus Garvey movement. Finally, water could be read as a source of ancestral strength, manifesting in African deities such as Mami Wata, or as a source of struggle – the Atlantic Slave Trade – or a source of cultural hybridity – the triangular exchange between continents. It is also crucial to incorporate conversations about climate

²²⁵ Quote from Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, introduction to chapter 1: *The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity*. The original quote from: Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge–London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 473 [N9,6].

²²⁶ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 473 [N9,7].

²²⁷ Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas. The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (New York–London: New York University Press, 2013).

²²⁸ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

²²⁹ Ibid.

change or the migration crisis, problems that are tangible today, and analyze how diasporic imagery evolves over time, contextualizing the past and intervening in the present.

Moreover, the triangular exchange between three continents—North America, Europe, and Africa—is also evident in the locations where *In the Face of History* was exhibited. The iteration of the project in Accra, Ghana, was exhibited at the Chale Wote Street Art Festival (2019), which took place at the Ussher Fort (**fig. 52**), a former slave fort entangled in Dutch colonial rule in the seventeenth century. The display featured singular, poster-like interventions and self-portraits of the artist attached to the fort's walls. The spacing between each vertical image, the rhythm of the repetitive act of hanging posters, and the roughness of the architecture created the impression of a wall of missing people. All the self-portraits of the artist employ the *Rückenfigur* strategy, showing the artist's naked back; this time, the depiction featured Fawundu against a plain background. The fort stood as undeniable proof of colonial crimes. The artist's self-portraits touching the walls made her a witness to this traumatic history. Her gaze appeared to go beyond the surface, sensing something more profound. Meanwhile, she was looking away from viewers, sharing a private moment with the site and silently honoring those in bondage. Similar to Lefferts House, this felt like a form of mourning.

1.3.2. Witness and Spectacle

The title of the series makes one wonder: who is the face of history, and who has a right to speak and narrate? While the ongoing motif of the series is the repetitive figure of the artist layered onto the reproduced images, it does not mean that Fawundu is portraying a passive observer. Her figure is not completely static, and due to her different dynamic hairdos and poses, she seems to be an active participant in the spectacle of the events unraveling in the archival materials. The artist represents the figure of the witness, watching and “documenting” crimes, lynchings, and mobs, as well as protests, accomplishments, and political changes in segregation laws. As Amy Louise Wood puts it:

“Witnessing” refers not only to public testimonials of faith or truth but also to the act of being a spectator of significant and extraordinary events. A spectator or a bystander becomes a witness when his or her

spectatorship bears a legal, spiritual, or social consequence; when it can establish the true course or meaning of an event or action; or when it can confer significance or value on an event. To act as a witness is thus to play a public role, one that bestows a particular kind of social authority on the individual, at the same time that it connects that individual to a larger community of fellow witnesses.²³⁰

By multiplying her figure into dozens of prints, the artist represents a collective spectatorship rather than a single subject. The status of the self in Fawundu's self-portrait is entangled in a relation with many other human beings, as well as with spirits and ancestors,²³¹ giving the act of witnessing a more powerful meaning.

The stylistic choice of presenting a figure with its back to the viewer, not revealing the identity of the subject but focusing instead on braided hair, evokes the early Polaroid prints of Lorna Simpson, such as *Stereo Styles* from 1988, *Twenty Questions* from 1986, *Dividing Lines* from 1989 or *Guarded Conditions* from 1989 (the first row, **fig. 53**), commonly described as anti-portraiture,²³² and serving as a counter and subversive image of the Black woman. Due to the cropping of the figure to the bust and the centrality of the portrait, Simpson's early works, as well as Fawundu's photographs, evoke the institutionalized scrutiny of the photographic record, characteristic of passport pictures or mug shots. The notion of the gaze, in this case, is crucial because both artists are denying it, showing their backs in a gesture that cuts short any exchange, and which might establish a power imbalance due to a historical depiction of the subjugated "Other."

María Magdalena Campos-Pons, an Afro-Cuban artist who explores the diaspora in art, is another artist whose strategies Fawundu shares. In her series of six large-scale Polaroids, *Identity Could Be a Tragedy*, which features self-portraits of Campos-Pons (**fig.**

²³⁰ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2009), 4.

²³¹ Fawundu explicitly states that she is representing a collective in an interview for CatchLight: "To position oneself as the central figure within a photograph is most challenging. I never consider them to be self-portraits, but more so a representation of the collective self." See Adama Delphine Fawundu, "Behind the Lens with CatchLight Global Fellow Adama Delphine Fawundu," *CatchLight*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.catchlight.io/news/2023/3/16/behind-the-lens-with-adama-delphine-fawundu> [accessed July 23, 2024].

²³² See Huey Copeland, "Bye, Bye Black Girl": Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat," *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (Summer, 2005): 62–77; Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See*, 12; Doreen St. Félix, "The Mysterious Darkness of Lorna Simpson's Paintings," *The New Yorker*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-mysterious-darknesses-of-lorna-simpsons-paintings> (accessed July 8th, 2024).

54), she also avoids eye contact by closing her eyes and gradually disappears into the background by painting her skin white²³³ and increasing the exposure of the instant film. Both Campos-Pons and Fawundu utilize the notion of exposure to comment on the conditions of blackness in picture-making and the exploration of selfhood. While Campos-Pons criticizes the early accounts of racial bias in Polaroid films, Fawundu analyzes the way blackness (and race in general) was discussed in media coverage.

The layered image of the artist in archival reproductions centers on the experience of a Black woman, a witness to history with its atrocities, accomplishments, suffering, and joy. Her figure does not always obscure the images she is referencing; in many instances, the viewer can see right through her. Especially considering the red and pink-ish iterations of the self-portraits, due to the screen-printing method, which reveal what is “under.” Fawundu’s work, in a very literal sense, resembles what W.J.T. Mitchell called *seeing through race*.²³⁴ The main argument in Mitchell’s book is that race is both hyper-visible and invisible in certain social contexts,²³⁵ which is also reflected in the analyzed series. Similarly, *In the Face of History* confronts the viewers with two types of spectacle of racial violence: one that is direct, like the photograph of the scourged back of a slave, or indirect, like documents from the Berlin Conference that divided Africa between the colonizing powers.

Bridging past and contemporary events, Fawundu’s *Freedom Cape* functions both as a memory site and as a monument. Constructed from historical documents printed onto fabric, forming a wearable garment, the center of the cape contains a self-portrait of the artist wearing an array of cultural jewelry and a face mask – a staple of the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic (**fig. 55**). The portrait is in color, depicting the artist naked against a black-and-white background filled with patterns. The figure is looking straight into the

²³³ Paint is not necessarily the correct term, since the artist coated herself with cascarilla, an eggshell powder used in rituals for protection and cleansing. See Mazie M. Harris, “‘This, This, This, This, This.’ Photography in Pieces,” in *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Behold*, ed. Carmen Hermo (Los Angeles–New York: J. Paul Getty Museum–Brooklyn Museum–Getty Publications, 2023), 42.

²³⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race*.

²³⁵ Ibid.

camera, which contrasts with all other iterations of the artist's silhouette in the cape, which were captured in a *Rückenfigur* pose. The palms of the woman's hands are cut by the bottom of the photograph, merging with the two black-hair wigs attached to the cape, and cascading onto photographs of braided hair and African sculptures. These prosthetic bodily extensions resemble the blood dripping from a cut and materialize the ongoing motif of hair, which is so significant to black culture. This mixed-media panel alone is worthy of further analysis, as it is a central part of the work and mirrors the body of the person wearing the cape: Fawundu.

Besides the attached hair, the artist has also covered her nipples with flower-like jewelry that resembles cotton balls. Another 3D element is a pendant on a necklace dangling from the fabric. All of these parts could be interpreted as amulets or as offerings, since the artist was performing in the garment, wearing Mami Wata shells on her head, and in this way addressing African deities and indigenous beliefs. The braided hair visible in the lower part of the panel, along with the depictions of the statues, emphasizes the artist's interest in weaving the diasporic imagination.

Hair as a medium is also characteristic of Campos-Pons. For her 2004 Polaroid composition *Constellation* (**fig. 56**), the artist combined a self-portrait of her head seen from an aerial perspective with photographs of braids and dreadlocks, as well as depictions of water, thereby expanding her reach into the multidimensional microcosm. This reflected the artist's stated aim of "reclaiming women not just as a body, but as an intellectual entity and generator of knowledge."²³⁶ The hair, in both Campos-Pons' and Fawundu's cases, provides a metaphor for the entanglement of memory and knowledge, creating a tangible link between a woman's body and history. Such a rhizomorphic subject, as Kobena Mercer describes Campos-Pons's work, constitutes a "network of affective ties to others, along the lines of dreadlocked strands of hair which resemble plant roots equally at home in soil or water."²³⁷ Similarly, Fawundu, focusing on the woman's figure in the center of a

²³⁶ *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Behold*, ed. Carmen Hermo (Los Angeles–New York: J. Paul Getty Museum–Brooklyn Museum–Getty Publications, 2023), 19.

²³⁷ Mercer, *Travel and See*, 16.

microcosm of historical and contemporary documents, acts as both a witness and a dialectician, examining social tensions in order to intervene in the present.

The central panel framed by red and blue colors, important to American iconography, references the red and blue states of the political system. On both of the wing panels (**fig. 57**), the artist adopted a strategy taken from *In the Face of History*, arranging an array of archival photographs and documents with the figure of her back screen-printed onto them. The repurposed images create a quilt-like effect. Most of the depictions reference the history of Shirley Chisholm, a Brooklynite and the first Black woman to be elected to the United States Congress (in 1968). Through the cape, one can follow Chisholm's presidential campaign imagery, posters, pins, and magazine covers, which are juxtaposed with nineteenth-century archival records.

Materializing the accomplishments of historical figures, as well as the challenges and uncertainties of the present, the cape functions as a memorial site (preserving both the memory of the past and the memory of those lost to the pandemic) and a contemporary monument, bringing photographs to life. It is worth noting that the artist performed wearing the cape, like a superhero, running through Prospect Park (**fig. 58**), paying honor to the Lenni Lenape people and enslaved people from the Lefferts plantation. Her movement made the cape dynamic; gust of winds stretched the fabric, transforming it into an even more monumental form. The archival body of Chisholm has returned to Brooklyn in a new shape, thanks to its embodiment in textile, reminding us of why voting has the incredible power to enact change.

Fawundu's series, alongside *Freedom Cape*, subverts the power imbalance historically tied to the portrayal of Black bodies, and looks for sources of self-empowerment, constructing new artistic iterations of archival documents, transforming them into fabric and wearable pieces, and intervening in the current socio-political landscape while performing. The artist's redefinition of the photographic record, from a two-dimensional print to a cape that can be worn, is moving and, with its weight and

texture, has impacted both the performative and corporeal aspects of the tangibility of memory.

The motifs of voyage and diaspora present in the series, particularly through the figure of the ship, addresses Black subjectivity, memory, and the legacy of slavery. Fawundu's work blends her self-portrait with imagery from Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line, symbolizing the Pan-Africanist movement and reclaiming the narrative of migration from the forced displacement of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and transforming it into one of empowerment. Her intervention in the archival record reimagines the ship as a living system connecting the past and present, drawing on Gilroy's notion of the ship as a symbol of cultural and political exchange in motion. Focusing on the exploration of displacement, Black women's mobility, the cultural significance of hair and ancestral connections, as well as broader issues like collective trauma, climate change, and migration, Fawundu creates a bridge between the memory of the past and the present through tangibility. By integrating speculative history and self-portraiture, the artist reclaims lost stories, and seeks moments of empowerment amidst historical atrocities.



Fig. 8. Isaiah West Taber, *Dahomeyan Girls, Dahomeyan Village, Cal. Midwinter Exposition, 1894*. Gelatin silver print mounted on card (5.12 × 7.87 in / 13 × 20 cm). UC San Diego, Special Collections and Archives.



Fig. 9. Isaiah West Taber, *Dahomeyan Girls with war hatchets and knives, Dahomeyan Village, Cal. Midwinter Exposition, 1894*. Gelatin silver print mounted on card (5.12 × 7.87 in / 13 × 20 cm). UC San Diego, Special Collections and Archives.



Fig. 10. Isaiah West Taber, *Allegorical Fountain, Cal. Midwinter Exposition, 1894*. Gelatin silver print (24.29 × 18.66 in / 61.7 × 47.4 cm). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.



Fig. 11. Ayana V. Jackson, *Don't Hide the Blade/ How do you think their women dress?* (*Archival Impulse*), 2013. Archival pigment print (47.2 × 43.4 in / 120 × 110 cm). Ayana V. Jackson.



Fig. 12. Ayana V. Jackson, *Diorama I (Archival Impulse)*, 2012. Archival pigment print (44.09 x × 44.09 in / 112 × 112 cm). Ayana V. Jackson.



Fig. 13. John Edward Saché, *Andamanese Group with Their Keeper Mr Homfray, Photographed at Calcutta*, 1865. Albumen print (7.60 × 5.39 in / 19.3 × 13.7 cm). The British Library, London.



Fig. 14. Ayana V. Jackson, *Diorama II from Palais Royal to Jardin d'Acclimatation (Archival Impulse)*, 2013. Archival pigment print (27.17 × 22.05 in / 69 × 56 cm). Ayana V. Jackson.



Fig 15. Ayana V. Jackson, *Diorama III from Palais Royal to Jardin d'Acclimatation (Archival Impulse)*, 2013. Archival pigment print (27.17 × 22.05 in / 69 × 56 cm). Ayana V. Jackson.



Fig. 16. Military dovecote, 1875. Source: Julia Stachura, Jardin d'Acclimatation, Paris, 20 June 2025.



Fig.17. Eugène Thiesson, *Femme Botocudo*, 1844. Daguerreotype (plaque: 4.33 × 3.35 in / 11 × 8.5 cm, case: 6.10 × 4.92 in / 15.5 × 12.5 cm). Musée du quai Branly.



Fig. 18. Eugène Thiesson, *Femme Botocudo* (profile), 1844. Daguerreotype (plaque: 4.33 × 3.35 in / 11 × 8.5 cm, case: 6.10 × 4.92 in / 15.5 × 12.5 cm). Musée du quai Branly.



Fig. 19. Abraham Onoriode Oghobase, *Colonial Self-Portrait*, 2018. Photograph in sepia (measurements unknown). Abraham Onoriode Oghobase.



Fig. 20. Elliott & Fry (?), Frederick Lugard, 1st Baron Lugard, circa. 1893. Albumen photograph (measurements unknown).



Fig. 21 and 22. Photographs from Alphonse Bertillon's photo album from his exhibition at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Albumen silver print (measurements unknown). National Library of Medicine.



Fig. 23. Ayana V. Jackson, *Diorama IV Tierra del Fuego (Archival Impulse)*, 2013. Archival pigment print (54 × 72 in / 137 × 183 cm). Ayana V. Jackson.



Fig. 24 Unknown photographer, Native Indians from Tierra del Fuego, ca. 1920.



Fig. 25. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009 (detail)*, 2009. Gelatin silver print (each: 5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Lorna Simpson.



Fig. 26. Allan Grant, *Dorothy Dandridge at home, 1954*. The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock.



Fig. 27. Keystone, *Eartha Kitt, 1955*. Getty Images.



Fig. 28. Isaac Sutton, *June Lewis, 1957*. *Jet*, Vol 11, Iss 15.



Fig. 29. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009* (detail), 2009. Gelatin silver print (5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Walker Art Center.



Fig. 30. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009* (detail), 2009. Gelatin silver print (each: 5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Lorna Simpson.



Fig. 31. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009 (details)*, 2009. Gelatin silver print (each: 5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Installation view, *Staging Action: Performance in Photography Since 1960*, MoMA, 2011.

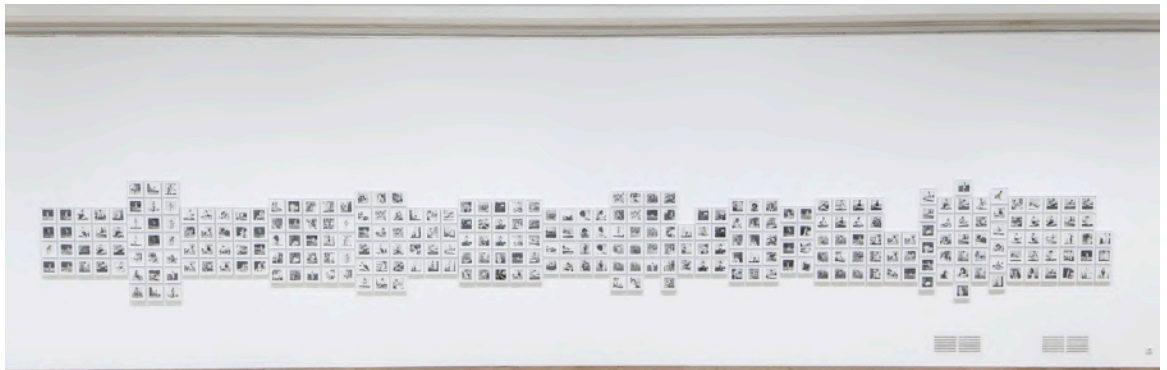


Fig. 32. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009*, 2009. Gelatin silver print (each: 5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Installation view, *Lorna Simpson*, Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, 2014.



Fig. 33. Hank Willis Thomas, *Black is Beautiful (1953-2008)*, 2009. Inkjet print on adhesive paper (variable dimensions). Installation view, Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, 2009.



Fig. 34. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009* (details), 2009. Gelatin silver print (each: 5 × 5 in. / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Lorna Simpson.



Fig. 35. Unknown author, Little Willie John, Tekilla Davis, Audri D'Younge, and Leona Fryer, 1957. Source: *Jet*, Vol 11, Iss 11, 1957, p. 59.



Fig. 36. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009* (details), 2009. Gelatin silver print (each: 5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Lorna Simpson.



Fig. 37. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009* (detail), 2009. Gelatin silver print (5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Walker Art Center.



Fig. 38. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009* (detail), 2009. Gelatin silver print (5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Walker Art Center.



Fig. 39. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009 (details)*, 2009. Gelatin silver print (each: 5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.



Fig. 40. Lorna Simpson, *Chess*, 2013. 3-channel video installation, sound (duration: 10:19 min). Jeu de Paume.



Fig. 41. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009* (details), 2009. Gelatin silver print (each: 5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Lorna Simpson.



Fig. 42. Lorna Simpson, *1957-2009* (detail), 2009. Gelatin silver print (5 × 5 in / 12.7 × 12.7 cm). Lorna Simpson.



Fig. 43. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *In the Face of History*, 2017-. Mixed media on paper (various dimensions). Adama Delphine Fawundu.



Fig. 44. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *In the Face of History* (detail), 2017-. Mixed media on paper (various dimensions). Adama Delphine Fawundu.



Fig. 45. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *In the Face of History* (detail), 2017-. Mixed media on paper (various dimensions). Adama Delphine Fawundu.



Fig. 46. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *In the Face of History* (detail), 2017-. Mixed media on paper (various dimensions). Adama Delphine Fawundu.



Fig. 47. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *In the Face of History* (detail), 2017-. Mixed media on paper (various dimensions). Adama Delphine Fawundu.



Fig. 48. *Women in the Face of History*, Federal Hall, Wall Street, New York City, 2021.

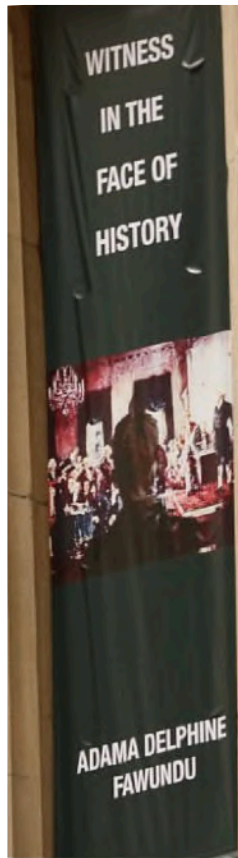


Fig. 49. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *In the Face of History* (detail), 2017-. Mixed media on paper. Installation view, *Women in the Face of History*, Federal Hall, Wall Street, New York City, 2021.



Fig. 50. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *Freedom Cape*, 2020. Mixed media on fabric. Adama Delphine Fawundu.



Fig. 51. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *In the Face of History* (detail), 2017-. Mixed media on paper (various dimensions). Adama Delphine Fawundu.



Fig. 52. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *In the Face of History*, 2017-. Mixed media on paper (various dimensions). Installation view, Ussher Fort, Chale Wote Street Art Festival, 2019. Adama Delphine Fawundu.



Fig. 53. Lorna Simpson, *Guarded Conditions*, 1989. 18 color Polaroid prints, 21 engraved plastic plaques, and plastic letters (each 91 × 131 in / 231.1 × 332.7 cm). Lorna Simpson.



Fig. 54. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Identity Could Be a Tragedy*, 1995-6. 6 large format Polaroids (each panel: 24 × 20 in / 61 × 50.8 cm). Hood Museum of Art.

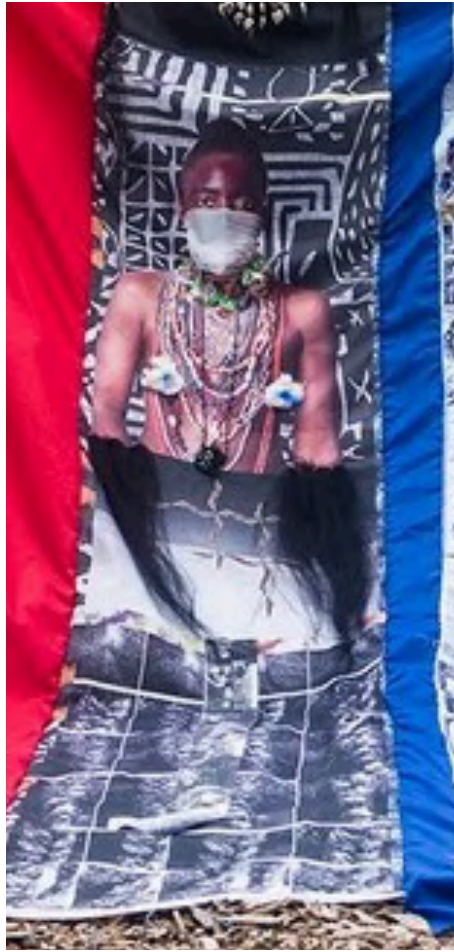


Fig. 55. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *Freedom Cape* (central panel), 2020. Mixed media on fabric. Adama Delphine Fawundu.



Fig. 56. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Constellation*, 2004. Instant color prints (each: 24 × 20 in / 61.0 × 50.8 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Fig. 57. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *Freedom Cape* (detail), 2020. Mixed media on fabric. Adama Delphine Fawundu.



Fig. 58. Adama Delphine Fawundu, *Freedom Cape* (performance), 2020. Mixed media on fabric. Adama Delphine Fawundu.

2. RE-PAIRING THE CANON

2.1 Dissecting Manet

At the end of the twentieth century, art history faced a challenging time. The traditional, linear, and formal approach to the discipline was undergoing the scrutiny of deconstructive postmodernism.²³⁸ Emergent discourses concerning identity politics, multiculturalism, and global art were challenging the Western-centric and white-centric art canon, and highlighting cultural and artistic pluralism, new feminist approaches, and the intersecting struggles of class, gender, and race.²³⁹ Many contemporary Black artists were putting their works in dialogue with the art canon in order to intervene in its structures and hierarchies, based on white privilege. By doing so, they posed questions about the (in)visibility of Black artists in art history, the representation of Black bodies in the works of old and modern masters, and the shaping of the collective memory in relation to visual culture. At this point, it is worth mentioning that there is no definitive art canon; it is more of a rhetorical tool that is inherently hierarchical and exclusive and needs a constant “checking-in” from both art historians and artists.

²³⁸ For a comprehensive summary of the discussion around postmodernism and the art canon see Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray, “Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity,” *Art Journal* 65, no. 1 (Spring, 2006): 22–39.

²³⁹ The discussion is lengthy, and within the framework of this chapter, I will focus on books and essays from the 1990s, aiming to rethink the notion of the art canon and speculate on the potential ways of interrogating traditional narratives. It is worth mentioning here Hans Belting’s short but seminal book from 1983, *The End of Art History? / Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?* as an early example of a reconsideration of the art historical framework and Euro-centric art canon. For a critique and review of Belting, see David Carrier, “Review of The End of the History of Art? by Hans Belting and Christopher S. Wood,” *History and Theory* 27, no. 2 (May 1988): 188–199. I would like to also point out two books from the 1990s that provide an intersectional feminist reading of art history and/or art canon. First: hooks, *Black Looks*. hooks’s book critically interrogates the old narratives, providing alternative ways for looking at Black subjectivity, which is crucial for the framework of this chapter in particular and my dissertation in general. Second: Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon. Feminism and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999). This book engages the culture wars of the 1990s over the art canon, offering a comprehensive overview of the issue. See also Karen-Edis Barzman, “Beyond the Canon: Feminists, Postmodernism, and the History of Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 327–339. In her article, Barzman calls to attention the universalizing rhetoric of art historical analysis, providing a model of radical democracy “in which asymmetrical social relations are (continuously) transformed as we articulate a variety of viewing, reading, and writing positions that compete in a shifting field of discourse.” (334). For more see Michael Camille, Zeynep Çelik, John Onians, Adrian Rifkin, and Christopher B. Steiner, “Rethinking the Canon,” *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 2 (June 1996): 198–217.

This chapter will examine the notion of *re-pairing* in contemporary Black self-portraiture. The term I introduce here encompasses both the process of restoring or fixing images from the past and the act of juxtaposing and pairing them together. These practices engage with collective memory, as the referenced material often evokes famous artworks from art history. Another meaning of repair concerns reparative museology. Many major art institutions in the United States, such as the Museum of Modern Art, have been the main culprits in creating narratives on the centers and margins of art, catering to a white-centric, male-dominated art canon. Museums around the world are only now being held accountable for their colonial legacies, and scholars and activists worldwide are calling for the decolonization of collections containing stolen artifacts. Repair, in this case, would also focus on the issues of repatriation, reparation, or restitution.²⁴⁰ The reparative museology approach demands the dismantlement of the broken art system, acknowledging injustices and years of negligence. Colin Sterling and Jamie Larkin have sought to address the material, discursive, symbolic, and affective dimensions of reparative museology, and developed their own definition of repair, which I wish to quote in its entirety:

Understood as a process of mending what has been wrecked or damaged, repair encompasses a multitude of embodied gestures and physical interventions, from stitching and pasting to long-term maintenance and wholesale reconstruction. While repair can mean returning something to its 'original' state, it may also involve wholly new forms of symbolic and material production that seek to fundamentally remake the world.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ One of the most famous examples of decolonization is the repatriation of the Benin bronzes, a group of several thousand metal sculptures looted during the Benin Expedition of 1897. The objects have just recently been repatriated to Nigeria from the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Humboldt Forum, among other institutions. See Sarah Bahr, "Met Museum Announces Return of Two Benin Bronzes to Nigeria," *The New York Times*, 23 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/09/arts/design/met-museum-benin-bronzes-nigeria.html> (accessed August 4, 2025); Harriet Sherwood, "London museum returns looted Benin City artefacts to Nigeria," *The Guardian*, 28 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/nov/28/london-museum-returns-looted-benin-city-artefacts-to-nigeria> (accessed August 4, 2025); Thomas Rogers, Rahila Lassa, Alex Marshall, "How Germany Changed Its Mind, and Gave the Benin Bronzes Back," *The New York Times*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/20/arts/benin-bronzes-nigeria-germany.html> (accessed August 4, 2025).

²⁴¹ Colin Sterling and Jamie Larkin, "Towards Reparative Museology," *Museums & Social Issues* 15, no. 1–2 (2021): 1–3.

In the following examples, I will actively explore “embodied gestures,” “physical interventions,” and “new forms of symbolic and material production” in contemporary Black photography. One of the main strategies of redefinition examined here is the gesture of appropriation, understood as a critical artistic tool that facilitates conversation between photography and painting, as well as between contemporary artistic interpretations and the history of art.²⁴² The notion of re-pair will also emphasize the connection between the mental image and the physical embodiment of a trope from art history. The latter will be important when considering iconic artworks as agents of tangible memories. Through homage and critique of the referenced iconography, artists activate cultural remembrance, often using familiarity as a tool to connect with viewers. At the same time, by re-contextualizing visual tropes or re-directing their meanings, the artists strategically position themselves within the frame of art canon(s) to interrogate the modes of representation formulated by Eurocentric traditions regarding blackness, nudity, and otherness.

The issue of deconstructing the original iconography moves beyond art history. By incorporating their bodies in the act of appropriation, Black photographers actively resist and reclaim agency over their own representation, both as models and image makers. Challenging the dominant white gaze that shapes the collective American memory, the interventions of Black artists expand the field of vision, providing subversive and complex interpretations of contemporaneity in relation to racial and gender identity.

The following part of the chapter examines contemporary artistic interpretations of two paintings by Édouard Manet from 1863: *Olympia* and *Luncheon on the Grass* (*Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*). To re-pair these iconic references, the artists discussed here concentrate on the interplay between the gaze and the viewer, the portrayal of Black models, or a combination of both. To emphasize the interventional character of the analyzed self-portraits, I propose the metaphor of dissection as an overarching term in this section. According to the Oxford dictionary, to dissect is to analyze, break down, and

²⁴² See Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* 8 (1979): 75–88. Douglas Crimp’s *Pictures* refers to an exhibition he organized in 1977 featuring artists such as Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith, which explored strategies of appropriation, manipulation, and subversion.

separate into pieces, derived from the Latin word *dissecare*.²⁴³ The term is primarily used in the scientific field in relation to an autopsy, an act of dismembering and studying an anatomical structure. The last thing I address in this chapter is the “corpse” of Manet, or rather, his body of work. However, the corporeal implications of that term reflect what the concept of tangible memories focuses on: bodily redefinitions, reenactments, and, as a result, dissections of the referenced images. The sharp tools associated with the act of separation or breaking down, such as the scalpel, knife, and scissors, will be replaced by the piercing gaze of the artist, symbolically cutting through layers of history and memory, empowered by the act of self-expression. What will be important to consider here is how contemporary Black artists challenge the collective memory of viewers and how they intervene in the structure of iconic paintings by placing themselves within the picture to create new meanings through the act of appropriation.

Borrowed from Kaja Silverman, the theory of suture will also be relevant in my analyses of acts of appropriations, visual quotations, and redefinitions. At its core, suture theory describes the process by which a cinematic text (or any other signifying system) confers subjectivity upon the viewer within the formal structure of the film.²⁴⁴ In order for suture to fulfill its function, i.e., to produce a subject in film discourse, the viewer must first experience a sense of lack or loss, which is then “sutured” or reconciled by means of the film’s structural and stylistic elements. The stitching system is based on a two-stage model (shot/reverse shot) that most “classic narrative films” use in editing for continuity.²⁴⁵ Manet’s paintings employ their own forms of “suture” to position the viewer: they simultaneously disrupt traditions (e.g., Olympia’s nudity combined with the direct gaze²⁴⁶), while maintaining others (e.g., Black maid as background character). The following examples of contemporary iterations will delve into these relations in detail.

²⁴³ Oxford English Dictionary, “dissect (v.),” December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6278142483>.

²⁴⁴ See Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Dossier Suture: Cinema and Suture,” *Screen* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1977): 35–47, and Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 195. In her book, Silverman draws heavily from Jacques-Alain Miller’s and Jean-Pierre Oudart’s Lacanian-inspired theories.

²⁴⁵ Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, p. 201.

²⁴⁶ The heated discussion around Olympia’s nudity, meticulously reconstructed by T.J. Clark in *The Painting of Modern Life* (1984), or the implications of the generational influence of *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* analyzed by Michael Fried in *Manet’s Modernism* (1996) has supported the claim of Manet’s crucial position in relation to modernity and modern painting.

2.1.1. Flipping the Script

One of the earliest photographic interventions of the kind that is of interest here comes from Renée Cox (b. 1960), a Jamaican-American artist specializing in digital photography. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Cox has been consistently “flipping the script”²⁴⁷ and causing conservative outrage, pushing the discussion around Black subjectivity in photography into the mainstream media. Cox’s interest in art history started in the 1990s, during her junior year of college in Florence, where she encountered the works of the old masters.²⁴⁸ What she noticed was the lack of depictions of people of color besides the “occasional Black Moor.”²⁴⁹ That inspired Cox to intervene in the European art canon, centering her own body and the bodies of other Black men and women within her narrative. In her 2001 photo series *American Family*, amidst recreations of La Grande Odalisque and Saint Sebastian, the artist reenacted two paintings from Manet, granting the French artist special attention.

The series was exhibited in 2001 in the Robert Miller Gallery in New York, the same year her *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* (fig. 59) was shown at the Brooklyn Museum at the *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers* exhibition.²⁵⁰ The latter earned Cox media and political attention. In *Yo Mama’s Last Supper*, the artist depicted herself as Jesus, posing nude among clothed apostles, which caused the Mayor of New York City, Rudolph W. Giuliani, to take offense and call the work “disgusting, outrageous

²⁴⁷ This is how the artist describes her strategy of reenactments. See Mark Segal, “Renée Cox on Flipping the Script,” *The East Hampton Star*, April 10, 2021, <https://www.easthamptonstar.com/arts/2021410/renee-cox-flipping-script> (accessed October 22, 2024).

²⁴⁸ This information comes from the artist’s official website: *Flippin the Script*, Renée Cox, 1994–1997 (artist’s project description), Renée Cox, <https://www.reneecox.org/flippin-the-script> [accessed October 22, 2024]. The original source: Segal, “Renée Cox on Flipping the Script.”

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers* exhibition ran from February 16, 2001, through April 29, 2001, curated by Barbara Head Millstein. It spanned over 50 years of African-American photography and brought together works by 94 photographers.

and anti-Catholic.”²⁵¹ One critic from The New York Times, Michael Kimmelman, blamed Cox’s photograph for “rekindling” the culture wars, although he also noted that her work did not exceed the “bounds of normal provocation today.”²⁵² Following the negative press surrounding *Yo Mama’s Last Supper*, her solo show in Robert Miller Gallery also received critical feedback for merely being “a pastiche of available ideas, literal-minded art theory, spirited narcissism, and stunning production values.”²⁵³ Despite this harsh criticism, Cox’s interventions over time proved to be groundbreaking and influential to the next generation of artists.

Combining social taboos and art historical iconography, the artist embraced the postmodernist zeitgeist. Assuming numerous identities, both fictional and real, the *American Family* series explores topics such as motherhood, BDSM, and the representation of women in art history. It can be seen as a further exploration of subversive strategies Cox began in collaboration with Lyle Ashton-Harris in the *The Good Life* series, in which she took on the role of the father, wearing formal menswear and sporting a mustache and goatie, while Harris represented the mother, holding a baby. *The Child* (fig. 60) presented a textbook example of the shift in 1990s photography toward the politics of identity and the postmodern swapping of gender roles.²⁵⁴ The photograph dates back to

²⁵¹ The media coverage of Cox vs Giuliani was extensive, see Elisabeth Bumiller, “Affronted by Nude ‘Last Supper,’ Giuliani Calls for Decency Panel,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/16/nyregion/affronted-by-nude-last-supper-giuliani-calls-for-decency-panel.html> (accessed 29 October 2024); “Rudy In Rage Over Female Christ,” *CBS News*, February 15, 2001, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rudy-in-rage-over-female-christ/> (accessed 29 October 2024); “Giuliani makes indecent proposal,” *Times Herald-Record*, February 19, 2001, <https://eu.recordonline.com/story/news/2001/02/19/giuliani-makes-indecent-proposal/51183817007/> (accessed October 29 2024). It is essential to mention that the work was exhibited in Oratorio di San Ludovico as a part of the 1999 Venice Biennial and generated no negative press. See Eleanor Heartney, “Thinking through the Body: Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (Autumn–Winter 2003): 3–22.

²⁵² Michael Kimmelman, “Critic’s Notebook; Making and Taking Offense, Elevated to Art Form,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/16/nyregion/critic-s-notebook-making-and-taking-offense-elevated-to-art-form.html> (accessed October 29, 2024).

²⁵³ Roberta Smith, “ART IN REVIEW; Renée Cox,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/02/arts/art-in-review-renee-cox.html> (accessed October 30, 2024).

²⁵⁴ Lyle Ashton-Harris was also featured in the 1997 *Rose is a Rose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography* exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, curated by Jennifer Blessing. This exhibition encapsulated the artistic and academic discussion around gender at the time, incorporating drag culture and trans and nonbinary representation. After 20 years, the curator revisited the exhibition and wrote: “In the days before the Internet, the *Rose* catalog offered images and voices that were otherwise relatively hard to find. The recent revival of interest in the exhibition overlaps with the trans activism of a younger generation, concurrent with the zombie revivification of the culture wars.” See Jennifer Blessing, “Rose is a Rose Revisited,” *Aperture*, no. 229 (Winter 2017): 102.

1994, a significant year for both artists, who participated in the iconic *Black Male* exhibition – Cox with her crucifix of a lynched Black man and Ashton-Harris with his series *Constructs*, which explored gender performance. *The Child* binds together the religious theme of the holy family with reversed family and gender roles, and the political message concealed in the colors of the Pan-African flag, visible in the background. The duo's take on masculinity and femininity while referencing family relations was radical at the time and remains progressive today (e.g., LGBTQ+ parenthood).

The first of Cox's iterations of Manet's paintings in the *American Family* series is *Olympia's Boyz* (**fig. 61**), a stunning color print mounted on aluminum, measuring an impressive 88 x 108 inches / 223.52 x 274.32 cm, which renders the figures larger than life. In contrast, Manet's canvas measures 51.4 in × 74.8 in / 130.5 cm × 190 cm, which was considered quite large for a portrait at the time. Consequently, Cox's photograph is nearly twice the size of Manet's artwork (**fig. 62**). This size transformation holds symbolic significance; photography, as a medium, is no longer constrained to smaller prints. Advances in printing technology have removed these limitations. Additionally, Cox's image is printed on aluminum, providing a glossy surface that introduces a new materiality to the photograph, enhancing its durability. This juxtaposition invites consideration of what Michael Fried noted about large-scale photographs, popularized in the 1980s and the 1990s. He remarked that they offer a contemplative viewing experience typically linked to the history of painting, asserting a connection to the same (cultural memory) spaces traditionally associated with painting.²⁵⁵ This was also noted by Jean-François Chevrier, who wrote:

They are designed and produced for the wall, summoning a confrontational experience on the part of the spectator that sharply contrasts with the habitual processes of appropriation and projection whereby photographic images are normally received and *consumed*. [...] It is not a matter of elevating the photographic image to the place and rank of the painting. It is about using the picture form to reactivate a

²⁵⁵ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*.

thinking based on fragments, openness, and contradiction, not the utopia of a comprehensive or systematic order.²⁵⁶

Cox's work combines the grandeur of 1970s/1980s large-scale format prints with the 1990s' play with identities and subversion, strategizing painting as a visual model that grants the Black body subjectivity within traditions from which Black subjects have historically been absent, marginalized, or stereotyped. She casts herself in the center role, as Olympia, while her two sons guard her, standing right behind her. By subverting racial and gender dynamics in her recreation of the iconic painting, she follows in the steps of artists such as Yasumasa Morimura and Katarzyna Kozyra. Both artists utilized the large-scale photographic tableaux. In 1988, Morimura created a self-portrait, *Futago* (re-done 2018), in which the artist assumed the roles of Olympia and the Maid, performing both gender and racial identities (**fig. 63**). Kozyra's 1996 triptych (**fig. 64**) presented the artist during and after chemotherapy, and depicted the figure of Olympia as an elderly woman.²⁵⁷ Both of the artists' interventions were focused on including non-normative bodies in the art canon – for Morimura, the queer Asian body, and for Kozyra, the body on the verge of death and in a state of illness. All of these examples, including Cox's work, explore appropriation as an act of empowerment, forcing the viewer to confront marginalized bodies and identities. These photographs destabilize the collective memory of the referenced painting, elevating photography to a medium of resistance and re-canonization. The effectiveness of these appropriations comes from an act of (re-)pairing visual conventions from the past and the present, which activates the viewer, who is no longer a passive observer but a witness to these changes.

The main figure in Manet's *Olympia* was identified by art historians as a *courtesan*, a sex worker from the artist's time. Nude and confident, looking straight at the viewer, the woman depicted became a subject of scandal, and the painting was attacked by critics at

²⁵⁶ Jean-François Chevrier, "The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography (1989)" in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982*, ed. Douglas Fogle (New York: Walker Art Center, 2003), 116.

²⁵⁷ For an analysis of Kozyra's triptych see Izabela Kowalczyk, *Ciało i władza. Polska sztuka krytyczna lat 90*. (Warsaw: Sic! Publishing, 2002).

the Parisian Salon for its alleged vulgarity and crudeness.²⁵⁸ At the time, the artist was actively challenging preconceived notions about art, combining classic elevation and contemporary banality, and in this way, reflecting a shift in the bourgeois lifestyle and its values, i.e., moving away from traditional communities such as family and church, towards commercialized, consumer-driven forms of spectacle: the streets and sex.²⁵⁹ Cox's photograph also breaks from restrictive societal expectations, focusing on the figure of the emancipated mother who is not afraid to showcase that she is a sexual being and can still be seen as a subject of desire. She is empowered and regal, wearing nothing but a beaded armband, choker, and golden heels, and reclining on a skein of Kuba cloth. As Jo Anna Isaak has noted, this essential sexualization of the artist as a mother is countered by the prohibiting presence of an institution such as the family, which regulates and restricts sexual activity.²⁶⁰

The size of the photographic print makes the figure of the artist larger than life, dominating the viewer and establishing the power dynamic at the get-go: the contemporary Olympia is still in charge. The confrontational aspect of the figure is significant while discussing the shift of racial identity: "The pleasurable contemplation of black femininity has always provoked fear and guilt in the white male viewer," as Isaak writes.²⁶¹ This dynamic, sustained by the history of the asymmetrical power of the white male voyeur and his privileged position, has been addressed by many scholars, but I would like to highlight an insight from Lorraine O'Grady. In her seminal essay on reclaiming Black subjectivity, she writes: "The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, non-white or,

²⁵⁸ As T.J. Clark notes, the figure of the *courtesan* in the French class system of the nineteenth century was not discussed, but certainly not a foreign sight to the art scene at the time. See: T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 87; Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism. Or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 223.

²⁵⁹ See Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, and Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (London: Penguin Books, 1971).

²⁶⁰ Jo Anna Isaak, *Renée Cox: American Family*, catalog accompanying the exhibition *Renée Cox: American Family* (New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 2001), 3 of 4.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

prototypically, black.”²⁶² What O’Grady describes there is the construction of the binary of white and non-white sexual attraction, in which the latter was often related to otherness, fetishized exoticization, and extremity, and resulted in an internalized invisibility.²⁶³ In *Olympia’s Boyz*, the artist challenges this binary opposition by including her two mixed-race sons, whose father is a white Frenchman.

The presence of the artist’s children highlights the genuine family implications in the *American Family* series, while also implicitly acknowledging the multiracial realities of Black identities. Her young sons are standing in the back guarding their mother, dressed as African warriors, wearing head wraps and holding spheres. “For survival, Black children in America must be raised to be warriors,” writes Audre Lorde.²⁶⁴ In this sense, survival, guarding, and protecting can be seen as the artist’s commentary on racism, still thriving in a seemingly “post-Black” early 2000s America. The direct gaze of the artist as a mother addresses female viewers, mothers, daughters, and sisters, acknowledging the complexities of lineage and family bonds.

Another important intervention in the iconic reference was Cox’s interpretation of the figure of the Maid. The Black model from the painting, Laure, has just recently become a subject of interest to scholars and curators. Manet portrayed her numerous times and even created a solo portrait of her entitled *La Nègresse* (1862-63), but the recovery of her name was made possible thanks to the artist’s notebooks, analyzed by contemporary art historians.²⁶⁵ Two recent interventionist exhibitions featured representations of Black models in modernity and challenged the collective understanding of Black subjectivity in

²⁶² I am referring here to the essay published on the artist’s website: Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” artist’s website, <https://lorraineogrady.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lorraine-OGrady-Olympias-Maid-Reclaiming-Black-Female-Subjectivity1.pdf> (accessed October 23, 2024). The first version of O’Grady’s essay: Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” *Afterimage* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1992): 14–15. The revised versions follow: *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: Icon, 1994); *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. Grant Kester (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 1998) and *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London–New York: Routledge Press, 2003).

²⁶³ O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity.”

²⁶⁴ Audre Lorde, *Zami, Sister Outsider, Undersong* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993), 75.

²⁶⁵ Critics and art historians have frequently overlooked or belittled her figure. One of the most famous examples is T.J. Clark’s chapter on *Olympia*, in which the scholar devoted more than fifty pages to the painting, completely disregarding the figure and focusing more on the cat than the maid. See T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 79–146.

the history of painting: the pioneering *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (2018), curated by Denise Murrell in the Wallach Art Gallery of Columbia University, and *Black Models: from Géricault to Matisse* in Musée d'Orsay in Paris (2019). Murrell's research represented a truly reparative approach to the art canon, highlighting the overlooked and forgotten figures of Black models, retrieving their names, and focusing on their agency.²⁶⁶

It is interesting how Cox has compositionally replaced the figure of the Maid with the two figures of her mixed sons. This can be interpreted as a reference to the mixed children of enslaved women, who were often forced to have intercourse with their white master. Another possible reading is as a reference to the stereotype of Black maids or Mammies taking care of white children. As Andrea Liss notes, the stereotypical portrayal of an enslaved woman nursing white children has heavily impacted how Black motherhood has been shaped in American culture.²⁶⁷ It is important to recognize this historical burden when analyzing Cox's photographs, which grant the figure of the Black mother a spotlight and recognition. On the one hand, she presents the narrative of an empowered Black woman, comfortable with her sexuality and body; on the other hand, by depicting her sons, she offers an intimate insight into her private life, opening up to the audience. This "double trap of vulnerability and emancipation" makes the visibility of Black bodies in art and culture a complex matter.²⁶⁸

Another significant aspect of Manet's painting is the trope of class hierarchy. In the original, this theme remains ambiguous and challenges the conventional separation between the lower and upper classes.²⁶⁹ The figure of Olympia might symbolize a higher-class sex worker. Her social status is nuanced by her placement in the composition – she is elevated, and her direct gaze rejects objectification by a male viewer. Additionally, her relationship with the Maid who is serving her enhances the complexity. As Linda Nochlin

²⁶⁶ See Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2018).

²⁶⁷ Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 94.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁶⁹ More about the issues of class in T.J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life*.

notes, the Maid is one of the courtesan's possessions.²⁷⁰ Does the distinction between the classes run strictly along color lines?²⁷¹ By 1863, the year when the painting was completed, France was over a decade into its post-abolitionist era. That means that the figure of the Maid is, in fact, a free woman. Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby highlights how the abolition of slavery in France allowed for more representations of free Black people to emerge in the media, while simultaneously, societal anxieties around race and labor were still present.²⁷² Cox's intervention further complicates the class issues unresolved within the original image. She envisions herself as a queen protected by her guards. She embodies both Olympia and the Maid, granting subjectivity a plural status. By choosing a photographic image, she is referencing the egalitarian status of the medium, and thus seemingly contradicting the regal status of her performance.

In the painting, the Maid is bringing flowers to her lady, possibly from one of her admirers. This gesture introduces a hint of the male gaze, adoration and desire—perhaps even power—as suggested by a presence lurking behind the curtain in the background. Access to Olympia is guarded by Cox's warrior sons. While the Maid in Manet's painting is fully clothed, there are earlier examples of photographic studies featuring both white and Black women in the nude. In their seminal book on Black women's bodies, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams have recovered 1850s photographs from Félix-Jacques Antoine Moulin, a French photographer who created studies for artists, which were extremely popular in artistic and bourgeois circles at the time.²⁷³ Two of his photographs analyzed by scholars, *A Moorish Woman with Her Maid* from 1856 (**fig. 65**), made during the photographer's trip to Algeria, and *Untitled* [Boudoir scene of a nude white woman and her naked black maid] from circa 1850 (**fig. 66**), made in his Parisian studio, are examples of boudoir-style nudes in an oriental setting. Both photographs were made more than a decade

²⁷⁰ Nochlin, *Realism*, 203.

²⁷¹ The term 'color line' was used by W.E.B. Du Bois in his now-canonical 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, but first appeared in an article by Frederick Douglass – *The Color Line* – published in *The North American Review* magazine in 1881. See Frederick Douglass, "The Color Line," *The North American Review*, no. 132 (1881): 567–77.

²⁷² Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Still Thinking about Olympia's Maid," *The Art Bulletin* 97, no. 4 (2015): 430–433.

²⁷³ Willis and Williams, *The Black Female Body*, 36–37.

before Manet's painting and reference works such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Grande Odalisque*. As Willis and Williams noted, the depiction of unclothed Black women in Orientalist-themed photographs was rather unusual and never idealized like nudes of white women.²⁷⁴ The striking contrast between the flirtatious and engaging demeanor of the white woman in the 1850 photograph and the slouched, distanced pose of the Black woman reinforces racially biased stereotypes of desire and beauty. Differentiating between nude versus naked rhetoric, Willis and Williams attribute nakedness to the depiction of the Black woman, which alters the meaning of the erotic photograph.²⁷⁵ The entanglement of the bodies of the two women is very particular. Their legs are crossed in an arranged pose, and partially covered by draped fabrics. Both of their bodies are sprawled on a cheetah hide rug. The photograph highlights the tangible qualities of the materials and bodies, presenting a highly theatrical *mise-en-scène* in which the two women assume their roles. However, the Black woman appears uncomfortable, averting her eyes, gazing into the distance with worry, and holding the Moorish woman's ankle,. Just as in Manet's *Olympia*, the power dynamic between the women suggests inequality. In this context, Cox's re-pairment radically subverts the Black woman's subjectivity regarding the Olympia-esque trope in both art history and the history of photography.

As Jennifer DeVere Brody has aptly noted regarding Manet's *Olympia*: "The painting [...] becomes a totem in our ritual understanding – a memory that makes us remember, re-member our subject positions, our politics in the world."²⁷⁶ In her queer and performative reading, Brody emphasizes the painting as a dynamic agent of cultural memory, continuing to provoke discussions about gender, race, class and sexuality, intersecting past and contemporary issues.²⁷⁷ Cox's reparative approach is that of a demanded reclamation of desirability, beauty, and power. By placing motherhood at the

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 39.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Jennifer DeVere Brody, "Black Cat Fever: Manifestations of Manet's *Olympia*," *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 1 (2001), 99.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 1–3.

center of a conversation around nudity and objectification, she asserts a complex dialogue between female agency, family, and artistic creation.

By appropriating Manet's painting, the artist demonstrates the culturally active role this image plays in the collective memory. In changing the roles and positions of people of color within the art canon, works such as *Olympia's Boyz* have inspired numerous other Black and queer artists. There are many such examples, from which I would like to highlight three. First is Golden's self-portrait, *I'm human, after all* (2021), depicting the gender non-conforming artist assuming the role of Olympia (**fig. 67**). They are reclining on the upholstered bench, wearing a white towel and turban, gazing directly at the camera. The setting of the photograph feels domestic, with the patterned fabric that acts as a backdrop adding to this feeling. The title of the photograph is impactful. These words could be spoken by both the artist and the Black woman depicted in Manet's painting. What Golden has taken from Cox's intervention is the subjectivity and humanization of the characters of Olympia and especially of the Maid. In Cox's appropriation, the issue of motherhood alters the context of the original image, whereas in Golden's case, it's an issue of gender identity. *I'm human, after all* is an empowering statement, challenging more general notions such as the objectification of women of color in art and reflecting a personal struggle in relation to the artist's identity.

The second artist I want to highlight is Mickalene Thomas, a queer female artist known for elaborate mixed-media paintings that intervene into the Western art historical canon. In her oeuvre, there are many works that appropriate tropes from canonical paintings, particularly those of Manet. One of the most prominent examples is *Afro Goddess Looking Forward* (2017), which portrays a collaged figure of a Black woman with a glittery afro, dressed in colorful fabrics, and reclining on a pile of pillows and fabrics (**fig. 68**). Within the fragmented body of the figure, a black and white cut-out from a photograph stands out. It depicts the artist's eyes, which gaze directly at the viewer. This fragmented self-portrait dissects not only the referenced visual convention but also the figure of the Black woman. This composite depiction utilizes collage as an artistic strategy, evoking the historical layers of the image and diasporic identities of women of color. Her

interpretation of Olympia questions the very nature of the gaze, disconnecting it from the painting and rendering it inherently photographic. Suturing together two visual media, Thomas accentuates the stitching of the two modalities. The photographic cut-out resembles a mask, but instead of hiding the artist's identity, it reveals her face.

"The portrait offers a special case that lets us examine this interrelationship between face and mask,"²⁷⁸ wrote Hans Belting in his seminal book *Face and Mask: A Double History*. He highlighted the intertwined cultural histories of the two concepts, rejecting the binary opposition of the face as authenticity and the mask as falsehood.²⁷⁹ Thomas addresses this precise thesis in her work while highlighting the constructive roles of the face, mask, and gaze. All of these issues are also problematized by Lyle Ashton-Harris in his self-portrait as Laure. In the photograph *The Gaze (For Laure)* from the 2018 series *Flash of the Spirit*, the artist poses nude against a backdrop of a lush, bucolic landscape, wearing a West African mask adorned with long, golden locks (**fig. 69**). The portrait is a close-up, focusing on the upper body of the artist and his legs. The mask is a central element of the photograph, through which the artist is looking directly at the camera. The expression of the mask is puzzling; their eyes are open, their mouth is slightly agape, and their forehead has visible wrinkles or markings. Harris unmask the colonial foundations of modernism, which rendered Black figures as props and appropriated African culture for aesthetic purposes. Andrea K. Scott has described Harris's work as "hallucinatory reclamations,"²⁸⁰ emphasizing the trance-like fantasy performed by the artist. Reclamation and re-pairing in *The Gaze (For Laure)* can be interpreted in multiple ways, ranging from retrieving Laure's subjectivity and centering the experience of queer diasporic identities, to decolonizing the Black figure in art history.

All of these interpretations focus on the inclusion of diverse Afro-identities in the history of modern painting through a critique of colonialism, granting Black heroes and

²⁷⁸ Hans Belting, *Face and Mask: A Double History*, trans. Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 20.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Andrea K. Scott, "The Hallucinatory Reclamations of Lyle Ashton Harris's Masked Self-Portraits," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-hallucinatory-reclamations-of-lyle-ashton-harriss-masked-self-portraits> (accessed July 15th, 2025).

heroines a privileged role in recreated scenes, and reclaiming their subjectivity and historical importance. By replacing traditionally white figures with their own self-images, Black artists embody visual tropes of different races and genders, linking the past with the present. This is achieved through performative gestures, such as posing, applying makeup, dressing up, and arranging the scenery, to highlight the material conditions of taking a picture. Ultimately, by situating the Black self-image within the broader context of art history, Cox's version of *Olympia* and all subsequent artistic interpretations serve as interventions in the art canon, exposing the destabilized diasporic identities shaped by modernity.

2.1.2. Picturing Rest

The exhibition *Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition*, organized by the Phillips Collection in 2020–2021 and curated by Adrienne L. Child, brought together African-American artists engaging with the European modernist tradition. Entering the exhibition, one could see a room entitled *Gazing Back at Manet*, which provided a dialogue between the iconic painting and Black artists, emphasizing a feminist approach, celebrating women's sexuality and empowerment (**fig. 70**). One of the most prominent sections of the exhibition consisted of seven works referencing *Luncheon on Grass*, four of them being photographs by Carrie Mae Weems, Mickalene Thomas, Ayana Jackson, and Renée Cox.²⁸¹ I will focus on Cox's *Cousins at Pussy's Pond* and Jackson's *Judgement of Paris* due to the fact that they are self-portraits. However, it is worth noting Weems's strategy of "flipping the script" in *After Manet* (2002) by depicting four young girls resting—three of them looking into the camera and one sleeping. By eliminating nudity and emphasizing the narrative of Black youth at leisure, Weems suggests that portraying rest can still be a radical act today. This approach is also reflected in contemporary scholarly and curatorial input regarding Black studies, such as

²⁸¹ The 360-degree digital tour of the exhibition is available on the Phillips Collection's website: <https://www.phillipscollection.org/event/2020-02-28-riffs-and-relations-african-american-artists-and-european-modernist-tradition> (accessed October 30, 2024).

Tricia Hersey's *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto*, or the exhibition *Rest Is Power*, curated by Deborah Willis, Joan Morgan, and Kira Joy Williams.²⁸² Jackson's and Cox's photographs center on rest as a radical act, while incorporating African traditions within the suture of *Luncheon on Grass*. The juxtaposition of two works, *Cousins at Pussy's Pond* and *Judgment of Paris*, in the space of the Phillips Collection (**fig. 71**) has generated a stimulating variety of strategies for appropriating Manet's iconic painting. First, the viewer entering the gallery space notices two large-scale, colorful tableaux, one framed and the other mounted on aluminum. They are "made for the wall,"²⁸³ inviting the observer to situate themselves in front of the pictures. While comparing the two photographs, one can notice similarities in their composition; both depict three figures instead of the four from the original painting. A stark contrast lies in how the figures are portrayed, in Cox's interpretation completely nude and in Jackson's fully clothed.

Cox's exploration of family relations continues with *Cousins at Pussy's Pond* (**fig. 72**), a large-scale digital photograph, 46 × 60 in. (116.8 × 152.4 cm), mounted on an aluminum panel, which lends the exhibited work a characteristic reflective gloss. The photograph is a part of the *American Family* series and depicts three nude figures: the artist on the left and two men. Suggesting a family relationship in the photograph seems to be a far reach, to say the least. The sexual tension between the athletically built hunks and the artist is palpable. Cox is accurately reenacting the pose of the main female protagonist of *Luncheon on Grass* (**fig. 73**); she is looking straight at the camera, resting her chin on her hand, bending one knee, and straightening her back. Her hairdo is a loc updo, emphasizing her cultural identity. All three figures are sitting on colorful fabrics resembling traditional African textiles, some of which cover the men's genital area. There are a few more indicators of how their attire is African-inspired, such as the spears held by the men and the

²⁸² The exhibition was part of the *Black Rest Project* initiative and took place at 20 Cooper Square. Emily Lordi connected the exhibition with a broader discussion around the issue of representation: "On the most basic level, Black people are generally pictured as doing anything but relaxing—as being attacked, or agitating, or performing feats of athleticism or entertainment. It can seem that Black ease is permitted only in death, as in the benediction to which the exhibition title alludes, 'Rest in power.' Yet rest seems elusive in life, the curators suggest, in part because it is rarely represented in art." See Emily Lordi, "The Visual Power of Black Rest," *The New Yorker*, October 18, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-visual-power-of-black-rest> (accessed October 30, 2024).

²⁸³ Chevrier, "The Adventures of the Picture Form," 116.

leather arm cuff worn by the artist. The props from the image resemble the setting of *Olympia's Boyz*, both depicting warriors but at different ages. These grown-up versions seem to be fighting for the woman's attention, and not necessarily guarding her. Their spears are crossing, echoing the pyramid shape of the composition, and drawing the viewer's attention to the relationship between the figures. The scene balances a pastoral theme with an erotic undertone, characteristic of the *American Family* series.

The scene is located at Pussy's Pond in Springs, a part of East Hampton, a resort area for wealthy and predominantly white New Yorkers. The proximity to the water suggested by the title and depicted in the background references Marcantonio Raimondi's *Judgement of Paris* (ca. 1510-20) after Raphael (**fig. 74**). This work was one of the inspirations for Manet's painting.²⁸⁴ The right side of the etching's composition depicts the incident that sparked the Trojan War, with Paris choosing the most beautiful goddess from amongst the three portrayed: Juno, Minerva, and Venus. On the left side, there are three other nude figures, two river gods and a naiad, arranged in a pyramid-like composition by a body of water. The muscular men accompanying Cox resemble the incredible physiques of Raimondi's river gods. In the photograph, the figures are not equally nude; the men have their genitals covered with cloths, while the woman, Cox, is fully exposed. Both men are looking at her with objectifying gazes, while she, in turn, directs her gaze toward the viewer, who is a witness to this particular dynamic.

The landscape depicted in *Cousins at Pussy's Pond* creates an atmosphere of peacefulness and calm, with lush greenery surrounding the pond, unobstructed by any signs of city life. Water, which often symbolizes fluidity, purity, or travel, seems a significant element in the portrait. It is worth mentioning that the photograph must have been taken at midday; the sun is bright and strips the scene of any mystery. The nature in the photograph, seemingly untouched by humans, reinforces the narrative of a primal vision of American terrain – a myth that has significantly influenced the narrative of the

²⁸⁴ The discussion around Manet's sources is brilliantly recovered by Michael Fried in *Manet's Modernism or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

country's history, especially regarding the wild west.²⁸⁵ Cox subverts this by incorporating African traditions into the landscape, which contextualizes her self-portrait within the history of the Middle Passage. The crossing spheres held by the men could symbolize conquest, a concept often associated with masculine domination. At the same time, the artist explores the notion of a “primitive” Other and the European fascination with African cultures. In Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*, unlike *Olympia*, there was no sign of racial power dynamics embedded in the painting. Cox's appropriation adds this layer to the dissected image, interpreting it through the lens of imperialism and slavery, while maintaining the narrative of family connections.

The incorporation of the African tradition into a canonically European and white image binds Cox and Jackson together and, ultimately, explains how the two were connected at the *Riffs and Relations* exhibition. In her interpretation, Jackson focuses on portraying Black bodies at leisure, the opposite of a working maid or slave. The large-scale digital photograph, 50 x 60 / 127 x 152.4 cm *Judgement of Paris* (**fig. 75**) from the series *Intimate Justice in the Stolen Moment*, depicts the artist embodying both female and male characters from Manet's *Luncheon on Grass*. Jackson chose the title of Raimondi's work as a reference not only to showcase her knowledge of the old masters and marry two stories but also to emphasize the role of choice and judgment in her centering Black bodies within the frame. The artist portrays three figures: the woman protagonist and two men accompanying her, set against a forest backdrop. The one figure missing in Jackson's appropriation is the woman bathing in the background. Instead of her, there is an unobstructed road into the woods that suggests some kind of escape. The backdrop does not cohere with the three figures; it almost alienates them from it, which emphasizes the artificial nature of the digital collage.

Jackson's tripling explores performative repetition by altering the garments, accessories, and poses, while also challenging gender roles by depicting both feminine and masculine Black protagonists, all performed by a single individual. What is essential here

²⁸⁵ Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture. American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 119–135. On demystifying of the American landscape see also Lipiński, *Ameryka*.

is that Jackson chose to portray all the figures fully clothed, dressed in a mix of toned and colorful fabrics resembling African textiles. Subversively, the artist stripped the reference of any provocative implications. The controversy in Manet's painting was encapsulated by the nude woman gazing at the viewers with confidence. For Jackson, the clothes act as a shield, on the one hand, protecting the woman on the left from a fetishizing gaze and sexualization, on the other, searching for the source of empowerment in traditional African clothing, such as the head wrap. At the same time, the presence of European historical garments, such as corsets, can be interpreted as a reference to the oppressive costume of femininity, which not only limited movement but also enforced certain beauty standards. The clothing leaves one wondering, what if Manet dressed the woman protagonist? Would the painting be as impactful for art history as it is? Jackson's intervention, in this sense, radically repositions the power structure within *Luncheon on Grass*, just as Cox strips the men of their clothes.

The aspect of judgment seems to be particularly aimed at the history of representation of Black figures in the art canon. Jackson places her heroines in a triple timeline: mythological, modern, and contemporary. Ultimately, her self-portrait reflects on the history of representation, viewing it through the lens of colonization and enslavement. As the artist pointed out, within this time period, Black bodies were usually portrayed in servitude. With her intervention, Jackson wishes to bring "other modes of existence that are operating parallel to or at the very least simultaneously."²⁸⁶ As she continues: "One can at once be enslaved and also be a mother, a sister, a lover, an idealist, a dreamer, an inventor, an engineer. These are all selves that the black body and the black woman's body also occupied in that period of time."²⁸⁷ Jackson's judgment is aimed toward the power dynamics limiting Black people's – and especially Black women's – subjectivity and selfhood. In the history of the Judgement of Paris, the power of choice was in the hands of the man, and the judgment was about women's beauty. These tropes intersect in the artist's

²⁸⁶ Ayana Jackson, "Riffs and Relations: Ayana Jackson," The Phillips Collection's website, April 21, 2020, <https://www.phillipscollection.org/blog/2020-04-21-riffs-and-relations-ayana-v-jackson> (accessed November 14, 2024).

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

self-portrait, as she assumes both gender roles, reversing the traditional power dynamics. Her direct gaze prevents the viewer from objectifying her body; she is in full control of the scene.

The juxtaposition of Jackson's and Cox's photographs generates two complex approaches to visualizing and materializing time and space in the art canon within a memory framework. Both of the artists are using self-portraiture to appropriate iconic references, while interrogating the lack of representation of Black bodies at leisure. By doing so, they create a counter-image in the collective imagination. Both iterations place African identities at the center of the narrative, focusing on how colonialism and slavery shaped modernity. Although both photographers are using digital photography to recreate Manet's painting, each of them is approaching the tangible memory of it differently. Jackson recreates the scene wholly in the photographic studio space, using digital manipulation, while Cox uses a real landscape, bringing the scene to life in a public space. The intersection of gender and sexuality plays an important role in the analyzed photographs, making the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* a contemporarily relatable image that still resonates with the issues of representation in the twenty-first century.

Finally, I would like to propose a queer reading of *Luncheon on Grass*, with an iteration from Paul Mpagi Sepuya (b. 1982). The artist specializes in studio photography, often picturing queer and BIPOC people, utilizing art historical references to include historically excluded identities within the conversation of art canons. His 2022 *Darkroom Studio Mirror (0X5A4052)* is part of an extensive oeuvre that explores self-portraiture and queer desire (**fig. 76**). The photograph is a large-format print (79.5 x 50 inches / 190.5 x 127 cm) closely resembling the size of Manet's painting. The scene depicts three nude men, with Sepuya on the left. The space of the photographic studio is bathed in a warm, red light, reminiscent of the light used for developing photographs in a darkroom. The second meaning of the word darkroom indicates a room, typically in a gay nightclub or sex club, where people engage in anonymous sexual activities. This duality, inscribed in Sepuya's self-portraiture, will be explored more closely in Chapter 4 of this study.

The strategy of playing with the viewer's position and role is characteristic of Sepuya's oeuvre. The depicted figures are captured in an intimate moment of engaging in a conversation while being comfortably nude. The man on the right side of the photograph is sitting on the ground with his legs crossed, resting his head on his palm, leaning toward the other two men. His pose resembles Rodin's *The Thinker*, and it appears that he represents a state of deep reflection. He is not flexing his muscles to evoke the statuesque build of the sculpture; he is allowing his body to rest. The other man and Sepuya, opposite him, are entangled together in a sitting and lying down arrangement, with the artist repeating the pose of Manet's female protagonist. Acting as a fourth figure is a digital camera on a tripod, situated in the middle and turned in the direction of the viewer, who is confronted with its gazing eye. By carefully examining the surroundings, one can notice a thin line near the right side of the photograph, subtly shifting the interior, revealing that the photograph is, in fact, capturing a mirror image of the scene.

There are two main differences between Sepuya's self-portrait and the referenced painting. First, the artist's gaze, assuming the position of Olympia, appears to be directed outside the frame, looking up at the man on the right into the space of the studio. His figure is a bit blurry compared to the other men, especially the head, giving the impression of him flinching or moving just before the shutter clicked. His body appears tense as he focuses on executing the perfect silhouette line, accentuating the muscles in his arms, stomach, and back. The second difference between the painting and the photograph is the body positions. Sepuya is resting his palm on his knee, elongating his arm and obscuring the torso of the man behind him. The man's legs are intertwined with Sepuya's, sharing a moment of mutual contact that closely mirrors the lower part of the photographic boudoir scene by Moulin that was discussed earlier (**fig. 77**). In comparing the two studio images, some surface similarities emerge, such as both depicting same-gender relationships in controlled settings and employing a theatrical aesthetic. However, a key difference is that the fetishistic and orientalist gaze present in Moulin's photo is absent in Sepuya's self-portrait. Although none of the men are looking directly at the camera, they are all aware of its presence and intentionally participate in creating the image. The scene's intimacy and the

focus on queer men shift the gender dynamics, removing the power asymmetry seen in *Luncheon on Grass* or the boudoir-styled studio photos of that era.

Sepuya's photograph set in his atelier highlights the conditions of picture taking, revealing behind-the-scenes details such as mirror stands, lamps, and technical equipment that define the studio space. The photographs displayed in the background and on the left wall are self-referential, showcasing Sepuya's works in progress. Framing the studio with elements of the artist's own work may evoke, for example, the portrait of Émile Zola, where Manet captures the writer surrounded by his paintings, with *Olympia* cropped at the edge. These residues of the artist's artworks are making the portrayed space more personal and entangled in memory.

In my interview with the artist, the photographer revealed:

It is a photograph made in a moment of conversation at night in my studio. It's one picture from an evening, and so there is no process of composition, only setting up the conditions where things fell into place. Then, there is an attention to humor that can align things in unexpected and delightful ways. I did not set out to make a picture of *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*. [...] I suppose, if anything, there is a way of looking at painting through the spatial geometry of photography in something like Manet, the way Jeff Wall also does.²⁸⁸

I would like to highlight how Sepuya explores the spatial geometry of photography in *Darkroom Studio Mirror (0X5A4052)*. Similar to Jeff Wall, Sepuya places himself within the tradition of self-reflective portraiture, exposing the mechanism of the photographic gaze through the mirror. We cannot hear the click of the shutter, and we are not the ones who pose. However, the looming presence of the apparatus keeps us on edge. The camera guards the men depicted in the studio, acting as the beholder of the gaze, directed toward the viewer. Both Sepuya's self-portrait and Wall's *Picture for Women* (1979) utilize the mirror as a picture plane, blurring the line between the image as a flat surface and a perceived three-dimensional space (**fig. 78**). In both works, the camera is positioned in the center of the composition, revealing the creative process and making the act of

²⁸⁸ The interview was conducted during my Fulbright residency in New York, thanks to the Fulbright Junior Research Award 2023–2024, realized at New York University, Tisch School of the Arts. The transcript of the interview is available by contacting Julia Stachura.

photography the central theme. Just like Sepuya's, Wall's self-portrait references one of Manet's paintings – *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, which famously utilizes a mirror to introduce multiple perspectives and complicate the spatial structure of the painting.²⁸⁹ Wall and Sepuya continue this tradition by using modern technology (large-scale color photographs, with Sepuya's in digital format and Wall's mounted on a lightbox) to create a similar effect that reveals the making of suture.

The concept of re-pair in this study was intended to emphasize the coming together of parts from European to African traditions, sutured together by contemporary artists. The revisions of *Olympia* and *Luncheon on Grass* unfold the ways the nude and, in particular, the Black female body operated throughout history, narrowing down the wide range of topics to the threshold of modernity. All of the analyzed photographs, in one way or another, intervene in the structure of the Western art canon by embodying certain tropes and figures, recovering the stories of marginalized models. Both Cox and Jackson dissect the collective image of iconic references through the lens of gender and race, redefining the historical modes of presenting Black women's sexuality and its relation to white women's sexuality. Additionally, Cox has expanded the notion of motherhood, intersecting into it eroticism, beauty, and desire. By addressing the Black female spectator, she empowers the female audience, providing an example of an inclusionary approach to the art canon. Jackson, on the other hand, focuses on the issue of objectifying and fetishizing women. Clothing all the figures in her photograph, she challenges the depiction of female nudity in the Western art canon and imagination. Sepuya's self-portrait further explores themes related to sexuality in Manet's painting, presenting them through the lens of queer desire.

"The margins are dangerous and will need to be subjected to the discipline of art again... and again," writes Lynda Nead.²⁹⁰ This statement is even more applicable to contemporary times, when global Internet connectivity and social media have made art more accessible to the masses. At the same time, it has also rendered the art canon more susceptible than ever. Nead's witty threat reminds me of a quote from Georges Bataille:

²⁸⁹ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 16–17.

²⁹⁰ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 7.

“According to the Great Encyclopedia, the first museum in the modern sense of the word (meaning the first public collection) was founded in France by the Convention of July 27, 1793. The origin of the modern museum is thus linked to the development of the guillotine.”²⁹¹ If the future of art will even need a canon, and how representational modes of identity will change within a fluctuating collective memory – only time will show.

2.2. Afro-Gothic

When picturing the American canon of art, Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* (**fig. 79**) instantly comes to mind. Numerous artistic and pop cultural references have cemented the painting’s iconic status in the American collective memory.²⁹² Wood’s painting from 1930 depicts a white farmer (the family dentist, Dr. Byron McKeeby) and his daughter (the artist’s sister, Nan Wood Graham) standing in front of the Dibble House in Eldon, Iowa. The woman is dressed in a colonial apron, and the man is wearing overalls and holding a pitchfork. The house in the background is representative of the Gothic revival, contrasting white wooden panels with Gothic-style windows. The portrayed pair look tense, standing straight with deadpan expressions. The man is looking straight at the viewer, while the woman’s eyes wander to the side, gazing into the distance. Marking the beginning of the Great Depression Era, the painting reflects grim times, while offering some signs of resilience.

The significance of the relationship between the painting and photographic medium has been studied by Wanda M. Corn, who noted that Wood adopted the clothing, stiff poses, and demeanor from nineteenth-century studio photography.²⁹³ This is a significant trope when considering the tangible memory of *American Gothic*, which not only justifies the interest of photographers in the painting but also explains it. Another trope surrounding

²⁹¹ Georges Bataille and Annette Michelson, “Museum,” *October* 36 (Spring, 1986): 24–25.

²⁹² See Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Minneapolis Institute of Arts–Yale University Press, 1982); Barbara Haskell, *Grant Wood. American Gothic and Other Fables* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2018); Bradford R. Collins, “Spinster Tales: A Closer Look at *American Gothic* and Its Circumstances,” *American Art* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 78–95.

²⁹³ Wanda M. Corn, “The Birth of a National Icon: Grant Wood’s ‘American Gothic,’” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 10 (1983): 253–75.

Wood's work and persona is the subliminal queer coding of his oeuvre, concealing his life as a closeted homosexual man.²⁹⁴ The painting's psychological dimension emphasizes solitude and alienation, depicting the estrangement of Midwestern folk. As Barbara Haskell asks, what does *American Gothic* mythologize?²⁹⁵ Is it the assumed whiteness of American identity?

American Gothic has attracted many photographers, who have reimaged and reinterpreted it. One of the earliest and most notable iterations is from Gordon Parks, picturing Ella Watson in 1942, a Black janitor and charwoman working in Washington D.C (**fig. 80**). The photograph brings the issues of racial and class representation to the forefront while deconstructing the myth of the American Dream. At the same time, it highlights the painting's photographic quality and instant recognizability.

In this section of the chapter, I will focus on a more recent photograph by Lola Flash (b. 1959), titled *Afro-Gothic* (**fig. 81**). The self-portrait appropriates the visual tropes of Wood's *American Gothic* and Parks's photograph, intersecting with those of race, class, and queerness. Flash's practice, as an artist and a member of the New York activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and ART+, is one that intertwines artistic and political issues. As a gender non-conforming person, the artist actively uses their voice to represent the stories of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ people. Their photography has been centered on queerness and blackness in portraiture since the 1990s, a decade crucial to the shifting paradigms in art history and the art canon.²⁹⁶ The photograph *Afro-Gothic* is a part of the most recent work-in-progress series *syzygy, the vision* (2019–), partially conceived during the global pandemic of COVID-19.

The self-portrait series features the artist wearing an orange prison jumpsuit, posing in public settings such as the New York subway, crossing Abbey Road, and interacting with

²⁹⁴ See Janet Maslin, "Behind That Humble Pitchfork, a Complex Artist," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/04/books/04book.html> (accessed November 6, 2024). In her essay Maslin wrote: "Friends knew him to be mischievous (as evidenced by his paintings' elaborate use of symbolism), homosexual and a bit facetious in his masquerade as an overall-clad farm boy. They knew that his ultra-Iowan simplicity was more than a little contrived."

²⁹⁵ Haskell, *Grant Wood*, 13.

²⁹⁶ Cathrine Lord and Richard Meyer wrote about Flash's portraits, which exceed the viewer's assumptions about gender or sexuality. See Cathrine Lord and Richard Meyer, *Art & Queer Culture* (London: Phaidon, 2013), 262.

various landscapes. The first part of the title, “syzygy,” refers to a term used in astronomy and mathematics, meaning the configuration of three celestial bodies that occurs during a full or new moon.²⁹⁷ The second part of the title, “vision,” could signify multiple things, but it most importantly ties the series to the framework of Afrofuturism. This movement brings together Black subjectivity, technoculture, science fiction, fashion, and experimental style. As Ytasha L. Womack writes: “Afrofuturism is a way of looking at the world. It is an assertion of being, or what we refer to as ontology. It is a way of knowing, or what we call epistemology. Afrofuturism is also an aesthetic, a self-evident range of creative styles.”²⁹⁸ Also relevant to the Afrofuturism movement is the relationship with the past, present, and future. As Womack elaborates in her text, people from the African diaspora have developed a unique perspective on space and time.²⁹⁹ Often reflecting on historical traumas and personal struggles, Afrofuturists seek healing in art, looking for reparative approaches to epistemology and ontology.³⁰⁰ Flash’s project draws inspiration from Black music such as Sun Ra, Funkadelic, Missy Elliott, and Janelle Monáe, as well as Black sci-fi writers like Octavia Butler, a futuristic aesthetic, and art history. *Afro-Gothic* is one of the few self-portraits in the series that provides a clear reference to a painting. Another painterly reference is *Hommage to Kerry James Marshall*, portraying the artist in his studio. This photograph will be discussed in the last chapter of the study.

2.2.1. Framing and *Framing* the Afrofuturist Re-Pair

Afro-Gothic (2019) depicts Flash in a striking orange prison jumpsuit, wearing a helmet with a blue-tinted visor. The artist is standing straight, posing with a long wooden stick that resembles the farmer’s pitchfork from Wood’s painting. The stick itself gives the artist support and also visually grounds Flash in the landscape. The artist looks outer-worldly in

²⁹⁷ Karen Jaime, “Talking About Joy, Legacies, and Afrofuturity: An Interview with Lola Flash,” *ASAP Review. Open-Access Reviews of Arts of the Present*, March 8, 2021, <https://asapjournal.com/feature/talking-about-joy-legacies-and-afrofuturity-an-interview-with-lola-flash/> (accessed November 12, 2024).

²⁹⁸ Ytasha L. Womack, “Afrofuturism as Space and Being” in *Afrofuturism. A History of Black Futures*, ed. Kevin M. Strait and Kinshasha Holman Conwill (Washington, DC.: Smithsonian Books, 2023), 21.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

front of the wooden house, the jumpsuit contrasting with the grey facade of the building. Their helmet resembles the one worn by astronauts, evoking space travel. Flash's uniform is a combination of standardized prison attire, characterized by its orange color, which visually distinguishes it from civil clothing, a futuristic helmet, African jewelry, and handcuffs (present in other photographs of the series). All of these elements built a performative persona, standing out and not fitting in with the landscape portrayed in the photograph. Flash is intentionally using an astronaut helmet to emphasize the space aesthetic characteristic of Afrofuturism, while also evoking alienation and estrangement, which are tangible in Wood's painting.

In my interview with Flash, the artist spoke about the origin of the series:

Moving from analogue to digital, I imagine myself as a superhero – an arresting, gender-fluid mythical being. The series began in 2019, with me wearing an orange prison uniform and a space helmet, one arm handcuffed, the other free, evoking my optimism for the future. In my large-scale photographs, I channel the spirits and distinctive visions of many of my favorite artists, pioneers who forged their concepts and iterations of Afrofuturism. [...] *Syzygy* inserts itself into reimagined spaces that reflect realistic possibilities as the universal, timeless character exemplifying hope, self-agency, and freedom. Thus far, the series' locations range from across America and England.³⁰¹

The mentioned “gender-fluid mythical being” is alluding to the artist's gender-nonconforming identity as well as the Afrofuturist framework, moving beyond the Western binary systems and Eurocentric ideals concerning time. Spanning two continents, the *syzygy* series touches upon migration, diasporic identities, and ancestral spirituality, searching for both inner (self-agency) and outer spaces to imagine a better and hopeful future. In this context, the re-pair that emerges from Flash's intervention is rooted in a radical re-imagination characteristic to decolonial and Afrofuturist movements.

³⁰¹ In my interview with the artist, Flash shared with me behind-the-scenes aspects of the project: “The first pictures for the series I took during a residency at the Center For Photography at Woodstock. I got a helmet, and I always have had a lot of prison uniforms in my apartment. I just never knew what I was gonna do with them, but I always thought about incarceration. I saw the helmet had an orange color on it. So I thought, okay, I will wear my orange prison uniform. And then, I went to the store with my friend and I saw these orange handcuffs. I was like, cool. And that is the whole *syzygy* uniform.” The interview was conducted during my Fulbright residency in New York, thanks to the Fulbright Junior Research Award 2023–2024, realized at New York University, Tisch School of the Arts. The transcript is available in the author's archive.

By comparing *Afro-Gothic* and *American Gothic*, there are some evident iconographic resemblances and formal differences. Grant's portrait formula was very standard at the time compared to the photographs of families posing proudly in front of their homes.³⁰² The figures are depicted from the waist up, obscuring most of the house in the background. In contrast, Flash depicts himself in a wide shot, standing in the distance, so the whole figure is visible, capturing almost the entire house in the background, along with some neighboring trees. What is similar is the stiff posing and serious demeanor, partially covered by a blue visor in Flash's case, as well as the overall composition of the figure portrayed in front of the house. There is also a resemblance in the depicted architecture; both houses feature gable roofs, forming a triangular shape in front, with wooden paneling. While Wood's composition of the figures forces a close encounter, Flash's self-portrait creates a distance. In the case of Flash, the meaning of Gothic expands as blackness emerging "from behind" *American Gothic*, effectively suppressed and still imprisoned, but hopeful for an Afrofuturist future.

Subsequent scholars have analyzed Wood's painting thoroughly, providing interpretations connecting it to regionalism, rural American life, family traditions, and its cultural impact.³⁰³ The artist, as an Iowa native, was raised in a Midwestern traditionalist social landscape, and in many ways, his art reflects this. As Ignacio Darnaude has noted, while many publications and exhibitions tend to keep Grant in the closet, the Whitney Museum's retrospective did the opposite, celebrating the artist's queerness.³⁰⁴ The 2018 exhibition *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables* curated by Barbara Haskell and Sarah Humphreville, skillfully connected the artist's sexual identity with the socio-economic context of the 1930s in America, providing an insightful dissection of populist images of rural America, while analyzing the artist's subconscious anxieties. The curators wrote: "Wood sought pictorially to fashion a world of harmony and prosperity that would

³⁰² Corn, "The Birth of a National Icon," 256.

³⁰³ See, respectively: Dennis James, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1975); Corn, "The Birth of a National Icon," 252–275; Sue Taylor, "Grant Wood's Family Album," *American Art* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 48–67.

³⁰⁴ See Ignacio Darnaude, "American Gothic, a coded window into Grant Wood's queer life," *WEHOnline*, September 10, 2022, <https://wehonline.com/2022/09/10/ignacio-darnaude-american-gothic-a-coded-window-into-grant-woods-queer-life/> (accessed November 6, 2024).

answer America's need for reassurance at a time of economic and social upheaval occasioned by the Depression. Yet underneath its bucolic exterior, his art reflects the anxiety of being an artist and a deeply repressed homosexual in the Midwest in the 1930s."³⁰⁵ The layered suppression of identity and sexuality that the curators of *American Gothic and Other Fables* aptly pointed out has to be seen against the backdrop of socio-political issues present at the time. Wood's painting was conceived during a period of economic crisis and poverty. Performative straightness allowed the artist's painting to be accepted in a homophobic society, while Flash's appropriation radically deconstructs it. Their work focuses on queer identity and blackness, openly discussing it through a famous visual trope rooted in the American collective memory. For Flash, the ongoing mass incarceration crisis and racial injustice act as triggers to unite their activist and artistic strategies.

The *syzygy* series powerfully reflects on the health crisis in America and the social upheaval reflected in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which arose in response to the brutal killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade. For the artist, finding hope and reassurance during that difficult time was crucial. As Flash describes in their statement, the project intersects the instability of the present with hope for a better future, providing a multidimensional contemplation on issues such as mass incarceration, conflicts, racism, and healthcare crises.³⁰⁶ As Deborah Willis writes in her essay *Looking Inward and Outward*, self-portraiture during the year 2020 served as a visual response to the unthinkable experiences Black artists were going through, addressing the horrors of racial violence and police brutality, as well as the isolation of the pandemic.³⁰⁷ "In truth, we all have been forced to look at ourselves and our intimate spaces and environments, and to consider our feelings of pleasure, complacency, fear, and loss,"

³⁰⁵ Quote from the website of the Whitney Museum: <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/grant-wood> (accessed November 6, 2024).

³⁰⁶ Lola Flash, "AFROFUTURISM," artist statement from artist's website: <http://www.lolaflash.com/e3wlu6hvhgh6mstex6v11111msl39y6> (accessed November 5, 2024).

³⁰⁷ Deborah Willis, "Looking Inward and Outward in: Sources of Self-Regard. Self-Portraits From Black Photographers Reflecting on America," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/19/arts/black-photographers-self-portraits.html> (accessed November 6, 2024).

she wrote.³⁰⁸ The last part, loss, was especially significant for artists like Flash to process. While being a member of ACT UP, they witnessed a lot of AIDS-related deaths and lost numerous friends. Fighting for a better and safer future for queer and BIPOC youth was always a priority for the photographer. During one BLM protest, Flash appeared wearing the syzygy uniform, a face mask, white gloves, and a broken orange handcuff, in one hand holding a sign “STOP F**KING KILLING BLACK PEOPLE,” marching through the streets of New York in July 2020 (**fig. 82**).³⁰⁹ Flash’s fist is raised, paying homage to the Black Power movement, and the urgent message of the sign represents the artist’s activist stance of resistance to anti-Black violence. Their futuristic attire in the midst of the global pandemic reminds me of the question Chardine Taylor-Stone asked in her essay on Afrofuturism: “If we accept that all humanity will be present in the future, why is it that non-European cultures seem to disappear once we get through the Earth’s atmosphere?.”³¹⁰

The shift from Wood’s regional and rural portrait of the Great Depression to Flash’s Afrofuturistic re-pairing intervention produces a time-travel leap, characteristic of the Afrofuturism movement.³¹¹ As Sofia Samatar has observed, “Afrofuturists prize the histories encoded in the left over, the discarded, the scattered, and the second hand.”³¹² Flash’s photograph follows this description to a certain degree, with the artist using an iconic and popular, but not the most acclaimed, work of art and remixing the trope for their own futuristic vision. The strategy of remix is fundamental when discussing Afrofuturism. Derived from music theory, a remix allows for appropriation and fragmentation (also called

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ See “See Artist Lola Flash’s Powerful Photographs of New York City’s Coronavirus Lockdown and Black Lives Matter Protests,” visual essay for *ARTnews*, July 7, 2020, https://www.artnews.com/gallery/art-news/photos/lola-flash-nyc-lockdown-black-lives-matter-protests-slideshow-1202693553/lola_flash-16/ (accessed November 12, 2024).

³¹⁰ Chardine Taylor-Stone, “Where space, pyramids, and politics collide,” *The Guardian*, January 7, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2014/jan/07/afrofuturism-where-space-pyramids-and-politics-collide?CMP=tw_t_gu (accessed November 12, 2024). On the intersection of pandemic and Afrofuturism, see Kimberly Nichele Brown, “Black Women and the Pandemic Imagination,” *The Radical Teacher*, no. 122 (Spring 2022): 42–51.

³¹¹ Sofia Samatar, “Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism,” *Research in African Literatures* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2017), 176.

³¹² Ibid., 178.

sampling) of references in order to reimagine Black identity in a new, futuristic context.³¹³ What would that mean for Flash? Firstly, the artist chose a painting emblematic of Midwestern “Americanness” and that focuses on whiteness. Secondly, their appropriation is in their encoding *American Gothic* with queerness and blackness, radically shifting the significance of this particular visual trope in the American collective memory. Finally, the composition of Wood’s painting provided Flash with a space to intervene in Afrofuturistic re-pair, reframing the past within current events and speculating on the future.

The urgency of socio-political issues is tangible in Flash’s self-portrait. Both their and Wood’s work share the tropes of class and labor. In Grant’s painting, the man symbolizes the hard work of Midwestern folk; holding a pitchfork associated with farming and dressed in overalls; he represents the traditionally masculine role of breadwinner. The structure of the three metal prongs of the pitchfork repeats in the pattern in his overalls, the form of the gothic window, and even in the wrinkles on the farmer’s face. One of the interpretations of this emphasis would mean that the man is the protector of the house and family. This would add to the traditionalist values the painting evokes. Associated with the peasantry, the pitchfork also indicates the lower class status of the portrayed figure, making the painting relatable to the masses. Hence, the extreme popularity of reproducing it in advertising campaigns. Along with the farmer, the woman portrayed in a conservative apron with a white collar complements the traditionalist picture.

The class issues that *American Gothic* generates have been explored and expanded on in appropriation from Parks in his photograph of Watson posing in front of the American flag.³¹⁴ The photograph captures the harsh reality that many women of color had to face during that time, working as sanitary workers and surviving racial segregation. Watson is holding a broom, resembling Wood’s farmer with his pitchfork, looking absently

³¹³ On remixing and Afrofuturism: Sean Zhang, “Remixing the Future,” *The MET Perspectives*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/remixing-future-afrofuturism-john-jennings> (accessed November 7, 2024).

³¹⁴ The photograph’s most recent monograph, *American Gothic: Gordon Parks and Ella Watson* (Steidl: Göttingen, 2024), contains a detailed and contextualized overview of Parks’s work, as well as a comprehensive study of Ella Watson’s significance in American visuality.

outside the frame.³¹⁵ The mop in the background, resting against the desk, emphasizes the janitor's duties. Similarly to Wood's painting, the photograph showcases a down-to-earth perspective on the American working class, demystifying the American dream. In Flash's iteration, the working class uniform is replaced by an orange jumpsuit, re-contextualizing Parks's remarks on the racial injustice inherent to the issue of mass incarceration in America. In most instances, the problem affects Black and Brown men, who as former inmates are prevented from finding employment. In *Afro-Gothic* the notion of constraint that the uniform symbolizes is contrasted with the landscape and domestic context of the scene. The artist is picturing themselves outside, alone, not guarded or supervised, but rather observed and recorded by the camera. An intriguing element that resembles the restraint of the handcuffs is their beaded bracelet with shells. The bracelet is more visible in the *Specter* photograph, where the artist is holding the stick once again, showcasing a more detailed view of the jewelry. The tradition of beaded bracelets is rooted in African culture, and within the Afrofuturist framework, this detail is significant to the strategy of re-pairing past and future. The figure of a futuristic inmate worker with African roots, first and foremost, addresses the trauma of slavery, emphasizing the struggle for freedom. Moreover, justice has not yet been served, as the artist is still bearing the signs of bondage, pointing out the longevity of the struggle for abolition. In this context, words from Frederick Douglass come to mind: "The thought of being only a creature of the present and the past troubled me, and I longed to have a future – a future with hope in it."³¹⁶

Here, I would like to expand my analysis of *Afro-Gothic* to incorporate another image from the *syzygy* series. The 2020 self-portrait *Divinity* (**fig. 83**) depicts the artist wearing the same attire as in *Afro-Gothic*, standing in the middle of a vertically positioned boat, and resting against a wall of red bricks. The shape of the boat resonates with

³¹⁵ As John Edwin Mason emphasizes in his essay on Parks's photograph, the artist has known the referenced painting. He writes: "Parks had undoubtedly seen reproductions of the painting and had perhaps also seen the original. Wood's painting was part of the collection at the Art Institute of Chicago when Parks lived in the city and frequented the museum." See John Edwin Mason, "Gordon Parks' American Gothic," *Medium*, February 26, 2016, <https://medium.com/vantage/gordon-parks-american-gothic-af36a14b8b70> (accessed November 7, 2024).

³¹⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1892, chap. 19, book in open access [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Life_and_Times_of_Frederick_Douglass_\(1892\)/Chapter_19](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Life_and_Times_of_Frederick_Douglass_(1892)/Chapter_19) (accessed July 3, 2025), 193.

monumental arched windows, which are blocked with wooden panels. Flash's bright orange uniform contrasts sharply with the blue interior of the boat. The artist is standing in the middle, illuminated by sunlight. The left side of the boat is in shadow, making part of the interior a darker blue that resembles the color of the ocean. Flash is standing in an upright position, their hands clasped together in a gesture of prayer or paying respect, and their head tilted back. This photograph is a particularly personal and vulnerable way of honoring the artist's ancestors, who were enslaved.³¹⁷ Flash is putting themself in a position of exile, looking for their roots in involuntary migratory experiences and forced movement. The boat is both a metaphor and a site of confinement, resembling a casket.

Both *Afro-Gothic* and *Divinity* represent the visual resonance of slavery, characterized by Kimberly Juanita Brown by the trope of the afterimage.³¹⁸ The scholar understands the afterimage in its plurality as a layering of images, emotions, collective consciousness, distortion, etc., regarding a gendered position, particularly Black women's experience.³¹⁹ By engaging with a memory of a traumatic past, especially considering the personal connection of the artist to the topic, Flash is using Afrofuturist framework as a way of moving forward. Peeling off layers of the afterimage of slavery has guided the artist to the trope of American identity, the notion of house and landscape, all of which are present in *American Gothic*.

Another key motif in both photographs of Flash is the artistic exploration of imagining imprisonment. Here, *framing* will be interpreted as a form of bondage, shifting the focus from formal analysis to the socio-political context of the artist's self-portrait. While considering the intersection of slavery, neocolonialism, and mass incarceration, I propose reading *Afro-Gothic* and *Divinity* alongside Jared Owens's exploration of carceral geographies, presented at the *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* exhibition at MoMA (2020) and the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for

³¹⁷ In my interview with Flash, the artist said: "Those folks, my ancestors who were enslaved, they were constantly thinking of how can we get out of this? And so they had songs and all kinds of different messages, their smart ways of maneuvering through being enslaved and into being free." The transcript of the interview is available by contacting the author.

³¹⁸ See Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

Research in Black Culture (2023). Curated by Nicole R. Fleetwood, the pioneering exhibition brought together artists who had been incarcerated, former inmates who had become artists while in prison, and artists whose practices interrogate the carceral state.³²⁰ Although Flash was not part of the exhibition, their work deeply resonates with the exhibition's interventional and activist character.

Carceral geography is a term developed by Dominique Moran, and is defined by the scholar as a “geographical engagement with spaces, practices, and experiences of confinement and coercive control.”³²¹ Following the foundations of Michael Foucault's seminal work *Discipline and Punishment*, the term is part of an interdisciplinary field of study, focusing on carceral mobility, surveillance, agency, and the body.³²² Owens founded an art collective while imprisoned in a federal prison in Fairton, NJ, along with artists Jesse Krimes and Gilberto Rivera, where he started exploring carceral geographies and incorporating soil from prison yards into his mixed-media paintings. In his *Series III #5* mixed-media painting from 2022, and *Ellapsium: master & Helm* from 2016, the artist combined the image of a 1788 diagram of the *Brookers* slave ship with the letter X and a blueprint of Fairton prison, all covered in an orange hue (**fig. 84**). The artist explains his use of the letter X, saying: “By using the imagery of the Brookes' slave ship, and imposing an ‘X’ over the figures, the painting asks two questions: 1) Who is forgotten or marginalized? 2) How do ancient symbols used in contemporary juxtapositions affect how we see *ancestors* and the remnants of oppression in the mind's eye?.”³²³ For both Owens and Flash, color plays a significant role in the narrative. The colors used by Owens symbolize the power structures in the prison system, orange being the most significant, thereby marking “forbidden spaces, forming a painted boundary between incarcerated

³²⁰ During my Fulbright scholarship at NYU, I was able to see the exhibition at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The exhibition travelled to: MoMA PS1, AEIVA, The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, and Brown University.

³²¹ See Moran's website: Dominique Moran, “What Is Carceral Geography?” *Carceral Geography*, <https://carceralgeography.com/about-3/what-is-carceral-geography/> (accessed November 12, 2024). More in Dominique Moran, *Carceral Geography. Spaces and Practices of Incarceration* (London: Routledge, 2015).

³²² See Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

³²³ Quote from the exhibition description in Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Photos of the description are available by contacting the author of the dissertation.

people and prison administration.”³²⁴ In Flash’s Afrofuturist reimagination, color plays a significant role in distinguishing the artist from the landscape, making them hypervisible. This is paradoxical, considering the marginality and ultimately invisibility of imprisoned people in the socio-cultural milieu.

Within the overlapping themes of slavery and prison, it is important to mention the work of Angela Davis, who wrote extensively on the carceral state of America, and called for the dismantling of the prison-industrial complex. The activist compared the prison abolitionist struggle to the anti-slavery abolition movement, pointing out the failure to incorporate former inmates into society, and their being sentenced to social and economic alienation even after they are released.³²⁵ Flash’s work explores the carceral geographies’ spatiality by moving outside prison confinement, but also by framing themselves within the grand narratives of the Great Depression in *Afro-Gothic* and slavery in *Divinity*. The notion of freedom in both cases is marked by centuries of struggle, and Flash’s way of connecting with the memory of their ancestors is by putting themselves in a position of exile as an outer-spaced interventionist.

Through the intersection of memory, space, and bodily presence, Flash’s re-pair tackles the issues of Afrofuturist temporal overlaps. By rejecting linearity, Afrofuturism dismantles the standard Western concept of temporality, decentering the mono-directionality that leads to what Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung called a mono-History.³²⁶ As the scholar emphasizes, the histories imprinted in bodies and the psyche, rather than in writing, “reflect upon and investigate the partiality of the images.”³²⁷ In the *syzygy* series the artist works within the concept of Sankofa. In the Ghanaian language, this means to retrieve things from the past to build a better future. This is what Flash practices

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle. Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, ed. Frank Barat (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016): 25–26. Davis was commenting on Frank Barat’s remark on the history of the abolitionist movement and the struggle to create a better society. She said: “You could remove the chains, but if you did not develop the institutions that would allow for incorporation of previously enslaved people into a democratic society then slavery would not be abolished. In a sense, when we are arguing, is that the prison abolitionist struggle follows the anti-slavery, abolitionist struggle of the nineteenth century; this struggle for an abolitionist democracy is aspiring to create institutions that will truly allow for a democratic society.” (25–26).

³²⁶ Ndikung, *In a While or Two We Will Find the Tone*, 33.

³²⁷ Ibid., 32.

with *Afro-Gothic*, returning to a traumatic narrative that allows for recovery to take the lead. Through contemporary issues that affect people of color in the United States, the artist re-imagines the narrative of American identity, framing it within injustice, negligence, and bondage. The *American Gothic* trope serves here as a starting point for establishing a connection between the artist and the viewer, who is allured with the visual familiarity embedded in the collective memory. This strategy allows Flash to intervene and include a gender-non-conforming Black body in the picture while expressing solidarity and empathy with incarcerated people who have lost their right to freedom. This approach echoes the question about the future of the art canon and its changing position within the collective memory and social sensitivity. Flash's strategy of re-pair is one with high social stakes rooted in activist practices and sited at the intersection of trauma, healing, and queer radicalism.

2.3. Re-Figuring the Museum

"Have we all been sleeping on Carrie Mae Weems?" asks Huey Copeland in his essay *Close-Up: Specters of History* in 2014.³²⁸ At the time, the gap in scholarly work concerning such an esteemed artist was alarming, but it also reflected the asymmetry between acclaiming and developing a discourse surrounding Black women artists. Carrie Mae Weems's (b. 1953) artistic oeuvre since the 1990s has challenged preconceived notions about American identity in her photography. Early on in her career, Weems began to explore family pictures and visual conventions present in the media. The pioneering *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) was created in response to the underrepresentation of Black women in mainstream media and the arts in general.³²⁹ Another significant project in her career, *From Here I Saw What Happened, and I Cried* (1995–96), presented a valuable

³²⁸ Huey Copeland, "Close-Up: Specters of History," *ARTFORUM* 53, no. 1, September 2014, online: <https://www.artforum.com/features/carrie-mae-weemss-lincoln-lonnie-and-me-2012-221166/> (accessed November 7, 2024).

³²⁹ Throughout the 2010s, the *Kitchen Table Series* has been a central component of retrospective exhibitions of the artist, such as: *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, 2012–2013; *Dawoud Bey & Carrie Mae Weems: In Dialogue*, Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, MI, 2022.

lesson on the history of colonialism, the dangers of pseudo-science, and the power of photography in supporting racism and stereotypes. Combining image and text, the artist created a multidimensional story with appropriated photographs found in museums and university archives. Paradoxically, the artist was threatened with being sued by Harvard University for using images from the collection of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology without permission.³³⁰ In the 2010 *Slow Fade to Black* series, Weems protested the erasure of Black female performers from American cultural memory.

These projects focus on memory and erasure, highlighting the challenges Weems encounters as a Black female artist in the U.S. Her work delves into self-portraiture, representing her personal identity and societal roles, while also addressing broader themes about humanity. Weem's work radically engages anti-colonial and anti-imperial narratives, decentering whiteness and shifting the focus on the Black subject. In doing so, the artist does not fall into the trap of essentialism or simplified Manichean binary, but rather, she operates within a broader discourse on history, visibility, and diaspora. By "deconstructing the simple notions of subjectivity," Weems's photographic projects are prone to the question of how the "self" is constructed in relationship with imagery and history.³³¹ Is reactivating historical memory inherently bound up with trauma? How do artists become witnesses to history?

In the early 2000s, Weems started to explore the relationship between self-portraiture, landscape, and architecture. Projects like *Embracing Eatonville* (2002–2003), *The Louisiana Project* (2003), and *Roaming* (2006) resulted in establishing *Rückenfigur* as the main motif in the artist's oeuvre. As discussed in the first chapter, the depiction of the figure from behind encourages the viewer to adopt the role of a spectator. The following project, *Museums* (2006), will be the next subject of my analysis, which will delve into the

³³⁰ Yxta Maya Murray, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried: Carrie Mae Weems Challenge to the Harvard Archive," *Unbound: Harvard Journal of the Legal Left* 8, no. 1 (2013): 1, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2324363> (accessed July 3, 2025).

³³¹ bell hooks, "Diasporic Landscapes of Longing (1994)," in *Carrie Mae Weems: October Files*, ed. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis and Christine Garnier (Cambridge–London: The MIT Press, 2021), 17. hooks wrote about the critical trap of oversimplifying Weem's work by focusing on racial otherness. She writes: "Transforming ways of seeing means that we learn to see race – thereby no longer acting in complicity with a white supremacist aesthetic that would have us believe issues of color and race have no place in artistic practices – without privileging it as the only relevant category of analysis." (17).

representation of Black female artists in the world's major museums, as well as the issue of the colonial debt owed to African countries. The series contains more than a dozen large prints in black and white, 40 x 50 inches / 101.6 x 127 cm, depicting the artist turning his back to the camera while standing in front of major art museums, such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Project Row Houses in Houston, Cleveland Museum of Art, Birmingham Museum of Art in Birmingham, Alabama, Tate Modern and British Museum in London, the Galleria Nazionale D'Arte Moderna in Rome, the Louvre in Paris, Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, Berlin History Museum, Zwinger in Dresden, and the Fountain of the Great Lakes by the Art Institute of Chicago (**fig. 85**).

The *Museums* and *Roaming* series have a lot in common; both were conceived in the same year and deploy the same artistic strategy of being present in the cultural landscape. For the purpose of my argument, the scholarly input in *Roaming* would be beneficial to exploring the themes of witness, muse, landscape, and monument in the analysis. Another significant trope will be the global implication of Weems's series. Considering both the differences and similarities shared between African-American artists and artists from the so-called Global South, this part of the chapter will provide a decolonial reading of *Museums*. Examples of a shared (with African artists) aesthetics of self-portraiture will not only broaden the landscape of Black portraiture, but also unravel a similar goal in building and strengthening the narrative of diaspora in contemporary art. It is also essential to recognize the peculiar position of African-American artists, considering the link between the history of enslavement and the imperialistic position of the United States.

Weems's artistic engagement with the politics of visibility has always been intertwined with the power of imagery, particularly the power of photography. By exploring both national and diasporic histories, the artist consistently acknowledges the presence of Black women in the narratives she examines. Throughout her earlier works, she was interested in folklore, tracing the beliefs of African communities in the United States and protesting against the erasure of local identity and history. In 2005, Weems was

awarded the Joseph H. Hassen Rome Prize Fellowship, and in 2006, she traveled Europe to create self-portraits for the *Museums* series. That allowed the artist to concentrate on the narrative of the African diaspora and migration, and reflect on the global impact of institutional violence.

The *Museums* series is a project in line with the reparative approach to museology and decolonial studies. Weems's strategy of empowerment is based on portraying art institutions entangled in the history of architectural representations, power, and national identity. Her "spatial investigations," as Sarah Lewis calls the artist's practice, examine how bodies occupy the space, what spaces are BIPOC people invited to, and from which ones they are excluded.³³² The re-pair in Weems's series could be interpreted in many ways. Initially, in her self-portraits, the artist pairs herself with her alter ego, the muse, serving as a guide for viewers. Next, she contrasts her body's representation in public spaces with institutional architecture, emphasizing differences in scale and significance in photographic depictions. Third, adopting a global outlook, Weems highlights the decolonial aspect of her work, aiming to address the trauma inflicted by the history of imperialism and colonialism on BIPOC communities. In this view, art institutions have often supported colonial crimes, kept stolen artifacts, and created narratives about BIPOC people that have frequently excluded minority perspectives. Lastly, as a woman artist, Weems appears to critique historical and art discourse that often marginalizes women artists and neglects their achievements.

Series such as *Museums* are representative of the self-representation of blackness as beautiful, empowered, abundant, elegant, and graceful.³³³ Weems's work is an example of the "critical labor of positive," as hooks noted after Sadiya Hartman, which means that dehumanizing narrations based on colonial and racist prejudices can be recovered by the artistic work of extracting positive values.³³⁴ This aligns with the concept of re-pairing, offering healing and ultimately empowerment and justice. The issues that Weems is trying

³³² Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, Carrie Mae Weems, and Thelma Golden, "Carrie Mae Weems and the Field," in *Carrie Mae Weems: October Files*, ed. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis and Christine Garnier (Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2021), 41.

³³³ hooks, "Diasporic Landscapes of Longing," 17.

³³⁴ Ibid.

to resolve in her project concerning how the historical structures of racial inequality have evolved in the context of a globalized or planetary society are relevant to this day. Illustrating this urgency, I would like to evoke words from Achille Mbembe:

The imperative to *deracialise* is also valid for Europe, for the United States, for Brazil, and for other parts of the world. The emergence of new varieties of racism in Europe and elsewhere, the reassertion of global white supremacy, of populism and retro-nationalism, the weaponisation of difference and identity are not only symptoms of a deep distrust of the world. They are also fostered by transnational forces capable of making that same world inhospitable, uninhabitable and unbreathable for many of us.³³⁵

What Mbembe is saying here and what also applies to Weems's series is that anti-racist work should start with the dismantling of global white supremacy. As the scholar points out, new forms of racism are no longer internal problems, but rather, issues actively fueled by transitional forces, making the world seem "inhospitable, uninhabitable and unbreathable." This is precisely why Weems travels to famous art museums worldwide, highlighting systemic inequalities and oppression within their institutional frameworks.

2.3.1. Muse, Monument, Architecture

The first main trope present in the *Museums* series is the relationship between the body, the landscape, and cultural institutions. Weems's spatial investigation leads to questions about what spaces female artists are invited to and from which spaces they are excluded; what the relationship is between the Black body and public space; how the artist navigates the intersection of body, history, and place; and, ultimately, how the artist utilizes re-pair as the strategy of empowerment. All the photographs in the series have one thing in common: the figure of the artist, dressed in a black, full-length gown. In some photographs, Weems is wearing an afro; in some, her hair is combed back. There is a certain power in her stance; her back is straight, her hands at her sides, and she is standing completely still. On the one hand, the artist resembles a statue, not interacting with the surroundings or the tourists

³³⁵ Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen, "Thoughts on the planetary: An interview with Achille Mbembe," *New Frame in South Africa*, September 6, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/40268677/Thoughts_on_the_planetary_An_interview_with_Achille_Mbembe (accessed November 8, 2024).

visiting the museum; on the other, she guides the viewer through the world and history. The artist describes her performative self in the photograph as a muse, an ongoing trope in her oeuvre:

The muse made her first appearance in *Kitchen Table*; this woman can stand in for me and for you; she can stand in for the audience, she leads you into history. She's a witness and a guide. She changes slightly, depending on location. For instance, she operates differently in Cuba and Louisiana than in Rome. She's shown me a great deal about the world and about myself, and I'm grateful to her. Carrying a tremendous burden, she is a black woman leading me through the trauma of history. I think it's very important that as a black woman she's engage with the world around her she's engaged with history, she's engage with looking, with *being*.³³⁶

Weems's words are important to understanding the artist's relationship to self-portraiture. She is clearly distinguishing herself from the woman in the photograph, calling her a muse, witness, and guide. Derived from Greek etymology, Muses were inspirational goddesses who possessed knowledge embodied in history, poetry, and music, among other things. Two of the Muses seem to be significant to Weems: Clio, representing history, and Mnemosyne, representing memory. It is worth mentioning that iconology describes the personification of memory as a woman dressed in black.³³⁷ Historically, the relationship between the muses and artists has been marked by a gendered power dynamic: the man as the active creator, and the woman as a passive source of inspiration and often portrayed as a seductive femme fatale. In the *Museums* series, the muse is no longer subjugated to this binary relationship. She is intertwined with the artist, Weems, with whom she shares her subjectivity, and the viewer, with whom she shares a common perspective.

Let's examine how the artist's body engages with the landscape and the art institutions presented in the *Museums* series. First, in one of the rare close-ups in the series, *Guggenheim Bilbao* (**fig. 86**), the artist is standing in front of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain, designed by Frank Gehry in 1997. The artist turns her back to the viewer,

³³⁶ Dawoud Bey, "Carrie Mae Weems," *Carrie Mae Weems: October Files*, ed. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis and Christine Garnier (Cambridge–London: The MIT Press, 2021), 150.

³³⁷ I could not find Ripa's interpretation of Memory in the English translation of his *Iconology*. The Polish translation is an extended study of his writing. See Cesare Ripa, *Ikonomia*, trans. Ireneusz Kania (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), 308–309.

wearing her signature black gown and holding onto the railing that separates her from the river. The boat-like shape of the building and its close proximity to the water evoke the context of Spanish colonization and the era of geographical discoveries. The muse is looking straight ahead at the museum, which obscures the horizon. Her pose resembles Caspar David Friedrich's *Woman Before the Rising Sun/Setting Sun* (1818–1820), possibly depicting Caroline Brommer, the artist's wife (**fig. 87**). In that painting, the woman is wearing a dark, full-length gown, looking at the sun rising/setting and surveying the natural landscape, with her back turned to the viewer and her arms spread in devotion. Considering that the landscape for Friedrich was an allegory for religion, the depicted woman is praying and possibly represents the nation of Germany.³³⁸ The characteristic trope of *Rückenfigur*, discussed in the first chapter, encourages the viewer to assume the role of a spectator. Both in Weems's photograph and in Friedrich's painting, the viewer's position is mediated through the body of the female figure. In both cases, the woman is in the center of the composition and obstructs part of the landscape, first bringing attention to the silhouette and later to the scene in the background. In Friedrich's painting, the woman touches the lines of the hills in a planimetric view; she connects with the landscape, which has an almost absolute dimension – or rather, frames the sky as a source of the absolute. Weems, similarly, touches the ramp of the fence – and the museum becomes this absolute reference.

Weems's self-portrait evokes the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "every displacement of my body – has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them."³³⁹ In his writings, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that there is no separation between the body that sees and the body that touches. Weems's self-portrait intertwines visibility and tangibility; she is looking into the distance and touching the rail.

³³⁸ The female allegories for nations were particularly popular throughout the nineteenth century, see Ursula E. Koch, "Female allegories of the nation," *Digital Encyclopedia for European History* [online], June 22, 2020, <https://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/gender-and-europe/gender-and-revolution-in-europe-19th-20th-century/female-allegories-nation> (accessed November 13, 2024). The postcolonial reading of the gendered allegories in decolonized countries is explored by Elleke Boehmer in her book *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005). The author provides a compelling analysis of the development of nationalism defined by sexual difference, particularly the notion of motherland in the chapter *Motherlands, mothers and nationalist sons: theorising the en-gendered nation*. The book is available through open access: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155j4ws> (accessed November 13, 2024).

³³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 134.

The museum is framed by her attentive gaze, while the rail serves as a boundary, distancing the artist from the institution, both physically and symbolically. Following Merleau-Ponty's words, the past is no longer just intellectually recalled but also corporeally represented.³⁴⁰ Weems embodies this concept, casting herself as a muse, representing generations of women artists who have been denied a place in the art canon.

By foregrounding the body of a Black woman, Weems's self-portrait grants the viewer a complex position, especially considering the context of the museum paradigm. The representation of female artists of color in the most prominent museums was at the time still scarce. "You're Seeing Less Than Half The Picture. Without the Vision of Women Artists and Artists of Color," the Guerrilla Girls stated in 1989. This anonymous feminist group, formed in New York in 1985, has advocated for increasing the visibility of artists of color, particularly women, in art institutions.³⁴¹ The "half of the picture" status quo is ghosting over Black women artists to this day, proving that the issue is still relevant and necessary to discuss. According to a National Endowment of the Arts study from 2008, women made up 46 percent of active artists in the United States; by 2019, the number had increased by 5 percent, while just 11 percent of the artists in major museum collections were female.³⁴² The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, being a relatively new major art museum, has seventeen women artists in its collection (from eighty-two overall), five of

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ The Guerrilla Girls have devoted many of their interventionist art to demanding institutional visibility for women artists of color, for example, "Only 4 Commercial Galleries In NY Show Black Women" (1986), "We've Encouraged Our Galleries To Show More Women And Artists Of Color. Have You?" (1989), "When Racism And Sexism Are No Longer Fashionable, How Much Will Your Art Collection Be Worth?" (1989), "The Guerrilla Girls Asked 383 European Museums About Diversity" (2016).

³⁴² See "Where Are the Black Women Artists At?, Black Art in America," *Black Art In America*, November 8, 2023, <https://www.blackartinamerica.com/blogs/news/where-are-the-black-women-artists-at-1> (accessed November 13, 2024). "According to a 2017 National Endowment of the Arts study, 51 percent of visual artists working today are women. However, more than two decades after the Guerrilla Girl's debut, a 2019 study revealed that, between 2008–2019, only 11% of artists in major museum collections were women. When it comes to black women artists, their absence in galleries and museums is glaring."

them being artists of color (Japan, Mexico, and Lebanon).³⁴³ Contesting absence and inequity, Weems establishes the presence of the Black woman artist and muse (the self) within the global cultural landscape, embodying a space for the Black female spectator. In her self-portrait, she projects the “viewer” within the context of each portrayed landscape. Her *Rückenfigur* strategy allows us to symbolically enter the photograph through the artist, who acts as a mediator and vessel. This approach is similar to that of Adama Delphine Fawundu, who also employed *Rückenfigur* to depict her connection with history. However, Weems performs in the field by visiting locations, whereas Fawundu uses archival material as a background for her layered prints.

The corporeal “omnipotent presence” of Weems in the series is haunting, especially in the photographs depicting the muse in the distance, just like in her self-portraits with the Tate Modern, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (**fig. 88**).³⁴⁴ In other iterations, the artist keeps on moving towards the buildings, just like in her portraits with the Louvre, British Museum, and Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (**fig. 89**). No matter how close Weems gets, she is always outside, mirroring the marginalized experience of many female artists of color. Each geographic location and institution adds a particular context to the series, revolving around the discursive power each museum has and the collections it holds. The artist moves from one place to another to emphasize the notion of diasporic migration, reflecting the history of colonial looting and the movement of people and artworks across the ocean. The lingering ghost of the past is especially tangible in her photographs of the Louvre and British Museum, the two most significant European museums, both carrying the legacy of the colonial and imperialist past. As Kimberly Juanita Brown writes, “Carrie Mae Weems’s body represents a

³⁴³ The museum has an index of the artists in the collection on its website: <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/the-collection/artists?page=5> (accessed November 13, 2024). The museum has contributed to an economic boom in the region, referred to by journalists as the Bilbao effect. See Rowan Moore, “The Bilbao effect: how Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim started a global craze,” *The Guardian*, October 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/oct/01/bilbao-effect-frank-gehry-guggenheim-global-craze> (accessed November 12, 2024). J. Pedro Lorente provides a recent and rather affirmative analysis of this phenomenon, see J. Pedro Lorente, “Reviewing the ‘Bilbao Effect’ Inside and Beyond the Guggenheim: Its Coming of Age in Sprawling Cultural Landscapes,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 67 (2): 365–379.

³⁴⁴ Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems,” 149.

conflation of temporality and space, the afterimage of slavery, and the elongation of the residue of empire.”³⁴⁵

In the photograph outside the British Museum (**fig. 90**), the artist is standing still while tourists walk up the stairs toward the museum’s entrance. Her black gown distinguishes her from the others, making her presence seem haunting. The frame of the self-portrait is awkward; the muse is captured on the right side, with her figure slightly tilted to the side, occupying the image’s margins and leaving the space in the center for the people passing by her. This composition contrasts with the one from Bilbao, where the muse is front and center, and partially obstructing the view of the museum building. Here, the artist depicts herself from a distance, glancing at the tourists passing by. No one is paying any attention to her, as if she were invisible. The monumental portico of Ionic columns dominates her figure, amplifying the classical grandeur and suggesting the insignificance of humanity in this architecture. A poster among the columns promotes a 2006 exhibition of Michelangelo’s drawings entitled *Closer to the Master*.³⁴⁶ This detail is a significant addition to Weems’s examination of the power relations in world museums. The master, the genius, the ‘greatest of all time’ was always a man. The way the artist positions her body within the axis where one of the columns is located makes her figure appear stoic. Examining the framing further, the cut below the decorative tympanum of the portico deprives the architectural view of this key element. Instead, the artist decided to leave a vast amount of empty space in the bottom half of the photograph. This arrangement distances the viewer from the artist and the building, making the purpose of the *Rückenfigur* almost impossible to achieve. This highlights the complex role of the artist as a muse, witness, and narrator of the diasporic journey. The black gown symbolizes mourning and her compassion toward the many victims of colonial rule. As Deborah

³⁴⁵ Kimberly Juanita Brown, “Photographic Incantations of the Visual,” in *Carrie Mae Weems: October Files*, ed. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis and Christine Garnier (Cambridge–London: The MIT Press, 2021), 153.

³⁴⁶ See Alan Riding, “British Museum Shows Works Michelangelo Wanted to Hide,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/29/arts/design/british-museum-shows-works-michelangelo-wanted-to-hide.html> (accessed November 20, 2024).

Williams points out, Weems is embodying their memory and reenacting their journeys.³⁴⁷ The artist acts as a mediator between us and this public space. Her pause there indicates hesitation and a kind of insight that tourists lack; we can choose whether to follow the crowd or to contemplate or criticize the canon, identifying with the muse.

In a photograph by the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston (**fig. 91**), the figure of the artist incorporates the monument into a conversation on the power of architecture and museums. The building of the MFA in Boston, representative of the Neoclassical architectural style, is depicted from the front, with a statue in front of it. The artist, distancing herself from the camera, has her back turned toward the viewer and is gazing at the museum's entrance. Her figure is small in comparison to the architecture and the grand monument. The latter is a 1908 equestrian statue by Cyrus Dallin, entitled *Appeal to the Great Spirit*, depicting a Native American on horseback facing skyward, with his arms spread wide in a spiritual request. Dallin exhibited his sculptures portraying Native Americans at multiple world fairs – the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, the 1899 Paris Salon, and the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris. Joseph Zordan, an Anishinaabe and art historian, wrote critically about the sculpture and the stereotypical trope it reinforces: “*Appeal to the Great Spirit* is a near-perfect encapsulation of the ‘vanishing race’ trope—wherein Indigenous people are represented as a doomed race with no hope but to quietly vanish from the planet, to make way for the superior race. With *Appeal to the Great Spirit*, Dallin has taken our grief as Indigenous peoples and cast and immobilized it in bronze, cursed to hang in the air forever, with lips parted and eyes frozen wide open.”³⁴⁸ Captured by Weems in black and white with a medium-format camera, the sculpture evokes Edward Curtis's *The North American Indian* photographic series (1907–1930), in which the trope of the “vanishing race” was fixed in the collective memory of predominantly white Americans.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Deborah Willis, “Carrie Mae Weems: Rehistoricizing Visual Memory,” in *Women Mobilizing Memory*, ed. Ayşe Gül Altınay, María José Contreras, Marianne Hirsch, Jean Howard, Banu Karaca, and Alisa Solomon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 280.

³⁴⁸ Joseph Zordan, “Appeal to the Great Spirit,” MFA Boston's website, July 6, 2020, <https://www.mfa.org/article/2020/appeal-to-the-great-spirit> (accessed November 20, 2024).

³⁴⁹ More on Curtis's photographs and the image of Native Americans through the white gaze, see Lipiński, *Ameryka*, 337–392.

The relationship between the monument, the artist's self-portrait, and the museum provides a complex overlap of visual representations. The open arms of the Native American remind me of the open arms of the *Rückenfigur* trope in Friedrich's painting and Weems's photograph from Bilbao. The gesture of searching for something absolute and almost sacred corresponds with the museum building having been styled as a Greek temple – a temple of art. At the same time, the ritualistic tone of the sculpture is not tied to any Indigenous beliefs but rather to the stereotype of the “vanishing race.” In this context, both the museum building and the monument appear mythic, founded on a hierarchical foundation. The artist is situated between a monument that reinforces white men's narrative about Native Americans and the museum, which stands as an institutional framework for such reinforcements. Weems's stoic figure resembles a statue frozen in time. She is significantly smaller than the massive equestrian monument set on a high pedestal. Both are fixed by a camera lens, symbolizing a historical gaze, turning bodies into mere representations of otherness – Black and Native American identities. The role of the photographic document is criticized by Weems, as the medium historically contributed to the imperial and colonial conquest.³⁵⁰

In this context, I would like to introduce a work from Rosette Lubondo, *Imaginary Trip II* series, from 2018 (**fig. 92**), which was created with the support of the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac. The images of the artist with her back turned to the viewer and revisiting post-colonial places in Congo bears the strategy of Weems's haunting appearance in *Museums*. In the photograph *Imaginary Trip II #1*, Lubondo documents a former boarding school founded in 1936 by missionaries and located in modern-day Kongo Central, documenting an abandoned and ruined building with a neglected statue on the left. The artist, dressed in a bright red polka-dot dress and carrying a white umbrella and a briefcase looks like she has just arrived there. The element of the journey, similar to Weems's strategy, intersects with the notion of intervening in memory at the intersection of body, space, artistic presence, and colonial history. It is worth emphasizing here that an

³⁵⁰ On the role of document in Weems's photography, see Andrea Kiss, “The Poetics of Carrie Mae Weems's Documentary Portraits Past and Present. Explorations of Grace,” *Afterimage* 46, no. 4 (2019): 57–73.

institution with a clear colonial debt – the Musée du Quai Branly – financed the project of a Congolese photographer, whose work is currently in the museum’s collection. These gestures are complex and most times should be taken with a grain of salt. Besides examining the stylistic resemblances between these two artists, I also intend to trace linkages to other Black women artists from the diaspora who received institutional recognition, among other reasons, thanks to artists such as Weems. However, this newly achieved visibility is burdened with a long history of exhibiting and displaying bodies of color in major art institutions.

In the poem *After Carrie Mae Weems’s Museums Series, 2006–*, Maya Phillips writes:

*I’d like to be beautiful
Held by the attention of white walls and yet

I forget the statue of my body the artifact I am
Black and woman my survival is studied
A lesson I relearn every day of my life
[...]
Art’s mercy divorces the artist from her image
her body’s exhibition*

The poem explores the Black woman’s body within the institutionalized context of display, which is crucial for understanding the *Museums* series’ strategy of re-pair. When Phillips writes “I forget the statue of my body, the artifact I am”, she is speaking about the histories of women like Sarah Baartman, a Khoekhoe woman who was exhibited as a freak show attraction in nineteenth-century Europe. Due to her body build, Baartman’s remains were displayed posthumously inside the Musée de l’Homme and ultimately repatriated in 2002 to South Africa.³⁵¹ The last two verses of the poem expand on the issue of representation, the separation between the body and image, and the complex nature of self-portraiture, all of which are present in Weems’s series. By contrasting her small figure with the

³⁵¹ See: *Black Venus 2010. They Called Her “Hottentot,”* ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010). More on the issues of exhibiting Black female bodies in Willis and Williams, *The Black Female Body*, 7–82.

monumental architecture, the artist emphasizes the impact of the narratives produced within the white walls of cultural institutions and, ultimately, how exclusionary they feel.

Reflecting on the global impact of the *Museums* series, I would like to highlight the recent appearance of Weems's self-portraits in the newly built Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (Museum Sztuki Nowoczesnej [MSN]) in the fall of 2024. It was the second time her works were exhibited in Poland. In 2006, Weems was part of the exhibition *Czarny Alfabet. Konteksty współczesnej sztuki afroamerykańskiej / Black Alphabet. Contexts of Contemporary African-American Art* in the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw (curated by Maria Brewińska). She exhibited a video from *The Louisiana Project* (2003), a series heavily focused on the American South. The *Museums* series, showcased in Warsaw, connected more deeply with the local context. The curators chose to display six photographs from the series (**fig. 93**), complementing the long-awaited opening of the institution and foreshadowing future challenges MSN would encounter. This emphasizes the tension between the peripheries and centers of art. MSN and Warsaw's rapidly evolving infrastructure are redefining what constitutes the margins outside the major art hubs. Weems's works contribute to the discussion about the museum's social and spatial role, sublimely addressing issues such as the placement of the museum within a given landscape and its relation to power. In the MSN context, it stands out as a modern white cube that contrasts sharply with the socialist architecture nearby.

2.3.2. Inside-Out

Just as Weems is dismantling the institutional asymmetry of power from the outside, Helina Metaferia is working on this from the inside. In her project *Refiguring the Canon* (2018–), the Ethiopian-American artist marries photography with performance art and guerrilla interventions, creating photographs, videos, and elaborated paper collages. Her videos showcase the artist performing inside the Des Moines Art Center, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, among others, where she moves about inside the museum's space and interacts with

famous artworks. One of her most powerful gestures is captured in part one of the video *Ruminating Over Circles & Squares* (2018), in which Metaferia engages with Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing 343A,B,C,D,E,F* (1980). The video starts with a close-up of the artist's dreadlocks. The camera is still, recording Metaferia slowly walking toward two larger-than-life geometric figures, a black square and a circle in white squares on a black background (**fig. 94**). The artist is dressed in all black, fitting her body in the crevice between the two white squares, blending in with the background and creating the illusion of disappearing. This seemingly magic act is, however, telling a hard truth. Artists of color are most often invisible to major art institutions. This simple yet powerful gesture resonates with Weems's haunting presence even more.

The part of the series I would like to focus on here is the photo collages, made from self-portraits of artist depicting stills from her performances, combined with found materials such as art magazines, including *Art News*, *Art Forum*, and *Art in America*, published in the 1980s, the decade in which the artist was born.³⁵² Metaferia's attention to tactility and reusable materials makes her work particularly compelling when discussing the tangibility of memory.³⁵³ In the series *Flower Pots* (2019), the artist created paper collages from her self-portraits, combining them with fragments of reproductions of artworks from art magazines. The self-portraits depict the artist's bust; the cut-out line is right above the woman's breast and under the collarbone, creating a fleshy, bodily base for the paper flowers to grow out of. In all of the flower pots in the series, the photographed body of the artist is marked by various patterns, from fragments of abstract paintings to drawn-on shapes, representing the Western interest in primitivism that resurfaced in the 1980s. Metaferia uses photography almost as a sculptural medium, expanding its two-dimensionality with layered paper cut-outs. Some parts of the cut-outs stand out from the wall, creating the impression of a third dimension.

³⁵² Metaferia's work was recently featured in the first large-scale exhibition dedicated to Black collage, *Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage*, organized by the Phillips Collection (July 6–September 22, 20224).

³⁵³ The artist said in one of her interviews, "There is an emphasis on process over object in my work, though I enjoy using my hands and the tactility of making visual forms," emphasizing touch in visual art. See: "Collaging With... Helina Metaferia," *The Phillips Collection*, July 30, 2024, <https://www.phillipscollection.org/blog/2024-07-30-collaging-withhelina-metaferia> (accessed November 13, 2024).

In 2019, *Flower Pot I* (**fig. 95**), a relatively large-scale bust of 46 x 34 inches / 116.84 cm x 86.36 cm, the artist depicts herself nude, with her hands holding a dreadlock updo. Her body is covered with rhombuses of various shades of blue, resembling an eye-like shape. She is placing the cut-outs strategically onto her skin, eyes, and lips, creating an intricate pattern. This particular strategy of body marking resembles Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons's *The Right Protection* self-portraits from 1999, depicting the artist's dark-skinned back covered in brown eyes and blue eyes with contrasting white scleras (the white of the eye) painted onto a large-scale Polaroid and a lithograph (**fig. 96**). The connection between the two artists is important since they have collaborated numerous times during Campos-Pons's performances. Both artists use their bodies to channel collective experiences and speak about memory, spirituality, and womanhood. The eyes in Campos-Pons's self-portrait, first and foremost, symbolize protection; they are watching over her and, at the same time, observing the audience. Moreover, the eyes put an emphasis on the voyeuristic nature of art and the desire to be looked at. In *Flower Pot I*, the decorative "eyes" protect the artist's eyes in the photograph, completely blocking her gaze. This placement resembles some funerary traditions, e.g., those practiced in ancient Greece, where coins were placed over the eyes of the dead. This gesture could also be interpreted as a play on tangibility in photography. Instead of focusing on vision, the artist draws attention to touch, first by her pose, emphasizing her arms, and secondly by her skin, marked with a pattern. The red poppies growing out of the artist's hair are connected with the dreadlocks by colorful, abstract stems and leaves cut from the pages of the magazines. In this case, the flowers look realistic; in others, like *Flower Pot 4* (**fig. 97**), the flowers are clearly appropriated from a painting, in particular, from Vincent van Gogh's *Irises*, influenced by the style of Japanese prints (1889). This composition differs from the one featuring poppies, showing a cut-out of the artist with her arms raised and her head turned to the side as she splits her long dreads in half, holding a bundle in each hand. A large field of irises and other flowers is placed onto the split hair, creating an elongated shape that resembles a boat. Metaferia's skin is covered with fragments of abstract paintings in purple and blue colors; her eyes are obscured by a triangular shape with two circles glued on top,

and with portal-like multiplied arches attached to the side. The artist's appropriation of the fragments of the reproduced works from art magazines draws attention to the resourcefulness of Metaferia's art, which is created with the use of found objects. This eco-friendly approach aligns with the topic of nature, growth, and transformation. The artist's body is a source of vital energy, providing soil from which the flowers can grow. She is becoming one with the various configurations of fragments of abstract paintings, decorating her body and transforming it into a flower pot. The entanglement of her dreads and the flower stems emphasizes her connection to nature, as well as symbolizing the artist's giving life to creative ideas. Metaferia's approach to nature resonates with Campos-Pons's artistic credo of honoring the sacred connection between people, beings, spirits, fauna, and flora, and celebrating sensibility and fluidity. It is important to note the similarities shared between the two Afro-diasporic artists, and to point out how legacy and groundwork of Campos-Pons, the more experienced artist, has provided tools for younger generations of artists of color to dismantle the white-centric canon. As Carmen Hermo writes, "Campos Pons's body of work shows us the ache of sublimated violence, the resilience of memory, the bittersweet beauty inherent in the fortitude of survival, continuation, and growth."³⁵⁴ Her experiments with collages, painted photographs, performances, sculptures, and drawings in the 1980s were parallel to the re-interest in primitivism that Metaferia is examining. She uses her self-image to archive a certain period of time in art history and to "activate bodies to generate experiences, to bring out memories and histories."³⁵⁵ As the artist writes in her statement, "Playing with the 1980s trending re-interest in 'primitivism,' I use my Ethiopian-American female body as a way to reclaim that gaze and decolonize the appropriation of black culture."³⁵⁶ The main question that Metaferia's collages raise is how museums and art critics define other cultures. When exoticizing, fetishizing, or orientalizing is present, how does this affect the way the

³⁵⁴ Carmen Hermo, "Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: Behold," in *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Behold*, ed. Carmen Hermo (Los Angeles–New York: J. Paul Getty Museum–Brooklyn Museum, 2023), 20.

³⁵⁵ Elisa Pierandrei, "Helina Metaferia: Weaving and Resisting in More Than A Few Ways," *Contemporary And*, July 15, 2021, <https://contemporaryand.com/magazines/helina-metaferia-weaving-and-resisting-in-more-than-a-few-ways/> (accessed November 13, 2024).

³⁵⁶ Quote from a statement on the artist's website: Helina Metaferia, "Refiguring the Canon," <https://www.helinametaferia.com/exhibitions-series/refiguring-the-canon> (accessed November 15, 2024).

audience views non-white bodies? The “contact zone” between European and African or Oceanic cultures in the past happened to manifest mostly through the imagination of white artists, replacing other cultures with their interpretations of it.³⁵⁷

In this context, it is important to highlight two exhibitions from the 1980s: *Primitivism in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* organized by The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984, and *Magiciens de la terre*, organized by Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette in 1989. Both of the exhibitions used a strategy of pairing the works of modernist masters with the works of artists from so-called Third World countries, to examine the underlying shared similarities in style and intention.³⁵⁸ The 1984 *Primitivism in 20th-Century Art* exhibition was heavily criticized for ignoring the cultural significance of its non-Western artifacts in religious beliefs or their environmental context, and for instrumentalizing other cultures to fit the preconceived thesis stated in the title.³⁵⁹ Within its pairing framework, *Magiciens* was able to present a more equitable approach to the exhibited cultures, but it was also criticized for abstracting works from their cultural context.³⁶⁰ Metaferia’s collaging aims, in particular, to disrupt narratives that universalize the diverse cultural identities of the African continent into one – issues very personal to her own background.

In one interview, Metaferia spoke about her relationship with the art history canon and the ways of interrogating it:

As an artist who has been trained in the western canon I had my own experiences with being told that this is my history and something that I need to integrate. [...] Being of recent African descent and knowing that the story is obviously very complicated and very complex and wanting to tell that narrative in a way that wasn’t

³⁵⁷ See: James Clifford, *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press, 1997). Later, Okwui Enwezor elaborated on this term in his essay “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (Winter, 2003): 57–82.

³⁵⁸ For a comparison of the exhibitions see Ivan Karp, “How Museums Define Other Cultures,” *American Art* 5, no. 1/2 (Winter–Spring, 1991): 10–15.

³⁵⁹ See Thomas McEvelley, “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief,” *Artforum* 23, no. 3 (November 1984), from online archive: <https://www.artforum.com/features/primitivism-in-20th-century-art-at-the-museum-of-modern-art-in-1984-207620/> (accessed November 20, 2024). More on the critique of MoMA’s exhibition, see James V. Hatch and Joe Weixlmann, “Primitivism,” *Black American Literature Forum* 19, no. 1 (Spring, 1985): 51.

³⁶⁰ See Reesa Greenberg, “Identity Exhibitions: From *Magiciens de la terre* to Documenta II,” *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (Spring, 2005): 90–94.

finger waving, or didactic. I wanted to do this in a fresh way that spoke to me, to just focus on the body as medium, body as conduit. And that comes through with performance.³⁶¹

The notion of the body as a medium, or to reference Hans Belting, the body as a living medium, is particularly significant to collages such as 2018 *Out of the Palm of My Hand* (fig. 98). This work is a large-scale, 83 x 33 inches / 210.82 cm by 83.82 cm paper cut, depicting a fragment of the bust of the artist with one arm extended, “pouring” a waterfall of fragmented images vertically toward the gallery’s floor.³⁶² Numerous cut-outs plastered onto each other showcase predominately white figures from paintings of various styles, depicting boxers, bathers, musicians, and scenes of celebration, conversation, and violence. Metaferia herself is the source of the images; her body nourishes them, hence the missing corpus of her body. Carrying out this radical act of repair on the art canon has symbolically cost the artist her fleshy presence.

Both Weems and Metaferia know the cost of being a Black female artist within the museum context. The artists provide two different strategies for intervening, one from the outside and the other from the inside. This reflects the generational gap between them, as well as the long journey the artist of color has undergone. Artists like Weems and Campos-Pons were pioneers in the institutional critique of racial bias and injustice, in the United States and Cuba, respectively, where they advocated for women diaspora artists through the medium of photography. Metaferia, who is following in their steps in her decolonizing intent, bridges critical historical inquiry with tactile, eco-conscious creativity, reconfiguring the established narratives.

³⁶¹ Angela N. Carroll, “Ethiopian American Artist Helina Metaferia Refigures the Canon at Hamiltonian Gallery,” *BmoreArt*, September 5, 2018, <https://bmoreart.com/2018/09/ethiopian-american-artist-helina-metaferia-refigures-the-canon-at-hamiltonian-gallery.html> (accessed November 13, 2024).

³⁶² The collage was exhibited in multiple galleries, including the Hamiltonian Gallery in Washington, DC, and NOMAD Gallery in Brussels.



Fig. 59. Renée Cox, *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, 1996. Cibachrome prints (each: 30 × 150 in / 76.2 × 381 cm). Renée Cox.



Fig. 60. Lyle Ashton Harris, Renée Cox, *The Child*, 1994. Dye-diffusion Polaroid (20 × 24 in / 50.8 × 60.96 cm). Lyle Ashton Harris.



Fig. 61. Renée Cox, *Olympia's Boyz*, 2001. Archival digital c-print mounted on aluminum (134 × 168 in / 340.36 × 426.72 cm). Renée Cox.



Fig. 62. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863–65. Oil on canvas (51.4 in × 74.8 in / 130.5 cm × 190 cm). Musée d'Orsay.



Fig. 63. Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Futago)*, 1989. C-print (82.68 × 118.11 in / 210 x 300 cm). SFMoMA.



Fig. 64. Katarzyna Kozyra, *Olimpia*, 1996. C-print (each: 47.44 × 70.87 in / 120.5 × 180 cm). Katarzyna Kozyra.



Fig. 65. Félix Jacques Moulin, *[A Moorish Woman with Her Maid]*, circa 1856. Albumen silver print (7 1/8 × 9 in / 18.1 × 22.8 cm). Getty Museum.



Fig. 66. Félix Jacques Moulin, *Untitled [Boudoir scene of a nude white woman and her naked black maid]*, circa 1850. Source: Willis, Deborah, Williams, Carla. *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, Temple University Press, 2002, p. 39.



Fig. 67. Golden, *I'm human, after all*, Roslindale, MA, 2021. Color print (measurements unknown). Golden



Fig. 68. Mickalene Thomas, *Afro Goddess Looking Forward*, 2015. Rhinestones, acrylic, and oil on wood panel (20.83 × 29.96 in / 52.90cm × 76.10cm). Mickalene Thomas



Fig. 69. Lyle Ashton Harris, *The Gaze (For Laure)*, 2018. Dye sublimation print on aluminum (27 ⁷/₈ × 36 ⁷/₈ in / 70.8 × 93.7 cm). Lyle Ashton Harris



Fig. 70. *Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition*, The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, 2020-2021



Fig. 71. Ayana Jackson, *Judgement of Paris*, 2018 (left). Archival pigment print on German etching paper 50 × 60 in / 127 × 152.4 cm). Renée Cox, *Cousins at Pussy's Pond*, 2001 (right). Archival digital c-print mounted on aluminum (46 × 60 in / 116.8 × 152.4 cm). Installation view, *Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition*, Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, 2020-2021.



Fig. 72. Renée Cox, *Cousins at Pussy's Pond (American Family)*, 2001. Archival digital c-print mounted on aluminum (46 × 60 in / 116.8 × 152.4 cm). Renée Cox.



Fig. 73. Édouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass/Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, 1863. Oil on canvas (81.9 × 104.1 in / 208 cm × 264.5 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Fig. 74. Marcantonio Raimondi, *Judgement of Paris* (after Raphael), ca. 1510–20. Engraving (11.46 × 17.20 in / 29.1 × 43.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum, New York.



Fig. 75. Ayana V. Jackson, *Judgement of Paris (Intimate Justice in the Stolen Moment)*, 2018. Archival pigment print on German etching paper (50 × 60 in / 127 × 152.4 cm). Mariane Ibrahim Gallery.



Fig. 76. Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Darkroom Studio Mirror* (0X5A4052), 2022. C-print (75 x 50 inches / 190.5 x 127 cm). Paul Mpagi Sepuya.



Fig. 77. Félix Jacques Moulin, *Untitled [Boudoir scene of a nude white woman and her naked black maid]* (detail), circa 1850. Source: Willis, Deborah, Williams, Carla. *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, Temple University Press, 2002, p. 39



Fig. 78. Jeff Wall, *Picture for Women*, 1979. Cibachrome transparency mounted on a lightbox (80.5 x 56.1 inches / 204.5 cm x 142.5 cm). White Cube, London

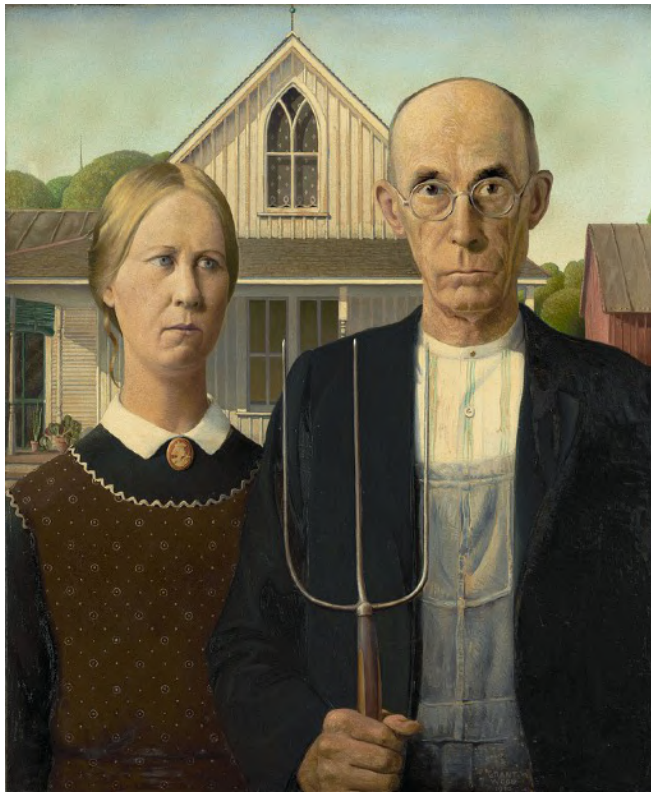


Fig. 79. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930. Oil on beaverboard (30 3/4 × 25 3/4 in / 78 cm × 65.3 cm). Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 80. Gordon Parks, *American Gothic*, 1942. Gelatin silver print (24 × 20 in / 61 cm × 51 cm). The Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, New York.



Fig. 81. Lola Flash, *Afro-Gothic (syzygy, the vision)*, 2019. C-print (20 × 16 in / 50.8 × 40.64 cm). Lola Flash.



Fig. 82. Lola Flash, *Stop Killing Black People* during BLM protest, 2020. Lola Flash



Fig. 83. Lola Flash, *Divinity (syzygy, the vision)*, 2020. C-print (33 3/4 × 22 9/16 in / 85.7 × 57.3 cm). Lola Flash.



Fig. 84. Jared Owens, *Series III #5*, 2022. Mixed media on panel, soil from the prison yard at F.C.I. Fairton, lino printing. *Ellapsium: master & Helm*, 2016. Mixed media on birch panel component. Installation view, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, 2023.



Fig. 85. *Carrie Mae Weems*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2014



Fig. 86. Carrie Mae Weems, *Guggenheim Bilbao (Museums)*, 2006. Gelatin silver print (40 × 50 in / 101.6 × 127 cm). Carrie Mae Weems.



Fig. 87. Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman before the Rising Sun / Woman before the Setting Sun*, 1818-1820. Oil on canvas (8.66 × 11.81 in / 22 × 30 cm). Museum Folkwang, Essen.



Fig. 88. Carrie Mae Weems, *Tate Modern and Philadelphia Museum of Art (Museums)*, 2006. Gelatin silver print (each 40 × 50 in / 101.6 × 127 cm). Carrie Mae Weems.



Fig. 89. Carrie Mae Weems, *Louvre and British Museum (Museums)*, 2006. Gelatin silver print (each 40 × 50 in / 101.6 × 127 cm). Carrie Mae Weems.



Fig. 90. Carrie Mae Weems, *British Museum (Museums)*, 2006. Gelatin silver print (each 40 × 50 in / 101.6 × 127 cm). Carrie Mae Weems.



Fig. 91. Carrie Mae Weems, *Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, (Museums)*, 2006. Gelatin silver print (each 40 × 50 in / 101.6 × 127 cm). Carrie Mae Weems.



Fig. 92. Rosette Lubondo, *Imaginary Trip II #1 (Imaginary Trip II)*, 2018. Inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag (19.69 × 29.53 in / 50 x 75 cm). Musée du quai Branly, Paris.



Fig. 93. Carrie Mae Weems, *Museums*, 2006. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2024. Photographs by Julia Stachura, 25 October 2024.

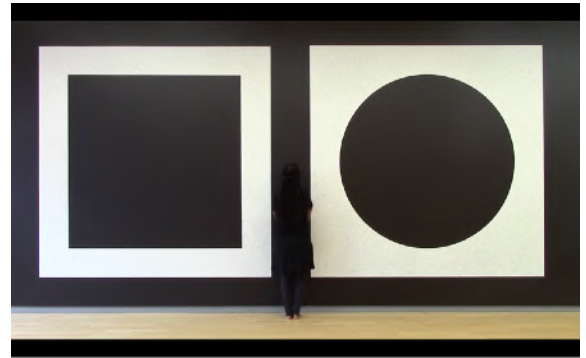
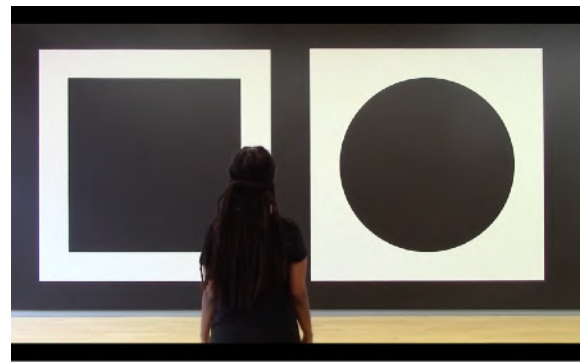
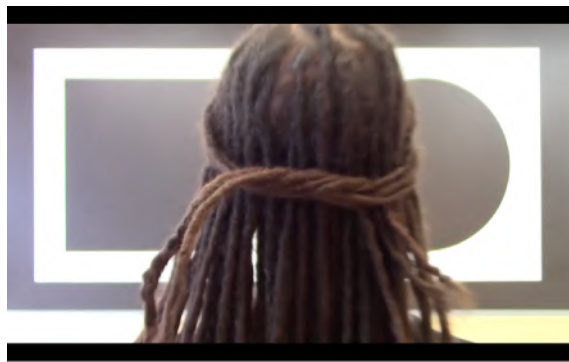


Fig. 94. Helina Metaferia, *Ruminating Over Circles & Squares (Refiguring the Canon)*, 2018-. Video (duration: 13 min). Helina Metaferia.



Fig. 95. Helina Metaferia, *Flower Pot 1 (Refiguring the Canon)*, 2019. Collaged paper (46 × 34 in / 116.84 × 86.36 cm). Helina Metaferia.



Fig. 96. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *The Right Protection* and *Untitled (The Right Protection)*, 1999. Polaroid (left: 20 × 24 in / 50.8 × 60.96 cm), lithograph (right: 20 1/4 × 17 1/2 in / 51.44 × 44.45 cm). Source: *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Behold*. J. Paul Getty Museum - Brooklyn Museum, 2023, plates 22 and 23.



Fig. 97. Helina Metaferia, *Flower Pot 4, (Refiguring the Canon)*, 2019. Collaged paper (23 × 34 in / 58.42 × 86.36 cm). Helina Metaferia.



Fig. 98. Helina Metaferia, *Out of the Palm of My Hand (Refiguring the Canon)*, 2018. Collaged paper (83 x 33 in / 210.82 × 83.82 cm). Helina Metaferia.

3. FAMILY FRAMES

3.1. Labor of Love

Photographs hold a special place in the family; they are reminders of passing time, generational legacies, and childhood memories. The first exhibition takes place in the house when the photograph is framed, hung on the wall, or placed on the furniture. bell hooks has written that the walls of images are sites of resistance.³⁶³ Especially when we consider the context of African-American culture and history, these walls stand against segregation, injustice, and dehumanization, providing a private, homely, and familial source of empowerment.³⁶⁴ Family or vernacular photography is also a source of knowledge or self-knowledge, one that is most private and intimate. It becomes a catalyst for many contemporary artists to examine memory and intertwine family stories with a broader socio-cultural context.

Numerous examples of familial frames intersecting photography can be found in the academic literature on the subject, from the iconic Barthesian reading of the photograph of his mother to the seminal book *Family Frames* by Marianne Hirsch.³⁶⁵ I would like to focus on the latter, as it provides me with the necessary tools to expand the concept of tangible memories to incorporate the familial gaze and examine self-portraiture in the context of family collaborations. These notions will be crucial in this chapter, in which I will analyze works from three artists: LaToya Ruby Frazier's album *The Notion of Family* (2001–2014), Rahim Fortune's project for *Sources of Self-Regard* (2020), and Jonathan Mark Jackson's *The House Servant's Directory* (2018–2019). Each of these artists critically uses photography to dismantle the mythology of the white, middle-class American family and closely examine the image of working-class Black families. Frazier's

³⁶³ hooks, "In Our Glory," 47.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 47–48.

³⁶⁵ See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. For more examples of the notion of family intersecting photography and memory, see Gillian Rose, *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, the Public and the Politics of Sentiment* (London: Routledge, 2010); *Picturing the Family. Media, Narrative, Memory*, ed. Silke Arnold-de Simine and Joanne Leal (London: Routledge, 2018).

work combines social documentation with a personal narrative that reflects the challenges faced by three generations of women in a severely polluted post-industrial environment, where trauma is inherited across generations. In Fortune's project, the artist reflects on his hometown from the unique viewpoint of being a caregiver for his father amid the constraints of the COVID-19 quarantine. The final project I will discuss examines the hidden aspects of domestic labor, as Jackson recounts the story of his ancestor who served as a house servant in the 1820s.

Each project focuses on both personal and collective memory, involves a close-knit group of individuals, in particular, the immediate family, and is intertwined with broader themes concerning social, racial, and class issues in the United States. These projects primarily employ portraiture and self-portraiture as tools for memory, utilizing repetition, fragmentation, and mirrors to illustrate how memory and cultural memory work. Photography thus serves here as a means for artists to empower their storytelling, whether through deeply personal accounts or by linking personal narratives to the wider socio-political and cultural representation of American families. Within this framework, blackness and class status are intrinsically tied to these artists, reflecting not only their families but also the artists themselves through their familial stories, thereby enriching the ongoing dialogue about the American social landscape.

The photographic representation of African-American families is not limited to these chosen projects. There are multiple other works in contemporary BIPOC photography, such as Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), Lyle Ashton Harris's *The Good Life* (1994), or Zun Lee's *Fade Resistance* (2012–ongoing), which all tell complex stories about, respectively, womanhood in relation to domestic spaces and loved ones, inverted gender constructs in family dynamics, and the archiving of vernacular memories. However, I found the issues raised by Frazier, Fortune, and Jackson as pressing as ever, as they all deal with both historical trauma and contemporary crises concerning health, economic decline, and class struggle.

One of the angles from which all of these issues are visible in the United States is the notion of the Black working-class family. Upon entering the new millennium, LaToya

Ruby Frazier (b. 1982) began to look closely at her family, herself, and her hometown. The photobook *The Notion of Family* (2001–2014) spans a decade of the artist’s life, documenting Braddock, an eastern suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This was simultaneously the artist’s debut and breakthrough album, earning Frazier a position on the photographic scene.

The Notion of Family intersects self-portraits, family portraits, landscapes, and still lifes, documented in various styles and approaches to the photographic medium. The form of the photobook itself combines the family album and autobiography, balancing traditional hardcover luxury and larger-format reproductions with the experimental distribution of text and poetry. Both editions of the photobook, from 2014 and 2016, depict a shadow of the artist on the cover (**fig. 99**), emphasizing the invisibility of the people left unnoticed by systemic erasure and economic exclusion, e.g., the working class, Blacks, the poor, etc. As the artist has mentioned in interviews, during the long process of producing the series, she shot it chapter by chapter, knowing the outcome would be essentially a book.³⁶⁶ It is important to acknowledge this perspective, as it situates her photographic practice at the juncture of document, history, and sociology. Equally significant to the materiality of the photobook is the relationship between the image and text. Every second photograph is juxtaposed with and complemented by Frazier’s writing, characteristically constructed in a poem-like free-verse structure, in which she forgoes traditional rhyme and rigid structure in favor of a more conversational style, enhancing the rawness and sense of urgency. Sometimes, the text appears at the bottom of the photograph, providing a description of its historical context, but most often it is placed on the opposite page, mirroring the image. The titles of the photographs are indexed at the end of the photobook, providing additional information, such as the names or addresses of the people portrayed, as well as other facts characteristic of social photographic documents.

The artist began working on the project when she was still a teenager, documenting her life and family throughout her early adolescence. A strong sense of solidarity is

³⁶⁶ LaToya Ruby Frazier, “LaToya Ruby Frazier’s ‘The Notion of Family’ Confronts Racism and Economic Decline,” *Aperture*, YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asBMg8yQX5w> (accessed November 29, 2024).

tangible throughout the series. Many of the photographs were taken by Frazier's mother, Cynthia, in close collaboration with her daughter, emphasizing the strong bond shared between the two. The series also commemorates the memory of Grandma Ruby, who passed away a few years prior to the completion of the photobook. She is the second most frequently occurring figure in the series. The project feels like a collective portrait, laboriously crafted with love and care.

The project's backbone is the family album, an intimate and private object, and a staple in the household, always put out during family reunions and holidays and "often regarded as a ritualized and deeply ideological bourgeois self-representation."³⁶⁷ Today, social media such as Facebook or Instagram have replaced the traditional book format of the family album and made it accessible to online users, allowing family snapshots to circulate as freely as ever. The artist began developing her project in the 2000s, a time when digital archiving was gaining prominence. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge her materialist approach, evident in her use of the book format and an analog camera. Bourgeois self-representation is systematically criticized by the artist. For Frazier, who comes from a working-class family that struggled with poverty, self-representation is both an act of vulnerability and a form of empowerment.

The album opens with a little booklet consisting of three photographs (**fig. 100**). The first depicts a memorial plaque to John Frazier, the first citizen of Braddock who lived in the eighteenth century. The photograph of the plaque was taken by the artist in Braddock's Battlefield History Center, a small museum commemorating the 1755 battle of Monongahela (in the Lenape language, Mënaonkihëla), one of the first in the French and Indian War. The last name shared by the artist and a settler suggests an ancestral lineage, as well as providing a strong connection to the place. The second image in the booklet is a snapshot of a little girl, LaToya, wearing a white Sunday dress, standing in a backyard, and

³⁶⁷ Mette Sandbye, "Looking at the family photo album: a resumed theoretical discussion of why and how," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 6, no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v6.25419> (accessed November 29, 2024). The family album became an object of interest to scholars after the year 2000, see Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002); Geoffrey Batchen, "SNAPSHOTS: Art history and the ethnographic turn," *Photographies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 121–142, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540760802284398> (accessed November 29, 2024).

smiling at the camera. This vernacular photograph is the bearer of a childhood memory, encapsulating innocence and joy, in contrast to the stone-cold plaque in memory of John Frazier. The last image depicts an older gentleman, the Scottish-American industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. The appropriated image is a classic bust portrait, photographed in the Pach Brothers' family-run photography studio circa 1912, a few years prior to Carnegie's death. Frazier chose this serious portrait rather than one of numerous photographs depicting the industrialist with a soft smile and grandpa-like demeanor. The context of the Pach Brothers' family business is also significant to the photobook, as it constantly reminds us of how family structures played an important part in the history of the town. Carnegie owned a steel mill in Braddock, which occupied the historic site of the battlefield of Monongahela, tying his story to that of John Frazier. Carnegie was one of the wealthiest Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, alongside J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller, the "richest of the rich." The presence of a photograph of a little girl in the middle of two prominent male figures in the town's history, and in a broader scope, the history of America, is a powerful gesture. By picturing the microcosm and macrocosm of the American Dream narrative, Frazier depicts her younger self entangled in the historical ties of the white world, which determine her mode of functioning. It is also indicative of how the artist views family portraiture as part of a larger narrative of history and public forms of commemoration. Her younger self stands out as a lonesome monument of innocence and joy, entangled in the politics of the rich.

In focusing on Braddock, the artist raises important issues, such as racism, poverty, and heavy industry pollution, that affected the health of her family and that of the area's citizens, but also impacted people throughout the U.S. In stating that "Braddock is everywhere," Frazier interweaves its story with reflections on the global state of injustice and governmental negligence of the working class.³⁶⁸ Her most recent 2024 survey, *Monuments of Solidarity*, organized by the Museum of Modern Art and curated by Roxana

³⁶⁸ Maurice Berger, "LaToya Ruby Frazier's Notion of Family," *Lens. Photography, Video and Visual Journalism*, October 14, 2014, <https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/14/latoya-ruby-fraziers-notion-of-family/> (accessed November 30, 2024).

Marcoci, introduced the idea of the monument in Frazier's photography.³⁶⁹ In this context, *The Notion of Family* would function as a generational monument in which LaToya places familial values on a pedestal, emphasizing everyday acts of solidarity and the survival of working-class families in America. The narrative in the photobook reflects this complexity, depicting various shades of familial love, struggle, and generational trauma, and countering the seemingly heroic but, in fact, exploitative narratives of social documentaries from the 1930s and 1940s. Frazier is well aware of the photographic legacy she is engaging with, as well as of the mechanisms of the medium she is working with.³⁷⁰ Questions such as who is creating the work, to whom the social document is addressed, and who controls the narrative about marginalized communities are crucial to understanding where Frazier is coming from as a Black woman, photographer, and storyteller.

One of her more significant predecessors in documenting the area was Lewis Hine, who worked on the *Pittsburgh Survey* from 1907 to 1908. He authored a pioneering sociological study of the area, providing insight into the lives of working-class families and capturing poor working conditions that affected the health of workers, including industrial accidents. Hine's photography served as visual proof and a tool for reforming steelworkers' rights.³⁷¹ It greatly influenced Frazier, as she points out in an interview with Fred Moten:

And something that really impacted me in terms of documentary work, and what you're starting to say about creation instead of destruction, is that if it wasn't for the photographs Lewis Hine made here in Pittsburgh, when they did surveys in the early twentieth century, people wouldn't have known about the condition of working-class people's lives. It was through that creativity, through making those images, that child-labor laws eventually came into existence.³⁷²

In this quote, Frazier underscores photography's role in revealing social inequalities and injustices. The camera serves as a weapon in the battle against oppressive systems. For the

³⁶⁹ See *LaToya Ruby Frazier: Monuments of Solidarity*, ed. Roxana Marcoci (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2024).

³⁷⁰ *PhotoWork: Forty Photographers on Process and Practice*, ed. Sasha Wolf (New York: Aperture, 2019), 74.

³⁷¹ Columbia University Libraries have provided open access to the *Pittsburgh Survey*; see "The Pittsburgh Survey," Columbia University Libraries, <https://exhibitions.library.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/css/social-survey/the-pittsburgh-survey> (accessed November 29, 2024).

³⁷² See LaToya Ruby Frazier, Fred Moten and Dawn Lundy Martin, "LaToya Ruby Frazier and Fred Moten," *BOMB*, no. 143 (Spring 2018): 91.

artist, a photographic social document not only demystifies the American dream but also fosters social awareness and empathy, resulting in tangible change. She situates her own work within the historical continuum of photographic social documents addressing contemporary issues.

In another interview, Frazier explained her approach to the photographic process in more detail:

I don't know that I would say I have a photographic style, but what's important is how the trajectory of an inquiry is sustained. In my case, I care about social documentary work in the twenty-first century and about how that speaks to the early twentieth century. I try to conscientiously bring those ideas into conversation with a conceptually informed approach to making art – one that talks about the politics of everyday life. I am interested in using photography to unpack questions about how the images were made, how they relate to the subject's life.³⁷³

A few key points from this quote are important to consider before moving forward: how the artist engages the conceptual framework of photography, how politics affect everyday life, and what the social document means in the twenty-first century.

The photographic social documentary has a long tradition of operating at the intersection of racial identity and class hierarchies, especially during the times of the Great Depression in the United States and the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Photographs by Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, and Walker Evans shaped the image of poverty in America.³⁷⁴ At the same time, these photographs were part of a larger socio-political agenda, involving the press, which had the right to alter and decontextualize images, something which infamously happened with Lange's *Migrant Mother*.³⁷⁵ Frazier is well

³⁷³ *PhotoWork*, 74.

³⁷⁴ The discussion on the impact of FSA photography on American iconography of poverty is vast; examples follow: Cara A. Finnegan, "Social Engineering, Visual Politics, and the New Deal: FSA Photography in Survey Graphic," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 334–362; John Rayburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006). I also want to point out Winfried Fluck's examination of the iconic status of photographs from Lange and Evans, in which the scholar characterizes the formal language of photographs of the Great Depression, see Winfried Fluck, "Poor like Us: Poverty and Recognition in American Photography," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 55, no. 1 (2010): 63–93.

³⁷⁵ All of the sources above mention this iconic image; however, I would like to stress the importance of the analysis of gender intersecting class in *Migrant Mother*, see Jacqueline Ellis, *Silent Witnesses, Representations of Working-class Women in the United States* (Wisconsin: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1998), 27–54.

aware of the mechanisms of how the history of the photographic document is entangled in politics. By positioning herself within the framework of social commentary, she both acknowledges the existing body of work of photographers such as Hine, Lange, and Parks and produces her own narrative, based on extremely personal experiences.

There is also a strong connection between Black intellectuals and using photography as a tool for social change and uplift, represented by Frederick Douglass in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and W.E.B. Du Bois at the turn of the twentieth century. For both, photography challenged the pseudo-scientific claims being made at the time and provided counter-images that could be used to tackle claims of racial inferiority.³⁷⁶ Du Bois's sociological surveys served as scientific proof of the injustices Black people faced at the beginning of the twentieth century; these were displayed along with photographs at the 1900 Paris exhibition.³⁷⁷ Frazier follows this lead, juxtaposing her photographs along with historical facts and statistical data on the Braddock area. Another important context for *The Notion of Family* is the 1955 *Family of Man* exhibition curated by Edward Steichen at MoMA, one of the first blockbuster museum exhibits, and which later travelled to 37 countries in total.³⁷⁸ The exhibition presented the idea of a global family engaged in an array of universal human experiences, such as birth, death, and motherhood. It created a spectacle out of humanism at a peculiar time in history, just after World War II and on the cusp of the escalating Cold War. As Marianne Hirsch points out, the exhibition strategically asserted all-human bonds that were shared among the dividing and polarizing East and West, as well as by the decolonizing South.³⁷⁹ Frazier's work is highly critical of the superimposed universality of the around-the-world family album created by Steichen and MoMA, particularly images picturing Black families. It is

³⁷⁶ Du Bois's engagement in photography, was discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. Here, in the context of the social document, I would like to emphasize the role the family image played in the Parisian exhibition. See: Shawn Michelle Smith, "'Families of Undoubted Respectability,'" in *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 77–112.

³⁷⁷ See Shawn Michelle Smith, "'Looking at One's Self through the Eyes of Others': W.E.B. Du Bois's Photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition," *African American Review* 34, no. 4 (2000): 581–99.

³⁷⁸ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press, 1997). Hirsch provides a detailed background about the exhibition and a comprehensive analysis of its main motifs in *Family Frames*, 48–77.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

important to mention that while Steichen's idea of a universal humanity was intended to overcome racial hierarchies, America was still heavily segregated (1955 was the year of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the brutal murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till). Frazier combines these contexts by looking at the social document through the intersecting lens of race, gender, and class, and by pointing out the uniqueness of each family experience as well as the importance of adopting a critical approach to even the most intimate topics.

3.1.1. Familial Look

The repetitiveness of the family cycle of grandmother, mother, and daughter, and the corporeal symmetries shared between bodies and landscapes of the hometown allow one to analyze Frazier's strategy through a notions of the familial look and gaze, as well that of the allo-portrait.³⁸⁰ These categories are borrowed from Hirsch's book *Family Frames*. The familial look and familial gaze are central to the scholar's framework for analyzing family photographs. Hirsch makes a distinction between the two: the familial look creates and fosters familial relations between individuals, while also providing mutual recognition. In contrast, the familial gaze projects a cultural and mythical screen between the subject and the camera.³⁸¹ As the scholar writes:

I would like to suggest that photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life. Since looking operates through projection and since the photographic image is the positive development of a negative, the plenitude that constitutes the fulfillment of desire, photographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not.³⁸²

Hirsch's rhetoric echoes the Lacanian diagram of the gaze, in which the screen corresponds to the myth of the ideal family and the subject of representation to the lived reality.³⁸³ Family, as personal and truthful as it may seem, is indeed a concept, a structure,

³⁸⁰ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Portrait de l'artiste, en général* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1979).

³⁸¹ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 2–11.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁸³ See Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*.

and a discursive layer within the context of visual culture. This statement applies to Frazier's work, as many of her photographs are arranged and performed. The title of the photobook, *The Notion of Family*, is not the same as that of *the* family or *a* family. This makes the photographer's approach focused more on the cultural, social, and historical inclinations of the image of family, which is often deliberately manufactured by documentarists and photojournalists in order to evoke empathy or pity. Frazier is critical of the history of this male-dominated field, adopting deliberately self-aware optics as a Black female photographer, and focusing on the matriarchal narrative of the family, which intersects the viewpoints of different generations of women. This reflects what bell hooks has written about what the notion of gaze holds for Black people: "Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The 'gaze' has been and is a site of resistance for colonized Black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that 'looks' to document, one that is oppositional."³⁸⁴ This applies to what Frazier is doing by casting each bearer of the gaze as a Black woman – if she is not taking the picture, then her mother does. Similarly to Simpson's project on the Black pin-up girl, the Black female spectator in *The Notion of Family* critically dismantles both the binary opposition of the gendered gaze as well as its assumed whiteness.

This argument connects with Hirsch's theory of the familial look, which is a mutual look in which the binary of subject and object is suspended.³⁸⁵ As the scholar concludes: "Familial subjectivity is constructed relationally, and in these relations, I am always both self and other(ed), both speaking and looking subject and spoken and looked object [...]."³⁸⁶ The relationship between the self and others is a particular one within the family structure. Because of the inherent familiarity and shared similarities, otherness is constructed within these relations, the shared connections that exist within the small community that is a family. It is in this context that Hirsch introduces Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's notion of *allo-portrait*, which combines the Greek etymology of *other* and

³⁸⁴ hooks, *Black Looks*, 116.

³⁸⁵ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 9.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

different with the portrait, as a seemingly oppositional term to the self-portrait.³⁸⁷ Hirsch further specifies the implied otherness as an otherness within – within the family and the self, reflecting the subject’s plurality: “Inside this closely drawn if permeable frame, the notions of the familial look and gaze can be explored and illuminated through a genre of the photographic auto/allo-portrait.”³⁸⁸

The Notion of Family presents the fluidity between the self- and allo-portrait in both visual and textual material. In many instances, the artist narrates her own self-portraits, adding poetic remarks and personal statements, examining the *self* through another system of power – the text. Her work has a heavy self-referential character, which allows for it to be framed as autobiographical.³⁸⁹ By pointing out the literary influences on Frazier’s book, I am not granting a privilege to the text or reinforcing a textual reading of photography (or so-called imagetext³⁹⁰), but rather articulating another critical practice of inscribing the self within certain traditions. Frazier follows in the steps of Carrie Mae Weems’s artistic legacy, combining a strong sense of self with experimental writing, which complements the visual message. Weems’s *Kitchen Table Series* combined family drama with descriptive storytelling, role-playing in an intimate setting, negotiating space, power, and intimacy.³⁹¹ The written text functions in the series like a movie or theater script, enabling viewers to visualize a film featuring the artist herself. This cinematic approach enhances Frazier’s album by intertwining raw documents of daily life with staged photographs of family members, creating a dynamic interplay between documentation and performance, where the text offers a backstory for the characters introduced.

³⁸⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Portrait de l’artiste*.

³⁸⁸ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 83.

³⁸⁹ On the intersection of photography, text and biography, see Timothy Dow Adams, *Light Writing and Life Writing. Photography in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative*, ed. Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003); Katarzyna Bojarska, “Auto-Photo-Biographies,” *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, no. 13 (2016): 1–20.

³⁹⁰ See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³⁹¹ Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, Carrie Mae Weems, and Thelma Golden, “Carrie Mae Weems and the Field,” in *Carrie Mae Weems: October Files*, ed. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis and Christine Garnier (Cambridge–London: The MIT Press, 2021), 40.

In this context, it is even more evident that the portrait of the self-as-other, or allo-portrait, can also be understood as a term that mediates the present self with past selves through the lens of memory. The act of looking at oneself as a child or as a teenager while being an adult produces another version of oneself, one that is similar but different. The necessity for multidirectional self-analysis is not only applicable to Frazier's photobook but also absolutely crucial to her documentary practice, serving as a source of intersecting familial perspectives. To analyze the shift from self-portrait to allo-portrait in *The Notion of Family*, I will examine the photographs in which the artist appears alone, followed by those with her mother.

Self-Portrait (October 7th, 9:30 am) from 2008 presents Frazier as both the author and the main character of the photobook (**fig. 101**). It is the first image in which she appears as an adult. The photograph depicts the artist sitting on the bed topless, looking straight at the camera. Despite her vulnerable state, her gaze is confident and sharp, resisting objectification. She is the Black female spectator, returning the gaze and making the viewer accountable. The necklace with a cross around her neck indicates she is Christian. The tattoo on her belly depicts two dragons facing one another, which may signify the battle between good and bad. There is a certain androgyny to the way she presents herself. Typically masculine boxers are peeking out from under her pajama bottoms, and she is slightly slouched forward. One of Frazier's hands is tucked under her bottom, while the other seems to be reaching toward the camera. This inviting gesture is paired with the artist's serious demeanor. She seems tired; her hair is messy, as if she has just woken up, which is suggested by the title (9:30 a.m.). Her posture, appearance, and expression mirror the resilience of her upbringing. She subverts the conventions of the female nude and expectations of what a self-portrait of a documentarian should look like. She appears both vulnerable and honest, approaching the camera with reservation and confidence, and shielding herself from the intrusive gaze of the spectator.

The shimmery lighting in the room, which dances on her skin, creating an aurora-like effect in the background, adds to Frazier's mystery. Who is she, and what kind of story she has to tell? As Zoe Leonard notes, the lighting seems to be "watery," as if it were being

reflected through a mirror.³⁹² Despite the absence of water or a mirror in the image, her self-portrait evokes the figure of Narcissus. She is looking into the camera lens, which symbolically replaces the water's surface, allowing the artist, like the mythical figure, to fall in love with her own reflection. The moment Narcissus recognizes he is living in a system of signs, he is able to decipher his own body image, leading to self-recognition, a moment of revelation that resembles the Lacanian mirror stage.³⁹³ This stage describes when, during a child's development, they recognize themselves in the mirror or piece together the fragmented image of their body into a whole.³⁹⁴ Lacan even uses the term "primary narcissism," building upon Freudian libidinal theory, and emphasizing self-focused energy as opposed to sexual energy³⁹⁵. This concept, mediated by the camera lens, would indicate that Frazier's subjectivity unites or merges together through an act of photographic self-portraiture. But where does the image fragmentation preceding this action take place?

To answer that, one has to look at the text accompanying the image:

Looking both inwardly and
outwardly, I desire to move
beyond boundaries. Similar to
Annie, Lucy and Xuela, heroines
from a Jamaica Kincaid novel, I
am in search of a new space,
place, and time. There is a tight
Pressure and sharp piercing
pain in my chest. The lack of
deep sleep has not worn off. I
feel a sense of imbalance.³⁹⁶

³⁹² Zoe Leonard, "Self-Portrait October 7 (9:30 a.m.)," *MoMA Magazine*, 2007, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/1077> (accessed December 10, 2024).

³⁹³ See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York–London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 75–81.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁹⁶ LaToya Ruby Frazier, *The Notion of Family* (New York: Aperture, 2014), 8.

Her introduction is written like a poem, focusing on the subject, which is herself. The look inward and outward indicates the perspective applied in *The Notion of Family*, which analyzes family structures within a broader framework of memory, history, and social documentary. It could also imply a dual gaze – one directed at the self from within and one from the outside, emphasizing the contrast between self- and allo-portraiture.

The three characters referenced from Jamaica Kincaid's novels are from three books by the Antiguan-American writer. The first is *Annie John* (1985), an autobiographical coming-of-age novel exploring growing up in Antigua, mother-daughter relationships, climbing the social ladder, and colonial influence on identity.³⁹⁷ The second novel, *Lucy* (1990), tells a story about immigration, homesickness, and memory, following Lucy, a girl from the West Indies as she moves to America as an au pair.³⁹⁸ The last book, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), follows Xuela's experience of the loss of her mother, trauma, and abandonment, as well as her striving for self-definition and her indolence, marked by colonialism.³⁹⁹

By adopting a multi-generational perspective, the artist includes not only her personal ancestors but also literary figures who guide and watch over her. Frazier, like the characters in the books, is in search of her identity, exploring the relationships with the women in her life, surviving poverty, and grieving the loss of a family member: her Grandma Ruby. Every woman in *The Notion of Family* experiences a different Braddock: Grandma, its economic boom; Mother, its economic decline; and Daughter, its economic decay. And just like in Kincaid's novels, the past plays an equal role to the present, especially in Braddock, which is heavily affected by industrial decline and systemic negligence. Frazier's identification with Kincaid's heroines situates her within the diasporic lineage of women navigating fragmented identities and traumas. Is the *desire to move beyond boundaries* enabled by the act of photographic self-portraiture, or is the artist enclosing her identity in another frame?

³⁹⁷ See Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985).

³⁹⁸ See Eadem, *Lucy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

³⁹⁹ See Eadem, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996)

The *Self-Portrait March (10:00 a.m.)* from 2009 (**fig. 102**) is almost like a twin sister of the *Self-Portrait (October 7th, 9:30 am)*. This black and white photograph feels intimate, as the artist's piercing yet tired gaze seems to strike a chord of both sympathy and fierceness at the same time. The artist is dressed in a loose grey tank top, without a bra, and dark pants with floral embroidery; her hair is pulled back messily. She is sitting in bed, posing with the striped bedspread as a background, balancing an impression of homely coziness and claustrophobic dizziness. The viewer is allowed to enter the intimate space and is simultaneously trapped as the artist acknowledges their presence through the introductory poem. The text reads:

A descendent of
Scottish
African
Braddonian
Blue-collar
Steel workers
I embrace my heritage.⁴⁰⁰

This is the second poetic biographical introduction in the photobook. This time, Frazier points out the main entry points to the book: family, cultural heritage, place, labor, and class. The text represents the artist's fragmented identity, comprising the collective selves of her family, ancestors, and Braddonians. A sense of collectiveness is also emphasized by the reference to the working class, the blue-collar proletariat, united in a common struggle. Moreover, there is a deep sense of pride within the words "I embrace my heritage," making the lone figure of the young artist photographing herself in the bedroom the strong female heroine of her own narrative. The relationship between space and time in this particular self-portrait is expressed primarily in the title – March 10:00 am – and the introduction, which highlights the Scottish, African, and Braddonian influences, granting

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 18.

the memory of her ancestors a significant role. Similarly, in *Self-Portrait (October 7th, 9:30 am)*, the strong literary influence of Kincaid points to the diasporic and colonial themes that run throughout the series, while exploring their longevity and influence on relationships between mother and daughter. Frazier addresses these issues thoroughly in the photobook, while rooting her identity in the particular context of Braddock, which becomes a source of both her self-regard and suffering.

3.1.2. Momme

Another important strategy in Frazier's approach to memory is mirroring. The usage of mirrors, as well as mimicked poses and repetitive wordplay, constantly recur within the series, emphasizing the family's cycle of generations. This trope is particularly evident in the photographs with the artist's mother, who takes part equally in the creation of the images. In the following analyses, allo-portraiture will be used as an operative category, as well as an opening category for re-thinking self-portraiture as a selfish act.

The 2008 photograph *Momme* (**fig. 103**) depicts Frazier's mother in the foreground, with her side turned to the camera and her eyes closed, and with LaToya in the background, looking straight, half of her face obscured by her mother's profile. Both women are wearing black wig caps and comfortable, homey clothes. The mother is dressed in silk pajamas with floral patterns, and the daughter is wearing a white tank top with a black bra under it and a minimalistic necklace with a cusp in the front. The title combines two words, mom and me, emphasizing the conjoined nature of the portrait and the family relations that connect the two women. The portrait feels raw and intimate, although it is clearly staged; the poses are precisely aimed to align the women's facial features. Despite this, the lack of glamorization and idealization of the female form sustains the artist's honest approach to the image. Their beauty translates into strength, resilience, and matriarchal collaboration.

The exchange of gazes and looks in this photograph is of particular significance. Frazier is looking at the camera through her mother's body; one of her eyes is completely obscured, and the other is ambiguously focused, split between the subject in front of her

and the lens of the camera. Following Hirsch's rhetoric about the image of the family being between myth and lived reality, the artist is split between familial gaze and familial look, which is represented by the division of the two halves of her face, one visible to the viewer and the other protected by her mother's body.⁴⁰¹ The viewer, virtually taking the camera's position, is mirroring Frazier, looking at the daughter through the mother's figure. Her mother, on the other hand, caught in the middle, averts her gaze, not only by closing her eyes but also by turning to the side and blocking it with her body. To use the Lacanian diagram once again, the mother's figure aligns with the image/screen, affecting the way we see Frazier. This gaze-screen dynamic relates to what Amelia Jones has written about the corporeal screen, mediating between tangibility and the subject, and the photograph as a skin.⁴⁰² Jones's term evokes Freudian *screen memories* concerning childhood memories and trauma.⁴⁰³ For Freud, *screen memories* are protective; they both show and cover traumatic or repressed content.⁴⁰⁴ This means that memory is moldable, fluid, and changes with time, and by taking a certain shape, it becomes tangible, just like Jones's corporeal screen, which treats the photograph of the body as "not just a simulacrum or a two-dimensional screen but a fleshlike screen, one that presupposes the depth and materiality of the body as a subject."⁴⁰⁵ In Frazier's portrait, her mother's body becomes a corporeal matrix to the daughter's photographic image. She is mediating between the gaze, the subject, and the viewer, affecting how we see her "copy," the daughter.

This conjoined image tackles several issues relating to identification. First, the connection between her body and her mother's body, the shared similarities in their facial features, and bodily recognition of one within the other evoke the Barthesian umbilical cord metaphor: "A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed."⁴⁰⁶ The women's lips are in line with one another, creating the

⁴⁰¹ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 8.

⁴⁰² Jones, "The 'Eternal Return'," 950.

⁴⁰³ I wrote about this connection in the introduction part of my dissertation.

⁴⁰⁴ See Sprengnether, "Freud as Memoirist," 222.

⁴⁰⁵ Jones, "The 'Eternal Return'," 970.

⁴⁰⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 81.

illusion of a single facial feature. At the same time, by looking closely, we can see that they are made of fragments and different shades. Similarly, their noses are visually intertwined. Frazier and her mother become close through hybridity, a corporeal-pictorial oneness. This intergenerational (allo?/self?) portrait suggests more than just actual proximity; it visualizes sharing. The body in Frazier's photograph becomes a permeable frame,⁴⁰⁷ on the one hand, delineating the subjectivity of the mother, and on the other, that of the daughter, to ultimately merge them into a collective subject formation.

This corporeal and maternal reading of photography makes it "inherently familial and material, akin to the very processes of life and death," as well as opening up a conversation about love in photography. The strong emotional connection to the notion of love is merely a pretext for analyzing Frazier's images through this lens. It is more of a radical gesture of care, expressed by facing the camera, thoroughly observing and mirroring each other, sharing familial looks, and collaborating on how the family story is told. All of this allows the women to portray the act of love as resilient and empowering while dismantling the patriarchal foundation of the family in culture.

Additionally, in a conversation with Fred Moten, Frazier shared an anecdote about how her mother accidentally evoked Barthesian artistic theory by stating: "I wanted you to make this photograph because the moment you took that picture, it was no longer me. And that's the whole problem here. I'm not the person in those photographs."⁴⁰⁸ This shows how aware her mother is of the photographic medium and of being *photo-graphed*, evoking the Lacanian dictum.⁴⁰⁹ Through this moment of unrecognizing herself, the self and the other split, allowing for an exchange of gazes between the subject and its photographic referent. It also mimics how memory works, adding layers or corporeal screens each time a recollection occurs, an exchange of glances between the past and present. For Frazier, the moment her gaze travels from her mother's body to the lens of the camera, this split has already taken place. Just as Hirsch describes in her analysis of the term *allo/auto-portrait*, the subject constitutes itself visually by means of either the mirror

⁴⁰⁷ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 83.

⁴⁰⁸ Frazier, Moten and Martin, "LaToya Ruby Frazier" 91.

⁴⁰⁹ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 106.

stage externally and a socially given “*moi*” (“I”), or temporally through a previous self.⁴¹⁰ In each example, Hirsch continues, “photography stages the subject’s own specular self-encounter as an encounter with otherness.”⁴¹¹ The split is also explicitly emphasized by the composition of *Momme*; there is a division visible in the background between the white wall and a patterned curtain. Looming in the distance, in the corner behind the mother’s back, is a fragment of a mirror, symbolically completing the image’s complex relationship with identification.

The bond shared between the women is sustained by photography and the common goal of survival. In another iteration, *Momme (Floral Comforter)* from 2008 (**fig. 104**), the two women are portrayed standing in front of a floral background, the bottom frame ending at their knees. LaToya is taller than her mother, and standing on the right; her hair is worn down, and she is wearing a white tank top and pajama bottoms in a checkered pattern. Her mom is also wearing a white tank top, and her hair is tied back. The floral comforter’s padding emphasizes the domesticity of the scene. Both women look tired, which is accentuated by the detail of their bra straps falling from their shoulders. This detail encapsulates the similarities between the experiences of girlhood and womanhood in a very subtle way.

Although there are just two figures in the portrait, the memory of the father is addressed in the accompanying text:

An only son
A father
A college student
A soldier
While you were away fighting
the Global War on Terror,

⁴¹⁰ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 89. Hirsch uses the male subjective *him* to describe the mechanism of identification. I prefer to use a non-gendered term when explaining a theory that is applicable to everyone. When appropriate, I use a gendered pronoun, for example, when speaking of the Black female spectator.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

defending us from Weapons
of Mass Destruction, the
continuation of the War on
Drugs incarcerated men your
age, leaving single mothers
defenseless against domestic
biochemical weapons and
pharmaceutical companies.⁴¹²

Frazier is sympathetic toward her mother's experience, acknowledging her struggle caused by a faulty system. The image made by the two, along with the written message, is a letter to the absent father, expressing the double perspective of a wife and daughter, and combining the shared grief of two women. The strategy of mirroring each other's poses and similar clothing style not only reflects the generational and familial continuity of mother and daughter, but also emphasizes their shared bond, rooted in trauma and the memory of the father.

Another presence addressed by the women is the figure of the viewer. The image feels confrontational. We are held by their gazes, as we assume the position of the third figure, the absent father. Simultaneously, we are in the place of the camera, another significant actor in the scene, and return the look, mirroring the women. We are privileged to symbolically enter the intimate and domestic space of the Fraziers' house, assuming multiple roles, while also being guarded by their watchful gaze. We are outside the family frame.

Hirsch, in her theory, assumes a continuum between self-portrait, allo-portrait, and family picture.⁴¹³ For her, the subject formation is constituted of the "family's visual reflection of the individual subject."⁴¹⁴ Frazier's portrait employs mirroring as a strategy for exploring similar issues. She depicts herself and her mother as physical reflections,

⁴¹² Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 82.

⁴¹³ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 85.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

blurring the line between self-portraiture and allo-portraiture. Both women are their individual selves while also acting as others to distinguish themselves from each other. Despite the many visual similarities in poses and clothing styles, each of the women has her own distinct characteristics, her own emotions, and identity. They engage in a silent dialogue with one another, with the father, with the viewer, and with the past.

The issues addressed by the artist in the text, such as the “war on drugs” in the 1970s and 1980s, and the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, which affected the private spaces of households, symbolically seeping through the walls, remind me of Martha Rosler’s collages : *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (**fig. 105**). In her interventional photomontages from 1967–1972, Rosler combined glossy and lubricated advertisements of U.S. homes with raw photo documentaries of the war in Vietnam, and in later versions, of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (2004–2008). Despite the visual differences, both Rosler’s and Frazier’s work “forces the viewer to see and feel the crisis at hand,” and to witness the tangible consequences of U.S. foreign politics.⁴¹⁵ *Momme (Floral Comforter)* documents the real-life implications of a disrupted household. Systemic decisions are imprinted on the bodies and faces of women who are struggling to keep their family safe and sound. The presence of the soldier, supplemented by the text, simultaneously implements the father’s absence. For Frazier, the war fought outside and inside the walls of the home mirrors how politics affect both public and private spaces. For Rosler, under the facade of peaceful domesticity lies a repressed, traumatizing image of violence. “In creating a single perspectival field, Rosler creates a space that is almost ‘real,’ drawing our gaze to a reasonably probable scene even as we pull back from the implied threat to the family,” writes Caren Kaplan.⁴¹⁶ The notion of threat in Frazier’s photograph is only seemingly out-of-frame; the straightforward and confrontational perspective creates tension between the women and the viewer and makes one wonder, who is in danger? Such

⁴¹⁵ “Bringing it All Back Home: How Martha Rosler brought the Vietnam War into the American living room,” Minneapolis Institute of Art’s website, <https://new.artsmia.org/stories/bringing-it-all-back-home-how-martha-rosler-brought-the-vietnam-war-into-the-american-living-room> (accessed December 12, 2024).

⁴¹⁶ Caren Kaplan, “Domesticity at War: Bringing the War Home in Martha Rosler’s *House Beautiful* Wartime Photomontages,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 9, no. 1 (2023): 4. The article is available online: <https://catalystjournal.org/index.php/catalyst/article/view/39401/31295> (accessed December 16, 2024).

an intimate portrait of family relationships is the total opposite of the cookie-cutter nuclear family photos that Rosler criticizes in her work. Frazier's document is raw, vulnerable, and tender at the same time.

Despite the visual differences, it is important to draw connections between works such as *House Beautiful* and *Momme (Floral Comforter)* for a couple of reasons. Firstly, highlighting women artists' perspectives on domesticity as a site where political forces manifest themselves is still contemporarily relevant, as crises around the world and ongoing wars have been mediated by television, photography, and, more recently, by the Internet and cell phones. Frazier's work and the newer iteration of Rosler's photomontages were created during the same time of a progressing globalization, in which the role of memory and spectatorship drastically changed and evolved into a decentralized virtual network.⁴¹⁷ Both artists resist this to a certain degree, leaning toward the materiality of their works: Rosler is continuing her strategy of collaging from the 1960s, and Frazier encapsulates her work into a tangible object, such as a book. Secondly, by forcing viewers to bear witness to the systemic violence and tangible consequences of U.S. foreign politics, both artists turn memory into an issue of global accountability.⁴¹⁸ Lastly, they both disrupt the traditional and conservative image of the white American family with a strong paternal figure and a docile woman taking care of the household.

Another of Frazier's disruptive strategies is the use of mirrors to create frames within frames, images within images. In the photograph *Mom and me in the Phase* from 2007 (**fig. 106**) Frazier depicts a scene in the bar's interior filled with mirrors. The photograph is one of a few direct quotations of famous artworks in the photobook, in this case, Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* from 1882 (**fig. 107**). Considering Frazier's chosen medium, she is also directly referencing Jeff Wall's *Picture for Women*. However, many of the issues inherent in Wall's photographic tableau do not extend to Frazier's traditional photographic album format. Building on the discussions in Chapter 2

⁴¹⁷ See Assmann and Conrad, *Memory in a Global Age*.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, 6–10. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad wrote about the contemporary shift in memory and witnessing in the context of globalization and Internet access. Emphasizing the accessibility of imagery and memory, the scholars accentuate that the moral and ethical implications of witnessing are as collective as ever.

—particularly the inclusion of non-white identities in iconic references and the interplay of the traces of one image within another – I aim to highlight how Frazier adapts the compositional structure of *Folies-Bergère* to explore the dynamics of spectatorship and the familial look/gaze in her work.

The photograph depicts the artist's mother, who was working the bar in a local restaurant during the holiday season. The perspective plays tricks on us, presenting a “bartender” on the other side of the bar, assuming the customer's position. In the long mirror on the wall behind the woman, one can see LaToya's head and a glimpse of the camera. Her figure is small, almost blending in with the multiplied reflections of the garlands of Christmas stockings. There seems to be no one in the bar besides the two, possibly indicating it is daytime or the beginning of the shift. In comparison, Manet's painting depicts a scene during a busy night, with people in the background filling up the space. In Frazier's photograph, the stockings act as extras, mimicking the shimmering impressions of the lights and the crowd in the painting.

The key figure in *Folies-Bergère* is the bartender; surrounded by liquors, she takes up the center of the composition and is standing with her back to a mirror. Her reflection does not align with her figure, creating a spatial disorientation for the viewer. This feeling is intensified by the image of a man in a top hat talking to the woman, visible in the upper right corner of the painting. Who is the bartender looking at? This shifted perspective creates tension between the man talking with the bartender and the virtual viewer. Are they going to fight for the woman's attention? In her photograph, Frazier also utilizes spatial disorientation. The artist's mother is sitting on a bar stool, holding a drink, and looking at the camera. It is now LaToya who is standing behind the bar, with a variety of liquors in front of her. The question is not necessarily who in real life is working at the bar, but what does this shift in perspective say about the relationship between mother and daughter, and about the photographer and her subject? How does the gesture of appropriating a famous visual convention function in an intimate family frame?

Frazier's portrait raises issues about who is the object/subject in the photograph. The artist's self-reflection is almost undetectable in the rows of decorative stockings. Her

presence in the photograph balances between visibility and invisibility, complicated and mediated by the mirror. Similar to Wall's photograph, Frazier's portrait is organized by sections of mirrors. The lines between each section are emphasized by the design of the interior and, the tiles on the wall, and the structure of the bar, which repeats the rhythm of these vertical divisions. Frazier adopts an empathetic perspective, positioning herself with her working-class mother, and thereby mirroring what the woman does daily. At the same time, there is a visible distance between the two created by the structure of the bar, which makes the mother seem alienated. The class-conscious approach of Frazier is reminiscent of Manet's painting, in which the main character is the epitome of the nineteenth century working class in Paris: a hustling girl. In a manner truly characteristic of Manet, the woman figure dares to look the viewer in the eye, and is thus simultaneously both objectified by the customer and confidently self-aware of her position. The spatial ambiguity of the distorted perspective visually detaches her from her own self in the mirror's reflection. The power play between the customer, the viewer, and the barmaid is complicated by the mirror, which unmask her social status in more than one way, suggesting she works as a sex worker. Ruth E. Iskin has examined the role of spectatorship in Manet's paintings, emphasizing the multiplicity of gazes, spanning from the male gaze to the female gaze, and the more generalized gaze of the masses, driven by a consumerist desire.⁴¹⁹ For Frazier, the dynamic between the figures in the photograph is much different; the viewer's position is less invasive and more familial. The setting of the bar anchors Frazier's story in a critique of capitalist society, while centering the figure of a working-class mom on a break. She is captured in a moment of rest, sipping her drink and, for once, assuming the role of the visitor. From LaToya's perspective, we find ourselves in the role of the barmaid, similar to how the young Frazier is in her mother's shoes. In this context, the daughter's gaze is empathetic and caring.

The description beside the photograph in the book reads: "The apparition is me. We are not in Manet's bar at the Folies-Bergère."⁴²⁰ Frazier's choice of wording is peculiar. An

⁴¹⁹ Ruth E. Iskin, "Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère." *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (1995): 25–44.

⁴²⁰ Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 12.

apparition suggests that she is a specter, a figment of the imagination, not real. The statement resembles Jacques Derrida's remark on ghosts and photography, iterating Barthesian theory: "Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same, the *punctum* in the *studium*, the completely other, dead, living in me. This concept of the photograph *photographs* every conceptual opposition; it captures a relationship of haunting that is perhaps constitutive of every 'logic.'" ⁴²¹ Barthes understood *studium* as the educational, cultural, and historical information inscribed in photography; *punctum*, conversely, is a wound, cut, prick, sting, or speck affecting the spectator, leaving a mark or a bruise. ⁴²² In terms of the Derridian concept of ghost, the *punctum* in the *studium* might be interpreted as a cut/wound, etc., in the conventional structure of an image or identity. The opposition between the living and the dead, which conjoins in the apparition, plays with Foucault's theory of utopias and heterotopias, in which the mirror is a placeless place: "In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror." ⁴²³ According to Foucault, the mirror also functions as a heterotopia, making the virtual space real during the moment of looking at oneself, and simultaneously being aware of the surrounding real space. ⁴²⁴ In *Mom and me in the Phase*, the mirror mediates between the photographer and the viewer, reflecting the relationship between the mother and the daughter, connecting through the act of mirroring one another, and turning the lens toward each other, as numerous examples mentioned here show. The space reflected in the mirror adds depth to the interior, making it almost dream-like, drowned in festive garlands. On the stockings visible from the "bartender's" perspective, there are names assigned to each, one of them being Toya, resembling LaToya's own name. The apparition-like presence of the artist corresponds with the utopia of the mirror. She is

⁴²¹ Jacques Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume 1*, ed. Peggy Kanauf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 272.

⁴²² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 25–28.

⁴²³ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

present in the virtual space of the reflection, which creates an illusion of the artist standing behind her mother. However, the reflection of her spectral body is not haunting in nature, but rather, seems more protective, as if looking over the woman. Following Derridian rhetoric, in the mirror, her notion of the self disjoins, doubling as both self and the other, living or dead, nuancing the family memory explored in the series.

Frazier's line, "The apparition is me," brings to mind another aspect of Manet's painting – the subliminal notion of the illness and death of the artist. Manet died a year after completing *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* from complications arising from syphilis.⁴²⁵ Considering that both the daughter and the mother were battling terminal illnesses⁴²⁶ (the process of the mother's treatment is documented in the series), the portrait as a specter gains a deeper and more personal meaning.

The dialogue between Manet's and Frazier's work, drawn here, emphasizes the role of the mirror in creating a shift in conventional representation. Both artists use reflections to address a split in perspective between the viewer and the figures depicted in the work. In Frazier's case, the reflection disrupts the preconceived idea of who is the subject of her photograph, and who is performing the labor, whether it is her or her mother. While making a portrait rooted in the real-life problems of the working class, Frazier addresses the critique of consumerist and capitalist society that is also present in Manet's painting. By inserting new identities of working-class Black woman into a well-known visual trope, Frazier simultaneously activated and disrupted the meaning of the original work. Interweaving everyday struggles into a visual and symbolic dialogue with Manet, the artist is negotiating the presence of the mother figure within the discourse of art history as well as within the history of photographic self-expression.

Another example of strategizing mirrors in *The Notion of Family* is the 2008 photograph *Mom making an image of me* (**fig. 108**), which is another significant highlight in the collaborative portraits of mother and daughter. The women are dressed in the exact

⁴²⁵ Thierry de Duve and Brian Holmes, "How Manet's 'A Bar at the Folies-Bergère' Is Constructed," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 1 (1998): 136.

⁴²⁶ Kellie Jones and LaToya Ruby Frazier, "LaToya Ruby Frazier: Witness: The Unfinished Work Of the Civil Rights Movement: A Conversation with Kellie Jones," *Aperture*, no. 226 (Spring 2017): 22.

same clothes and wig caps as in *Momme*, extending the story of the portrait from a different angle, and allowing the viewer more spatial access to the bedroom. The women are depicted standing on two opposite sides of the camera on a tripod in the middle, framing the device with their own bodies. The mirror in the center of the composition is not framed; it has sharp edges on one side and a semicircular cut on the other and is placed on the radiator, resting against the wall with a curtain on the left side of the photograph. The same curtain was visible in the background of *Momme*. The mirror shows signs of use; it holds a memory of many touches and handprints, ultimately affecting the visibility of women. Viewers cannot fall for the illusion, as all the traces make it hyper-visible. The reflection also metaphorically shields us from the camera, which is not aimed at us, but at the mirror.

Following the Foucault's argument about the mirror image, its virtual space reveals a door situated right where the mother of the artist is standing, opening to another door visible in the distance; the woman's silhouette is framed within the mirror and the photograph frame. This complicates not only the spatial relation addressed in the context of the domestic interior but also the emotional dynamic between the mother and daughter. The relationship between the photographer and the photographed is also complex, with the camera acting as a third figure, and assuming the central position in the composition. The corporeal presence of the object is emphasized by the tripod, which gives it a stabilized structure as well as height. This way, all three figures encounter their images in the mirror. Metaphorically, the camera could be interpreted as a family member, both taking part in and taking a family portrait.

The mirror is a family frame, encapsulating the dynamic between the women, and foregrounding the issues of subject formation. As in other portraits, women mirror each other's poses, assuming both the positions of self and other, and engaging in a form of familial mimicry, all while being guarded by the camera. This is what differentiates this portrait from *Momme* or *Momme (Floral Comforter)*. The presence of the camera makes the arranged scene feel staged and performative, which contrasts with the disorganized surroundings—the tangled cables in the left corner, the open boxes on the right, and the

drawn curtain. The mirror, acting as a family frame, organizes the portrait within its virtual spatiality, which feels almost like a separate image, artificial to the depicted interior. The women become three-dimensional photographs, as Craig Owens would describe them.⁴²⁷

In a different iteration of the composition *Grandma Ruby, Me, J.C. and Mom in Mom's Bedroom* (**fig. 109**), the photograph expands the look into Frazier's household and portrays four generations of women. The artist is kneeling, looking into the viewfinder of her camera to take the photo. The angle from which the photograph is taken is different from the one of Frazier with her mother, revealing part of the bed and a pile of clothes and blankets. This time, the artist's mother is on crutches, recovering from her surgery, which was documented by Frazier a year prior. The mirror shows even more signs of use, collecting dust, smudges, and fingerprints all over it. A grainy, foggy image of the family's reflection occupies the bottom half of the mirror. The portrait makes me feel both marginal and central at the same time.

The composition of the group is carefully arranged. The artist is positioning herself right under a light switch; her mother is standing at the threshold of a door, holding on to the doorframe, the pile of clothes corresponds with a fragment of a mattress covered by a heavy comforter. The women mirror each other generation by generation: Grandma Ruby and her daughter Cynthia, LaToya and her mother. In this portrait, the camera loses its autonomy, being operated by Frazier, who adjusts it to include the smallest member of the family, her little cousin beside her, J.C (Joshua Christopher). The camera is "standing" among the family members, almost as if it were equal to them. They are all aware of being *photo-graphed*, of participating in an exchange between the gaze, image and screen.

In both of these works, the visible reflection of the camera makes both the photographed and the viewer aware of the act of capturing the photograph. At the same time, the gaze of the camera pointing toward the viewer creates a tension between the

⁴²⁷ Owens, *Beyond Recognition*, 201–217.

tangibility of the mirror and its metaphoric transparency.⁴²⁸ The mirror acts as a frame, screen, and mediator between the gazes of the family members identifying each other in the reflection. The viewer is literally out of the frame but virtually participating in this exchange. In documenting all the “apparitions” re-appearing within the home, who leave their marks on the mirror’s surface, adding to the traces already visible there, Frazier is exploring the family structure from within, creating an (in)visible boundary between the insiders and outsiders, between family and strangers.

3.1.3. Holding the Past

Another important relationship explored within the framework of family and memory in *The Notion of Family* is the artist’s connection with Grandma Ruby. She represents the oldest generation of women in the photobook. The album follows the last years of her life; she is pictured as a pillar of the family and as a caretaker while also being shown in a vulnerable state, on her deathbed and post-mortem inside a coffin. Her memory is tangible throughout the book; her name is mentioned in the texts even when she is not visible in the picture. One of the recurring motifs attached to the figure of Grandma Ruby is her impressive doll collection, squeezed inside a small apartment. In the photograph *Grandma Ruby and Me* from 2005 (**fig. 110**), Frazier portrays herself with her Grandma, sitting on the carpeted floor, surrounded by trinkets and dolls. The portrait balances staged and snapshot photography. The women appear to be caught in the moment, turning to the camera as if they are responding to a voice calling them to take a cute family picture: smile at the camera! The black wire emerging from Frazier’s hand indicates that the artist was using a shutter release cable, a clear indication of who was taking the photograph. Both

⁴²⁸ See Julia Stachura, “A Space of Negotiation: Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s Photographic Portraits as a Reflection on the Image of Blackness and Nudity,” *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, 28 (2020): 1–30. Stachura wrote about these issues in analyzing Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s mirror portraits: “Thus, the viewer participates in a double mediation. Only seemingly observed by the camera’s watchful eye, his perception is unable to reach the subject visible in the photograph on account of the presence of the double screen formed by the mirror and the reflection it produces. On the one hand, this stands as a critique of the aggressive look, the gaze, penetrating the objectified subject, stemming from the lack of direct access to the photographed scene; on the other hand, it is a new image of the black subject whose identity, entangled in romantic and creative relationships, is no longer disrupted by external vision. The looking camera is thus activated, becoming a witness to the scene, whereas touch charges it with capturing reality. The lens/object becomes the literalized object-reason for the desire, *le regard*, watching the characters in the scene.” (16–17).

women look at the camera, the artist smiling delicately while Grandma looks slightly worried or even surprised. The poses of the two mirror each other, reflecting the generational continuum of the female line of the family. The contrast between Frazier's smooth and slender arm and Grandma's wrinkled and veiny one emphasizes how the texture of the body changes with age, making the skin a map of past experiences. The room's interior combines modern technology, such as a TV and VHS player, with antique elements, including a rotary dial telephone and a vintage grandfather clock. This creates an impression that time stopped within these walls. The youthful presence of Frazier enlightens the space.

The artist looks very young in the photograph; her braided hair with pompons and ribbons makes her resemble a live version of Grandma's dolls. The relationship between the women feels special. Laura Wexler describes it as so: "This is not a simple nuclear family; when Frazier was a small child, her mother sent her to live at Grandma Ruby's house for safety. Frazier's grandmother had a doll collection that filled the home, and LaToya became another doll baby among them. "Toy" was even the nickname that Grandma Ruby called her."⁴²⁹ Frazier herself writes: "I was a porcelain doll she kept locked away in a glass case until she decided to take me out and exhibit me."⁴³⁰ The doll signifies multiple notions here, and protection is one of them, expressed by Grandmother Ruby's desire to see LaToya forever as a little girl, the one from the booklet at the beginning of the album. She sees home as a space of refuge and safety, protecting her granddaughter from the hostile environment outside. At the same time, she uses infantilization as a coping mechanism to deal with the fact that LaToya is growing up. Frazier's comment about being exhibited emphasizes the tension between document, home, and the family frame, each of which preserves the past based on a different desire. The family frame drawn by Grandma Ruby as an experienced elder is one of overprotectiveness in relation to the younger generation of Black women. As the artist mentions, her Grandma would never talk about the past, indicating the lived trauma of

⁴²⁹ Laura Wexler, "A Notion of Photography," in *Notion of Family* (New York: Aperture, 2014), 144.

⁴³⁰ Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 61.

racial injustice.⁴³¹ The document offers another perspective, making the photographer an insider, a familiar, and finally, a woman. Home, in this case, is not only a place of exhibition but also a place for incubating the past.

Frazier delves into her Grandma's relationship with repressed memories of the past in 2002 *Grandma Ruby holding her babies* (**fig. 111**). The photograph depicts the elder sitting on her bed, holding black and white dolls. The woman is wearing a nightgown similar to the ones worn by the dolls. She is holding the dolls tenderly and looking down at the white doll with a pacifier. The portrait is intimate, and the framing positions the artist at the legs of her Grandma. The portrait resembles an iconic photograph from a doll test documented by Gordon Parks for *Ebony* magazine in 1947. The test was a groundbreaking experiment on the psychological effects of segregation on African American children conducted by Dr. Kenneth Clark and Dr. Mamie Clark, one of the first African Americans to receive a Ph.D. from Columbia University. The photograph *Doll Test* depicts a young Black boy from Harlem reaching toward a white doll while looking at the black doll (**fig. 112**). The boy's choice was preceded by a question from the psychologists: "Which doll would you rather look like?" demonstrating his awareness of racial significance in America and the internalized racial hierarchy at an early age.⁴³² Clark's research was also used as supporting evidence in the 1954 desegregation lawsuit *Brown v. Board of Education*. Parks's photographs served not only as a tool for scientific research presented in court but also as a strongly critical foundation for the freshly established *Ebony* magazine, founded in 1945. The magazine extensively covered social and political issues while also popularizing Black culture and reaching a mainstream audience.⁴³³ *Doll Test* is a beautiful and devastating image, showing a unique perspective focused solely on a child's decision. The boy's gaze at the black doll is mixed with sadness, contemplation, and confusion. The

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴³² The whole photographic documentation and the text are available on the Gordon Parks Foundation's website: <https://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/gordon-parks/photography-archive/doll-test-19472?view=slider#2> (accessed November 26, 2024).

⁴³³ On *Ebony* and the cultural significance of the magazine in African-American households, see Huey Copeland, "Dark Mirrors: Theaster Gates and *Ebony*," *Artforum* 52, no. 2 (October 2013), <https://www.artforum.com/features/dark-mirrors-theaster-gates-and-ebony-217938/> (accessed November 29, 2024); *Speaking of People: Ebony, Jet and Contemporary Art*, ed. Lauren Haynes (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2014).

test's "Would you rather" is embodied in the gesture of reaching toward the white doll. Frazier's photograph shares similar devastation and expands on this issue, contextualizing it within the family framework. For Grandma Ruby, a girl growing up at the time when the doll test was created, the experiment seemed to demonstrate a similar conclusion: an internalized sense of degradation. In the photo, she holds the white doll tenderly, her palm grazing the dress' material, her gaze fixed upon it. As Cheryl Wall notes, dolls conventionally socialize young girls into motherly roles; they can also be vehicles for empowering fantasies of dolls becoming presidents, doctors, or pilots while also translating ideals of beauty into imaginative role play.⁴³⁴ In her essay, Wall mentions the role of dolls and other embodiments of girlhood in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, in which the blue eyes and blonde hair representing features of white girls are enticing to Pecola, a poor Black girl, the protagonist of the novel.⁴³⁵

The doll test holds a significant place for many African Americans who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s. Deborah Willis wrote about it by evoking a family image of hers, the 1955 snapshot taken by Willis's father, depicting two sisters, Deborah and Yvonne, sitting on the couch posing with two dolls with different skin tones and features. In analyzing the photograph, Willis found a real-life and personal connection to the doll test, in which there is an intersecting of family, childhood memory, and the significant role of photography in the household cultivated by her father.⁴³⁶ Frazier's photograph plays on the same notes but in reverse. She is the youngest member of the family, pointing a camera at the eldest while being aware of the iconic visual reference to Parks. The connection between the domestic, intimate environment, the heartbreaking realization that comes with the doll test, and the photography documenting it shows that even a family photo can hold a mirror to socio-political zeitgeist.

The text accompanying Frazier's photograph reads: "Grandma Ruby's husband died on Mom's first birthday. Left to raise six children during the '60s could not have been an easy task. She worked as a manager for Goodwill. Grandma Ruby internalized the idea

⁴³⁴ Cheryl A. Wall, "On Dolls, Presidents, and Little Black Girls," *Signs* 35, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 796–801.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 798.

⁴³⁶ Willis, *Picturing Us*, 4–6.

that Black women aren't supposed to cry, they're to remain silent and endure suffering."⁴³⁷ Frazier's description intersects all of the recurring motifs in the photobook: motherhood, in this case, Grandma Ruby's and her daughter's relation; the socio-political context – the 1960s was the time of the Civil Rights Movement; the working-class background, with Ruby working in Goodwill; and overcoming a stereotypical and misogynistic narrative, the need to endure suffering. bell hooks wrote about the internalized hate and acts of love – and, in particular, self-love – that help one to overcome these issues, care being the most important among them.⁴³⁸ The gesture of care is expressed by Grandma Ruby in her nursing the dolls and rejoicing with childhood, and by Frazier in tenderly documenting this moment.

Frazier is accessing through her Grandma the memory of a time she could not personally remember. The photograph is an example of what Hirsch calls *postmemory*. The scholar understands it as a form of memory, distinguished by a generational distance, that connects the subject to a source via “imaginative investment and creation” instead of recollection.⁴³⁹ Postmemory concerns second-generation memories; in Frazier's case, Grandma Ruby would be a bearer of *the* memory, while LaToya is the generation of *postmemory*. The dolls are a common ground for both women, a recognizable and familiar object. However, a specific memory attached to the doll test is strictly entangled with Grandma Ruby's experience as a girl growing up during the 1940s. Frazier's child-like appearance in *Grandma Ruby and Me* could be also interpreted as an “imaginative investment,” expressed by the artist embodying one of her grandma's dolls. This way, Frazier evokes both the memory of her Grandma's childhood and her own.

3.1.4. The Body of the Town

Besides the portraits of her family, Frazier's photobook is also rich in landscapes, treated by the artist as an equal actor in her social document. Here, I would like to suggest another

⁴³⁷ Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 27.

⁴³⁸ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2000), 53–68.

⁴³⁹ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 22.

fruitful path for analyzing the tangibility of memory in her work through the paralleling of bodies and landscapes. “Linking the story of familial illness to her hometown’s industrial past, Frazier connects sickness directly to post-industrial precarity, conservative politics, and the dismantling of the New Deal welfare state,” writes Olympia Contopidis.⁴⁴⁰ The importance of the context of place within *The Notion of Family* is addressed in one of the first images in the photobook. The photograph depicts a close-up of a 1980s road sign stating *Welcome to Historic Braddock. Compliments of AIR-SCENT INTERNATIONAL, SURCO PRODUCTS, PestcoInc. PEST CONTROL. Please drive carefully* (**fig. 113**). The sign is shown in a distinct manner; the welcoming phrase is cut in half by the upper frame, as is *Please drive carefully* at the bottom; the font design is all over the place, and the logos are out of center. A dent between the two d’s in the town’s name makes it look as if it had been struck by a bullet. A light reflecting from the metal plates, which are held together by rusting nails, indicates the photograph was taken with a flash during nighttime. The eerie atmosphere and unsettling feeling evoked by the sign foreshadow the tragic state of the decaying ghost town, portrayed further in the photo book. The photograph echoes Lee Friedlander’s documentary of signs, but with a significantly darker tone.

Contrasting with the close-up of the sign, the following image drastically shifts the perspective to an aerial view, presenting the Edgar Thomson Steel Works, Andrew Carnegie’s first mill. *United States Steel Mon Valley Works Edgar Thomson Plant* from 2013 (**fig. 114**) was shot from a helicopter and is one of the latest additions to the photographed series. In the background, one can see the Monongahela River (Mënaonkihëla), an important resource for the region, as well as a witness to the battle of 1755. The image is uncanny; it has a model-like mockup quality. The pollution being emitted from the chimneys is thick and white, and industrial architecture dominates the town. The aerial perspective emphasizes Braddock’s history of migration, spanning East-Central European migrants in the early 1900s, African-Americans during the Great

⁴⁴⁰ Olympia Contopidis, “How Not to Aim the Camera Downward. Representing the Feminized Working Poor,” *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 30 (2021): 19.

Migration in the 1930s, and later, white flight, the migration of white people out of the town in the 1960s.

The panoramic aerial view dramatizes the autonomy of the look, as Kaja Silverman writes, analyzing the camera as a social apparatus in Harun Farocki's 1989 film, *Images of the World and Inscription of War (Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges)*.⁴⁴¹ Farocki's work analyzes media violence through the notion of the blind spot, one example being aerial footage of the IG Farben industrial plant taken by the Americans in 1944. The blind spot here, as Farocki stresses, is the Auschwitz concentration camp, depicted next to the industrial bombing target.⁴⁴² By pointing out the inability of the Allies to see and recognize Auschwitz in an aerial photograph, Silverman emphasizes how the look is separate from the camera/gaze.⁴⁴³ This echoes Frederick Douglass's words: "Thus early I learned that the point from which a thing is viewed is of some importance."⁴⁴⁴ The aerial view, in Frazier's case, connects the history of mass production and industrialization, leaving the figures of the workers completely out of the picture. Although they are the backbone of Braddock, from this perspective, they become invisible. This is akin to the difference between John Frazier's and Andrew Carnegie's photos framing the portrait of Frazier as a little girl: their figures are like aerial views of history, which bracket the microhistory of the artist's contingent biography. By using this historically burdened camera viewpoint, her social document becomes politically charged.⁴⁴⁵ What type of investigation is she conducting? Does the aerial view change its significance when the one who is gazing is a Black woman? In this context, how does the viewer's position change?

The aerial viewpoint is seemingly mythical, placing the viewer in an impossible position, looming over the town. It allows us to see the landscape from afar, with the river

⁴⁴¹ Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 142–146.

⁴⁴² Lacan's notion of the "blind spot" is primarily discussed in *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964)

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁴⁴ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and Freedom* (1855), 36, open access from The Avalon Project, Yale Law School Lilian Goldman Law Library, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/douglas01.asp (accessed December 10, 2024).

⁴⁴⁵ When thinking of aerial photography, not only World War II comes to mind, but also the figure of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, of the pseudonym Nadar, who in 1858 captured Paris from a hot air balloon. Nadar's invention became a foundation for war-time spying and provided another angle for investigating and surveilling the city.

in the background, along with the pollution generated by the factories. In this context, the photographer is critiquing the environmentally destructive industrial complex, which is gradually changing the landscape and poisoning Braddonians. Frazier's identity as a Black woman from a working-class family, living and working in Braddock, undoubtedly intersects here with her status as a photographer and documentarist. The blind spot in *United States Steel Mon Valley Works Edgar Thomson Plant* is the body of the worker, affected by smoke, dust, and industrial waste from the factory. Moreover, Angela Gugliotta, in her experimental study on gender ideology and environmental justice in Pittsburgh, compares smoke to the changing representations of the virtue of labor throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, once personified by masculinity, other times by femininity.⁴⁴⁶ The artist herself juxtaposes shadow and invisibility with pollution and toxicity, intersecting the issues of environmentalism, gender, and class in multiple instances, e.g., in the booklet and on the cover of her photobook.⁴⁴⁷

Lastly, Frazier parallels the body battling illness to the state of the town. *Epilepsy Test* from 2011 (**fig. 115**) is a powerful juxtaposition of a portrait of the body in sickness and in a decaying urban landscape. The photograph on the left depicts the artist's mother, wired to medical equipment, taking an epilepsy test, as the title suggests. She is turned away from the camera, and her hospital gown is open, revealing her bare back, EEG wires connecting the woman's head to the apparatus. The image on the right presents the gutted

⁴⁴⁶ See Angela Gugliotta, "Class, Gender, and Coal Smoke: Gender Ideology and Environmental Injustice in Pittsburgh, 1868–1914," *Environmental History* 5, no. 2 (April 2000): 165–193. In her essay, Gugliotta writes: "Smoke was labor's product – it enforced, for both men and women, a preference for industry over luxury – virtue over sin. [...] Smoke's greatest labor burden fell on Pittsburgh's working-class women, and to compound the injustice their cleaning 'activities' were not even recognized as labor. Conceptions of housework as feminine spiritual emanation would have mixed effects on the further history of anti-smoke activism." (168–169).

⁴⁴⁷ See Jones and Frazier, "LaToya Ruby Frazier." Summarizing the issues raised in this part of the chapter, I would like to evoke a quote from the artist, pointing out the chain-reaction events that affected her town and herself as an artist and documentarist: "Growing up in the 1980s in the Rust Belt in Braddock Pennsylvania – a time when cities are shrinking, all the factories have been outsourced, all your social services have been cut, the schools are closed, the library is barely functioning – I was already dealing with an invisibility complex. And I didn't really understand why we were next to this factory, caught in the shadow not only of the Edgar Thomson steel plant, but also caught in the shadow of Andrew Carnegie. What does it mean to have to measure yourself, or try to be seen, through an industrial capitalist? [...] I knew that I was dealing with shadows and invisibility, and dealing with toxicity and pollution, and then dealing with three generations [...] of women who grew up in three different economic periods." (21–22).

insides of the historic hospital building, which once held a community center, cafeteria, and restaurant, provided more than 120 beds, and employed more than 600 people.⁴⁴⁸ The ruins are depicted up close, giving the scene a dramatic effect. The wires and cables hanging from the construction are a visual response to the ones from the hospital. Frazier depicts the landscape as a metaphor for the body and vice versa, emphasizing how labor and environmental pollution have affected her mother. The health and condition of the town translate into the health of the people, and “what is shameful is not the body that suffers but rather the systems that mete out violence.”⁴⁴⁹

The Notion of Family is a tug-of-war between love, care, and labor, allowing us to see the history of the town depicted using a humane and empathetic approach. Frazier’s photographic document emphasizes the resilience of the members of her family, affected by a long history of industrial decline and systemic neglect. The multigenerational perspective present in her works, as well as in the collaborative approach employed in her photographic self-portraits, builds a strong matriarchal foundation for Frazier’s artistic practice. The family relations explored by the artist are raw, intimate, and vulnerable despite the performative aspects of their compositional arrangement. Particularly involved in the image-making process is the artist’s mother, blurring the lines between the photographer and the photographed, and creating self- and allo-portraits collectively created with family members.

Frazier’s work emphasizes the tangibility of memory in multiple ways. Firstly, through the photobook format, resembling a family album, contrasted with the fleeting nature of digital media, being popularized at the time. Another example is the familial object, such as Grandma Ruby’s doll collection, which holds both inherited trauma and nostalgia for a second generation through postmemory. In this context, the interior of the house becomes a tangible site of memories passing from one generation to another. Similarly, the mirror preserves traces, fingerprints, and signs of use, affecting the reflected image of the family, the enduring loss of the paternal figure, illness, and death. Lastly, the

⁴⁴⁸ Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 103.

⁴⁴⁹ Teju Cole, “LaToya Ruby Frazier,” *Aperture*, no. 223 (Summer 2016): 127.

female body in Frazier's allo-portraits acts as a matrix and corporeal screen, becoming a tangible interface between the gaze, the viewer, and the camera. Through her deeply personal photography, Frazier transforms abstract concepts of memory and history into concrete visual evidence, carrying both the weight of the past and the promise of resilience. Frazier's radical intimacy and collaborative familial storytelling challenge the dehumanizing stereotypes often perpetuated in the media, presenting instead a nuanced portrayal of the Black American experience and using art as a powerful agent for social change and historical reclamation.

3.2. Homecoming

Continuing the framework of family frames, this part will explore Rahim Fortune's 2020 series of self-portraits, created in his hometown of Austin, Texas. Fortune (b. 1994) is a visual artist born in Texas and raised between Texas and Oklahoma, currently living and working in New York. His heritage is a focal point for most of his projects: his mother was Indigenous (Chickasaw) and his father was African-American. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Fortune returned to his hometown and quarantined with his immediate family. At the time, the artist, along with his sister, was caregiving to their father, who was battling ALS, a rare neurodegenerative disorder and a terminal illness. Staying in Austin resulted in a series of self-portraits, in collaboration with the artist's younger sister.⁴⁵⁰

The untitled series of photographs is part of the *Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America* exhibition, presented by The New York Times, and curated by Jolie Ruben, Sandra Stevenson, and Amanda Webster. The exhibition, held at Brooklyn Bridge Park, featured self-portraits by 27 Black artists displayed outdoors in a public space. It was accompanied by an essay by Deborah Willis, which explored contemporary Black self-portraiture through the lens of current events of

⁴⁵⁰ "An Evening with The New York Times," Photoville 2020 Talks On-Demand recordings, <https://photoville.nyc/event/an-evening-with-the-new-york-times/> (accessed December 4, 2024).

the time, including protests against police brutality during the summer of 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic health crisis.⁴⁵¹ These events provided a significant context for Fortune's series, which combined photography, self-expression, memory, and illness. As an artist familiar with the medical system through his father's terminal illness, Fortune was well aware of the inequalities in access to healthcare that people of color face on a daily basis. The COVID pandemic added another layer to this. This time of quarantine made his bonding through photography with his sister especially significant. It also added a complex dimension to the family dynamic between the photographer and the photographed.

The series showcased three types of portraiture: a straightforward headshot, a back portrait, and a close-up, all taken by the artist's sister in domestic space. Other images showed these portraits displayed in public settings, photographed by the artist himself. In the essay that accompanied the exhibition, Fortune explained: "I wanted to explore the parts of myself that are exposed and public, the parts of myself that are private and sacred, and the parts of myself that I work to destroy and unlearn."⁴⁵² He also specified that the headshot signified the exposed and public aspects, the bare back portrait represented private and sacred elements, and the suited figure symbolized what he aimed to destroy and unlearn.⁴⁵³

The repetition and exploration of the self in Fortune's series resonate with Jones's photographic self-performance, characterized by the scholar as a series of returning subjective "I's."⁴⁵⁴ For Jones, the photograph, as well as the depicted subject, can be understood as a screen, displaying "corporeality-as-surface," like a skin concealing a complex depth.⁴⁵⁵ In this sense, a photograph is both a representation and a veil, layered with the returning and shifting subjectivity of self-performance. The three styles of portraiture explored by Fortune and his sister in domestic and public spaces both protect

⁴⁵¹ Willis, *Sources of Self-Regard*.

⁴⁵² Quote from the artist's website: Rahim Fortune, "Sources of Self-Regard," artist's website, <https://www.rahimfortune.com/commissions/sources-of-selfregard> (accessed December 2, 2024).

⁴⁵³ "An Evening with The New York Times."

⁴⁵⁴ Jones, "The 'Eternal Return'," 950.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 967.

and reveal certain parts of the artist's personal life and identity, set against the backdrop of a health crisis and family struggles.

I would like to expand on the notion of *eternal return*, which ties together the representation and repetition of the self with the practice of homecoming as an act of practicing remembering. In this context, the basic philosophical idea of eternal return is of recurring events, happening over and over again, picturing oneself “caught in the endless feedback loop of eternal return.”⁴⁵⁶ Derrida's iteration rejects the passiveness indicated by this position, overcomes the binary opposition of original and repetition, and reframes it through the lens of *différance*.⁴⁵⁷ Jones borrowed the notion of eternal return from Derrida's theory; however, she gave a scant explanation of how it applies to art. Jones defines photographic self-portraiture as a site of exchange between image (memory screen), subject, and viewer, in which the artist embodies the past, which comes alive through the memories of the viewer in the present.⁴⁵⁸ This resonates with what I understood as the act of embodiment or reenactment of the past in my analyses of the tangibility of memory in the first and second chapters. Moreover, Jones references the notion of the Barthesian *punctum*, the cut, prick, wound, etc., as a mediator between the subject and viewer, particularly when discussing self-portraiture. In this sense, the *punctum* would work as an activator of the viewer's memories, projecting their own specters into the self-portraiture.⁴⁵⁹ The scholar strictly links this with performance, indicating the relationship between the subject and camera is mediated by the screen, which freezes the

⁴⁵⁶ Jones, “The ‘Eternal Return’,” 975.

⁴⁵⁷ On the history of the concept of eternal return see Lee Braver, “Eternal Return Hermeneutics in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida,” *Open Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2022): 1–21. The article is available through open access: <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/opphil-2022-0267/html?srsltid=AfmBOoo4u8NYWscdUXhvN-ghJ2aNN1CGm6smMQ1Y7DdiVy5Jgjrpm3> (accessed December 6, 2024).

⁴⁵⁸ Jones, “The ‘Eternal Return’,” 961.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid. Jones explains it with an analysis of Cindy Sherman's self-portraits (which are actually good examples of familial self-portraiture, as the artist collaborated with her partner during photoshoots), as “the gleam of the lip” acts as the *punctum* evoking personal memories for the scholar: “This detail sends me into an abyss of remembering (literally, re-memorizing Sherman's body via my own phantasmagoric bank of past thoughts and images, made ‘present’ through this image moment). Fruity kisses and the smell of ‘Tabu,’ my mother's perfumed lipstick, glowing glossily above me before her night out. In that gleam is the promise of both sexual excitement and loss (my mother's sexual excitement that, due to the opposition of motherhood and sexuality in our culture, was felt to be my loss). For me, Sherman's gleam opens into her own promiscuous self-display, her (and my?) own desire to be both powerful (a term not conventionally aligned with femininity) and desirable at once.” (961–962).

body as a representation.⁴⁶⁰ Jones advocates for a seemingly fixated meaning of photography on death, freeing the past from “the *having been* tense of the photograph transferred into the *not yet* of future possibilities.”⁴⁶¹

An example of what the artist considers to be an exposed and public representation is a black and white headshot depicting Fortune facing the camera, motionless and expressionless (**fig. 116**). He is dressed in a striped black and white shirt, with his hair styled in an afro. The portrait exemplifies a deadpan aesthetic, characterized by a cool and seemingly neutral tone, reminiscent of identification photographs commonly found in passports, driver’s licenses, and mug shots. The photographic formula of face-focused, deadpan portraits evokes the instrumentalization of the medium by the government and the police, who use the portrait as a tool for identification, tracking, and border control. Both identification photos and mugshots were standardized in the nineteenth century, respectively, by Scottish-born Canadian photographer William Notman at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and by French police officer Alphonse Bertillon in 1888.⁴⁶² Reemerging a century later as an artistic photographic expression, deadpan identification portraits became popularized among the group known as the Düsseldorf School of Photography, including Thomas Ruff. His large-scale headshots experiment with how one understands the photographed subject with ostensibly limited knowledge about it.⁴⁶³ Fortune combines both historical and contemporary perspectives, building tension between the formality of this specific photographic representation and the intimacy of its creation.

Fortune not only faces a camera but also his sister. He exchanges a familial look with her, allowing for mutual recognition.⁴⁶⁴ At the same time, he is also facing the viewer, with whom the familial bond is absent, replaced instead by the gaze. We, as viewers

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 949.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., p. 976.

⁴⁶² Smith, “The Mug Shot.”

⁴⁶³ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London–New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 105–106. In the context of the shift in photography in the 1990s, see Barry Schwabsky, “The End of Objectivity: Thomas Ruff, from ‘Portraits’ to ‘Other Portraits,’” *On Paper* 1, no. 3 (January–February 1997): 22–25.

⁴⁶⁴ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 2–11.

outside of Fortune's family, can only replicate an exchange based on the socio-cultural implications.⁴⁶⁵ The artist seems aware of this, presenting himself in three representational modes, with the headshot illustrating his public persona. This is the most accessible of the three and the only one in which Fortune looks directly at the camera, allowing the spectator to take an active role in its creation. The medium actively shapes this corporeal experience, balancing Fortune's portrait on the edge of photographic death and performative movement.⁴⁶⁶

Another image shows a printed portrait of the artist posted onto a closed fireworks stand, an ephemeral and temporary structure associated with seasonal celebrations (**fig. 117**). The landscape portrayed in the photograph is completely devoid of people, and thus, reminiscent of the time of the pandemic, when isolation and a lack of human interaction prevailed. The composition is straightforward, depicting the lone firework stand in the center, flanked by trees and bushes in the background. The surrounding weeds and unkept grass impart a feeling of abandonment. A portrait of Fortune is placed slightly off-center on the middle panel of the stand. The banner situated above reads *LONE STAR FIREWORKS*, topped with a star that evokes the Texan flag. The photograph is an homage to the artist's late mother, whose birthday was on the Fourth of July, a day typically celebrated in America with fireworks.⁴⁶⁷ Within this framework, the portrait and the temporary architecture serve as a space for remembering and honoring a deeply personal bond.

The way Fortune's portrait is placed on the wall of the stand resembles a missing person poster or a wanted poster. This public space completely detaches the portrait from the context of the familial moment of collaboration with his sister. Moreover, the large scale of the portrait, compared to a standard identification photo, makes Fortune hyper-visible. His Native and Black cultural background, juxtaposed with the reference to the Fourth of July, raises a question: What does Independence Day mean for him besides the family memory attached to it? The relationship of Native Americans and African Americans with the day is complex and historically burdened with bondage and genocide.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶⁶ Jones, "The 'Eternal Return',"

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

As Frederick Douglass put it, “This Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn.”⁴⁶⁸ For Fortune, the firework stand is not only attached to a cultural resilience but also to a personal grievance of his mother's passing.

Another way the portrait appears in the public sphere is on the pillar of the underpass, located near the place where the artist grew up⁴⁶⁹ (**fig. 118**). The heavy, concrete, grey construction dominates the landscape. There are no signs of the presence of people in the area besides the image of Fortune's head shot. Similarly to the photograph with the fireworks stand, the artist is taking a photograph of his own portrait displayed in public. Again, the place holds personal significance, being close to the artist's home.⁴⁷⁰ At the same time, the character of the space is defined by transit, traveling, and moving from one place to another. Fortune's self-portrait in this context is also transitional, emphasizing homecoming.

The way Fortune plays with the family frame is strongly rooted in repetition. The two photographs are intricate examples of frames within frames, featuring photographs within photographs. The artist is facing an image of himself while taking another picture. Viewers, conversely, confront a double portrait—first, the print of the headshot captured by the sister, and second, a self-portrait of the artist, which is a photograph of his own portrait taken outside. These portraits displayed in public spaces reflect the artist's personal homecoming, his reconnecting with a place of familial significance. The dual act of photography, initiated by the artist's sister and continued by Fortune himself, incorporates a collective and collaborative viewpoint.

Another significant aspect of these portraits is the portrayal of Black men in public spaces. More than thirty years after the *Black Male* exhibition, the topic is still relevant. In her essay for the exhibition, bell hooks pointed out the burden of representation that frames the Black male body: “Any liberatory visual aesthetics of the black male body must engage a body politics that critically addresses the way in which racist/sexist iconography,

⁴⁶⁸ Frederick Douglass, “‘What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?’ Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, 5 July 1852,” In *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass: A Critical Edition*, ed. John R. McKivigan, Julie Husband, and Heather L. Kaufman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 68.

⁴⁶⁹ “An Evening with The New York Times.”

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

refigured within the framework of contemporary fascination with the ‘other,’ continues to be the dominant backdrop framing the way images are created and talked about.”⁴⁷¹ By entering public space, Fortune’s image is framed within the larger system of visual politics, exceeding the family frames and familial looks. The identification photograph in this context is burdened with a history of mug shots and racial profiling, judgment intersecting with gender, race, and fear.⁴⁷² What Quaylan Allen and Henry Santos Metcalf write on these issues, converses with what hooks meant by the “dominant backdrop”: “Considering the way black masculinity is constructed (through a discourse of violence and criminality), it appears that a fear of black men pervades the political ideologies, decision-making processes, and procedures of the law enforcement and criminal justice systems in ways that perpetuate higher conviction rates and longer sentences for black men.” An image of Fortune, a Black-Native man in public space, intervenes in the political memory and public sphere. His afro, a hairstyle that embodies a sense of cultural pride and liberation, becomes politicized. As I mentioned in the introduction, the coverage of Angela Davis’s FBI search and trial was one of the most prominent examples of media harassment and stereotyping in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁴⁷³ Her afro became associated with criminality, as she appeared in an FBI wanted poster in 1970 (**fig. 119**). Davis’s image in an afro became so popular that the journalists deliberately chose it over any other portrait, despite the activist occasionally wearing slicked-back hair. I discovered a particularly symbolic depiction of this predicament during my research at the Tamiment Library and the Robert F. Wagner Archives at NYU. In a draft for the page one of the media coverage of the activist’s arrest from the United Press International Photo, *Angela Davis – Before and After*, we can see two images of Davis – on the left, in slicked back hair in a FBI mug shot taken after her arrest in 1970, and on the right, in an afro in a photo from 1969 (**fig. 120**).⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷¹ bell hooks, “Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politics,” in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 130–131.

⁴⁷² Quaylan Allen and Henry Santos Metcalf, “Up to No Good: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Fear of Black Men in US Society,” in *Historicizing Fear. Ignorance, Vilification, and Othering*, ed. Travis D. Boyce and Winsome M. Chunnu (Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2019), 19–34.

⁴⁷³ Davis, “Afro Images.”

⁴⁷⁴ National Guardian Photographs Collection, PHOTOS.213, Box 17, Folder 5, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

A red x crossing the image on the left indicates that the media used the one in an afro, despite the photograph being taken a year before the arrest. Although Fortune is not explicitly addressing Davis's story, his portrait encapsulates similar representational issues, as he also appears in public space. Fortune's portrait becomes a tangible continuation of this historical dialogue. It is not just a depiction of his identity but a conscious engagement with the political memory surrounding Black bodies and hairstyles. His image intervenes in and challenges the dominant backdrop of racist and sexist iconography, forcing viewers to confront the complex layers of meaning and history embedded within a single visual representation.

The second type of portrait in the series depicts the artist facing a white wall with his back turned to the viewer (**fig. 121**). He is shirtless, exposing his tattoos to the camera. Beside his body, his afro is a focal point in the picture. His figure is slightly out of center, with his shadow weighing on the right side of the photograph. This portrait was also taken by his sister. The moment of vulnerability shared between siblings here feels special. They are both caregivers to their father, and their healthy bodies are in the constant presence of a body battling illness. The parts that the artist holds sacred – his hair, flesh, and physical being – simultaneously mask and expose his identity.

The photograph resembles Lorna Simpson's strategy of anti-portraiture, iterating Friedrich's *Rückenfigur*, leaving space for the viewer to take on the position of the depicted figure. While virtually doing so, the spectator is, like the artist, facing a wall, closing the space in front of him, leaving literally and metaphorically no room for the gaze to explore. Similar to Simpson, Fortune's anti-portrait resists the convention of facing the camera, or "facingness" as Kobena Mercer describes it, averting the gaze and isolating one's self from it.⁴⁷⁵ The tension between the protection and exposure of the self is especially palpable when juxtaposing this portrait with the one facing the camera.

⁴⁷⁵ Kobena Mercer elaborates on this particular strategy in centering the politics of the Black body, expanding on what hooks wrote years prior: "Interrupting conventions of facingness that define the portrait genre, the formal measures of cropping, framing, and captioning that create an "'antiportrait' strategy depart from the goals of individualist self-expression or protest against stereotypical distortions of black female bodies to enact instead a postconceptual practice that alters the very terrain on which identity is taken as a target of dialogic intervention." See Mercer, *Travel and See*, 12.

Fortune's portrait returns three more times in the series, printed out on paper like a poster or flyer: on a wooden house, in a tree, and in a puddle of water (**fig. 122–124**). His presence in the town is rendered by the cultural implications of photography in public spaces, once again evoking a missing person poster. This time, however, the person's identity is completely obscured; only the tattoos reveal specific information about the man. The image is too vague to signal anything and too conceptual to be a family photograph. Each time Fortune's portrait appears, it holds a different memory and transforms the photograph's materiality. Discarded in the water, the paper begins to wrinkle, affecting the body and hair depicted in the portrait. Similarly, when the poster is placed on the tree, its structure affects the surface of the paper and ultimately alters Fortune's image; his back bears marks from the tree bark, and his figure is distorted, fitting the trunk's shape.

The third iteration of Fortune's familial portrait, collaborated with his sister, depicts the artist wearing a black suit and tie and a white shirt (**fig. 125**). He is posing for the camera; the frame crops part of his head and arms, focusing on his torso. Tattoos are peeking out from one of his sleeves, and a delicate metal chain bracelet adorns his wrist. His hands reach the jacket, forming fists, evoking a pose that reminds me of Rashid Johnson and Hank Willis Thomas's 2008 collaboration, *A Portrait of Two American Artists as Young Negro Scholars* (**fig. 126**). Here the men are depicted from the waist up, wearing suits, with their clenched fists at their chests. Johnson has long, dark dreadlocks and is looking up and to his left. Thomas has short, dark hair and gazes directly into the camera with his head tilted slightly to his right. Both men are channeling Black intellectuals, evoking historical figures such as Frederick Douglass or W.E.B. Du Bois, known for their long life engagement with photographic images. Fortune's photograph expands on the concept of the anti-portrait, partially hiding the artist's identity while accentuating his gesture as a focal point of the composition. The clenched fists also reference a long tradition of solidarity and revolution, especially social movements such as the Black Power movement. Alongside the Black intellectuals, the photograph evokes an image of Malcolm X, one of the movement's leaders, usually depicted wearing a classic suit and tie. Referencing a style of jazzmen in the Harlem Renaissance or Black Dandyism, his image

intersects gender, intellectuality, and leadership, disregarding stereotypes that frame Black men in culture and media as criminals or savages.⁴⁷⁶ Fortune is countering this narrative by connecting style with power.

Following Fortune's description, this image might symbolize the parts that he wants to destroy or unlearn. This is more evident in the image's return, depicting a burning stack of his portraits in a suit, revealing more versions in formal attire (**fig. 127**). In the context of the power-style dynamic (or power suit), the portrait serves more as a critique of masculine and patriarchal costume than an homage to Black Dandies. That critique might come from another association with a Black man in a suit, known from the history of photography as Robert Mapplethorpe's *Man in Polyester Suit*. The photograph from 1980 depicts a Black man wearing a three-piece grey suit, exposing his genitals through a zipper in his pants. The framing of the portrait fetishizes the man's sexual parts; we cannot even see his face because his identity is reduced to his penis.⁴⁷⁷ The act of cropping the head (partially) is repeated by Fortune, who moves the tight framing upwards. The lower frame of the portrait ends where his bottom half would be. Mapplethorpe's photograph, which features homosexual desire and a fascination with Black male bodies, may not be a direct reference to Fortune's portrait, which would make the familial collaboration with his sister extremely uncomfortable. Instead, I would suggest that Fortune is exploring a power play rooted in masculinity and representation, combining the formal language of studio photography, reminiscent of Mapplethorpe's, with an image of a Black leader and intellectual climbing the social ladder. What is evident in *Man in Polyester Suit* is that the projected spectator is a white male, not necessarily reflecting Mapplethorpe's identity but rather serving a fantasy of mastery. As Kobena Mercer emphasizes, this fantasy implies a

⁴⁷⁶ See Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion. Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2009). Miller wrote a comprehensive study on Black Dandyism crossing the Atlantic, emphasizing how fashion and styling became the tools of liberation, “from slaves to selves,” as well as how the notion of Black masculinities changed throughout the history of cultural representation of Black bodies in art and literature. Another important addition to the topic is the styling of Black intellectuals, subverting the bourgeois tradition. See more Anna Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro. Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

⁴⁷⁷ See Kobena Mercer, “Fear of Black Penis,” *Artforum* 32, no. 8 (April 1994), online: <https://www.artforum.com/features/fear-of-a-black-penis-225187/> (accessed December 6, 2024).

hierarchical and historical ordering of racial identity submissive to the power play in contrast to white masculinity inherently holding power.⁴⁷⁸ In Fortune's photograph, the first spectator of his image is his sister, a woman toward whom the power suit of masculinity does not indicate desire, but rather, references a big brother figure. The artist deconstructs machismo in the previous two portraits, particularly in the second one, which depicts a more vulnerable version of himself.

Fortune's self-portraiture, particularly his use of repetition and frames within frames, serves as a powerful exploration of tangible memories. The double portrait viewers confront, first the sister's headshot, then Fortune's self-portrait of that headshot, demonstrates how a single image can be re-contextualized and re-experienced, creating new layers of meaning and memory. His act of taking a picture of an image of himself underscores the self-reflexive nature of memory, where the artists often re-engage with their own past through existing representations. This repetition is a strategy of reinforcing and re-evaluating personal and familial narratives within the broader scope of the representation of Black men in America. Furthermore, the display of these portraits in public spaces transforms personal, familial memories into collective ones. By taking these images outside, Fortune is making his personal homecoming a public statement, allowing viewers to participate in and reflect upon the significance of place and family.

3.3. Robert's Bedroom

"Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars,"⁴⁷⁹ writes Derek Walcott.

⁴⁷⁸ Idem, "Review: Looking for Trouble," *Transition*, no. 51 (1991): 186–187. Mercer's essay tackles the stereotypical representation of Black masculinity in Mapplethorpe's oeuvre, explaining how the fantasy of mastery fixes the Black subject as an object: "Through a combination of formal conventions – the posing and posture of the body in the studio; strong chiaroscuro lighting; the cropping, framing, and fragmentation of body parts – the fantasy of mastery in Mapplethorpe's 'look' structures the viewer's affective disposition towards the image" (187).

⁴⁷⁹ Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," Nobel Lecture, December 7, 1992, The Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1992/walcott/lecture/> (accessed March 6, 2025).

This quote addresses healing after a rupture. The Love that Walcott is writing about is generational memory work, the search for traces of ancestral existence. The white scars could be read two ways: as a mark on the connective tissue left on healed skin or, more metaphorically, as a mark left by a historical wound – a prick that, in photographic language, Barthes would call a *punctum*.⁴⁸⁰ The cracked heirlooms symbolize the broken heritage. Materializing in traces, memories leave tangible marks of the past in the present.

This part of the chapter will examine the traces of history left in domestic spaces within the context of enslavement, family, and invisible labor in Jonathan Mark Jackson's (photographic project) *The House Servant's Directory* (2018–2019). The artist's work engages with the memory of slavery through objects and photographs, utilizing portraiture to reimagine the past. Following the story of Jackson's paternal ancestor, Robert Roberts (ca. 1780–1860), I will analyze how tangible memories transmit trauma through photographed objects – traces/vessels of the past in a cross-generational domestic haunting.

In his project, Jackson retraces the steps of Roberts in Gore Place in Waltham, Massachusetts, where the man lived and worked from 1825–1827. Roberts was a butler for Christopher Gore, an abolitionist, a prominent member of Boston's African-American community, and a father.⁴⁸¹ Most importantly, his guidebook *The House Servant's Directory* (1827) was the first commercially published book by an African-American author. It contains more than a hundred pieces of advice on such topics as cleaning various surfaces and materials, setting furniture, preparing drinks, and storing food, and even beauty tips. Polishing, washing, trimming, and removing stains – such labor was focused on keeping the house in good shape and taking care of the material belongings within it. Roberts' story is that of a self-made man determined to foster Black dignity. In his project, Jackson reimagines Roberts' life and work, following his guidebook and taking self-portraits in the interiors of Gore Place, a house that has been turned into a museum. His presence in the space is fragmentary, disassembled, and haunting. By retracing his ancestor's steps, the artist puts himself in a vulnerable position, trying to re-connect and re-

⁴⁸⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

⁴⁸¹ From a biographical note, Michigan State University, <https://d.lib.msu.edu/msul:68> (accessed March 7, 2025).

embody a intergenerational memory severed by slavery. The mansion, in this context, becomes a site of memorial transmission triggered by Roberts' literary legacy. Jackson's bodily performance of looking for signs of his ancestor's presence, embodying the guidebook's clues through poses, is expressed through what I would like to call photography's touch, which is hyper-focused on a haptic and intimate relationship with such traces. As I wrote in the introduction to this study, the body arrested in a pose becomes a sculpted photograph, balancing on the edge of photographic death and performative movement. Like Midas's golden touch, photography's touch has the power to transform but also to freeze or fix a moment in time, making Jackson's self-portraits exist in a haunting limbo. The artist is performing the duties of Roberts while simultaneously addressing his spectral presence. He examines both objects, as he calls them vessels and phantoms.⁴⁸² Light is also a recurring motif traced by the artist, appearing within the context of the ontology of photography, and examining the indexical relationship between light and light-sensitive material.

Another important notion explored by Jackson is the figure of the viewer or the dead audience, as the artist uses both terms to describe the witnesses of his practice.⁴⁸³ The latter is connected with Toni Morrison's concept of rememory, which Jackson understands as forgotten or misplaced memories that can be accessed despite a temporal delay or lack of the lived experience.⁴⁸⁴ His logic follows what Sethe, a character from the novel *Beloved*, says about slavery in a conversation with her daughter, Denver:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place — the picture of it — stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸² Jonathan Mark Jackson, *Rememory*, Thesis Essay (Providence, RI: Department of Photography of the Rhode Island School of Design, 2022), 11.

⁴⁸³ Ibid. Jackson writes: "Thinking relationally with Saidiya Hartman and Michel Rolph Trouillot, if the archives of slavery are 'a death sentence' (1), then archives, literature, and visual artwork pertaining to the memory of slavery are equally shaped by death, or an audience of the dead. Before explaining how my photographs are formed by this elusive, most times unknowable, dead audience, I want to highlight an almost purposefully lost work from Morrison's catalog." (11–12).

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁸⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 70.

Sethe suggests that memories are not only personal but also shared within a larger collective. Mental images survive despite the absence of physical proof, just like trauma stored in the body. Jackson is also conversing with his family about material traces of colonial archives that shape a racialized presence. However, the temporal gap between them requires a material vessel, in this case, the guidebook, acting as the voice of Roberts, symbolically speaking to the artist. My question is, how can the two temporalities be explored by photography, and in what ways does tangible memory operate here as a mode of cultural identity? How do the authorships of Jackson and Roberts intertwine and retroactively align with one another? And, finally, how does photography's touch frame the traces left by the past?

3.3.1. Intimate Geography of the House⁴⁸⁶

The house is a porous place in which memory slips through the fissures and resides in traces that accumulate over time. Fixed points in the past are constantly illuminating a changing present, which adds layers to the forms of family remembrance. As Jan Assmann reminds us, our memories exist in constant interaction with other memories and their carriers: symbols, images, rites, texts, sites, etc.⁴⁸⁷ Vessels play an important role in personal memory, just like the Proustian madeleine.⁴⁸⁸ Jackson, through contact with objects that were once touched and cared for by his ancestor, does not trigger a personal memory of colonialism or slavery but a memory mediated by Roberts's figure. A sort of a postmemory, as Marianne Hirsch would describe this cross-generational relationship, works in *The House Servant's Directory*. The imaginative investment, projection, and creation are three characteristics of postmemory's affective work.⁴⁸⁹ They all appear in Jackson's practice, as he is reimagining the life of Roberts, his literary voice and labor, and

⁴⁸⁶ Gabea Baderoon, "The Ghost in the House: Women, Race, and Domesticity in South Africa," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2014): 7.

⁴⁸⁷ J. Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," 111.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 110–111.

⁴⁸⁹ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

simultaneously performing, directing, and documenting his project. While doing so, the artist is looking for traces that will give him access to the tangible memory of his ancestor.

Jackson's project on Gore Place spans a year. During this time, he photographed still life as well as multiple self-portraits with a large format camera, working under supervision by the staff, who kept an eye on his activity in the house.⁴⁹⁰ The mansion contains 22 rooms in a style influenced by English Regency architecture. The house was staffed with four servants, the most notable of whom was Roberts, who worked there for eighteen months. It is known that he was a prominent leader of Boston's free Black community.⁴⁹¹ His leadership skills are noticeable when reading the guidebook. Roberts's book touches on the topic of oppression and survival, especially in the introduction part addressed to two young men, Joseph and David, who soon will become servants just like him. He is taking the role of a mentor of young Black men, advising them not only on how to fulfill their duties but also how to navigate life with dignity and safety.

The dynamic of being both observant and observed is significant to understanding the power relation between the owner and the servant. In a way, they are both subjected to spectatorship but for different reasons. The servant is looking out for the space and the people inhabiting it with care and attentiveness. The owner, on the other hand, is keeping an eye on the servant, looking at his hands. His observation is one of surveillance and control. This dynamic is even more complex in the context of Roberts's guidebook, in which he is taking the role of a supervisor, teaching young students his craft. Jackson embodies the latter in an observation hunt, paying attention to the smallest details within the mansion, as Roberts himself was watching him from a distance, making sure each of his actions was correct. *Attic Skylight* illustrates how this relationship is facilitated by the photography's touch.

The image (**fig. 128**) depicts the artist tenderly and carefully adjusting the window frame, wearing white cotton gloves, which are usually used in archives and for cleaning. The focus point here is the artist's hands, contrasting with the pitch-black interior. He is

⁴⁹⁰ J. Jackson, *Rememory*, 66

⁴⁹¹ "Who Was Robert Roberts?," Gore Place, <https://goreplace.org/about/history/who-was-robert-roberts> (accessed March 19, 2025).

wearing a dark top, completely disappearing in the darkness, as well as a pair of beige trousers, and a leather belt with a silver buckle, which peeks out from the bottom frame of the window. Most importantly, the artist's head is nowhere to be found in the photograph as it was removed in postproduction. "Each encounter, each step I took on the floor echoed across these two skylight windows. The unaltered image did not grant me access to this feeling. I manipulated the image digitally and removed my face from the frame, to allow the cavity of the dark attic behind me to be seen. This decision marked a small rupture in my image making method at the time,"⁴⁹² Jackson explains. The disappearing part of the artist's body relates to what Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson describe as a perpetual state of fugitivity, arguing that material evidence of slavery simultaneously produces disappearance regarding the bodies of the enslaved.⁴⁹³ The absence of the artist's head is also a significant rupture in the structure of the self-portrait, which no longer serves as a genre granting recognition or self-expression, but rather produces a void for others to symbolically take place. In this case, Jackson's body serves as a vessel for his spectral audience, Roberts' primarily as a means for stepping into the frame.

Jackson's photography is very minimalistic and almost abstract. The tilted sash window visible in the center of the composition contrasts the whiteness of the architecture with the pitch-black interior of the attic space. The camera focuses on many kinds of traces, from rain stains, chipped paint, and dirtied window frames, to the light reflecting on the wall. The sense of touch is highlighted by the two white-gloved hands, contrasting with the dark background and making two gestures. The gesture on the left shows an outstretched hand glued to the window glass. The gesture of the other hand resembles the *I Love You* sign in American Sign Language; the middle and ring fingers are grasping onto the frame, while the thumb is extended to the side, and the index and little fingers are raised.

From the instructions in Roberts's guidebook, we can read how important is the activity Jackson is performing:

⁴⁹² J.M. Jackson, *Rememory*, p. 23.

⁴⁹³ Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson, "Perpetual Returns: New World Slavery and the Matter of the Visual," *Representations* 113, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 3.

When all your lights are extinguished, see that your fireguards are put to your fires, and that every thing is safe in the rooms before you go out; then fasten your front door; then go round to all the doors and windows on the back part of the house, to ascertain whether they are all safe fastened. This is the most important part of a servant's duty, to see that the house, and all the fires are safe. It is so great and important a part of your duty, that the lives and property of your employers depend on it.⁴⁹⁴

In a way, Jackson is communicating with Roberts through touch, repeating the gestures of taking care of the house and keeping the mansion safe. At the same time, the attic feels like a place of refuge that offers some privacy to the servant. In the structure of the house, it is the polar opposite of the cellar, and as Gaston Bachelard notices after C.G. Jung, this vertical axis of a house symbolizes the fears inhabiting it.⁴⁹⁵ "In the cellar fears are easily "rationalized." [...] In the attic, the day's experiences can always efface the fears of night";⁴⁹⁶ writes Bachelard. Jackson plays with this concept, depicting the attic as a liminal and mysterious site in which a headless man resides, tirelessly performing his duties. The attic, usually used as a storage space, for the artist, holds memories, both concealing parts of his ancestor's life and his own identity, while revealing layers of historical trauma.

Another way Jackson establishes contact with Roberts's memory is through a more direct touch. In *Stamp*, the artist is portraying himself, resting his head on a wooden table and turning his face from the camera to a window with shutters painted in white (**fig. 129**). His figure is fragmented, the right edge of a horizontal photograph cuts his lower body, which is probably sitting in a chair. He is wearing a dark blue shirt, his natural hair is parted, and his torso is leaning toward the furniture. On the table, there are three carefully arranged objects. First, on the left, there is a coiled wax candle supported by a metal structure. Known as a courting candle, the object was used to measure the time of visits, just like an hourglass. The milky color of the wax and the volume of the rolled candle make the object visually add weight to the side of the table, corresponding with the artist's

⁴⁹⁴ Robert Roberts, *The House Servant's Directory, or, a Monitor For Private Families* (Boston–New York: Munroe and Francis – C.S. Francis, 1828), 67.

⁴⁹⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 18.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

head, which he has laid down on the wood. There are two other things connecting the candle and Jackson: a letter sealed with red wax and a seal stamp.

The relation between the stamp and the seal is of an indexical nature. The heavier, imprinting part of the seal is turned to the camera, with a pattern resembling an initial of Gore's – the letter G. The button-sized tangible imprint protects the content of the letter, leaving us wondering to whom it is addressed. The peculiar pose of the artist adds to the mystery. Is he sleeping? Resting? Pretending to be dead? The composition of the photograph balances portraiture and still life, emphasizing the passage of time by a symbolism carried by the depicted objects. Firstly, the courting candle, an object measuring the time by the burning of wax, a relict of the past, no longer used. Similarly, the sealed letter is a leitmotif of intimate communication and a narrative clue known in art history from paintings of artists such as Vermeer.

Jackson's personal relationship with this place materializes in the objects and furniture in the house, which his ancestor once took care of. Roberts probably touched the wooden table dozens of times, making sure that, in accordance with his book, everything was in proper order.⁴⁹⁷ The way the artist is connected with the table is very intimate, as he is listening to the story the object has to tell. Photography's touch, in this case, operates here in contact points between the warmth of the cheek and the coldness of the wooden surface, the pressure of the seal and the paper, and between the window and the shutter.

3.3.2. In White Gloves

The conditions of domestic labor varied and depended heavily on the status and wealth of the house's owner. The lives of the servants, butlers, and nannies were bound to the family, preventing them from achieving autonomy. As Roberts wrote in his guidebook, warning his two proteges: "[...] your time or your ability is no longer your own, but your employer's [...]." ⁴⁹⁸ This dependency is also reflected in art, especially European painting that depicts

⁴⁹⁷ Roberts, *The House Servant's Directory*, ix.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

non-white servants as secondary symbols or racial Others.⁴⁹⁹ The history of servitude, bound up with coloniality, global trade, migration, slavery, class, and material culture, has long been on the margins of institutional narratives about modernity. A significant shift came in the 1990s when artists began to engage in direct dialogue with museums, redefining the mainstream narratives and filling the gaps of historical amnesia and institutional erasure. One of the most prominent examples is Fred Wilson's 1992 installation *Mining the Museum*, organized at the invitation of The Contemporary, Baltimore, and exhibited in the space of the Maryland Historical Society (MHS). Using the MHS's resources, Wilson confronted the whitewashed narrative of the great history and mythology of the American monolith alongside a violent slavery-defined past. Thus, in one room, there were empty pedestals of Black Americans who lived in Maryland (Benjamin Benneker, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass), juxtaposed with the busts of white Americans and a Frenchman (Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, Napoleon Bonaparte) with no connection to the site, but only functioning as prosthetic heads representing the myth of America's white founding fathers. To the collection of nineteenth century silver dinnerware, Wilson included slave shackles from the same period; soft and inviting armchairs were placed in front of a slave whipping post; and a portrait of young Master Henry Darnell III with his servant, a Black boy in a dog collar, was accompanied by a voice from a cassette tape, asking questions: *Am I your brother? A friend? A pet?*⁵⁰⁰ (fig. 130).

Wilson's work illustrated not only the selective seeing that corresponds to a narrative immersed in the comfort of social ignorance, exclusion, and racial obscurity but, more importantly, the institutional violence and silence gagging the mouths of the historical subaltern. Excavating the archival material, the artist uncovers layers of ideological constructs and historical neglect, confronting both objects and viewers with the nuances of socio-political context and human empathy, juxtaposing "white wealth and

⁴⁹⁹ Regarding the growing interest in analyzing and recovering stories of domestic workers in art history, see Diane Wolfthal's book *Household Servants and Slaves. A Visual History, 1300–1700*, which foregrounds the stories of servitude in a broader historical and socio-political context, focusing on both the aesthetic and ideological functions of those representations.

⁵⁰⁰ See Fred Wilson and Howard Halle, "Mining the Museum," *Grand Street*, no. 44 (1994): 151–72.

black torture that American institutions have consistently repressed.”⁵⁰¹ One of the most shocking and recognized images from Wilson’s intervention is the one depicting silvers and slave shackles (**fig. 131**). In Jackson’s *Breakfast Room* (**fig. 132**), we can see a ghost of Wilson’s intervention peeking from behind a white wooden cabinet, the door ajar exposing a collection of silver dinnerware. Like Wilson’s intervention, Jackson’s work not only critiques the past but emphasizes the ethics of display, memory, and curation. In both artists’ approaches, the museum is no longer a passive space of preservation, and becomes instead an active site of re-examination, dialogue, and, ultimately, accountability.

Scattered traces of Roberts’s presence reflect the fragmented identity of the artist himself. In order to connect with his ancestor, Jackson has to put himself in his shoes, symbolically and literally putting on the butler’s white gloves. The white-gloved hand is a recurring motif throughout the series. Firstly, it reminds us of the archival status of the space in which the artist is photographing himself. Once a domestic space, now a museum, Gore Place is a historical site, preserving the memory of its inhabitants. Secondly, the gloves provide protection, both for the body and the site, preventing direct contact of the skin with the objects. They also symbolize purity and cleanliness, the formal elegance of the labor. At the same time, the gloves prevent leaving fingerprints, and thus interfering in the “crime scene”.

The white glove also appears in the photograph *Moon II* (**fig. 133**), in which Jackson carefully adjusts the metal latch of a wooden door painted white. The latch’s circular movement has left a moon-like trace over time. The artist focuses on this detail by pointing out the latch that caused it, lifting it up, and supporting it with his thumb and index finger. The gesture in a white glove, so delicate and careful, reminds us of the vulnerability of the space. The cotton material of the white glove contrasts with the cold metal of the latch, which bears signs of use and rust. The paint covering the door is chipping, and the cracks emphasize the structure of its material form. Each wooden panel is a frame within the larger frame of the door, creating a symmetrical composition disrupted by a semi-circular trace. The simplicity of the arrangement, the sterile feeling

⁵⁰¹ Copeland and Thompson, “Perpetual Returns,” 8.

triggered by the white glove, and the washed-out color of the interior create an environment of cleanliness that seems almost surgical.

The photograph captures the artist's hand, which emerges from the lower right corner of the frame, while his body remains outside the shot. This central gesture conveys care and attentiveness, mirroring the actions of his ancestor, fostering a connection through meticulous labor. However, the cotton glove establishes a barrier, impeding a tactile and direct relationship with the house, its essence, and the artist himself. This material layer not only safeguards the house and the history embedded in its walls, but also protects the artist's body, yet it simultaneously hinders his ability to fully experience or replicate the labor of his ancestor. This layer of material protects the house and symbolically the history inscribed into its walls. The celestial reference, parallel to the cycle of nature cycle and the cycle of labor, feels almost ceremonial. The circular shape resembles the body of the moon, reminding us that the housework is subjugated to the seasons and the cycle of day and night.

This work should be seen in connection with *Moon I*, a self-portrait of the artist's gloved hands catching a beam of sunlight (**fig. 134**). In it his palms are clenched. His fingers point towards the viewer as if he were offering them the light itself. This offering is symbolic of the ontology of the photographic medium. In the simplest terms, the image is recorded by light touching light-sensitive material. To evoke Krauss's index, a photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by the light's reflection onto light-sensitive paper.⁵⁰² Additionally, in Jackson's photograph, this indexical relationship is deeply rooted in the ontology of Blackness.

An example is provided by a letter from Jackson's late Grandfather, Frederick, writing retroactively to Roberts.⁵⁰³ Entitled *Dear family-back-home*, the letter from 1970 starts with:

⁵⁰² Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 75.

⁵⁰³ The letter is not a part of *The House Servant's Directory* series, however, it addresses Roberts who is the main source of inspiration for the project.

There is no natural color Black in the world. Its existence is made by the combination of the earthly colors or by tricks of light. This is the first lesson he teaches me. When the graphite and charcoal are sharpened, and we have found a place with opportunity, he tells me to begin by picking out the shadows.⁵⁰⁴

Grandfather Frederick's letter carries deep and symbolic weight. In the opening sentence, he is stating that race is a social construct, as opposed to biological essentialism. What is meaningful here is that he is writing these words to his ancestor, who lived through slavery. The metaphor of light and shadows, parallel to the Du Boisian color line and racial segregation, emphasizes the history of oppression. The teacher-student relationship addressed in the writing could be interpreted as mentorship passed from one Black man to another, just like in *The House Servant's Directory*, or knowledge passed from one generation in a family to another.

The sharp contrast between the lightened white gloves and the pitch-black interior makes the lonely gesture stand out, creating a dramatic, baroque-like effect. The way Jackson deliberately arranged his palms reminds me of one of Carrie Mae Weems' self-portraits from the 2003 series *Missing Link* (**fig. 135**). The series is part of a larger project on Louisiana, consisting of performative and haunting appearances of the artist wandering through Malus-Beauregard House and the surrounding land. In the black and white photograph, Weems is standing against a the black background, dressed in a men's tuxedo, with flamboyant shirt, an animal mask (donkey's head), and white gloves. The gesture, highlighted by the contrasting black tuxedo and the whiteness of the cotton material, stands out from the depiction. Along with the mask, it makes the portrait highly symbolic. Firstly, Weems is referencing the racially charged history of Mardi Gras, alluding to the 1873 Comus Mardi Gras Parade and the presentation *The Missing Links to Darwin's Origin of Species*.⁵⁰⁵ Secondly, the artist is commenting on gender roles within the historical context

⁵⁰⁴ The whole content of the letter is available at the Film Photo Award website. See Justin Levesque, "Interview: Jonathan Mark Jackson," *Film Photo Award*, Spring 2019, <https://www.filmphotoaward.com/fpa/interview-jonathan-jackson> (accessed March 17, 2025).

⁵⁰⁵ In her analysis of Weems's series, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw writes about Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnival, temporarily suspending the social barriers and deconstructing the hierarchy in the context of Mardi Gras. See Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "The Wandering Gaze of Carrie Mae Weems's 'The Louisiana Project'," in *Carrie Mae Weems: October Files*, ed. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis and Christine Garnier (Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2021), 173–184.

of New Orleans, masquerading as a wealthy man from an exclusive society, the secretive Rex Ball.

In a way, the gloves are acting as a mask. They are masking both of the artists' hands, covering their skin, and ultimately hiding their identities. In both cases, the gloves are parts of a costume. For Jackson, it is the costume of a servant's uniform, with him playing a part in his ancestor's story. For Weems, it is a part of attire with theatrical, mime-like qualities, with him mocking the pompous wealthy white men of the New Orleans elite. Both of these artists raise the issue of class hierarchy and its facades while simultaneously questioning the gender roles within these structures. For Weems, this is more obvious as her work contrasts men's attire with her own gender identity; for Jackson, on the other hand, the conversation focuses on masculinity and domestic labor.

Another self-portrait, *Speaking Light*, explores the ontology of photography further, focusing on light (**fig. 136**). The image depicts Jackson in a dimly lit room, carefully and precisely placing a stick on the carpeted floor. He is wearing white gloves, one hand gripping the stick, the other positioning it. His back is bent, his gaze fixed on the ground. At first glance, it almost looks like he is mopping the floor. With more careful examination, one notices the absence of a mop head. In this case, we could interpret this peculiar pose with a stick as the setting of a sundial or a sun clock. That would explain why the light is an important component of the image. Tracing the sun allows for a measuring of the passage of time. This is another motif that recurs throughout the series, which explores both the time of history and the time of labor.

The title, *Speaking Light*, evokes the indexical relationship between photography and illumination, as well as the communication between the artist and the medium. The ambiguity of the stick—its dual potential as a tool and pointer—blurs the boundaries between domestic service and artistic expression. In this image, light becomes a medium of speech, revealing the unseen labor and echoing the unspoken histories embedded in space. By staging this moment, Jackson invites viewers to reflect on the temporality of Black life—how his ancestor's story is measured through gestures, routines, and light. The white

gloves reappear, once again signifying care, delicacy, and perhaps a distancing from the “dirty” work of memory or cleaning.

According to Hirsch, photographic images, more than oral or written narratives, enable us not only to touch the past but also reanimate it.⁵⁰⁶ Jackson’s practice of performing labor and embodying the figure of his ancestor is itself an act of reanimation. Photography not only documents this process but provides him with a memory lens through which he can fragment the presence to parallel the fragmented memory. Although Jackson touches heavily upon the history of a racialized past and enslavement, he does not rely on graphic imagery and dramatization. The series showcases quiet, domestic colonialism. The silence and stillness of the house is eerie. Jackson focuses on the smallest details, the everyday things that are usually missed in historical narratives.

This approach is also reflected in how the artist communicates with his dead audience. The triptych *Rupture* positions the viewers/dead audience in a quiet limbo (**fig. 137**). The left panel depicts a wooden clock, two wooden chairs, and a cracked wall, focusing on the temporality. The middle photograph is a close-up of a damaged wall, with a visible shadow on the left side. We can assume that it is a self-shadow of the artist, that is, a self-portrait and shadow combined, bridging together the symbolism and history of the shadow with subjective and creative self-expression.⁵⁰⁷ In this case, Jackson’s self-shadow can be understood as a shape-shifting and ephemeral image, mediating between the living and dead, and a double index captured by photography’s touch.⁵⁰⁸ Firstly, the self-shadow is an index itself, a human’s doppelgänger, moving and transforming by means of light. Documented in photography, a medium “touched” by light, doubles itself, becoming hyper-indexical. The shadow travels partly to the third panel of the triptych, accumulating in the corner of the wall with exposed old wooden planks.

In *Rupture*, the artist focuses on the unglamorous parts of the house, resembling more of a ruin than the mansion of a rich family, exposing the white scars and recovering

⁵⁰⁶ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 36.

⁵⁰⁷ The term *self-shadow* in the context of American photography of the second half of the twentieth century was coined by me in 2022. See Julia Stachura, “Double Index. Self-Shadow in American Photography of the Second Half of the 20th Century,” *Artium Quaestiones* XXXIII (2022): 279–299.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

the space for his own ancestral memory and legacy. Symptomatic in this context is his work *Devils*, depicting a wall eaten by time, featuring caricatural and racist imagery, illustrating shadow silhouettes whipping and chasing devils (**fig. 138**). The artist focuses on the corner of the wall, not giving much context to where the site is situated within the house. The signs of damage resemble chemical burns on the surface of a photo-sensitive material. The image is haunting and disturbing; it cuts through the tissue of history in an unexpected way, tearing open the house's fabric, and laying bare the violence embedded in its foundations. The primitive shadow silhouettes are characteristic of nineteenth-century antebellum racially charged illustrations, exaggerating and simplifying the features of the figures. The practice of shadow tracing, known from the inventions of Johann Casper Lavater among others, sustained pseudoscientific claims about racial inferiority.⁵⁰⁹ Until this photograph, the signs of the slavery past within the Gore place were more subtle, even subtextual. While the white walls of different corners of the house kept the historical trauma at bay, here, all hell breaks loose. *Devils* also resonates with the works of prominent African-American artist Kara Walker, who started exploring silhouette cuts in the 1990s. Her practice deals with the ghosts of the American racist past through the notions of sex, violence, and gender.

Ultimately, Jackson's work underscores how acts of labor, touch, light, and looking are imbued with historical weight. His project critiques the ethics of display and representation, especially in institutions that preserve heritage, but in doing so gloss over the brutality that shaped it. His photographs invite reflection not through spectacle but through silence, absence, and the slow, deliberate unveiling of what lies beneath the surface of polished domesticity. The impact of trauma is reflected in the fragmentation of the artist's body, parallel to the traces of his ancestor's past scattered throughout the mansion. In this context, Jackson's body functions as a medium, a bodily vessel, bridging the past and present. Through traces – such as white gloves, household objects, and light –

⁵⁰⁹ Clorinda Donato, "Reading the Face: Lavater in the 21st Century," *Lumen: Journal of the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies* XX (2001): 83–100.

Jackson reenacts and reanimates the labor of his ancestor while reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of accessing the past through memory, touch, and photography.

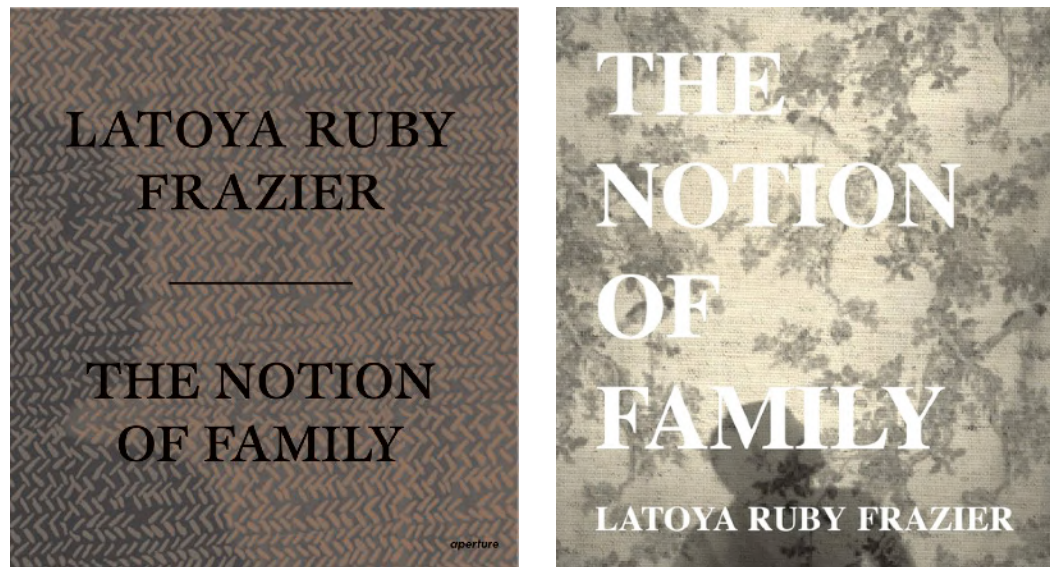


Fig. 99. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, 2001-2014.



Fig. 100. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *John Frazier*, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Andrew Carnegie (*The Notion of Family*, 2001–2014), 2010. LaToya Ruby Frazier. Source: Frazier, LaToya Ruby. *The Notion of Family*, Aperture, 2014, booklet.

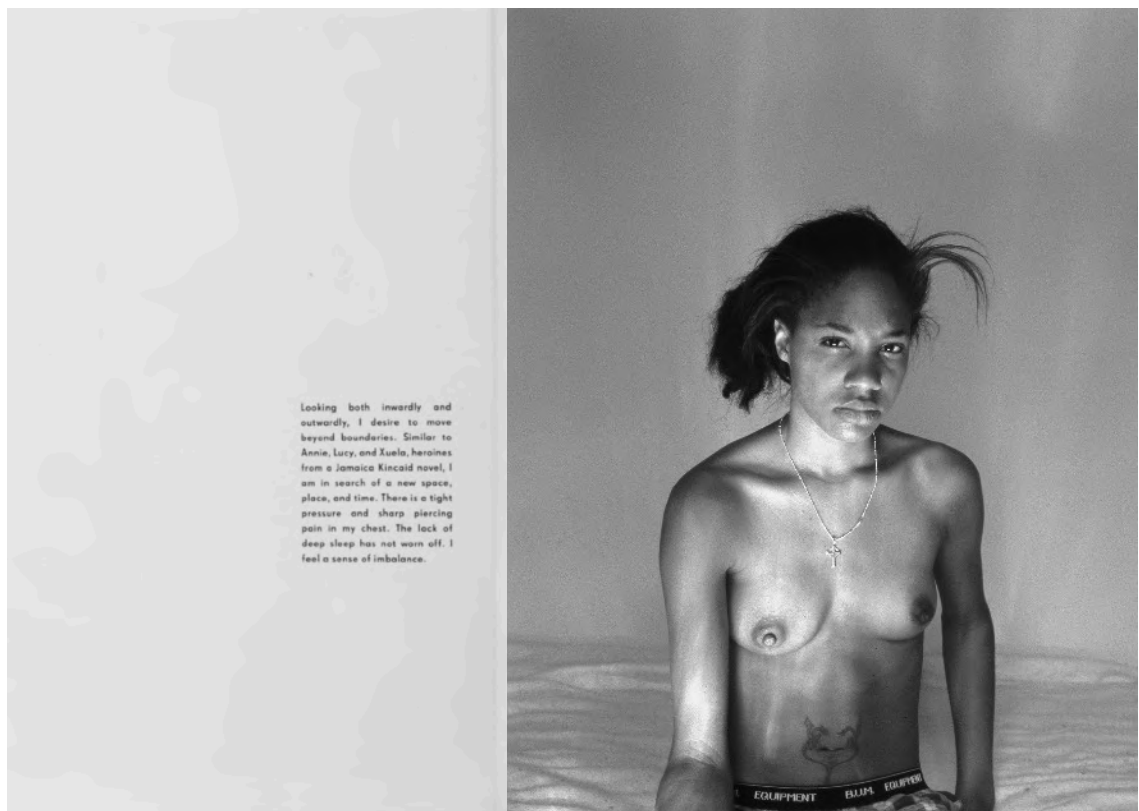


Fig. 101. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Self-Portrait October [9:30 a.m.] (The Notion of Family 2001–2014)*, 2007. LaToya Ruby Frazier

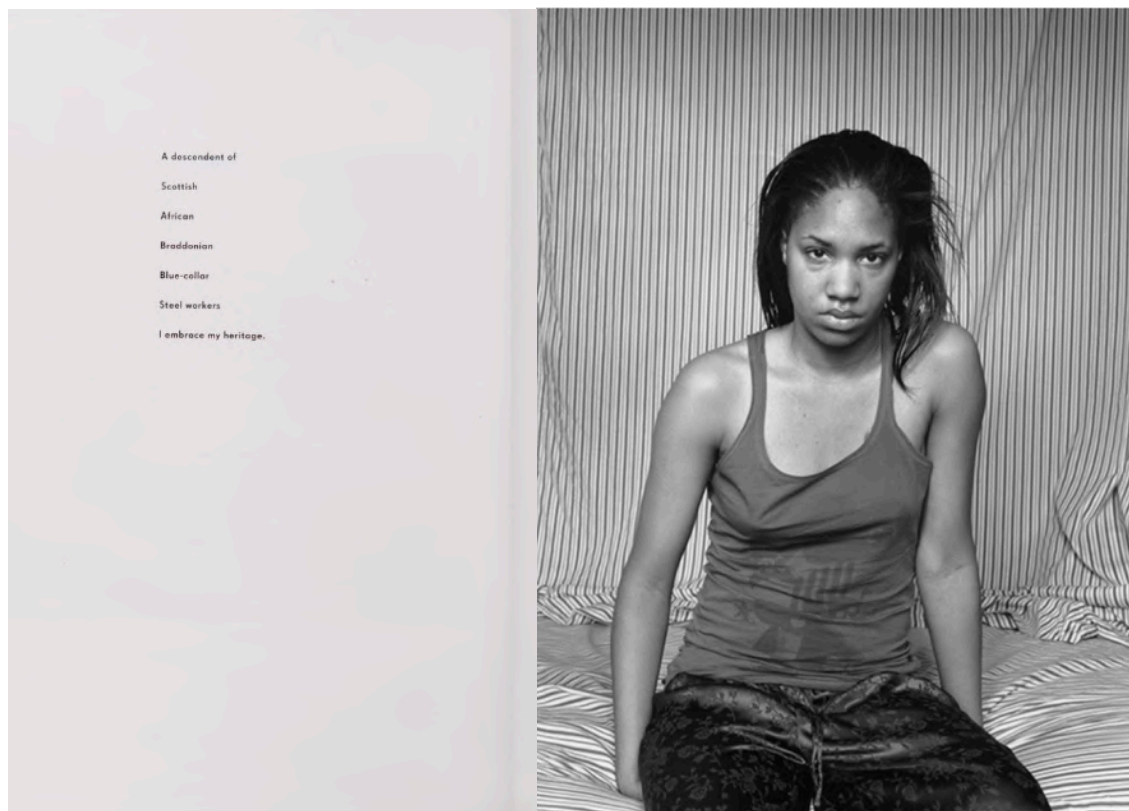


Fig. 102. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Self-Portrait March [10:00 a.m.] (The Notion of Family 2001–2014)*, 2009. LaToya Ruby Frazier



Fig. 103. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Momme*, (*The Notion of Family* 2001–2014), 2008. LaToya Ruby Frazier.



Fig. 104. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Momme [Floral Comforter]*, (*The Notion of Family* 2001–2014), 2008. LaToya Ruby Frazier.



Fig. 105. Martha Rosler, *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, 1967-72 and *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series*, 2004-2008. Martha Rosler.



Fig. 106. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Mom and me in the Phase (The Notion of Family 2001–2014)*, 2009. LaToya Ruby Frazier.



Fig. 107. Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1881-1882. Oil on canvas (37.80 × 51.18 in / 96 × 130 cm). The Courtauld, London.



Fig. 108. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Mom making an image of me* (*The Notion of Family* 2001–2014), 2008. LaToya Ruby Frazier.



Fig. 109. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Making an Image of Grandma Ruby, Mom, J.C., and Me* (*The Notion of Family* 2001–2014), 2008. LaToya Ruby Frazier.



Fig. 110. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby and Me (The Notion of Family 2001–2014)*, 2005. LaToya Ruby Frazier.



Fig. 111. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby Holding Her Babies (The Notion of Family 2001–2014)*, 2002. LaToya Ruby Frazier.



Fig. 112. Gordon Parks, *Doll Test*, 1947. Gordon Parks.



Fig. 113. LaToya Ruby Frazier, 1980s “Welcome to Historic Braddock” Signage and a Lightbulb (*The Notion of Family* 2001–2014), 2009. LaToya Ruby Frazier.



Fig. 114. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *United States Steel Mon Valley Works Edgar Thomson Plant* (*The Notion of Family* 2001–2014), 2013. LaToya Ruby Frazier.



Fig. 115. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Epilepsy test (The Notion of Family 2001–2014)*, 2011. LaToya Ruby Frazier.

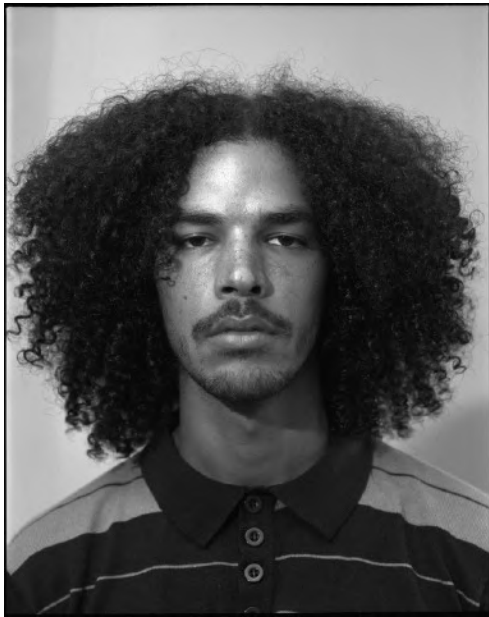


Fig. 116. Rahim Fortune, *Untitled* (*Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America*) 2020. Rahim Fortune.



Fig. 117. Rahim Fortune, *Untitled* (*Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America*) 2020. Rahim Fortune.



Fig. 118. Rahim Fortune, *Untitled* (*Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America*) 2020. Rahim Fortune.

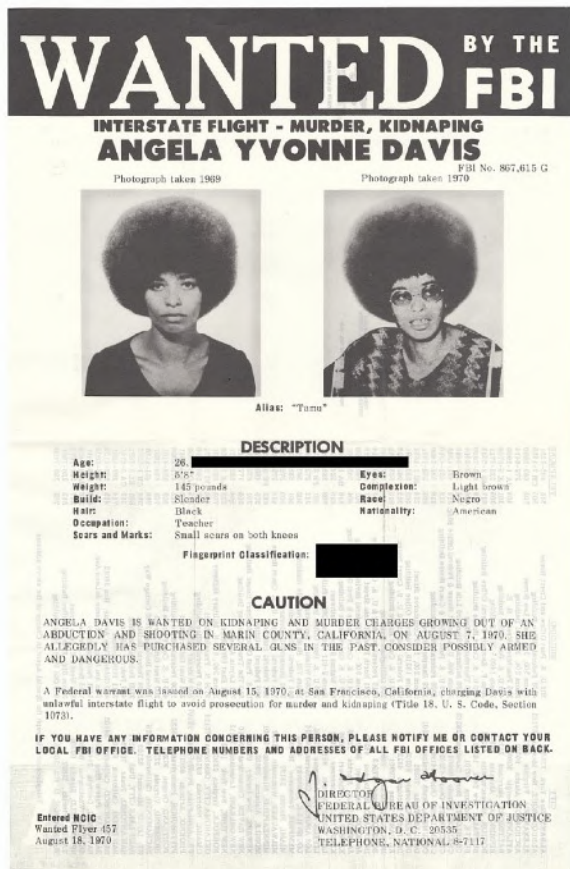


Fig. 119. FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) wanted poster for Angela Yvonne Davis, 1970. Ink on paper (16 × 10 1/2 in / 40.6 × 26.7 cm). National Museum of African American History and Culture

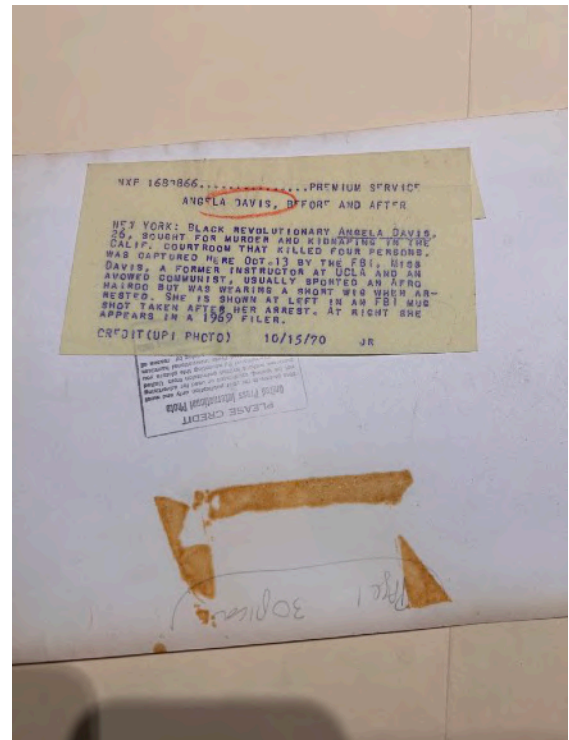


Fig. 120. United Press International Photo, *Angela Davis - Before and After*, 1970. Tamiment Library and the Robert F. Wagner Archives at NYU.



Fig. 121. Rahim Fortune, *Untitled* (*Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America*) 2020. Rahim Fortune.



Fig. 122. Rahim Fortune, *Untitled* (*Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America*) 2020. Rahim Fortune.



Fig. 123. Rahim Fortune, *Untitled* (*Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America*) 2020. Rahim Fortune.



Fig. 124. Rahim Fortune, *Untitled* (*Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America*) 2020. Rahim Fortune.



Fig. 125. Rahim Fortune, *Untitled* (*Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America*) 2020. Rahim Fortune.



Fig. 127. Rahim Fortune, *Untitled* (*Sources of Self-Regard: Self-Portraits from Black Photographers Reflecting on America*) 2020. Rahim Fortune.

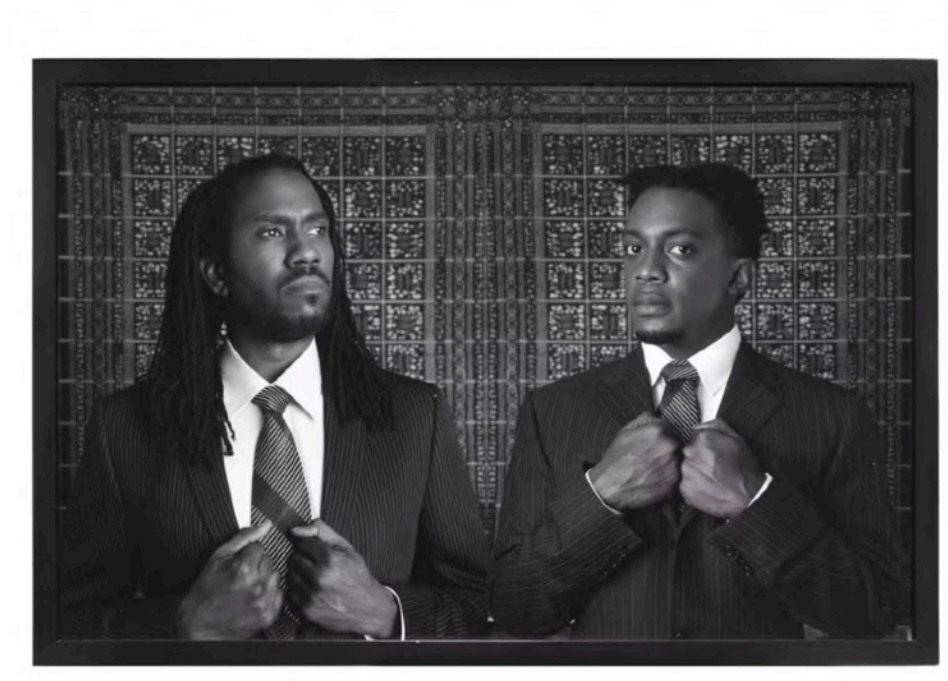


Fig. 126. Rashid Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, *A Portrait of Two American Artists as Young Negro Scholars*, 2008. Lambda print (48 × 72 5/16 in / 121.92 × 183.67 cm). Studio Museum in Harlem.



Fig. 128. Jonathan Mark Jackson, *Attic Skylight* (*House Servant's Directory*, 2018-19). Jonathan Mark Jackson.



Fig. 129. Jonathan Mark Jackson, *Stamp* (*House Servant's Directory*, 2018-19). Jonathan Mark Jackson.

Fig. 130. Fred Wilson, *Painting of Henry Darnell III* (*Mining the Museum*, 1992), ca. 1710. Maryland Historical Society



Fig. 131. Fred Wilson, *Metalwork* (*Mining the Museum*, 1992), ca. 1793-1880. Installation view, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, 1992

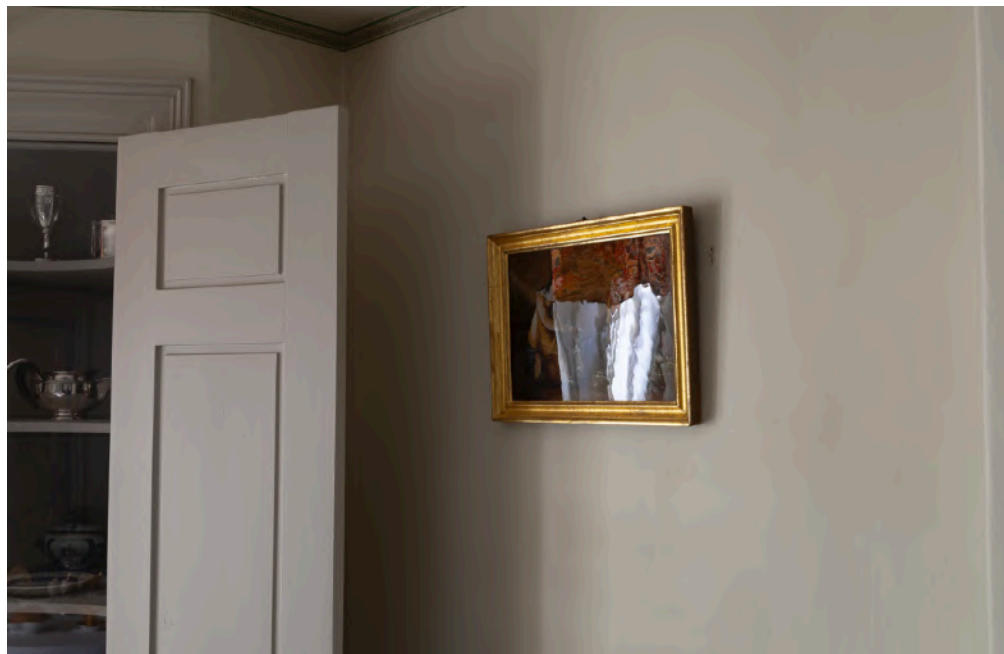


Fig. 132. Jonathan Mark Jackson, *Breakfast Room* (*House Servant's Directory*, 2018-19). Jonathan Mark Jackson.



Fig. 133. Jonathan Mark Jackson, *Moon II* (*House Servant's Directory*, 2018-19). Jonathan Mark Jackson.



Fig. 134. Jonathan Mark Jackson, *Moon I* (*House Servant's Directory*, 2018-19). Jonathan Mark Jackson.



Fig. 135. Carrie Mae Weems, *Missing Link* (*Liberty*) (*The Louisiana Project*, 2003), 2003. Pigment print (36 3/8 x 25 3/8 in / 92.4 x 64.4 cm). Fraenkel Gallery.

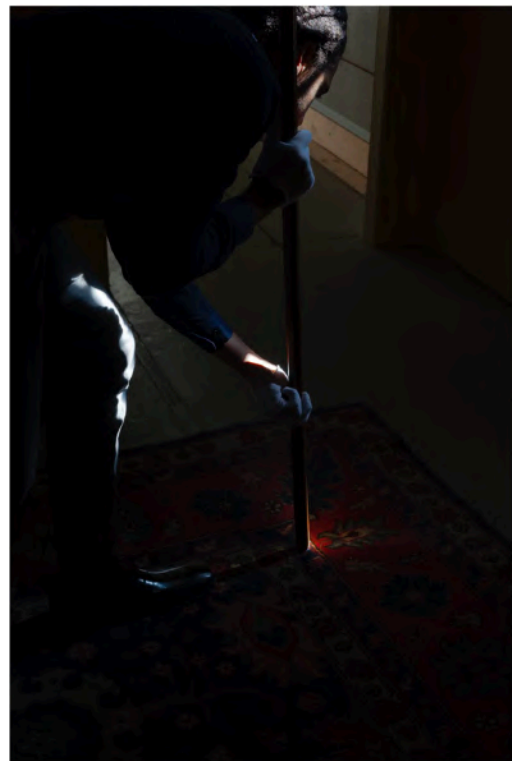


Fig. 136. Jonathan Mark Jackson, *Speaking Light* (*House Servant's Directory*, 2018-19). Jonathan Mark Jackson.



Fig. 137. Jonathan Mark Jackson, *Rupture* (*House Servant's Directory*, 2018-19). Jonathan Mark Jackson.



Fig. 138. Jonathan Mark Jackson, *Devils* (*House Servant's Directory*, 2018-19). Jonathan Mark Jackson.

4. STUDIO

The final chapter of this study will focus on the photographic studio as a site of Black and queer self-expression. The genre of studio photography holds significance within the Black diaspora. As early as 1840, Jules Lion, a mixed-race Parisian photographer, introduced the daguerrotype process to New Orleans.⁵¹⁰ Soon after, African-American photographers adopted the new medium, enabling self-expression and providing a means for overcoming the stereotypical image of blackness commonly featured in caricatures and posters. In this context, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of figures such as Frederick Douglass, whose numerous studio portraits exemplify how self-fashioning and personal expression via photography served as tools of empowerment for Black people. In his *Lecture on Pictures* from 1861, he praised the accessibility of traveling studios, highlighting the egalitarian status of the photographic medium:

The smallest town has its daguerreian gallery, and even at the crossroads where stands but a solitary blacksmith's shop and what was once a country tavern but now [is] in the last stages of dilapidation, you will find the inevitable daguerreian gallery, shaped like a baggage car, with a hothouse window at the top, adorned with red curtains, resting on Gutta Perchian springs and wooden wheels painted yellow. The farmer boy gets an iron shoe for his horse and metallic picture for himself at the same time, and at the same price.⁵¹¹

Douglass is presenting the traveling studio as a humble and modest yet powerful site of transformation. The red curtains suggest almost theatrical and performative qualities to it. The quote also presents how quickly photography became a commodity, as sturdy as a horseshoe (a metallic picture). For the abolitionist engaged in issues of social equality, the medium held for Douglass the potential to create tangible change in the collective image of blackness.

Besides Douglass being a central figure in the history of Black studio portraiture, I would like to emphasize the significant role of African photographic studios, particularly in West Africa. Malian photographers such as Malick Sidibé (1936–2016) or Seydou Keïta

⁵¹⁰ Willis, *J.P. Ball*, xiii.

⁵¹¹ Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," 127–128.

(1921/23–2001) documented their communities before and after Mali gained independence, helping to define what portraiture is for social identity. They captured the self-fashioning and expression of Malian youth on a backdrop of patterned fabrics, props, and elaborate studio design. In 1996, the exhibition *In/Sight: African Photographers 1940 to Present*, organized by the Guggenheim Museum in New York and curated by Okwui Enwezor, introduced African photographers to the Western audience. Along with Sidibé and Keïta, the show presented a variety of approaches to the photographic medium in African diaspora, such as Samuel Fosso's performative self-portraits from the late 1970s, or Rotimi Fani-Kayode's queer portraits inspired by traditions of Yoruba.⁵¹² Enwezor recognized the importance of studio portrait photography within the African continent, noting the “process of reconfiguration” and “acting out an ideal” as characteristic features of the genre: “It evidences not only a social transformation but a structural and ideological one, in which the complex negotiations or individual desires and identities are mapped and conceptualized.”⁵¹³

It is difficult not to address Robert Mapplethorpe's involvement in the subject, especially given the artists I will talk about in this chapter. Mapplethorpe, a queer white photographer who specialized in studio photography, focused on depictions of homoerotic and sadomasochistic relationships between men. His controversial photo book, *Black Book*, from 1986, contained highly aestheticized and fetishized images of Black men. Three decades later, in a retrospective exhibition titled *Implicit Tensions. Mapplethorpe Now* at the Guggenheim Museum, his photographs were displayed alongside works of Black queer photographers such as Lyle Ashton Harris, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya, who offered a re-contextualization of that infamous photo book.

In Chapter One, I concentrated on colonial photography, highlighting how it reinforced racial stereotypes in a highly controlled setting, such as that of the photographic studio. Recent interventions, like those of Jackson in *Archival Impulse*, challenged the historical gaze that dehumanized Black people by taking the roles of both the photographer

⁵¹² Okwui Enwezor, *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 13, 236.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 33.

and model. The artist utilized the studio as a site for performative reenactments, where the trauma of colonial violence could be countered. In this chapter, I will focus on the portrayal of photographers in studios as artists empowered in the sites of creation. I will focus on analyzing studio photography and depictions of photographic studios in the works of Lyle Ashton-Harris, Carrie Mae Weems, Rashid Johnson, Omar Victor Diop, Lola Flash, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya. I want to pay special attention to the latter because of the way he problematizes the photographic studio as a central theme in his artistic oeuvre.

In art history, the representation of an artistic studio/atelier/workshop most often evolved around a white male figure, whose identity was rarely explored due to his presumed heterosexuality. By reclaiming the narrative about the Black body in the photographic studio and by questioning the conventions of art, contemporary photographers engage in a dialogue with collective cultural memory. Studio becomes a site where returning images and conventions are embodied by artists and models, who redefine the historical burden of representation.

4.1. Liberation and Construction

In this section of the chapter, I will examine strategies for constructing and deconstructing Black masculinity in the studio space, drawing on examples from Lyle Ashton Harris, Rashid Johnson, and Omar Victor Diop. As I mentioned in the introduction part of this study, the 1990s were a significant decade for exploring identity politics in art in the United States. One of the key figures in and predecessors to this change was Lyle Ashton-Harris, whose *American* series provided a powerful exploration of gender expression and the DuBoisian concept of a double consciousness.⁵¹⁴ In 1989, he produced another self-portraiture series in the studio called *Constructs*. The series consists of four photographs titled with numbers from 10–13, depicting Harris's full figure in a studio setting, with a black backdrop in the background (**fig. 139**). In two of the photographs, the artist is nude, and in the other two, he is dressed in a tutu, a tank top, and wearing a wig. The expression

⁵¹⁴ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

of the female character is similar to Miss Girl from the *Americas* series. The studio appears as a site for the construction of gender identity and sexual liberation. At the same time, the artist reveals mechanisms used to create fantasies in the studio by leaving visible the edges of the backdrop within the photograph. The studio setup frames the artist, with the backdrop creating a visible boundary between Harris and the rest of the space: in one photo, his elbow almost reaches the side edge, while in another, his raised fist appears to touch the upper boundary.

Monica Amor wrote about the series: “The artist has represented himself in full length, his body offered for the contemplation of the viewer whom instead of encountering the masculine frontality of a macho Black body, confronts a sculpted Black body wrapped in delicate crinoline, his head crowned by a tacky wig, his lower body accentuating a rather feminine contrapposto.”⁵¹⁵ The large-scale photographs confront the viewer with an almost life-size depiction of Harris in drag. Through self-portraiture, the artist deconstructs the normative identity of the Black male while constructing a feminized figure of the queer artist, pointing to the fluidity of gender. Amelia Jones draws attention to the relationship between the photographer and spectators, noting that the viewer’s solicited gaze reveals their own normativity as otherness.⁵¹⁶ In this sense, in encountering Harris’s self-portraits, we not only question his identity but also ours. What social conventions bind us and give us permission to declare what is a norm and what is not?

The studio in Harris’s photographs functions as a place of transformation and identity transition, exceeding social norms. Self-portraiture allows the artist to fulfill the roles of both subject and image maker, while also inviting the viewer to this privileged site where transformation takes place. His series rebuts the supposed gender uniformity of Black masculinity, countering stereotypes and social expectations.⁵¹⁷ Notably, the series was featured in the *Black Male* exhibition (1994), framed as a reclamation of Black homoeroticism and post-Mapplethorpe self-expression.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁵ Lyle Ashton Harris: *Our first and last love*, ed. Lauren Haynes and Caitlin Julia Rubin (New York–Waltham: Gregory R. Miller & Co. – Queens Museum – Rose Art Museum, 2024), 25.

⁵¹⁶ Jones, “The ‘Eternal Return’,” 947.

⁵¹⁷ Lyle Ashton Harris, 25.

⁵¹⁸ Golden, “My Brother,” 33.

He creolized masquerade,⁵¹⁹ as Kobena Mercer describes the artist's strategy, pointing to the performative nature of his self-portraits. Harris depicts multiple selves; each of the characters is different from one another, due to props, just like in the theater. Mercer notes, "there is no unitary, authentic or essential *me* to begin with, only the contradictory range of subject-positions and composite identifications that *I* become." Like the *Americas* series, *Constructs* is based on difference – both gender and racial – obtained by means of archetypal symbols. In the case of *Americas*, it was makeup, directly epitomizing Fanon's concept of Black skin, white masks, as Mercer also notes. In the case of *Constructs*, the difference is built through props, also used in the *Americas* series, giving the self-portraits both theatrical and political overtones. The frilly tutu appears as a symbol of the prima ballerina, the campy embodiment of a girlish dream. The short, messily styled wig evokes a manifestation of a white woman's mid-life crisis. By confronting us with these clichés of femininity, the artist points out the artificiality of social gender constructs, while subliminally deconstructing the Black male figure. It is only with such a clear and blunt distinction that the viewer can perceive the ridiculousness of the social norms we live by. At the same time, Harris's silhouette towering over the viewer exaggerates the monumentality of the artist-constructor, resembling the figure of Corbusier's *Modulor* (fig. 140). Unlike the modernist visualization of an anthropometric scale of proportions, the gender-bending artist points out the new measures of postmodernity: the absolute performativity of the self.

In the *Constructs* series, modernist harmony and structure are demystified. The messily styled tutu and disheveled wig move from order toward chaos and playfulness. In this context, the photographic studio as a background frames the artist, almost enclosing him in a particular symbolic system, a controlled environment for mythical creativity. Harris's unbridled nature escapes simple classification, pointing to performance and creolized masquerade as a strategy of empowerment and liberation.

⁵¹⁹ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle. New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 230.

Continuing my reflection on the studio as a site for constructing Black masculinity, I would like to reemphasize the significance of historical figures such as Douglass. The abolitionist recognized the power of photography and its role in building a visual legacy early on. Carefully crafting the image of a Black intellectual, Douglass became one of the most photographed men in the nineteenth century. His figure influenced contemporary artists, such as Rashid Johnson (b. 1977) and Omar Victor Diop (b. 1980), who recreated his daguerreotype portrait from circa 1847–52. Johnson, in his interpretation, *Self-Portrait with my hair parted like Frederick Douglass* (2003), assumes Douglass’s characteristic 3/4 pose, looking straight at the camera with a determined gaze (**fig. 141**). The photograph was taken with a large-format camera, allowing for high-quality depth in the portrait. The artist is dressed in a black suit that visually merges with the pitch-dark background of the studio. His hair is styled after the portrait of Douglas produced by Samuel J. Miller (**fig. 142**). In the daguerreotype, the abolitionist is wearing elegant formal attire, looking at the camera with a serious demeanor. The tight frame of the daguerreotype does not reveal any elements of the studio space; it is free from any theatricalities characteristic of middle-class portraiture at the time.⁵²⁰ The plain background emphasizes the silhouette of the abolitionist, making his subjectivity the sole focus of the portrait. The studio offered a stage for a performance of self-fashioning, a controlled and private environment, where Douglass created his timeless image of the Black intellectual. In his self-portrait, Johnson not only embodies the figure of Douglass but also emphasizes his “repeated photographic performances.”⁵²¹ As Shawn Michelle Smith argues, due to the technicalities of daguerreotypes, Johnson is recreating a mirror image of Douglass, a reflection of his hairstyle.⁵²² I would call it a refraction, characterized in physics by the movement from one medium to another, or in this case, from one photographic technique to another.⁵²³ The

⁵²⁰ Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photographic Returns. Racial Justice and the Time of Photography* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 27.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵²³ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “refraction,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 20, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/science/refraction>.

contemporary image evokes Douglass's memory through the most personal and tangible features – his hair, which becomes an epitome of the Black man's identity for Johnson.

When we return to the question of the Black gaze, Johnson's intervention in the collective memory of Douglass also occurs through the gaze, which serves as the focal point of his self-portrait. Viewers are confronted through Johnson's figure with that of Douglass, whose presence mediates the photographer's performance, hairstyle, clothing, and, above all, pose. As Tina Campt points out, the Black gaze forces us to confront our relationship with blackness and anti-blackness.⁵²⁴ Both Johnson's and Douglass's photography, through a tight frame, does not allow the viewer to escape or look away. Through Johnson's gaze, we also metaphorically reach Douglass's gaze and the story of a former slave who, at the time, revolutionized thinking about Black subjectivity and self-determination.

The recreation of the abolitionist's image in color revitalizes the memory of him and draws attention to the materiality of the photographic medium. The metal plate of the daguerreotype contrasts with the golden embellished case, making the black and white image stand out. Johnson's photograph does not mimic old techniques; however, due to the use of a format camera, his image achieves high quality and a timely effect.

Another significant example of reconstructing and recontextualizing Douglass's 1847/52 image is a self-portrait by Senegalese artist Omar Victoria Diop (**fig. 143**). In his 2015 *Diaspora* series, the artist portrayed Black subjects known from the history of art and photography, combining fashion and sport attire. One of the self-portraits shows Diop as Douglass, holding a referee whistle. The artist recreated the same hairstyle and even elements of Douglass's styling, such as his bow tie and patterned vest. The patterned background, similar to the pattern on his vest, ties Diop's self-portrait to the tradition of African studio photography. The artist is also mimicking the form of the daguerreotypes' frame, encircling his portrait and framing it in a plain sheet. He also animates the abolitionist figure, adding gestures, props, and color to the image.

⁵²⁴ Campt, *Black Gaze*.

Diop plays with the notion of Black masculinity, pointing out the dandyism of Douglass and his forward-thinking fashion at the time. The self-portrait emphasizes the flamboyance of Black men's styling, drastically differing from Johnson's rather masculine, "straight" look. What is also important is how Diop's image positions Black masculinity within the context of diaspora, encompassing the history of slavery and emancipation, fostering a dialogue globally between a large community of people. "Inviting these forgotten souls into our present times felt like [I was] turning into a medium, allowing these historical figures to continue a discourse that they started during their lifetime,"⁵²⁵ the artist states.

In his quote, Diop highlights a significant connection between himself and memory. By "turning into a medium," the artist is channeling and embodying historical figures, allowing them to metaphorically "speak" to the contemporary audience. Studio photography in this context allows the artist to metaphorically create a stage, where each figure can manifest themselves through the use of props, clothing, and gestures. This is common to all the self-portraits discussed in this section. By playing different roles, artists' bodies are transformed into media, both deconstructing the artist's selfhood and constructing a new identity based on the past or certain visual conventions.

4.2. The Artist and His Muse

In art history, the artist-muse relationship has usually involved an active male artist and a passive female model, who is often nude. More contemporary feminist readings focus on reclaiming the subjectivity of women by retrieving the identities of nameless models (Laure is one of the most significant examples in recent years) and centering female artists in the conversation. Carrie Mae Weems's photographs from her 1996 series *Framed by Modernism* are great examples of the deconstruction of the art-historical power dynamic between the male artist and the female model/muse (**fig. 144**). In a series of three photographs, Weems confronts the long-standing tradition of depicting the art studio as a

⁵²⁵ Ellyn Toscano and Deborah Willis, "Found, On Blacks in the Mediterranean," *Transition*, no. 132 (2021): 69.

place of worship of male genius, with her playing the role of the muse while Robert Colescott, an African-American painter, assumes the role of the artist. His body language indicates a moment of weakness, as if he has failed. In two of the three photographs, he looks concerned, covering his face with his hand. He is holding a school blackboard with musical notation on it as if his body needed support to stand. The man is portrayed in the foreground, framed by his paintings in the background. Weems is seen in the corner of the studio, standing nude against the wall. She is changing the poses and glancing at the man in one of the photographs. Despite the clear visual dominance of masculinity in the foreground, Weems depicts it as fragile. Her body seems to be holding all the power, despite being undressed. A text accompanying the photographs supplements the visual narrative, which resembles a stop-frame sequence of film shots:

SEDUCED BY ONE ANOTHER, YET BOUND BY CERTAIN SOCIAL
CONVENTIONS (1)

YOU FRAMED THE LIKES OF ME & I FRAMED YOU, BUT WE WERE BOTH
FRAMED BY MODERNISM (2)

& EVEN THOUGH WE KNEW BETTER, WE CONTINUED THAT TIME HONORED
TRADITION OF THE ARTIST & HIS MUSE (3).⁵²⁶

While the photographed image reflects polarization within the relationship – dressed/nude, white/Black, man/woman – the textual approach indicates mutual influences. Weems is aware of the stereotypical nature of the artist/muse dynamic, which is burdened with inherited cultural patterns. Despite that, both the artist and the muse engage it. Within the framework of modernism, it could be interpreted through the lens of both gender and race. As analyzed in the second chapter, women of color have been subjects of interest to many modernist masters, Manet being one of them. However, as Kelsey Rae Winiarski explains in her essay on *Not Manet's Type*, Black women have been denied agency and

⁵²⁶ “Framed by Modernism,” Carrie Mae Weems, <https://www.carriemaeweems.net/framed-by-modernism> (accessed July 5, 2025).

often portrayed as archetypes of servants or fetishized Hottentots.⁵²⁷ Weems's nudity in this context could be read as a powerful gesture of reclaiming the sexuality of Black women, as well as a reminder of the power imbalance embedded in the gender dynamic.

In the *Museums* series, the artist did the exact opposite, picturing a muse as a fully dressed woman, repeatedly refusing the gaze and eliminating the asymmetrical power dynamic of active man/passive woman. In *Framed by Modernism*, the one who is gazing directly at the camera is the man. The middle photograph captures the only moment of contact with the viewer, who, in the case of the other two photographs, is only a passive voyeur, peeping at what is happening in the studio space. The direct gaze of the man allows us to metaphorically enter the space by being acknowledged.

As Brian O'Doherty has written: "The nude as muse, naked to the male gaze, also modeled the capacity of women to invert themselves into a kind of echo chamber for male desire. That desire was sublimated in the locus of creation, the studio, which was now a gendered space, the womb that delivered the work."⁵²⁸ O'Doherty highlights a significant theme in the history of art, that of labeling the studio space as the place of the metaphorical birth of art. In Weems's case, this relationship is examined critically; her body is kept out of man's reach, sight, and touch. Since this is her self-portrait, she, the artist, controls the representation, with the man serving as a prop. When gender is further questioned alongside issues of identity – such as the fact that Weems's photographs feature two African-American artists – the studio's placement within art history becomes more complex. Depictions of Black male artists in the studio are as scarce as representations of female artists within Western-centric narratives.

It can be concluded that Weems's photographs reframe the issues surrounding the portrayal of Black women in art studios and the depiction of Black male artists. The challenges related to the male artistic subject will reappear in analyses of Paul Mpagi Sepuya's photographs, which add complexity through themes of sexual identity. Regarding

⁵²⁷ Kelsey Rae Winiarski, "Modern Painting, the Black Woman, and Beauty Ideologies: Carrie Mae Weems' Photographic Series 'Not Manet's Type,'" *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 11, no. 6 (April 2018), 260–273.

⁵²⁸ Brian O'Doherty, *Studio and Cube. On the relations between where art is made and where art is displayed* (New York: Buell Center / FORuM Project, 2007), 29.

Weems's images, the artist avoids the binary of the male powerful subject and the passive female subject, highlighting the vulnerabilities of both genders.

Building on the issues raised by Weems's series, problematizing the gender and racial dynamic within the artistic studio, I would like to bring Lola Flash's self-portrait *Hommage to Kerry James Marshall* into the conversation (**fig. 145**). In their Afrofuturist photography series *syzygy, the vision* (2019–), Flash paid tribute to one of Kerry James Marshall's paintings, depicting the Black female painter's workshop. Flash's self-portrait was made during the artist's residency in Woodstock, inside the attic of the house featured in *Afro-Gothic* (discussed in the second chapter).⁵²⁹ The image depicts the artist dressed in a prison jumpsuit and an astronaut helmet, sitting in a chair, surrounded by equipment for a makeshift photographic studio. Their self-portrait references *Untitled (Studio)*, a 2014 painting (**fig. 146**) in which Marshall recalls a visit to the studio of the acclaimed African-American painter Charles White (1918–1979).⁵³⁰ It was there that Marshall first saw the Black artist during the creative process.⁵³¹ In his interpretation of a memory from the past, the male painter's place is occupied by a female artist. Flash, reinterpreting Marshall's painting, also refers to the artist's memory, mediated by *Untitled (Studio)*.

Marshall's painting, featuring a male nude model and a female painter, reverses the traditional gender roles seen in artist studio scenes. It is a highly self-reflective piece reminiscent of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, incorporating familiar symbols from art history such as a dog, a fragment of a work-in-progress, a skull, and flowers (reminiscent of Manet's depiction of the maid). In contrast, Flash's self-portrait lacks the explicit references to art history present in Marshall's work. There are no models, dogs, or skulls to connect Flash's photography with the painting tradition. Instead, the artist appears to identify shared pieces of studio equipment that are relevant to both painting and photography.

⁵²⁹ From my interview with Lola Flash. The transcript is available by contacting Julia Stachura.

⁵³⁰ The painting was a centerpiece in the 2017 retrospective at The Met, *Mastry*.

⁵³¹ Inside the Studio, *The Met Museum's Perspectives*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/kerry-james-marshall-untitled-studio> (accessed July 5th, 2025).

It should be noted that Flash's work pertains to memory, and therefore, not all of the elements are perfectly recreated; some are merely suggested. The recreation of the Black artist's studio (or rather, two instances of it) – one indirectly through imagery and the other through recollection – signifies a form of lineage or continuity within the tradition of depicting African American artists at work. Flash's labor encompasses both the roles of model and photographer. The prison jumpsuit, characteristic of the *syzygy* series, alongside the gesture of self-chaining to a chair, indicates a form of framing, both discursive and literal, related to incarceration. Furthermore, Flash's figure is framed against a photographic backdrop intended to evoke the illusion of a no-space or vacuum. The artist reveals the behind-the-scenes processes associated with portrait creation, akin to Marshall, who simultaneously displays the model in the background alongside a cropped portrait visible in the corner. This shared commitment to demystifying the artistic process further aligns with the spirit of inquiry present in Weems's work, encouraging viewers to consider not only the final image but also the complex narratives and power dynamics that inform its creation.

4.3. Mirror with a Memory

The inclusion of sexual minorities in the conversation about spaces for creativity is a meaningful topic for contemporary artists, as exemplified by Flash's self-portrait. In this part of the chapter, I will expand on the studio as a site of Black queer liberation in Paul Mpagi Sepuya's photographs. The artist specializes in digital studio photography and has been photographing his atelier for almost two decades. Initially, he used his own New York City bedroom to stage his early self-portraits and portraits of his friends.⁵³² After moving to Los Angeles, he focused on exploring and building a community around studio space,

⁵³² About early portraits of Sepuya and his New York community, see David Velasco, "Project: Paul Mpagi Sepuya," *Artforum*, March 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/features/project-paul-mpagi-sepuya-242297/> (accessed January 11, 2025).

which quickly became a meeting spot for his queer peers.⁵³³ Consequently, his work became one of the most recognizable and transformative among contemporary American photographers, providing a new approach to Black queer studio portraiture and digital portraiture. His self-portraits explore the contemporary representation of queer Black men, rooted in the history of photographic studio space and the history of art.

There are two main topics in Sepuya's studio photography that I would like to analyze within the framework of tangible memories: the studio as an archival site and as a metaphor for gay nightlife. The newest publication on the artist, *Dark Room A–Z*⁵³⁴ from 2024, provided an abundant network of terms and operative categories for Sepuya's oeuvre, the studio being one of them. The artist sees the studio as a site of interaction and accretion between himself, his friends, and the studio itself.⁵³⁵ His atelier is usually portrayed as a white, almost surgical space, evoking the clean white cube of an art gallery. For over a decade, American critics and scholars, along with global curators and scholars who have engaged with his work, have focused on the significance of what a photographic studio represents for Sepuya. The artist's studio engages long-standing traditions connected to the classic image of the white male artist, assumedly heterosexual, though this is not explicitly stated. Sepuya's photographs of the atelier as a queer sanctuary for BIPOC individuals challenge this traditionally accepted model of the spaces of creation. In this context, the artist models himself after historical studio photographers who participated in the counter-culture and were important to the Black community, such as James Van Der Zee, Lyle Ashton-Harris, and allies like Carl Van Vechten.

In his text *The Expanded Photograph*, David Everett Howe describes Sepuya's atelier as an experimental space where traces of the artist's activity, staged acts, and unpredictable events can be traced.⁵³⁶ He understands it as a site-specific space with almost

⁵³³ See Courtney Malick, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya in Conversation with Courtney Malick: From the Singular to the Indexical in Contemporary Portraiture," *International Arts and Culture*, December 2015, <https://www.sfaq.us/2015/12/paul-mpagi-sepuya-in-conversation-with-courtney-malick/> (accessed January 11, 2025). Courtney Malick aptly points out that the specificity of Los Angeles influenced Sepuya's choice to explore the studio space.

⁵³⁴ See Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Dark Room A–Z*, ed. Gökcan Demirkazik (New York: Aperture, 2024), 54, 362, 385.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁵³⁶ David Everitt Howe, "The Expanded Photograph," *ArtReview*, May 2014, 78–82.

sculpture-like qualities, filled with exchangeable props and, most importantly, visited by people, who leave their mark on the space and, ultimately, on the photograph. Borrowing from Rosalind Krauss, Howe places Sepuya within the postmodernist shift, connecting the images of his studio to marked sites.⁵³⁷ In her essay on sculpture in the expanded field, Krauss describes the possibilities of an impermanent, photographic, and political marking of a site.⁵³⁸ Howe sees in this comparison a turn towards the work's space of existence. Using Krauss's terminology further, he likens the studio to a site of "indexes of past lives," pointing to the critical category for Sepuya's work, an index.⁵³⁹ Evan Moffitt presents a similar thesis, describing the artist's studio as an "archive of human contact."⁵⁴⁰

In her canonical essay on art in the 1970s, Rosalind Krauss defined an index as a mark or trace that establishes its relationship to the referent on a physical basis, such as a footprint to a foot or a light to a photosensitive surface.⁵⁴¹ The scholar writes: "Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object."⁵⁴² The light, in this case, is quite literally touching the photosensitive surface, leaving a trace on the tangible material. This dynamic is challenging to translate to digital photography, which is not bound to the traditional relationship between positive and negative. Hence, in the newer iteration of the index in scholarly writing proposed by Mary Ann Doane, she suggests: "[...]the digital has not annihilated the logic of the photochemical but incorporated it."⁵⁴³

Doane asks about the place of contingency in photographic representation and why it always revolves around death.⁵⁴⁴ Furthermore, she wonders if digital media are indexical and, if so, what indicates that.⁵⁴⁵ Doane's questions are inspiring and represent an updating

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁵³⁸ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 41.

⁵³⁹ Howe, "The Expanded Photograph," 82.

⁵⁴⁰ *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*, ed. Wassan Al-Khudhairi (Saint Louis–New York: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis–Aperture) 2020, 21.

⁵⁴¹ Krauss, "Notes on the Index," 70.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 75.

⁵⁴³ Mary Ann Doane, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2007): . 5.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

of how indexicality in contemporary photography can be interpreted and reconsidered within the framework of tangible memories of digital studio photography. As I will argue in my analysis, Sepuya's work could be described as "digital analog," using new technologies to reimagine spaces traditionally linked with analog photography, such as the darkroom. He does not accumulate his frames on film, which itself is a limited sequence of (narrative) images, but saves the photographs as files with digital names in the SD memory of the camera. The titles of his photographs are, in fact, named by the camera or, to be more precise, the camera's digital memory.⁵⁴⁶ At the same time, the artist interprets touch as a main agent of the medium, focusing on the thematization of the index, which is characteristic of analog photography.

As Evan Moffitt recalls, Sepuya's studio in Los Angeles quickly became a meeting place, an archive of human interaction, and a space for the collective co-creation of photography.⁵⁴⁷ Moffitt emphasizes that a unique aura was created around the artist, attracting people to the atelier who, feeling safe there, became part of "Paul's community."⁵⁴⁸ Besides friends and peers, the studio itself is one of the main subjects on which Sepuya focuses in his photographs. Its intricate structure, obtained by means of mirrors, movable walls, and props, presents a visual puzzle for the viewer to solve.⁵⁴⁹ Mirrors started to fill up the studio space in Los Angeles in 2014. At first, they offered a surface to organize his work and became sites for analog collages, on which printed-out portraits were plastered.⁵⁵⁰ Soon, they became the primary agents of the artist's expression, complicating the exchange of gazes between the photographer, model, and viewer.

⁵⁴⁶ As the artist mentions in one of the interviews that even before shooting digitally, he used the letters and numbers associated with the roll of the film and frame numbers to title his analog portraits. Dan Rubinstein, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya in conversation with Dan Rubinstein," *Lampoon Magazine*, no. 27 (2023): 46.

⁵⁴⁷ *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*, 24.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁴⁹ Many authors use words such as "puzzle" or "kaleidoscope" to describe the intricate arrangement of Sepuya's studio. See Lanre Bakare, "A new Mapplethorpe? The Queer Zine Legend Reinventing the Nude," *The Guardian*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/apr/28/paul-mpagi-sepuya-mapplethorpe-queer-zine-legend-who-shoots-faceless-portraits> (accessed January 11, 2025); Andrea K. Scott, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya Mines the Queer History of the Portrait Studio," *Photo Booth*, March 29, 2019, [https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Andrea+K.+Scott,+\"Paul+Mpagi+Sepuya+Mines+the+Queer+History+of+the+Portrait+Studio&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&dlr=1&sei=K3-FZ7CMKsCSwPAPsaTy0QQ](https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Andrea+K.+Scott,+\) (accessed January 11, 2025).

⁵⁵⁰ *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*, 17.

Ultimately, the mirrors expanded the idea of what self-portraiture in the studio can be. As the artist describes himself, they started to unmask their artifice:

The smudges in the first mirror studies were left as an indication that the mirror's surface was not intended to be a trick "non-space," and because I intended every image to be direct about its making. The metaphors extending from the latency versus visibility emerged later. [...] This is the idea that a latent image or trace is made visible through a process within or against darkness or dark material. It requires this dark, black and brown fabric, or black camera apparatus, or my black body to make these otherwise invisible – or rendered invisible – traces visible. And so I realized that in order to actually get a photograph of the traces, I had to construct a dark cloth around the mirror, and I could move behind the backdrop into this space. [...] The backdrop delineates a space that is intended to be seen, to be background to a subject, but by extension, also creates a space that is *not* meant to be seen.⁵⁵¹

In this extensive quote from the artist, Sepuya pinpoints a couple of crucial issues in his practice. Firstly, a non-space might be interpreted as a direct reference to Foucault's placeless place of the mirror's reflection. The rhetoric of utopia and heterotopia was discussed in the previous chapter regarding LaToya Ruby Frazier's self-portraits. In the quote, Sepuya is not necessarily signaling a rejection of Foucaultian theory but rather presents the smudge as proof or evidence, grounding the mirror in reality and presence, as opposed to virtuality and absence. Furthermore, in his theory, Foucault explains the coexisting doubleness of the mirror, stating that, while looking at oneself in the glass, the place that the body occupies is doubled, connected to the surroundings as well as to virtual space.⁵⁵² Other issues raised by the artist are the conditions for creating images, and the structure and architecture of photography and its artifice, which are unraveled by the smudges. In this context, the traces left by the body add a layer to the mirror surface that breaks with the illusion of transparency. Finally, Sepuya talks about the latency of the marks, invisible to the eye, while set against the white walls of his studio, camouflaging them. On the other hand, when set against a dark background, all of the marks resurface, coming to the forefront and changing the way the space of the studio, the backdrop, and the artist's body are perceived. This process, as Sepuya acknowledges, resembles the way analog photography operates; the latent image is invisible to the naked eye and stays

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁵² See Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 24.

hidden until chemicals render it visible. For the artist, the developing fix for traces spans from the black and brown of the fabric and camera apparatus to his Black body. All three are equal components to his photographic oeuvre; the camera mediates as a body, the body mediates as a backdrop, and vice versa.

In one of his ongoing series, *Studio*, the artist reflects on the meaning of the presence of a Black figure in a photographic atelier. He is countering the history of representing people of color as racialized, sexualized, and fetishized fantasies of white men. *Studio (0X5A8716)* from 2020 (**fig. 147**) is a self-portrait, depicting Sepuya in his studio. The horizontal view of the space presents two large mirror panels, slicing the reflection of the camera on the tripod in half. Similarly fragmented is the image of the artist. On the left side of the photograph, we can see Sepuya standing on the wheeled wooden frame with a mirror flat, facing the backdrop. The artist is fully nude; his back is resting against a thick metal structure supporting the movable wall. The fragmentation of his silhouette by the mirrors conceals parts of his face, torso, genitals, and legs, partially hiding his identity.

As Margaret Walters writes in her seminal book *The Nude Male* (1978), the male body in Western culture has absorbed political, religious, and moral significance, while the female body has been left passive and condemned to the gaze of the male subject.⁵⁵³ This power dynamic, driven by scopic desire, was most often associated with phallic power, even in cases where the physical phallus was hidden behind a fig leaf or covered with a cloth.⁵⁵⁴ A distinction must be made between the phallus as a symbol of masculinity, indicating control and power, accumulating a masculine potential, and the physical penis, the male genitalia. In *La signification du phallus*, published in 1977, Jacques Lacan linked the figure of the phallus to the sign of difference.⁵⁵⁵ The child entering the Symbolic order, and thus language and culture, through the mirror stage becomes an independent subject and makes a sexual distinction. The phallus, or the lack thereof, becomes the criterion for the construction of the subject and, thus, for the inscription of oneself into specific cultural

⁵⁵³ Margaret Walters, *The Nude Male. A New Perspective* (New York: Paddington Press, 1978), 7.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁵⁵ Lacan, *Ecrits*.

frameworks and social roles. In this context, the studio's structure conceals the artist's physical genitalia, while the camera serves as a symbol of power. Sepuya exposes a metaphorical phallus at the center of the composition, simultaneously fracturing and obscuring its reflection. Both the subject of the photograph – the artist and the object – the camera are spliced by the sharp incisions of the mirrors, evoking the Lacanian mirror stage, crucial to the formation of the *self*.⁵⁵⁶ They are equal participants in the drama of identification. The backdrop visible on the right side of the photograph emphasizes this performative aspect of the self-portrait. The heavy black velvet curtain, usually associated with a theater, visually parallels the image of the artist. The smudges evident in the reflection of Sepuya's body are also visible in the reflection of the curtain.

The space of the atelier is depicted in Sepuya's self-portrait as a highly controlling and controlled site. The diagonal metal arm of the frame creates a visual incision, lining up with where the artist's neck is, symbolically decapitating him. A wheeled mirror strictly choreographs Sepuya's position within the studio space. The artist seems to be hiding behind the metal frame, with its structure trapping him inside. Not only is his neck guarded by the metal arm, but his ankles are as well. The coldness associated with metal responds to the coldness of the glass surface. It simultaneously contrasts with the warmth of the artist's body and the visible body trace left near his arm. One can imagine the way the body was pressed to the mirror, leaving a steamy and foggy mark, adding a haptic layer to the reflection. Another layer adds small fragments of colorful tape scattered on the glass, indicating that Sepuya uses the mirror as a site for organizing his work, taping prints and fragments onto the surface.⁵⁵⁷

As Rizvana Bradley notes, "his [Sepuya's – ed. J.S.] technique of splicing and reproducing portions of the studio's *mise en scène* within the photographic image itself introduces a queer visuality that disrupts the viewer's conventional line of sight."⁵⁵⁸ These

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 75–81.

⁵⁵⁷ See: *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*, 17 and Amelia Abraham, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya, the Photographer Conjuring Digital Cruising Culture," *Another Man*, March 20, 2020, <https://a.storyblok.com/f/59954/x/672858500e/03-20-2020-another-man.pdf> [accessed January 11, 2025].

⁵⁵⁸ Rizvana Bradley, "Aesthetic Inhumanisms: Toward an Erotics of Otherworlding," in *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon*, ed. Johanna Burton and Natalie Bell (New York: New Museum, 2017), 198.

incisions into the image for Bradley cut through the normative representation of the subject in the photographic studio.⁵⁵⁹ How would that manifest in *Studio (0X5A8716)*? Firstly, the incision in the reflection of the camera's eye symbolically dissects the ocularcentric paradigm of photography, which grants the vision the primary role.⁵⁶⁰ Sepuya focuses not only on the sense of touch but allows it to dominate the space and, through smudges and other traces, affect, partially obscure, and change the "conventional line of sight." The marks on the mirror near the reflection of the artist's body emphasize the sense of touch, covering almost all of his body reflected on its surface. The traces are especially tangible around the arm; some of the smudges repeat the motion of the bending limb, multiplying the specter image of a caressing hand. Another amalgamate of traces is visible in the center of the image, at the camera's black body, creating a web-like, almost shattered filter through which we perceive the apparatus. Despite this, the image itself is not affected, but its reflection is, thus our presence "in front of the picture" becomes problematized.⁵⁶¹

Another way of introducing queer visibility in Sepuya's self-portrait is by utilizing reflection as the main strategy for fragmenting the subject. The trope of the mirror is also a common theme in stories about queer love and homosexuality. One of many examples is the 1928 self-portrait of Claude Cahun, a genderfluid artist and photographer, depicting a blurred identity, intersecting feminine and masculine features, or Félix González-Torres's *Untitled (Orpheus, Twice)* from 1991, depicting two mirrors, evoking a loss of queer love. In the context of Sepuya's studio, these queer connotations are significant, as they provide examples of how queer relationships and queer bodies are perceived through the lens of the mirror image. Additionally, Sepuya's self-portraits problematize the reflections of Black

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ See Dorota Łuczak, *Foto-okno. Wizja fotograficzna wobec okularocentryzmu w sztuce I połowy XX wieku*, (Kraków: Universitas, 2018).

⁵⁶¹ In earlier works by Sepuya, the eye of the camera seems free from any marks. As I wrote in my article on the artist's self-portrait from 2017 *Darkroom Mirror* (_2090183): "The presence of traces on the surface of the mirror – clustered in the upper part of the photograph, near the left-hand edge of the field of view – implies a body print (index), as well as body heat, sweat, and movement. But no smudges or marks appear anywhere near the lens; these are seemingly unable to disturb the vision of the mechanical eye, which, by capturing a mirror image, pictures a certain distortion anyway." See Stachura, "A Space of Negotiation....," 8/29.

bodies within the whiteness of the studio, allowing for the interpretation of the atelier as a politicized space.

As Andrea K. Scott notes, the fragmentary nature of the figures depicted in the artist's photographs is linked to an awareness of the marginalization of the LGBTQIA+ artist community in art history.⁵⁶² According to the author, this can be read literally from the composition of the works and metaphorically from the concept of fragmentation as a split personality (hiding in the so-called "closet", pretending to be someone else). This argument could be expanded to include the intersection of gender and race, as Bradley proposes: "Ultimately, Sepuya's photographic imaginary gives way to a differently gendered unconscious, where the irreducible haptic feel of queering sight meets blackness's ontological difference in ways that not only unground normative practices of looking but also provoke the affective and sensual redistribution of the visual."⁵⁶³ Both queer visibility and blackness's ontological difference in the artist's work are embedded in the way Sepuya plays with index, suggesting that there are images exceeding representational boundaries that are inherently photographic. Thus, the traces of human bodies create a sense of coded knowledge that is only decipherable by some.

In another photograph from the *Studio* series, Sepuya expands the story of *Studio* (0X5A8716), sharing the space with another man (**fig. 148**). *Studio* (0X5A9586) portrays two Black nude men divided by a wheeled panel. Two mirrors reflect the studio space, with one revealing a camera in the center of the composition. The framing of the photograph provides the viewer with access to other parts of the atelier that would be otherwise obscured by the backdrop and mirror panels. We can see two doorways to other rooms on opposite sides of the image. The figure of the man accompanying Sepuya is partially obscured by the structure of the wheeled panel. His posture is erect; he is looking at the apparatus, and almost as if in a trance, his whole body is turned in its direction. He is the only one, besides the viewer, acknowledging the apparatus's presence. The model's genitals are peeking out from behind an element of the panel; both a physical phallus and a

⁵⁶² Andrea K. Scott, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya Mines the Queer History of the Portrait Studio," *The New Yorker*, March 2019.

⁵⁶³ Bradley, "Aesthetic Inhumanisms," 198–199.

metaphorical one – the camera – are present in the photograph.⁵⁶⁴ Moreover, the way the man's body is positioned toward the camera directly confronts him with this symbolic power. Sepuya is hiding behind the panel, his body leaning toward a metal crate; his eyes are closed, and it seems he is listening, not engaging with the other. There are visible smudges in the space between the men's heads: the shapes of traces resembling two figures kissing. The metal arm of the stand cut diagonally through the "lovers' trace" in the middle. All of the geometrical and structural elements of the studio are intentional; the vertical and diagonal lines, activated by the viewer's gaze, participate in the critical examination of power. Sepuya is deconstructing the constructive aspects of the photographic image, using mirrors to both produce and undermine the illusion that the camera is capturing the viewer.

The story of the pair progressively unravels, as in the third image in the series, *Studio (0X5A9580)*, the two men are getting closer to one another, with both now finding themselves behind the mirror stand (**fig. 149**). They are both nude; Sepuya is lying on the floor while the other man is standing over him. He is propping himself up on his elbow, which extends over the metal frame of the stand, his back is turned, and we can see his braided hair but not his face. The other mirror visually cuts off part of his torso and legs. To reapply Bradley's metaphor of queer visibility, this incision cuts through the conventional portrayal of the body in the studio space, introducing fragments as the primary source of subjectivity in the self-portrait. Sepuya is looking up at the man towering over him, holding onto his ankle. The diagonal metal arm of the stand serves as a compositional prop and modesty cover, partially concealing the genitals of Sepuya's friend/lover. The man is holding onto the rail, repeating the photographer's gentle gesture of holding his leg. He is looking down at Sepuya, smiling; his body is flexing, striking a contrapposto pose that evokes classic Greek sculptures, such as the Doryphoros or the Victorious Youth. He is standing with most of his weight on his left leg (in the picture), while the other is slightly bent at the knee. His posture and the way he is embracing the arm of the stand also evoke the figure of Christ carrying the cross. The array of smudges on

⁵⁶⁴ Lacan, *Ecrits*, 75–81.

the mirror slightly obscuring the man's head, arm, and part of his torso evoke both the lover's touch and a halo. Sepuya quotes religious and classical art tropes to place Black queer bodies within the framework of art history. By doing so, he is invoking the homoerotic desire palpable in ancient Greek sculptures and, at the same time, rejecting the religious stigma around queerness.⁵⁶⁵

This play of poses and interactions between the model and photographer reminds me of Carrie Mae Weems's *Framed by Modernism*, in which visual storytelling completes a narrative of desire. The relationship portrayed between Sepuya and his studio partner does not reinforce a traditional division between the artist, who holds all the power, and the model, orchestrated by the photographer. They are both engaged in portraying their relationship; they are equally nude, exploring desire in the safety of the studio space. Sepuya's vulnerable position by the model's feet would even suggest a reversal of the power dynamics. However, if we consider the camera as a symbolic extension of the artist, its presence in the photograph reminds us who is, in fact, in charge of the portrayed scene. Just like Weems, the artist assumes the dual role of model and image maker, redefining the traditional portrayal of the binary dynamic.

The photograph that completes the story of these two lovers is *Studio (0X5A9534)*. This vertical photograph from 2021 depicts Sepuya and the man sharing a kiss in the studio space (**fig. 150**). The latter is sitting on a wooden bench while Sepuya is kneeling in front of him, clicking the shutter on a camera on a tripod. The proximity of the apparatus is essential, as it is no longer occupying the center of the composition, standing in the distance, but it is within the artist's reach. Sepuya subverts the voyeuristic and fetishistic gaze often associated with the representation of marginalized bodies to a gaze controlled by the Black queer artists. He is taking a photograph of the scene while simultaneously arresting the viewer in the pose. The mirrors no longer splice the camera's eye, but instead, the traces on its surface partially obscure its reflection. Hal Foster and

⁵⁶⁵ See David Everitt Howe, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya," *Art in America*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/paul-mpagi-sepuya-62668/> (accessed January 11, 2025). In his text, Howe notices how many of Sepuya's references tie to the canonical works commissioned by the church.

W.J.T. Mitchell would call this a Medusa-like effect.⁵⁶⁶ Although the Medusa was decapitated, her deadly power remained vital – parallel to Sepuya’s photograph. The mirror literally “kills” the lens’s ability to go through the glass, but symbolically, its power is still active and affecting the viewer, striking a pose and turning into a photographic sculpture. At the same time, the artist forces narcissistic optics onto the camera, gazing at itself, trapped in the spatial confinement of the studio.

The multiplication of touches – touching the shutter, touching the mirror, touching the body – makes the tactile sensation a primary experience in the space of Sepuya’s studio. It is even humorously highlighted by the glasses tossed on the floor beside the artist’s feet. Alois Riegl, understood *taktisch* as both tactile and tactical concerning the reception of the work of art.⁵⁶⁷ *Tactical* evokes formation, strategy, and order – all of which are present in Sepuya’s careful construction of *mise-en-scène*. The studio is arranged, and the scene is choreographed. Yet despite this orchestration, traces inevitably escape the rigor. These moments of slippage push the tactical into the tactile, where touch becomes not just a sensation but a mode of knowing.

Here, I would like to expand on Moffitt’s thesis on Sepuya’s studio as an “archive of human contact.”⁵⁶⁸ The artist thematizes the index as a carrier of both photographic and intimate knowledge, exploring touch in studio photography as a radical gesture of Black queer memory. One of the inspirations for this framework is an essay from madison moore, conceptualizing queer archiving as a practice incorporating residue from nightlife, to which the author refers as sleaze or ephemeral traces.⁵⁶⁹ Sepuya’s studio explores the tension between the organized, surgical space of the studio and the anti-rigorous,⁵⁷⁰ disordered traces of queer relationships. In the photograph, the traces are particularly visible in the

⁵⁶⁶ See W.J.T. Mitchell, “What Do Pictures ‘Really’ Want?” *October* 77 (1996): 71–82 [the article became a part of the author’s seminal book *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* from 2005]; Hal Foster, “Medusa and the Real,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 44 (Autumn 2003): 181–190.

⁵⁶⁷ See Tobias Wilke, “Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin’s Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses,” *Grey Room* 39 (Spring 2010): 39–55; Jacek Ostaszewski, “Koncepcja odbioru haptycznego w teorii filmu,” *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 127 (2024): 163–192.

⁵⁶⁸ Paul Mpagi Sepuya, 21.

⁵⁶⁹ madison moore, “DARK ROOM. Sleaze and the Queer Archive,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 31, no. 1–2 (2021): 191–195.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

area of contact, hanging heavily over the heads of the lovers. The irregular, abstract imprints, smudges, and dust become more prominent against the black background, revealing movement and contact patterns on the surface. They act as mediators between bodies, space, and time. These traces are not linked solely to touch but also to time and memory. This concept aligns with Marta Smolińska's theory of haptic memory, which emphasizes the spatiotemporal act of contact between a body or matter and a surface, viewing such contact as the epicenter of a network of material relationships.⁵⁷¹ Aindrea Emelife connects the smudges to memory, comparing the traces to fossils, the remains or impressions of once-living things from a past geological age. She writes: "When set against the white walls of the studio [smudges – ed. J.S.], they act like fossils, memorialising time and humanity's attraction to leaving a mark on this world. When set against darkness, they create a pattern of lived experience – a mapping of identity and moments – as the latent image is made visible. Darkness – dark material, dark skin, the absence of light – awakens these histories."⁵⁷² Mapping identity is a valuable concept that provides spatiality and surface coverage to the marks, much like how a map outlines a territory. In this context, traces gain their own bodies, temporalities, and identities, extending the idea of what self-portraiture can be.

In my discussion in the introduction of the concept of memory as a body, borrowed from Kevin Everod Quashie, I linked the tangibility of memory with the transformative process of subjectivity, empowered by retrieving memories. For Quashie, within the Black cultural context, memory is fleshy, attributed to the body or even a self-contained entity; hence the process of coming to a relationship with memory is ontological.⁵⁷³ Sepuya's practice of exploring the memory of a body through an index reminds me of David Hammons's *body prints*. In the 1970s, the artist experimented with his own technique of printing, smearing margarine and other oily substances onto his body and hair and pressing himself onto a large sheet of paper, leaving a greasy mark, which was later dusted with

⁵⁷¹ Marta Smolińska, *Haptyczność poszerzona: zmysł dotyku w sztuce polskiej drugiej połowy XX i początku XXI wieku* (Cracow: Universitas, 2020), 293–294.

⁵⁷² Aindrea Emelife, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya: mirrors, exposure and concealment," *Wallpaper*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.wallpaper.com/travel/r-finds-worldwide-gift-guide> (accessed January 11, 2025).

⁵⁷³ Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory*, 13.

pigment (**fig. 151**).⁵⁷⁴ As I wrote in the introduction, Hammons's body prints provided a double denotation of stereotype – fixing an image in print and in the social psyche. Both artists focus on the idea of mutual, social, and inclusive existence in art, while also exploring the experience of racial otherness and the concept of blackness. Index, in this sense, can be viewed as an image that extends beyond the experience of (in)visibility.

Besides the index, Sepuya also conceptualizes blackness through a curtain/backdrop that appears in all the photographs from the *Studio* series. It is depicted both as a physical textile and a photographic representation in *Studio* (OX5A9586) and *Studio* (OX5A9580). The black curtain parallel to the bodies of men contrasts with the whiteness of the studio space. It substitutes for the blackness of the body while exuding a tangible, heavy, and haptic presence in the atelier. In *Studio* (OX5A9534), the curtain peeks from the right corner of the photograph, concealing the hand of the artist's lover, who is propping himself up on a bench. The hand is nonchalantly pulled back, as in a theater, revealing an intimate scene of kissing and the act of photographing.

A longstanding tradition in painting explores the conversational relationship between the curtain and the viewer. For Stoichita, the frame of each image negotiates the boundary of the fiction.⁵⁷⁵ According to the scholar, the curtain was part of the religious, medieval tradition of *velum*, which framed the altarpiece.⁵⁷⁶ This religious practice of putting a curtain in front of an image was done to protect it from dust and intense light. In more modern times, the curtain was used for two primary purposes: first, as a protective barrier between the viewer and the work of art. In this case, the curtain serves as an integral element of the drama and spectacle. Second, the curtain acted as a protective layer, guarding more explicit and daring images, which were usually viewed in a more private setting, in the company of peers, primarily men.

⁵⁷⁴ Filip Lipinski has written about other body prints from Hammons, focusing on the *Injustice Case*. See Lipiński, *Ameryka*, 106–107.

⁵⁷⁵ See Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image*, 79.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

The curtain, usually at the margin of the image or at the threshold of containing the fiction within the frame, in Sepuya's work has another, more significant meaning. As the artist stated himself, the curtain holds an erotic potential of empowerment:

I think about Manet's Olympia, the maid, her bouquet of flowers and then that curtain. Of the possibilities and erotic potential of being unseen but depended upon. Of being the hand that positions and controls, closes and pulls back the curtain. Of transforming what at first is marginalization into a queer power. And Olympia need never know. So the constant reference to painting is what photography inherited in staging by means of that curtain.⁵⁷⁷

Within the framework of power, Olympia's maid was historically considered a marginal figure to whom only a few paid attention until her story was recovered by artists and scholars such as Lorraine O'Grady or Denise Murrell.⁵⁷⁸ The way Sepuya views her role is radically redefining her presence in the art history canon, introducing her as an active subject, in charge of "queer visibility that disrupts the viewer's conventional line of sight."⁵⁷⁹ For the artist, it is touch that gives control over the conditions of staging the image, and, ultimately, the curtain becomes a tool for setting a boundary between what is shown and what stays hidden.

In this context, I would like to introduce another way of reading the blackness of the curtain within the space of Sepuya's studio: through Hammons's *Concerto in Black and Blue*.⁵⁸⁰ This site-specific work was exhibited at Ace Gallery in 2002, featuring a space engulfed in darkness, lit only by visitors' flashlights (**fig. 152**). Hammons's *Concerto* played with the historically exclusive implications of the white cube, indirectly addressing codes embedded in racial discrimination. Together with other visitors, the viewers formed a collective subject perceiving the artist's work in total darkness. In Sepuya's self-portraits, this experience translates to the artist and his peers/models navigating the white space of the studio. The curtain in this context divides, obscures, and

⁵⁷⁷ Silvi Naçi, "In Conversation with Mark McKnight and Paul Mpagi Sepuya," *Hunter*, no. 39, Spring-Summer 2022, <https://a.storyblok.com/f/59954/x/a1f58b23ea/2022-hunter-full-copy.pdf> (accessed January 11, 2025).

⁵⁷⁸ I discuss this issue in detail in Chapter 2.

⁵⁷⁹ Bradley, "Aesthetic Inhumanisms," 198.

⁵⁸⁰ See Stachura, "A Space of Negotiations," 20–21.

reveals parts of the atelier. The example of *Concerto* highlights another significant issue symptomatic of Sepuya's work. As Darby English writes, following critics' opinions on the art of African-Americans, there are certain tendencies to isolate and alienate the artist from their work.⁵⁸¹ One reason is the interpretation of racial determinants, which universalizes the experience of blackness. Related to this is the issue of representing Black artists. English, following Kobena Mercer, points out the simultaneous negotiation here of the problems of imaging: how to give form to identity and how to represent presence in the context of its absence, generated by the historical conditions of the black subject's (in)visibility.⁵⁸²

There are many similarities between all four photographs from the *Studio* series, such as the setting, the camera's reflection splinted in the middle, or the presence of traces (smudges) dispersed across the glass. Wheeled panels, mirrors, backdrop, and fragments of tapes are recurring elements of the *mise-en-scène*, emphasizing the repetitiveness of the photographic studio but also unraveling the conditions in which photographs are made. "Spaces obtain their meaning from social agreements, confirmed by usage, which can change. Implicit in each studio is an ideology derived from that agreement,"⁵⁸³ writes Brian O'Doherty. In his seminal book *Studio and Cube*, the author hints at the tension between the "no-touch," white cube, laboratory-like gallery space and the studio space, characterized by the "all-over tactility."⁵⁸⁴ Sepuya's atelier mixes both, indicating that the space for working on projects is simultaneously a space for exhibiting and human connections. Hence, we see fragments of other works and studies hung in the studio as it were a gallery. We notice the tape on the big mirror panels, left after the prints were plastered onto the surface. The display of the work-in-progress, the unfinished, in a mirror marked with smudges suggests the continuous and expansive nature of the photographic studio as an incubator of ideas and social relationships. Sepuya deliberately exposes the behind-the-scenes of his process to emphasize the intersecting temporalities that exist

⁵⁸¹ Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art In Total Darkness* (London: The MIT Press, 2010), 6.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁸³ O'Doherty, *Studio and Cube*, 7.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

within the space of his creation. At the same time, the atelier is a closed circuit, keeping the outsider's gaze in a state of disorientation, and creating an illusion of being photographed by the camera, in which the mirror becomes both a boundary and a site with tangible memory.⁵⁸⁵ The smudges, smears, and marks left on the mirror's surface in the artist's studio hold memories of friends and lovers, archiving the body's warmth, fingerprints, hot breath, spit, hair gel, and sweat: "the low, the funky, the flesh, the things that make bodies moan, groan, and shudder."⁵⁸⁶

4.3.1 Studio as a Metaphor for Gay Nightlife

The meaning of the word "darkroom" refers both to the photographic process and gay club culture. "Both dark rooms are places of physical contact, whether between chemically sensitive paper and developing agents or between the bodies of men. [...] The space of the photograph delineated by the black velvet scrim suggests a third 'dark room': one in which desire develops before our eyes,"⁵⁸⁷ writes Richard Meyer about Sepuya's practice. In a photographic context, the darkroom is quite literally a dark room from which all light is excluded except the safelight used for developing photographs.⁵⁸⁸ In the context of the queer culture of cruising, a dark room or darkroom means a room in a nightclub, sex club, adult bookstore, or gay bar, where strangers engage in anonymous sexual acts.⁵⁸⁹ Sepuya

⁵⁸⁵ Sepuya himself used the words "closed circuit" to describe the studio space: "The mirror creates a space that might just create a picture that has no need of a beholder. The making, exhibitionism and voyeurism are entirely within a closed circuit." See Abraham, "Paul Mpagi Sepuya...". Justin Torres used a similar wording while describing the relationship between the viewer and cameras depicted in Sepuya's photographs as a "closed loop": "And then, because you have the presence of the smudges, one realizes, "Oh, this is a photograph of a mirror. This is a closed loop. It's not about me." See Justin Torres, "Here is a portrait of an L.A. artist having an intimate conversation among friends," March 15, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/image/story/2023-03-15/photographer-paul-mpagi-sepuya-discusses-queer-identity-art-history-politics-los-angeles> (accessed January 11, 2025).

⁵⁸⁶ Mali D. Collins-White, Ariane Cruz, Jillian Hernandez, Xavier Livermon, Kaila Story and Jennifer Nash, "Disruptions in Respectability: A Roundtable Discussion," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 18, no. 2-4 (2016): 471.

⁵⁸⁷ Lord and Meyer, *Art & Queer Culture*, 269.

⁵⁸⁸ Definition of photographic darkroom from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, https://www.oed.com/view/entry/10186783m0e99.han.amu.edu.pl/dictionary/darkroom_n?tab=meaning_and_use#1332097120 (accessed February 3, 2025).

⁵⁸⁹ On the queer history and cultural definition of dark room/darkroom see Nick Levine, "The Dark Room Boom," *Vice*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dark-room-boom-queer-spaces-uk/> (accessed February 3, 2025).

explores this doubleness in his series, such as *Dark Room Studio Mirror* or *Daylight Studio / Dark Room Studio*, from which I will analyze only a few examples.

I saw Sepuya's red darkroom photos for the first time at an exhibition in Hamburg in 2023 (**fig. 153**) where he showcased both large prints and much smaller dye sublimations on a matte aluminum surface. The latter resembled the materiality of a daguerreotype or a metal plate print, tying the darkroom concept to the history of photography. The exhibition, entitled *Daylight Studio / Dark Room Studio*, focused on the temporal differences between day and night, affecting the way the studio space was presented. The daylight photographs depicted statuesque bodies frozen in classical poses when, in the dark of the night, his subjects became blurry, captured in motion under a long exposure.⁵⁹⁰ Sepuya's red photographs are hard to describe as self-portraits. It seems like this category is losing its relevance and meaning while looking at the entangled bodies and blurred silhouettes. The multiple bodies become one joined organism. The atmosphere feels heavy and tangible with arousal. Michael Anthony Hall describes these depictions as "moody abstractions,"⁵⁹¹ emphasizing the entanglement of the bodies and traces, which are hard to distinguish. The red light drowning the space, suitable for photosensitive materials, is also characteristic of the light in the club, partially concealing the exposed body parts, and adding a red hue to the skin tones.

The depictions of the figures in the studio evoke José Esteban Muñoz's concept of ephemera, rooted in queer world-making and queer utopia. For the scholar, ephemera is a modality of anti-rigor and anti-evidence, similar to what moore wrote about queer archiving.⁵⁹² Muñoz links ephemera with memory and performance, indicating that through ephemeral traces one could access the hidden history of queerness, one that resists the permanency of documentation.⁵⁹³ The scholar proposes seeing queerness as a

⁵⁹⁰ Janelle Zara, "Light Dark Room Play," *Cultured*, 114–115, <https://a.storyblok.com/f/59954/x/cffe1b2b33/2022-6-cultured.pdf> (accessed January 11, 2025).

⁵⁹¹ Michael Anthony Hall, "Viewing Pleasure: Paul Mpagi Sepuya. Behind the Lens with the Masterful Image-Maker," *VMagazine*, November 25, 2022, <https://vmagazine.com/article/viewing-pleasure-paul-mpagi-sepuya/> (accessed January 11, 2025).

⁵⁹² José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 10.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

possibility, a sense of self-knowing, or a mode of sociality and relationality.⁵⁹⁴ In this sense, the ephemeral follows “the traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things.”⁵⁹⁵ In his essay *Ghosts of Public Sex. Utopian Longings, Queer Memories* Muñoz develops his theory further, devoting whole passages to memory, specifically the construct of queer utopian memory. For the scholar, visualized remembrance of queer world-making potentialities embodies the possibility to create a space for sexual citizenship.⁵⁹⁶ Sepuya’s studio space could also represent a site where queer utopia happens; the recurring memories of bodies that once shared the same space and shared intimacy linger. His atelier studio preserves and archives these traces, accumulating fresh ones that cover the old ones, like a palimpsest. The mirror’s surface in Sepuya’s studio has lost its shine; remnants create layers of opacity that distort the body’s reflection. This adds complexity to its visibility, at times diminishing it while also enhancing its tactile quality.

The lighting makes the traces on the mirror particularly visible, and in the case of *Dark Room Studio Mirror (0X5A5515)* and *Darkroom Studio Mirror (0X5A5668)*, even hyper-visible (**fig. 154, 155**). The smears and smudges on the mirror are almost tangible, still radiating with the body’s heat. This sensation is enhanced by the studio light, sustaining the impression that everything and everyone in the space is on fire. The camera is placed on the tripod and positioned in the center of each scene. Behind the camera in *Dark Room Studio Mirror (0X5A5515)* there are two figures standing side by side; one of them seems to be holding another camera, looking through a viewfinder. The other person is possibly holding another device in their hand. In *Darkroom Studio Mirror (0X5A5668)* we can see a man standing while a second one is kneeling in front of him, and a third man is caressing his face. What is crucial here is that due to the long exposure, these portraits capture each movement as if it were that of a specter. The reflections of the bodies multiply, and the superimposed traces on the mirror disrupt the traditional portraiture convention even more. It is almost impossible to decipher who is depicted in the

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁹⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, “Ghosts of Public Sex. Utopian Longings, Queer Memories,” in *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*, ed. Ephraim Glenn Colter (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 357.

photographs. The subject depicted is collective; it merges the bodies together. The light affects the visibility and, ultimately, the identity of people in the studio. The skin bathing in the intense red safe light becomes a subject of photographic development. Just like the indexes on the mirror, the bodies seem to be ephemeral. The black curtain emphasizes the presence of a joined, multilayered entanglement of spectral traces of movement. The backdrop, the carpet, and the fragment of the pillow enhance the tactile qualities of the studio space, which is filled with soft, pleasant materials that are inviting to touch, embrace, and sit on. The metal body of the camera and the tripod contrast with the rest of the soft-touch *mise-en-scene*. The depicted apparatus is in focus, and the sharp edges of its metal legs contrast with the multiple specters of the legs of the people posing.

The prominent fingerprints near the studio lamp in the upper left corner evoke forensic practices of dusting for evidence and using ultraviolet light to recover traces left by a perpetrator. Fingerprinting was developed in the late nineteenth century as a mode of mass identification, surveilling bodily marks, and searching for proof, “locating the forensic cell(f).”⁵⁹⁷ The trope of investigation opens Sepuya’s photographs to reading these traces as a commentary on the history of the penalization of homosexuality. In this context, the blurred faces and ambiguous identities of the people posing for the artist might not have been only an aesthetic choice but also a reference to the ways queer culture(s) throughout time has had to stay hidden in order to stay safe. All the smudges, smears, and movement triggered by the long exposure would then function as a sort of masking, producing a hinted, obscured, and opaque gaze, protecting the identities of the people depicted in the photograph.

Muñoz’s theory on ephemera helps us to understand the desire to stay masked more precisely:

Queerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances

⁵⁹⁷ See Sonja Boon, “Dusting for Fingerprints: Bodily Traces, Embodied Memories, and the Forensic Self,” *Life Writing* 14, no. 1 (2017): 69–82.

that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.⁵⁹⁸

What the scholar is describing is a sense of survival and self-knowledge, a code forming another sense of mask or filter, readable only to those who know and who participate in the community. Similarly, Gökcan Demirkazik writes about the function of traces in Sepuya's work:

What are traces good for? [...] At the hands of marginalized communities, articulating a legacy out of communal and individual traces may be more directly a question of survival. Traces of a process or the passage of time can embody a *moral*. They may not always have a strong indexical dimension, resulting in the broadening rift between the trace and its *owner*. Still, a trace does not have to be a physical or optical sign emerging from the imprinting of a thing, light, or force on the material world; it may be a fragment belonging to a body that is no longer there. The resolute (one-)directionality of the word tracing is an injustice to the ontological diversity of traces that arise from living, working, and loving in Sepuya's studio⁵⁹⁹.

In the passage, the author indicates that traces are not solely indexical, referring to the relationship between the physical object and its imprint. Demirkazik understands traces as proofs of the existence of queer people in the history of photography (past), a legacy that survived till the present, and the experiences of “living, working, and loving” in the community today. The studio space in this context provides archival knowledge, “memorizing” each person and their story.

The traces – smudges, sweat, dust, and smears – add layers of tangibility, deepening the mirror's surface and transforming it into an archive of touch. The temporal relationship between these traces and the body allows us to view the mirror as a repository of memory, specifically, of the body, leaving behind imprints and images. Sepuya conveys this interplay in his photography, embracing the traditional concept of photographic indexicality despite his focus on digital techniques. He presents the studio as a large camera box, depicting it as a space where the photographic process unfolds, and queer desire flourishes.

Like the backdrop, the colored light becomes an active agent in transforming the meaning of the space in the context of blackness. Here I would like to parallel another site work by David Hammons with Sepuya's *Darkroom* series. Blackness in Hammons's work

⁵⁹⁸ Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 6.

⁵⁹⁹ Sepuya, *Dark Room A–Z*, 395.

is a matter of blue, writes Fred Moten.⁶⁰⁰ The artist's installation *Real Time*, realized in 2000 at the Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, Poland (curated by Milada Ślizińska), conceptualized the idea of an invisible heritage. It consisted of gradient filters covering the castle's windows, filling up the space with blue light, along with flooded floors, transforming both the spatial conditions of the interior and impacting the visitor's perception (**fig. 156**). As Darby English points out, to experience and see Hammons' work, one must become part of it.⁶⁰¹ The color blue encompassed emotions and cultural music code, blue–sad, blue–blues,⁶⁰² as Ślizińska writes. The blues, combining spiritual songs, field hollers, and call-and-response sequences, is a language in itself, bearing echoes of the struggle against racial oppression and the melancholy resulting from the sound of blue notes, characterized by their lowered tonality. Through the filters transmitting light at different intensities and layers of cultural meaning, Hammons sublimely comments on the historical invisibility of African Americans, referring to racial segregation, characterized by W.E.B. Du Bois as the “color line.”⁶⁰³ The simple act of drowning the space in blue turned ephemeral light into something almost tangible and solid, mediating dialogue between the space and the visitors' bodies, becoming moving and breathing works of art. Translating these conditions into Sepuya's photography, the studio bathed in a red safelight transforms all the people inside it into living, breathing photographs. Both artists are turning light into an active participant in the formation of identity. In this sense, the light, either red or blue, acts as a mediator of cultural and social interactions based on the gaze, reflecting what W.J.T. Mitchell described as seeing through race, claiming that a color-blind world is neither desirable nor achievable.⁶⁰⁴ Sepuya's red has multiple cultural meanings, signifying the analog process of the photographic medium, the club culture, and its architecture for public gay sex.

⁶⁰⁰ Fred Moten, lecture at the Wattis Institute, March 10, 2017, in *David Hammons: In Our Mind* (San Francisco: CCA Wattis, 2018), n.p.

⁶⁰¹ English, *How to See*, 1.

⁶⁰² David Hammons, *Real Time*, 09.05.2000–18.03.2000, trans. Barbara Pugacz-Muraszkiewicz, ed. Milada Ślizińska (Warsaw: Ujazdowski Castle, 2000), n.p.

⁶⁰³ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

⁶⁰⁴ Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race*.

Another intersecting reference I want to suggest is the 2010 *Darkrooms* series by the Polish photographer Konrad Pustoła. His project contains panoramic photographs taken in several gay clubs in Poland. Elongated and fragmented views of dirtied walls, floors, and furniture create the impression of a liminal space, which, in many photographs, seems almost abstract. In one example, in photographs of black tiles, the dimmed lighting gives just enough visibility to see the scratches on the walls, chipped paint, and smudges and smears on the tiles (**fig. 157**). All of these traces are functioning on the margins of interiors, outside of what is intended for show – Maria Poprzęcka calls this *ob-scenity*, emphasizing the hidden qualities of the darkrooms, located outside of view and of societal norms.⁶⁰⁵ The gaze of the viewer as projected in Pustoła’s photographs is that of the voyeur: detailed but also fragmentary, wide but also compressed due to the panoramic format of his pictures. Their place is outside the scene as well. This is quite contrary to Sepuya’s work, in which the spectator is constantly being caught staring.

Both artists use the innuendo of the photographic darkroom, but each tells the story of public sex in a different way. In Sepuya’s case, it is a glamorous, studied, and theatrical portraiture, translating the conditions of gay cruising into a photographic studio, which, during the day, is characterized by an almost surgical whiteness and, under a safe light, turns into a quasi-night club. Pustoła, on the other hand, strips these spaces bare, pointing to the abstraction, liminality, and emptiness of the places where people have anonymous sex.

In Sepuya’s self-portraits, the erotic moves out from the bedroom and into the studio; it becomes a political act and an empowering statement in a space of creation. His works interrupt the predominant lens of whiteness in the history of visually representing the artist’s studio, raising questions about who has the right to look and be looked at. Sepuya rarely looks back; the camera does this for him, seemingly observing the viewer. Among the elements that frequently reappear in his photographs are the camera, backdrop, and mirror, which carry various meanings essential for understanding the artist’s work.

⁶⁰⁵ Maria Poprzęcka, “Na oko: między zmysłami,” *Dwutygodnik*, November 2009, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/felieton/616> (accessed January 11, 2025).

Black fabric in the studio serves multiple functions: it fills the space and divides the atelier into two realms: one visible to the viewer and one hidden from the figures in the photographs; it also acts as a metaphorical veil, affecting the visibility of the racial subject, and replaces the artist's body with a blackness that symbolizes the Black photographer. The camera, symbolically representing the phallus, also functions as a link in social, romantic, and creative relationships. The mirror, in turn, becomes an archive of these relationships' traces, a tactile record, and evidence of bodily presence spread over time within the studio, a space for collectively negotiating the conditions under which the photographs are created. The erotic tension emphasized in the photographs, along with the tactile qualities that stimulate the senses, closely associates Sepuya with the act of photographing sexual acts and the pleasure and fulfillment that follow. Adding this layer of meaning to the darkroom amplifies the erotic tension and tactile qualities in Sepuya's work. It suggests that the studio is not only a space for artistic creation and political statements, but also a metaphorical darkroom/dark room where intimacy, identity, and the act of looking and being looked at are explored in their most raw and vulnerable forms.



Fig. 141. Rashid Johnson, *Self-Portrait with my hair parted like Frederick Douglass*, 2003. Lambda print mounted on Sintra (45 3/16 × 57 1/4 in / 114.8 × 145.4 cm). Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.



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Fig. 143. Omar Victor Diop, *Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), American social reform activist, writer, and statesman (Diaspora)*, 2015. Pigment inkjet printing on Harman By Hahnemüle paper mounted on aluminum (23 5/8 × 23 5/8 in / 60.01 × 60.01 cm). Minneapolis Institute of Art Collection

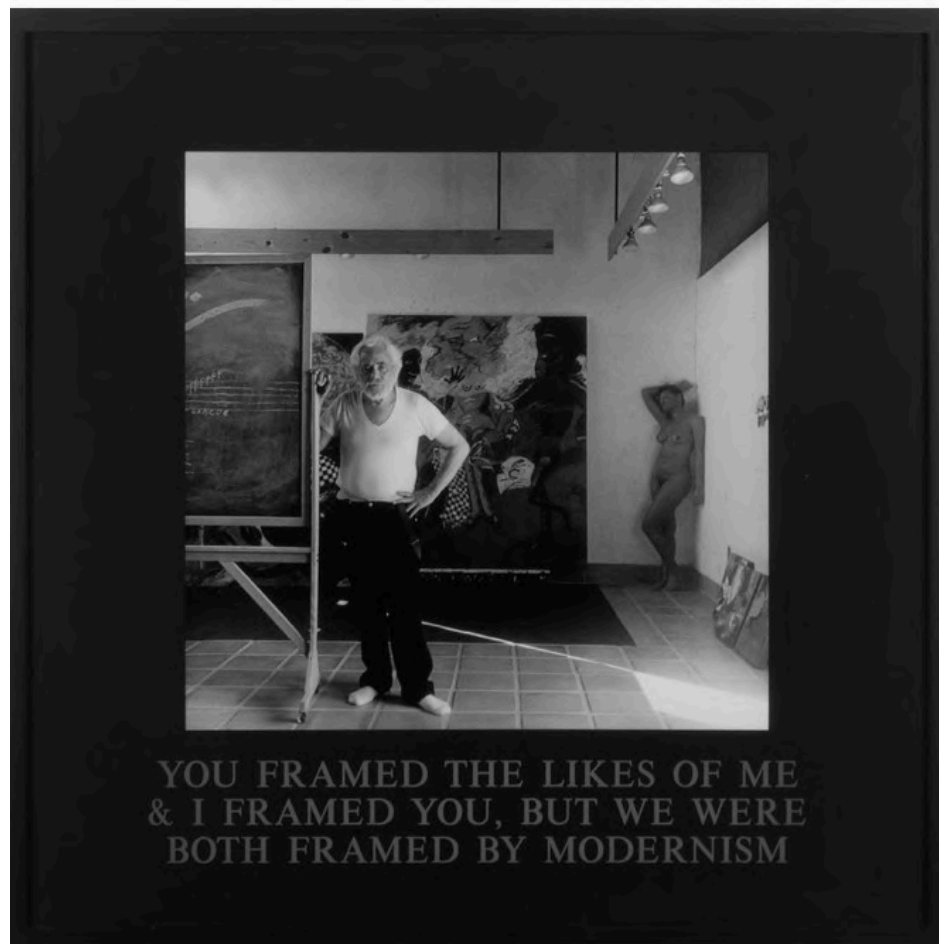
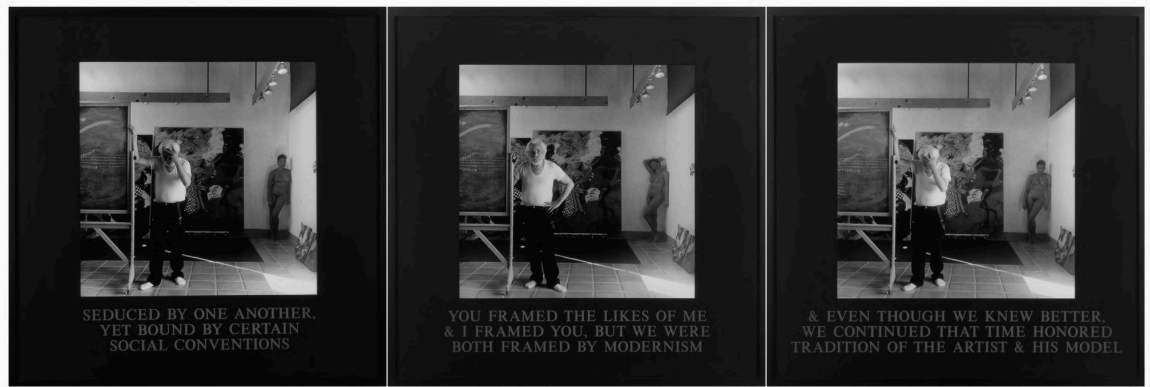


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Fig. 145. Lola Flash, *Hommage to Kerry James Marshall (syzygy, the vision)*, 2019. C-print (40 × 60 in / 101.6 × 152.4 cm). Lola Flash.



Fig. 146. Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014. Acrylic on PVC panels (83 5/16 × 119 1/4 in / 211.6 × 302.9 cm). Metropolitan Museum, New York.



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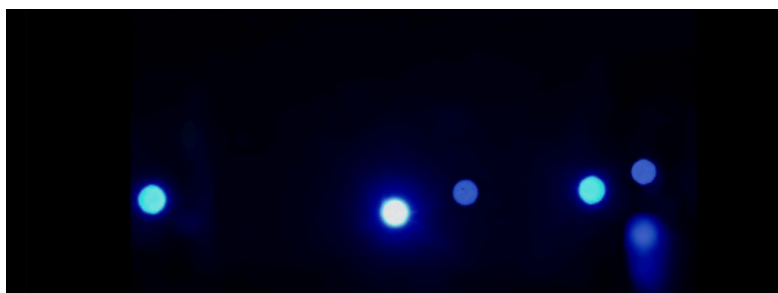
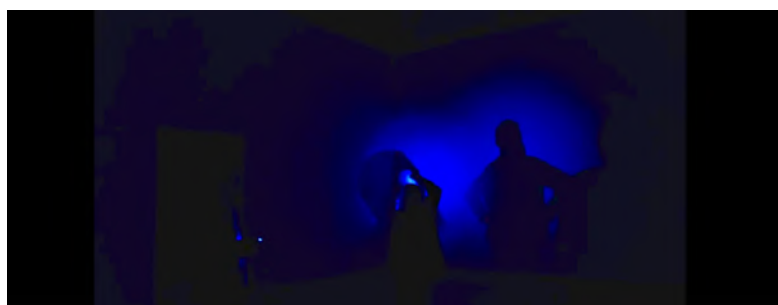


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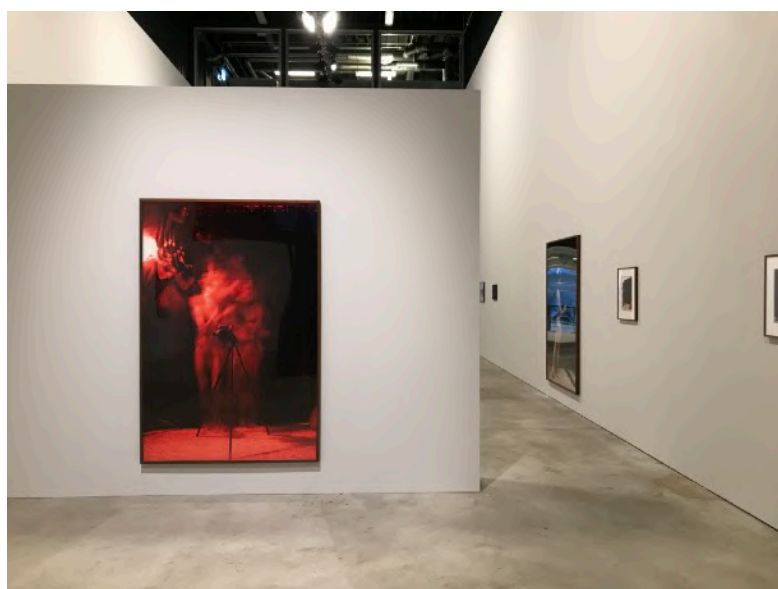


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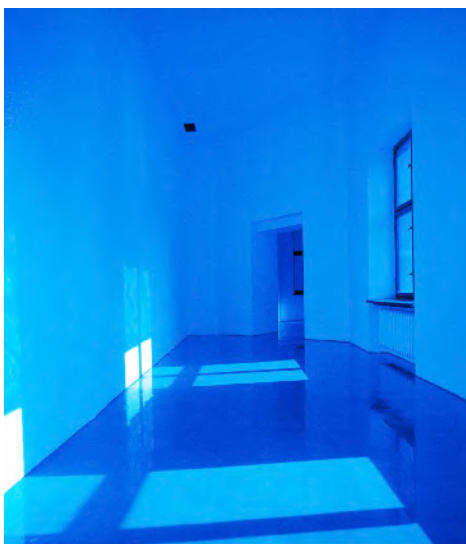


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CONCLUSION

*The influence of pictures upon this all-surrounding and all-powerful thought element may some day furnish a theme for those better able than I to do it justice.*⁶⁰⁶

Frederick Douglass, *Lecture on Pictures* (1861)

*Within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, forgetfulness is encouraged.*⁶⁰⁷

bell hooks, *Black Looks* (1992)

*[...] since I put into the arena of the world my body, my representations, my very thoughts qua mine, and since everything that one calls me is in principle open to a foreign gaze, should it but be willing to appear.*⁶⁰⁸

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968)

In the various strands of my arguments, I have sought to highlight the importance of centering Black figures in memory studies. Self-portraiture has served as a space for intervention, illustrating multiple approaches to exploring selfhood and Black subjectivity. It has revealed how tangible memories emphasize images that return, while also being performed, appropriated, remixed, and reenacted by contemporary artists. These strategies included working with archival materials, collaborating with families, recontextualizing well-known motifs from art history and Afrofuturistic reimaginings, highlighting marginalized identities and sexualities within the art canon, and challenging institutional power structures. It was also vital to view these interventions within specific spaces: homes as sites of refuge, love, and liberation; studios as places of creation and freedom; and the

⁶⁰⁶ Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," 130.

⁶⁰⁷ hooks, *Black Looks*, 191.

⁶⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 59.

landscape, where artists actively engage with it, bringing their performative self-portraits into a broader field.

This study aimed to introduce and honor contemporary, living artists who actively explore memory, whether collective or individual. The chosen series of photographs and artworks represents only a part of their practices, which often extend beyond photography into film and painting. The tangible memories framework serves as a model for both perceiving and experiencing the past, emphasizing the material and bodily link between photography, memory, and subjectivity.

I was writing this dissertation amidst significant socio-political events, including the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the armed conflict in the Middle East involving the United States, and the election of Donald Trump as president. Many political decisions linked to Trump's presidency have adversely affected the BIPOC community, the academic sector, the arts in institutions, and freedom of speech overall. A March 2025 Executive Order aimed at eliminating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs uses power to exclude discussions of identity, marginalization, and oppression from the public and private spheres.⁶⁰⁹ In this context, Carrie Mae Weems's *Museums* series acquires a new dimension and perspective in relation to the ongoing issues faced by artists of color.

In the context of policies that aim to erase trans identities through passport regulations, it is crucial to actively oppose homophobia and transphobia, and to challenge stereotypes that fuel society's fear of gender diversity. Artists like Lola Flash, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya demonstrate that their exploration of gender construction and social roles remains highly relevant. A recent exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York focusing on Black dandyism exemplifies how major institutions can influence discourse on gender expression, Black masculinity, and fashion by presenting historical contexts alongside modern reinterpretations of the Black dandy figure.

Discussing memory in the context of political radicalization and rising social conservatism is vital to preventing what is known as historical amnesia. This term

⁶⁰⁹ Maya Pontone and Isa Farfan, "Museums Scramble to Grasp Impact of Trump's DEI Mandate," *Hyperallergic*, January 31, 2025, <https://hyperallergic.com/987131/museums-scramble-to-grasp-impact-of-trump-dei-mandate/> (accessed July 19, 2025).

describes the collective forgetting of the past, often exploited by authorities to manipulate history and distort current understanding. Social issues like racism and nationalism often stem from selective remembrance, which can be difficult to remedy later. In his book *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton emphasizes that recurring images from history play an active role in shaping bodily memory.⁶¹⁰ These performances of memory help combat forgetting and social amnesia. Tangible memory is embodied work by artists, preserving stories of the past, engaging with cultural memory, and exploring artistic breakthroughs, colonial history, and the connection between Black photography and the cultural diaspora across the past, present, and future.

As I was finishing writing this study in July 2025, a wave of eighty anti-immigrant rallies flooded Poland, organized by the radical far-right party Konfederacja (Confederation).⁶¹¹ Ignited by racist and xenophobic narratives, part of Polish society shares a fear of the “*infection of the social body by otherness*,” as Ndikung paraphrases Henrik Erdman Vight.⁶¹² The deployment of familiar, nineteenth-century-esque stereotypes, albeit amplified by modern tools like AI-generated imagery tragically illustrates how selective remembrance and distorted historical narratives are weaponized to fuel fear of “otherness.” In this fraught landscape, the insights from Douglass’s writings and the power of tangible memory embodied in artistic work become not just valuable but indispensable.

⁶¹⁰ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁶¹¹ See Katarzyna Maria Skiba, “Anti-Immigration Demonstrations Take Place In More Than 80 Cities Across Poland,” Euronews, 19 July 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/19/anti-immigration-demonstrations-take-place-in-more-than-80-cities-across-poland> (accessed July 19, 2025).

⁶¹² Ndikung, *In a While or Two We Will Find the Tone*, 150.

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