




lorna simpson

repetition and
differentiation—
lorna simpson's
iconography of
the racial
sublime

OKWUI ENWEZOR



...fundamentally, the camera is merely a subjective apparatus, an apparatus of subjectivity. I would go so far as to say that the camera is a wholly philosophical product; it is an instrument of cogito.

—Georges Didi-Huberman¹

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EGINNINGS

In the late 1970s, Lorna Simpson embarked on a trip of discovery: the discovery of photography to which she has devoted a quarter century of her illustrious artistic career. At the same time there was a parallel journey, closely allied with the first, based on an extended series of travels to Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, where she began employing the camera to document her passage through territories that were then just beginning to register their diverse cultural and spatial settings in her pictorial imagery. These two coordinated trips over several summers—across continents, communities, and cultures—give the first indications of Simpson's preternaturally clear artistic motivation. What is immediately striking in the images generated from these trips is not the furtive tentativeness of an amateur. Instead, her photographs exhibit a sense of great visual control and a directness that is neither too intimate nor surreptitious. There is a hint of diffidence that one senses in the photographs, as if she were working around the edges of her subjects. By the same token, the images are utterly devoid of cant and sentimentality. In this clutch of photographic images that form the earliest public manifestation of her practice,² the ground was laid for what ultimately became the basis of a photographic argument about the nature of photographic subjectivity and the artist's control over the process of image making. In Italy, Spain, France, Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Jamaica, New York, and the American South, Simpson pursued her practice by training herself to see images in everyday events and social rituals, absorbing their import, as well as shaping her observations into photographic meaning, sharply delineating the spatio-temporal connection of her subjects to place.

FIRST LESSONS

The images are not timeless, universal signs. They are scorched with emblems and textures of their time and place (both in the garb and coiffure of the subjects). A photograph of two women wearing *hijabs* and semitransparent veils in the medina of Marrakech is instructive, not least because it is an agitated image. In the image it is clear that the woman at the bottom edge of the left corner may have just become aware of the presence of the photographer. Does the photographer have permission? This oft-repeated question inscribes the social contract between photographer and subject, especially when the cultural context demands it. It seems that this photograph demands an answer congruent with the question. The look in the eyes of the veiled woman, along with the sternness of her furrowed brow, does not signal any invitation. They merely place, for the record, evidence of her disapproval. Yet one cannot know for sure. There is an ambiguity in the exchange of looks between photographer and subject. The struggle for power and control over the scene of representation makes the simple plot of this photograph an ambivalent one.

The encounter with the Moroccan woman is familiar, that is, if we apply an orientalist reading upon this scene of differences, with the barely adult Simpson occupying the position of the penetrating Western gaze, that look that pierces and enervates the subject. But here it is the photographer's subjectivity that is at stake. She is being judged, along with the instrument that seemingly authorizes her entrance into the orientalist context. Her subjects do not give ground—the larger looming figure at the central portion of the image has turned from the camera. She either is ignoring the photographer or is oblivious to her presence. She is buried in her thoughts, her tense, invisible body burrowed within the flowing outfit that all but conceals it. But this obliviousness is betrayed by the palpable tension that runs from her hunched shoulders down to the hands hidden inside her outfit, which does indicate a response to the camera's presence. Neither woman collaborates in the slow striptease of the photographic game that frequently strips the "other" naked, turning her into merely an object of desire. This kind of refusal has engendered a multiplicity of critical literature, especially with the advent of the publication of Edward Said's landmark book *Orientalism*³ in 1978. The two women and the photographer are protagonists in a critical cultural conversation. Here we must see the exchange purely from the point of view of the subjects, whose gaze and body language dominate and seize control of the picture. Simpson must yield ground. She has lost the capacity to maintain the authority of the camera and its ability to invade the space of the other as most street photography tends to do.

In all the images from this trip, the confrontation between the Muslim women and the American girl inscribes a dialectic of power, about who has control over the image.



LORNA SIMPSON
Morocco (Moroccan Women), 1980
Courtesy the artist

Such struggle for power, for control over representation, has played a formidable role in Simpson's conception of photography and its capacity to enter a judgment of the scene of representation. The critical attitude that accompanies the photographic encounter is further distilled, years later, in Simpson's engagement with American racialized modes of representation and the bodies of black women. Yet, in contrast to the uneasy encounter with the Muslim Moroccan women, Simpson's other documentary pictures produced around the same period lack similar dramatic face-off. In other words, they are not dialectical. These pictures, shot entirely in familiar Western contexts, are not as contested. In Sicily, for example, the images, while clearly competent, are not as arresting. They appear hackneyed, depending as they do on clichés of tourist photography. We have seen such images before in countless establishments—pizza parlors, travel agencies, "Visit Italy" brochures—retailing cheesy Italian exotica. There is the image of robust, dark-haired Italian women full of merriment and so obviously delighted by the presence of the camera. The scene is as it should be: a combination of rustic charm and the simple joy of being alive. Another image is a street scene of a group of dark-suited men gathered in conversation in the middle of the picture. In the central foreground a young boy is playing, his smiling face crinkled in delight at an invisible object to which he has turned his head. In the background, to

LORNA SIMPSON
Sicily, 1980
Courtesy the artist

LORNA SIMPSON
Sicily (Street Scene), 1979
Courtesy the artist



the right, a matronly woman dressed in black is leading a small child outfitted in ruffled white chiffon into a courtyard, while to the left, in the far background, stand another woman in black and a young girl in white. But the winning charm of the picture is also the true subject of the photograph: he is standing there, like the lover he models himself as, arms akimbo, an unlit cigarette dangling from the corner of his lips. He is a perfect caricature of the local gigolo. These images clearly betray Simpson's absorption of classic post-war street photography modes of observation.

However, in subsequent images taken in New York there is clearly a sense that Simpson's perception of her own cultural context is far more acute and less dependent on the crutch of touristic exoticism. These images are shot across different settings but are mostly set within the urban milieu. The subjects are middle class, urban black Americans or immigrants in various ceremonial or ritual contexts, such as families attending a wedding, going to church, or watching a parade on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. The ease with which Simpson photographed these events is

reciprocated with a similar ease in the manner the subjects present themselves to the camera. One image in particular shows Simpson's debt at this time to the work of the great African American photographer Roy DeCarava, especially his classic book *Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), a collaboration with Langston Hughes.⁴ The photograph in question depicts a young black woman in a tiered lace bridesmaid dress clutching a small, white-ribboned bouquet of flowers as she faces the camera. In the image there are four figures posed against the backdrop of a station wagon. The bridesmaid is standing to the left side as she leans slightly forward while supporting the weight of her body with her left hand placed against the car's front door. In the middle is an older woman (also dressed formally in a white lace dress) half sitting inside the car's open back door. She is staring at the camera with a look of bemusement. To her immediate left stands another young woman holding a small child in her arms. The photograph is reminiscent of DeCarava's picture *Graduation, New York* of an extravagantly attired black girl on her way to graduation. Simpson's photograph evokes a similar sense of tenderness. This portrait of a black family displays the sensitivity that is the hallmark of DeCarava's analysis of black life in America, and may perhaps explain the ease one detects in these images. In a way, Simpson was working within her own culture. Notice that she has completely avoided the cliché of urban strife, poverty, and dilapidated neighborhoods in which black subjects are normally portrayed. These then are questioning photographs, images that go to the heart of black subjectivity and sense of the self. But are these images adequate to the task demanded by the encounter with the Muslim Moroccan women? We will soon discover the answer to this fundamental question in the decision Simpson makes in the 1980s.



DEFAMILIARIZATION

Like most beginners in photography, Simpson, who was in her late teens during the period the photographs were taken, worked in the honored documentary tradition. The documentary tradition to which she had initially responded includes both the work of European and American modernists: men and women such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Consuelo Kanaga, Gordon Parks, Roy DeCarava, Robert Frank, and many others. Such photography, splashy with bravado and social gravitas or cool and distanced as was the case with Evans, had reached its height with the advent of the witnessing industry procured by photojour-

LORNA SIMPSON
Eastern Parkway Brooklyn, N. Y., 1980
Courtesy the artist

LORNA SIMPSON
Flushing Meadows Park, 1980
Courtesy the artist



ROY DECARAVA

Graduation, New York, 1949

Gelatin silver photograph, printed 1982,

8³/₁₆ x 13 inches

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum purchase with funds provided by Photo Forum 1994 (94.746)

nalism and perfected in arty style through the invention of the “decisive moment” in the work of the likes of Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa. This style became indisputably cemented in the public imagination in the post-war years.

Most practitioners who employed the documentary form had great belief in the mediated truth of the image, especially one that was generally concerned with the human condition; with the poetic beauty of the ordinary and the metaphysical power inherent in observed nature. The introduction of the less bulky handheld camera in the 1930s changed

the nature of the photographic enterprise. Freed of the encumbrance of the stationary large-format machines of the previous era, photographers became more agile, an advantage afforded by the mobility the portable camera offered. It also changed the nature of documentary photography. As the twentieth century was being rapidly transformed, the documentary photographer was there to record and document it, to preserve, translate, and transmit its ideals of change and progress. This portable camera, in the overwhelming way it was used and in its attempts to penetrate social conditions, was both a sensitive and an indiscriminate machine. This machine in turn manifested a superficial image-mongering in the gossipy snapshot of the paparazzi. On the other hand, in the ponderous style of “concerned photography,”⁵ it became a sort of ethical shorthand directed toward the most troubling parts of society. We shall not speak of the nature of this “concern,” whether it lacked decorum or was just simply excessive.

Suffice it to say that from its very inception “concerned photography” was troubled and presumptuous. It was ready to be subjected to a radical process of defamiliarization: at once sensational (Arbus), detached, and severely objective (conceptual art). During this period in the 1950s and 1960s, American society was undergoing a profound and radical change. The changes brought about by the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the Women’s Rights movement touched the practice of photography in immeasurable ways, especially as artists became more inclined to deploy its methodologies and images.

Andy Warhol, that cool purveyor of the profound and the mundane, was one of the early contemporary artists to recognize the crucial shift in the practice of photography and the relationship between public images and the defamiliarization from their referent. In *Red Race Riot*, a large silkscreen of repeated images of a news photograph showing the police setting attack dogs on civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama, Warhol was able to critique the fundamental flaw inherent in documentary photography, which though attentive to the event was less able in negotiating the signifier/signified relationship reading of the image solicited. *Red Race Riot* indicated a different photographic paradigm, one that turned from the photojournalistic tendency of the documentary as news to the more iconic treatment of photographic images as archives of public memory (from celebrity to the infamous, disasters, and the bizarre).

This shift, which was already clear in the photomontages of the 1920s and in the defamiliarizations of Surrealism and Dada, would occur frequently throughout the 1960s in the work of Richard Hamilton, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and other pop artists. With conceptual artists such as Bruce Nauman, Ed Ruscha, Eleanor Antin, Adrian Piper, Dan Graham, Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson, Hans Haacke, and Martha Rosler, photography became a tool of documentation to be dissociated from the “concern” of the documentary practitioner. Photography was an instrument of investigation, a mechanism of critical analysis; its product a series of citations involving systems, experiments, preconceived narratives, “based in daily, lived rhythms or ‘real time’”⁶ that were no less true than the so-called unmediated images drawn by “pure” documentary. Photography at this juncture in contemporary art was fundamentally subjective. Simpson entered art school at the climax of the dialectic between the two traditions: one putatively objective and the other brazenly subjective. Needless to say, the latter view had the greater appeal and held more meaning for Simpson. The realization that there was a different photographic possibility would prove pivotal to Simpson’s attempt to constitute a new discursive strategy for subsequent work. It was the strip of photographic territory she had to traverse in order to understand that photography was “fundamentally subjective,” but also, that it was vitally philosophical.

APOSTASY

For a young artist still discovering the world of contemporary art, such realization as was manifested through the encounter with multiple photographic tropes was not necessarily reassuring. By the time she enrolled in art school in New York in 1978, Simpson, like the rest who passed through the birth canal of the documentary school, had become an apostate. However, the transformation of her work would come only later, while in graduate school in San Diego. In 1982, after leaving New York for the West Coast, she would become involved in an artistic environment where procedures of working were radically different from those of her beginnings in New York.⁷ The art department of the University of California, San Diego, comprised a number of experimental artists including Allan Kaprow and Eleanor Antin. Owing to the performance- and process-oriented work championed by the faculty, regular attendance at performances was de rigeur.

The activities surrounding contemporary artistic procedures furthered Simpson’s ongoing interrogation of photography. She was increasingly engaged with the analysis of the intermedia and temporal relationship between the performative act and the camera. She was in doubt about the adequacy of the documentary method as a way of



ANDY WARHOL
Red Race Riot, 1963
 Synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on canvas
 11 feet 5 inches x 6 feet 10½ inches
 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Art
 Resource, New York

digging beneath the crust of photographic truth. While the documentary form often proved incisive in the observation of social reality, declaiming on the imperturbable relationship between photographic truth and reality, it still appeared limiting for the kind of work she wanted to pursue. Rather than just recording reality, she wanted to investigate it, to unravel it, to interrogate it, and if possible to re-envision reality—in short, to reinvent truth.

What Simpson was most concerned with was not “self-evident” truth. Rather, she was invested in “historical” truth, that is to say, those images calcified like plaque in the social unconscious. Such images needed to be produced, in a similar vein to Cindy Sherman’s series “Untitled Film Stills.” To get to her goal, Simpson needed to demonstrate to herself that the camera was not just an instrument designed to probe into the depths of truth (self-evident or historical), one fashioned through apostolic devotion by various industries of the manufactured image. She wanted to reveal it also as a machine that spewed all manner of conventions and clichés, stereotypes that had to be overcome if the camera was truly to become “a wholly philosophical product” in the deconstructive mode. It was then that Simpson began her own quest of defamiliarizing the documentary image by turning to the staged, composed, performative image. She achieved her goal by first discarding the conventions of her documentary past. Working with a sequential, though not necessarily repetitive, relation of images shot in black and white, she inserted clips of language: dialogues and monologues to open up the discursive and narrative possibilities of the work.

The introduction of language in direct relation to the images owes partly to the fact that Simpson wanted to erase the caption that was so necessary for the denotative aspect of documentary practice. Her photographs began then to embody aspects of film stills, where she made the vital link between language and visual form. But this kind of relation had to be wholly invented in Simpson’s work. The photographs would bear resemblance to nobody and no event. They would become the event and their own singular semblance. By purging her shadowless images of any allusion to a socially recognizable environment, slicing away all the chiaroscuro detail for severe, empty, monochromatic, evenly lit scenes, she was able to realize the conceptual task that had previously stymied her documentary work.



CINDY SHERMAN

Untitled Film Still, 1977

Black-and-white photograph

Edition of 10, 8 x 10 inches

Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures Gallery (MP #3)

I did a lot of documentary photography in college—it’s an interesting practice, but as you distribute these photographs, what are you really saying with them? I found conceptual photography took that issue up. Being in California in the ’80s was completely the opposite of being on the East coast. Everyone was doing performance. I was at a point with taking photographs that I would think “I’m sick of seeing shows of only documentary work.” Yet, I wasn’t a performance artist. I like watching people perform but I don’t like to be out there, so my entire time was in observation.⁸

The settings of her photographs—which in the beginning alternated between a stark white background or lugubrious black, and later included a brownish-red background after she started working in color with the large-format Polaroid camera—appeared like backdrops for technical or scientific photography. The images have a neutral institutional appearance and tend to isolate the figures from any referential system. When necessary, the backdrops were employed to accentuate depth of field or aided in the establishment of shallow perspective. These were rigorously worked out systems for depicting scenes of angst, despair, and gestures of resistance.

The very first image that emerged from this new body of work, *Gestures/Reenactments* (pp. 10–11), encapsulates the first stage of this period of intense experimentation. It is in the nature of the unresolved issues in Simpson's development that the germinal work in her mature practice would be based on the image of the black male figure. Given the fact that in subsequent images Simpson would work exclusively with black female subjects, what is the significance of this appearance of the black male figure in the scene of representation? What becomes immediately clear in this depiction is the appearance of the castration complex. The series of monologues that runs beneath the six panels explores various anxieties that bedevil the black male subject in American culture. In the first panel the monologue runs thus:

*So who's your hero—
me & my runnin buddy*

*how his runnin buddy was standing
when they thought he had gun*

*how Larry was standing when he found
out*

There is an elegiac quality to these lines that may lead to the interpretation that this is a scene of tragedy and loss, a dissociation and emptying out of the subject. By leaving the lines incomplete, Simpson appears to be calling on viewers to complete the picture, to draw some conclusions about the fate of the “runnin buddy.” Standing off the frame, the anonymous male figure clad in white shorts and T-shirt appears as if he had been roused from bed. The mark of resignation in his slightly slackened frame is drawn out by the manner in which he stands, with his hands placed on his hips, scratching his thigh, or with hands folded facing the viewer. The gesture and pose indicate how people often stand when absorbing disturbing news. This work carries the rumor of the depleted black male subject, who is simultaneously feminized (how Larry was standing when he found out) and menacing (when they thought he had a gun).

Because the black male often is portrayed as either too constrained or uncontrollable, the figure in *Gestures/Reenactments* is a cipher of his social condition. The text panels that accompany the work present an essay on that condition. Simpson forces us not just to read the panels, she calls on us to scrutinize their meaning. Hers is an ethical gesture that reaches out beyond the principles of representation and into the

zone of historicity. To historicize and theorize sources of black pleasure and denial require a recoding of the iconic nature of the subject. Consequently, in portraying the subject as a character of sexual ambiguity completely devoid of the armors of masculine toughness yet exorbitantly endowed with such masculinity—so much so he risks death by his mere existence—she points us to the general aporia inherent in his social condition.



The co-mingling of sexuality and race has since remained an undercurrent of Simpson's work. Where Simpson explores the sexual ambivalence of the black male subject historically in American culture, her contemporaries such as Gary Simmons do so less ambiguously in works like *Line Up*, while artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien returns us to the scene of ambivalence in the film *Looking for Langston* (p. 134), as Glenn Ligon would do later in *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–93). Each of these works by artists of Simpson's generation shows how generative

the figure of the black male subject has been in contemporary visual culture, a theme productively underscored by Thelma Golden in the exhibition *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art* at the Whitney Museum in 1994.⁹

GARY SIMMONS
Line Up, 1993

Synthetic polymer on wood with gold-plated
basketball shoes

114 x 216 x 18 inches overall

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase,
with funds from the Brown Foundation, Inc. (93.65a-p)

CRISIS

What crisis? Crisis of race and gender? Or crisis of method? It is both. Let us focus on method first: Simpson's repudiation of her own photographic beginnings has largely remained unexamined in the large critical literature that has accrued around her work. This may be partly owing to the fact that after some early exhibitions at the beginning of the 1980s, she withdrew them from circulation. But to better understand the import of her subsequent work requires a return to the scene of crisis in her work, one that bequeathed her a surplus of new artistic maneuvers.

The abandonment of documentary practice was the first significant crisis in Simpson's understanding of photography, whereby she fell out of love with photographic realism and its apostolic truths. But she fell in love, so to speak, with photography as a shaper of subjectivity, as a moment in praxis in which to enact its vast theoretical promise and historical application. But this crisis was not unique to her alone. Around it was the crisis of representation, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, authorship, and authority. It was part of the radical reorientation of the artistic hierarchies that were being dismantled by artists in the 1960s and was occurring on the political front in the wake of decolonization, the Algerian War, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, and the revolt of students in May 1968. Simpson's estrangement from documentary realism occurred at that moment in historical recognition when the certainties of the monolithic, hegemonic arrangement of economic and political dominance of Western culture experienced an open revolt. The increasing multicultural dimension of this revolt remains palpable.

EVENTS OF THE SELF

Accompanying these events were the epistemological investigations initiated by artists, many of them utilizing performance and the camera. Whether performing the body or examining the socio-economic, racial, and sexual codes that surrounded it, in the 1960s, photography, along with video and structuralist films, became one of the preferred methods for recording, documenting, and witnessing the excessive production of subjectivity in contemporary art, making the resulting image the iconographic remainder of the extinguished embers of passionate performances, actions, processes, and analysis (Chris Burden, Ed Ruscha, Carolee Schneeman, Eleanor Antin, Bruce Nauman, Gordon Matta-Clark, Hans Haacke, Valie Export, Adrian Piper, Robert Smithson, Ana Mendieta, Yvonne Rainer, Richard Serra, Cindy Sherman, and Martha Rosler). The photographic support as such was overcome as a supplement, surrogate, index, archive, etc. For these artists the “camera [became] a wholly philosophical product; it was an instrument of cogito.”

This turn to the camera to record the tumultuous events of the self, giving rise to a formal analytical procedure in photographic practice, coincided with critical developments in postmodernism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism. In contemporary art

this focused on the crucial dialectic of the signifier/signified relationship in image making. The conceptual matrix of this induction of postmodernism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism and the camera was most productively explored by such artists as Adrian Piper, whose series “Food for the Spirit” pointed clearly to the idea of the self as something sutured from a multiplicity of sources, none of which properly designated a pure, authentic self. Instead, the investigation on which these artists embarked was a larger philosophical quest, one that concerned the possibility of self-knowledge through the restaging of the self by positioning the activity of the investigation in the crack between the signifier/signified dialectic. Piper’s and Sherman’s critical projects

with the camera thoroughly exemplify the crux of the signifier/signified dialectic.

To understand Simpson’s artistic practice, therefore, we need to invest our interaction with her work by exploring this domain of analysis involved in the recording of the events of the self, whether as surrogate, invented, imagined, or real. To understand how the signifier/signified relationship has functioned in Simpson’s photographic production requires taking an inventory of the forms, objects, signs, discourses, and types of images that have emerged in her carefully constructed *mise en scène*.



BRUCE NAUMAN
Art Make-Up, No. 4: Black (detail), 1967-68
16mm film transferred to video
10 minutes, color, sound



THE AMERICAN SUBLIME AND THE RACIAL SELF

We will see how and why this fresh logic of the photographic instrument held great appeal for Simpson, as was already demonstrated in *Gestures/Reenactments* and subsequently in *Screen 1, Screen 2, Screen 3, Screen 4* (all 1986) and *Completing the Analogy* (1987). The turning point in her work lies specifically in the fact that for her generation photographic inquiry became concerned principally with cogito, and it was not necessarily the drive to self-knowledge nor autobiography that compelled this shift. There were larger issues at stake: a whole social body and its pathologies. Let us give this a name: It is the spectacle of the racial self and the gendered body. Take the example of *Completing the Analogy*, in which a tousle-haired black female garbed in a crinkled cotton gown, her

back turned to the viewer, appears to be facing a blackboard in an image in which foreground and background have been erased. The slightly animated pose contrasts dramatically with the text printed on the photograph, which reads:

*HAT IS TO HEAD
AS DARKNESS IS TO.....SKIN*

*SCISSORS ARE TO CLOTH
AS RAZOR IS TO.....SKIN*

*BOW IS TO ARROW
AS SHOTGUN IS TO.....SKIN*

But insofar as this is concerned with certain practices of dissection, we can more properly locate its aesthetic properties as the ken of the American sublime: race and gender in social discourse. Therefore, to confront Simpson's early photographic work (1985–95) and the elliptical linguistic registers that ring it like a halo, we have to engage how the disquietingly straightforward, pared-down images open the viewer up to a vast epistemic field. It is a field rooted in a particular type of violence. This violence is grounded in methods of subjection and denial. Access to its disclosure therefore requires more than the tacit acknowledgment of its historical base and its temporality.

Over the last century, manifold cultural examinations and artistic investigations have been opening knowledge of this violence to viewers. D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) is a key example of the iconographic violence rooted in the American sublime. Popular media, literature, and countless Hollywood films are saturated with such images. It is never said enough that nothing escapes the racial sublime and the epistemic violence that surrounds it in the American civilization. The scrutiny of the racial sublime constitutes a key philosophical and methodological framework of Simpson's critical project. But what is this violence and how does it frame her artistic

ADRIAN PIPER
Food for the Spirit, 1998
Selenium toned silver print
14½ x 14¾ inches

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design;
Mary B. Jackson Fund (2000.97.1)

procedures? Or, rather, how has Simpson deployed the dispersed regimes of this violence to explore the limits of the body, the black body mounted on the scaffold and bound up in its suffocating hold? Then there is the female body. And then the black female body. And then . . . Simpson stages her work in the tumultuous events of the racial and gendered self. Perhaps we can see why it is possible to speak here of the double displacement that is evident in all her work, especially in the constant insertion of the photographic subject into the zones of racial and female identification. The first displacement connects to the question of what it is to be black and female. This frame represents the universal and the particular in her line of enquiry. The second displacement is on the narrower subject of what it means to be African American and American simultaneously. This frame is driven by the concepts of diaspora and subalternity; nationality and citizenship. The relay of positions and modes of address also touch on specific formal and methodological issues: the inter-media relationship between photography and film, text and image, speech and narrative. All of these form the backdrop of what this essay seeks to explore.

RUPTURE, OR THE MADNESS OF RACE

There is in the “mythology of madness” the oft-repeated story of the radical therapy effected by Phillipe Pinel when he released the madmen and madwomen from their chains in Bicêtre and Salpêtrière hospitals in Paris in 1794. Pinel’s freeing of the madmen and madwomen was said to have ushered in a revolution in the treatment of madness. Not only did he free these men and women from their literal chains, he simultaneously, through their deincarceration, also freed them from the stigma to which the chain had interminably condemned them beyond repair.

By the same token, Pinel did not so much free the insane from their hellish confinement as much as he released their madness from total censure. In this way he returned them back into the world, or rather, into the social government of the asylum from which the insane had been banished. And in which for centuries scores languished, under lock and key, behind high walls, where no “serene” gaze of rationality and respectability would ever fall on that insolence that represents the ruined human character.

In America, race constitutes its own form of madness, along with its own asylums and governmentalities. From the earliest moment that European colonists arrived on the American shores, race has been the great alloy of a potent social experiment, one that produced slavery and the plantation economy. If the Bicêtre and Salpêtrière hospitals were more than therapeutic zones—being as they were places of seizure—the confinement on the plantation under slavery mobilizes similar senses of capture and stigma. Race in America simultaneously represents the unspeakable and the irrepressible, as well as an epistemological model of biological differentiation that produces a prodigious body of discourse and representation. And like madness in the asylum, it enjoys a particular kind of censure behind the high walls of its own asylum. Except, unlike the asylum, which is ringed by thick, mortared walls and protected by a forbidding gate, the madness of race exists nakedly visible in the tumescent flesh of the American social ideal and is practiced in the open terrain of the cultural landscape.

Toni Morrison has productively explored how the episteme of race as a literary device of social and political differences was constituted. She makes us aware of how the discourse of race suffuses the canons of early and modern American writing, particularly the novels of America's most celebrated writers. She argues that the madness of race, along with its utter naked visibility, is part of the unique character of American literary arts. According to her analysis, a cursory search into American literature reveals the obsessive nature of the racial attitude in what she identifies as the uses of an Africanist presence to elevate the representations of literary whiteness and at the same time ameliorate the lurking sense of a human bond that connects the enslaved and the free. This presence, as it were, stages a discourse, a funnel through which the dialectic between enslavement and freedom could be passed. Morrison came to this insight through close readings of Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Styron, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and many others.

My curiosity about the origins and literary uses of this carefully observed, and carefully invented, Africanist presence has become an informal study of what I call American Africanism. It is an investigation into the ways in which nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served. I am using the term "Africanism" not to suggest the larger body of knowledge on Africa that the philosopher Valentin Mudimbe means by the term "Africanism," nor to suggest the varieties and complexities of African people and their descendants who have inhabited this country. Rather I use it as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people. As a trope, little restraint has been attached to its uses. As a disabling virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability. Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom.¹⁰

Abolition literature and the slave narrative were direct literary responses to the disjuncture of racial difference. This disjuncture has been well preserved in the American aesthetic imagination, from the vaudeville black face of Al Jolson to President George W. H. Bush's deployment of Willie Horton in an advertisement during his presidential campaign in 1988. During the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s the disjuncture of race as an artistic paradigm made a return in the form of black nationalism, while in the 1980s it was penetrated by the insight of cultural and postcolonial studies and postmodernism. In contemporary art, a denotative and connotative Africanist presence has been abundantly used by artists—black and white alike—who find in the form of this spectral subject a language for the racial sublime. Simpson, Kara Walker,

Glenn Ligon, and Fred Wilson are some of the better-known younger African American artists who have wrung meaning out of the vast Africanist visual archive and who have also departed from the props of black nationalism of the 1960s. They have devised a more nuanced if not always successful philosophical engagement with its imagery. If the madness of race suffused the work of these artists—providing, as their work proved, a topic of serious theoretical and historical reflection—it has not come without misgivings on the part of the critical establishment. As Morrison correctly observed, “When matters of race are located and called attention to in American literature [and art], critical response has tended to be on the order of a humanistic nostrum—or a dismissal mandated by the label ‘political.’ Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly.”¹¹

However, the work of these artists was accompanied by a number of broader theoretical positions. One such position could be found in the work of the Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, whose book *Black Skin, White Masks* sought to unravel the power of the racial asylum over its inhabitants and administrators.

I want to think through some of the implications of race and madness in connection with the important work Fanon did in the asylum in Blida, Algeria, during the colonial war there in the 1950s. Early in his career Fanon had grasped the link between racism and madness. Similar metaphors used to describe Pinel’s historic deincarceration of the insane have been applied to Fanon’s work in Blida. In Algeria, Fanon wanted to demonstrate through the case study of asylum inmates interned in colonial jails that racism literally drives the subject insane. In order to offer the inmates effective therapy, he, like Pinel, had to release them from the chain of inferiority imposed by colonial racism.¹²

Fanon’s work then was a double therapy, dealing with literal madness and colonial racism. Lorna Simpson’s interrogation of race in her work has consistently attempted to unravel the underlying madness of the same: the racial sublime, a combination of desire and repression. The racial sublime operates on the prodigious multiplication of social signifiers along with the phantom forms of subjection in everyday life in America. No wonder Cindy Sherman suppressed an early work in which she developed a number of female characters in black face, adding to the archive. In this series of untitled, photographic impersonations produced in 1976 she projected the romance of race back into the scrim of the racial sublime.

But in Simpson’s work we will notice that the selfsame racial sublime was not only a romance but was accompanied by the episteme of violence to the black body, which is doubly violent to the black woman’s body and psyche. Therein lies the undercurrent that lurks in many of Simpson’s images. While the theoretical basis of the intersection of race and gender in Simpson’s work is soundly grounded in the broader project of feminism, as her project doubtless is, it still does not obscure the basic premise argued by many African American feminists such as Michelle Wallace¹³ and bell hooks,¹⁴ that mainstream feminism has been quite blind to the violence of the racial sublime. Within this terrain Simpson’s work has introduced a fundamental dialectic, namely, the relationship between plenitude and negation. The privileging of the black female subject in her photographic projects addresses the question of plenitude,

while the insistent refusal of the face of the woman alludes to her negation by the culture at large. In fact, much of Simpson's work proceeds from the establishment of this crucial disjuncture.

THE NEGATION OF PORTRAITURE

In all of Simpson's attempts at interrogating forms of hysteria that surround the racial sublime, what the viewer is confronted with time and again is the paradoxical denial of the façade of the stereotypical victim (woman and black, black and woman). That is to say, the superficial characterization via portraiture of the face on which could be read the inscription of racial, gendered, and sexual violence. By denying this access, Simpson reworks the ethical paradigm of the documentary, critically questioning the maudlin sentimentality introduced in early photography of the face as a window into the soul of a subject. The face has been a cheap trick in photography, wherein shallow psychological and morality tales become conventions for reading deep character into nothing but a mask. Proponents of this trick want us to believe in the oracular certainty of the mask, as if a more penetrating insight can be gleaned from the gaze of the subject. By having her models face away from the camera, cropping off the head and screening the faces, Simpson was constantly performing surgeries and excisions, cutting away the skin of resemblance. In so doing, she was able to abolish the façade and the distraction of the gaze. To address this conundrum she has invented her own countersystem of knowledge that plays on the linguistic nature of everyday speech: tongue twisters, pantomimes, riddles, and puns. The locution is richly American. It is self-knowing and self-effacing speech, an exchange of tongues to fit into areas the gaze may not reach.

For example, in *Twenty Questions (A Sampler)* (pp. 12–13) Simpson uses the nineteenth-century circular device of portraiture to negate the portrait of the subject and thereby deny and eradicate the insolence of the gaze. The subject's face and gaze do not encounter the viewer's. Yet Simpson goes ahead to lead us into the trap, inviting us to make judgments of her character, to cast aspersions, to damn with an epithet, indicate delight, or register horror in the clear rendering of five questions, each related to the will to define who this subject is. The questions run thus: "Is she as pretty as a picture" "Or clear as crystal" "Or pure as a lily" "Or black as coal" "Or sharp as a razor." It is an effective ruse: four identical images of a reversed portrait bust featuring a woman's back, her features obscured and masked by a shock of lush pomaded hair (hair plays a crucial role in the work) that runs down to and conceals her neck, revealing only the naked vulnerable flesh around the shoulder, down to the upper reaches of the back, which is covered by a simple calico chemise.

It is a clinical image, undifferentiated like a police line-up photograph, elements of which she has appropriated from Alphonse Bertillon's infamous machine. As we know, the line-up is an agent of identification and misidentification. Simpson has used and tweaked it, so that the self-repeating image calls on the viewer to decipher the characterological zone into which to confine the subject. Didi-Huberman calls this the "legend of identity and its protocol."¹⁵ The constant use of the line-up by Simpson feeds this legend, yet it assumes an entirely different protocol by the sheer obduracy of

the subject's refusal to declare an identity, to reveal herself before the iron law of the legend's damning gaze. This is the function of the negated portrait, to open us up to the original sin fundamental to the miasma of racial hysteria.

THE HYPOCRITICAL GAZE

The gaze is unforgiving. It operates below the surface and under the skin, even more so with all the scopic devices that clatter around all contemporary existence. From airport scanning machines, MRI scanners, Doppler tests, to conventional cameras, these instruments magnify the gaze, leading it into the deepest recesses of the body. *Looking Devices* (1996), a grid of photographs documenting various examples of binoculars, is a commentary by Simpson on the prosthetic attachments of the gaze. In this instance, the key issue for her was the subject of voyeurism. However, today the machines of voyeurism have proliferated. These numbing instruments that suffuse life and in a flash of shattering immobility fix the subject or body into a classification system, into a zone of knowledge, tabulated in a ledger of all-encompassing visibility, have become what must be overcome for us to have bodies. Didi-Huberman might have declared such a system hypocritical, by which one may point to the hypocrisy of the photographic apparatus. Here "it is hypocrisy as method, a ruse of theatrical reason as it presumes to invent truth."¹⁶

Perhaps the claim that the camera is an instrument of cogito bears examining. To get around the apparent contradiction of such a statement in response to the hypocrisy of the apparatus, it should be added that the camera is equally a blunt instrument. It is the latter understanding, one suspects, that led to Simpson's rethinking of the documentary method by seeking to detach the camera from the body. Which asks the questions: By what method then does the camera know the truth of the body? In what way is it an instrument of cogito? In part, Simpson's work has been about resolving this contradiction. By nominating the photographic apparatus as both agent and double agent. By forcing the camera to betray its clandestine undermining of the body, while making it serve the task of inventing an entirely different subjective protocol by theatricalizing the body through the selfsame camera. *Wigs* (pp. 40–42), a large-scale series of fifty individual photographs of wigs printed on felt, exemplifies the theatricalized body, albeit its surrogate form, disciplined within the grid of scientific rationality. But *Wigs*, despite its impressiveness, is in many ways a transitional work, developed at a point at which Simpson was beginning to erase the trace of the body entirely from her work; suppressing even the corporeal parts on which the marks of gender and race had been bound. Here the absent portrait is being dispersed, broken down into surrogate parts.

WEIRD SYNESTHESIA: THE SPEAKING ORGAN AND PROPHECY

But let us hold on a while longer to the negative dialectic of the portrait—understood from the perspective of the hypocritical instrument—and enumerate other ways it furnished Simpson with her ordnance of philosophical arguments. We know that the details of this argument were established in the post-documentary images. But the earliest account of it in the refusal of the Muslim Moroccan women was purely

serendipitous. Since then, for Simpson, portraiture has served the function of refusal and dissidence, like the Muslim Moroccan women a decade earlier who, though they did not turn away, yet denied Simpson full access to their portraits. Whatever the lessons learned from that earlier encounter, it was properly absorbed, perhaps unconsciously, into the latter work. The subject is never fully visible. There is never eye contact. Nor invitation to intimacy. Nor familiarity. It is not a question of the decorum of portrayal or resemblance: The target is the limits of photographic depiction and representation, vision and visibility. The more to underline the hypocrisy of the camera as it presumes to invent truth. The linguistic association is nothing more than the opportunity for Simpson to rubbish the presumption. But it is much more than that, for that would be too easy. In fact, the linguistic connotations unmask the violence

inherent in racial hysteria. As such, *Twenty Questions (A Sampler)* manifests an attempt to render the symptom of the hysteria, which is not at all dependent on mere representation but rather is linked to mental images burned into the cerebral cortex.

In 1989, Simpson produced a series of photographs in which she introduced

images that may be seen as complete portraits in that the faces are neither turned away nor cropped out of the frame. These images were not a complete concession to portraiture or resemblance; rather, they are informed by the underlying assumption of the insufficiency of visuality alone to explain phenomena. In this case, which is partly experimental, Simpson appears to want to invest the gaze with a new kind of capacity: the capacity of speech. In the portraits that ensued from this experiment, text has been overlaid on the faces, partially obscuring the full identity of the subjects. In *Sounds Like* (1988), *Proof Reading* (p. 27), and *Easy for Who to Say*, the obliterated eyes or faces are covered by either a single word related to subjectivity or letters related to sentence structures, becoming the speaking gaze. Here the eye/gaze may not be allied with vision, but it certainly is with prophesy. It is literally a speaking organ in a form of weird synesthesia.

In *Easy for Who to Say*, five identically formatted Polaroid photographs are presented in a repeating horizontal line. But we do not see the faces that bear the portraits, since they are not vehicles of recognition. It is already quite clear that these enigmatic images are not portrayals but ciphers. For where the eyes/gaze would have been, Simpson has superimposed five vowels, each representing a word: for example, A = Amnesia; E = Error; I = Indifference; O = Omission; U = Uncivil. In *Sounds Like*, the Polaroid portrait shows a model wearing a white blindfold across her eyes with the lettering I-WIT-NESS etched across where the gaze would have been. The work performs the task of bearing witness and inscribes subjectivity simultaneously. Like *Easy for Who to Say*, each letter and the associated word take on the charge of delineating a mnemonic game; a disturbance perhaps in the experience of the subject. *Proof Reading* similarly engenders associations with



LORNA SIMPSON
Easy for Who to Say, 1989
 5 color Polaroid prints, plastic plaques
 31 x 115 inches overall
 Collection Mr. and Mrs. Howard Ganek

ophthalmologic examination. All three works are principally concerned with methods of disclosure whereby the structure of memory is conjoined with the capacity to see, to visualize, and to be visible: to be believed, issues already anticipated in *Waterbearer* (p. 15).

The degree to which Simpson refuses full disclosure of her photographic subjects' faces is part of her attempt to limit the connotation of autobiography. It is also a denial of the anxious, stereotypical victim, that is to say, the superficial rendering, via portraiture, of the face of the black woman as victim on which could easily be deciphered the inscription of racial violence or sassiness. This matter is adjudicated in *Untitled (2 Necklines)* (pp. 24–25) and *Stereo Styles* (pp. 22–23). What is in a face if not, as some would argue, the oracular insight gleaned from the gaze of the subject. But with the eyes bound by the glaucoma of non-sight, words become the manner of prophesy. The counter-measure against the hypocrisy of sight.

I suggested earlier that negation is pivotal to Simpson's use of the portrait. To understand the way the liminal figures who inhabit her photographic tables function in relation to representation, we would do well to linger on the nature and status of the photographic portrait: between the portrayed and depicted, the represented and the documented, the visible and invisible, the inchoate and the overdetermined. From very early on, the figures appear to have been assigned a rather standard set of outfits befitting their roles as stand-ins for a generic racial and gendered self. The plain smocks, the unadorned studio settings scrubbed of every detail, almost as if the studio were an isolation chamber in an institution. Because the figures are almost always black women, they represent a kind of every black woman. They have no names. No faces. No identity except their biology. But they are made alive to us via their symptoms. Didi-Huberman's keen insight into the work of Charcot and his treatment of hysterics at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris is apt in exploring what Simpson is concerned with:

[The symptom of race]...in its ever-renewed reification of bodies, in the maintenance and mastery, and even jouissance,...In this way it fomented a perverse relation...constantly asking [itself], in a certain way the ultimate perverse question: "Of what corporeal substance is a woman made?"...Confronted with this quest, the hysterical body consented to an indefinite reiteration of symptoms, shreds of responses, a maddening reiteration. For a perverse authority, it was titillating. Iconographable.¹⁷

But is the body of a woman, much less that of a black woman, so easily procured by the machine of iconographic reification? Sherman approaches this question in one way in her send-up of the conventional female stereotypes merchandised in Hollywood cinema, or turns them into tools of historical struggle in the Renaissance portrait styles she pilfered to serve her ends. Simpson approaches it differently. Because she eschews pure portrayal, she arrives at portraiture by way of negation, canceling out the visage; suppressing and obscuring the identity of the sitter. In this way her images resemble no one. The portraits are resemblances of a general kind that are bound up in

the limits of race and gender. In these quintessentially anti-portraits, one is raced and sexed: black and woman.

INDIFFERENCE: ON NOT BEING PROPER SUBJECTS

Because Simpson rarely divulges the full identity of her sitters, the portraits she composes stand not just for a general figuration, they stand for an abiding American Africanism. The models in the photographs are never proper subjects. They are shadow figures, specters, archetypes of the American racial sublime. Here the model is thoroughly dissociated, and turned into a figure of indifference. Gilles Deleuze's opening sentence in *Difference and Repetition* speaks directly to Simpson's method, insofar as the indifference to portraiture is concerned. He writes:

*Indifference has two aspects: the undifferentiated abyss, the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved—but also the white nothingness, the once more calm surface upon which float unconnected determinations, like scattered members: a head without a neck, an arm without a shoulder, eyes without brows.*¹⁸

It is quite clear that throughout the construction of the works the artist has been carefully gesturing toward that plenitude that marks the position of the black figure in the American imagination. The black figure is abundant with meaning and has filled to the brim the corpulent estate of the country's artistic legacy. The black figure is a monstrous body: at once threatening and benign, capable of the most horrific actions yet essentially a child. In the carefully chosen texts that accompany the photographs, it is quite clear that the figures we see are struggling to exceed their limits. It is also clear that these are troubled bodies, excessive bodies, subjugated and unmanumitted bodies.

Here we return to the principle of negation, for the Africanist presence is essentially a vehicle of negation and negativity. There is never a surplus that accrues to that figure. It is a disfigured subject, marked by indifference, that suffers the malediction that racism produces; confined in "the undifferentiated abyss, the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved." It is in this sense that Simpson's approach to portraiture opens up the unresolved role of the black figure in a generally racialized society that is steeped and invested in the production of indifference.

VOICE AND MIME

Much of Simpson's work imbricates language, speech, and text. Language is employed like a lever to pry open the lid of the unconscious. Here text plays a subsidiary role. However, when it approximates speech, it functions like a memory trigger in relation to a visual cue. The text panels also confront the viewer with a fundamental contradiction between the sense of vision and voice as separate forms of knowing: between seeing and speaking. If we are to reconcile this contradiction, then much of Simpson's work is not simply annexed to text/image relationship, it is fundamentally audiovisual.

REPETITION AND DIFFERENTIATION

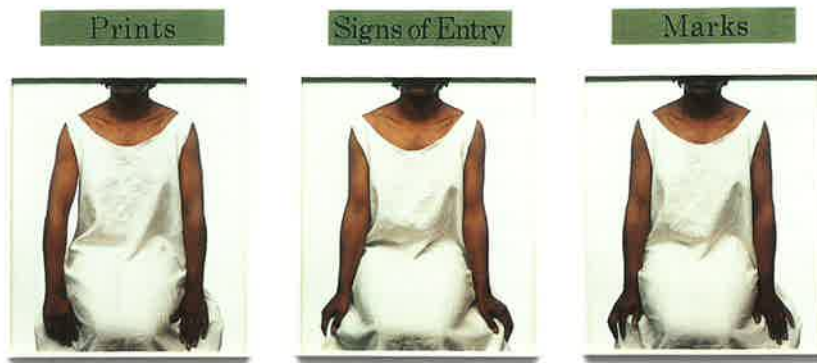
In *Five Day Forecast* (pp. 16–17), for example, Simpson deploys a staccato device, a kind of mechanistic action of repetition and differentiation. One feels as if doused with a shower of recriminations. Arranged like a weekday diary—from Monday to Friday—five nearly identical photographs of female figures with arms folded tightly across the body, just below the breast, form a single horizontal line facing the viewer. Above each image, the day of the week is correlated with two words running beneath each image, forming a total of ten such words. A word is repeated and immediately differentiated to signal the shift to a different register of meaning. For instance, we shift from misdescription to misinformation to misidentify, misgauge, and misconstrue. In each case, *mis* is repeated and comes to stand almost like an object. Each repetition functions like a mark of emphasis, ballast for the point of differentiation that announces yet another set of clues. Here, as with the case of portraiture, an object of negation is introduced to indicate the status of the subject's relationship to the narrative. It is a sonic recall attached to a linguistic sign. Language not only involves the voice, it is lashed to the ear. Here the aural landscape and sonic texture of the voice combine to propose the non-concordance of the figure which constantly slips out of recognition, which falls back into the void, down the abyss.

Memory Knots (1989) and *Guarded Conditions* (p. 135) are similarly structured, each adopting the same principle: The former is organized by the logic of a journal (a similar arrangement is deployed in 1978–1988, pp. 28–29) and the latter like a flow chart of symptoms. Both distill and elucidate in clear terms the chief historical argument—race and gender, memory and amnesia—that runs through much of Simpson's work. *Guarded Conditions* is monumental, slightly larger than human scale. Simpson uses the iconography of the police line-up to high effect in the pose of the model, a big-boned black woman clothed in the signature unadorned white, hospital-issue wrinkled gown, standing with both arms folded behind her back. There are six images in all, comprising a total of eighteen individual prints. Though the arrangement of the images may indicate they are repeated, they are in fact not exactly the same picture all the time, as if mimicking chronometric photography. Above the images, a large sign like an advertising shingle is hung and beneath runs a band of fevered verbs—skin attacks, sex attacks—repeated like a mantra. But in this case it is more an urgent act of repetition and differentiation than pure denotation. The repetition and differentiation of sex and skin attacks—the inferno of the subject—serves to conjunct the horizon of race and gender discourse as an attack and stain on the subject.

GRAIN OF THE VOICE

Does the text sponsor the image or vice versa? Is the image part of an imaginary domain, one that has lapsed to the rear of recognition and must now be coaxed back with words? These questions bear on the proper understanding of the artist's enterprise. Simpson's facility with language is not merely technical. It is not part of the compositional technique of a writing course. It is located in discourse, and this is

what makes her lines bristle with such authority. The rigor and discipline of her lines are not unlike that pursued in the poet's ardor to stage in language the materiality of speech. The grating sound of words translating terrible deeds against identity; the grain of the voice communicating the infamy of the body. The cadence of the voice (and its voicing), the staccato and cool precision of delivery make impossible the eradication of a single line or word. What the reader/viewer experiences is the climax of a radical tension, the meaning of each line, the acerbic brevity of a compositional rigor that recuperates the dispersed subject, brings her back to historical visibility. Here words are laid on the grounds of each figure or on a separate plaque attached next



to or affixed between frames or on the image, like slabs of stone on pavement. Like sentinels demanding recognition, each word sitting on the white sheet or etched on a black plastic rectangle becomes an object, a thing in itself, not merely a sign. This is clear in the arrangement between image and discourse in *Three Seated Figures* or violence in

Double Negative (p. 30). Each of the text panels sublimates the literal denotative conjunct. In *Double Negative*, a stacked vertical panel of four Polaroid photographs consisting of a single image of a braided hairpiece formed into a circle, there is an ungiving solidity to the appearance of each text panel between the images. The four repeated images suggest a noose, while the verticality of the stack gives the impression of the scaffold. Language and image are used to represent the violence of the Jim Crow mob, bringing to mind the image of the lynched body. Consequently, the relationship between text and image in the work is completely different from the way the caption is used to domesticate photography, which always turns the image into an illustration of something rather than a complement to an event.

LORNA SIMPSON

Three Seated Figures, 1989

3 dye diffusion (Polaroid) prints, 5 plastic plaques

30 x 97 inches overall

Collection Carol and Arthur Goldberg

INTERMEZZO: WORKS FROM THE MID-1990S

I have been interrogating the extent to which Simpson invested her practice with certain features of American Africanism, in the inferno that is the American racial sublime. Throughout this exercise, we saw how the racial sublime invented a veritable asylum out of the plantation. When we entered the asylum we saw that it was drenched with the deposits of black female trauma that since the early days of slavery attacked and infested the body, producing a toxic stench. Simpson shows how unbearable this stench had become in representation. But by 1994 she had grown weary of stalking this body. She had become exhausted with attempting to lance the boil of American racial agnosia. Though her contemporary Cindy Sherman would persist and go on, ad infinitum, plying the same impersonation tropes, for Simpson gender and race had become intolerable subjects. She was at the end of her tether.

In 1995, she meticulously began scrubbing her images of the iconography of racial and gendered bodies. She turned instead to what could be called the rumor of the body. She turned to innuendo and insinuation because the female body had slipped from the stage to attend to certain carnal rendezvous and assignations, to the pleasures of the body. Simpson's new work in the spring of 1995 suddenly introduced images in the documentary mode that were completely devoid of figures. Instead, there were photographs of real sites: landscape, cityscape, interior and exterior architecture. She was setting the stage, as it were, for what was to come in her films, in which identity of the female kind would be rendered quite visible and play a crucial role in her exploration of the multiplication of feminine roles and identities.

The works that make up her "Public Sex" images are not in any sense entirely new, being as they were extracts from a larger compendium of images Simpson had built up over the years, stretching back to her early beginnings. So while she had abjured images with any referential—documentary—facture, she did not entirely stop photographing scenes of everyday life or events. During trips to other countries or drives around or outside the city, she had continued all the while photographing architecture and landscapes and depositing the images in a growing archive of notebooks, each image carefully annotated with commentary. The "Public Sex" series grew out of these notebooks. They represent a partial return to her beginnings in documentary, except where a moat had existed between them, she now constructed a bridge to link them: between that past and the present in order to realize an entirely different view. Rather than explicit image/text disjunction, Simpson abstracted the associative content of each image, setting them up as scenes and vignettes of public encounter and enlivening them with short narratives. There is something self-consciously melodramatic about the works, as if she had placed her visual tongue firmly in cheek. She was employing the implements of the detective story by assuming, in some images, the persona of the private eye or a reporter. The combination of images with snippets of dialogue, some of which identify places, is a far cry from the antiseptic institutional spaces of the previous work. These pieces clearly prefigure Simpson's move into film.

The Clock Tower (pp. 50–51) shows a hulking view of a tower photographed from a distance and placed dead center in the image. The two clocks embedded on the south and east face of the tower are slightly misaligned (one face reads 8:21 and the other 8:24), recalling Felix Gonzalez-Torres's elegiac *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1987–91), a sculpture of two out-of-sync generic white clocks. *The Clock Tower* follows the trajectory of a conversation overheard—note again the conjunction of audio and visual, the eavesdropper and the voyeur simultaneously—between two people, man and woman—who work in the same office. (The conversation in *The Clock Tower* presages the hilarious series of pas de deux that will emerge in Simpson's first film, *Call Waiting* [see pp. 60–61].) However, in the present conversation, the two lovers are discussing details of their after-work assignation in the tower where the clocks are. Close reading of the text, along with the cadence, inflections, pauses, and descriptive elements of the unfolding drama, reveals Simpson's keen ear for intrigue, her perspicacious observations of the mundaneness of people's lives and desires;

their constant pursuit of dangerous thrills and petty gratifications. From the breathy planning for an illicit meeting by two co-workers who obviously relish the edge of danger associated with doing it right there in the office; to the casual racism that the folks in *The Bed* (1995) have to endure as black people lodging in an upscale hotel; or the homoerotic encounter in *The Park* (pp. 54–55), where the cruising “sociologist” haunts men’s public bathrooms in search of sexual fulfillment on the pretext of some unstated research assignment; or feverish sex in a parked car in the imagined silence of the vaulted space in *The Car* (1995), Simpson, like a detective, places us in the center of a psychosexual game and of dream narratives.

Each of the work’s prominent scenes designates both an object and a place. The car, bed, rock, park, clock tower, each acquires an enigmatic fetish character. For example, the scene and narrative of *The Staircase* (pp. 68–69) seem completely drawn from an element in Freud’s essay “Dream-Work,” published in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In the case of “A modified staircase dream,” the patient’s oedipal fantasy about his mother is played out in a scene in which he dreamt about repeatedly climbing the stairs while accompanied by his mother.¹⁹ A comparable sexual anxiety and enigmatic tension is illuminated in the chilling silence and empty image of the curvilinear staircase, the form of which, along with the ambient chiaroscuro projecting deep into the nave on the left corner of the image, no doubt mimics the folds of a sexual organ. Nevertheless, the object/place relationship transmits the idea of zones into which inner desires, or places of intimate encounters, are displaced. Again one should note the degree to which Simpson has honed her skills of hearing and observation, skills so evidently natural for cinema.

The soft-focus, woolly, inky surfaces and the moody dramatic lighting that wash over the large expanses of the images convey a sense of film noir.²⁰ However, the noir genre does not, as some have argued, carry over to the films. Rather than cinema, the structure of films like *Call Waiting* and *Interior/Exterior, Full/Empty* (see pp. 62–64) is drawn from television. It is a classic send-up of daytime soap operas. Simpson’s *31* (see pp. 88–89) enlarges this framework, only in this case, the tracking of the single female character over a period of thirty-one days is much in the mode of “reality television.” Yet *31* draws from the structure of the diary, a method already employed in earlier photographic pieces such as *Five Day Forecast* and *Memory Knots*. Nothing is arbitrary in the planning and execution of Simpson’s works. Each tableau or mise en scène is carefully planned and continuously edited and pared until the work strikes the right psychic balance and visual impact.

WHAT DOES A WOMAN WANT?

Freud’s famous question remains a fascinating problem in terms of the psychic and corporeal drives that determine female desire. While Freud never found a satisfactory answer to his inquiry, it was more than compensated for in his theory of the castration complex and penis envy,²¹ whereby the absent member, the missing part now inhabited by the lacuna of the feminine sex, indicates the struggle between man and woman; the wish and desire of the female to possess a penis. For Freud, perversions of female sexuality arise from the wish to have the male organ, an organ that, having

been castrated, has been folded back and now returns as the erogenous clitoris. Freud seems to suggest that the relationship between men and women is fueled by envy or jealousy. Does the woman wish to castrate every man in sight so as to diminish the wish to reattach the absent member? Joan Copjec makes an important point about the difference between jealousy and envy (a frequent trope in film noir that often leads to murder, which then becomes the *raison d'être* of the film; this is not altogether different from how it is expressed in Simpson's films). Copjec quotes *Crabb's English Synonyms* as defining them thus: "Jealousy fears to lose what it has; envy is pained at seeing another have that which it wants for itself."²²

WHAT DOES THE BLACK WOMAN WANT?

What this suggests is that in Simpson's work the question of gender that is constantly inscribed hinges on this dialectic between envy and jealousy; between absence and fulness, negation and plenitude; between the oedipal and the castration complexes. *She* (p. 37), a four-panel, horizontal work showing a sitting woman dressed in a brown suit and buttoned white shirt, implies through the hand gestures in each image that the space of lesbian sexuality has to be included in the dimension of gender that has preoccupied the artist. In the first panel from the left, the sitter lounges laconically with her hands gingerly placed forward on her thighs. The second image that follows is more aggressive; the sitter appears to grasp the crotch (in search of the missing penis?). The third panel is more diffident, as if upon finding the member gone, she now wants to cover up her embarrassment, while the fourth and final panel shows her falling back to resignation. If the loss of the penis points toward the development of perversions in the female, as Freud noted, *Suit* (1992), another piece drawn from the same sitting, completes that claim by Freud. But this is questioned by Simpson in the text panel that accompanies the full-length portrait of the woman standing with her right hand on her hip, back turned to the viewer. The text reads:

*An average size
woman in an average
suit with ill-suited
thoughts*

This does specify that the woman's response to sexuality is not passive and can be accompanied by a level of aggressiveness. In *Call Waiting*, Simpson picks up this quarrel again in a series of vignettes showing various characters in a multitude of duplicitous roles, with lovers conversing on the phone, double-crossing and being double-crossed. *Call Waiting* is as much about the search for pleasure and the frustration of desire as it is the locality of the struggle for power between women and men. Simpson positions the woman at the center of this conversation, making her both the protagonist and antagonist in a form of oedipal display of angst between various couples. "What does a woman want?" intones Freud. Fanon recalibrates the question and turns it into "What does the black man want?"²³ It seems we are not yet done with this oedipal quarrel. Fanon is less charitable with the black woman who loves a

white man than with the black man who sleeps with a white woman. For him, when the black woman sleeps with the white man, it is a betrayal of the black man, but the black man who sleeps with the white woman is just getting revenge for his castration.²⁴ With Mayotte Capécia, the black Antillean woman who desires and loves a white man, the weight of an entire discriminatory and misogynist pedagogy, a whole *weltanschauung*, is brought to bear by Fanon on what he perceives to be her betrayal of the black man.²⁵ The contradiction is that Fanon ascribes a connotation of inferiority to the black woman's desire, even suggesting that the black woman is the authentic object of the black man's desire. This would mean then that the black man is an envious man, whose decapitation fuels his psychosexual frustrations.

Simpson cares not a jot about resolving the problem of the phallus and the way it has weighed negatively on female desire. Neither is she deeply concerned with the pacification of the black male ego. She is most concerned with the fulfillment and enjoyment that black women or women of color (notice that the female characters in *Call Waiting* are either African American or Asian) derive from their sexual empowerment. *Interior/Exterior, Full/Empty*, a seven-channel film shot in black and white, takes up the challenge of elucidating the place of female desire. Filmed in sequences of pairs of women or single female characters engaged in conversation with unseen characters on the phone, each segment of the work makes women—black women—the locus of conversation. The film mediates the absence of the black male from a distance. In the final portion of the sixth segment, two male characters—one black, one Hispanic—appear at the closing of the film and stare directly into the camera, but they are not endowed with speech. They do not speak, their eyes convey through the pantomime of the gaze the incarceration of the male ego. The final segment of the film is shot from a fixed-point perspective against the backdrop of a spring landscape, with a small pond flowing out of a rectangular dam and concrete culvert from which the water is transported serving as the establishing shot. Because the camera stays fixed continually on the landscape, the film takes on the qualities of a stage, a sort of arcadian amphitheater out of which numerous characters—couples—stroll in and out of frame as if in a dream sequence drawn from Akira Kurosawa's great film *Rashomon* (1950), which unfolds as a series of flashbacks. The slow pace of this final wordless segment of *Interior/Exterior, Full/Empty* is as beautifully realized as it is hauntingly ambiguous.

PROFILE/PROFILING

Since the interregnum that marked her shift from photography into film and video, Simpson has maintained a fairly constant interaction between photography and film. Each is used to augment the other, either as an extension of one (stills from films that are stand-alone photographic images) or in the interpretation of the other, or in conjunction. In any case, this has been fairly common practice in recent contemporary art. In 2001 Simpson embarked on a series of small black-and-white portraits shot in profile of single male and female combinations. These portraits are encased in white oval mats and arranged in repeating and alternating directions in an irregular grid formation. Two things are immediately striking in these series of images: the first

is the manner in which the figures photographed in profile recall the “racial typologies” of daguerreotypes of African slaves photographed by Louis Agassiz in 1850 in Columbia, South Carolina.²⁶ Though the profile has a long pictorial history, from Egyptian to Greek and Roman antecedents, and was broadly used for domestic portraiture in eighteenth-century paintings, with the rise of the human sciences in the nineteenth century it was adopted for more pernicious uses as a method for studying and categorizing criminality and racial inferiority. The profile was adapted as a method of study to discern alleged cranial deficiencies and irregularities in the features of criminals or anthropological subjects.²⁷ Philosopher Giorgio Agamben has engaged these developments in what he describes as the “anthropological machine.” In the logic of modern scientific rationality, the anthropological machine “functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human...”²⁸ Profiling thus represents one of the pictorial functions of the anthropological machine. This merged the criminal and racial bodies and brought photography into alliance with anthropometry. For a long spell during the nineteenth century the reliance on this quack science magnified and extended the capability of the photographic apparatus in shaping the knowledge of “inferior” peoples.

In so doing, the profile portrait plunged from its sentimental perch on the domestic mantel down into the cauldron of racial and criminal laboratory. Simultaneously it invented an album of abnormalities and an archive²⁹ devoted solely to the study of racial types, the multiplication and indiscriminate isolation of the “nonhuman within the human.” Between Alphonse Bertillon and Francis Galton—two prominent figures in the usage of anthropometry—the study of the cranial aspects of races and criminals was not only directed toward the biological, each was concerned with their effects on society. This is manifested in their methods and interest in how criminality and race impacts the social order. According to Allan Sekula, “where Bertillon was a compulsive systematizer, Galton was a compulsive quantifier. While Bertillon was concerned primarily with the triumph of social order over social disorder, Galton was concerned primarily with the triumph of established rank over forces of social leveling and decline.”³⁰ Bertillon being French and Galton, English, I suppose this indicates the fundamental difference between the composition of French and English class systems. So much for science.

But the science of man in the nineteenth century, especially after the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, was a voracious and insatiable cannibal. Through the anthropological machinery of imperialism, it hunted and consumed in prodigious quantities the body of the other, in order to assure itself that the pseudo-scientific interest in racial otherness was not a sublimation of its own carnal abnormality. This brings me to the second point about my understanding of Simpson’s idea to use the portrait profile convention, in the contemporary American practice of racial profiling. In these series of works, especially *Men and Study* (pp. 83–84) the combination of frontal and profile depictions underscores her intention to alert us to the connection between criminality and race. A similar device exists in Warhol’s *America’s Most Wanted* (1963).

Simpson's return to the historical exegesis of the black body is by now beyond annotation. It is informed by the constant interruption of aesthetics by ethics. Or rather the knotted relationship between the two, and in light of Wittgenstein's idea that "ethics and aesthetics are one and the same."³¹ Yet, it needs stating that the recitation of the travails of the inflamed black body is really beside the point in this work on profiles and profiling. Rather, what Simpson is interested in is the social and cultural devices within which these two subjects are imbricated. The way they each speak to a larger social agenda, whether it be about immigration or terrorism, the uses of profiles and profiling have multiplied.

SHADOW ARCHIVE

In spite of its contemporary implication or because of it, Simpson addresses contestations that surround racial profiling and the issues they raise by recourse to a Foucauldian archaeology of the history of images of black people drawn from an archive that extends from the 1790s to the 1970s, from historic paintings to Hollywood dramas and blaxploitation films. Inscribed on the framed, demure photographs are the complete or partial titles (employed to magnify both their effect and meaning), drawn from films, paintings, and representations of and by black people, and arranged like a running list of citations or as encyclopedic entries that encode the sophistry of racial science. *Untitled (guess who's coming to dinner)* (p. 79) is both a title of one work and a subtext for its reading. Interspersed in the frame of this piece are vertical bands of near-identical profile shots of the same young black woman who is photo-graphed from back to side so as to make prominent—by a slight extension of the neck—the cranial features of her neck and slightly arched back. Arranged facing in and out of the frame, some of the images fill the oval frame or cut off part of the face. In the bottom left and right sides of the photographic panel runs a long vertical list of titles drawn from films and paintings. Whether the viewer remembers the films or paintings is not of interest; instead what seems to be taking place is the inscription through the listing of the titles, of a veritable shadow archive, one that is neither explanatory nor expository. Rather, the way the titles open up the space between image and history is epistolary in nature. In this way Simpson remains involved in her extended correspondence with the viewer about the way images signify and what sort of symptoms they point to. *Untitled (guess who's coming to dinner)* addresses the taboo interracial relationship in which Sidney Poitier plays the sensitive, urbane black love interest of a white woman. Needless to say, in the film Poitier has to overcome his blackness through his non-threatening demeanor (he plays a renowned United Nations doctor) in order to become worthy of his beloved in this romance of race and progressive politics. However, what is ultimately redeemed in the film is neither Poitier's black character nor blackness, but whiteness. These portraits are emotionally loaded, and historically acidic even though Simpson adopts the most innocuous form of outmoded imagery to explore the decadent discourse that envelops her subject.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I have written elsewhere that the black image is a troubled image; it perturbs the conscience, unsettles the tranquility of settled canons of beauty. Particularly in the museum context in which the aesthetic authority of art is often arbitrated, the black image is often seen first as an anomaly in the sense that it is foremost a political image before it could ever become a vessel for probing the epistemological fundamentals of artistic tradition.³² A portrait of a black person hanging in a museum is usually disturbing to viewers. Because it has historically resided marginally in the domain of the general imagination, except as a fugitive force—as Toni Morrison clearly shows—this figure is never wholly free of the reflexive assumption that it is outside of the norm of the canons of beauty. Therein lies the great incentive behind Simpson's prodigious complex analysis and usage of the black form in her work. Using a black subject in a work of art is neither a casual act nor innocent. To confer upon the black figure an aesthetic and historical value in artistic production is a consciously political act, one that does not in any way diminish the aesthetic value of the intention.

Nothing confirms this more than the manner in which generic blackness has functioned as a trope for negotiating the political and aesthetic in Simpson's work. Ignoring the political conditions of the black subject in art is a self-defeating act of critical bad faith. Along with this, Simpson has shown that the powers of recognition of this figure lie in the attendant compensatory erotic charge it produces. It draws viewers closer, often forcing new modes of recognition and identification. The unremitting monologues on identity and the self, the carefully calibrated discourses on race and gender, the contrapuntal nature of power and social consciousness in her work permit viewers to see the black subject afresh, in modes unfamiliar to their prior experience of it. Simpson asks viewers to engage her subjects not as coincidence but in conjunction with the aesthetic politics of American and Western devalorization of black identity. Her work suggests that politics and aesthetics are formed like Siamese twins. And to extricate their deformed joining requires the most delicate and dexterous surgery. In fact, it requires the complete suspension of belief in the idea that representation has a powerful impact in the formation of opinion about art. The anxiety of castration exhibited constantly by the black male confirms this. We see it in the misogynist acting out that often accompanies his performative public persona in pop culture, especially in sports and hip-hop culture.

The wounded black male figure could after all be recuperated. Simpson permits us to see this in *Cloudscape* (p. 100), a potent symbol of transcendence and grace. The solitary image of the black male figure whistling and enveloped by fog appears to be a song of departure from the charnel house of the racial sublime. But this does not mean it will disappear completely, since race and masculinity still have social meaning. However, we see that in recent years, the iconographical moorings of Simpson's work are increasingly being cloaked—never concrete nor in full display. Instead, they wear a different sort of covering, a kind of ethical camouflage that does not yield to easy deciphering. For more than twenty-five years Lorna Simpson's work has enriched the archive of American art, investing it with a complexity it has yet to return fully to viewers of contemporary art.