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To Whom it May Concern:

Julia Strachura is establishing herself as an impressive emerging scholar across multiple modalities, including visual culture, photography and art history. This writing offers a potent response to the conversations Black artists are making and offers a generative theorization of time; and helps theorize the unfolding currents in Black visual culture. It is indeed an ambitious conceptual framework. The dissertation has a rich integration of art history, history of photography, memory studies, Black visual culture, a strong grounding in contemporary scholarship (focusing on Tina Campt, Kobena Mercer, among others) and I note that it was important for me to see the inclusion of lesser-studied artists. Ms. Strachura has a clear passion and originality in the writing and-research. The dissertation is timely. I suggest that Ms. Strachura add to the introduction a statement that defines clearly how this dissertation will add to the field globally.

The theoretical framing is strong but dense; it occasionally becomes a list of critical thinkers (Campt, Mercer, Assmann, Hartman, Wynter, hooks, Jones, Belting, Lacan) without enough synthesis. At times, authors are placed side by side even when their frameworks conflict epistemologically. Identify which theorists structure the argument most centrally and explain how to reconcile divergent frameworks, such as translating the text and the artwork that forms the arguments.

The introduction is quotation-heavy, and some citations function decoratively rather than analytically. For example, three major epigraphs (Douglass, hooks, Merleau-Ponty) create conceptual weight but aren't yet fully integrated. Analyze more and please show how each quotation advances the overall conceptual framework. The prose is strong and elegant but oftentimes the paragraphs run too long and contain four or five conceptual claims without hierarchy.

As a Fulbright/NYU/graduate student, Ms. Strachura articulates her position in distinct ways as a non-Black scholar working on Black self-portraiture, a European and a Polish academic and there are cultural and geographical distances from subjects. In doing so she brings a reading of a concept of *tangible memories* in a profound exchange: Black US art self-portraiture into dialogue

with a Polish context. As stated earlier the dissertation is rich and ambitious and the scope is broad. There are over twenty named important contemporary artists with multiple theoretical traditions (memory studies, Black studies, decolonial theory, phenomenology, art history). Ms. Strachura's comparisons examine the artistic, social and cultural histories of race making in the United States and shifts the terrain of critique to analyze how blackness has been central to the ways in which artists create their work. This breadth of these comparisons do not obscure the main thesis.

Ms. Strachura clarifies early which aspects are central (e.g., self-portraiture and tangible memory) but needs to define which are secondary to the argument. I suggest she include what is not discussed in the thesis as a way for the reader to clearly understand what is actually being covered. She frames *tangible memories* as her central conceptual innovation, but the definition remains expansive and risks losing the stronger points being made about the artists' works. When is a memory "tangible," and when is it not lost in the beginning. Where is Ms. Strachura position on some points that empower ideas of tangible memories?

In my view, the centerpiece of work is on memory as Ms. Strachura redefines Black photographic practices and self-portraiture. The thesis represents a substantial rethinking from established writers on self-portraiture and strategies of empowerment in posing and exploring notions of identity. The writing in the early stages established a frame of discovery by quoting Frederick Douglass's writings and Ms. Strachura outlines each section in cogent responses to each chapter. Again, the prose is luminous and is inviting to read as her path to completing the arguments present is strong for a book manuscript to be workshopped after graduation. This dissertation is *dense* and opens up the possibilities for a few publications which promises to be an important and original work poised to make significant contributions to the fields of art history and Black visual studies.

Tangible Memories. Black Photographic Self-Portraiture and the Strategies of Redefinition and Empowerment approaches photography's relationship to Black culture through the artist's imaginary and renews itself over and over through its critical writing and responses to the Black body. That's a wonderful intention. The core of this dissertation, "Tangible Memories," already resonates deeply with the spirit of my own work—the excavation of Black life and legacy through the lens. My response, therefore, aims to sharpen the focus on visibility, sovereignty, and the archive of the body. Some points emphasize on the profound connection between the act of taking a photograph, the assertion of self-regard, and the ongoing project of re-historicizing visual memory and reframing the labor of remembering:

Ms. Strachura's research is vital, an essential act of looking back to move forward. The analysis establishes "tangible memories" as a powerful tool—a lens for confronting and transforming the visual history that so often sought to diminish Black existence. To make this critique even more resonant, Ms. Strachura focuses on the relentless assertion of the "self" within the metaphorical frame.

1. The Labor of Visibility

Ms. Strachura explores the self-portrait in a communal sphere, especially in the work of various Black artists, always acknowledging the dual nature of exposure: the vulnerability and the power, which is quite powerful in Ms. Strachura's analysis of the personal and the political.

- **The Weight of Re-enactment:** For artists engaging directly with colonial imagery, like Ayana V. Jackson and others, the work is emotionally laborious. By foregrounding this ethical dilemma, the act of re-enactment does risk re-inscribing trauma. And, Ms.

Strachura addresses this in the concept of transforming the colonial gaze into a gaze of and witnessing.

2. The Archive of the Body

Ms. Strachura states that the archive is powerful by writing deeply on how the archive reveals broader stories.

- The Garment as Memory: In Adama Delphine Fawundu's *Freedom Cape*, the photograph is liberated from the flat page and given body and texture. Ms. Strachura focuses on the tangibility of the fabric—it is worn history, literally placing the political narrative (Shirley Chisholm, Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line) as a second skin. This is the embodied memory that counters a sense of a 'lost history' and it reads well.

3. Locating Power: The Studio and the Museum

The critique of the art canon is strong and a direct challenge to institutional structures that historically excluded Black curators, artists, writers, and voices.

- in the Studio: Emphasizes that the studio, particularly for queer and Black artists, is a sacred space of construction and refusal. It is a sanctuary where self-definition happens freely, often contrasting sharply with the hostile public world. This space allows Lyle Ashton Harris to challenge masculine norms and Paul Sepuya to redefine the erotic gaze—they are the masters of their own visual economy.
- The Haunting Muse: Reiterate the power in Carrie Mae Weems's standing *outside* the grand European museum. Her figure is a witness and a guide, using the black garment to embody mourning and the memory of all who were excluded and all the objects that were appropriated. Ms. Strachura writes strongly about Weems' presence that forces a reckoning with colonial debt and the unfinished business of history. The prose in other works I feel the same.

The most vital work is that which illuminates how Black artists see, how they have been seen, Ms. Strachura has done this work beautifully.

The section on Black Lives Matter in Poland is powerful — it shows how photography travels, how images cross oceans and form new communities of care and resistance. At present, this moment feels adjacent rather than central to the heart of the argument. The contextualization of BLM in Poland is compelling, but currently it feels appendicular, not integrated into the core argument of photographic self-portraiture. How does the Polish context help develop the argument about US-based self-portraiture? Is it comparative analysis or a case of transnational circulation of imagery?

Ms. Strachura proposes 1990–2024 as a frame but then writes that the richest material is 2000–2020? periodization seems partly artist-driven, partly based on shifts after the BLM. This is valid, but needs more justification. This dissertation is animated by a deep respect for the photograph as a site of memory; a place where the personal and the collective come forward to speak. Ms. Strachura brings together artists whose practices insist that the act of looking is also an act of remembering. Their approach is generous, historically engaging, and attentive to the ways Black subjects have shaped their own representation.

Still, there are areas where the project would grow stronger by listening more closely to her own central idea. The dissertation gathers many voices — artists, theorists, movements, geographies. This abundance reveals the author's expansive interest. Consider focusing back on the central

question: what does “tangible memory” do in these self-portraits, and why now? Some questions I came away with after reading this include:

- When is memory *tangible*?
- What forms does this tangibility take?
- How do the artists make memory visible, wearable, or touchable?

Julia Strachura’s *Tangible Memories: Black Photographic Self-Portraiture and the Strategies of Redefinition and Empowerment* is a deeply thoughtful and original contribution to the study of Black visual culture and photography. The dissertation’s strength lies in its sensitivity to the affective, material, and ethical dimensions of self-portraiture as both an aesthetic and political practice.

As Ms. Strachura summarizes in her research, I believe she will sharpen her focus on how “tangible memory” operates as both theory and practice which will enhance its clarity and impact in her concluding paragraphs. Ultimately, *Tangible Memories* demonstrates Ms. Strachura’s intellectual maturity, curiosity, and originality. This study is poised to make a meaningful contribution to art history, Black visual studies, and memory studies, affirming her position as a vital new voice in contemporary scholarship. Finally, I believe this dissertation meets the requirements for the PhD in art history/art studies.

Sincerely,



Deborah Willis, PhD
University Professor, Chair