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Introduction

“What I’ve tried to do with the photo work is create contradictions—an edge between the subject and the interpretation about how a ‘subject’ is viewed or contextualized... I prefer gaps and contradictions so that not all the viewer’s questions are answered.”¹

- Lorna Simpson

As her words indicate, Lorna Simpson creates artwork that evades a singular interpretation.² In order to make artwork that refuses definitive interpretations, Simpson employs a formal element that is a visual reflection of the mindset with which she approaches the world. As she professed in the same interview the quote above originated from, Simpson views the world around her not through one ideological framework but with the understanding that through fragmentation, the act of disassembling and reconstructing, the fallacies and contradictions that many societal frameworks are built upon can be revealed. The artist’s ability to create contradictory and compelling works can be seen in her consistent use of fragmentation. I have taken Simpson’s notion of fragmentation, a simple descriptor of how she views the world and creates art, and morphed it from being a nebulous concept of her artistic practice into a two-part definition that describes its usage in her work.³ The fragmentation, in all its various forms, is a crucial formal element in accomplishing Simpson’s mission of creating work that inspires questions more than they answer them and is also emblematic of her broader artistic practice.

* I would like to thank Dr. John P. Bowles for his advice and assistance throughout this process. I would also like to thank my parents for their graciousness, generosity and continuous love and support. Lastly, I am grateful for my friends and their encouragement.

¹ Issac Julien and Thelma Golden. “Conversation with the Artist,” in *Lorna Simpson* (New York: Abrams, in association with the American Federation of Arts, 2006), 134, 139.

² Julien and Golden, “Conversations with the Artist,” 139.

³ Ibid.

Within Simpson's work there are two distinct types of fragmentation. They are often used simultaneously in the same work but can also be seen separately. The first type of fragmentation occurs when Simpson takes the body, in most cases the body of a black woman, and fragments it using different photographs to represent distinct portions of the body. For example, the top photograph in a work depicts the woman's head to her shoulders, the middle photograph shows from mid-way down the woman's arms to her knees, while the bottom and last image captures from the tops of her shins to the floor on which she stands. In these works bearing this type of fragmentation, Simpson uses the frame, which takes the form of a grid, to emphasize the fragmentation present. Three to four smaller frames, each holding one photograph that portrays a segment of the body, composes a larger frame.

The second form of fragmentation present in her work is when Simpson crops the figure's body in a photograph so that only a portion of it is fully visible. For example, Simpson photographs only the neck and collarbones of a woman or shows solely the back of a woman's head. This kind of photograph is typically placed inside one frame, rather than the multiple smaller frames used in the previous type of fragmentation. These two methods of fragmenting the body are not interchangeable, but for the purposes of this thesis they are understood under the banner of "fragmentation" and have similar meanings.

This thesis, consisting of three chapters, discusses the major interpretations of the fragmentation present in Simpson's art. All three chapters delve into the oppositions, contradictions, and refutations the fragmentation reveals. The first chapter looks at the interpretation of the black female figure in Simpson's work as one that either represents a broader category of marginalized people or specifically portrays the experiences of black women in America. Through analyzing

the formal element of fragmentation I deconstruct this interpretive binary. Building on the discussion of the black female body in the first chapter, the second chapter relates Simpson's work to photographic styles used in the past. By establishing connections between Simpson and photographers who preceded her work further meaning inherent in Simpson's art is elucidated. In the third and final chapter, I contemplate the implications of the gridded frame that serves as the mechanism by which the fragmentation is reinforced in her artworks. Each chapter tackles a different aspect of the fragmentation present in Simpson's early photographic work. All the chapters are all linked in that I explore the multiple functions of the fragmentation and the meaning it conveys.

While doing the research for this thesis, I noticed consistently that scholars writing about Simpson would briefly comment on the fragmentation present in the artwork but quickly move on to a more "substantial" topic such as identity or race. What is missing from these previous interpretations and writings is the way that the fragmentation in Simpson's work contributes to her provocative portrayal of the important topics of race and identity. I propose in this thesis that the consistent portrayal of the female black body as fragmented is linked to the identity forming practices established by hegemonic forces as well as the self-determination of black individuals. The constant use of fragmentation in Simpson's early work is demonstrative of the artist's desire to explore the faulty nature of photography through highlighting the manipulations and conventions of this medium while exposing identity forming forces.

Chapter 1: Universal versus Particular

If Simpson wishes for her work to inspire multiple interpretations and evade definitive conclusions, she accomplishes this by incorporating the intersectionality of race and gender in her art. This exploration of intersectionality takes the form of the black female figure who is featured prominently in her work. The bulk of this thesis, and this first chapter, focuses on understanding the black women in Simpson's work by evaluating their context both in regards to their location in Simpson's work but also past representations and understandings of the black female body in America. Simpson has commented multiple times on her desire to universalize her figures. Too often there is a tendency to read work by black artists as autobiographical which prevents a more universalized interpretation from taking place.⁴ Simpson refutes any attempt to read her work as autobiographical, stating that the black women in her work are, "representative and not specific, and therefore not me."⁵ If we begin with Simpson's statement that the black female figure in her work does not illustrate the artist but is representative: who does the figure represent?

Coco Fusco's understanding of the black female figure is more in line with how the artist sees her work. Fusco believes that it is possible to remove the black female figure from her cultural history, context, and experience in order to make her a cipher for otherness.⁶ Fusco is not

⁴ These tendency stems from the impulse to read both photography and art created by black artists as autobiographical. For Simpson's full quote on this issue see Joan Simon, "An Interview with Lorna Simpson" in *Lorna Simpson: Standing in the Water* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 189.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Coco Fusco, "Uncanny Dissonance: The Work of Lorna Simpson," in *English is Broken Here*, (New York: New Press, 1995), 98.

alone in her more broad interpretation of Simpson's work. Rather, her understanding of Simpson's art is emblematic of an oft-spouted interpretation that the female figure in Simpson's work is a universal character and not simply representative of black women.⁷ Interpreting the black figures in Simpson's art as not just representatives of otherness, Fusco argues that the black female figure represents a group that is more isolated and marginalized and thus deserving of the label, "the other of the other."⁸ In the same way that Fusco exemplifies the universal argument, bell hooks's argument is representative of a more narrow interpretation of Simpson's work where the experiences and identity of black women are solely exposed.⁹

Both scholars assert that Simpson's work counters hegemonic notions of black femininity. They depart from each other in their interpretation of which representation, universal or particular, is present in Simpson's work. Fusco sees "the other of the other" manifesting itself in the depiction of a black woman and thus suggests a more universal interpretation. hooks, meanwhile, refuses to separate the black woman depicted from the intersectional experience her race and gender mandate. Therefore, hooks falls into the "particular" camp.

Pivotal to both interpretations is the fragmentation of the black body in Simpson's work. The fragmentation present in *You're Fine* (figure 1) and *Time Piece* (figure 2), two works evaluated in this chapter, lends itself to a variety of interpretations. It supports both Fusco and hooks's claim, but in doing so it dissolves the binary of the universal versus particular interpretations

⁷ Huey Copeland argues that in her work Simpson is able to represent both the universal and the particular. Specifically, he sees Simpson "aim[ing] for a 'restating of the universal,'" in which the artist demonstrates the ways that typically black women have been denied representation in the past. While Copeland ultimately argues that it Simpson's ability to depict figures that traverse the boundary of universal versus particular, his argument summarizes generally well known interpretations of Simpson's work. Huey Copeland, "'Bye, Bye Black Girl': Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat," *Art Journal* 64 (2005), 68.

⁸ Fusco, *English is Broken Here*, 98.

⁹ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind* (New York: The New Press, 1995) 94-100.

these two scholars, and those belonging to each respective camp, suggest. The relationship between the fragmentation and embodiment discourse links both of these interpretations together. Embodiment rhetoric and discourse focuses not on the abstract and theoretical concepts that formulate identity, but on the lived experiences of black women and the ways in which the reality of moving through space with a gendered and racialized body establishes identity.¹⁰

To make her case for the particular reading of Simpson's work, bell hooks analyzes and interprets *You're Fine*. Created in 1988 from Polaroid pictures, ceramic tiles and engraved plaques all set on a white background, *You're Fine* depicts a black woman reclining on the floor. Each of the four photographs that compose the work is placed into one of four sections of the frame that holds each image. The reclining woman faces away from the camera wearing a white shift, her straight, unbound hair grazing the white floor on which she lays. The shift she wears is sleeveless, showing her arms and the hem falls below her buttocks leaving the lower half of the back of her thighs exposed to the camera's lens. While the floor is as white as the whole background of the work, in each photo she faces a light gray backdrop. The continuity created by the matching background makes the photographs seem expansive rather than closely cropped images of a woman's body.

The four Polaroids depicting the woman neatly fragment her body. The first photograph, located in the right-most frame, shows the top of woman's head to below her shoulders. Also present in this first photograph is the woman's right hand that hovers over the back of her head. The second Polaroid continues the representation of the woman's body as it shows from underneath her biceps past the swell of her hip. While her right arm is depicted in the first photograph, in the second her left elbow rests in the serpentine curve of her body, the hand unseen. The

¹⁰ Brittney Cooper, "A'n't a Lady?: Race Women, Michelle Obama, and the Ever-Expanding Democratic Imagination," in *Melus* 35 (2010): 40.

woman's legs, seen in the third photo, are bisected two-thirds down her calf by wooden structure of the frame. This photo portrays most of the figure's legs, the majority of which is uncovered by the white shift. The fourth and final photograph is located in the left-most frame and displays the remaining portion of the woman's body from the lower part of her calf to the cream colored soles of her feet which are angled away from the camera.

The positioning of the female figure does not evoke so much as it creates the archetypical reclining female nude pose seen on various canvases throughout time. The reclining female has a long tradition within art and is closely associated with the patriarchal objectification of women. There is no lack of images where the front of the female's nude body faces the viewers as she lies upon a chaise or a grassy hill.¹¹ Typically showing the female figure from the back, as was also common, lends the image a more predatory feel as the female is not always aware that she is being lasciviously gazed upon. Some classic examples of a reclining female nude seen from behind include Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) and Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647-1651). More recently, artists, including as Simpson, have taken up the reclining pose and subverted its conventional interpretations. Alice Neel's *Pregnant Woman* (1971) depicts a reclining female nude, whose body is rendered grotesquely in jaundiced yellow and sickly green. Even as her body is on display for viewers, the figure in *Pregnant Woman* confronts each speculative gaze with a direct stare. Unlike *Pregnant Woman*, the woman in *You're Fine* faces away from the camera. These two images are united in that each artist deliberately employs an exploitive pose of the female body only to subvert it. While there is much to unpack

¹¹ Examples include Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, 1510, Edouard Manet's 1865 *Olympia*.

in Simpson's inclusion of this specific position and its connotations, I have chosen instead to focus on the ways in which this reclining female differs from her predecessors. In the same way that Neel has disrupted the viewer's experience by rendering her woman with steely stare, Simpson's use of fragmentation is equally as disruptive and prevents an unencumbered viewing of this reclining black woman.

The fragmentation is located in the disconnect between the continuation of the woman's body from one photograph to the next. Simpson has deliberately mismatched the placement of these Polaroids next to each other within their respective frames. The first and second photographs, depicting her head and torso, are misaligned so that the top of the woman's bicep hovers millimeters above the rest of her arm displayed in the second image. Similarly, the two photographs of the woman's calf and ankle do not perfectly match up. This misalignment reinforces the fragmentation already established by the segmentation of the body which has been distributed over four photographs. While altogether the images provide a holistic representation of the figure's body, the four frames as well as the purposeful misalignment highlights the fragmentation present in this work.

Placed above the frame that holds the Polaroids are ceramic letters spelling out "you're fine." Also composed of ceramic letters is the phrase "you're hired" that is parallel to "you're fine" below the frame. To the right of the frame are two vertically oriented engraved plastic plaques. The longest and closest one to the frame reads "secretarial." Immediately to its right is a smaller plaque that says "position." Thirteen horizontal plaques are stacked atop each other to the left of the frame. The words on these plaques such as "blood test," "ears," and "urine," relate to medical services, anatomy, and bodily functions.

While Fusco does not include *You're Fine* in her essay on Simpson's work, her general interpretation of the artist is still applicable to this specific piece of art. According to Fusco's estimation, Simpson's work does not represent the particular experiences of black women, but instead the black women frequently depicted can be understood as a cipher representing "the other of the other."¹² For Fusco, Simpson's work should be interpreted universally rather than solely as a representation of the black female experience. The use of the word "universal" to characterize this aspect of the binary is misleading. Those belonging, intentionally or otherwise, to the universal camp, such as Fusco, are not suggesting that Simpson's work be read as representing a common human experience or identity. Universal can be an apt descriptor; however, because it implies that the interpretation of the work applies to more than just the experiences of black women in America. In her essay Fusco suggests the idea of "the other of the other" as the extent to which Simpson's figures can be universalized. According to Fusco's definition, one belongs to "the other of the other" provided you are neither white nor male.¹³ White males are not arbitrary choices with which "the other of the other" is defined. Fusco claims these two characteristics (white and male) are the source of the hegemony of American society.¹⁴ Throughout history, white men have shaped representations of people of color to fit their own purposes. An example of this occurred after slavery ended and white supremacy needed to be justified. Thus, the understanding of black masculinity shifted from the black man as a child who needed to be protected to the brute Negro, a figure of "hyper-masculine savagery."¹⁵ What this example proves is that in

¹² Fusco is quite direct about this assertion, stating, "Her [Simpson's] images do not...illustrate a communal black experience as some might seek to find." Fusco, *English is Broken Here*, 98.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kevin Thomas, "Deconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity: Understanding Representation of Black and White Manhood in Print Advertising," 2-3.

determining the conception of blackness, the white men were interested in upholding their superiority and mandating that black identity be that which constrains to their own needs.

To bolster her interpretation of universality, Fusco focuses particularly on the similar background in many Simpson works. The figure in *You're Fine* and other Simpson photographic works from this time are placed in a neutral background. In *You're Fine* the neutral background is the gray of the backdrop and white floor on which the woman lies. The neutrality of the background allows the figure shown in the work to become removed from her daily life and the circumstances that define her and thus enter into a fantasy-like dreamscape, a world devoid of markers belonging to any one group's identity.¹⁶ By locating this woman in a blank background Simpson prevents the reading of this woman as a representation of black female identity because she is not linked to any other characteristics other than her own body. Fusco argues, therefore, that Simpson's work is about showcasing how identity is constructed by using a black woman as an example, not an illustration of black identity.

The use of the dreamscape inspired by the neutral background in *You're Fine* convinces Fusco that Simpson is not deliberately striving to represent black women's identity and experiences. Had Simpson desired to represent black identity she had the opportunity to do so. Simpson began her career documenting women in the streets in the mode of documentary photography.¹⁷ Fusco believes that documentary photography "often seeks to redeem the subjects of a marginalized world." Simpson rejected the identity markers of real life in her photography in the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Enwezor argues that even from her early documentary photography Simpson's interest in the "photographic argument about the nature of photographic subjectivity and the artist's control over the process of image making" can be gleaned. In Enwezor's opinion, Simpson's shift from documentary photography to composed and staged images in the studio is demonstrative of the artist's desire to grapple with the idea of photography as "a shaper of subjectivity" and the freedom that exploring that subjectivity generates. Okwui Enwezor, "Repetition and Differentiation - Lorna Simpson's Iconography of the Racial Sublime," in *Lorna Simpson* (New York City: America Federation of Arts, 2006), 103, 111.

studio. Had Simpson truly wanted to represent black women's experiences, Fusco argues, she could have continued to photograph women where they actually lived, in their homes and on the streets, and thus concretely represented black female identity by depicting their lived reality.¹⁸ Simpson made the choice, however, to leave the streets and the actualities of daily life and photograph women in her studio, purposefully removing all context and signifiers that could link the female figure in her work with the specificity of black women's experiences and identity.

Another compelling aspect of the universal argument is to articulate what is lost by too narrowly interpreting Simpson's work. Simpson's works like *You're Fine* are meant to invite questions and close looking by creating images that deal with intersectionality. Conceived of by black feminists, intersectionality explains that identity is not formulated by separate characteristics but instead is the result of the "overlapping spheres" of gender, race, sexual orientation and social class.¹⁹ By pinning down Simpson's artworks as representations of a specific subset of the population, which is seen in hooks's particularist interpretation, potential meanings of the works can be lost. This is often a criticism employed by scholars discussing Simpson's work, including the artist herself. Brooke Belisle characterizes Simpson's retort to Deborah Willis's suggestion during an interview that Simpson's work explicitly represents "the deep sense of isolation that many black women experience," as one of deflection.²⁰ In response to Willis's interpretations, Simpson says that she wants to "expand rather than limit" interpretations of her work and that she prefers to use "the figure of the black woman to talk about many different things."²¹ Due to provocative nature of Simpson's work and its demand for close inspection and attention, it would

¹⁸ Fusco, *English is Broken Here*, 98.

¹⁹ Thomas, "Deconstructing Hegemonic," 1.

²⁰ I could not find access to this particular interview and instead relied on the summary provided by Brooke Belisle in her essay "Felt Surface, Visible Image: Lorna Simpson's Photography and the Embodiment of Appearance," *Photography & Culture* 4 (2011): 161.

²¹ Ibid.

be a mistake to only see the experiences of black women represented. As the figures are not placed in actual reality and instead located in a dreamscape they should be interpreted, Fusco believes, more broadly.²² By functioning as ciphers, those whose marginalization is so severe they belong to the subcategory of “otherness” is made visible and discussed.²³

It would be fair to say that bell hooks disagrees with most of Fusco’s assertions. hooks does understand Simpson’s works to be a portrayal of otherness, but specifically the experiences of one part of the group of other: black women. Her “particular” interpretation does not go so far as to suggest that represented in *You’re Fine* is the circumstances and experiences of one specific black woman. Instead, hooks suggests that the black woman in *You’re Fine* represents black women as a collective group.²⁴ Although within the broad category of “black women” there are unquestionably a variety of experiences and identities. Those belonging to the particular understanding of Simpson’s work insinuate that by being black and female there is a communal history, culture and experience.

hooks finds evidence of the particular in the positioning and placement of the black woman’s body in *You’re Fine*. Returning to the white men who conceive of and propagate hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity, American society has long perpetuated the black female body as one that is not self-defined.²⁵ Understandings and representations of black identity have

²² Again, Fusco’s interpretation is broader in that she understands the black women in Simpson’s works as ciphers for otherness rather than representatives for the human condition in general. Fusco, *English is Broken Here*, 98.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind* (New York: The New Press, 1995) 97.

²⁵ Fatima Tobing Rony understands photography as a means of representation that has been abused in the past. “We Must First See Ourselves” tackles seven black female photographers that are using photography as a means of reclaiming the false and denigrating representations of blackness that photography put forth. The photographers included in this exhibition use personal narratives to create honest and authentic representations of their experiences. Simpson does not rely on personal narratives but her work does fit in with Rony’s discussed artists in that she is makes visible a figure, the black woman, who has been denied representation in the past and uses her photography to “protest the injustices of their times and to present ‘characterizations of black people and black families who were human, not statistical.’” Fatima Tobing Rony, “We Must First See Ourselves,” in *Focus: Personal Narratives: Women Photographers of Color*. (Winston-Salem: Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 1993), 11.

shifted throughout time to reinforce white supremacy. Combatting this ongoing hegemonic practice, hooks argues that the woman in *You're Fine* fights against these false representations of black identity. Central to this rebuttal of the white patriarchal conception of black femininity is the agency Simpson restores to her figures. This agency is conveyed in two ways by position of the woman who faces away from the camera.²⁶ First, by turning away from the camera she denies the lens her face. This symbolic act of protecting her identity ensures her anonymity and informs spectators that her body is something that only she can control. In this instance, she is choosing not to share her body with the camera. Secondly, with her back turned away from the camera she is able to establish her own gaze independent of those that look upon her. Because the viewer cannot see her face it is impossible to know where she looks, what she sees in the space that lies before her, or how she feels.²⁷ The establishment of her own space where she can emotive or act as she pleases without worrying about the eyes of spectators grants this woman agency and a sense of autonomy that the hegemonic conceptions of black femininity deny her.²⁸

Further contributing to a particular reading of *You're Fine* is Simpson's restoration of mystery to the black female body.²⁹ hooks asserts that the determination of black bodies as hyper-sexual or violent has led to the complete loss of subtlety and mystery in black individuals. Black women, in the eyes of mainstream America, have been deemed unworthy of examination because they have determined as "lacking in complexity."³⁰ Simpson's decision to include plaques that allude to the physical examination that takes place in a doctor's office and equate it

²⁶ hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 94.

²⁷ hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 94-5.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 97.

³⁰ By fragmenting the figure in her work Simpson forces viewers to take another look. The act of looking multiple times counters the transparency that representations of black women often convey. Ibid.

with employment takes on new meaning in light of hooks's analysis. By evoking images of sterile exam rooms, crinkling paper shifts, and medical tests, viewers are forced to confront that too often evaluations of black women are based solely on their physicality and not on the depth present within each individual. Black women, throughout American history, have been understood in regards to the services they provided to society, be it their reproductive capabilities to produce more slave labor or the labor they themselves could supply. The mystery that is central to our determination as individuals has been restored to this woman who faces away from us disallowing us to know who she is and the emotional state perhaps displayed by her face. At its core, this woman is unrecognizable because of her lack of facial representation. She is not linked, therefore, to "the other of the other" but is deeply rooted in the experiences of black Americans and the ways they have been labeled and explained throughout history. The restoration of mystery, and thus individuality, this woman portrays links her to the particular reading. Rather than relying on the prevailing racist and sexist notions that have determined black femininity, Simpson allows the woman in *You're Fine* to be mysterious and subtle.

Looking at *You're Fine*, hooks sees a paradoxical scene of agency and dehumanization occurring simultaneously.³¹ The text panels and ceramic letters tell a story of domination. The subjugation of black women has been as present as black women themselves in America: as reproductive vessels for their white owners, sexual assault they underwent at the hands of their white owners, the eugenics operations done on black women without their consent, and the discrimination that black women face every day as they seek employment. The text on the plaques references medical tests and the dehumanization that occurs when bodies are broken down into the fluids they produce and the micro-components measurable by medical technology. The

³¹ hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 99.

words on the plaques refer to these instances of domination not so much in explicit verbiage but in the feelings of oppression they conjure. Despite the oppressiveness the accompanying text suggests, looking at the reclining woman's body there is no evidence of oppression.³² The woman in *You're Fine* exudes no stress or discomfort in the face of this potential threat. By ignoring this dehumanization, this woman transcends the medical and employment humiliation insinuated in the sterile background and threatening words that surround her.³³ For hooks nothing is lost when the particular interpretation is applied to Simpson's works. Rather, much is gained such as a rewriting of black women's history, which hooks asserts is as powerful as it is uncommon.³⁴

As Huey Copeland suggests it is the suspension between the particular and universal that animates Simpson's work.³⁵ To only see the universal or particular in *You're Fine* would be too easy. The interpretive binary of universal versus particular exists because it is born of our desire to explain away the difficulties in Simpson's work; however, viewers must revel in the complexities that Simpson presents. The intersectionality inherent in Simpson's work forces us to contend with the complexities of black identity and its representations.

In their respective essays, neither Fusco nor hooks discussed in depth the fragmentation present in *You're Fine*. Yet, looking at the fragmentation dissolves the binary that both Fusco and hooks unwittingly fell into. In their desire to find the deeper meaning that Simpson's work conveys they overlooked a meaningful characteristic that is readily available in much of Simpson's early art and very visible in *You're Fine*.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ hooks, *Art on my Mind*, 100.

³⁵ For Copeland, the fluctuation between the universal and the particular in Simpson's work not only animates it but also demonstrates the ways that representation of black women often prevent black subjectivity from being demonstrated. Copeland, "'Bye Bye Black Girl,'" 64-65.

Before the significance of the fragmentation in the universal versus particular debate can be delved into, first the photography technique Simpson used in making *You're Fine* must be understood. Using a Polaroid camera to create the work, Simpson signals that these were not images that could be manipulated in a dark room after the photo had initially be captured. From the nature of the Polaroid camera and the large scale of the body present in each photograph in relation to the background, Simpson must have taken these photos relatively close the model. Thus, it is improbable that Simpson took four individual photographs that depicted the whole body and then cropped each image to show only a portion of the body. More likely, Simpson took close ups of the four different parts of the body and then used minimal cropping, if at all, to create the final image. The purposeful misalignment of the photographs as well as placing each photograph within its own frame indicates, however, that no matter how whole the body may appear, it is truly fragmented.

The fragmentation present in *You're Fine* dismantles the binary that many scholars have fallen into while discussing Simpson's work. It accomplishes this by lending itself not solely to one interpretation but instead because it can be read in a variety of ways thus negating the understanding of Simpson's work as something that is "either/or." In trying to explain Simpson's artistic choices and interpret their meaning, too often, critics and viewers try to explain away what makes her work truly appealing: that it traverses many boundaries, one of which is being both universal and particular. It is possible, and the fragmentation of the figure makes it so, that the figure in *You're Fine* is both universalized and particular. The ability of the body to be both universal and particular is accomplished because the disassembling and mending of the body in Simpson's works necessitates and requires a closer look. That desire to make viewers look return to the artwork for further inspection is inextricably linked to the figure of the black woman in

You're Fine. In the same way that the fragmentation physically creates space within the composition—the gaps created in-between each Polaroid by the wooden bars of the frame—it also establishes the necessary metaphorical space for Simpson's work to be removed from the binary and into a realm of multiplicity.

The binary is dissolved because it supports Fusco, hook's and many others' argument. Understanding the black woman in *You're Fine* as a cipher for the "other of the other," as Fusco conceives, allows her to take on a broader meaning rather than just be representational of the experience of black women in America. The literal segmenting of the body through the Polaroids that capture the various sections of the body and the strict structure the frame provides is evocative of the marginalized peoples of which Fusco speaks. Those who belong to "the other of the other" that Fusco discusses in relation to Simpson's work are united in that they do not belong to the dominant culture due to conceptions of white masculinity and beauty. Not meeting the standards of beauty or having defining bodily characteristics that defy conventional beauty types is one way to make certain peoples feel marginalized.

In *You're Fine* the body is at once taken apart and reassembled. The figure's body has been broken down—head to shoulder, thigh to calf—and is reminiscent of the ways in which marginalized people's bodies have been targeted for their specific characteristics. For black women the focus within mainstream representations has been on the size of their lips or buttocks. For Asian women, it is their eyes and hair that have become the stereotypes with which they must contend. Jews (although their designation as not white is questionable but at certain points in American history have been marginalized) are constantly equated with large noses. The fragmentation, the separation of various parts of the body into different images and into different frames, requires that the viewer take a second, third, infinite amount of visits and time to analyze

the body that is on display within *You're Fine* and contemplate the ways bodies have been taken apart within mainstream society. Fusco contends that it is not identity that is on display in Simpson's work but how that identity is formed.³⁶ Looking at the fragmentation in *You're Fine* forces us to evaluate each aspect of the body as it is presented to us, sequentially and separated. Simpson's act of segmenting the body is a visual reminder of the ways in which the actual bodies of people of color, those belonging to "the other and the other," contend with stereotypes in which specific parts of their figure are made prominent in an often successful attempt to isolate them by differentiating them from the beauty norm.

Understanding Simpson's work even more broadly than Fusco does, the fragmentation can expand her interpretation. It is a visual reminder of the ways that all humans are connected. Our bodies, composed of the same organs and extremities, can be broken down in the same way. A white male body could be disassembled in a similar, if not identical way, as Simpson has done here with this black woman. In this reading, the fragmentation serves as a universalizing aspect where viewers are reminded of the human body at its most fundamental: the physicality of human existence and the shared anatomy of which all people are all in possession.

Even as the fragmentation shows the commonality that exists between all humans regardless of their gender and race, it also demonstrates how bodies, because of those factors, have been treated and their identity thus conceived. If the particularist reading of *You're Fine* and other Simpson works centers on agency and self-definition then the fragmentation certainly reinforces that interpretation. The black female body is one that has never been whole in the Americas. Before the United States was established as an independent nation and continuing on until today, black women have been treated as only as bodies, stripped of their autonomy and subtlety,

³⁶ Fusco, *English is Broken Here*, 98.

they have been defined by hegemonic conceptions of their identity and purpose as reproductive agents and hyper-sexualized beings. In fragmenting the body the ways in which the black female body has been fragmented and used for different purposes can be seen. For so long in mainstream, hegemonic American culture a black woman's body was not something that belonged to herself but was a physical entity that could be divided and used to serve the different purposes of the white patriarchy. It provided physical labor in the form of domestic duties and field work, then it endured birthing labor to produce more slaves. The fragmentation of this female body points to the injustices done to it in the past and the ways that the black female body has been utilized.

But while the fragmentation can be read in multiple ways, and I maintain that it should be, it most closely aligns with the discourse of embodiment that has become a necessary part of the theories on black identity formation. Disembodied and what Jayna Brown refers to as “discursive” theories have dominated our understanding of identity theory.³⁷ These discursive theories center on the intellectual experiences that formulate identity, such as W.E.B. Du Bois's double-consciousness. Brittney Cooper asserts that double-consciousness is an “*internal* battle over the ideals and discourses of black identity” that suggests that black identity is created by how black individuals perceive dominant white notions of black identity.³⁸ These internal formulations must be considered in addition to the physical and lived experiences of what it means to be black and female and navigate through certain spaces. Part of what embodied discourse speaks to is that “moving black bodies [are] the logical and primary medium for contrary acts of reliance,

³⁷ Double consciousness is an internal process because it takes place within the body, whereas Cooper understands black identity to be the negotiation of Southern ideals on the black body and the ways those ideas impact the black body in space. Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 75.

³⁸ Cooper, “A’n’t a Lady,” 44.

that they are literally alive in complex response to” systems of oppression.³⁹ But how can you reconcile a moving body that is a site of resistance and change with the stagnant and fixed black female body in *You’re Fine*?

The fragmentation in *You’re Fine* and other Simpson works speaks directly to the embodied experience that is the foundation upon which black identity is created.⁴⁰ This occurs because the fragmentation deals directly with the body. It is the body, not the woman’s thoughts that are being taken apart in *You’re Fine*. By fragmenting the body, Simpson comments on the ways that the black female body has been utilized throughout American history, as previously discussed, but also the agency she possesses as an evolving and resilient force that defines itself in the face of the frameworks that attempt to create and impose its own understandings of blackness upon her.

Although hooks sees agency in this figure because she remains relaxed and composed within a scene of potential oppressiveness, what this female figure does not do is move. She is static and fixed within the confines of the four photos and the frame that encapsulates her. Here is where the fragmentation allows the dynamism and agency of the black body to be demonstrated. Previously, I talked about the purposeful misalignment of the photos within the frame. This misalignment takes place at the junctions of the four photographs where the parts of the body meet. The misalignment of the photographs next to another suggests movement, shifting, and readjusting. These incremental and wiggling movements showcases the body reacting to the discursive claims that attempt to define it.⁴¹

³⁹ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 73.

⁴⁰ I am not arguing that the embodied experience is the only element upon which black identity is formulated, but I agree with Cooper and Brown that embodiment discourse and rhetoric is as important as the internal battles Du Bois proposes. Cooper, “A’n’t a Lady,” 44.

⁴¹ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 75.

This movement is far more evident in the fragmentation of Simpson's 1980 work *Time Piece* (figure 2). In this photographic work, a black woman with short curly hair stands facing away from the camera in front of a grayish tan backdrop. As seen in *You're Fine* the backdrop the figure stands in front of mimics the background of the larger work that is also a gray color. Her body is composed of two photographs that bisect across her torso at elbow height. The first photograph depicts from the slight space above her head to her knees. She wears an elbow length black dress that scoops down in the back to show her scapulae. This fragmented woman is shown four times, her position shifting slightly in each of the three depictions. Here again, Simpson has purposefully misaligned the images at the junction where the first photo ends and the second photo begins. This fragmentation occurs across the woman's torso segmenting her elbows into two. In the first and leftmost image her hands rest halfway between the inside and outside of her thighs. Continuing to read the work from left to right, the hands move to the outside of the thigh even as the fingertips still rest on the tops of the thighs. By the image furthest right the woman's hands are not fully beside her but in front of her body and almost out of sight from the spectator's eyes. Accompanying the movement of her hands from the side of her thighs to the front are the increasingly mismatched photographs. Again reading the image from left to right the leftmost image is the most matched of the three as the bunched black sleeves of the dress almost perfectly align with the hem of the sleeves shown in the bottom Polaroid print. But as the image progresses to the right the movement and misalignment becomes and more noticeable. By the third image on the right the bottom part of the woman's arms begin almost an inch away from where the arm ends in the above photograph. The shifting of the photos dramatizes the swell of the woman's hips as the bottom half of her body is no longer proportional to the top half. The bot-

tom image appears to have been taken at closer range and is wider thus creating the disproportionality. More apparent in *Time Piece* is the misalignment and wriggling that demonstrates the black body's agency and response to the hegemonic concepts of blackness that try to define it.

The incremental space in *Time Piece* where elbows meet provides a surreal experience for the viewer who feels as though they are wearing ill prescribed glasses that distort their vision. The woman in the Polaroid prints feels blurry and mirage like. This surreal feeling of duplicity—the body both being stagnant within the images and the sense that they are moving because the photos are misaligned—speaks to the physicality of blackness that formulates identity as embodied discourse conceives of it. These moments of movement are not a casual mistake of the artist's hand but a purposeful allusion to the ways that black female bodies navigate space and how those experiences formulate identity. The movements of the body are alluded to in the engraved plaque that sits to the right of the three framed women. The plaque consists of eleven lines of text all dealing with time, “died a year ago,” “died at the same time,” “died last month.” These references to time reinforce the movement seen in the photographs. Time was one of the ways in which control was exerted over enslaved black men and women.⁴² It was believed that slaves did not possess the knowledge of time, which directly opposes the highly regularized notion of time that is central to Western society and modernity.⁴³ Furthermore, time was linked to the oppression of bodies because it was up to the master or overseer on a plantation to determine how long an enslaved person worked.⁴⁴ Slaves had no control over time as their bodies were not considered their own, but property and thus at the discretion of its owners who mandated labor without regard for the preferences of those they ordered. Simpson's direct references to time are

⁴² Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 102.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

reminder of how it was used as an instrument of oppression. But the various times in *Time Piece*, “a year ago,” “seven years ago,” “last month,” and the subtle but definitive movements of the body in the Polaroids again link back to embodiment theory. They showcase one of the fundamental points of embodiment discourse that, as Elizabeth Grosz explains, the body “cannot be definitely known since it is not identical with itself across time.”⁴⁵ Just as time changes so does the black female body that resides in it. Even though the figure in *Time Piece* first appears fixed within the black frames that encapsulate her, the fragmentation of her body displays movement that gives this body agency and allows it demonstrate the self-determination it has always possessed, even if in the smallest of ways.

Ultimately, on display in *You're Fine* and *Time Piece* are not the actual representations of black identity, but the processes that contribute to identity formation. The fragmentation is an element of Simpson's work that demands multiplicity and refuses any one understanding be it universal or particular. It, therefore, supports multiple readings, but most closely aligns itself not with the discursive and abstract theories of identity formation, but with the embodied and lived experiences of black women.

⁴⁵ Grosz conceives of four theories regarding bodies in her text *Volatile Bodies* which Brown summarizes in her own essay. The four theories are: the natural body which mitigates the understanding of race as something derived from biology; the body as a vessel and instrument that can be animated or passive; the body as a conduit which transmits messages that are otherwise inaccessible from our psyche; lastly, that the body is not consistent over time as it is determined by the historical and cultural context in which it is found. Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 74.

Chapter 1 Illustrations

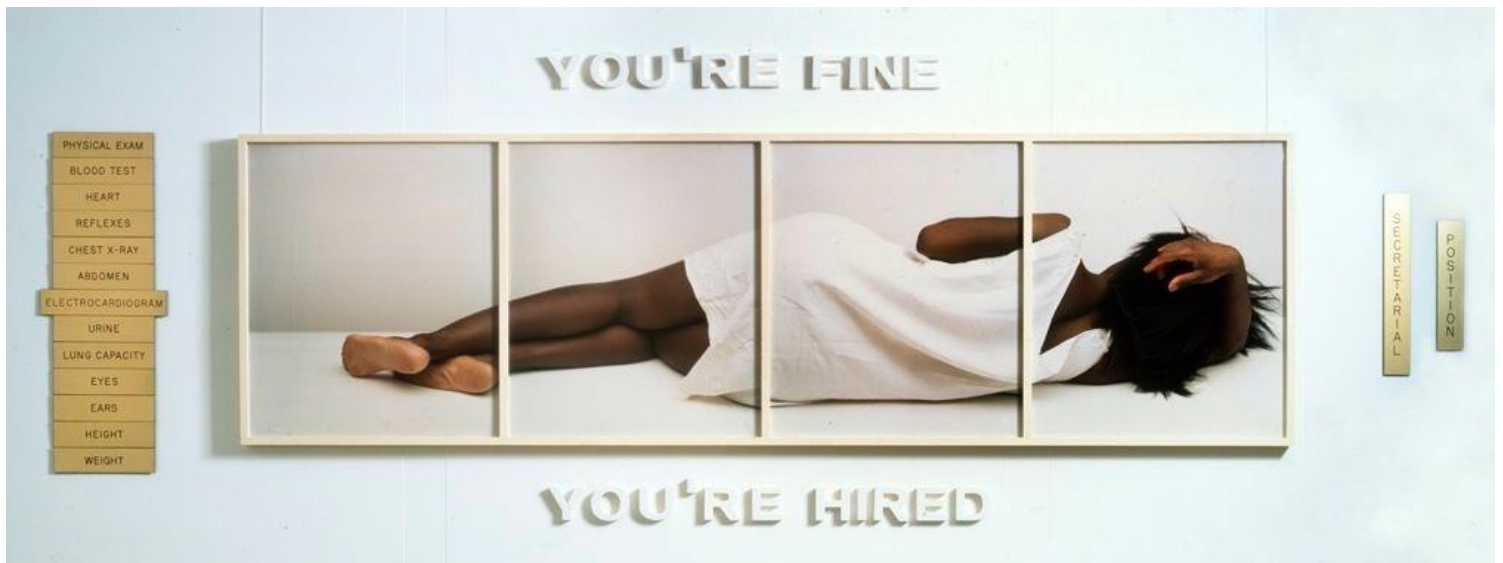


Figure 1: Lorna Simpson, *You're Fine*, 1988, 4 dye diffusion color Polaroid prints (1 framed panel), 15 engraved plastic plaques, ceramic letters, 39 x 108.125 x 1.625 inches.

Chapter 1 Illustrations

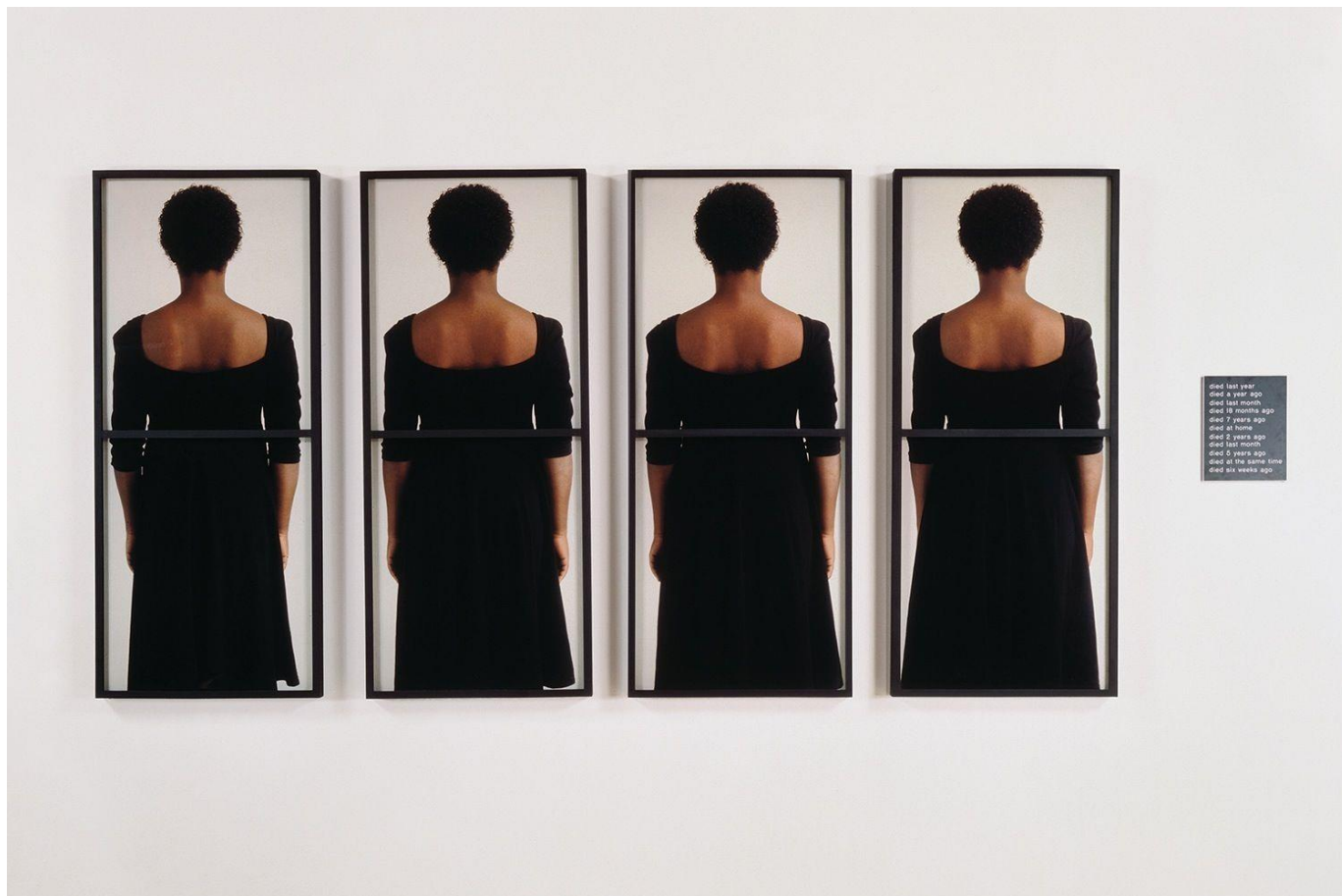


Figure 2: Lorna Simpson, *Time Piece*, 1990, 8 dye diffusion color Polaroid prints, 1 engraved plastic plaque, 125.1 x 128.5 x 1.875 inches.

Chapter 2: Mimic and Subvert

Looking at Lorna Simpson's work one can see echoes of photographers past. Not all of these references are intended to be positive tributes. As expected with all of Simpson's art, her work functions on multiple levels to interact with other photographic works and contradict impressions regarding the truthfulness of photography. This chapter focuses on two aspects of Simpson's practices that are interwoven with her usage of fragmentation in her photographic works. First is that the fragmentation within Simpson's early art works to dispel the notion that photography represents identity truthfully and holistically. By fragmenting the body of her figures Simpson disrupts the viewer's gaze and undermines the impression that a photograph is a truthful representation of the figure's identity. Secondly, Simpson references scientific photographers of the nineteenth century in order to counter their racist representations of African Americans. While Simpson mimics some of the strategies of these nineteenth-century scientific photographers, the fragmentation she employs contradicts the original intent of the photographers who sought to subjugate and denigrate blackness.

Dorothea Lange, an influential and popular documentary photographer, is quoted with saying, "A camera is a tool of relearning how to see without a camera."⁴⁶ Lange's words are emblematic of the perspective that advocates that a photograph transmits the same truth the eye beholds. What Lange does not reference is the perceptions that the cameraman or woman brings to the subject matter that he or she is "documenting" and the inevitable presence of those associations in the image he or she captures. During the same time that Lange was photographing, Beaumont Newhall observed that regardless of whether or not it is true that a camera captures exactly

⁴⁶ I originally found this quote inscribed on the wall of the Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn, New York City. I later found it in the following article. David Oshinsky, "Picturing the Depression," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2009, BR15.

what the eye sees, everyone believes it the photograph to function as the “pictorial evidence of an eye-witness.”⁴⁷ Since its birth in a century before Newhall contributed his essay to *Parnassus* in 1939, photography has been associated with truth. This connection has continued to linger and it is a notion that Simpson directly addresses in her early works.

One of the ways that Simpson counters this supposedly inherent association between photography and truth is through her use of fragmentation. The photograph is understood as a physical image of sight is because it reminds viewers of their own sight. The realism in documentary photographer Dorothea Lange’s works is so compelling that it convinces the viewer the scene it depicts is an accurate and truthful representation. Her 1937 *Ex-Slave with long memory, Alabama* (figure 1) portrays a black woman, her head covered in a white wrap wearing a ragged dark sweater standing before an out-of-focus background of a field. The crinkles of her nose and the veins on her neck are clearly visible as are the sharp bones of her left wrist. Lange’s image requires no squinting. The figure appears crisply before the viewer’s eye and is thus easy to blithely understand as an accurate portrayal of this woman’s life. The stained clothes and weary face show a life of hard work as does the title of the photograph “Ex-Slave.”⁴⁸ Truthfully, nothing is known of this woman. It is the associations of blackness, womanhood, and slavery that each individual viewer brings to this image that shapes the interpretation of the photograph. For example, my knowledge of slave labor leads me to believe that she was forced to undergo difficult, punishing work and that it is likely she was the victim of sexual violence as many enslaved

⁴⁷ Beaumont Newhall, “Documenting Approach to Photography” *Parnassus* 10 (1938): 2.

⁴⁸ As she traveled and photographed, Lange kept notebooks filled with information. She frequently captioned her photographs based on the information she collected while out in the field. It is impossible to verify the information she used to formulate her captions, but they were often shortened by her boss at the Farm Security Administration, Roy Stryker. There are instances where Stryker shortened Lange’s lengthy captions. It is unknown as to whether *Ex-slave with a long memory, Alabama* is the original title or if it had been abbreviated by Stryker. Elizabeth Partridge, *Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning: Her Lifetime in Photography* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2013), 24.

black women were at the hands of their white masters. By being labeled as a documentary photographer Lange is granted with the authority to suggest the meaning of this woman's life through the descriptive and evocative title. Yet this image was taken in 1937, seventy-four years after the Emancipation Proclamation. As the title of the photograph does not specify the age of the woman depicted, it is not unreasonable to assume, knowing the dates of the photograph and the Emancipation Proclamation, that she was freed from slavery as young woman. Yet the "with a long memory" portion of the title and her placement in front of a field purposefully conjures up images of the toils of manual slave labor.

In contrast, Simpson's 1988 *Five Day Forecast* (figure 2) is a work that purposefully confuses potential interpretative meanings in order to counter the idea that photography is a truthful representation of an individual or collective's identity. While Lange's work was easy to visually digest due to its clear print on silver gelatin, Simpson's silver gelatin prints present a more confounding work of art that deliberately addresses the viewer's notions and understandings of race. *Five Day Forecast* consists of five photographs of a black woman, dressed in a white shift. With her arms crossed tightly over her torso, her position shifts slightly in each of the five photographs. The photographs only depict the woman's neck to the tops of her thighs, the engraved plastic plaques located above and below her functioning as substitutes for the rest of her body. Above each photograph is a plaque bearing the name of each weekday with "Monday" hovering over the left-most image and the fifth and final photograph culminating in "Friday." If the plaques above the photos function as the figure's head, the two engraved plaques located below each photograph are her legs. The plaques located below the photos in *Five Day Forecast* conjure accusations and insults much in the same way that Lange's title "Ex-Slave with a Long Memory" evoked the memory and history of the featured woman. Each plaque bears a word that

begins with “mis,” such as “misdescription,” “misfunction,” “misremember,” and “misdiagnose.” The reading of each word feels like a punch. By the time the viewer reaches the tenth and final plaque beneath the fifth photograph, the viewer understands why the figure crosses her arms around her torso so tightly: as a protection against the daily assault of these words.

Simpson’s incorporation of text and imagery is integral to her intent to disprove the truthfulness of photography regarding its ability to portray identity. Allan Sekula cites the work of Martha Rosler, specifically her *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* as a work that utilizes text as an accompaniment to imagery as a way to “anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, complement, particularize, or go beyond the meanings offered by the images themselves.”⁴⁹ *The Bowery* consists of photographs of the Bowery landscape of streets and buildings placed next to words evoking drunkenness such as “wino” and “barrelhouse bum.” Thirteen years after Rosler created this seminal work, Simpson uses a similar method in *Five Day Forecast* to confuse the interpretation the photographs alone would offer. While the words serve a vital purpose in complicating the figure depicted in the five photos, the fragmentation present is the visual indicator by which the truth of the photograph is disrupted.

The fragmentation evident in *Five Day Forecast* is another visual tool Simpson employs to prove the false notion of photography as an authentic portrayal of identity. As previously discussed, within Simpson’s work there are two types of fragmentation. In *Five Day Forecast* the fragmentation occurs in that the body is not represented holistically. Rather it is truncated so that only her torso is seen. Her head has been severed by the frame and her legs are similarly missing.

⁴⁹ In Sekula’s estimation, Rosler’s *The Bowery* “comes the closest to unrelenting *metacritical* [emphasis in original] in relation to the documentary genre.” *The Bowery*’s combination of text and photographs forces viewers to confront the “fundamentally flawed, distorted character” of representation. It is unknown whether or not Simpson was aware of Rosler’s work, but it is reasonable to assume that during her studies at the School of Visual Arts and at the University of San Diego she would have encountered this seminal work. Allan Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),” *The Massachusetts Review, Inc.* 19 (1978): 866.

The loss of vital parts of the body, such as the head, disrupts the viewer's understanding of the body. Lange's photo centers around the woman's face. The vertical lapels of her sweater leads viewer's eyes to the woman's face, highlighted by her vibrant white hair wrap. By looking into the three-quarters turned face of the figure, general convention informs viewers that they know this woman and the truth of her life: that of a hard working former slave that lives in poverty. But in *Five Day Forecast* Simpson prevents this "knowing" from taking place. Through removing the face of the woman from the photograph, viewers are unable to stare into her eyes and make assumptions based on her the curve of her chin or the wrinkles in the corners of her eyes. By removing the face, Simpson takes away our most direct access point to this woman's identity. Unable to determine her identity based on the features of her face, instead viewers are forced to scan the squirming bodies that compose the five photographs hoping for a physical clue to indicate who the woman featured is. Although viewers may seek for these identifying clues, the movements of the woman within the photographs evades their efforts.

Furthermore, the disruption of the viewer's gaze caused by the fragmentation forces viewers to confront the ways in which photographs can be manipulated and thus falsely represent identity. In *Ex Slave* viewers look upon the woman unencumbered. The photo appears to have a minimal frame (if at all) and the photograph is crisp. In contrast, the fragmentation of the body in *Five Day Forecast* is difficult to look at. Viewers stare at the five photographs looking for a point of entry, a place where they can begin to study and thus know this woman and her identity. Instead they are greeted with a segmented body. Her torso is covered by a shapeless shift. The clenching and flexing of the woman's wrists along with her shifting clavicle functions as the most expressive parts of the image. The fragmentation is in direct dialogue with documentary photographers in the past, whose smooth and easily viewed images helped convey the message

of truth with which photography is so often associated. Disrupting the easy viewing experience of documentary photographs in the past, Simpson has shown us only a fragment of this woman's body. This un-holistic body along with the text that borders the photographs force viewers to gaze upon this image in confusion rather than provide a definitive statement about black identity.

As discussed in last chapter, *You're Fine* and *Time Piece* were works intended to demonstrate the societal and representational forces that have been used to convey identity. In *Five Day Forecast* Simpson again takes up this issue by directly referencing documentary photographs and their supposed function as the physical evidence of the camera man or woman's experience. The fragmentation is a device that disrupts the viewer's gaze and allows other interpretations to enter into the artwork. Preventing a definitive understanding from taking place, Simpson refutes the notion that a photograph is an accurate telling of an individual or collective's identity.

Before Simpson purposely engaged with and refuted past notions of identity and photography, her early photography was primarily in the mode of documentary photography, albeit a later iteration.⁵⁰ Beginning in 1978, Simpson studied as an undergraduate at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. New York City, rife with documentary photography, influenced Simpson who absorbed aspects of this photographic practice. Okwui Enwezor argues that even as Simpson followed the template of documentary photography by going into the streets and "documenting" the lives of its inhabitants, she refused to portray clichés of the black urban life she photographed.⁵¹ Enwezor advocates that Simpson was aware of the "struggle for power, for control of

⁵⁰ Like Lange, Simpson traveled across the United States (and Europe and North Africa) to take photographs in the documentary style. Unlike Lange, Simpson was not interested in showcasing the poverty that black Americans faced whereas highlighting poor living and working conditions was central to Lange's practice. Okwui Enwezor, "Repetition and Differentiation –Lorna Simpson's Iconography of the Racial Sublime," in *Lorna Simpson*, (New York: Abrams, in association with the American Federation of Arts, 2006), 103.

⁵¹ Ibid.

representation” inherent in photography even as she first began taking photos.⁵² The struggle for power and control are themes that continued to be present in Simpson’s works even as she moved away from the more traditional documentary photography.⁵³

Simpson’s photography shifted as she pursued her Masters of Fine Arts. Her graduate studies took place in San Diego, California necessitating a cross country move that provided exposure to new art forms.⁵⁴ Whereas New York City was beset by documentary photography, San Diego was home to a strong contingent of performance artists. Simpson, already in doubt of the ability of documentary photography to portray the reality of an image as it was tied up with issues of representation and the personal biases of the photographer, became interested in “the temporal relationship between the performative act and the camera.”⁵⁵ While in California, Simpson’s photographs changed from being candid or semi-candid street shots of the documentary photography style to photographs captured in a studio. The transition from street to studio signified Simpson’s desire to create staged representations fully under her control.⁵⁶ An example of an image created within this context is *Five Day Forecast* whose ultimate meaning depends on altering the individual viewer’s understanding of the role photography can play in representing identity.

As Simpson migrated away from documentary photography she continued to think about the representations of identity that documentary photography put forth. The fragmentation pre-

⁵² Enwezor, “Repetition and Differentiation,” 105.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Enwezor, “Repetition and Differentiation,” 108.

⁵⁵ Enwezor sees Simpson’s engagement with the temporal aspect of photography as a reflection of her doubt in documentary photography and its ability to convey truth. Enwezor, “Repetition and Differentiation,” 108-9.

⁵⁶ In order to adequately display the inaccuracies of documentary photography Enwezor posits that Simpson had no choice but to turn to a staged image because rather than “record reality, she wanted to investigate it, unravel it, interrogate it.” Enwezor, “Repetition and Differentiation,” 109.

sent in *Five Day Forecast* and other works from this time are a direct reflection of Simpson's impulse to create work, within the context of the studio that comments on both the faulty methods by which photography conveys identity and the societal forces that continue to shape identity. Scientific photographers of the nineteenth century were also interested in using photography to portray societal conceptions of identity. In their case, however, their notions of identity centered on the inferiority of enslaved black Americans based on the pseudo-science of physiognomy and phrenology.

Scientific photography was used to portray and perpetuate stereotypes based on the false physiognomic claims of marginalized peoples. While throughout the world scientific photography focused on different populations, in America the effort honed in on enslaved black men and women. The fragmentation present in *Twenty Questions* (1986) (figure 3) simultaneously complicates a viewer's comprehension of the figure in the work by disrupting their gaze while also negating the conventions of scientific photography. The fragmentation enables Simpson to reference these conventions but have them serve a different purpose: portray the agency and subjectivity of the figures deprived of them by the racist motivations of the early photographers. Simpson is careful in how she accomplishes this depiction of self-determination. Integral to Simpson's process is the limited access viewers have to the figure's body. The fragmentation evident in these works is the main visual strategy that accomplishes this limitation. *Twenty Questions* is a work showcasing another fragmented black body that works to dispel the prejudice inherent in the scientific photographs of the nineteenth century. As with *Five Day Forecast*, multiple looks are necessary in order to discern if the four images repeated are identical or slight variations of each other. *Twenty Questions* features the same photograph four times, but looking

at Simpson's oeuvre from this time makes even an experienced Simpson supporter question whether it is truly the same image.

Twenty Questions is composed of cropped circular photographs that portray only the back of a black woman's head. The hair of the woman depicted is relaxed and voluminous. Its almost bell-like curve echoes the roundness of the black frame that surrounds it. The top part of the woman's hair is highly lit, the texture of her hair highly visible as are the shadows it casts on the woman's back. The photograph extends as far as where the woman's scapula would lie on her back, severing her body below the shoulders. This photograph is repeated four times, the black circular frames containing the images forming an ellipses on the white background of the work. Centered above the four photographs is a plastic plaque that reads "twenty questions," the title of the work. Plaques are located below the photos in a repetitive, spaced out pattern. Directly beneath the first and left-most image is a plaque with the words "Is she pretty as a picture." Immediately to the right of this plaque is another one, centered between the first and second photographs that reads "or clear as a crystal." Parallel to the title plaque above, the third plaque is centered beneath and between the second and third photographs saying "or pure as a lily." The fourth plaque, "or as black as coal," is placed in between the third and fourth images while fifth and final plaque, "or as sharp as a razor," is centered underneath the fourth framed photograph. From the plaques' location and the repetitive use of the word "or" Simpson instructs us to read *Twenty Questions* from left to right. Even without analyzing the four images' fragmentation, the words on the plaques question our assumptions of the woman depicted. The confusion the plaques and fragmentation create definitively informs viewers that they do not have access to truth of the figure being depicted neither physically nor regarding her identity.

Also not unlike *Five Day Forecast*, which references documentary photographs of the past, Simpson's staging of the figure in *Twenty Questions* recalls the work of J.T. Zealy, a daguerreotypist working in the nineteenth century. Specifically a connection between *Twenty Questions* and Zealy's daguerreotype of Delia (figure 4), an enslaved woman, is seen. Zealy was a local daguerreotypist working in Columbia, South Carolina where the Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz visited to find different types of African slaves to document for his ethnographic research with Samuel Morton.⁵⁷ Zealy was not chosen for his artistic skill, but because of his proximity to the location of the enslaved men and women that Agassiz chose. Truthfully, it has only been recently that daguerreotypists are considered artists at all.⁵⁸ In 1850 daguerreotypists were as uninvolved in the photographic process as much as was possible. Brian Wallis explains that it was the hands-off approach of the daguerreotype that contributed significantly to the medium's close association with the truth as the resulting images were considered miniature versions of reality because the images were highly detailed.⁵⁹ The daguerreotype along with its counterpart, the stereotype, which were photographic molds able to produce multiple copies, were the two dominant forms of representation and worked neatly to reinforce the ethnographic assertions of Agassiz and Morton. The stereotypes and denigrating imagery of blackness that continues to exist today were established by the collapse between the specificity of the daguerreotype and the "type" that the stereotype disseminated.⁶⁰ The typological photographs, such as the ones Zealy created for Agassiz, were considered by the general American public to be "self-evident, to speak for themselves, and at the same time be generic" and thus taken as truth.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science, Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes" *American Art* 9 (1995):40

⁵⁸ For full quote on the transition of daguerreotypist from anonymous camera man to artist see Wallis, "Black Bodies," 40.

⁵⁹ During the nineteenth century daguerreotypes were associated with truth because of their preciseness and ability to convey details of the sitter or object photographed. Wallis, "Black Bodies," 48.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

One such Zealy daguerreotype is that of Delia, an enslaved woman from a slave plantation around Columbia. Forcibly made to display her breasts with her clothes pooling in her lap, Delia is spotlighted in Zealy's studio space. The harsh light invasively exposes the contours of Delia's face and body amidst a dark neutral background. For Agassiz, Zealy's daguerreotypes fulfilled the ethnological function he intended: to prove polygenesis and the physiognomic science that sought to "understand connections between different human groups as well as the inner workings of the mind and spirit."⁶² The curve of Delia's forehead and the angle of her jaw were used as proof for polygenesis, the pseudo-scientific claim that Africans, and other people of color, descended from an origin different than Adam and Eve. In arguing why Zealy's daguerreotypes cannot be considered portraits, Wallis states that the emphasis on the bodies in Zealy's work "occurs at the expense of speech; the subject is already positioned, known, owned, represented, spoken for, or constructed as silent; in short, it is ignored."⁶³ Wallis's description of Delia's muteness explains what makes the fragmentation and the use of text in Simpson's work so powerful.

Rather than a frontal depiction of the woman in *Twenty Questions*, Simpson photographs her from the back. What is normally a position of exposure and vulnerability (because the figure is unaware of the viewer's intrusive gaze) is transformed in *Twenty Questions* into a position of strength. Simpson only grants us the back of the figure's head, our access to her face refused and our access to the rest of her body impossible because Simpson has fragmented it so severely.

The fragmentation of the body plays a crucial role in understanding what Simpson is trying to

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ As much as Wallis sees the loss of speech and self-representation in Agassiz's daguerreotypes, he also recognizes an act of refusal in the faces of the enslaved men and women photographed. Although they face the camera head on, forcibly stripped, Wallis conceives of their attitudes as "detached, unemotional and workmanlike." The disengagement of the sitters are indicative of a "refusal to engage with the camera or its operators." Even as these men and women were involuntarily photographed partially naked through their glazed eyes and clenched jaws they refused to grant all of themselves to Agassiz and Morton. Wallis, "Black Bodies," 40, 54.

convey about the systems that create black identity and representations of identity in the past. By limiting our view of her body onlookers are denied the ability to traverse the landscape of her body in order to make assumptions and decisions about her. Instead, Simpson uses the severed body as well as the words below the images to simply hint at what viewers perceive might be aspects of this woman's identity. The plaques' wording forces viewers to confront their expectations and assumptions of this woman. By simply looking at the photographs does one characterize her skin as "black as coal" or think of her white shift as granting her purity like that of a lily flower? These taunting words strip viewers of their assumptions. The images demand that while viewers may be able to see part of her body it does not follow that her true identity is discernible. The fragmentation in *Twenty Questions* and in other similar works acts as a visual metaphor: in the same way that viewers do not have access to the rest of this woman's body because it is segmented by the sharp curve of the cropped photograph, so too do viewers not have access to this woman's identity nor should they even consider that they do.

The fragmentation of the figure in *Twenty Questions* is a visual tool that simultaneously provides the privacy that images such as Zealy denied to black women and is a definitive act of refusal. Unyieldingly refusing to reveal her face in any of the four photographs of *Twenty Questions* is an act of self-determination by the woman featured. This refusal is seen in other Simpson works such as the previously discussed *You're Fine*, *Time Piece*, and *Five Day Forecast*. Also similar to *Five Day Forecast* is the type of fragmentation employed in *Twenty Questions*. The body in *Twenty Questions* falls into the second category of fragmentation in that only part of the body can be seen, not a whole body divided into parts. Blackness is often seen as homogenous because there are certain identifiers associated with it, associations established by nineteenth-century figures such as Agassiz, Morton and Peter Camper. The legacy of these scientists' work

looms large even centuries later. As Lorraine O'Grady documents, black women today contend with the "otherness" that these men's work thrust upon them. In locker rooms before and after swim practice, O'Grady informs, some black women refuse to get fully naked perhaps because "they must still protect themselves from the centuries-long assault which characterizes them."⁶⁴

Historian Darlene Clark suggests that due to the persistent and negative types of black female sexuality, black women often choose invisibility, where internally they can determine their own sexuality, rather than attempt to change the societal perception because they knew they do not possess the power or resources to do so.⁶⁵ The figure in *Twenty Questions* is far from invisible but her body is protected and sheltered by the fragmentation that allows only the back of her head and her shoulders to be seen. Simpson's limitation of the body through fragmentation references the ways that black women contend with the ongoing impact of these assaults while also preventing moments of objectification and subsequent judgement that defined representation of female blackness in the past.

Long characterized as a refusal to reveal her identity, the figure in *Twenty Questions* faces away from the camera. This act of defiance through denying access to her face, can be seen as the establishment of an independent gaze similar to that seen in *You're Fine*. The refusal, however, is also a further measure that prevents assumptions regarding her identity from being formulated. The lack of access to her face renders viewers unable to recognize her on the street as it would be impossible to identify her solely by the slope of her shoulders. Our conception of

⁶⁴ Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *New Feminist Criticism: Art: Identity, Action*, 153. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

⁶⁵ The invisibility of black women Clark suggests is not indicative of their refusal to engage with the negative stereotypes they faced but instead allowed them to conserve energy and channel their efforts internally by "create secret, empowering personas" rather than combat them within the body politic. Jessica Dallow, "Reclaiming Histories: Betye and Alison Saar, Feminism, and the Representation of Black Womanhood," *Feminist Studies* 30 (2004): 90.

identifying someone based on their face stems from Alphonse Bertillon. Beginning in 1882, Bertillon established a system of classification of Parisian criminals “centered on the anthropometric measurement of criminals.”⁶⁶ Criminals were posed in a manner now familiar. Two photographs were included in each criminal file in Bertillon’s system. One was of the criminal facing frontal towards the camera and the second a photograph of the individual’s profile. These photographs were so crucial to apprehending a criminal in nineteenth-century Paris that Josh Ellenbogen refers to these images as “identity portraits.”⁶⁷ Bertillon’s system attempted to take the visual and tactile impression of the world that govern our existence and transform them into easily understood data.⁶⁸ Bertillon’s classification structure became a widely used method within the prison system but had far reaching implications outside of it. Due to the work of Agassiz and Bertillon the face became central to notions of discerning identity within marginalized individuals. Thus, Simpson’s refusal to show the woman’s face in *Twenty Questions* is a powerful message that rebuffs the typical classification structures of the past in order to prevent such assumptions of identity from taking place.

Reinforcing this notion that Simpson refuses to grant her figures a single identity is referenced directly in parenthetical in the centered plaque above the photographs: “(A Sampler).” Belisle explains that a sampler is a “model of sewing or quilting in which various styles were demonstrated within one framework.”⁶⁹ The use of the word “sampler” alludes to the variety of descriptors that could possibly be used to describe the woman in *Twenty Questions*. The plaques

⁶⁶ Josh Ellenbogen, *Reasoned and Unreasoned Images: The Photography of Bertillon, Galton, and Marey* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 30.

⁶⁷ Ellenbogen, *Reasoned and Unreasoned Images*, 32.

⁶⁸ Bertillon’s conception of identity is one that negates entirely the embodied experience. He did not care about the “everyday visual or tactile” experience in the world but rather on the ways the body is quantifiable. Ellenbogen, *Reasoned and Unreasoned Images*, 53.

⁶⁹ Brooke Belisle, “Felt Surface, Visible Image: Lorna Simpson’s Photography and the Embodiment of Appearance,” *Photography & Culture* 4 (2011): 159.

serve as captions to the images they are placed beneath “suggest[ing] the images could correlate with different identities.”⁷⁰ While this definitely references the various assumptions made about black women, it also comments on the nature of photography to represent identity in general. The pairing of different texts with each image forces viewers to consider how each representation of identity is just a copy of something that has already been created.⁷¹ Even after Simpson deprives us of the figure's face and thus negates our ability to construct this woman's identity that way, the lure of photography may still be too tempting. For so long photography has been equated with truth, something Zealy's daguerreotypes of enslaved individuals both played on and perpetuated. Even as Simpson tries to dissolve this association in *Twenty Questions* many may still too easily believe they know this woman because she is represented as a photograph. But Simpson again anticipates this potential reading and thwarts it by repeating the same photograph four times. In doing so, she forces viewers to confront the truth that each photo, a supposed representation of an individual and their identity, is nothing more than a copy. Our potential grasping of this woman's identity is undermined when it is realized that it is impossible to tell which photograph to determine the truth between the images. Which of the four photographs was the original? Does the original photograph make it the truest representation of the woman?

Wrestling with these questions accomplishes Simpson's goal of forcing her viewers to recognize and confront the inability of photography to represent truth or identity fully. Each photograph in *Twenty Questions* is laden with a myriad of potential interpretations as intended through the fragmentation and plaques. In works like *Five Day Forecast* and *Twenty Questions*

⁷⁰ In Belisle's estimation the interaction of the text along with the photographs indicate that each of the four photographs is already a copy, providing further commentary on the falseness of representing identity. Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Simpson articulates the manipulative nature of photographic modes of the past. Through this process, Simpson exposes the representational and institutional forces that have been the foundation upon which black identity was created and perpetuated. Simpson's work traverses across time to connect with the imagery and systems that black women continue to contend with today.

Chapter 2 Illustrations



Figure 1. Dorothea Lange, *Ex Slave with a long memory*, 1937, gelatin silver print,
15 3/16 x 11 15/16 inches.

Chapter 2 Illustrations



Figure 2: Lorna Simpson, *Five Day Forecast*, 1988, 5 silver gelatin prints, in one frame, 15 engravings, 20 x 24 inches.

Chapter 2 Illustrations

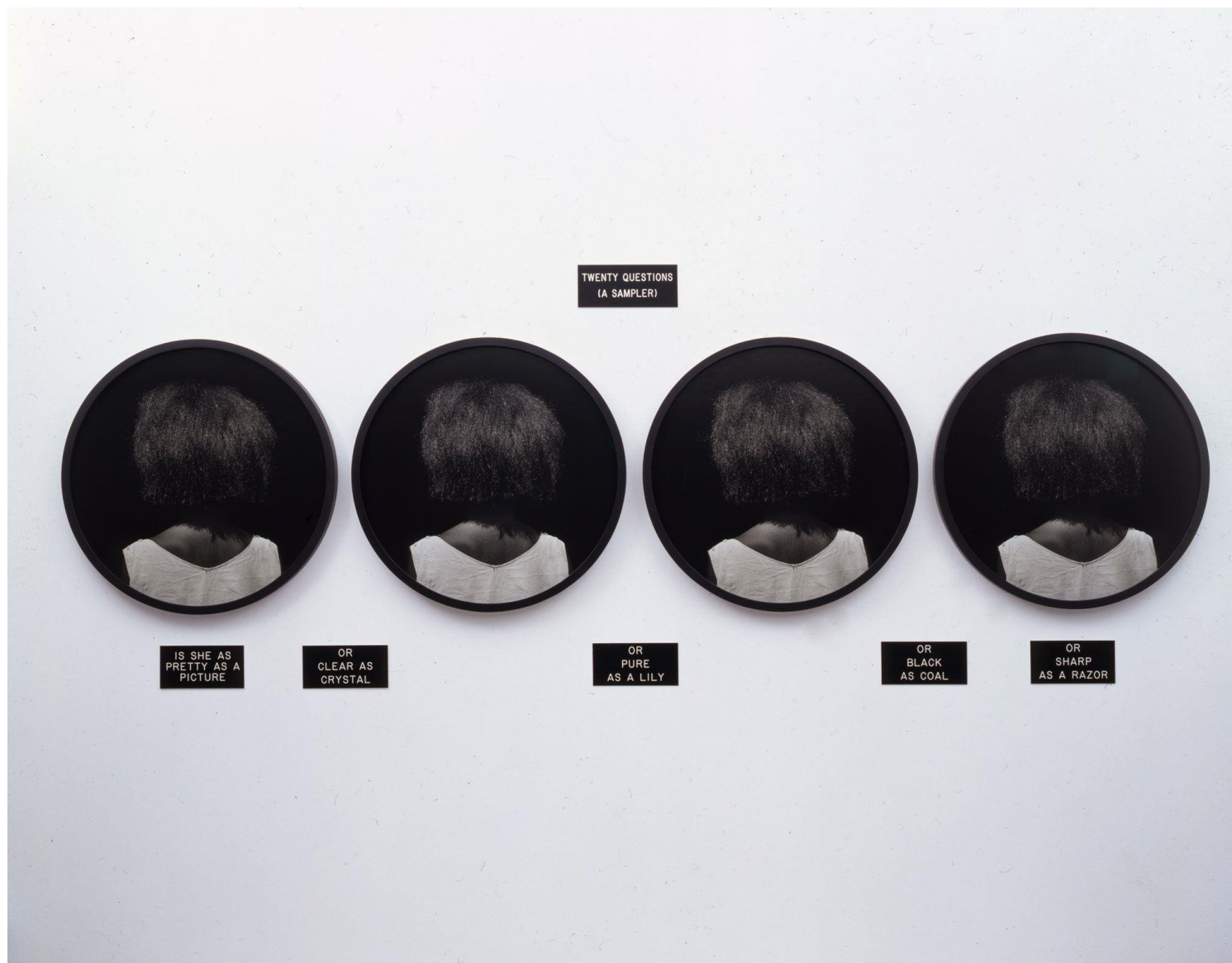


Figure 3: Lorna Simpson, *Twenty Questions*, 1986, 4 silver gelatin prints, 6 plaques, 39

1/2 x 106 1/2 x 0.375 inches.

Chapter 2 Illustrations

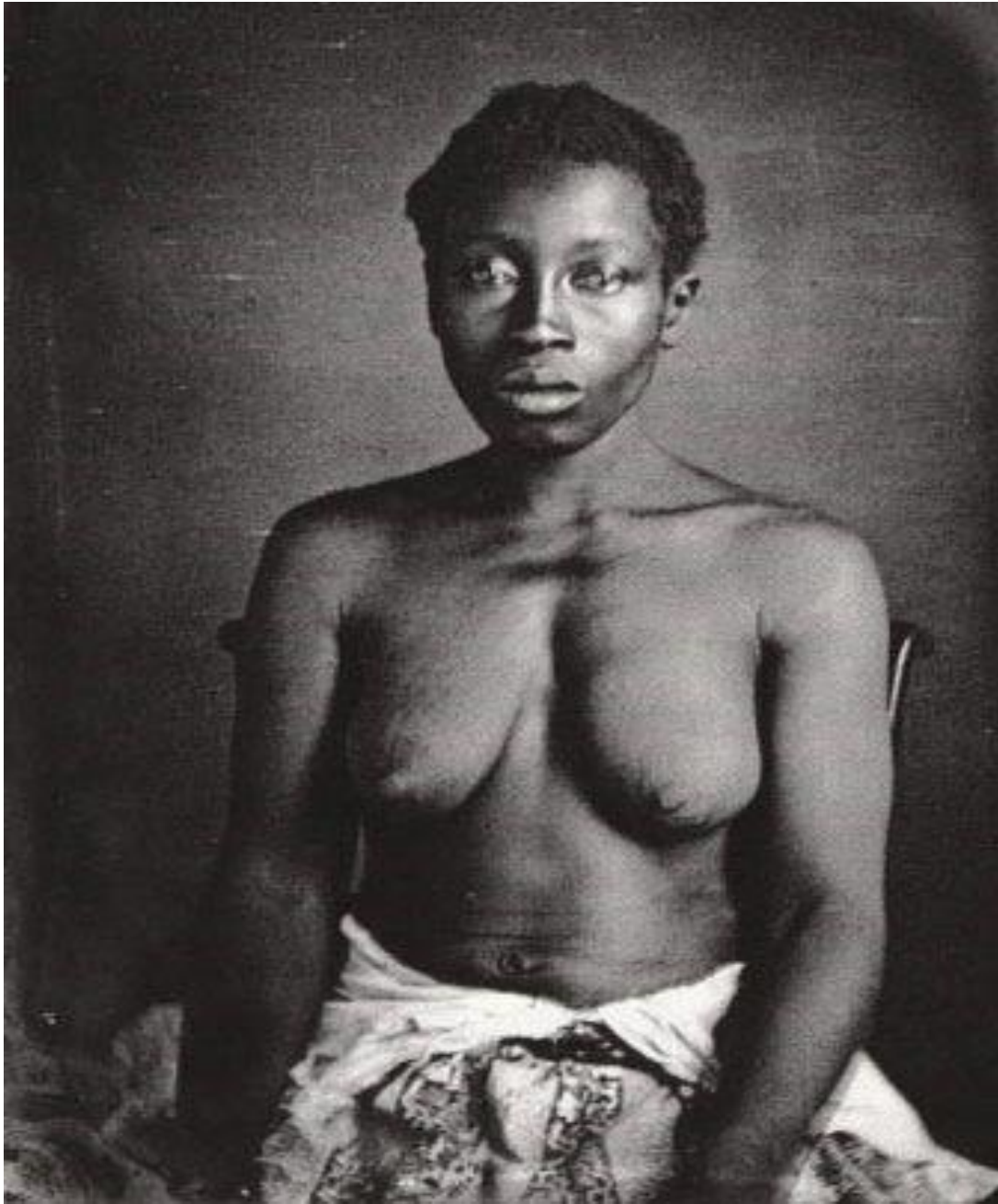


Figure 4: J.T. Zealy, *Delia*, 1850, quarter plate.

Chapter 3: The Grid as Boundary and Fragmenting Force

This thesis, thus far, has analyzed two facets of Lorna Simpson's use of fragmentation in her early works of the 1980s and 1990s. What has not been evaluated up until this point is the visual mechanism by which this fragmentation of the figures is reinforced. Approaching the fragmentation as that which is created by the visual tool of a gridded framing system inserts new meanings into Simpson's work. As previously mentioned, the fragmentation is implemented in two steps in Simpson's artistic process. The first step takes place in Simpson's studio where she photographs her models. With her camera, Simpson fragments the body of the figure by photographing it in sections. The fragmentation occurs at this point in her artistic process because many of the works discussed in this chapter, such as *Guarded Conditions* and *Landscape*, contain Polaroid photographs. By virtue of being a Polaroid the image is unable to be manipulated in the dark room as it is printed immediately after the photograph has been taken. The second aspect of fragmentation occurs when Simpson inserts the printed photographs into frames. The frames, typically black or wooden, are not just the way Simpson presents her finished photographs, but are integral in reinforcing the fragmentation of the bodies featured.

The general consensus in scholarship regarding Simpson's art is that it empowers and restores dignity to the black women it portrays. While not all art historians agree on a singular interpretation (in fact, Simpson's work purposely prevents a unified understanding from taking place) overall the reception to her early work has been largely a positive one. Understanding the framing system employed by Simpson as a grid, however, complicates this positive understanding of her work as that which grants black women the representations they deserve rather than the false and degrading images that proliferate American culture. While Simpson's use of the grid and its negative connotations with bodies of color undoubtedly raises questions about the

empowering nature of Simpson's work, it also is a method that is intended to expose the "cracks and seams" that shakily hold together the predominant views of black women as well as the forces that have come to define and shape black female identity.⁷² This chapter explores the dual functions of the grid and the fragmentation it ensures. On the one hand, the use of the grid can be seen as a continuation of the disparaging practices of scientific photographers and their attempt to measure and restrain black bodies. Alternatively, the grid system literally imposes cracks and seams into the bodies present in Simpson's works. Through creating physical space within the artwork the grid also allows for a metaphorical space to exist where the oppositional forces intrinsic to the black experience in America are made visible and discussed.

In order to understand why Simpson might employ the grid in her work, it is important to discuss why grids are so appealing to artists who are photographing or depicting bodies of color. It is also necessary to determine why it is that people of color conjure up the grid when viewed through the artist's eye (or lens, as the case may be). Historically, the grid has been one of the ways that bodies characterized by their "otherness" have been made palatable and understandable. Simpson, conscious of the ways her photography and art are connected to photographic styles that preceded her, must also have been aware of past uses of the grid.

The grid has been prevalent feature in art for centuries. As far back as the Egyptians, the grid was seen in relation to the body. The Egyptians created canonical proportions based off of a grid in order to create and perfect representations of bodies and showcase their conception of the idealized body.⁷³ The proportions established by the Egyptians's use of the grid influenced Greek

⁷² Julien and Golden, "Conversation with the Artist," 139.

⁷³ Erik Iversen, "The Proportions of the Face in Egyptian Art," *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 4 (1876): 135.

archaic sculptors responsible for producing the *kouroi*.⁷⁴ The usage of the grid both by Egyptian artists and later sculptors clearly establishes the grid within the domains of the body. Simpson, working to depict the body in her photography, has returned to an ancient and abiding system by which the body is defined and represented.

Hundreds of years later, Albrecht Dürer included an image with a grid in his book *The Painters Manual* (figure 1). Dürer's drawing depicts a draftsman sitting at his table. Resting on the table in front of the artist is a large gridded screen. Through the gridded lines the artist views his subject, a reclining semi-nude woman. Because she is placed behind the screen the grid is superimposed over her supine form. Dürer's print is a visual, if explicit, reminder that grids fulfill both an educational and objectifying role. The grid has a practical, didactic purpose, teaching art students how to draw the person (or object) they look upon with accurate scale and proportion. It is also an objectifying force that takes a body and subjects it to an ordering and analytical framework. This ordering occurs through the methodological practices of the grid whereby the body is quantifiable through the tiny squares that serve as the units of measurement. Simpson relies and references both the didactic and objectifying functions of the grid in her own work. The objectification of the figures in Simpson's works is not an unintentional byproduct of the grid, but rather is deliberately evoked by the grid in order to reveal and subvert the objectification black women have historically faced. The grid, as seen in Dürer's work, clearly exposes the educational and objectifying role the grid plays in art. Simpson calls on this aspect of the grid's historical usage in her own works.

⁷⁴ Based on the study, Guralnick concludes that it is reasonable to assume that some Greek sculptors were aware of Egyptian canonical proportions while others were not. At this time it is unknown how the Greek archaic sculptors became acquainted with that information whether it was through traveling to Egypt or sculpture pattern books that existed. Eleanor Guralnick, "The Proportions of Kouros," *American Journal of Archaeology* 82 (1978): 471.

In the nineteenth century, artists far past their schooling days relied on the objectifying nature of the grid to photograph people of color. One artist who used the grid in this manner was John Lamprey. In 1868, Lamprey employed the grid when photographing a Malayan man for his image titled *Front and Profile Views of a Malayan Man* (figure 2). Lamprey's inclusion of the grid in his photographs of the Malayan people reinforces the grid as that which objectifies those under its purview. The grid, in the eyes of Lamprey, was seen as a scientific tool by which the body could be measured and researched. Before photographing his figures, Lamprey placed them in front of grid made of string. Standing in front of this grid, the Malayan figure's body became measurable by the number of tiny squares of the gridded background. In *Front and Profile Views of a Malayan Man* the grid lays bare the Malayan man's body for scientific research. By placing the nude figure in front of a grid Lamprey diminishes the Malayan man's capacity for self-determination by reducing him only to the physical space his body takes up. The scientific intentions of this Lamprey photograph, and many others, declares that this man's body is subhuman and requires scientific research to understand. Lamprey's photograph ensures that the objectification that occurred during the taking of the photograph continues even after the original image has been captured. This perpetuation of objectification takes place because the intent of the photograph is for it to be viewed by others within the framework of scientific study. Lamprey's work follows that of J.T. Zealy's whose daguerreotypes of enslaved men and women were created for Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz. Lamprey, inspired by Agassiz's use of Zealy's daguerreotypes to prove polygenesis, attempted to do the same with his images of Malayan men and women. It is easy to lose sight of the objectifying nature of Lamprey's photograph. The grid fades into the background due to the classical pose of the male figure. In the frontal photograph, the unnamed and nude Malayan man stands in the iconic, and easily recognizable, contrapposto pose. Holding

a stick-like object in his right hand, his slightly bent right knee shifts his weight onto his left side in a subtle version of Polykleitos's *Doryphoros*. Drawing on this classical connection through his positioning of the figure, Lamprey was able to mask his racist intentions through the guise of classicism and science. Simpson's work also often recreates archetypal positions in art, such as the reclining odalisque pose present in *You're Fine*.

The use of the grid in Lamprey and Eadweard J. Muybridge's work support Shawn Michelle William's claim that "the grid clings to the body of color in the photographer's mind."⁷⁵ Only a decade after Lamprey's *Front and Profile Views of a Malayan Man*, Muybridge employed the grid in his *Animal Locomotion* series. Muybridge's photographs of Ben Bailey further cements the relationship between the grid and bodies of color. Unlike Lamprey and Agassiz, Polygenesis was not the focus of Muybridge's work. Instead, Muybridge was interested in capturing the movement of the body with his lens. The *Animal Locomotion* series included a variety of photographs capturing the models engaging in various motion based activities. The grid is ever present in Muybridge's work due to the manner in which he depicted the sequence of photographs. The photographs that compose series of movements is laid out in a grid format (figure 3). In the case of the images of Ben Bailey, the sequence of him faux fighting an invisible enemy in front of a gridded background is laid out in a two photographs by six photographs (figure 4). The grid present in Ben Bailey's series of images, dubbed "striking a blow," was the first instance that Muybridge used the grid. Ultimately, Muybridge utilized the grid in other works in the *Animal Locomotion* series, but his photographs of Bailey were the first usage. Once the grid was introduced into Muybridge's work due to Bailey's skin color, it seems the artist was unable to depart from this objectifying and methodological background.

⁷⁵ Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography at the Unseen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 83.

While substantially linked to the body as evidenced by the Egyptian use, Dürer's illustration and Lamprey and Muybridge's photographs, the grid is also associated with the elevation of reason that took place during the Enlightenment. The association between reason and the grid explains why the grid in Lamprey, Muybridge and now Simpson's work transforms bodies. Specifically regarding Muybridge's photographs of Ben Bailey, the black male body throughout American history has always been understood by the general public in relation to its ability to reinforce white power. After slavery the conception of black masculinity shifted from that of understanding the black man as "harmless imbeciles" or children to the brute Negro that was described as "innately savage, animalistic, and a predator of white women."⁷⁶ Conceiving of the black man as that who is dangerous and violent renders that body one that is out of control and in need of the guidance only the white man could provide. Thus, the use of the grid in depicting Bailey in the *Animal Locomotion* series plays upon the notion of the grid as that which not only measures the body but also rationalizes it. The rationalization the grid enables is not benign, but instead is a tool of supremacy that represents the black body as that which necessitated scientific study and white control. The grid provides both of these elements.

The association between the grid and civil planning supplies further evidence that the grid is an implement of rationality. After the Enlightenment the grid was adopted as a civil planning device used to provide structure in winding and unwieldy cities. The connotations associated with the grid as a civil planning tool transferred over when the grid was used to understand human proportions. In the same way the wilderness of America was considered unruly so too have human bodies been classified this way. Lamprey's use of the grid when photographing the Malayan man is just one example of when the grid was used as a means to impose order and

⁷⁶ Kevin Thomas, "Deconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity: Understanding Representation of Black and White Manhood in Print Advertising," 2.

structure onto a body conceived of as “other.” The grid, with its strong and established associations with reason, became one of the means through which things declared as “other,” be it land or bodies of color, could become decipherable.⁷⁷ In the battle between nature and civilization the grid was a triumphant tool in declaring and demanding reason and civility. Measuring a body with a grid transforms it from being “other” to being something that can be accounted for and studied analytically. Muybridge, who followed in Lamprey’s vein, only saw fit to include the grid when he was confronted with a body of “other.” The black body of Ben Bailey was different for Muybridge than those of the white men and women he previously had photographed. In order to understand this unfamiliar body, Muybridge placed him in front of a grid so that his actions could become calculable, a process deemed unnecessary for the familiar and accepted white bodies.

Simpson’s work that features black bodies fragmented by a grid specifically references all of the aforementioned usages of the grid throughout history. Returning to an image discussed earlier, in *You’re Fine* (figure 5) one can easily recognize the grid in the presence of the frame. The objectification in *You’re Fine* is two-fold. First, the deliberate evocation of past objectifying uses of the grid, such as that seen in Dürer’s print, places the female figure firmly within the jurisdiction of a subjugating grid. Secondly, after the image was captured by the Polaroid camera her body was subjected to the regulatory and objectifying grid in the guise of the wooden frame.

In addition to the medical examination the figure in *You’re Fine* is subject to, the reclining pose of the woman also contributes to her objectification. Her pose is that of the traditional

⁷⁷ For example, after the great fire in London, the grid system was used to reconstruct a more organized metropolis to prevent another fire from ravaging the city. As America was being colonized, the grid became a reoccurring civil planning tool as colonizers looked to British ideals of city planning to structure their own new metropolises.

odalisque, an archetypical position long used to objectify women.⁷⁸ While Beryl J. Wright posits that the fragmentation present in *You're Fine* fails in its attempt to subvert the objectification of the woman because “reclining female pose carries such a strong historical connection to the erotic gaze” I add that it is the grid, present in the form of the frame that contributes to this woman’s objectification.⁷⁹ The association between the reclining woman and the anatomical words that surround her elucidate the common ways everyday bodies are subjected to judgement. While a routine drug test or physical by a doctor may be innocuous, the subjugation black women face daily is far from harmless. The use of the grid in Dürer’s print in *The Painter’s Manual* (figure 1) shows clearly how the grid objectifies those with which it is connected. Similar to *You're Fine*, the grid in the Dürer piece has been superimposed over the female form. This superposition of the grid over the body is unlike that seen in Lamprey or Muybridge’s work where the grid served as a backdrop to the figures being photographed. The woman in Dürer’s print, her legs spread, is subjected to the measurement, ordering, rationalizing, and representation of the draftsman whose objectifying gaze understands her body only through the lines of the gridded screen that are overlaid onto her form. The figure in *You're Fine* faces the pervasive gaze of the employers who mandate her obedience, the doctors who examine her, and the viewers of the work who lasciviously and questioningly gaze upon her. The grid is a visual tool that has been thrust upon her by the artist after the original image was captured. The female figure in *You're Fine* remains unknowingly objectified by the grid that is superimposed over her reclining form.

⁷⁸ One famous instance of the odalisque pose is seen in Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s *La Grande Odalisque*. This painting features a nude woman her body laid out sinuously amongst the plush fabrics she rests upon.

⁷⁹ Beryl J. Wright, “Back Talk: Recoding the Body,” in *Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer*, ed. Saidiya V. Hartman et al. (New York: Universe Publishing, 1992), 14.

The woman featured in *Guarded Conditions* (figure 6) is also objectified by a gridded frame that is superimposed over her body. The grid in *Guarded Conditions* is an objectifying force for the same reasons that it is in *You're Fine*; it references photographers who utilized the grid either purposefully, or subconsciously as Shawn Michelle Smith argues, to depict and reinforce the otherness of certain bodies. Whereas the grid in *You're Fine* consisted of only four boxes, the grid in *Guarded Conditions* is far more comprehensive as it is composed of eighteen photographs/compartments within the grid. Objectification is central to the artwork through the presence of the grid and also the white auction block the female figure stands on which can be found in the third and bottom photo in each depiction of her form. Throughout these six photographs her feet are repositioned. In the leftmost bottom image, the woman's feet are in a V position with her heels touching and her legs slightly angled to the right. In the frame immediately to the right, the woman's legs are now oriented forward, her feet maintaining a more subtle V shape, but her heels are no longer touching. With her back turned away from the camera and her arms wrapped around herself in a position of defensiveness and vulnerability, *Guarded Conditions* evokes the moments an enslaved woman faced on the auction block and was subjected to intense degradation. By positioning her figure this way, Simpson practically entices the viewers of *Guarded Conditions* to engage in the same objectifying practices as that of the white slave owners who bid upon her. Understanding the platform in *Guarded Conditions* as an auction block is a frequent interpretation. Huey Copeland asserts that the auction block is deliberately referenced in order to reveal the precarious positions of enslaved black women.⁸⁰ This precariousness is reinforced by the grid that depersonalizes the figure due to its racist historical uses.

⁸⁰ Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 67.

The grid and the auction block work together to ensure that objectification is a forceful presence within *Guarded Conditions*. Both were utilized during the era of slavery. The daguerreotypes and photographs that used the grid did so as an attempt to reinforce the hegemonic notions of blackness and ensure the perpetuation of black subjugation and enslavement. Louis Agassiz and Samuel Morton's claims of polygenesis were not isolated scientific concepts, but were used as the rationale that justified slavery.⁸¹ If Africans, and people of color, did not originate from the same species as the white man then they were subhuman and thus in need of guidance, protection, and mastery by their white superiors. While the grid is not present in Zealy's daguerreotypes, the images served as pictorial evidence supporting the polygenesis claims and inspired illustrations that did incorporate a grid. In 1854, Agassiz and Morton's claims of polygenesis had become so popular that Josiah Clark Nott and George Gliddons published Morton's theories of race in their book *Types of Mankind* where gridded illustrations are present (figure 7).⁸² Due to its easy organizational structure and heft as a tool of rationality, the grid was an easy visual tool to employ in displaying the evolution of various races. At the top of the grid was the final result, the profile view of a man belonging to a certain race, and below the evolution of his cranium continuing to the animal skull from which Morton believed the specific race originated. This use of the grid granted objectivity to the polygenesis claims and lent the pseudo-scientific concept scientific rationality. Nott and Gliddons's gridded illustrations prove that the grid was a tool that when used in conjunction with bodies objectified them and provided a semblance of rationality and objectivity. Slavery, which the grid helped support, centered on the objectification of the black body. Slavery conceived of the black body as subhuman and objectified it through its exploitation of enslaved men and women for labor and sexual violence.

⁸¹ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 77-79.

⁸² Josiah Clark Nott, *Types of Mankind* (London: Trübner & Co, 1855).

The objectification vital to slavery also took place on the auction block where black individuals were sold. Simpson references this auction block through the inclusion of a white platform on which the black female figure in *Guarded Conditions* stands. If the grid was an instrument that helped justify slavery, the auction block was a tool that literally perpetuated it. The viewers of *Guarded Conditions* are granted only the backside of the female figure who stands on the auction block. From that vantage point the agency of the woman through her subtle movements of her feet and her clenched fist is visible. Her hands gathered behind her back, however, would seem to those viewing her from the front, as a pose of exposure. With her arms bent at ninety degrees at her mid-back, her shoulders slide back forcing her chest to open up. As viewers we are let in on this woman's secret: even as she objectified and exposed from the frontal view, through her minute movements of her arms and legs asserts her control over her own body. For the potential purchasers of the woman, the auction block serves as a platform of objectification. The grid and the auction block both work together in *Guarded Conditions* to convey the visceral objectification black women underwent during slavery.

It can be difficult to ascertain all the potential meanings of the different elements in *Guarded Conditions*. Throughout Simpson's oeuvre one can see her consistent desire to provoke questions regarding the societal forces that shape race and identity as well as race and identity itself. One such way that Simpson accomplishes this provocation is through the grid and the fragmentation it creates. Simpson addresses her consistent use of the grid and presence of fragmentation of her work in an interview with Thelma Golden. In 2006 Simpson remarked:

For some reason, even in my early photographic work, I have always constructed things within the form of a grid—maybe starting out with whole images but quickly serializing

them and segmenting them...The subject is always segmented or taken apart and reassembled in a particular way where you see the cracks and seams where things are put together or reconstructed...The way I operate is in this very fragmented way, not as a 'whole' subject. I do not interpret the world or the things around me within one ideological scope.⁸³

If the grid is a mechanism that fragments and objectifies the black body in compliance with hegemonic conceptions of blackness can it simultaneously expose and subvert those hegemonic forces as well? The grid as much as it is an objectifying force also imposes literal cracks and seams into Simpson works such as *Guarded Conditions*. The wooden lines of the frame interrupt the viewer's gaze of the figure's body by thrusting space in-between each photograph and junction of the body. This entrance of space, a crack or seam as it may be, creates both a physical space and a metaphorical space in which societal factors not initially associated with the grid or fragmentation become present within the artwork. One societal force present in *Guarded Conditions* but has not yet been discussed is that of the oppositional forces that help shape identity. Not specific to black women, every person is aware of the limits of what can be shared in public and what must remain a secret. The phrase, "TMI" (too much information) has become a common way of referencing this boundary between public and private. Within the black community, as with many communities, the conception of public and private exists and restricts what black women can share. While the restrictions of public versus private may seem inane, "the split between public and private is deeply connected to ongoing practices of domination."⁸⁴ Continuing with the interpretation that the female in *Guarded Conditions* is on the auction block, publicly

⁸³ Julien and Golden, "Conversation with the Artist," 139.

⁸⁴ hooks, bell, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 2.

she is an exploited and exposed figure on display to imaginary buyers. The arms behind her back emphasize her vulnerability and objectification. But the frontal perspective is not the vantage point Simpson shares with the artwork. Instead, her figure is turned away from the camera and only her backside is exposed. The backside of her body is kept private from the hypothetical purchasers that face the front of her body. The photographs that compose *Guarded Conditions* showcases the minute ways that the female figure, and the enslaved woman she represents, display agency. The private and self-determining side of this woman is revealed through the subtle movements of her hands and feet discernible only to the viewers of *Guarded Conditions*. In thinking of the boundary between public versus private, *Guarded Conditions* illustrates the private acts of refusal and agency that she was not permitted to display in public.

The boundary of public and private is also evident in *Landscape* (1992) (figure 7). Placed against a red backdrop a black figure stands dressed in all black clothing. There are three vertical frames each holding two large photographs. The top photograph in the frame depicts the figure from the base of her neck to below her hips. The top of the figure's head is not visible. The second and bottom photograph is from the top of her thigh to the bottom of the red floor on which she stands. Due to the nondescript clothing and the inability to see the figure's head it is difficult to tell if the figure photographed is a woman or a man. Giving us a clue as to what the figure's gender might be, however, are the shoes in which the figure has inserted their hands. In the left most image the figure's hands are slid into open toe heeled sandals and placed near her hips. The slope of the heel is strategically positioned over the woman's lower torso and hips to mimic the undulation of her body. The middle image shows the figure's hand stuffed into red high heel shoes whose toes are rounded. Rather than her hands be located at her hips, the shoes with her hands inside, meet together in the center of the figure's abdomen right above where a woman's

womb is located. The images furthest right shows the same figure with her right hand crossed over her left wrist as her hands rest inside strappy heeled red sandals. Only the tip of her fingers are visible through the small opening at the toe. As in *Guarded Conditions* a grid has been imposed upon the body in the form of the frame and inserts physical and metaphorical space into the artwork. Physically, the grid fragments the body through its harsh black lines that sever her body at the base of her neck and mid-thigh. The oppositional force of public versus private is the metaphorical element the grid inserts into *Landscape*.

The grid in *Landscape* creates fragmentation of the black body. This visual fragmentation echoes the fragmenting many black female bodies underwent. The way that the woman is bisected right below her genitals is a reminder of the eugenics procedures in which black women's bodies were cut open and their ability to reproduce prevented without their consent. This surgery is referenced in a caption on the bottom right photo, "Seated on a train she realized she had been given a 'Mississippi Appendectomy.'" The text and fragmentation allude to an intensely private moment, that of the operating room, where one's body is sliced open and its internal secrets probed and revealed. Yet this moment of betrayal by doctors does not remain hidden and secret. Instead, Simpson brings visceral awareness to the involuntary procedure with this caption and the pose of the figure.

If the harsh black line of the gridded frame splits this woman into two distinct parts, it also brings them back together again. Like a scar that covers an area once open, the grid also serves as a seam that reunites two parts of the body that were once separated. The grid also fragments through severing the woman's head from the image. As in other Simpson works the fragmentation of the body grants the figure anonymity by refusing to depict her face. This protection may be necessary as the engraved captions on each bottom photo share private stories from her

life that reference intimate moments made public. The caption for the left image reads, “She passed a sign for a town named Roscoe and remembered that’s what he called his dick.” The caption does not so much as allude to but explicitly convey a private, intimate moment between two individuals. Yet this private exchange of nicknames for genitalia has been made public both by its representation as text in this artwork and in the nickname conjured up by the public object of a street sign. In her book *Killing rage: ending racism* bell hooks notes that black women are silenced both within broader society but also within the black community, especially regarding issues of race. The censorship black women face is both self-inflicted and societal. The clear message that women receive is that should keep their experiences to themselves as they are not fit for public discourse.⁸⁵

Simpson references the silencing of black women in one of her earliest works, *Waterbearer* (figure 8). Looking at *Waterbearer* the artist’s wrestling with issues of private versus public is evident. *Waterbearer* is particularly relevant in comparison with *Landscape* because the earlier work also possesses fragmentation. The grid in *Waterbearer* is implicit as the figure is fragmented through the removal of the lower part of her legs in the photograph. Underneath the photograph of a black woman holding a jug of water in each hand is the text: “She saw him disappear by the river, they asked her to tell what happened, only to discount her memory.” The words, presumably spoken by the woman photographed, speaks to the censorship that occurs when a private memory or experience is made public. Her shared story is soundly rejected by the “they” and is demonstrative of the silencing black women face both within the black community and larger society. That this text included in *Waterbearer* originates from Phyllis Wheatley, the

⁸⁵ hooks recalls her own experiences being silenced as a panel member for discussions on race. Her male counterparts often talked over her or ignored her comments entirely, making hooks feel as though her opinions and experiences were invalid and unworthy of being shared. bell hooks, *Killing rage: ending racism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1995), 2.

first published enslaved black author, offers yet another note of confusion to the work. Even as the public discounts the recollection of a private moment, Wheatley's own words have endured and remained visible within the literary community. Such a contradiction is also inherent in *Landscape*. The private moments of involuntary surgery and an intimate nickname are recollections that often remain censored as the women who experienced them are forced into silence by societal boundaries. Simpson's inclusion of text in *Landscape*, similar to that of *Waterbearer*, allows these women whose stories have been discounted, to have their testimony be belatedly heard.

Offering up an alternative interpretation as well, the lines of the gridded frame are as much boundaries as they are fragmenting features. The grid is an element that fragments the body as well as encapsulates it. Positing the grid over a body rather than behind it, the body is trapped in frames that violently severs it and limit its movement. Unlike the backdrop of the photographs in *You're Fine* and *Guarded Conditions* the backdrop in *Landscape* is a vibrant red. This red background is in vibrant contrast to the white background the entire work rests upon. The starkness between the different backgrounds does not expand the images or create a dream-scape, as it does in *You're Fine*, but instead confines the women in her separate photographs. The definitive boundary the frame offers again references the opposition of private versus public that imposes censorship boundaries on black women.

Landscape is not the first work by a black artist that contends with the private versus public boundary by using a grid. Betye Saar's 1969 *Black Girl's Window* (figure 9) is as much a commentary on the artist as it is the portrayal of the societal forces that shape the black girl and her secret but fervent dreams. The young black girl presses her silhouetted figure against the panes of the window that trap her. Jessica Dallow asserts that *Black Girl's Window* references "a

collective racial history and memory.”⁸⁶ Simpson’s *Landscape* and Saar’s artwork are united through their use of the grid as a structural and visual tool. For Saar’s work, the grid is present in the format of a recycled window that serves as the basis for *Black Girl’s Window*. Simpson’s grid is constructed by the frame that while at first seemingly innocent in that it is standard for a photograph to be framed, it is as much a part of the artwork as the image it holds. Both Simpson and Saar’s art demonstrate an impulse to compartmentalize and fragment the experiences and bodies of black women. For Saar this means compartmentalizing the various aspects of American society that shapes perceptions of blackness. Phrenology, a topic Simpson also takes up, is referenced in the right middle image in *Black Girl’s Window*. Forces, such as pseudo-scientific conceptions of blackness, result in the trapping of the young girl whose face presses against the window pane. *Landscape* both through its text and imagery showcases the ways that black women are forced to compartmentalize their experiences. Unable to share their stories due to societal notions of what a black woman can and cannot talk about, her experiences remain trapped within her, just as she remains trapped inside the black bars of each photo’s frame.

The grid plays a vital role in the telling and hearing of these private experiences. The severing of the body by the harsh black lines of the frame and the sense of being trapped within the fixed perimeters of the frame visually inform audiences of the boundaries these women are kept in, unable to share their stories that are deemed inappropriate for the broader public and within their own community. In the same way that the young girl in *Black Girl’s Window* who dreams of the stars and the sun is trapped behind the window pane by the hegemonic conceptions of blackness that declares her intellectually and physically inferior so too is the figure in *Landscape*

⁸⁶ Dallow cites Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* as another artwork that appeals to the collective women’s history but that the gendered and racial memory, which Saar tackles in *Black Girl’s Window*, and I argue Simpson addresses in her work, remains hidden. Dallow, “Reclaiming Histories,” 83-4.

trapped, her hands forced into uncomfortable shoes and her body stuck within the confines of the frame that encapsulates her by our notions of what is appropriate for public discourse and what must be kept private.

In *Landscape* the grid functions in both capacities. On the one hand it serves as a reminder of bodies who have been directly affected by hegemonic notions of blackness such as unwillingly being forced to undergo sterilization. The grid also severely reminds viewers of the structured opposition between private and public and the ways in which that manifests itself. A surgical procedure, an intimate exchange between lovers conjured up by a public street sign, the interplay between private and public converges on the seams of the grid that houses each photograph.



Figure 1: Albrecht Dürer, *Draughtsman drawing a Nude*, 1525.

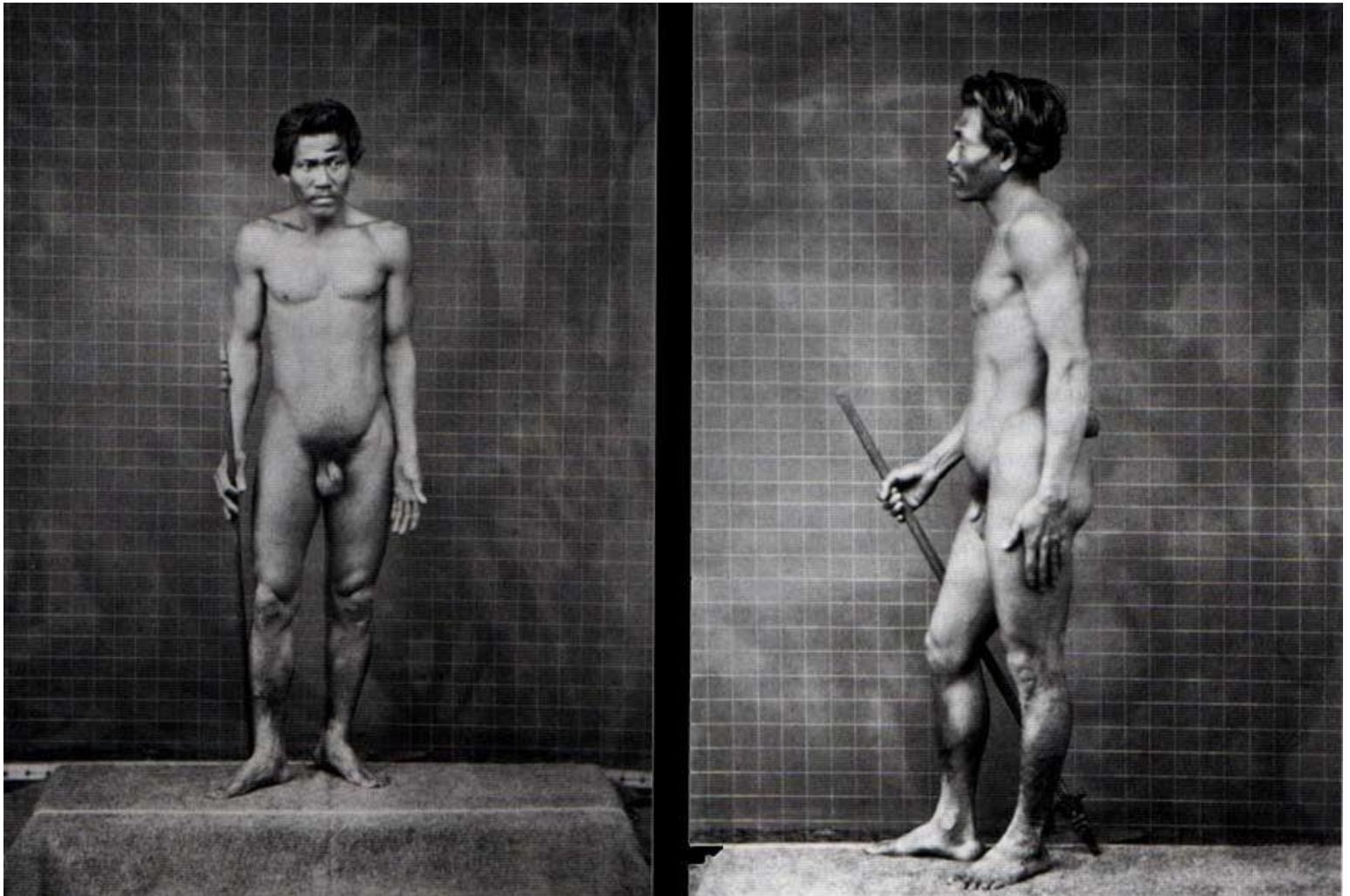


Figure 2: John Lamprey, *Front and Profile Views of a Malayan Male*, 1868-1869.

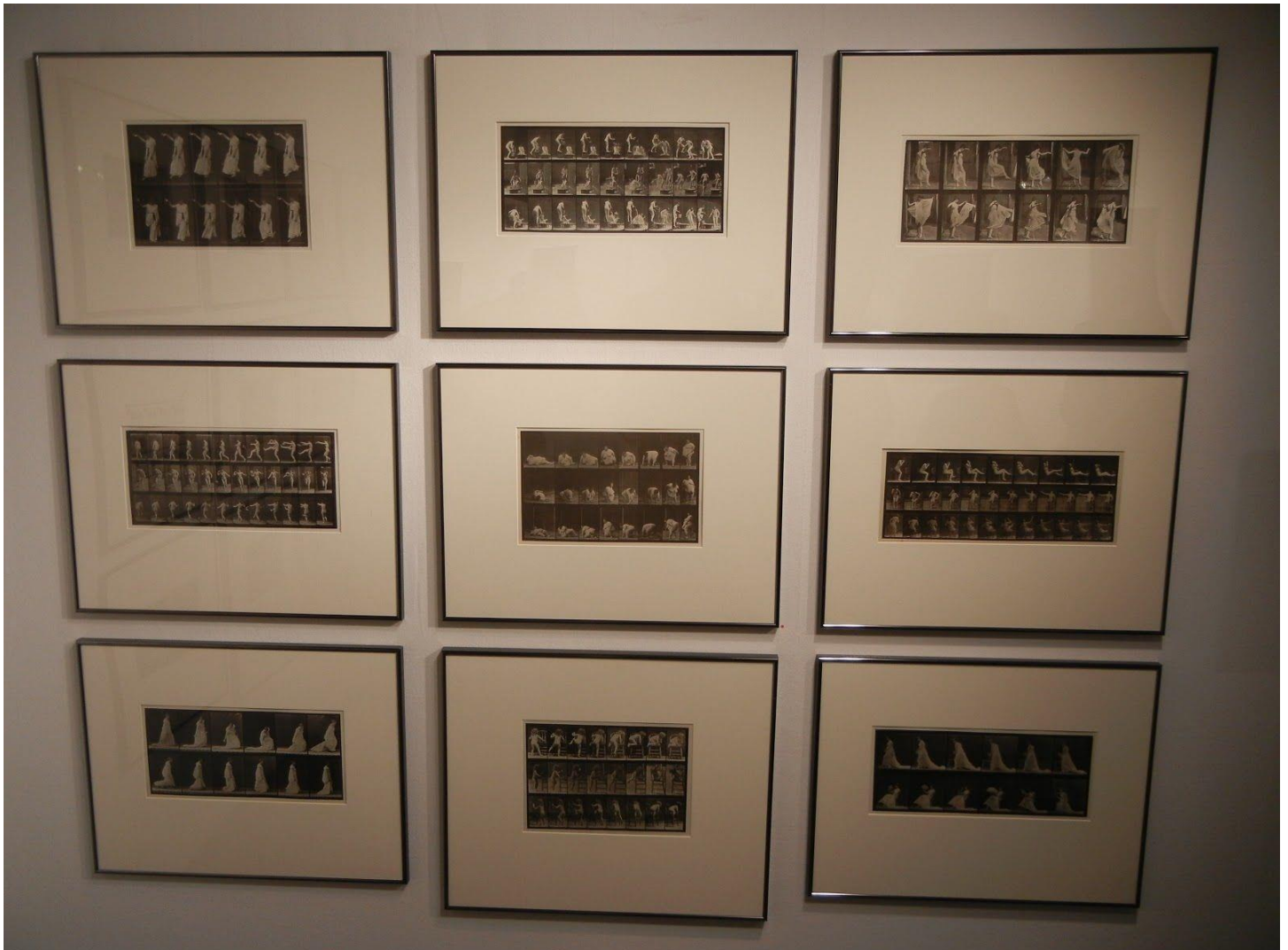


Figure 3: Eadweard Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion* series on display at the Laurence Miller Gallery in New York City, New York.

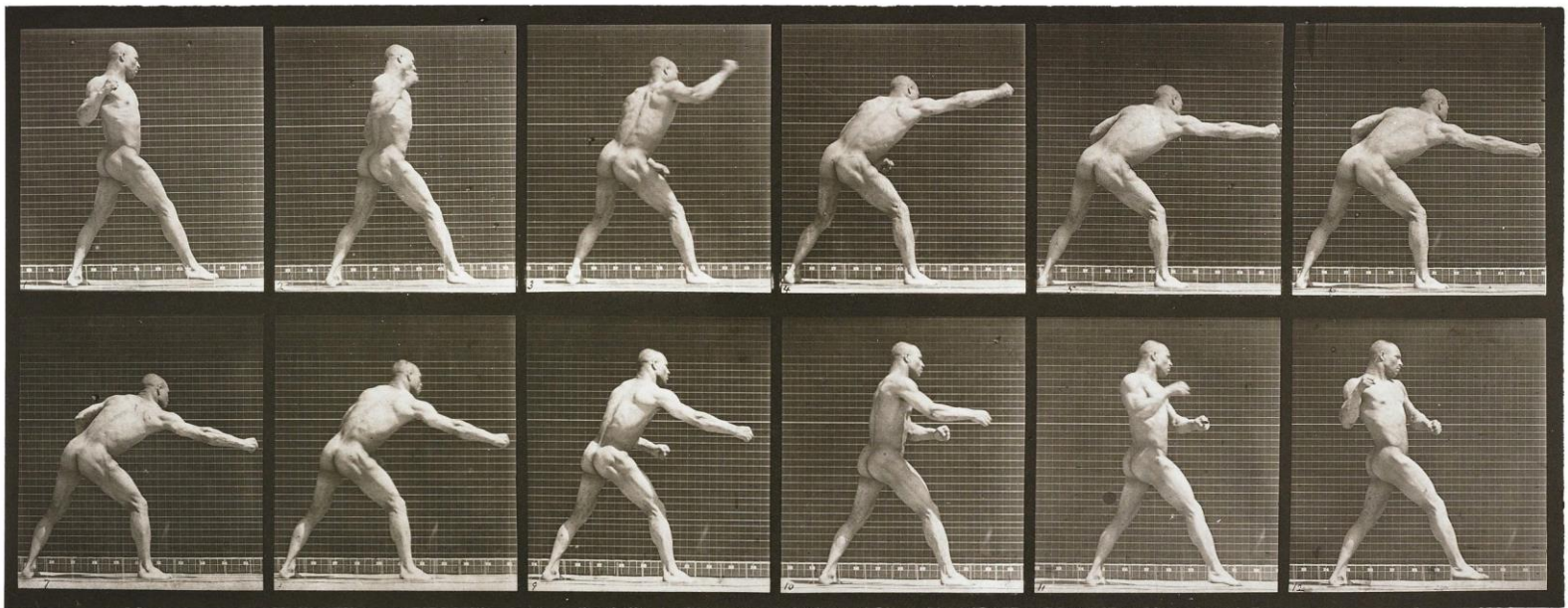


Figure 4: Eadweard Muybridge, *Animal Locomotion Plate 344 (Striking a Blow)*, 1887.

Chapter 3 Illustrations



Figure 5: Lorna Simpson, *You're Fine*, 1988, 4 dye diffusion color Polaroid prints (1 framed panel), 15 engraved plastic plaques, ceramic letters, 39 x 108.125 x 1.625 inches.

Chapter 3 Illustrations



Figure 6 : Lorna Simpson, *Guarded Conditions*, 1989, 18 dye diffusion color Polaroid

Chapter 3 Illustrations



Figure 7: Lorna Simpson, *Landscape*, 1992, 2 dye diffusion color Polaroid prints, engraved Plexiglas, each panel: 49.5 x 20.5 inches.

Chapter 3 Illustrations

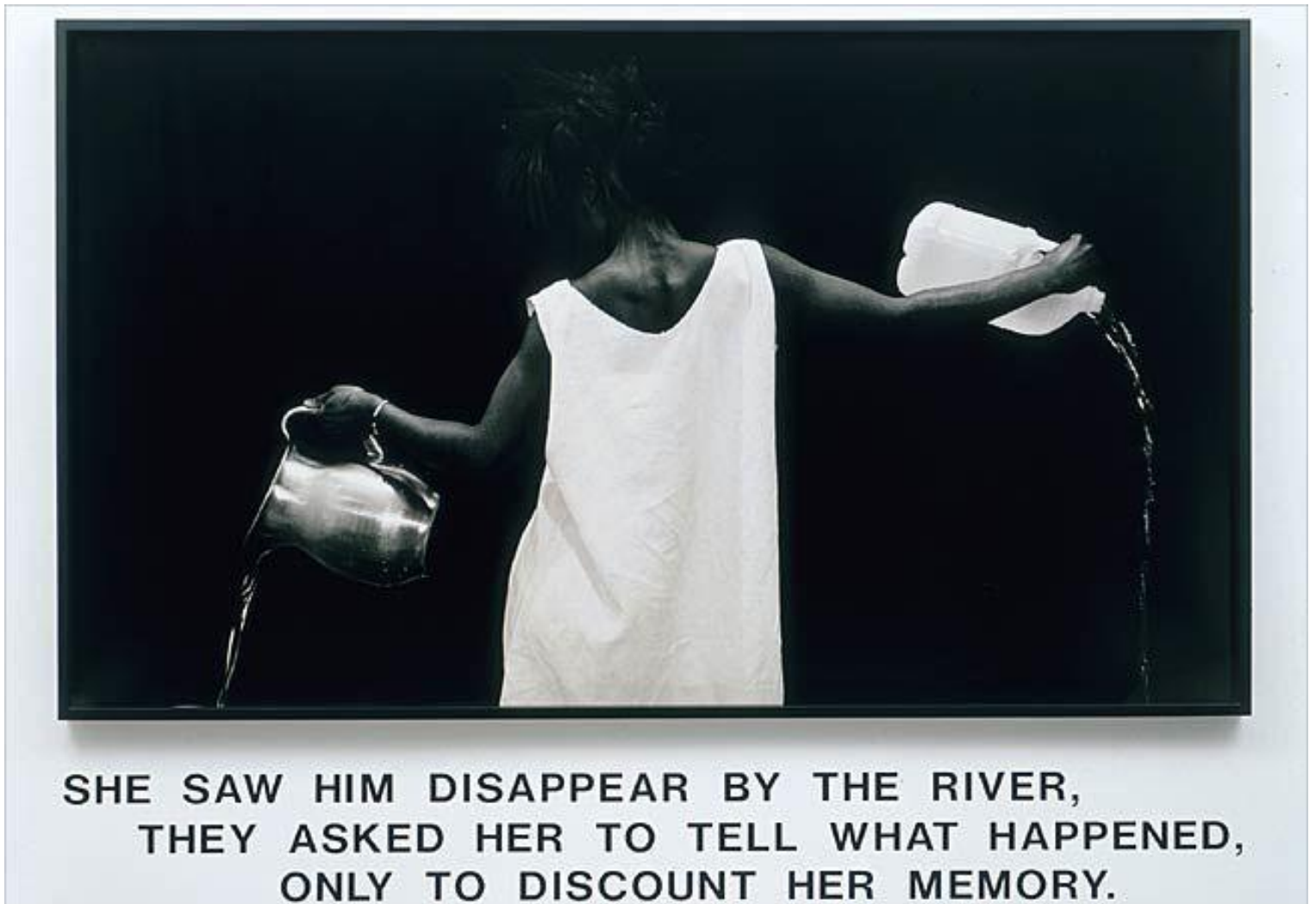


Figure 8: Lorna Simpson, *Waterbearer*, 1986, 1 black and white silver gelatin prints, vinyl lettering, 41.75 x 79.25 x 2.25 inches.

Chapter 3 Illustrations

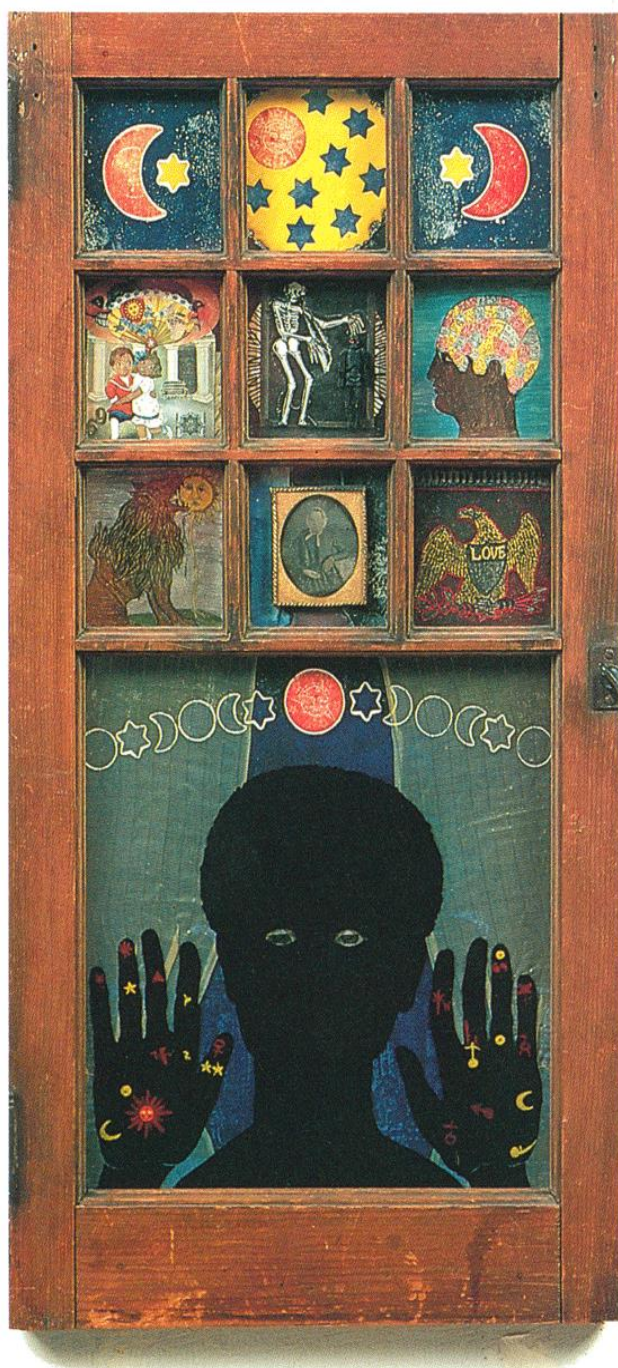


Figure 9: Betye Saar, *Black Girl's Window*, 1969, mixed media assemblage, 35.2 x 17.7 x 1.48 inches.

Conclusion

Subversion is at the core of Simpson's work. In her art, Simpson subverts notions of photography, hegemonic conceptions of blackness, the meaning of the reclining female nude and more. Fragmentation is an important, and overlooked, tool that accomplishes the subversion of these issues. Huey Copeland points out that oftentimes artists rely on the stereotype in order to negate it.⁸⁷ Ultimately, Copeland concludes, these attempts at subversion are unsuccessful because they end up perpetuating the stereotypical imagery that the artist intended to counteract. Unlike the artworks Copeland speaks of, one of which is Betye Saar's 1972 *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, Simpson does not fall into this trap.⁸⁸ By employing fragmentation Simpson undermines the stereotypes and past racist representations she references even as she mimics them.

I have showcased the ways that the fragmentation employed in Simpson's work served as visual tool by which the complexities of black identity can be represented. While each chapter has tackled a different aspect of this practice they are all linked in that demonstrate Simpson's consistent desire to return agency to black women and expose societal forces that have attempted to prevent this restoration from occurring. At the heart of the restoration of agency and self-determination is Simpson's deliberate exposure of the mechanisms by which identity is formed. Crucial to hegemonic understandings of black identity are the accompanying images. All three elements evaluated in the previous chapters: the universal versus particular understanding of the black female figure, the styles of photography Simpson incorporated in order to dismantle, and the frames of her work that functions as reinforcing fragmenting structures, rely on the heady influence of imagery in understanding and perpetuating "otherness."

⁸⁷ Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 13-15.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Due to her evocation of past representations of black women, Simpson's works are as pedagogical as they are testimonial. The artworks are educational in that they remind viewers of the assumptions with which most approach bodies deemed "other." In her work, Simpson forces viewers to acknowledge and challenge their biases. Her works teach viewers to check their prejudiced assumptions by making visible the mystery, subtlety and agency missing from past representations of black women in America. The Simpson artworks discussed in this thesis are reclamations of the black womanhood. They can be deemed as such because they make prominent black female experiences by bearing witness to the experiences of black women and because they acknowledge the constrictions that black women historically faced while still displaying the self-determination these women undoubtedly possessed, even if it was minute and undetectable to their oppressors.

Simpson is only able to engage in this reclamation process because she works in a medium inherently aligned with truth. Even though since its inception photography has been understood as a tool of truth-telling, it served as the visual tool by which falsehoods regarding race were disseminated and promoted. Along with refuting hegemonic conceptions of blackness, Simpson systematically dismantles photography's association with truth. She achieves this by conveying identity as that which is serial and easily replicable and manipulated. In doing so, Simpson calls into question the premises on which individuals make assumptions about race and black individuals.

As Jessica Dallow posits, there are few artists that focus on the gendered and racial collective memory.⁸⁹ Simpson can add her name to the list of artists who tackle the issues of collec-

⁸⁹ Dallow, "Reclaiming Histories," 83-4.

tive memory and experience of black women. The fragmentation so evident in these early Simpson works is a key part in allowing what allows these experiences to become evident. By overlooking the fragmentation that is constantly present in these early Simpson works, key insights into Simpson's art are missed. This thesis began as an attempt to see Simpson's art the same way the artist herself views it: as representations of what is often overlooked in the crevices of our society.

Examining the cracks and seams led me to delve into the literal breakages apparent in Simpson's works. The fragmentation is a purposefully, disruptive formal element. If all an individual wants to do is understand the Simpson artwork that is hung before them, why would Simpson be interested in complicating that process and perhaps preventing the true message of the work from being understood? What my research has elucidated is that Simpson does not seek to make the viewing experience of her work a comfortable one. Through fragmenting her figures Simpson forces viewers of her art to feel suspicious and uncertain about everything they view. This sense of confusion is reinforced by the text that often accompanies the photographs that insert multiple meanings of the images through powerful literary suggestion.

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