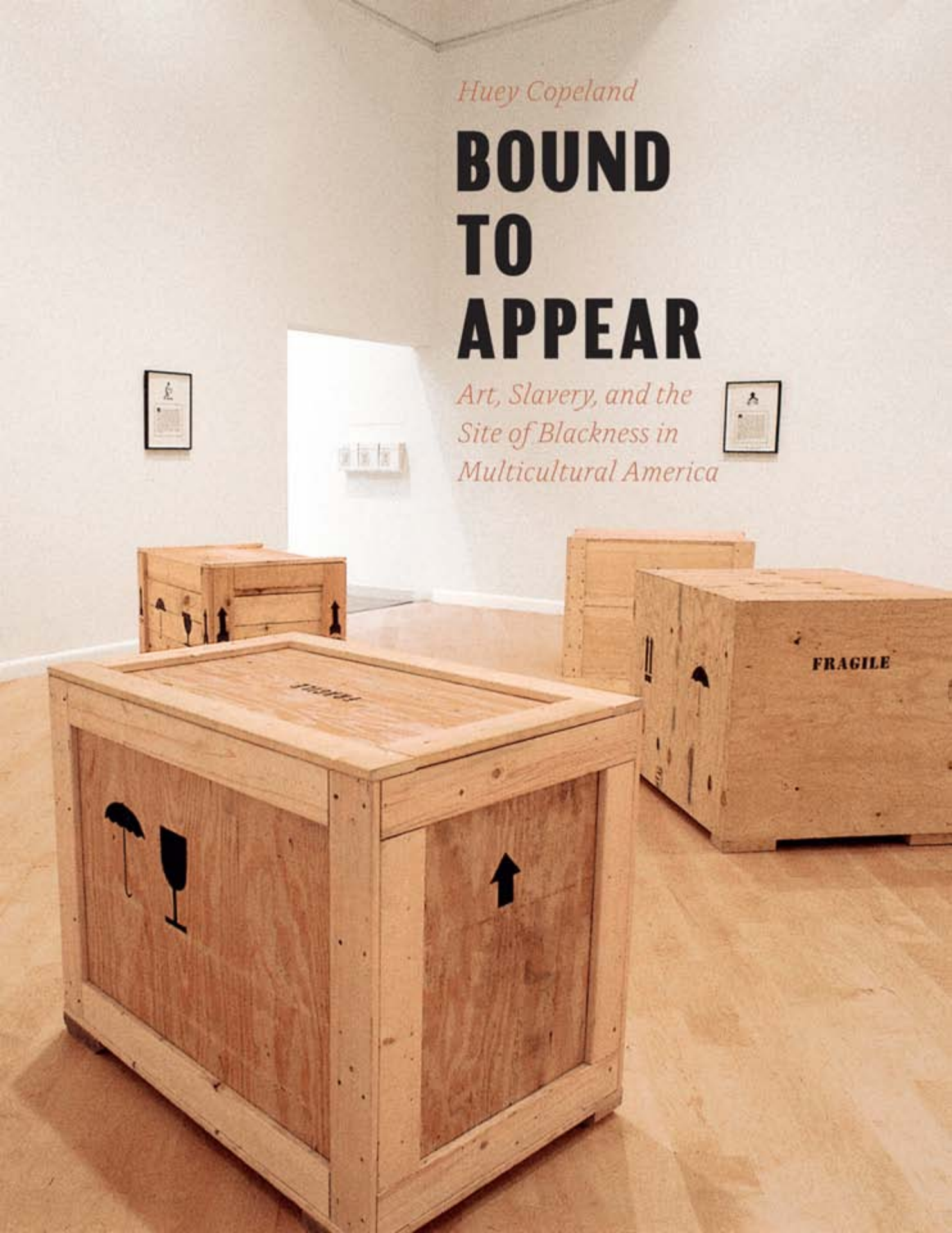

Huey Copeland

BOUND TO APPEAR

Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America

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Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America

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Isn't it strange? Whitman desired to fuse with Nature, and here I am, involuntarily, the comrade of the inanimate, but not by choice. . . . I am a property. I am a thing. I am in the same species as any other kind of property. We form a class, a family of things.

ISHMAEL REED, *Flight to Canada*, 1976

I.1
Ted Thai, *Choreographer Bill T. Jones*, from *Time Magazine*, October 10, 1994, issue. (© 1994 Time Inc. Used under license.)

Introduction

THE BLACKNESS OF THINGS

IN ***BOUND TO APPEAR***, I explore the significance of transatlantic slavery within critical aesthetic practice at the close of the twentieth century, when, for the first time in history, an appreciable number of artists of non-European ancestry figured prominently in the mainstream United States art world. What emerges from this study is a detailed picture of how a generation of African American practitioners in the late 1980s and early '90s negotiated both racialized discourses and art-historical antecedents in framing their work, recasting the appearance of blackness, and making common cause with marked subjects the world over.

While few scholars have tried their hands at charting this terrain, the aesthetic and political contradictions that black artists and their audiences confronted did not go unnoticed at the time; indeed, they were heralded and discussed at length in the pages of *Time* magazine:

> So often, the news from black America seems to be all bad: crime, broken families, failing schools, abject hopelessness. Yet amid the bleak circumstances that envelop so much of the African-American community, a singularly heartening piece of good news has been overlooked. Black artists are now embarked on one of the most astonishing outbursts of creativity in the nation's history.[1]

These few sentences, which introduce *Time*'s October 10, 1994, article, "The Beauty of Black Art," are quite deliberately plotted (fig. I.1). As the cover declaims, the new "black renaissance" is at issue; how better to demonstrate its remarkable emergence than by evoking—and promptly dismissing—the circumstances within which so many black Americans live? The essay's author, Jack E. White, goes on to name a wide range of African American practitioners, from poet Rita Dove to art-

ist Martin Puryear, all of whom have "escaped from the aesthetic ghetto to which they were once confined, where the patronizing assumption was that they would find inspiration only in their own milieu. As they move from the periphery to the mainstream, they are free at last to follow their various muses."[2]

In these lines, the clichés come thick and fast, but their rhetorical implications warrant our attention, because they emblematize the broadly spectacularizing terms in which African American cultural production was all too often cast in the age of multiculturalism. The black artist, we learn, has moved out of the hood and into the mainstream, where, "free at last" from racial constraints and loyalties, individual talent can thrive. The quoted phrase—forever associated with Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech of 1963—is again carefully chosen. White informs us that the explosion of black artistry in the late 1980s and early '90s was made possible by the civil rights movement's success in securing greater personal liberties for African Americans, and that it was fiscally driven by the increased spending power of a new black *petit bourgeoisie*.[3] In making this argument, he implies that artistic autonomy in postintegration America is a matter of class: culture can be had for a price, and consequently, "free at last" sounds more mechanistic than messianic. King's use of the phrase, by contrast, aimed to point us in a more righteous direction, summoning up a tradition that developed within the material impoverishment of slavery and that was predicated on the possibility of its earthly transcendence.

Not much of this enormous legacy figures overtly in "The Beauty of Black Art." Although White claims that the proverbial shackles have been broken, the artists to whom he gives pride of place clearly do still have some use for the shards of bondage. In fact, one of the most striking aspects of the article is that the rhetoric of slavery actively provided the creative raw material for many of the practices that it characterized as "racially and culturally universal."[4] Among the numerous works of this sort singled out for attention were novelist Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) and filmmaker Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993). A slightly more expansive treatment was afforded *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* (1990), a dance choreographed by Bill T. Jones that was inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe's bestselling 1852 abolitionist melodrama. Jones was the de facto star of the article—it was a photograph of his smiling visage that graces the magazine's cover—and his work was held out as exemplary of the latest "black upsurge."[5] So was composer Anthony Davis's, though in accounting for his music, White stumbled on a disjunction between theory and practice. "I can apply the African American sensibility to any subject," Davis declared, but as White pointed out, "his next opera, *Amistad*, nevertheless brings [him] back to a black theme," the real-life revolt of Africans taken captive by the crew of the eponymous slave ship.[6]

The contradiction at work in this exchange and throughout the article might be put like this: African Americans were freshly asserting their "freedom"—in the aftermath of yet another belated emancipation—by turning, paradoxically, to the history of black bondage. In doing so, they surely aimed to qualify socioeconomic

evidence of racial progress in light of past hardships.[7] Yet in conjuring the most abject episode in United States history, artists were also able to enact a kind of collective exorcism so that the business of art making could go on unfettered, now placed in the universal frame that White saw black cultural practitioners as embracing. Literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr., whose article served as the pendant to White's, confirmed this accounting. By his lights, unlike the unfulfilled Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s or the ideologically constrained black arts movement of the 1960s, advanced African American art since, say, 1987, has benefitted from deeper pockets, institutional endorsement, and radical "openness."[8] The inaugural date he settles on is not arbitrary: that was the year writer Toni Morrison published her tour de force, *Beloved*. In an earlier essay that likely served as the template for his *Time* piece, Gates identified that book's "transcendence of the ultimate horror of the black past—slavery," as one of the coordinates of a new movement in literature.[9]

Beloved was not, of course, the first novel to recast this history, but its inimitable conjunctions—of collective memory and historical fact, modernist lyricism and subjective fragmentation, gothic horror and cool structural analysis—have made it a central touchstone for subsequent revisitations of slavery. In crafting her ghost story, Morrison fabulated a character named Sethe based on the historical figure of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who infamously murdered her youngest daughter during an attempted escape from bondage in 1856 rather than see her child suffer through the horrors visited on female captives.[10] In the writer's hands, that child returns to disrupt Sethe and her family's new life, much as their former masters continue to pursue them. The novel's protagonists, then, are doubly haunted: by the threat of reenslavement and torture within the belly of capital and by the infant Beloved herself, whose presence indexes those disturbing "haints" that exist both because and in excess of Western reason, which, in ordering the world, necessarily suppresses and deforms it.[11]

In describing her hopes for the novel after it was published, Morrison cast herself as equally troubled, not so much by the ghosts of slavery as by the lack of their visual recognition within institutional and spatial frames. This is how she put it in 1989:

> There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to.[12]

Here, *Beloved* is framed as a spur to and a placeholder for a set of materializations

capable of figuring the enslaved. Yet Morrison's yearning for memorial markers—and the deeply imagistic tendencies of her writing in general—also beg the question:[13] just what did slavery look like in the late 1980s and early '90s, when it could be represented at all?

More to the point, how did visual artists figure the "peculiar institution" as a cultural and political fact? In so doing, upon what materials—whether historical, textual, vernacular, or artistic—did they draw, and why? To what extent did their works rhyme with prior modes of representing the enslaved both within dominant archives and counterhegemonic formations? How did visual practitioners reckon with the slave's position as a form of sexed and gendered property located at the nexus of Western civilization's material, aesthetic, and phantasmatic economies? Was art about slavery meant to point up or offer an escape from the continuing effects of white supremacy for black subjects on the ground, in representation, and within aesthetic discourse? Ultimately, what visions of the modern era come into focus when refracted through the lens of artistic meditations of slavery, especially given the institution's profound repercussions for our understanding not only of how blackness looks and functions but also of how human life is lived and felt?

THESE WIDE-RANGING AND DEEPLY INTERRELATED QUESTIONS provide the conceptual frame for this book. In it, I closely examine the work of Renée Green (b. 1959), Glenn Ligon (b. 1960), Lorna Simpson (b. 1960), and Fred Wilson (b. 1954). To articulate the logic behind this focus and offer some provisional answers to those questions, in this introduction I will lay out the seemingly discrepant aesthetic, social, and historical registers that the artists' projects engaged before describing my overall methodological approach and the specific arguments of each of the book's four chapters.

First off the artists themselves. While by no means a formal group, the now-celebrated African American practitioners at the heart of this study are linked generationally and conceptually by a shared investment in critical artistic strategies developed since the 1960s, and their nearly simultaneous turn toward slavery in large-scale installations executed between 1991 and 1993. Appearing in quick succession and up for less than a year in their original incarnations, these commissioned projects—Green's *Mise-en-Scène*, Ligon's *To Disembark*, Simpson's *Five Rooms*, and Wilson's *Mining the Museum*—constitute vital examples of site-specific art, which by definition relies on physical and cultural context in the generation of meaning.[14] I argue that in engaging previously neglected slave sites, these works not only provide models of how the black past might be reimagined but also tell a compelling story about the limitations and possibilities of blackness itself as a material, relational, historical, and theoretical site for cultural practitioners working in the aftermath of the civil rights era.

Reflecting the movement's social advances, each member of this quartet benefitted from greater access to avenues of publicity and from the concurrent rise of

curators and critics like Coco Fusco, Thelma Golden, and Kellie Jones, who were capable of framing their individual bodies of work and articulating the connections between them.[15] Just as noteworthy, the artists themselves shared professional and personal ties: Simpson, one of a handful of visual artists included in White's *Time* magazine roundup, developed an ongoing friendship with Ligon; both he and Green participated in the theoretically rigorous Whitney Independent Study program after graduating from Wesleyan University; and Green went on to work at several of the same cultural institutions that employed Wilson, including the African American art gallery Just Above Midtown. Considered together, these artists offer a focused yet multifaceted view of the prime discourses and modes of making available to practitioners in the late 1980s New York art world.

In those days, the mantra of "race, class, gender, and sexuality" began to critically inflect every variety of artistic discourse and production, marking a shift from the Eurocentric conceptualizations of alterity that contributed to the meteoric rise of painter Jean-Michel Basquiat and that likewise undergirded the Museum of Modern Art's controversial 1984 exhibition "*Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*.[16] The results of this emergent multicultural turn would become especially tangible as the period wore on. A number of contested survey exhibitions—the Whitney Museum's *1993 Biennial* chief among them—directly engaged the problem of cultural difference by featuring relatively large proportions of artists belonging to historically underrepresented constituencies.[17] At the same time, previously overlooked living practitioners, such as David Hammons and Adrian Piper, suddenly found themselves embraced by mainstream U.S. institutions, which rightly held up their conceptual plays on the materiality of the racial sign as both important interventions in the canon and invaluable models for the artists who emerged in their wake. As the title of an article by *New York Times* critic Michael Brenson succinctly summed it up in 1989, "Black Artists," it seemed, had finally garnered "A Place in the Sun."[18]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the successes of black artists in this moment were often seen to indicate a sea change in the cultural economy, which was critically enabled by the embrace of "difference" within the discourse of postmodernism and exemplified by what art historian Lucy Lippard has called the "mixed blessings" of multiculturalism.[19] An outgrowth of the social protests of the 1960s and '70s, this wide-ranging phenomenon did much to dismantle the myths of Eurocentrism, to enable public reckonings with the historical reproduction of racial inequality, and to formalize the recognition of cultural difference within pedagogical and institutional frameworks. Yet multicultural discourse also tended to emphasize the rehearsal of static identities and the imaging of corporeal difference as opposed to elective affiliation, let alone structural analysis.[20] The institutions of the U.S. art world circa 1989—scarred by the culture wars, recalibrated by a faltering economy, and desperate for federal funds earmarked to encourage "diversity"—were no exception.[21] In response, politically engaged "others," particularly artists galvanized by the AIDS crisis and the concomitant attack on queer

identities, drew upon languages of absence that spoke to and of resistive politics while often refusing the essentialization of identity.[22] The four artists I examine were part and parcel of this milieu and faced similar challenges as a result of its particular pressures: to a great extent, they were produced as ciphers of a blackness that could be packaged, marketed, and justified with greater fanfare and less cultural fallout than other forms of alterity.

Well aware of such pitfalls, Green and her cohorts frequently found themselves contesting the reduction of their art to unmediated illustrations of black life. However, they also felt compelled to address the dire conditions facing African Americans on the ground as well as the paradoxical nature of race relations, which, according to sociologist Manning Marable, "reached a new nadir in the late 1980s and early 1990s."[23] As he goes on to explain, while black faces were increasingly well represented in the arts, higher education, and the mainstream media, these symbols of achievement were, in a sense, merely that. Thanks to the efforts of President Ronald Reagan's administration, landmarks of social policy key to shoring up black gains in the past decade were effectively overturned, just as American industries that were once touchstones of black economic stability began to falter in the face of labor deregulation and stiff competition from foreign markets. Consequently, over the course of the 1980s, African American median incomes fell and black communities were allowed to descend into crack, crime, and intraracial violence.[24]

At some moments directly and at others obliquely, the work of Green, Ligon, Simpson, and Wilson spoke to just these phenomena: what White called the bad news from black America was not ancillary but central to their interrogations of the production of race within the mainstream media, which time and again capitulated to an incessant demand for the representation of black suffering. The work of these artists—and that of a number of black cultural producers—addressed the visual logic of racialized violence as well as its emblematic episodes, from the criminalization of the youths falsely accused in the Central Park jogger case to the brutal beating of motorist Rodney King by four Los Angeles police officers.[25] For cultural critic Cornel West, writing in 1992, such incidents underscored the "nihilistic threat" to black America's continued existence. This was not, he argued, "simply a matter of relative economic deprivation and political powerlessness," but was indicative of a widespread feeling of "psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair."[26]

In West's essay, the emotional and political predicament of African Americans at the close of the 1980s is construed as the result of a collapse of black leadership and institutions occasioned by the increasing stranglehold of corporate capital over every sector of national life. Since the 1960s, market forces have swept away symbolic and communal structures, conscripting black subjects to become complicit in their own commodification and devaluation within a glittering consumer culture.[27] According to West, an antidote to this predicament resides in a "*politics of conversion*" that is rooted in resistance to slavery and best modeled by Morrison's

"loving yet critical affirmation of black humanity" in *Beloved*.[28] For both the philosopher and the novelist, the modern was hardly "post" and history—despite the claims of neoliberal ideologues to the contrary—was far from over: in fact, it mattered and structured more than ever with the putative ending of the Cold War and the emergence of a globalized spectacular culture, in which blackness circulates ever more widely. [29]

I WOULD CONTEND THAT A SIMILAR HISTORICAL CONVICTION DROVE FINE ARTISTS, both in the United States and abroad, whose work manifests a profound understanding of the peculiar institution's ongoing effects. During this period, a number practitioners, from the Martinique-born sculptor Marc Latamie to the British installation artist Keith Piper, executed projects that drew on visual means, histories, and antecedents akin to those deployed by the figures at the heart of this study, underlining the shared histories of colonialism and enslavement that have shaped the black Atlantic world.[30] By focusing on American artists, I mean to home in on the ways that the contours of social formation within U.S. culture informed approaches to the economies of racialization, whose logics necessarily cut across geographical boundaries.

Cast in this light, my four chosen artists' work must be seen as at once broadly anticolonial in conception, specifically African diasporic in imagination—both Simpson and Wilson, it should be said, claim Caribbean heritage—and pointedly engaged with the exigencies of black art and life within the crucible of U.S. empire. Like few others, Green's, Ligon's, Simpson's, and Wilson's installations of the early 1990s allow for a reconsideration of blackness and slavery as artistic, cultural, and political sites in multicultural America with repercussions far beyond the nation's shores. In the pages that follow, I aim to describe these works and the practices from which they emerged and to lay out the structural conditions inflecting their appearance. At this point, it will be helpful to pass them in brief review in the order that I engage them, especially since few of the installations at first glance "scream" slavery so as to better approximate and undo the look of Western culture.[31]

In 1992, during a yearlong residency at the Maryland Historical Society, Wilson unearthed a series of neglected artifacts and used them to subvert traditional conventions of museum display, so that in *Metalwork 1793–1880*, silver repoussé vessels surrounded a set of roughly contemporaneous slave shackles (fig. I.2, upper left). Through such harrowing juxtapositions of objects as well as through the manipulation of light, sound, and wall text, Wilson's *Mining the Museum* evoked the material pressures that ordered the lives of black subjects and the larger worlds of which they were part. One year earlier, Simpson's *Five Rooms*, produced with the aid of vocalist Alva Rogers, opened in the slave quarters off of a Charleston, South Carolina mansion as part of the exhibition *Places with a Past* (fig. I.2, upper right). Rather than depicting the captives who might have inhabited the space or the acts of violence needed to keep them there, in the third room, the artist set out

I.2
Clockwise from upper left: Fred Wilson, *Metalwork 1793–1880*, from *Mining the Museum*, 1992–1993. (Image courtesy of The Contemporary Museum, Baltimore. Photography by Jeff Goldman. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.) Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (third room). (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.) Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark*, 1993, installation view. (Courtesy of the artist.) Renée Green, *Mise-en-scéne*, 1991. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

water bottles filled with rice that simultaneously indexed the local products of slave labor and stood in for slave bodies, while a recording played Rogers's recitation of hoodoo recipes.

The calculated re-presentation and re-sounding of slavery's characteristic forms was equally crucial for Ligon's *To Disembark,* first shown at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC (fig. I.2, lower right). Most notable in this installation were the nine shipping crates scattered about the gal-

lery that mimic the box in which the fugitive slave, Henry Brown, shipped himself to freedom in 1849. Upon his safe arrival in Philadelphia, Brown burst into song; in homage, the artist installed his containers with tape players that emitted a range of African American musical performances. Whereas Ligon's project compulsively staged the body's flight from the representational frame, Green sited blackness within the metaphorical and literal fabric of her 1991 installation *Mise-en-Scène*, which resembled a cross between an archive, a salon, and a decorative arts museum (fig. I.2, lower left). Executed for a contemporary art center near Nantes, France, Green's installation brought together laminated photographs, recorded classical music, and samples of locally produced textiles around three long coffin-like boxes that formally recalled the cramped spaces endured by captives during the Middle Passage but that actually contained placards indexing the city's role as a key site for slave traders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As is clear from even this cursory description, these projects—Simpson's most strikingly—resonate with Morrison's invocation of slavery in *Beloved*: they engage resistive African diasporic traditions and summon up the ghosts of the past, often through their innovative use of sound. Yet the installations' coolly archival facture and emphasis on material facts importantly depart from Morrison's example. Although there is affect aplenty in these works, the primary impact is not of a replaying of the trauma of slavery, which would imply that repressed horrors have somehow been recovered or bubbled up from a temporal interregnum.[32] Rather, in marking and metonymically conjuring the enslaved, these installations can be considered modes of "antiportraiture," to take up a term deployed by critic Lauri Firstenberg in a discussion of Simpson's work. The artist's frequent deployment of turned-back figures, she argues, is meant to refuse the gaze, to deny any presumed access to the sitter's personality, and to refute both the classificatory drives and emotional projections typically satisfied by photographic portraiture of black subjects.[33]

The installations in question are driven by a similar ambition, yet rather than put full store in the critical capacities of the image, they draw on a host of material traces as surrogates for the black body that expand the antiportait and freshly reveal its dialectical possibilities. In certain instances, as in Simpson's photographs, the conventions of portraiture—wholeness, frontality, resemblance—are strictly followed only to be rerouted; in others, such as Ligon's boxes, the black body is smuggled into the frame through an apparent refusal of the genre *tout court* in order to deform the visual siting of race. In tacking between these modalities, the four installations elucidate both the storied difficulty of figuring the black self within traditional Western visual frameworks as well as the logic that produces black subjects as fungible properties for global consumption, whether in the space of the plantation or on the cover of *Time*.[34] *Mining the Museum*, *Five Rooms*, *To Disembark*, and *Mise-en-Scène* can thus be seen as extensions of their makers' attempts to indict representations of black dereliction and to limn the historicity of their own positions as commodities within the multicultural art world economy.

By 1991, each of these practitioners had made a name for him- or herself in a different field of competence: Wilson with trenchant postcolonial critiques of the museum, Simpson through combining elliptical phrases with elegant photographs of black female figures, Ligon with canvasses covered in lines often borrowed from African American literature, and Green through site-specific projects exploring the fraught convergence of travel, aesthetics, and identity. What seems to me most remarkable, however, is that in confronting slavery head-on, each artist in his or her own way turned to objects, substituting actual things for absent bodies. This move simultaneously gave form to the political-ontological position of black subjectivity and foiled the kinds of imaginative projection, which, as theorist Frantz Fanon foundationally showed in *Black Skin, White Masks*, are central to the construction of race.[35] In the artists' projects, the enslaved are imbued with the corporeal wholeness and obdurate materiality of the commodity, demonstrating how value continues to be extracted from blackness, regardless of the form it takes. As such, none of the works require that the black body appear once more as lacking, amputated, or inferior, what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan might term "a body in pieces," a riven spectacle that everywhere bears the marks of its violent construction.[36]

To put it in West's language, these installations represent attempts at a *visual* politics of conversion. Rather than figuring African American identity as a mere effect of racialized subjection, *Mise-en-Scène* and its correlates reframed the siting, subject, and appearance of blackness through recourse to the material coordinates of slavery. In every instance, texts, archives, voices, and above all, things, were the salient markers required to telegraph the status of the enslaved, to bracket the retinue of overdetermined associations unleashed whenever the black body appears, and to underscore how Western habits of consumption and display are inextricably bound to the historical construction of African diasporic subjectivity.[37] Whether pieces of fabric or jars of rice, the materials featured in the installations foreground the fact that the economies of slavery haunt the texture of capitalism and the lives of its subjects, regardless of race. For Simpson and her peers, figuring blackness meant coming to grips with those practices that have undergirded the production of black being since the second half of the nineteenth century and that have had profound, if usually unacknowledged, consequences for the direction of hegemonic cultural and artistic discourse.[38]

ON THIS SCORE, it is instructive to recall American critic Clement Greenberg's influential 1939 essay on the logic of Western pictorial development, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." In the closing footnote of that paean to the maintenance of aristocratic values in the evaluation of recent art, Greenberg found his justification not in the feudal past but in a benighted present. "In Africa today," he writes, "we find that the culture of slave-owning tribes is generally much superior to that of the tribes that possess no slaves."[39] In these lines, racialized barbarity and aesthetic

discrimination go together, underlining how dark figures have been mobilized as linchpins of a modern metaphysics that not only demarcate the limits of culture and humanity within Western discourse, but that also effectively trouble the visual, epistemological, and historical categories that structure so-called white civilization.[40]

Blackness functions, then, as both a free-floating trace unmoored from individual subjects and as a concrete index of power relations that reveals the deep structure of modernity's modes of visualization, the despotism on which they rely, and the ways that they might be contested in the present.[41] At once abstract and bodily, literal and metaphorical, the ultimate sign of aesthetic negation and the prime marker of the socially negated, blackness marks those historical forces that continue to differentially engender subjects and objects in the modern world, everywhere shaping a cultural unconscious in which the individual effects of racialization assume a shifting texture despite the unyielding ruthlessness of their overarching logic.[42] To think in such structural terms is not to essentialize what are historically contingent practices and identities, but to position them in relationship to a centuries-old antiblack global hierarchy, which darkens the marginal, the fugitive, and the socially dead wherever they appear.[43]

So couched, Greenberg's passing comment at once instances and illuminates a thread running within art history and throughout Western culture that Cedric Robinson describes in his magisterial tome *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*.

> Racialism and its permutations persisted, rooted not in a particular era but in the civilization itself. And though our era might seem a particularly fitting one for depositing the origins of racism, that judgment merely reflects how resistant the idea is to examination and how powerful and natural its specifications have become. Our confusions, however, are not unique. As an enduring principle of European social order, the effects of racialism were *bound to appear* in the social expression of every strata of every European society no matter the structures upon which they were formed. None was immune.[44]

Like the devil himself, racialism rears its head however invoked. In his emphasis on the absolutely structuring significance of race, Robinson here spells out the critical thrust of the African diasporic tendency that he is at pains to delineate, which reaches back to the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, and Richard Wright in offering a vital lens for reconsidering even the most rebarbative of visual rhetorics.

Scholars of the black radical tradition—defined by Robinson as "an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle"—have tended to focus on social activism, intellectual history, and vernacular practices in explaining how African diasporic subjects have crafted means of resistance that rhyme with and outstrip the aims of historical materialism.[45] As my title's bor-

rowing from Robinson is meant to suggest, it is within this lineage that the four practitioners examined in this book belong. By dialectically exploring the historicity of blackness, Wilson, Simpson, Ligon, and Green reorient our approach to visual culture in the age of capitalist modernity, that centuries-long cataclysm of conquest and colonization subtended by the theft of African subjects who subsequently became available for any use whatsoever.[46] In their projects, they position blackness as a discursive site that is both "bound to violence"—to cite the title of novelist Yambo Ouologuem's epic account of African dereliction—and "bound to appear" within Western culture, whether in the form of a racist figurine or, more tellingly, an avant-garde tour de force.[47]

Think back, for instance, to Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), a scandalous conjoining of Africanness and the feminine that has become a touchstone of twentieth-century art; or recall Cindy Sherman's celebrated photographic performances of stereotypical white femininity, which were preceded by a bodily form of blackface minstrelsy in her *Bus Riders* series (1976). Given the praise heaped upon such practices, it is no wonder that twentieth-century art has so often arrived at its signal aesthetic ruptures by inhabiting what Morrison calls the "Africanist presence"; indeed, literary theorist Anne Anlin Cheng has argued that the modern visual tradition is predicated on a dream of donning blackness as skin in order to capitalize on its disturbatory effects.[48] In *Mining the Museum* and the other pieces explored here, the viewer's path to such fantasies is not only blocked but purposefully *détourned* onto the objects with which enslaved bodies were conflated and exchanged. As a result, these works rewire the circuitry of racialization that has rendered the visual itself a "negative scene of instruction" within black culture.[49]

I take this phrase from the critic Michele Wallace. She argues that unlike black achievements in music and literature, the recognition of African American art has been hampered by two mutually reinforcing modes of denigration: on the one hand, black artists have been marginalized within canon; on the other, black subjects have been endlessly caricatured within visual representation, effectively produced as a species of nothingness.[50] By the early 1990s, new scholarship such as Hugh Honour's *Slaves and Liberators*—part of the seminal *Image of the Black in Western Art* series conceived by the Menil Foundation in 1960—provided more than adequate evidence to support this contention.[51] Of course, African American practitioners throughout the twentieth century have not let this state of affairs stand; their work has consistently striven to outstrip both the mass media and mainstream art's racial distortions and to reveal the link between the two in order to articulate an alternative dream of black humanity. The fetishized black body, particularly as articulated within figurative traditions, was to be a major site of signification in this battle for cultural autonomy, one whose political and social stakes could be clearly indexed by the slave, who provided a point of departure, a way of measuring distance traveled and miles to go.[52]

Two examples are enough to the make the case: the first is an entry from Jacob Lawrence's series *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*, a bravura painterly performance

I.3
Jacob Lawrence, *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture (Painting #7: As a child, Toussaint heard the twang of the planter's whip and saw the blood stream from the bodies of slaves)*, 1938. (Image courtesy of the Aaron Douglas Collection, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University. © 2013 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York.)

I.4
Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972. Mixed media assemblage. 29.8 x 20.3 x 5 cm, signed. (Collection of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum; purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts [selected by The Committee for the Acquisition of Afro-American Art]. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.)

that revivifies even as it schematizes the primal scene of transatlantic slavery (1938; fig. I.3); the second is Betye Saar's complexly layered remake of a ceramic mammy figurine as a gun-toting revolutionary, a work inspired in equal parts by her study of African rituals and the boxes of Joseph Cornell (1972; fig. I.4).[53] Despite their historical and material differences, both pieces offer succinct instances of the limitations of figurative aesthetic means to gesture toward the unrepresentable terrain of slave interiority.[54] The artists I study at length surely owe a debt to these and other works by previous African American artists such as Malcolm Bailey, Edmonia Lewis, Faith Ringgold and Hale Woodruff, who likewise employed the slave to allegorize the current states of black subjectivity. But the way that slavery emerges within Green's, Ligon's, Simpson's, and Wilson's art constitutes a shift in emphasis if not in kind from iterations of the peculiar institution that rest firmly on the plane of the image or give the body a recognizably human form. In conflating sculptural objects and enslaved subjects, their practices accent the inability of figurative modalities of representation alone to address the structural logic of slavery and its ongoing effects.

It is this emphasis that begins to account for their installations' difference from contemporaneous engagements with slavery executed by the artists Ellen Driscoll, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Elizabeth Newman, Carrie Mae Weems, and Pat Ward Williams, all of which I address in the pages that follow. For the moment, we might consider Leonardo Drew's *Untitled # 25*, a mammoth cotton construction that summons the plantation and a host of other sites through its straightforward yet seductive materiality (1992; fig. I.5); and Weems's *Untitled (Boneyard)*, a phototextual assemblage that pairs a page of folklore with black-and-white photographs of black South Carolina burial grounds in order to hold onto Gullah traditions (1992; fig. I.6). These works bear an affinity to the installations on which I focus. Yet in those projects, which are spatially dispersed rather than visu-

I.5 (left)
Leonardo Drew, *Number 25*, 1992. Cotton. 274.3 x 304.8 x 116.8 cm. (Photograph by John Berens. © Leonardo Drew, Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.)

I.6 (right)
Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Boneyard)* from *The Sea Island Series*, 1992. Gelatin silver print. (Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.)

ally concentrated, images, texts, and objects not only delimit one another but are in their turn qualified by the use of sound. Even more than the literary, the sonic has long served as a viable if not unproblematic medium for black folks to refute the falsifications of the visual, to make claims on the human, and to give voice to dreams, desires, and aspects of the self that would otherwise go unheard even if they remain unintelligible.[55] As theorist Alexander Weheliye has argued, such an emphasis on "sonic subjectivity . . . does not lose sight of the black subject's visual interpellation but noisily 'rings' and 'clangs' beyond, above, below, and beside the optic nonetheless."[56]

Ligon's *To Disembark* provides the clearest example of this aesthetic remixing and its overall effect. In addition to Brown's boxes, the installation includes wall drawings based on a Zora Neale Hurston essay, as well as tongue-in-cheek runaway slave advertisements and narrative frontispieces that star the artist himself. The musical tracks softly emerging from the slave crates, such as the disco tune "Can You Party," generate alternative affective and phenomenological scripts for the installation as a whole, even as they typify the logic of its historical conflations. As do its counterparts, *To Disembark* collapses past into present in order to point up the continued salience of those representational modes that African diasporic subjects have worked with and against to carve out sites of autonomy, however provisional, in which blackness might sing.[57]

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS COULD STAGE SUCH COMPARISONS, in part, due to the expanding discourse on slavery that has emerged since the 1960s. According to literary scholar Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, many thinkers of that era—influenced by various social upheavals and the rise of black power—moved toward a more politicized conception of the past.[58] In so doing, they would position the slave as a vital locus for interrogations of violence, identity formation, and property law. These issues were indicative of the changes wrought by black intellectuals within and outside the academy who entered the historiographic fray on slavery in an effort to reimagine the current states of black consciousness. In responding to works such as Stanley Elkin's *Slavery* (1959)—which notoriously introduced the "Sambo thesis" to explain the deformation of black personality—historians of the new left and members of newly established black studies departments not only rendered academic texts social ones, but also drew parallels between eighteenth-century abolitionists and modern-day protest marchers, effectively telescoping disparate histories into each other.[59] The resulting scholarship emphasized slave communities, testimonies, cultures, and resistive tactics in order to chart out the multiple sites that the captive subject might occupy.

The titles of these studies tell the tale: John Blassingame's *The Slave Community*, Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture*, and Jean Fagan Yellin's "recovery" of Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, *Incidents of a Slave Girl*, "written by herself."[60] This last was of particular import for Wilson, Simpson, Ligon, and especially Green; now

vetted as a viable historical text rather than seen as abolitionist propaganda, Jacobs's fictionalized account of her escape from bondage provided a model to which all four artists would eventually turn in their own searches for what the slave narrator called "something akin to freedom."[61] Just as important, her text provided an instructive framework for understanding how gender and sexuality shaped the experience of enslavement and continue to inflect the visual constitution of blackness. Such concerns not only mattered personally to the artists in question—but also resonated deeply with broader debates then taking place around race and representation, from the controversy generated by white gay artist Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of nude black men to the firestorm that erupted after Anita Hill testified to sexual harassment at the hands of Clarence Thomas during his Supreme Court confirmation hearings.[62]

However, the most influential spur to the recrudescence of slavery in late-twentieth-century American culture was undoubtedly the 1977 television broadcast of *Roots*, based on Alex Haley's eponymous tale of his African ancestors' enslavement and subsequent travails in America. While the 1990s artists I discuss produced work that pointedly opposed the search for origins and the graphic scenes of black suffering highlighted in Haley's work, their resistance was nonetheless one of the many forms of engagement that *Roots* generated across the cultural field. Historian Fath Davis Ruffins explains that in the wake of the telecast, there was a dramatic uptick of interest in black heritage and genealogy that cultural institutions soon seized on. In 1979, the Smithsonian's Anacostia Neighborhood Museum produced the exhibition *Out of Africa*, which featured documents on the slave trade; in 1985, the National Museum of American History presented material relating to histories of enslavement for the first time in *After the Revolution: Everyday Life in America*; and in 1991, Richmond, Virginia's Museum of the Confederacy opened *Before Freedom Came*, a landmark exhibition that conjoined the material culture of the plantation as well as images of enslaved subjects to narrate the black experience.[63]

With such resources freshly available, visual artists were able to plumb a rich set of materials that allowed them to grasp if not pin down the still contested material coordinates of the enslaved and their descendants. Yet they were doubtless not insensitive to developments in black literature and literary studies, whether Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad's essay collection *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, or Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), a fantastic novel in which the protagonist, a black woman living in 1970s Los Angeles, is repeatedly thrown back among her enslaved ancestors in nineteenth-century Maryland by an unexplained mechanism.[64] If the scholarly work laid out a field of possibilities for navigating slavery as a site of cultural production, then Butler's novel provided a telling instance of how it might be brought into the present: not via traumatic recall or progressive narrative but through a radical conflation of temporal frames in which the past suddenly erupts to become contiguous with the present. Both of these tendencies brought home the relative paucity of archival sources for describ-

I.7. Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIX siècle*, 30 rue de la Pépinière, Brussels, 1968. (© 2013 The Estate of Marcel Broodthaers / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York / SABAM, Brussels. Photo: © 2013 Maria Gilissen / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York.)

ing the life of the slave and underlined the centrality of imaginative projection for any attempt to do so.

In the work of Ligon and his peers, the enslaved subject is posited as an impossible object who can never be fully pictured, but whose aporetic position—between life and death, person and property, thing and human—can be materially plotted. To put it another way, these artists took the meaning of slavery out of the figure and made it a function of the viewer's relationship to the world. This had everything to do, I think, with the examples provided by their artistic precursors and the previous sentence is meant to evoke one of them: minimal sculptor Robert Morris's 1966 dictum that "the better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision."[65] As art historians Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Miwon Kwon have shown, in accentuating the phenomenological experience of art, minimalism paved the way for practices that emphasize the subject's body and the multiple frameworks in which aesthetic experience unfolds rather than the autonomous object privileged within Greenberg's modernist criticism.[66] The 1990s installations I treat are part and parcel of this shift toward the critique of representation and of representational spaces, one usually aligned with the rise of postmodernism and productively taken up by a range of practitioners since the 1960s, including Marina Abramović and Ulay, Eleanor Antin, Michael Asher, John Baldessari and George Nicolaidis, Mary Kelly, and Robert Smithson, whose work I attend to in examining the installations at issue.

Of the tendencies to emerge from minimalism—conceptualism, performance, institutional critique—site-specific art bears most directly on *Five Rooms* and its counterparts. An especially telling example of the genre is Marcel Broodthaers's

Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXe, which opened in the artist's Brussels home in the fall of 1968 (fig. I.7). Despite the promise of its title, the space was filled with haphazardly placed ladders, museum crates borrowed from the Palais des Beaux Arts, and postcards featuring reproductions of nineteenth-century French paintings. Denying viewers access to the museum's traditional objects, Broodthaers's installation instead focused attention on the means through which the artistic apparatus frames and transports its most culturally fetishized possessions.[67]

Subsequently, practitioners of various stripes have taken up means of dispersal and emptying out to address a range of social and historical regimes, differentially imagining the site of artistic display and its subjects.[68] Not dissimilarly, Green's, Ligon's, Simpson's and Wilson's projects allow for a reconsideration of what is perhaps twentieth-century art's profoundest innovation—the readymade object—in light of slavery's structuring principles. Long before the genre's originator, Marcel Duchamp, turned a urinal into a work of art through a series of enunciative acts in 1917, black bodies were subject to even more arbitrary and binding shifts in their categorical status, ready-mades *avant la lettre*.[69] Slavery, I want to say, haunts those signal works associated with the Western avant-garde well into the 1960s, a moment at which historical and discursive memories of the institution would provide all manner of impetus for black thinkers, scholars, and activists.[70] It makes a certain sense, then, that this book's main figures would look back to this moment of social upheaval, whose art freshly focused on the body's limits and capacities for perception, but could rarely intimate the racial strictures that underpinned them.[71] In the 1990s, a time when both radical artistic and political strategies seemed on the verge of exhaustion, these four practioners were able to launch what Foster—with a nod to Sigmund Freud—has called a "deferred action" that revivified past aesthetic means by exploring their unlikely yet mutual relations to newly recaptured histories of American enslavement.[72]

I would argue that by linking "postmodern" strategies of aesthetic withdrawal to the visual and material conditions negotiated by the enslaved, Wilson and his contemporaries undermine both the narratives of linear progress and the accounts of epistemic break that structure Western art history and its forgetting of non-white interventions.[73] Their work emphasizes how the recursive temporality of the postcolonial and the semantic promiscuity of blackness put pressure on the vaunted critical negativity of Western aesthetic practices, a maneuver vividly enacted in *Metalwork 1793–1880*, the most noted juxtaposition of *Mining the Museum*.[74] Like the tactics of Simpson, Ligon, and Green, Wilson's ability to display shackles and silver vessels as art owes much to the Duchampian tradition, but his arrangement also dramatically conjures the ghosted figures of slaves who were themselves cast in the mold of objects that might at any moment be converted into coin. By so emphasizing the political-ontological predication of the slave as a species of speaking property, the projects explored in this book bring to light the production of black being as an endless site of material and immaterial wealth.

The slave emerges as a thing-that-is-not-one, a form of readymade that not only challenges the status of the artwork, but that also intersects with and so reframes theorizations of the "thingly"—the commodity, the sculptural, or the material itself—within Western cultural discourse.[75] I read each of the installations as variously foregrounding one of these frameworks in relation to the blackness of things in order to get at the blackness of conditions for individuals on the ground and within the art world. At their best, these projects encourage us to reimagine the world from blackness up, to question the categorical division between subjects and objects, and to critique the model of humanity on offer within neoliberal capitalism. Such a conversion requires seeing ourselves first and foremost as what Raven Quickskill, the protagonist of Ishmael Reed's 1976 novel *Flight to Canada* would call "comrade[s] of the inanimate," members of "a class, a family of things," who together just might arrive at a liberation long-promised yet endlessly deferred. [76]

WITH THESE CONTEXTS IN VIEW, I want now to turn briefly to questions of method. Conceptualizing *Mining the Museum*, *Five Rooms*, *To Disembark*, and *Mise-en-Scène* as imbrications of recalcitrant form and difficult content—site-oriented installation and transatlantic slavery—goes some way toward accounting for the works' historical significance as well as my approach to them. By their very design, these projects held out an array of materials meant to be physically navigated, a condition of viewership that presents distinct challenges for those like myself who did not engage with the works in their first incarnations. In researching each installation, I have striven to interrogate the artistic, political, and historical exigencies determinative of its appearance and to reconstruct each space's look and feel with the aid of floor plans, photographs, interviews, archival documents, and encounters with extant remains. In framing the works and narratively reconstructing experiences of them, I emphasize how their makers' conceptualizations of blackness productively deform the operative assumptions of art history and critical theory. Accordingly, my analyses draw on Marxist, literary, psychoanalytic, and anthropological theories of the object, as well as black radical critiques of them that highlight the centrality of the enslaved to the aporias of Western culture. In addition to the perspectives of Robinson and Fanon, I look especially to the interdisciplinary work of scholars Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Orlando Patterson, Hortense Spillers, and Frank B. Wilderson III, which not only acknowledges the discursivity of the racial sign, but also reckons with the mutual imbrication of the gendered modalities of violence and vision that have constituted black subjects within modernity.[77]

Not unlike the works themselves, my methodological and theoretical influences in this book—the social history of art and black poststructuralist criticism—are fundamentally interleaved.[78] To my mind, the modes and methods of art history matter to the project of African diaspora studies because they emphasize the merits of looking with sustained attention to objects in all of their multiplicity.

Conversely, such an approach ought to matter deeply to black subjects, who have been produced as things and denuded of complexity, a depth and differentiation that the procedures of artistic discourse might freshly give us to see. Through this double emphasis, I hope to critique the myopia that continues to inform critical commonsense around the work of black artists and to build on sharp-eyed scholarly engagements with the practices of Green, Ligon, Simpson, and Wilson, as exemplified by the recent books of Darby English and Jennifer A. González.[79] Moving from where the extant scholarship leaves off, I pay particular attention to the formal coordinates and historical references animating each installation, as well as the circumstances governing each project's critical, artistic, and popular afterlives. In the process, I hope to intervene within the fields of modern, contemporary, American, and African diasporic art history more broadly by modeling an object focused, theoretically engaged, and lyrically attuned approach to research and writing on living black artists and their entanglements with Western art and culture.

Although I aim to illuminate how a group of practitioners came to operate in a singular vein at a particular moment, these artists' paths to slavery were by no means identical. Rummaging through the basement of the Maryland Historical Society, Wilson stumbled on a whipping post that had clearly been put to use; Simpson, solicited by a curator, conducted exhaustive research about the economies of slavery in Charleston; during one of his trips to the New York Public Library, Ligon came across an image of Brown emerging from his box; Green encountered toile as a child and decided to bring a piece of it with her when she voyaged to France. In every case, a practice was changed and refracted due to an encounter with slavery, prompting a new reckoning with the logic of blackness and its modes of signification. Of course, this emphasis, or any, for that matter, only speaks partially to the myriad pressures and possibilities motivating what are immensely rich and varied aesthetic procedures. Yet by charting the evolution of each project in relation to its author's oeuvre, we can understand how different aspects of slavery's legacy have shaped artists' work on the cultural field and the meaning of race within it. Each chapter takes up one of these aspects—redress (chapter 1), objecthood (chapter 2), fugitivity (chapter 3), and diaspora (chapter 4)—in exploring the possibilities that African American artists negotiated circa 1991. In each instance, I aim to address the ongoing crisis that has problematized realizations of black freedom and visions of black subjectivity from slavery to the present.

I begin in chapter 1 with Wilson, whose *Mining the Museum* models the discourses engaged, the liabilities posed, and the protocols of reading necessitated by the representation of the enslaved within liberal discourse. Prior to this work, Wilson's art primarily consisted of faux institutional tableaux meant to illuminate the ways in which museums constitute their publics from a white hegemonic perspective and to propose alternative visions of the socially dead. *Mining* was commissioned in the hopes that a similar message might be brought to Baltimore, pro-

viding both a model for change within the historical society and a way of reaching out to the city's disenfranchised black communities. As such, I argue that the story of Wilson's signature piece and its discursive production is necessarily caught up within a rhetoric of redress aimed at conditioning oppressed subjects to their lot. But if we are attentive to the political ontology of slavery and the reorientation of the sensible that Wilson proposes in *Mining* and throughout his early work, it is possible to understand how his practice registers not just the speech of reformist grievance but the radical noise of black grief. This is the sound of incomprehensible loss that undergirds dreams for a different order of relations amongst persons and things than the ones that capital, the museum, or the image could ever supply.

If Wilson's juxtapositions imply lines of connection between subjects and objects, then Simpson's art makes them material (chapter 2). In the phototexts that dominate the artist's *Five Rooms*, a long braid joins two women, both with their backs to the viewer. In their pairing of plastic text panels and enigmatic images, these works fall squarely in line with Simpson's trademark pieces of the late 1980s, which garnered the artist considerable acclaim almost from the moment of their first appearance, unleashing a stream of discourse that came to constrain the presumed address and ambition of her art. When she decided to address slavery in the context of *Places with a Past*, she realized that more than images and texts were needed to describe the enslaved subject, leading her to deploy an array of materials unprecedented in her practice. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, I argue that Simpson seized on metaphorically resonant things as surrogates for the slave body because they could more precisely describe the captive female subject's structural position within the disciplinary matrices of the antebellum South and more effectively materialize the relations that might pertain between subjects both despite and because of the vicissitudes of slavery. While Simpson's aesthetic choices in *Five Rooms* literalized the thinglike status of the enslaved woman, Rogers's vocal performances ventriloquized the haunting sounds of her subjection, leaving the viewer to negotiate the two as she made her way through a former slave quarters redolent with phantoms.

The viewer's metaphorical navigation of historical sites is arguably even more central to the work of Ligon, who is best known for paintings that deploy the words of dissident writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston. Rather than emblems of antiessentialist critique, his works, I propose, should be read as material deformations of the visual and verbal regimes that have historically produced black subjects as fugitives in life and representation (chapter 3). These regimes, inaugurated in the peculiar institution, palpably contributed to his conception of history and to his most trenchant aesthetic interventions. Although painting has undoubtedly been key to Ligon's practice, I suggest that we can only understand its subversive potential by examining the full range of tactics he deployed in the early 1990s; through them, the artist critiqued the modern visual technologies that beset the black gay male desiring subject and that would dispossess anyone of personhood and place. These diverse approaches come together in *To Disembark*. A recasting

of Brown's strange conveyance in the rhetoric of the museum and the sculptural, Ligon's project points up the ongoing circulation of commodified forms of blackness throughout the transatlantic world as well as the importance of revisiting the fugitive's means to contest them.

It is Green, however, who I think most strikingly models fugitivity in her practice, which at once emblematizes and puts pressure upon the operative assumptions animating her cohorts' engagement with the black body and its material surrogates. In her discursive self-construction and in the production of her work, Green operates peripatetically, at once performing her role as a transnational artist and recalling her difference from and affinity to those African diasporic subjects whose sojourns were anything but voluntary, such as Harriet Jacobs (chapter 4). Indeed, it was with Jacobs in mind that Green began to work on the historicity of enslavement, first in New York in her pivotal installation *Sites of Genealogy* and later in Nantes, France, where she would draw on a range of materials to execute *Mise-en-Scène*. The most important of these was undoubtedly toile indienne, a printed textile tightly woven into the triangular slave trade. Accordingly, in the installation, the three coffin-like archives detailing the facts about the trade in France were arranged in a triangle to reiterate this mapping within the gallery space. I argue that Green's choice and repetition of images, facts, and materials in this and subsequent works discrepantly mirror the logic of capital, revealing how the black body subtends the changing form of the commodity even when corporeally absented. In this way, her installations underline that blackness maps the uneven development of the global capitalist economy, and it is precisely within such gaps that Green articulates her radical African diasporic practice.

Ultimately, this book is also about forms of discrepancy: *Bound to Appear* seeks to characterize a brief interval in which a diverse yet like-minded quartet of artists engaged the phantasmatic character of slavery and in so doing freshly inflected both the blackness of their own practices and those on which they relied. As I show in the epilogue, this moment quickly passed, though the number, kind, and visibility of engagements with slavery's specular effects has exponentially increased in the last twenty years, as evidenced by the runaway success of contemporary artist Kara Walker. This fact, I think, serves to shore up rather than mitigate the specialness of Wilson's, Simpson's, Green's, and Ligon's achievements. For what we witness in their installations is a complex dialectic between fact and fiction, presence and absence, subject and object, sound and image, free play and determination, that aims to suggest the even more fraught relation of material things to bodily states. As spectators we are suspended among these contradictions, which constitute both slavery's terrain and that endless site of construction known simply as blackness.[80] Positioned there for a moment, we might not entirely grasp what it was to be a slave back then, but we can surely see what it means to be an embodied subject now, everywhere caught up in economies of race, affect, and reification whose coordinates remain as much real as imaginary.

A riot is at bottom the language of the unheard.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.,
Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?, 1968

1.1
Fred Wilson, *Metalwork 1793–1880*, from *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson,* 1992–1993, The Contemporary Museum and Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore. Silver vessels in Baltimore Repoussé style (1830–1880, maker unknown), slave shackles (c. 1793–1872, maker unknown, made in Baltimore). (Image courtesy of The Contemporary Museum, Baltimore. Photography by Jeff Goldman. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

Fred Wilson and the Rhetoric of Redress

In 1992, Fred Wilson temporarily reconfigured the Maryland Historical Society's displays, interspersing prized objects from the collection with repressed traces of Baltimore's slave past. The result was *Mining the Museum*, a work that has been hailed as a masterpiece by influential critics such as Lucy Lippard and one whose most celebrated moments, such as *Metalwork 1793–1880*, have been frequently reproduced and later shown independently of the original exhibition (fig. 1.1).[1] Doubtless the most succinct and harrowing of *Mining*'s numerous juxtapositions, *Metalwork* brings together shackles loaned by a local collector with silver vessels executed in the Baltimore repoussé style, thereby intimating how both the economies of slavery and the institution's exhibitionary protocols depended on the subjugation of black bodies for their coherence.

In the years since *Mining*'s dismantling, such pairings have become the predominant lenses through which Wilson's art is viewed, even as he has gone on to execute dozens of site-specific museum interventions and to produce objects in an ever-increasing array of media, from his impersonation of racist figurines in the 1995 video *Me and It* to his recasting of modernist biomorphic sculpture in black glass pieces like *Dark Dawn* (2005).[2] These works, I would argue, are coextensive with Wilson's larger critical project, but it is *Mining the Museum*'s juxtapositions that have come to function as vital touchstones in contemporary artistic discourse, particularly in accounts of museum practice, strategies of institutional critique, and the representation of cultural difference in the supposed aftermaths of the modern and colonial periods. More often than not, these accounts focus on the theoretical presuppositions that subtend *Mining* and the terms in which Wilson's postmodern anti-aesthetic are best defined.

Consider, in this light, just a handful of the more apt descriptions of his practice. According to Maurice Berger, Wilson is an allegorist *par excellence* whose arrangements of lost objects conjure up suffering black souls.[3] For Irene Winter, he is a Foucauldian archeologist who lays bare the conditions in which our society's view of history comes to be articulated.[4] Similarly, Jennifer A. González suggests that Wilson is a conceptual materialist who brings his viewers into an awareness of the fact that the past is an ideologically charged cultural construct.[5] In so doing, argues Walter Mignolo, Wilson not only reveals the imbrication of colonialism and modernism in the construction of past knowledge but also encourages present-day subjects to delink from Western epistemes.[6] Or, as Darby English once put it, the artist is as a museum writer able to institutionalize a postcolonial script that puts pressure on the status quo and thereby produces viewers freshly able to critique the world at large.[7]

These arguments matter to any narrative that might be crafted about *Mining*; the present chapter is no exception. Yet in revisiting the work and the moment from which it emerged, my goal is not to offer yet another name for Wilson and his artistic activity or to isolate his signal juxtapositions from their local and historical artistic contexts. Rather, I want to articulate the ethical ambition that has consistently animated his practice, which attempts to adjust our vision, to right the balance of history, and to amend the past with a view toward the present. Wilson's art, in other words, speaks a language of redress, whose accents and emphases are clearly heard in the context of *Mining the Museum*. That installation's discursive construction from beginning to end as well as its varied aesthetic means—objects, texts, space, artworks, and sound—reveal a fundamental imbrication with rhetorics of reparative speech that seek justice for the subjects of racial oppression. I will argue that it is the limitations and possibilities inherent in such speech that not only structured *Mining* and the various critical, institutional, and audience responses to it, but that also characterized the cultural imaginary Wilson plumbed to such great effect throughout his projects of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Time and again in this period, the artist sought to give a hearing to those silenced by hegemonic forms of representation. Ultimately, by framing Wilson's practice as a whole within the rhetoric of redress, I aim to illuminate how his art models an orientation toward the political and the aesthetic that reflects a black radical approach to the figuration of slavery, its subjects, and the things with which they have been conflated and exchanged. In making my case, however, it will first be useful to lay out the artistic contexts and cultural traditions that informed Wilson's encounters with the ghosts of America's past.

• • •

Prior to *Mining the Museum*, the "peculiar institution" was anything but foremost in Wilson's mind. In an interview published in the catalog of the exhibition, he stated, "Before I did this project I was thinking about colonialism and Africa. I

wasn't really thinking about America or African-American slavery. I thought we had dealt with that and we had gone past it and were dealing with other issues."[8] For Wilson, those issues emerged directly from his own experiences as a cosmopolitan man of African, Caribbean, and American Indian descent working within a broad spectrum of U.S. institutions and artistic modes. Indeed, the trajectory of his early practice fits neatly within narratives that trace a direct line from minimalism to institutional critique, though Wilson would productively deform every aesthetic strategy he deployed through his emphasis on the structuring facts of racial difference.[9]

Trained as a sculptor and theatrical designer at SUNY Purchase in the mid-1970s, Wilson moved to New York City after graduation, where he sat in on classes at Hunter College taught by the minimalist icon Robert Morris, who encouraged Wilson's explorations of the relation between objects and the performative body.[10] The young artist went on to run an arts outreach program in East Harlem, to serve as an assistant at the pioneering African American gallery Just Above Midtown, and to put in considerable time in the education departments at the Metropolitan, Natural History, and American Craft museums.[11] As he has often testified, with every new assignment it became clearer to him how racialization affected every register of official culture. This realization was reinforced by his travels to Egypt, Peru, France, Ghana, and Nigeria, which brought home to him both the prejudice and provincialism of Western culture, particularly as revealed in stylistic conventions of museum display.[12]

Like his fellow artistic travelers Andrea Fraser, Mark Dion, and James Luna, Wilson was well aware of the tradition of critical practice that had developed since the 1960s to highlight the day-to-day workings and historical biases of art institutions, especially those that reproduce modes of cultural hegemony. A signal example in this vein is Michael Asher's contribution to the Art Institute of Chicago's *73rd American Exhibition* (1979; fig. 1.2). This piece consisted of a simple

1.2
Michael Asher, installation view of Gallery 219 with statue by Houdon after removal from Michigan Avenue entrance, *73rd American Exhibition*, June 9–August 5, 1979, E33736, The Art Institute of Chicago. (Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.)

yet incisive act of sculptural relocation: the artist moved the bronze replica of Jean-Antoine Houdon's 1785 portrait of George Washington from a granite pedestal at the entrance to the museum to a wooden base in an interior gallery, thereby allowing the work to take its place among other eighteenth-century European art works and decorative objects. Thereby, Asher drew attention both to the historical conditions that define the museumgoer's experience and to the Art Institute's contradictory framing of itself within nationalist ideologies.[13]

In its new context, the statue of Washington became a more specific and specifically transatlantic object, placing it and the museum within long-standing Western economies of racialized consumption and display.[14] Asher's definition of such moves as "situational aesthetics" speaks well to Wilson's work and that of his contemporaries: "an aesthetic system that juxtaposes predetermined elements occurring within the institutional framework, that are recognizable and identifiable to the public because they are drawn from the institutional context itself."[15] Licensed by this example, as well as by the gestures of Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke, practitioners emerging in the 1980s continued to explore the ideological motivations of the museum, now with a more explicitly identarian agenda. For Wilson and his cohorts, art institutions came to provide rich subjects for interrogations of contemporary America, allowing them to scrutinize notions of belonging within a cultural discourse, which, since the 1960s, had been increasingly shaped by the dissenting voices of social "others."

In 1987, the artist began putting his own observations into sculptural and curatorial form. In that year, he made *No Noa Noa: History of Tahiti / Portrait of Gauguin* for an exhibition at the New York nonprofit gallery Artist's Space (fig. 1.3). The work is a stepped platform covered in plaster and painted in colors intended to evoke a diorama of the South Pacific isle; when viewed from above, it is meant to suggest the contours of the eponymous French painter's face seen in profile. The sculpture's clever conflation of the biographical and the topographical announced Wilson's persistent interest in at once indexing and revealing primitivist modernism's dream of a white self refashioned through a play of cultural differences sublimated into a single unified surface.[16] For unlike Wilson's other constructions, such as his 1988 *Portrait of Audubon*, which were situated outdoors and invited the viewer's bodily perambulation across their surfaces, in this work he populated his makeshift stage with store-bought wares that further alluded to and so reframed *Noa Noa: The Tahitian Journal* of Paul Gauguin, originally published in 1919.[17]

In contrast to the nineteenth-century painter's text, which languishes in the sights, sounds, and fragrance, or *noa*, of the tropics, Wilson's choice of materials emphasized the techné of imperialism. A dildo, calabashes, a bloodied Bible on a silver platter, a plastic bust of a Polynesian beauty, a microscope atop a pile of *National Geographic* magazines: through this concatenation of objects, the artist conjured up the psychosexual, colonial, and scientific impulses percolating within Gauguin's cultural imaginary without acceding to its visual logic. In the same year, in one of his early curatorial projects as director of the Bronx's Longwood Center

1.3
Fred Wilson, *No Noa Noa: History of Tahiti, Portrait of Paul Gauguin*, 1987. Plaster, wood, Bible, blood and mixed media. Dimensions variable. (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

for the Arts, he explored the means through which museums constitute cultural imaginaries as such. Entitled *Rooms With A View: The Struggle Between Culture, Content, and the Context of Art*, the exhibition positioned contemporary works within three very different yet spatially contiguous environments modeled, in turn, on modernist white cube, ethnographic museum, and nineteenth-century salon styles of hanging. Through this framing, Wilson illuminated the often-unnoticed ideological effects of gallery design, which, far from being neutral skins, actively direct the viewer's experience of aesthetic production.[18] While executed in the same year, these two projects differ markedly in facture, mode, address, and reception. *No Noa Noa* is a relatively unknown assemblage that mobilizes the conceit of portraiture to structurally map colonial regimes of power and vision; *Rooms with a View* is a singular exhibition, often understood as seminal within Wilson's oeuvre, that took the museum's protocols for arranging and displaying objects as its primary target.[19] Yet taken together, these works suggest how Wilson conjoined his collegiate training, personal investments, and art-historical savvy in subsequent installations that would prove foundational for his approach to the figuration of slavery.

Two works in particular stand out: *The Other Museum* (1990), executed at the alternative space White Columns, and *Primitivism: High and Low* (1991), the artist's first exhibition at the commercial gallery Metro Pictures. In each work, Wilson mobilized an array of materials—photographs, videos, recorded sound, artifacts,

1.4
Fred Wilson, *Colonial Collection,* 1990 (*left*). Wood masks and flags, insects in display boxes, jawbone, paper and Mylar labels, *Harper's Weekly* nineteenth-century prints, and skull in wood-and-glass vitrine. *Colonial Collection*, detail (*right*). 123.8 × 219.7 × 67.9 cm. (Photographs by Ellen Labenski [*left*] and Kerry Ryan McFate, detail [*right*], courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

and wall labels—to construct a faux museum environment that even more pointedly than *Rooms with a View* questioned the ways in which institutional display reflects the violence endemic to the Western cultural enterprise, only to efface it. Both installations were composed of a series of sculptural antiportraits, which, in purporting to depict individual figures, hark back to *No Noa Noa*'s spatialized tableau of culturally charged objects and serve as the literal building blocks of the artist's critique. In fact, he later mobilized these ensembles as stand-alone works and in the context of other museum interventions.

Several of these pieces take the form of vitrines. In *The Other Museum*, which focused on the organization and production of alterity within an ethnographic frame, Wilson debuted his *Colonial Collection* (fig. 1.4, left). This glass display case features insect specimens labeled not according to scientific designations but with the names of African tribes, a deft act of surrogation that recalls subjugated peoples as well as their dehumanization within Western discourse. On either side of this abject portrayal sit nineteenth-century images of conquest: one suggesting the genocide committed against American Indians, the other depicting European incursions into Africa (fig. 1.4, right). Fragments of a disarticulated skull bracket these materials, as if to simultaneously insert colonized subjects into the picture and to underline how they have been disallowed from speaking when not literally dismembered.

1.5
Fred Wilson, *Friendly Natives*, 1991, installation view. Plastic skeletons, stain, wood-and-glass vitrines. Dimensions variable. From *Fred Wilson, Objects and Installations 1979–2000*, Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, Baltimore, 2001–2002. (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

Wilson continued this line of inquiry in the rooms that constituted *Primitivism: High and Low*. The first retained the look of a contemporary art space while the second was modified to resemble a natural history museum. The installation as a whole took its name from two recent exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art: *"Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* and *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*. In so titling the work, Wilson aimed to demonstrate the pervasiveness of hierarchical modes of seeing, framing, and memorializing the other, an ambition perhaps best exemplified by his *Friendly Natives* (fig. 1.5). Situated in the second room, this work consists of four plastic skeletons placed in cryptlike vitrines labeled with filial designations, such as "Someone's Sister." Here, human remains are not merely specimens to be cataloged but depictions of subjects lost to history who were once enmeshed within the embrace of kinship structures. In this way, *Friendly Natives* and *Colonial Collection* do not so much unmask as insinuate the radically deindividuating protocols of the museum, allowing the ruthlessness of convention to rise to the surface. The works' mimicry of institutional form sets a trap for the viewer, who, in bending over to examine each vitrine's contents, might recoil from and reflect on the how the museum imposes relations on it subjects.[20]

These early installations were enabled by Wilson's engagement with critical writings, such as James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* and curatorial efforts

like Susan Vogel's exhibition *Art/Artifact* at New York's Center for African Art, which examined how anthropological collections produce and display cultural difference.[21] Like Wilson's work, these projects—which both appeared as published volumes in 1988—demonstrated how the human sciences, their representative institutions, and the positioning of objects within them work to maintain the prerogatives of colonial power. Since that time, various curators and critics have come to view American and European museums as machines for the production of alterity: in accounting for the range of human creativity, Western institutions tend to hierarchically arrange cultural artifacts along a spectrum running from past to present, primitive to civilized, margin to center, vanquished to victor.[22] These antinomies reproduce the disparities of freedom and cultural determination that are part and parcel of modern social organization and that reach their apogee in the gulf separating citizens and slaves, the racialized space that *Mining the Museum* would both inhabit and disturb.

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Although American bondage must be considered as part and parcel of the colonial project, the specificities of that institution are not the ostensible subject of either *The Other Museum* or *Primitivism: High and Low*. Yet in these works, Wilson revealed his attunement to the ways that people of color become objects of cultural property, an aspect of colonial practice that finds its mooring in the structuring relationship between "slavery and social death." In his influential 1982 study of that name, sociologist Orlando Patterson argues that in the course of her transformation from citizen to slave, the captive is symbolically murdered, detached from her previous community, and reborn into another over which she has no claim. This process of natal alienation is repeated both through the master's continual abrogation of the slave's rights to her body and through the denial of her access to the symbolic. Wilson used the languages of museum display to figure and undo these ongoing processes that denude subjugated populations—the enslaved, the native, and the colonized—of both personhood and property, casting them into a realm somewhere between the two.[23]

In Patterson's cross-cultural and transhistorical study, which both grounds and anticipates the turn to questions of power, citizenship, and bare life within recent political theory, social death is not necessarily organized by predetermined racial polarities.[24] Elsewhere in his early installations, however, Wilson productively colors the subject's political position, suggesting how mastery and subjugation, life and death, function along lines of white and black, a dichotomy that continues to shape the American public sphere.[25] In *The Other Museum*, for instance, Wilson also included a bust modeled after one of the boys indicted in the infamous Scottsboro case of 1931, in which nine blacks were unjustly imprisoned for allegedly raping two white women in Alabama (fig. 1.6). Entitled *The Last Murdered Black Youth*, the work was made not long after the racially motivated killing of Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, in 1989.[26] By bringing these two temporally distant

1.6
Fred Wilson, *The Last Murdered Black Youth*, from *The Other Museum,* White Columns, New York, 1990. Wax head, mid-twentieth century, in a wood-and-glass vitrine with a descriptive label. (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

1.7
Fred Wilson, *Guarded View*, 1991. Fiberglass mannequins, wood, paint, steel, and fabric. Dimensions variable. (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

moments together, Wilson's work underlined the constitutive and transhistorical vulnerability of black subjects as prime targets of those murderous drives, which, since the inauguration of transatlantic slavery, have all too often rendered African bodies fungible material in service to white power.[27]

A similar critique animates *Guarded View,* a work presented in the contemporary space of the *Primitivism* show (fig. 1.7). Four headless mannequins placed on a pedestal and dressed up as security guards from four New York art museums, the sculpture's elevation of working-class brown-skinned folks to the status of art freshly alerted spectators to the presence of subjects normally construed as interchangeable objects of negligible interest. Wilson drove this point home in *My Life*

as a Dog, a 1991 piece at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where he had been invited to critically interrogate the exhibition on view. After eating lunch with the docents, the artist changed into a museum guard uniform. When he arrived at the appointed gallery where he was to conduct his tour, his new acquaintances entirely failed to see him until he began to address them.[28]

In these works and throughout his art, Wilson orchestrates his audiences' bodily confrontations with silenced subjects who, through his authorial agency, literally and metaphorically speak back. His means for doing so mobilize the protocols of the museum so as to better *détourne* them: in *Friendly Natives* and *Colonial Collection*, once "objective" labels are rewritten as subjective commentaries; one boy's fate highlights the continual threat of actual and symbolic death in *Last Murdered Black Youth*; and in *Guarded View*, figures typically seen as extraneous to the gallery's economies of vision become the foci of scopic investment. Like that of any number of critical practitioners who have emerged since the 1960s, from Laurie Anderson to Martha Rosler, Wilson's art preys on conventions in order to operate in excess of them. His work thus falls in line with critic Craig Owens's theorizations of the supplement, which describe how postmodern artists introduced textual or sonic means into the visual field to at once reveal and shore up the limitations of the aesthetic object following the collapse of belief in the work of art's autonomy.[29]

The specific combination of supplemental forms invoked in Wilson's work reveals his investment in revising the modes of visualization that would deny oppressed peoples of depth and particularity. It is in this sense that his practice can be said to operate within a rhetoric of redress, which literary theorists Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman define, with a nod to Patterson, as "the kinds of political claims that can be mobilized on behalf of the slave (the stateless, the socially dead, and the disposable) in the political present."[30] Of course, such claims can never repair or even adequately compensate for the losses inflicted by modernity's regimes of racialized terror. What Wilson's tactics go to show is that redress can at least reckon with the violence of the past, create a link to its long-dead subjects, and denaturalize the logic of reification so central to slavery and colonization.

In figuring othered subjects, Wilson—as have African American cultural practitioners since slavery—made recourse to other bodily faculties in supplementing and recasting the visual field: the haptic, the written word, the thingly surrogate, and most signally, the voice, which offers irrefutable evidence of consciousness, however delimited.[31] For instance, the artist used sound in *Spoils*, the set of African masks placed above *Colonial Collection* whose eyes and in some instances mouths were tied shut by the flags of France and England, major powers whose imposition of colonial rule effectively muted indigenous cultural expression. On one mask he projected a video recording of vocalist Alva Rogers's face who could be heard saying, "Don't just look at me; listen to me. Don't just own me; understand me. Don't just talk about me; talk to me. I am still alive."[32] Perhaps even more affecting was Wilson's use of sounded urns in *Shards*, a sculpture included in his

1.8
Fred Wilson, *Shards*, 1991, installation view. Two ceramic pots. From *Fred Wilson: Recent Acquisitions*, Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York, 1991. (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

1991 exhibition, *Recent Acquisitions*, at Gracie Mansion (fig. 1.8). To create the work, the artist installed hidden speakers in two nineteenth-century Guatemalan pots, from which the sound of women weeping emanated. Played in endless loops, the recordings in these pieces underline that the work of redress is terminally unfinished, requiring constant repetition and renewal to keep the past alive and the present under scrutiny.

Moreover, *Spoils* and *Shards* enunciate two contrasting forms of appeal whose difference, in Best and Hartman's terms, lies in the "rhetorical distinction between grievance and grief . . . between the complaint that is audible," even defensible to white ears, and "the extralinguistic mode of black noise that exists outside the parameters of any strategy or plan for remedy."[33] While *Spoils* speaks directly to its audiences in plaintive tones, *Shards* abjures words altogether, offering only the irremediable sound of loss. When he confronted the peculiar institution head on in *Mining the Museum*, Wilson arguably drew on both of these registers, which, in resonating together, might outpace, disturb, or at least qualify the appearance of the marked subject. As theorist Alexander Weheliye has argued, "the sonic and the scopic, far from being diametrically opposed, provide occasion for one another: visual subjection begets sonic subjectivation," an alternative modality for accessing the socially dead on their own terms and with their opacities intact.[34] Thus, where the image might fail, Wilson attempted to give the slave a form, a voice, even a body, whose being could be recognized, the necessary first step toward reparation of any kind.[35]

. . .

To execute *Mining*, his first piece in an actual rather than a fictionalized museum, Wilson consulted staff members from all echelons of the Maryland Historical Society, worked closely with a handful of outside experts, and developed relationships with members of the African American community, all of whom helped him navigate an unfamiliar city and its archives. Wilson had access to every one of the society's two hundred and fifty thousand artifacts, eventually selecting just over one hundred for his exhibition, which occupied the third floor of the society's building. Recalling *Colonial Collection*, many of his object choices offered theretofore unseen glimpses of Baltimore's American Indian and African American legacies, a slant intimated by the colors of the black nationalist-inspired banner hung outside the society as well as by a message placed in its first floor lobby.[36]

There, visitors encountered a monitor playing a looped two-and-a-half-minute video of a black man—the artist himself—moving silently through the museum late one evening. Although brief in duration, the piece does not lack for action: at times nude but usually clothed, Wilson strolls past paintings, scurries between vitrines, activates extant displays, gazes at his reflections, and bodily inserts himself within a scenario depicting native subjects (fig. 1.9). In the accompanying audio voiceover, Wilson describes having a dream the previous night in which everything at the historical society had changed even though the objects remained. With this oneiric frame in place, Wilson goes on to introduce himself, *Mining*, and installation art more generally while sharing just what his own desires for museums were:

> A museum should be a place where anything can happen. An exhibition is an experience where you should expect the unexpected. It should make you think. It should make you feel something for the person who made the objects you are looking at. Art is like an exhibition. It makes you question. It makes you wonder. It opens you up to new emotions and the discovery of new ways to experience the world around you.[37]

Consequently, even before entering the work, viewers were asked to listen to a black subject whose speech, disconnected from his visage, would set the terms of their encounter. With the artist's voice still lingering in their ears, exhibitiongoers stepped onto an elevator featuring a framed text written by the historical society staff that provided prompts for engaging the installation's objects and that were keyed to the concerns Wilson gestured to in his video. "What is it? Where is it? . . . What is it saying? How is it used? For whom was it created? For whom does it exist? . . . What do you see? What do you hear? What can you touch? What do you feel? What do you think?"[38] These questions made patrons aware of what a departure from normative habits of museum spectatorship the exhibition was meant to be; they also served to further articulate the types of

1.9
Fred Wilson, film stills from introductory video placed in the lobby of the exhibition *Mining the Museum*. (Produced in collaboration with Lee Boot and Michael Barnes. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

affective, phenomenological, and critical perception deemed crucial to a rewarding experience of Wilson's project.

Narrating that experience in its temporal unfolding is important for an understanding of the installation and especially for my interpretation of it. Most commentators on *Mining the Museum* single out one or two trenchant juxtapositions, such as *Metalwork*, which, reproduced as a photograph, comes to stand in for the work as whole.[39] Even writers who offer more comprehensive descriptions of the project tend to suggest that the entirety of the installation may be viewed as a series of images organized into what English calls "symbolic vignettes" of—to borrow a term from González—"objects-as-signs."[40] Given the numerous striking visual episodes that punctuate the piece—to say nothing of its physical impermanence and relative photographic availability—these are reasonable claims to make. And like most, the account that follows heavily relies on curator Lisa Corrin's vivid description of the work and the extensive documentation contained in the *Mining*

1.10
Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, 1992–1993, The Contemporary Museum and Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, installation view. Empty pedestals labeled Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Benjamin Banneker (makers unknown); globe, silver-plated copper (c. 1913, designed by Mr. Thomas and manufactured by Stieff Company); acrylic mounts (c. 1960s, maker unknown); *Henry* Clay (c. 1870, Shobal Vail Clevenger); *Napoleon Bonaparte* (c. 1850, artist unknown); *Andrew Jackson* (c. 1870, C. Hennecke & Co). (Image courtesy of The Contemporary Museum, Baltimore. Photography by Jeff Goldman. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

the Museum catalog, a brilliantly designed object that in certain respects departs from the exhibition in attempting to recreate it textually. I want to argue, however, that getting a grip on *Mining*'s most profound implications from any critical perspective, black radical or otherwise, requires at least a provisional attempt to reconstruct how the installation orchestrated a series of affective atmospheres through light, color, and sound that determined viewers' bodily encounters with things understood as both material facts and emotive ghosts.

As soon as visitors exited the elevator they confronted six bases arranged around a display case that featured circa 1913 advertising trophy—a large silver-plated copper globe reading, ironically, "Truth"—ensconced among a forest of clear acrylic mounts produced in the 1960s (fig. 1.10). The three pedestals on the right bore busts of Henry Clay, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Andrew Jackson, none of whom were significant players in Maryland history; the three on the left were empty, labeled with placards reading "Harriet Tubman," "Frederick Douglass," and "Benjamin Banneker." These last were African American natives of the state and before Wilson's exhibition they had received little or no attention within the society's halls. This first juxtaposition thus evoked the constitutive absences that were to structure the artist's intervention and summed up the tones of loss, mourning, and anguish everywhere apparent in what was to follow. In a series of eight rooms, arranged in pairs of two by the colors they were painted—gray, green, red, and blue—Wilson presented constellations of objects that put notions of "Truth" into question while revealing the lapses of dispassionate "History."

In the second gray room, the artist assembled artifacts pertaining to the original inhabitants of the Baltimore area. In one grouping, a line of mid- and late-nineteenth-century cigar store Indians commissioned by white storeowners

1.11
Fred Wilson, *Portraits of Cigar Store Owners*, from *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*. Folk sculpture by John Philip Yeager (c. 1870s; except fourth from left; artist unknown). (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

faced a wall hung with mid- and late-twentieth-century photographs of indigenous folks (fig. 1.11). In contrast to most other objects in the exhibition, these images had to be imported from an outside instution, the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs, since the historical society itself did not possess contemporaneous representations of American Indians. In order to see the photographs, the viewer had to either peer or squeeze through the lineup of wooden personages, a corporeal straining to see beyond false bodies to images of actual subjects that made vivid the difficulty of countenancing present-day first peoples in the face of American history's racial phantasms, material residues, and willed amnesia. In this way, *Mining* limned the forms of social death that have shaped the depiction of marginalized ethnic groups within the U.S. cultural imaginary, which at once maintains and domesticates difference through the ambivalent play of stereotype.[41] Just as American Indians have been constructed as poignant absences in order to anchor the myth of Manifest Destiny, African Americans have often been rendered as hypervisible signs of abjection in order to represent and so reproduce their ongoing subjugation to white rule.[42] It is this version of racial manichaeism that marked the remainder of the installation's precise and damning arrangements of materials from the society's holdings: each of these ensembles brought forward the omissions of the institution while offering grounds for their redress.

To wit, in the green gallery immediately adjacent to the cigar store Indians, Wilson hung several paintings that highlighted the society's dearth of portraits focused solely on black subjects. In one case, the artist recruited a member of the janitorial staff to star in a video that was played on a monitor installed behind Henry Bebie's torn mid-nineteenth-century painting of an unknown sitter so that the blinking eyes of a black man peered out from behind the mask of a long-dead

1.12
Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, detail, 1992. Portrait of an unknown man, Henry Bebie, c. 1860. Oil on canvas. (Video image courtesy of The Contemporary Museum, Baltimore. Photography by Jeff Goldman. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

white one (fig. 1.12). Here, it is as if only through the literal rupturing of "high" art's surface that the marked subject can come into view. This uncanny intervention disturbed viewers' usual expectations of static objects and restored a sullied artwork to visibility while linking its culturally demoted status to the unsung labor of African Americans, who are still often consigned to subservient roles.

Justus Engelhardt Kuhn's circa 1710 portrait of the child Henry Darnall III provided an immediate case in point (fig. 1.13). When a viewer neared this work, a bright spotlight picked out the collared African boy to the left of the painting's eponymous subject. The same motion sensor triggered an audio recording of a local child's voice asking, "Am I your brother? Am I your friend? Am I your pet?," a recasting of the question that often accompanied abolitionist images of the enslaved—"Am I Not a Man and a Brother?"—and likewise meant to bring the viewer into an empathetic rapport with a black subject. This audiovisual juxtaposition exemplifies how Wilson sonically mobilized the rhetoric of black grievance within *Mining* to recast visual perception and to articulate the demands, if not the desires, of the enslaved. Confronted with this boy's plea, spectators might consider not only what their own historical relation to this figure would have been, but also how they might presently respond to an inquiry from a black male youth

1.13
Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, installation view. Justus Engelhardt Kuhn, *Henry Darnall III*, c. 1710. Oil on canvas. (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

culturally constructed as endangered and endangering. In this arrangement, as elsewhere in the installation, aesthetic interventions led to affective responses that played with and on each audience member's personal history and structural positioning.

The flickering sights and spectral sounds encountered in this room provided a fitting backdrop for the objects in the next one, which focused viewers' attention on remnants of Baltimore's material culture—such as the slave shackles and silver—that charted the regimes of power previously pictured in the exhibition's prints, drawings, and canvases. Many of the artifacts in this gallery were grouped together into a category that the wall text half-facetiously, if no less fittingly, identified as *Modes of Transport 1770–1910.* This series of juxtapositions gave emotional

1.14
Left, Fred Wilson, *Modes of Transport 1770–1910*, detail. Baby carriage (c. 1908, maker unknown), hood (twentieth century, maker unknown). (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.) *Right*, Anonymous, *Mount Vernon Place*, c. 1900. (Image Z24.521, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.)

punch to the abstractions of racial hierarchy while metaphorically suggesting the horrific means through which Maryland entered the twentieth-century. There was a model of a Baltimore clipper identified as "of the type converted to slavers after the War of 1812," and a baby carriage fitted with a Ku Klux Klan hood (fig. 1.14, left), which was placed across from *Mount Vernon Place*, an early-twentieth-century photograph of two African American nannies with their charges (fig 1.14, right). Both ensembles conjured up images of white children happily toying along in vehicles of death and highlighted the perversity of black women rearing white children who might someday perpetrate acts of racial terror. In the process, every viewer's memories of childhood, whether blithe or traumatic, might be affectively tainted by the facticity of violence.

In line with the one that preceded it, this section of the installation was painted green. With the first glimpse of the adjoining area's crimson walls, the meaning of "green room" as a place to prepare before the main event appropriately came to the fore: the first red gallery presented materials deployed to keep black bodies in line. In *Cabinetmaking 1820–1960*, viewers ran up against a whipping post surrounded by four elegant chairs spaced just far enough apart to permit movement among them (fig. 1.15). To examine a line of reproduced broadsheets advertising rewards for the return of runaway slaves, they likely would have passed a set of decoy ducks and become the target of the punt gun that faced the fugitive broadsheets (fig. 1.16). Such physical moves were also mnemonic. The names of

1.15
Fred Wilson, *Cabinetmaking, 1820–1960*, 1992–1993. From left: whipping post (date unknown, maker unknown), armchair (c. 1896, maker unknown); side chair with logo of Baltimore Equitable Society (c. 1820–1840, maker unknown); armchair (c. 1855, J. H. Belter), side chair (c. 1840–60; maker unknown). (Image courtesy of The Contemporary Museum, Baltimore. Photography by Jeff Goldman. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

1.16
Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992, detail. Punt gun, wooden stock, and metal barrel (date unknown, maker unknown); broadsides for the retrieval of runaway slaves Baltimore, c. 1820). (Image courtesy of The Contemporary Museum, Baltimore. Photography by Jeff Goldman. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

1.17
Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *Preparations for the Enjoyment of a Fine Sunday Evening*, March 4, 1797. Work on paper. (Museum Collection 1960.108.1.2.36. Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.)

the fugitives mentioned in one of the posters, Richard and Ned, referred back to a series of nineteenth-century watercolors presented in Green Room #1, which were executed by the British-born architect, engineer, traveler, and naturalist Benjamin H. Latrobe (1764–1820). Wilson recast Latrobe's pseudo-ethnographic studies of nameless Negroes as symbolic placeholders for these particular black subjects: in his hands, *Preparations for the Enjoyment of a Fine Sunday* became *Richard, Ned and Their Brothers* (fig. 1.17).[43] When attentive viewers subsequently encountered these names in the wanted posters in Red Room #1, they met with familiar avatars—old friends, so to speak—whose filial ties were always under threat within the peculiar institution yet whose relationships with each other could be fictively restored.

By contrast, in the following red gallery, a perversely whimsical Latrobe sketch, this one of a slave driver on the job, was juxtaposed with a bootjack known as "Naughty Nellie" that lay flat on its back beside an advertisement for the runaway slave Easter (fig. 1.18). Although this name recalled Wilson's titular transformation of a previous Latrobe sketch—the contemporary artist changed the caption *Market*

1.18
Left, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *An Overseer doing his Duty near Fredericksburg, Virginia*, c. 1798. Work on paper. (Museum Collection 1960.108.1.3.21. Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.) *Right*, Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, 1992–1993, photograph of the installation, detail. (Museum Collection 1992. Mining.Museum.019, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

1.19
Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, installation view. *Left*, dollhouse, c. 1904, detail. Painted wood, fabric, dolls, and dollhouse furniture. *Right*, pikes used in John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, 1959. (Photographs courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

Folks to *Easter's Mother*—when spectators looked into the vitrine containing the blacked-up female figure, they likely would have noticed another Latrobe, *An Overseer Doing His Duty*, reflected in the glass. If in the first green room existing images summoned up the subjectivity of captives lost to representation, then in the first red one, black bodies were just as likely to be reduced to errant property or crude lumps of flesh vulnerable to all manner of sexual use, precariously gendering both slavery's modes of assault and the viewer's corporeal experience.[44]

According to *Mining*'s logic, the collective African American response to such depredation could be equally ferocious, and justifiably so. In Red Room #2, exhibitiongoers came upon an antique dollhouse whose interior rooms revealed a revolt in full swing (fig. 1.19, left). Positioned before this spectacle, viewers could turn to consider one of several pikes purportedly used in John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, the site of the white abolitionist's attempted slave insurrection (fig. 1.19, right). While examining these objects, fraught with a violence in which they themselves could have been enmeshed, spectators might be momentarily blinded by a projector that cast the names of Tubman and other famous figures of black resistance onto the wall, rendering dark heroes in bright lights. This moment of visual piercing marked a shift in representational if not actual regimes of power as more and more African Americans began to appear as actors within the visual field laid out by the installation.

Although black subjects were not yet figured in terms that could be called their own, they nevertheless took center stage in the next section, a long corridor colored a light blue and populated with objects—a comb, an amulet, a rocking chair—for the most part made by unknown slave craftsmen from the surrounding area (fig. 1.20). *Mining* ended on an almost sanguine note, with a room devoted to Benjamin Banneker (1731–1806), of whom the historical record provides ample evidence, despite his neglect by the society. A free black and noted scientist who spent the majority of his life in the Baltimore area, Banneker was represented by his astronomical projections and an IBM computer that was used to chart out the position of constellations in the night sky during his lifetime (fig. 1.21). The

1.20
Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson,* 1992–1993, photograph of the installation, detail. (Museum Collection 1992. Mining.Museum.015. Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.)

1.21
Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, installation view. IBM personal computer (c. 1980s), astronomical journal (c. 1790–1806 by Benjamin Banneker), Maryland Chippendale dining table (c. 1756, maker unknown), celestial globe (date unknown, maker unknown). (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

celestial globe placed at the end of the installation not only encouraged viewers to reflect on Banneker's work and writing, but also to look on the "truths" of subjection in a global frame, referring them back to the shiny spherical trophy and empty pedestals with which they began.

While this moment within the installation's course offered a cooling antidote to many of the more emotionally heated earlier episodes, the threat of corporeal disintegration was evidenced even here. For despite his relative freedom, Banneker's dream journal gives voice to nighttime visions of terror elsewhere materialized in Wilson's exhibition and now approachable in structural terms. The astronomer thus became a spur for the recursive navigation of the exhibition as well as an emblematic site of retroactive projection capable of evoking subjects that the archive would consign to the dustbin of history.

• • •

Theorist Jacques Derrida argues that every archive is structured by acts of performative consignation that demarcate if only to obliterate an outside, holding out visions of a future organized by a self-constituting violence that aims to erase all traces of difference.[45] *Mining the Museum*, I would argue, revealed that violence so that it might be turned back on itself. The means used to do so, while consistent with Wilson's signature tactics, necessarily took their measure from the historical society's practices of display and the proleptic dreams that determined them. Seen in this light, the artist was both bound and enabled by the material coordinates of a predetermined cultural imaginary: "I didn't choose slavery," he averred, "I was really taking my cues from what was there."[46]

In the days before *Mining*, the few items relating to African American history on view at the Maryland Historical Society—two lonely vitrines featuring artifacts once belonging to local jazz musician Eubie Blake, for example—only served to reinforce the slighting of blackness that governed the institution.[47] Founded in 1844, home to the original manuscript of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, and itself housed in a Victorian mansion, the society was a straitlaced and well-respected establishment whose mandate and collection were determined by its white male bourgeois founders. Men with genteel interests, the first patrons of the historical society opposed slavery and feared racial miscegenation, leading many of them to advocate the return of all free Negroes in Maryland to Africa. In this they were not alone: blacks and whites alike from the early nineteenth century to the present have supported repatriation efforts despite their frequently racist justifications and the general opposition of African American communities.[48] Take the following pronouncement of American Colonization Society founding secretary Henry Clay: "Can there be a nobler cause than that which, whilst it proposes to rid our country of a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous portion of its population, contemplates the spreading of the arts of civilized life, and the possible redemption from ignorance and barbarism of a benighted quarter of the globe!"[49] While Clay clearly imagined black colonization as an implement of social control in the

1.22
John H. B. Latrobe, *View of Cape Palmas, Maryland in Liberia*, c. 1835. (Museum Collection 1885.3.1, Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.)

United States and of American imperialism abroad, his statement also figures repatriation as a viable and ultimately beneficent means of redress.

One version of this dream is visualized in the 1836 painting *Maryland in Liberia* (fig. 1.22). The work depicts a small group of half-dressed figures—some in togas, others in loincloths—standing before a beach scene representing the colony established at Cape Palmas for recent African American émigrés. Sunlight burnishes the clouds, ships float through the harbor, and modest dwellings dot the horizon of a world that seems to proffer the blessings of civilization to the Negro on his own ground and in forms deemed appropriate to his needs. The painter of this at once classicizing and primitivizing dreamscape was John H. B. Latrobe (1803–1891), son to Benjamin, the hand behind watercolors such as *An Overseer Doing His Duty*. Like his father, John was a formidable polymath. While serving as general counsel for the regional railroad company, he produced inventions, buildings, monuments, pictures, and writings that made him a prominent figure in the cultural life of nineteenth-century Baltimore.[50] He is perhaps best remembered, however, in his roles as a founding member and eventual president of the Maryland Historical Society and the Maryland State Colonization Society.[51]

As he did throughout *Mining*, in approaching the younger Latrobe's canvas, Wilson reframed a phantasmatic history fixed in paint by offering evidence of

1.23
Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, photograph of the installation, detail. (Museum Collection MTM.007. Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.)

alternative subjects, material traditions, and worldviews: despite all the attempts of those who wanted it to disappear so that another, whiter future might be imagined, blackness remained within Maryland. Perhaps to emphasize this persistent and intimate presence, Wilson placed the canvas near the close of the exhibition in that darkened hallway filled with brightly illuminated examples of slaves' creative labor, such as the large unglazed clay water jug produced around 1830 by Melinda, a captive on the nearby Cockney Plantation (fig. 1.23). In displaying her work, Wilson did not rely on the modes of sonic, textual, and bodily redirection that he had deployed elsewhere in his installation to work through and against the conventions of representation that curtail the expression of black humanity. Instead, he directed viewers' sight to the simple recalcitrant fact of the thing itself, which offered a riposte to the historical society and the regimes of representation that structured its displays.

So framed, Melinda's jug calls up another, one famously considered by Martin Heidegger in his essay "The Thing." Contrary to Western juridical, philosophical,

and scientific discourse, he proposes, a jug is not merely an object—a knowable form that can be reduced to a representation and defined by its difference from our being—but a *thing*. As such, the jug stands forth as an independent and self-supporting vessel whose emptiness contains and pours out the evanescent fullness of the world as it enfolds the human. Yet as the philosopher also maintains, such apprehension is perpetually out of reach given the ways in which our epistemologies figure the world as a collection of discrete objects: "the thingness of the thing remains concealed, forgotten. The nature of the thing never comes to light, that is, it never gets a hearing."[52] From this perspective, *Mining the Museum* can be understood as a series of staged auditions that give viewers the opportunity both to hear things in all of their radical alterity and to apprehend the flesh that undergirds the historical construction of objecthood.

This is especially true of *Metalwork*, a searing image of racialized subjection that materializes the historical interdependency of white wealth and black subjugation in the history of the New World (see fig. 1.1). Indeed, the dates in the work's title denote the years of two blows against slavery in the Western Hemisphere: the institution was curtailed in Canada in 1793, and the law that would end it in Cuba was passed in 1880, though this temporal framing flies in the face of the histories told by the vessels themselves.[53] According to its inscription, the can at the furthest right edge of the grouping was a gift to one Harry Hewlings Tyson from his great-grandmother; the creamer just to its left was part of a coffee and tea service given to Mary Clagett in celebration of her marriage to a local gentleman; and the pitcher nearest the wall, like the four goblets at left, were part of a set that the city presented to the officers of the U.S.S. *Baltimore* in 1890.[54] Wilson's dating not only reorients the historical and discursive positioning of these objects—often displayed in exhibitions of Baltimore silver—but also undoes their functioning as vehicles for the commemoration of communal ties and the transmission of white wealth. By combining a hodgepodge of pieces from different sets, he decreases their value and underlines their fundamental liquidity as assets: just as the enslaved might at any moment be ripped from their kin and placed on the auction block as commodities, so these prized antiques might be melted down, refashioned, and rendered as coin.[55]

In short, the artist makes the silver equivalent to the iron shackles, objects with no known provenance, whose dark past and function cannot help but summon up their captives. In turn, the highly worked surfaces of the repoussé vessels evoke the scarred backs of those enslaved, both real and fictional, who were forced to endure the lash, from Gordon, a former captive whose wounds were notoriously represented in a range of media in the early 1860s, to Sethe, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, whose scars resemble nothing so much as a "chokecherry tree."[56] In each case, a surface is raised under tremendous pressure, in one instance to increase an object's value and in the other to mark the master's possession of a subject. The wounds inscribed on slave bodies, what Hortense Spillers has called the "hieroglyphics of the flesh," find their uncanny answer in the ornamentation

of a silvered surface.[57] *Metalwork* is, then, another antiportrait, one depicting the bonds used to hold an enslaved subject and the processes that bind her to the object world. It is just such congruence, I would contend, that has shaped Western fantasies of alchemical transmutability and the black radical imaginings produced in their wake, whether recent or long past, visual or textual.

Think forward to Maya Angelou's 1998 film *Down in the Delta*. In it, the members of an impoverished black Chicago family can only afford to travel to their ancestral home in the South— and so experience a spiritual reawakening—by pawning their most prized possession; a sterling silver candelabra for which one of their enslaved forefathers was exchanged. As the characters in the film make clear, the object does not merely summon up their ancestor Nathan, it *is* Nathan and they address the metalwork accordingly.[58] A similar relation between persons and things also pertains if we look back. In Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, a fictional tale written in the late 1850s by a former captive, the narrator offers a profound meditation on her conflicted status while cleaning her master's portrait gallery.

> Though filled with superstitious awe I was in no haste to leave the room; for there surrounded by mysterious associations I seemed suddenly to have grown old, to have entered a new world of thoughts, and feelings and sentiments. I was not a slave with these pictured memorials of the past. They could not enforce drudgery, or condemn me on account of my color to a life of servitude. As their companion I could think and speculate.[59]

In these lines, Crafts registers and embraces her status as what novelist Ishmael Reed would call "a comrade of the inanimate."[60] I would argue that this dream of impossible companionship also undergirds *Mining the Museum*'s most radical reparative imaginings: persons and things brought into the intimate rhyming proximity that at once forms the lasting ground of slavery's most infernal accomplishment and holds open the promise of different relations than the ones capital, the museum, or representation itself can ever hope to supply.

Wilson asked viewers to do the difficult work of hearing subjects whose social death placed them in the indeterminate space between the thing and the human, in excess of subject and object positions and the calculations of being that determine them. In a gloss on Heidegger's text, cultural theorist Fred Moten argues that this precarious positionality constitutes the slave as that "dangerous supplement, as the fact out of which everything else emerges," "the nexus of the social and the ontological, the historical and the essential."[61] More than postmodern means to qualify the experience of the aesthetic object, Wilson's use of the supplement both conjures and locates the enslaved's vexed positionality at the margins of the sensible. Rather than mere images, his ensembles are meditations on the thing, pourings forth, absent figures, haints who must be heard.

Little wonder, then, that the artist referred to *Mining* as an exorcism of the historical society's ghosts. Once unleashed, these specters threatened the order of the

institution as well as the system of representation that it maintained, demanding a bracketing of the visual, a valorization of "primitive" modes of knowing the world, and an ongoing engagement with the past of slavery.[62] On this score, it is useful to consider how the artist described the journeys involved in putting *Mining* together:

> I would come from New York every weekend until I was full-time in Baltimore. I was coming every weekend for a year, and I would read on the train. I was reading *The Classic Slave Narratives*, edited by Henry Louis Gates. I would come to Baltimore and I would go back in time, back into the nineteenth century. Baltimore was, for me, really the nineteenth century. I was going through manumission papers, the logs of slaves, and the letters . . . but I was also struck by the wealth that was there. Seeing the juxtaposition of those things was really painful.[63]

Not unlike the corporeal flashbacks to the slave era experienced by Dana, the protagonist of Octavia Butler's 1979 novel *Kindred*, Wilson's spatial dislocation enacts a temporal rupture, throwing him into in an economy of blackness that seems more nineteenth-century than twentieth. The artist's painful encounters with apparitions of suffering spurred him to give the shades of slavery a hearing in terms that resonated not only within the spaces of museums, but also across the political landscape, where demands for transformation would pointedly take their cues from the visual field.[64]

• • •

Renewed calls for reparations to black Americans arguably reached an apogee of sorts with the publication of Randall Robinson's national bestseller *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (2001). The book ultimately proposes monetary restitution, social programs, and expanded opportunities for African Americans, yet it opens beneath Constantino Brumidi's *Apotheosis of George Washington*, the 1865 fresco that decorates the domed Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol building. In gazing up at the painting, what Robinson sees is not a depiction of the American story, but a lily-white procession of righteous forefathers that he reads as a series of racialized omissions. No trace of a Douglass or a Tubman, those great Maryland liberators for whom there was no space at the historical society; no mention of Philip Reid, the enslaved artisan given the task of casting the *Statue of Freedom* that surmounts the Rotunda; no evidence of the nameless black captives who quarried the building's sandstone blocks and hauled them from Virginia. What he sees, in other words, is American hypocrisy in aesthetic form.

> This was the house of Liberty, and it had been built by slaves. Their backs had ached under its massive stones. Their lungs had clogged with its mortar dust. Their bodies had wilted under its heavy load-bearing timbers. They had been paid only in the coin of pain. Slavery lay across American history like a monstrous

> cleaving sword, but the Capitol of the United States steadfastly refused to divulge its complicity, or even slavery's very occurrence. It gave full lie to its own gold-spun half-truth. It shrank from the simplest honesty. It mocked the shining eyes of the innocent. It kept from us all—black, brown, white—the chance to begin again as co-owners of a national democratic idea. It blinded us all to our past and, with the same stroke, to any common future.[65]

In Robinson's narrative, as in Wilson's installation, slavery is a scotomized fragment of the visual field that requires a willing of black bodies into the frame for restitution to begin.[66]

Of course, as scholars such as Roy L. Brooks have shown, the dream of reparation for centuries of racial oppression has undergirded black strivings for social justice at least since General William Tecumseh Sherman proposed to offer ex-slaves "40 acres and mule" in 1865. Although that idea foundered disastrously in the wake of Reconstruction, the notion of redress lost none of its appeal in the twentieth century, from Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement of the 1920s to James Forman's call for cash, land, job training, and federal services in his "Black Manifesto" of 1969. However, the modern movement truly began to gather steam due to successful claims for remuneration made by Jewish Holocaust survivors and Japanese American internment camp victims in the late 1980s. In 1987, a group of activists in Washington, DC, founded N'COBRA, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparation, and in 1989 Congressman John Conyers introduced the Commission to Study Reparations Proposals for African Americans Act. These were the first salvos in what by the early 1990s had become an expanding agenda pitched on a global scale.[67]

It is alongside such discourses that *Mining the Museum* was conceived; I aim to reframe its meaning in relationship to these rhetorics and their limitations, even though the ambitions for the work were initially more focused on the challenges then facing art institutions. As Corrin recounts in her catalog essay, multiculturalism was putting the canon into doubt and its guardians on edge; various constituencies were attempting to reclaim ancestral objects "acquired" from their forebears; federal funding for the arts was becoming less reliable and local resources increasingly important.[68] Responding to the same pressures that engendered *Mining*, other organizations also turned to artists with appropriately radical aesthetic pedigrees. By 1993, when the Ghent Museum opened *Rendez(-)Vous*—an exhibition in which the public was invited to bring objects into the institution that were then arranged by artists, such as Jimmie Durham and Ilya Kabakov—such strategies had become commonplace.[69] Each of these gestures, whether labeled as a site-specific work, an intervention into public space, or community outreach, helped to define the parameters of an expanding discourse on the museum and its discontents.

Mining stands out from these projects in its emphasis on the vagaries of racialization, and it was Wilson's investment in those issues that interested Corrin. At the time, she was assistant director of Baltimore's Contemporary, a two-year-old

peripatetic art center without a permanent collection known for its progressive approach to curating and its founder George Ciscle's long-standing engagements with seemingly intractable social problems such as inner-city violence.[70] Together with Charles Lyle, director of the Maryland Historical Society, Corrin commissioned what would become *Mining the Museum*, inviting Wilson to execute a project that could serve, in her words, as "a particular, localized model for change" for the larger museum community.[71] Lyle, she explained, hoped that the collaboration would allow the historical society to speak to "current concerns and public interests" and thereby cultivate "an audience that reflected the cultural diversity of the community."[72]

The community invoked here warrants further qualification: The historical society was located near one of the city's numerous racial fault lines, not far from a block of public housing whose residents are primarily African American, as was more than 60 percent of Baltimore's population.[73] Given its profile, how, Lyle wondered, could the historical society "make 'Chippendale relevant to a child in the projects?'"[74] To put it another way, how might impoverished black folks' desires be stoked or at least indexed within the framework of an institution chock-full of the castoff heirlooms of the white elite? Was there a way to repair the rift between black audience and white institution? Might the museum make a home within itself for the subjects on whose exclusion it was seemingly predicated?

The unprecedented success of *Mining* allowed the historical society to answer an emphatic "yes" to just these questions. The exhibition opened on April 4, 1992, the same weekend that Baltimore hosted the American Association of Museums annual conference and quickly received raves from both art world insiders and the general public. Hailed by *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman as an "improbable" yet perfectly matched "marriage of artist and museum," in the course of its run—extended from three to eleven months by popular demand—*Mining* ushered a record-breaking fifty-five thousand visitors through the society's doors, a significant portion of these people of color stepping across that threshold for the first time.[75] The historical society took full advantage of the opportunity, scheduling a flurry of public programs specifically targeted at black audiences and proudly described in its February 1993 newsletter, which was entirely devoted to Wilson's exhibition. In October 1992, for instance, the museum held its first "Celebration of the African-American Experience in Maryland," complete with games, craft demonstrations, and musical performances.[76] The day before the show closed on February 28, 1993, a DC repertory company performed texts central to the black experience from slavery to freedom, entitled—what else?—"Free At Last."[77]

For all its apparent earnestness about the narrative of black achievement, "Free At Last" also ironically looked forward to the position in which the historical society soon found itself. The museum might be liberated from the artist's imposition, but having been "mined," it was also newly accountable to its communities. Virtually overnight, the Maryland Historical Society went from functioning as a provincial institution that was at best racially indifferent to being

perceived as a glimmer of hope in America's ongoing nightmare of racial injustice, or at least an example of political correctness put into practice. While *Mining the Museum*, per the Contemporary's intent, directly engaged the cultural crises then facing museums, making good on its promise as "a particular, localized model for change" was another affair altogether. As an anonymous writer for the historical society newsletter readily admitted, "the real challenge remains in the Maryland Historical Society's efforts to keep the doors open for exchanging ideas with its own culturally diverse community."[78]

In the wake of *Mining*, a few more African Americans joined the board of the Maryland Historical Society, and several exhibitions were mounted that aimed to reach out to black communities: *What's It to You? Black History Is American History* (2000), as well as *Lift Every Voice and Sing* and *Sankofa: Retrieving the Past to Move Forward & The Maryland Tradition* (1996).[79] For years, there was even a pared-down version of *Mining* on view on the society's first floor that was meant to disrupt settled consumption of other concurrent exhibitions and that featured many of Wilson's most lauded juxtapositions—the cigar store Indians, Banneker's projections, Melinda's jug, and *Metalwork* foremost among them. But in spite of everyone's hope that *Mining* would become a paradigm for structural transformation, in a 2001 lecture, then society director Nancy Davis was forced to acknowledge that Wilson's "methodology . . . [could] never be duplicated by the MHS."[80] Neither, of course, could the galvanizing effect of the artist's presence: his critical purview could only be enshrined if the institution became completely other to itself.

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In recounting these facts, I do not mean to cast aspersion on the intentions of *Mining*'s principal sponsors or on the historical society's evocations of African American history for its newfound constituents. What I want to suggest is that the institution attempts at racial inclusiveness fit within a mode of redress aimed at conditioning black subjects to their lot within a white hegemonic order that remains structurally inviolable to revolutionary change. In fact, the installation was mobilized during the summer of 1992 as the object of a forum for students at one of Baltimore's local high schools to discuss the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King by white Los Angeles police officers and that episode's tumultuous aftermath.[81] This mobilization of the work—doubtless haunted by Baltimore's own "race riots" of the late 1960s—highlights the society's relative efficacy in exploiting extant outreach programs targeted at African American students as well as the difficulties it confronted in forging ties to established black cultural organizations such as Morgan State University and the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum.[82] Rather than a permanent bridge, *Mining* thus became a momentary tool for the management of black discontent and a viable alternative to its riotous articulation.

On this score, it is worth taking note of a letter written by one visitor to the exhibition, subsequently quoted in the historical society literature:

> After attending the AAM conference in Baltimore a few weeks ago, and viewing the installation by Fred Wilson at your museum, I flew home to Los Angeles to find the city in a racial blaze. The tensions we are feeling here today continue to remind me of the long, hard struggle that Afro-Americans have endured on the road from slavery and oppression, only a few hundred years ago, to what is now, once again, a reaction against socio-economic separation. Fred's installation, a contemporary interpretation of black history, is exemplary of the deeply rooted psychological issues which address their pain, even today. As a Graduate student in Exhibition Design and Museum Studies, I want to thank you for opening the door to an artist who has enlightened me personally and professionally, and to congratulate you for your bravery.[83]

Bravery, enlightenment, struggle. As this testimonial makes explicit, *Mining the Museum* was seen to replay the constitutive antagonism of American culture. It is a story we all know well, whether we know the work or not. Set against a backdrop of racial injustice, peopled by an incongruous yet likeable cast of characters, and starring the artist as its plucky protagonist, this writer narrates the effects of the exhibition in sentimental language as time-worn as the maudlin strategies of Harriet Beecher's Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[84] The letter restages the scenario of black victims and white martyrs that has defined reformist discourse from abolition to the present and that continues to curtail possibilities for the expression of black suffering, rage, and humanity.[85]

The Los Angeles rebellion sounded such black noises, which even the most radical forms of redress can only hint at in language. Whether plaints of grief or cries of grievance, African American demands for reparation have ultimately had as their goal not so much material gain as the elimination of institutional racism. The country's ongoing refusal to adequately address these claims points to the structuring influence of antiblackness in the formation of American culture and in the edifices of Western civilization more broadly.[86] To make the case for black redress, in other words, is to envision no less than a thoroughgoing transformation of the world as we know it.[87] *Mining the Museum* underlined that such notions of transformation are always contingent, reflecting the temporality of black radical politics, which necessarily unfolds within limited intervals, what might be called—to borrow a phrase from slave narrator Harriet Jacobs—a "loophole of retreat," a narrow space of resistance and autonomy created against all odds and with the merest of means.[88]

For eleven months, on one floor of the Maryland Historical Society, Wilson opened a loophole of his own. Through it, audiences could glimpse an institution reconfigured from the ground up and unmoored at the site of its own racial blindness, creating a space in which the subject of blackness might be heard. That hearing, however, was largely structured by the society's collections, haunted by the image of racialized subjection, and always available for recuperation within

practices of seeing that prevent an encounter with the blackness of things. For most viewers, Wilson's juxtapositions—unfailingly read as static tableaux by novices and aficionados alike—reinforced rather than challenged hegemonic conceptions of identity, affect, and affiliation because they evoked an overdetermined language of sentiment:[89] the work's ability to unleash emotion always threatened to obfuscate its structural analysis and its radical dreams.

The centerpiece of the section entitled *Cabinetmaking 1820–1960* and the responses to it offer a case in point (see fig. 1.15). In this composition, Wilson brought together four chairs from different eras of the nineteenth century around a whipping post that was of uncertain provenance but that had been on display at the local city jail well into the 1930s. The grouping succinctly evokes in order to conflate the uneven relations of power that pertain between judge and criminal, black and white, master and slave, voyeur and victim, registering the disparity in material conditions and corporeal sovereignty that separates social classes. Perhaps more than any other, this episode of *Mining* points up the spectacular ways in which captive bodies were disciplined due to their presumed inability to internalize their own abject status. *Cabinetmaking*'s speculative disposition of white witness and black criminal thus instances the circuitry of voyeurism, pleasure, and terror that has historically constituted American visions of racial difference.

Not unsurprisingly, the ensemble provoked tears as well as thoughts. Here is one society docent's account of a visitor's reaction to the arrangement:

> [A] young (early 30's) white man, a museum professional . . . stopped me to express his feelings upon completing his first viewing of MTM[:] he had tears in his eyes. He said MTM was the most powerful exhibit he'd ever seen and was the most moving experience he'd ever had in a museum. . . . His description of bending over to dutifully read the labels on the chairs in the Cabinetmaking section and then straightening up and suddenly noticing the whipping post for the first time was extraordinary. I got chills all over again listening to him describe the incredible impact this juxtaposition had on him.[90]

These reflections bear comparison to those of a twenty-year-old black college student. I quote liberally from his postshow survey, reproduced in the section of the exhibition catalog entitled "The Audience Responds":

> The most powerful images were of the whipping post, accompanied by arranged chairs, and the runaway slave postings. The quality of the whipping post shows how it was definitely made to last. The arranged chairs shows/symbolizes the arrogance & bestiality of how whippings induced public spectacle. . . . I am a male of African descent living in Maryland, not knowing firsthand the knowledge of slavery but knowing firsthand the long term effects. Maryland as an institute is still racist. . . . [*Mining*] makes people think and realize what really happened and what the frames of mind were of our past generations; Black & White alike. . . . I knew

> that there were plenty of artifacts from Maryland's ugly past which are reflections of Maryland's ugly present.[91]

Both of these passages ratify critic Hilton Als's assessment of *Cabinetmaking*, which "reverberat[ed]," in his words, "with the sound and smell of black bodies seen only in relation to commerce," inviting the sorts of phantasmatic projection so crucial to the construction of race that the installation elsewhere sought to qualify through the concatenation of sound, light, image, and thing.[92]

In the case of the museum professional, the sight of those beautifully crafted chairs inducted him into a scenario that opened onto others so painful to contemplate that eventually he could hardly see at all, his eyes wet with tears. In conveying that experience of conversion, he would himself become a spectacle capable of reigniting and to an extent displacing the work's emotional effects.[93] The second response trades less on such pathos, but it is just as telling and moves along similar lines. The student notices the "quality" of the whipping post and quickly moves on to *Cabinetmaking*'s symbolic meaning, which in turn leads to an indictment of Maryland history on behalf of all subjects concerned: both the state and the society remain sites whose "ugliness" is continuous, intrinsic, and well-nigh irreparable. For him, the exhibition was not so much an allegory, as a statement about the present that drew unavoidable links between the museum's modes of display and the processes that produce the social field.[94]

In fact, when taken as a real museum installation rather than as a critique of museums as such, *Mining* was able to elicit the very anxieties it was eventually used to quell. Consider the words of the individual—a self-identified sixty-two-year-old retired Caucasian dentist—whose testimony opens "The Audience Responds." In his estimation, the exhibit was "THE WORST AND MOST RACIST DISPLAY I HAVE EVER SEEN IN A MUSEUM!" Its power derived not from its exposure of a harrowing past, or its success as a fictive dream of the museum, but in its "ABILITY TO PROMOTE RACISM AND HATRED IN YOUNG BLACKS."[95] The three responses I have reproduced here mark out clearly divergent positions and attitudes: the teary-eyed gaze of the empathetic "white liberal," the pessimistic appraisal of the hardened "black youth," and the hysterical fear of the "elderly dupe." Yet they all speak a language that testifies to the continuity of American perspectives on slavery, highlights the forms of imagining required to bring racial terror into view, and risks sealing the subject into his own identity rather than opening onto a radical apprehension of it.

For his part, Wilson was well aware that his highly individual take on the historical society could not transform the institution or adequately address its fraught relationship to Baltimore's black communities once and for all. Artists who work on projects with a communitarian address are often looked to as institutional saviors capable of bringing a new day to the museum, that last bastion of official discrimination, while also transforming themselves.[96] Practitioners of color are particularly liable to be called to account for such transgressions, since

they are often presumed to serve as consciences of the white art world for which their work is ostensibly produced.[97] In light of these expectations, Wilson felt prompted to make it plain: "I'm not the black knight."[98] Ironically, in the years following *Mining*, he would time and again be cast in that role.

• • •

Thus far, Wilson has produced more than twenty interventions at museums across the globe. In the immediate wake of his Baltimore success, he executed a dizzying array of projects, from *Re:Claiming Egypt* at the 4th International Cairo Biennale (1992) to *Mixed Metaphors* at the newly renovated Seattle Art Museum (1993). Each of these installations engaged a different historical and ideological context and demanded various kinds of critical labor from the artist, though in every instance he deployed his signature tactics to focus on the intersection between race, culture, and the logics of museum display. Notable are the works of this period that revisit the peculiar institution. In *Reclaimed Monuments for Piedmont Park* (1992), Wilson brought lawn ornaments depicting black subjects into Atlanta, Georgia's rich network of commemorations to the antebellum past; in *Via Villemme* (1993), he executed a series of ritual cleansings and remembrances executed in a nineteenth-century Italian villa whose original owners were involved in the slave trade.[99]

However, it was his next run-in with slavery on U.S. soil that shared the most in common with *Mining the Museum*, above all in its ambitions for redress and communitarian engagement in relation to an established archive. He carried out this project, *Insight: In Site: In Sight: Incite: Memory*, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1994. Like its Baltimore antecedent, this piece was sponsored by an institution focusing on recent work—the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art—in collaboration with an older organization focused on the historical past, the Conservancy of Old Salem. Since 1950, the latter group had worked to restore the village of Salem to its look and feel prior to 1857 in an effort to highlight the lifeways, artifacts, and communal structures of the Czech protestant Moravians who established the settlement in 1766. Perhaps unintentionally, the conservancy's chronological cutoff date slighted the presence of enslaved blacks in the area whose architectural remains were either no longer extant or fell outside the restorative mission's scope. This was the case with St. Philip's, Salem's lone remaining African American church, which was built in 1861.[100]

In response to these conditions, Wilson created *Insight*, a four-part installation that worked through Old Salem's foundational exclusions by turning to the material culture of the Moravians as well as the non-Moravian "strangers"—black and white, slave and free—who walked among them. Inspired by the area's strong tradition of silhouette portraiture, the artist created outlines in black construction paper based on the profiles of contemporary Winston-Salem residents. He placed these markers throughout the village to indicate the locations where outsiders would have lived and worked (fig. 1. 24). Next, Wilson photographed dolls from the collection of the nearby Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts that had

1.24
Fred Wilson, *Insight: In Site: In Sight: Incite: Memory, Artist and the Community: Fred Wilson*, South Eastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1994, installation view. St. Philip's Church, Old Salem, paper and plastic silhouette markers made by the artist placed on the graveyard lawn. (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

1.25
Fred Wilson, *Old Salem: A Family of Strangers*, 1994. C-prints. From *Insight: In Site: In Sight: Incite: Memory, Artist and the Community: Fred Wilson* (SECCA). (Image courtesy Fred Wilson and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art [SECCA], Winston-Salem, NC. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

been consigned to storage since they were not made by Moravian hands and then arranged the images in a formation suggestive of a family tree (fig. 1.25).

As one would expect, the artist complicated and reframed these imagistic spurs to memory with installations meant to bodily immerse the viewer. For the third component of his work, he populated the dimly lit main sanctuary of St. Philip's with architectural models of buildings relating to the area's black communities while speakers played a recording of a Moravian religious service beneath the sounds of a young black girl asking a female elder about the fate of Africans in Old Salem: "Were they safe here / Were they happy here / How did it smell / How did it sound?" The woman responds, "I don't remember" (fig. 1.26).[101] In his other

1.26
Fred Wilson, *Insight: In Site: In Sight: Incite: Memory, Artist and the Community: Fred Wilson*, installation view. St. Philip's Church, Old Salem. (Photograph courtesy of the artist and The Pace Gallery. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

sculptural interventions, installed at former Moravian residences, Wilson united objects meant to index the structural position of enslaved inhabitants. Take *Rose*, an antiportrait that consisted of a chair, a copper still, an iron, and several kettles (fig. 1.27). This grouping of objects aimed to conjure up the laboring life of a black woman whose story the artist had encountered in combing through the diaries of Old Salem residents.

Insight's aesthetic means heavily relied on *Mining the Museum*'s surefire strategies for summoning the subjects and economies of the peculiar institution, a fact that contributed to the latter work's popular success, but that also opened Wilson to charges of uncritical repetition in the conceptualization of his museum-based projects. Art historian Miwon Kwon has most incisively articulated these concerns: in performing subsequent installations at other sites, was Wilson at risk of eviscerating any radicality inherent in his mode of site-specific work? Did his projects merely cater to rather than rigorously interrogate the needs of institutions anxious to appear responsive to their various marginalized constituencies? Perhaps most seriously, was he claiming to speak in the name of repressed black subjects without any self-reflexivity about his own highly discrepant and relatively privileged position?[102] These are points well taken, but I would argue that they overlook the specificity of the institutions and communities Wilson engaged as well as the history of their attempts to disrupt the reproduction of racial disparity.

Unlike the Maryland Historical Society, the conservancy initiated efforts to "mainstream" African American experiences within the framework of Old Salem's history in the late 1980s.[103] The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art likewise had begun the work of reaching out to black audiences in advance of *Insight*, which was the third in a series of commissioned works collectively entitled "Artist and Community" that included a piece created on-site by Tim Rollins and K.O.S. earlier the same year.[104] Rather than being recruited as a "black knight" able to make a onetime intervention into a highly segregated institutional site, Wilson's work at Old Salem was the outgrowth of an already extant program of redress that has continued into the present. In the years since the installation's closing,

1.27
Fred Wilson, *Rose*, Timothy Vogler House, 1994. Chair, copper still, iron, and kettles. From *Insight: In Site: In Sight: Incite: Memory, Artist and the Community: Fred Wilson* (SECCA). (Image courtesy of the artist and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art [SECCA], Winston-Salem, NC. © Fred Wilson, courtesy of The Pace Gallery.)

figures like Rose have come to play vital roles in the narration of the past: they are prominently featured in dramatic readings at local celebrations and are now given pride of place in the new exhibition area installed in a reconstruction of the log cabin church that served African Americans before St. Philip's was built, all developments spurred by Wilson's engagement with the site and its histories.[105]

The vastly different afterlife of *Insight* from that of *Mining the Museum* makes clear the absolute centrality of institutional will and long-term commitment to the difficult work of redress within any hegemonic system. Like Wilson's art, that work is by definition processual, limited, and essentially melancholic: in lieu of a radical break that would bring about the dissolution of the world as we know it,[106] slavery must be repetitively and indefinitely engaged in one project after another. While not necessarily adding up to revolution, such efforts might at least provoke local change within sites, subjects, and communities that would otherwise remain forever haunted. Although collectively shared, this dream necessarily shifts and darkens from moment to moment, and project to project: the work of Lorna Simpson, to which I now turn, provides an exemplary counter-model. As we shall see, her practice makes quite different demands of the viewer in order to ensure that we all remain plagued by the ghosts of those enslaved subjects who transformed the modern world as well as her approach to its figuration.

From a woman's point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with "post-modern" problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad, "in order," as one of the characters says in [*Beloved*] "not to lose your mind". These strategies for survival made the truly modern person. They're a response to predatory Western phenomena. You can call it an ideology and an economy, what it is is a pathology. Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way. It broke Europe. It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy. You can't do that for hundreds of years and it not take a toll. They had to dehumanize, not just the slaves but themselves. They have had to reconstruct everything in order to make that system appear true.

TONI MORRISON, "Living Memory," 1993

2.1
Lorna Simpson, *Guarded Conditions*, 1989. Eighteen color Polaroid prints, twenty-one engraved plastic plaques, seventeen plastic letters. 231.1×332.7 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

2

Lorna Simpson's Figurative Transitions

1.

Lorna Simpson's *Guarded Conditions* is an iconic if not canonical work of deceptively simple means (1989; fig. 2.1). On the most basic level, it repeatedly depicts a black woman who faces away from the viewer. The figure wears a simple shift and sensible shoes, her hair done up in equally sensible neck-skimming braids. The artist has rendered the woman's body larger than life-size and divided it into three subtly mismatched images whose serial iteration suggests an endless horizontal expansion. Yet among the six versions of Simpson's trademark antiportrait, differences do obtain between one seemingly identical set of Polaroids and the next, as if to register the model's shifting relationship to herself. Feet are shuffled about; hair gets ever-so-slightly rearranged; and in the middle row of photographs, the right hand alternately embraces then caresses the left arm, echoing the alternating rhythm of the words "sex attacks skin attacks," which are inscribed on the plaques running beneath the prints. The work presents "the black woman" as a vulnerable enigma, cut by the frame and framed by language yet still possessing an inscrutable sense of self.

But what of our own posture? What does it mean for us to stand before *Guarded Conditions?* To look at a row of women who will not look back? Does the fragmentation, enlargement, and turning away of the figure's body undo any sense of corporeal affinity we might feel, thereby foreclosing the possibility of identification? What are we to make of the interchange between image and text? How, finally, does the work aim to address and so position us as its imagined spectators? Surely the model's placement on a nondescript platform work is meant to summon and critique those phantasms associated with the historical staging of black female

subjects in the visual field from slavery to the present. The same imperative might be said to animate Simpson's practice as a whole, whether her early black-and-white documentary photographs of African American social gatherings, or her more recent efforts in film and video, such as the sprawling multi-channel installation *31* (2002), which purports to track the movements of a single black woman over the course of a month.

However, it was the artist's picturing of African diasporic womanhood in phototexts like *Guarded Conditions* that made her the locus of what is now a voluminous discourse, which productively models the promises and perils of a multicultural approach to art's histories. Getting a handle on Simpson's engagements with the "peculiar institution"—the aim of the present chapter—will not only require reckoning with these accounts, but will also mean revisiting her most detailed examination of the slave past, the rarely discussed *Five Rooms* (1991). Of all the site-specific installations considered in *Bound to Appear*, this project represents the greatest departure from an artist's tried-and-true habits of working. Yet ultimately, I want to argue, because of its "transitional" status within her oeuvre, *Five Rooms* allows us to grasp how representing the enslaved materially transformed Simpson's work, and provides a crucial lens for understanding the logic behind her varied means of figuring, siting, and historicizing the visual production of the black female body.

For the moment, I want to follow the trails offered by the literature. In examining Simpson's art, most critics tend to invoke slavery associatively rather than in the structural, affective, and historical terms that her art and the institution itself demand. The reception of *Guarded Conditions* provides a case in point. In the more than twenty years since its September debut at New York's Josh Baer Gallery, the work has been exhibited and reproduced ad nauseum, making it an emblem for black neoconceptualism, Simpson herself, and the contested cultural landscape in which her art was located. The piece put critic Robert Nickas in mind of an article he had recently read about "the brutal beating and rape of a black woman by two white men who, ironically, were working as security guards at the time. . . . The coincidence of the newspaper story and the piece in the gallery revealed how Simpson's work comments on the ugly facts of life without simply reporting them."[1] *Guarded Conditions* is introduced here as a studied refraction of the real; not dissimilarly, for curator Beryl J. Wright, it would become a double-sided metonym of racial sufferance. In her reading, the duplication of the turned-back figures "calls up images of those women who stand guard against the evils of the world on the steps of black fundamentalist churches on Sunday mornings," while the woman's isolated body locates her "in multiple situations of institutional repression and surveillance, such as slave auctions, hospital examination rooms, and criminal lineups."[2]

Although both interpretations privilege the off-frame scenarios that the artist assiduously refuses to picture rather than the internal logic of the work itself, taken together, these responses begin to suggest how *Guarded Conditions* sum-

mons up those corporeal depredations still central to narratives of black women's experience as well as their historical grounding within slavery's signal locales.[3] As Wright suggests, few sites resonate more evocatively with the work's unassuming white platform than the auction block as deployed in the antebellum United States. Varying in size, construction, and location—from a kitchen table repurposed for an urban private sale to a designated tree stump situated on the grounds of a plantation—auction blocks dramatized the precarious position of captive female subjects within slavery's economic and geographic scales. Forced to mount these structures at the master's command and to reveal their bodies for inspection by prospective buyers, enslaved women were removed from the circle of human suffering so that they might become circulating objects of sexual and pecuniary exchange.[4]

Simpson was not alone in directing viewers back to the auction block at just this historical moment. Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*, first staged in 1989, concluded with the sale, pitched to the audience, of the African American female performer cast in the role of the drama's eponymous slave protagonist; her name, Sally, refers to the playwright's own ancesstor and to Thomas Jefferson's enslaved "mistress."[5] To be sure, neither McCauley's play nor *Guarded Conditions* throws us back to a particular block, or to a verifiable subject. Rather, in both cases, the primal scene of slavery hurtles forward into the present, depicted with a resolute contemporaneity that does not so much conflate one moment with another as illuminated the structuring contours of black female oppression through a precise condensation of visual form. In Simpson's work various modes of figuration gesture toward what cultural theorist Hortense Spillers has identified as those economies of violence instantiated in slavery that continue to function in new and no less pernicious guises, still reducing subjects to things, even to flesh, though not always to chattel.[6]

I am not alone in making this observation. Art historian Kellie Jones argues that Simpson's phototexts reenact the historical production of black womanhood at the level of the image without, however, reperforming those processes on the figure itself, visually acknowledging the extent to which black folks have been produced as "human machines."[7] To make the case, Jones conjoins two intellectual positions: black cultural critic bell hooks's thinking about the transformation of African diasporic female subjects into parts of the laboring body; and art historian Rosalind Krauss's theorization of the part-object, a term that finds one of its most generative accountings in the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein.[8] The latter move is particularly productive. While psychoanalytic discourse has tended to be masculinist in outlook and Eurocentric in conception, it nonetheless provides a rich set of interpretive spurs and descriptive languages for thinking about the structural, affective, historical, and sexual dynamics of racialization, as well as Simpson's means for picturing them.[9] At key points in this chapter, I will look to this tradition not to offer a totalizing theory, but to ground Simpson's engagements with and critiques of hegemonic descriptive systems.

To take up where Jones leaves off, in Klein's framework, the infant construes itself and the world as incontrovertibly riven, a conglomeration of part-objects that satisfy and frustrate its needs. The mother herself is fragmented into a breast, becoming both the site of identification and the target of destructive feelings that fill the child with anxiety, afraid that the breast will lash out in retaliation. To shield itself from this venting of maternal rage, the infant splits itself and its object into good and bad portions, then projects all of its badness onto the outside world. In this position, which Klein calls the paranoid-schizoid, the hated breast becomes the hateful and hating breast. As the child comes to understand that each subject is a mixture of good and bad, it acquires a sense of conscience, guilty for the damage it has inflicted on the mother in fantasy, placing the child in the depressive position. The only way to overcome this psychic state is to repair the previous fantasized destruction of the breast, and to thereby internalize the image of the once-damaged, now-restored mother. This relay between positions develops early in the child's life and sets the pattern by which all further relationships necessarily function.[10]

Although Klein herself may not have entertained the thought, such dialogical movement can also be seen as structuring the political and psychic production of racial difference. Whether desired, envied, or feared, the black body is identified as the locus of those split internal objects that the white subject cannot successfully assimilate. And as Klein argues, when "these parts have been projected excessively onto another person, they can only be controlled by controlling the other person."[11] Trapped in the paranoid-schizoid position, the racist who lays eyes on a dark body cannot see a whole person with a mixture of good and bad aspects, but only a collection of malignant objects held together by a carapace of skin that is liable at any moment to fall apart, requiring the black subject's constant disciplining and justifying her instrumentalization for whatever ends.[12] Such impositions have had profound material and subjective implications for African Americans. Transmuted into objects by the transatlantic trade, black folks rarely had rights to their own bodies, their kin, or relation of any sort, since any bond might be torn asunder according to the master's whim, which carried all of the weight of the symbolic order.[13]

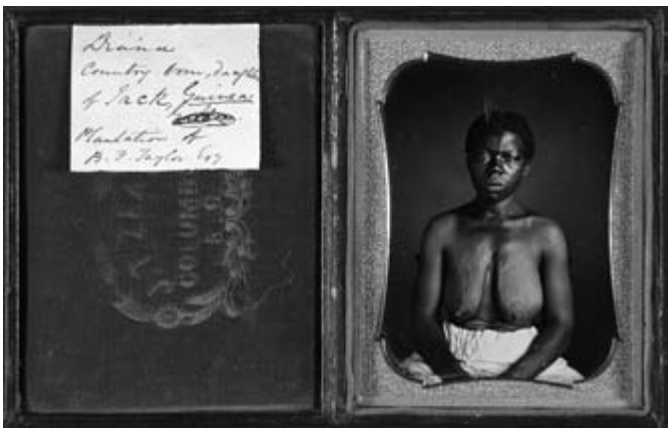
Simpson's phototexts take this order as determinative of their various mise-en-scènes, which at once evoke the distant past and describe conditions in the present. *You're Fine* offers a particularly germane example of the artist's method (1988; fig. 2.2). Here, she presents the figure as an odalisque stretched across four almost perfectly synchronized photographs. The woman's languid posture is belied by the texts accompanying the work, which neglect her beauty in favor of a checklist aimed at establishing a baseline of bodily health. "Physical exam, blood test, heart, reflexes": the plaques running along the left-hand side of the images further compartmentalize the model's already segmented body into so many part-objects that medical discourse would construe as libidinally neutral targets of examination. The implications of this procedure are clarified by the texts to the right of the

2.2
Lorna Simpson, *You're Fine*, 1988. Four color Polaroid prints, fifteen engraved plastic plaques, twenty-one ceramic letters. 101.6×261.6 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

photographs: one's fitness for a "position," "secretarial" or otherwise has little to do with individual wellbeing or the erotics of subjection. It is simply a matter of verifying that the corporeal apparatus can run smoothly enough.

The obtuseness and impersonality of such inquiry is precisely what the artist reveals, takes up, and reformulates. Because despite their bureaucratic, even scientific look, the text panels reveal little of descriptive value about their ostensible subject. Instead, they highlight the conventions of medicine itself, just as the photographic figures in Simpson's art reveal the contours of the cultural fiction known as "the black woman," who Spillers describes as the modern West's avatar of splitting and projection *par excellence*.[14] In *You're Fine* and *Guarded Conditions*, Simpson deconstructs those fictions as well as the attendant modes of picturing—criminal, typological, anthropometric, spectacularizing, and so on—used to produce the black subject as a transparent object. These modes depend on the almost absolute power of masters past and present and have come to structure the figuration of racial difference within the photographic field: the medium's capacity to isolate and magnify the visible world has time and again enabled materializations of the psychical drives that produced the slave as a species of part-object.

The historical record provides ample testament to these dynamics in the antebellum era and its aftermaths. Recall Richard Avedon's well-known photograph, *William Casby, Born a Slave, 24 March 1963*, an image celebrated and critiqued for the white liberal humanism of its visual and ideological framing.[15] Or better, think back, to J. T. Zealy's daguerreotype of Drana, one of the ruthlessly frontal portraits of captive subjects commissioned by Harvard natural scientist Louis Agassiz in 1850 (fig. 2.3).[16] Despite their photographers' radically divergent ambitions—to say nothing of viewers' myriad responses—in both images the black body and visage are staged as part-objects completely open to a visual inspection of dazzling exhaustiveness. Although William and Drana do look back, allowing a certain interiority to seep through, within a white supremacist hierarchy the "truth" of



2.3
J. T. Zealy, *Drana, country born, daughter of Jack, Guinea. Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Columbia, S.C.*, 1850. Daguerreotype. (Image no. 35-5-10/53041. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.)

these figures is always already known, and the image is merely another form of ratification that adamantly inscribes their difference.[17]

Like those of her cohorts Ligon, Green, and Wilson, Simpson's antiportraits simultaneously register and undo these procedures. Because her work deploys the photographic history of black femininity against itself, she has often been situated within a lineage of African American women's writing, performance, and visualization aimed at constructing counterhegemonic notions of the self in the face of slavery's persistent legacies. This resistive approach to cultural production arguably reached an apogee in the mid-1980s thanks to the work of a host of practitioners, including McCauley, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, filmmaker Julie Dash, and the pioneering phototextual artist Carrie Mae Weems, with whom Simpson has often been compared. Empowered by black feminist activism and discourse, enabled by the emergent multiculturalism of mainstream institutions, and African American women artists were seen as taking the next steps toward what Lorraine O'Grady described as the reclamation of black female subjectivity in her 1991 essay "Olympia's Maid."[18]

In fact, *Guarded Conditions* was reproduced in O'Grady's text, whose call for new framings of African diasporic womanhood foreshadowed much of the discourse on Simpson that would follow. According to hooks, the artist recovers "subjugated knowledge"; Michael D. Harris claims that she visually undoes "the sexualized black woman," thereby making—in Deborah Willis and Carla Williams's account—"a public statement . . . that forces the audience to confront issues like sexual repression and racism."[19] However, more than one writer intrigued by Simpson's work saw her particular ways of engaging with the history of black female visibility as much more fraught with contradiction, offering important lessons for our understanding of her art, its discursive reach, and its imagining of the slave past.

2.

Relatively early in her career, Simpson was counted among the ranks of well-educated, postliberated African American practitioners whose bourgeois ties allowed them to navigate milieux of any and every composition: here was a generation of what novelist Trey Ellis, writing in 1989, called "cultural mulattoes,"[20] a cadre whose emergence critic Greg Tate had already proclaimed some three years earlier in the pages of the *Village Voice*:

> Though nobody's sent out any announcements yet, the '80s are witnessing the maturation of a postnationalist black arts movement, one more Afrocentric and cosmopolitan than anything that's come before. . . . These are artists for whom black consciousness and artistic freedom are not mutually exclusive but complementary, for whom "black culture" signifies a multicultural tradition of expressive practices; they feel secure enough about black culture to claim art produced by nonblacks as part of their inheritance. No anxiety of influence here—these folks believe the cultural gene pool is for skinny-dipping.[21]

Born to a middle-class family in Queens and educated at the School of the Visual Arts, Simpson sits neatly within Tate's framing, as did her fellow players in the black feminist performance troupe Rodeo Caldonia, such as Jones, actress Raye Dowell, and the artist's occasional collaborator, singer and composer Alva Rogers.[22] Like her model in *Guarded Conditions*, the artist was positioned as one of many figures working in and on what might be called—to borrow another term from Krauss—the "expanded field" of blackness: African American cultural practitioners were claiming space in both the short-lived black alternative arts weekly *B-Culture* and in mainstream daily newspapers.[23]

Paradoxically, most assessments of Simpson's art within white institutional discourse tended to halt at the presumed threshold of black female experience, conflating the sight of the figure with the sites that Simpson's practice aimed to conjure up and leaving out the question of the work's address to us as embodied viewers. Again relying on a chain of associations presumed endemic to black female experience, these accounts often singled Simpson out as the mascot for a specious brand of multiculturalism that prized difference for its own sake. This tendency is exemplified by the September 19, 1990, cover story that ran in *New York Newsday* (fig. 2.4). In the accompanying photograph, the artist is thirty years old, standing guardedly before *Untitled (Prefer, Refuse, Decide)*, a work completed that same year. Although we can make out the grain of this calculated image, the data offered up by it is almost as superfluous as that held out by Avedon's *Born a Slave*. It is the caption that tells us everything we need to know, that the artist figured here is at the center of things precisely because of her relegation to the margins.

2.4
Ari Mintz, *The Outsider Is In*, from *Newsday*, September 19, 1990, issue. (Newsday © 1990. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the copyright laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of the material without express written permission is prohibited.)

> This year, outsiders are in. . . . And lots of museums, galleries, magazines and collectors are standing in line to seize the moment with artists whose skin colors, languages, national origins, sexual preferences or strident messages have kept them out of the mainstream. Say it's about time, blame it on guilt, call it a certificate of altruism for the living-room wall. Whatever, Lorna Simpson fits the bill.[24]

Indeed, she did. The article's author, Amei Wallach, goes on to note that Simpson was the first black woman ever to be chosen for the Venice Biennale and at the time she was one of only a handful of African American artists able to parlay exposure at nonprofit institutions like the Jamaica Center in Queens into inclusion at a mainstream gallery in Soho.[25]

And what of her art? According to Wallach's profile, it "is about what a tangled and terrifying thing it is to be a black woman. But her methods come straight out of the mainstream, museum-accredited white art world."[26] As these lines intimate, a large measure of the artist's success lies in the fact that her work appeared to bring issues of race in line with the postmodern and feminist critiques of representation that had began to crystallize in the 1970s and that came to constitute a *lingua franca* by the following decade. Simpson's work with image, text, and the

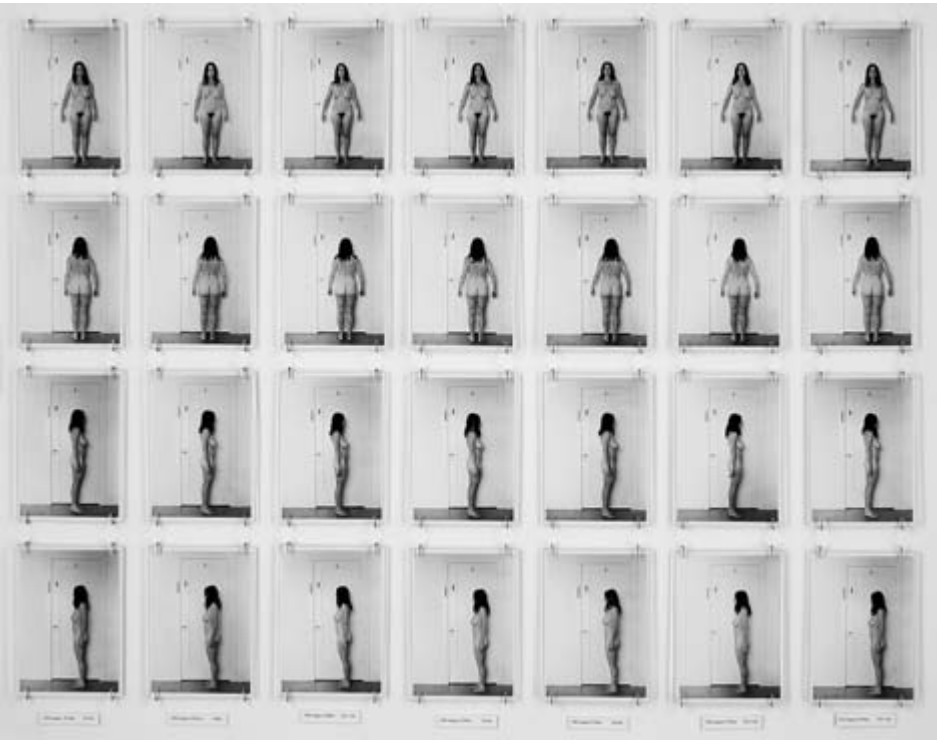
female body was imagined to successfully extend the political program of her white antecedents, from Carolee Schneeman to Cindy Sherman.[27] Even more tellingly, Wallach's pronouncement highlights the perceived tension in Simpson's work between form and content, lauding the artist's efforts as successful exercises in self-discipline—the screaming horror of her being reined in and made palatable by "white methods," whose instant legibility provided a wedge into the heretofore impenetrable terrain of "the black woman."

In the Simpson criticism, that figure is time and again imagined as a closed discursive site, in a repetition of the terms that the artist set out to critically revise. She would eventually vituperate against such limiting characterizations; she was well aware of how they were overdetermining her work's address:

> The thing I think I have the most difficulty with . . . is the thing about the black figure . . . how much "politicized" space this figure takes up. For instance, Kiki Smith does works about the body; she can do a sculpture out of resin or glass, it's kind of this pinkish Caucasian-ish tone, and her work is interpreted as speaking universally about the body. Now when I do it I am speaking about the black body. . . . But at the same time, this is a universal figure.[28]

"A universal figure." These words bear repeating, I think, because they clue us in to the world-historical ambitions of Simpson's practice. Although her art has preoccupied itself with the image of the black female body, as marked by the history of the Middle Passage, that figure is truly that: a *figure*, a character, a symbol, a rhetorical form. As such, it is an expansive site meant to refract and reframe the shared conditions of language and representation that differentially inform subjects' perception of what it means to be human in the modern era.

For Simpson, bringing those conditions into view meant coming to grips with the legacies of conceptual art. Like many of her pieces, the strategies she deploys in *Guarded Conditions* look back to the part-by-part serial construction of phototextual practices that emerged in the early 1970s.[29] Simpson was familiar with the art of Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, and, like Weems, she studied with noted conceptualist Eleanor Antin at the University of California, San Diego, where she eventually abandoned her earlier documentary photography for a more critically inflected idiom.[30] As did her teacher, Simpson seized on conceptualism's signature tropes—the grid, seriality, repetition, and, above all, language—in order to examine how our knowledge of the world comes to be organized. Critic Eve Meltzer argues that the proliferation of these informational modes in visual art since the 1960s were part and parcel of a larger structuralist turn whose effects continue to resonate throughout the humanistic disciplines. By approaching all cultural phenomena as predicated on the same ironclad rules that govern the linguistic play of difference, artists, historians, anthropologists, and psychoanalysts aimed to chart the seemingly total epistemic systems that produce the modern world and its subjects.[31]



2.5
Eleanor Antin, *The Last Seven Days from Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972/1999. Twenty-eight black-and-white photographs and date labels. (Photograph by Hermann Feldhaus. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.)

In Simpson's hands, however, deploying structuralist visual means required emphasizing the lapses and failures of any conceptual framework so as to account for the specific circumstances through which the black female subject comes into visibility. As Jones suggests, it is worth comparing *Guarded Conditions* to Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972; fig. 2.5). Over the course of thirty-six days, the older artist lost ten pounds through dieting and recorded her gradual transformation in a series of gridded photographs, four for each day, providing four views of her body.[32] The resulting work parodies even as it capitulates to notions of ideal female form: the artist has an exhibitionist streak that might easily be called narcissistic and the reduction she undertakes still maintains her corporeal integrity and arguably augments its appeal. No such assertion can be made about Simpson's work, which relies on repetition to make clear the difference that racialization makes.

To understand what that difference is, we might turn to *Easy For Who To Say* (1989; fig. 2.6). In this work, the artist has covered each iteration of the model's face with one of the vowels—A, E, I, O, or U. Now, the second edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary* defines a vowel as "a speech sound uttered with voice or whisper and characterized by the resonance form of the vocal cavities." Its enunciation requires a relaxation of the mouth and jaw, an opening of the body that

2.6
Lorna Simpson, *Easy For Who To Say*, 1989. Five color Polaroid prints, ten engraved plastic plaques. 78.7 x 292.1 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

is countered, even blocked, in Simpson's work by its representative letter, which effects a figural closure. Though the letters concealing the model's face intimate a multiplicity of positions she might occupy and attitudes she might assume—adulterer, engineer, ingénue, optimist, unflinching—such musings are cut short by the matching red words marching beneath the pictures. "Amnesia, Error, Indifference, Omission, Uncivil": these terms would undermine not only the subjective position the figure would seek, but also her grasp on any recognizable position at all. Ironically, the "I" still claims pride of place here, bucking the chain of equivalences intrinsic to language in order to center the work and the viewer's attention on that most basic of self-assertions, now made by a "self" that is tenuously present at best.

In this phototext, the meaning of the letter, like the orientation of the subject, is understood as fundamentally unstable yet always susceptible to reifying impositions. *Easy for Who to Say* thus stages the difficulty of rendering the black female body—that site of invisibility and projection firmly fixed within the American cultural imaginary—while also maintaining the haunting sense of absence that is constitutive of identity however defined. As Judith Butler has argued, no particular identity can emerge without foreclosing others, thereby ensuring its partiality and underlining the inability of any specific content, whether race or gender, to fully constitute it. This "condition of necessary failure," the theorist maintains, "not only pertains universally, but *is* the 'empty and ineradicable place' of universality itself."[33] Viewed from this perspective, the words below Simpson's photographs suggest not only the ways in which black women have historically been denied access to the universal but also how they have been produced as the negative grounds—slaves, flesh, chattel—against which the modern subject has been constructed. Still, Simpson's effacement of the figure underscores that the identity of this black woman, however prescribed, can never be entirely accounted for given the structural incompletion she shares with all subjects. In making visible the vexed predication of African American womanhood, the artist performs what Butler would call an act of "cultural translation," critiquing the racism and sexism of previous universalisms by contaminating them with the very identity on whose abjection they were founded.[34]

What we witness in this work, as in *You're Fine* and in *Guarded Conditions*, is a method whereby the peculiarities of one black woman's body at once seems to guide and follow the pattern on which the work is modeled: the fall of her braids and the tilt of her head echo the shape of a vowel, the delicate wing of the collarbones draw us toward the neck. Visually marked by the historical regimes that would cast them as part-objects, in Simpson's art, African diasporic women are rendered as partial subjects necessarily caught within those totalizing schemas of race and sex that would curtail their subjective potentialities, not to mention the artist's. Each of these figures disjunctively resets the scale of the "human," her contours disrupted and her subjectivity translated in order to speak of histories that are and are not her own. In this way, the dialectic of figural fragmentation

operative in Simpson's work expands beyond the frame, gesturing backward temporally to the violence performed on the black female body and forward spatially into the spectatorial field.

For even as a piece like *Guarded Conditions* laterally expands to include an army of identically clad subjects within its metonymic reach, it also aims to metaphorically pull us into its orbit, to implicate us in its categories, to establish the black female body as a site of identification and displacement in a visual rather than a psychic replay of the logic of the part-object. To encounter these images of the body in a posture perhaps analogous to our own and on a scale slightly greater, is to encounter a projected vision of ourselves on the block: it is as if our bodies' shadows have been thrown onto the wall and into the past by some unseen cone of light, a process of enlargement whose spatial logic is hinted at by the rows of text, which grow progressively longer as they near the photographs they caption in accordance with the logic of perspectival seeing.

Through such analogical solicitation, the work proposes that we test our bodies against its form; similarly, the model's placement before a white studio backdrop foregrounds our concurrent framing within the white cube of artistic consumption. Both aspects of the piece refer us to the black female body, a corporeal site everywhere riven by imperatives other than its own, reminding us of our own positions within a world run by biopower, which philosopher Michel Foucault defines as "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life."[35] In the artist's photographs, the dynamics of subjection, which universally and unevenly pertain, are most visible at the site of the black female body.[36]

Reading Simpson's work correctly, then, means holding a whole set of contrasts in tension—metonymy and metaphor, body and image, structure and detail, part and whole, subject and object—in order to understand the coordinates of the present and the construction of the past that she brings into view. As viewers we are momentarily caught up in those fraught intersections; in *Guarded Conditions*, we are perhaps first and foremost grasped belatedly, while standing behind the figure of a black woman, in a relationship of historical posteriority. The target of skin and sex attacks, a cipher of negation twice over, the black woman depicted in Simpson's photographs undergoes ravages of modernity—the loss of a symbolic matrix, the alienating effects of capital, the shattering of the subject—that have only escalated in her wake. This figure's "guarded conditions" are very much our own and it is only a matter of time before we are each called on to assume her position.

3.

Guarded Conditions and its sisters provide an oblique index of Simpson's attitude toward the slave past, which undergirds the conditions of black female visibility to which her work so rigorously attends. What I want to ask now is in what ways

2.7
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (first room). Glass bottles, water, wooden stools, engraved plastic plaques, sound. Overall dimensions variable. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

did her practice shift when she engaged specific figures and sites associated with slavery on their own grounds? How did an encounter with the remnants of the institution modify her sense of what materials and objects might be mobilized in the staging of an aesthetic encounter? In other words, what changed and what persisted in Simpson's movement from the image of the black female body to the physical reality of the quarters? For answers, we must look to *Five Rooms*, one of many projects that together comprised *Places with a Past*, an exhibition organized by curator Mary Jane Jacob as part of the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, which ran from May 24 through August 4, 1991. Executed in collaboration with Rogers and sited in the dependency of a historic mansion for approximately

2.8
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (first room). (Photograph by John McWilliams. courtesy of Spoleto Festival USA. © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

ten weeks, *Five Rooms* explicitly spelled out Simpson's approach to slavery for the first time (see figs. 2.8–12).

As even a quick glance at images of the work suggests, in executing *Five Rooms*, the artist continued to deny the sorts of visual transparency associated with the enslaved in favor of her own recalcitrant lexicon. Indeed, the walls of her chosen site teemed with those now-familiar panels of text, but this time they featured information about botany, geography, and the particulars of slave trading and resistance in the area (fig. 2.7). While the first and third of the rooms included sets of the artist's outsized turned-back women, these pairs were now tangibly connected by a long braid of artificial hair (fig. 2.8). However, the whole of the installation made clear that Simpson's tried-and-true phototextual strategies, even carefully retooled, were not enough to differently summon the slave past. In *Five Rooms*, she recruited an array of materials unprecedented in her mature work, relying on the readymade tradition set in motion by Marcel Duchamp and subsequently elaborated on by artists from minimal sculptor Carl Andre to *Places with a Past* participant Ann Hamilton.[37]

Simpson's objects make for a motley assembly: a makeshift wooden hut occupied the second room (fig. 2.9), images of local flora dominated the fourth (fig. 2.10), a ring of brown kewpie dolls hung in the last (fig. 2. 11), and jars of Carolina gold—the most valued rice variety of the region—sat squarely on stools in the

2.9
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (second room). Wooden hut, engraved plastic plaques, sound. Overall dimensions variable. (© Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

2.10
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (fourth room). Gelatin silver prints, engraved plastic plaques, sound. Overall dimensions variable. (© Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

2.11
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (fifth room). Plastic dolls, string, engraved plastic plaques. Overall dimensions variable. (Photograph by John McWilliams. Courtesy of Spoleto Festival USA. © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

2.12
Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991, detail (third room). Glass bottles, rice, wooden stools, four Polaroid color prints, sound. Overall dimensions variable. (© Lorna Simpson. Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

third (fig. 2.12).[38] All of this from an artist who would later admit, "I have a fear of objects because… including objects in the work, forces the work very strongly in a particular direction. I've always been kind of afraid of that—I kind of feel that I lose control in some way."[39] Music played its part as well. In each of the five spaces, the artist installed speakers that emitted one of four vocal tracks performed by Rogers, ranging from the singer's original composition "Islands" to the threnody of "Strange Fruit." In its use of sound, collaborative production, and emphatic materiality, *Five Rooms* demands that we again consider the orientation of Simpson's art. In many ways, the work condenses and expands her signature strategies by taking up the phenomenological space implied in her earlier work and literally embedding the viewer within it. Yet *Five Rooms* also coincides with the beginning of a phase in the artist's career that would witness a move away from her trademark figures and all of the references that went with them.[40]

In the process, Simpson conducted an investigation into how actual and imaged objects signify in the visual field opened up by site-specific art, a mode of aesthetic practice inaugurated in the '60s and '70s by the likes of Hans Haacke and Mierle Laderman Ukeles in order to engage the physical and structural constraints of a particular location.[41] As the artist's first significant entry in this artistic mode, *Five Rooms* occupies a liminal position within her trajectory, which in part accounts for its relative critical neglect. I would contend, however, that it is precisely this in-betweenness that makes the installation such an invaluable lens through which to approach a practice that consistently tarries in the gaps between categorical distinctions. In *Five Rooms*, Simpson negotiated the distance separating phantasms of African American femininity and the actuality of African diasporic women's lived experiences, a gap that has everywhere animated her art. The installation's emergence within the interstices of Simpson's oeuvre thus emblematizes and brings into focus her works' structural and relational functioning as "transitional objects and transitional phenomena."

I take these words from the title of a paper by psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, a trainee of Klein, for whom the phrase designates the infant's first truly "not-me" possessions—a doll, a rope, a tune hummed to itself—which, while symbolic of part-objects like the breast come to be valued for their actuality.[42] Simpson's choice of aesthetic resources in *Five Rooms* resonates uncannily well with Winnicott's descriptions, yet more important for my account of her work is the function that he ascribes to transitional objects and phenomena within childhood development. In his framework, these materials initially provide the infant with an intermediate space of illusion that seems to align subjective fantasy with objective reality. As such, they enable the child to test the limits of his creative projection against the actuality of the object world. Loved, abused, and eventually decathected through the withdrawal of libidinal energy, transitional objects and phenomena ultimately allow the infant to cope with disillusionment and to differentiate "between fantasy and fact, between inner objects and external objects, between primary creativity and perception."[43]

The same can be said of Simpson's '80s phototexts. Through their formal replaying of the black female body's production as a series of part-objects, these pieces conduct viewers out of the cultural imaginary and toward the realities of the symbolic. More than any other of Simpson's works, *Five Rooms* allows us to track how the artist negotiated those realities in material terms and how they eventually allowed her to incorporate a range of objects into her art—felt, shoes, and candles—that differently, though just as persistently, engaged the history of slavery. To flesh out this contention, in the pages that follow, I interleave interpretation with sustained description in an attempt to conjure the primary assumptions and corporeal experience that characterized the project's brief existence. Equally key to my account is the work's unfolding onto a range of contexts: narratives of slavery in South Carolina, site-specific art as modeled by *Places with a Past*, and black women's social positioning past and present. What remains paramount, however, is the ways that Simpson's art recast or ignored these specific histories in elucidating the structural conditions of enslavement and their ongoing legacies within the African diaspora.

Listen, for starters, to her reflections on *Five Rooms*, recorded for a public television special just a few weeks after she completed the installation: "What interested me was that this was kind of the giant slave port of the South, this was the center, and I felt very attracted to do a piece about that, not having done anything specific—in terms of specific information or subject matter—about slavery in my work before. Nevertheless, the work is about African Americans so of course there is a connection."[44] Simpson's own connection to the region was less personal than structural. A born-and-bred New Yorker of African American and West Indian descent, she had occasionally visited relatives in Atlanta during vacations but was more likely to spend her childhood summers with extended family in the Bahamas. In the course of the TV interview, she allows that to a certain extent, she held the familiar Northern view of the American South as benighted terrain, and in preparation for her sojourn, she consulted a range of primary and critical texts that begin to suggest the status of slave historiography circa 1991 and to illuminate the particular model of historical engagement that would subtend *Five Rooms*.[45]

While the work, like Simpson's oeuvre in general, makes no reference to specific individuals, the artist's readings included several firsthand accounts: the planter David Doar's volume *Rice and Rice Planting in the South Carolina Low Country*; Patricia Jones-Jackson's ethnography *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions in the Sea Islands*; and Harriet Jacobs's narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Simpson complemented these perspectives with sweeping historical overviews, from George Brown Tindall's relatively focused *South Carolina Negroes, 1877–1900* to Richard Price's capacious anthology *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*. She also looked to efforts that trained their focus on the dynamics of gender in the context of the peculiar institution, such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*.[46]

These texts offer a rich trove of materials from which to construct a composite portrait of enslaved South Carolina women in economic, cultural, and political terms on the macro- and micro-historical scales. Taken together, they illuminate both the modality of racial oppression inaugurated with the implementation of slave codes across the United States in the early eighteenth century, as well as the transformation of African folklore in the hands of the Gullah people of Georgia and South Carolina's Sea Islands, whose arts and language circa 1990 continue to reveal a sustained link to continental traditions.[47] However, in its blend of materials and its approach to a specific site, *Five Rooms* shared most with another volume in Simpson's library, Charles Joyner's structuralist history *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*. Using slaveholders' tabulations, images of vernacular architecture, agricultural records, and accounts of spiritual and material practice, Joyner reconstructs the life world of the enslaved in the All Saints Parish of the South Carolina Low Country.[48] With such reading in hand, Simpson went to Charleston to investigate sites for her project, on the lookout for certain cultural formations and already cognizant of how the area was pervasively shadowed by the past of racial violence, though not necessarily in the forms one would presume and despite the shiny veneer promoted by the city itself.[49]

Like the white settlers of the region, many blacks came to Charleston from Barbados and other points in the Caribbean.[50] As the artist reminds us in her television interview, the city was a major port of entry, a sort of black Ellis Island, through which it is estimated more than a third of the enslaved Africans brought to America passed.[51] This circumstance accounts both for the city's historical black majority since the 1820s as well as its ability to accrue tremendous wealth in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[52] The destruction caused by the Civil War and a series of natural disasters resulted in large-scale economic devastation, and it was only in the 1920s and '30s that the city began to revive thanks to the efforts of the local "plantocracy." A small group of blue bloods, these descendants of the oldest white families in the area set out to preserve the city's architectural wonders and to cloak its past in tourist-friendly nostalgia.[53] Perhaps unavoidably, in constructing Charleston as an emblem of Southern gentility, the historical preservation movement aligned itself with patterns of segregation and selective amnesia, coercing black residents to relocate for the sake of local treasures, thereby securing the eventual "Disneyfication" of the area.[54]

Given such a history of exploitation and self-promotion, it makes sense that composer Gian Carlo Menotti was welcomed to the city in 1977 when he started a performing arts series modeled after his successful "Festival of Two Worlds" in Spoleto, Italy.[55] Nor is it surprising that when she was asked to introduce a visual component to the American festival, curator Mary Jane Jacob would eventually title her project *Places with a Past*. Conceptualized in the wake of the highly lauded 1987 *Skulptur Projekte* in Münster, Germany, and inspired by *Sculture nella Città*, held in Spoleto in 1962, Jacob's was the first major U.S. project to approach the whole of a city as a series of sites for sculptural intervention to widespread acclaim.[56] Promi-

nent sectors of the art press praised the exhibition for bringing diverse audiences into contact with that relatively new genre called site-specific art and for reflecting the multicultural ethos of the day without an appreciable loss of aesthetic quality.[57]

The roster for *Places with a Past* was a telling cross-section of contemporary practices that included artists of various races, genders, national origins, levels of recognition, and familiarity with installation-based work, from African American master David Hammons to the French duo Gwylene Gallimard and Jean-Marie Mauclet. Like that of Simpson and Rogers, several of the eighteen exhibitions examined some aspect of the slave past, and many more aimed to evoke absent figures through an accretion of historically resonant objects. To name just a few: Narelle Jubelin dotted the local Customs House with slave tags and antique coins; Joyce Scott bedecked a local square with beads and branches meant to venerate ancestors lost to lynching; and Elizabeth Newman filled a former schoolhouse with water, honey, dresses, photographs of black nursemaids, and audio recordings of lullabies sung by a local "dah," an African-derived term referring to a black female caregiver (fig. 2.13).[58]

2.13
Elizabeth Newman, *Honey in the Rock (Got to Feed God Children)*, detail, *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival*, 1991. (Photograph by John McWilliams. Courtesy of Spoleto Festival USA.)

2.14
Governor Thomas Bennett House Dependency. (Photograph by the author, 2010.)

In using an array of materials to activate the senses and recall the lives of black women, Newman's *Honey in the Rock (Got to Feed God Children)* was perhaps most similar to *Five Rooms* in strategy if not in tone or emphasis: rather than a site that foregrounded the ties of sentiment that linked subjects across racial lines, Simpson opted for the actuality of the slave quarters occupying the first floor of the dependency at the Governor Thomas Bennett House (fig. 2.14). The mansion itself, built around 1822 in the wake of a storm that caused considerable damage throughout the region, is an august building now often used for weddings;[59] the dependency presently houses the Medical Society of South Carolina. In 1991, this structure was in relative disrepair, having been damaged, like many parts of Charleston, by yet another hurricane in September 1989. When Simpson visited the building, there was no marker indicating its former purpose, as was not uncommon despite the preservation society's otherwise fanatical attention to historical detail.[60]

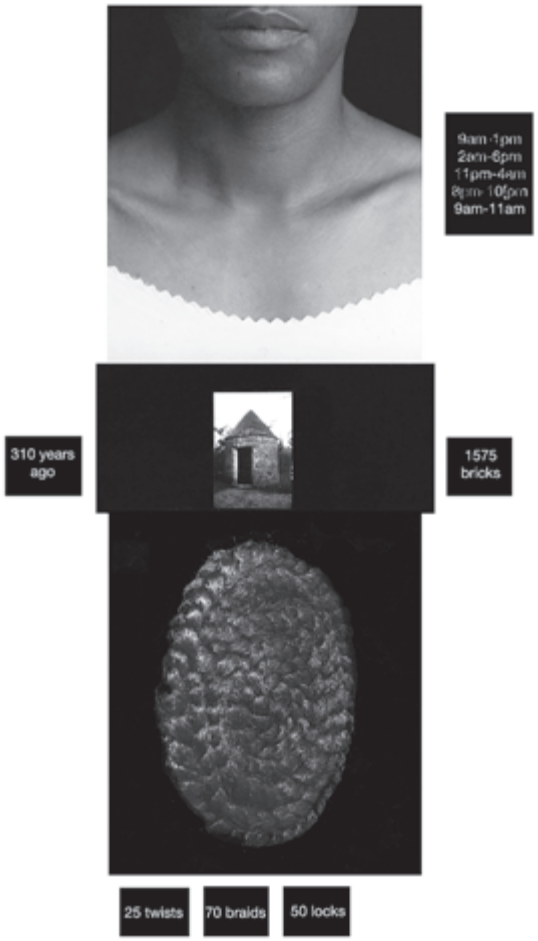
In eventually settling on this location for *Five Rooms*, the artist was able to evoke a whole set of issues related to Charleston's economic growth, to make clear what was forgotten in the celebration of the city's past, and to emphasize the proximity of master and slave in urban settings, as the dependency is located less than a stone's throw from the "big house." Servants directly engaged in the upkeep of the mansion—cooks, nannies, drivers, and butlers—would have occupied the Bennett quarters. While these slaves often enjoyed better material conditions than their counterparts on the plantation, they were under more continuous surveillance and expected to display greater compliance; the ruse of white domesticity offered the enslaved no safety from the demands of their masters.[61] For black women, who were often subject to sexual as well as physical abuse, life and labor within such spaces was doubly articulated.[62] Simpson's project takes account of this dichotomy,

yet in *Five Rooms*, the focus was not so much on the specific depredations experienced by the enslaved females who would have inhabited the quarters but on black women's contradictory status as agents of culture and objects of speculation within the economies of New World slavery.

Accordingly, the first room of the installation greeted viewers with simple black wooden stools supporting large bottles of water—modeled on those in use at area plantations—that in this context recalled the journey that brought enslaved women to South Carolina's shores. Simpson labeled the containers on the right with the names of slave ships, the countries from which their captives hailed, and in some cases the stops where cargo was deposited: Angola, Barbados, Providence, and Jamaica, for instance, were listed under the vessel Berkley (see fig. 2.7). She engraved the text panels leaning on the jars to the left with the names of local rivers that open onto the Atlantic and so eventually to Africa: Savannah, Amoretta, Winnemac (see fig. 2.8). On the wall was the expected set of photographs: two turned-back figures—one apparently nude, the other clothed—linked by two images of a cable of braided hair. The statistics running beneath these pictures documented the female contents of unidentified slave ships: "under the age of ten: 43," "over the age of ten: 789."

In their stacked arrangement, the plaques recall *Guarded Conditions*, as does the room's disposition of photographic figures, but the installation's emphasis on a physical encounter in real space makes the earlier work's implicit invitation to formal and bodily comparison an effective prerequisite. Let us, for a moment, imagine what it might have been like for an attuned viewer to perambulate this space and its objects, to lean toward images and away from stools, and to move back and forth between the texts and bottles that occupied the only available seats in the house. The spectator comes to pause before the clothed woman in the photograph on the far left. Standing there, she becomes aware of how the jar on the stool beside her metonymically completes the figure, stand-ins for legs and a torso that can only be imagined. This constellation prompts her consideration of the strange affinity suggested between the jar and herself, the photographic figure's "body" and her own, the "not-me" and the "me." In the process, the work solicits her to measure the metaphorical and physical distance separating her from those forms and to consider the violent conditions that would render her body and these objects frighteningly commensurate.

Simpson's move toward the thing as a figural marker of the body was not unforeseeable. By 1991, her strategy of visual fragmentation had already led her to a variety of new forms such as African masks, which are associated with blackness, to be sure, though not as immediately overdetermined by narratives of victimization as are images of black women. In *Counting* (1991; fig. 2.15), executed around the same time she was at work on *Five Rooms*, Simpson combined a trio of images, vertically stacking a woman's neckline on top of a brick smokehouse that surmounts a coil of false hair. She paired these photographs with texts that measure out intervals of time and tally up accumulations of matter. The placard



2.15
Lorna Simpson, *Counting*, 1991. Photogravure with silkscreen. 185.4 x 96.5 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

to the right of the first image reads "9am–1pm / 2am–6pm / 11pm–4am / 8pm–10pm / 9am–11am"; on either side of the second, "310 years ago" and "1575 bricks"; below the last, "25 twists / 70 braids / 50 locks." Rather than letting the caption do the work of describing a set of conditions that then allow the viewer to imagine a place as in *Guarded Conditions*, here, language communicates a series of moments and the images provide an actress, a locale, and a prop: it is our job to contemplate the scenario. In *Counting*, not only is our access to the sight of the black female body bracketed, but the image itself is also curtailed as a site of semantic proliferation. This work's tenuous leveling of person and thing underlines the artist's procedure of literalizing the discrepant equation of black female bodies and readymade forms that would serve as the material baseline for her intervention in *Five Rooms*.

Aware that this approach might risk a certain coldness, the artist decided early on to add vocals to the mix, since they could provide a highly affecting, "romantic" dimension to the work.[63] In so doing, Simpson mobilized the powers of what theorist Lindon Barrett has called the African American "singing voice." For Barrett,

2.16
Carrie Mae Weems, *Older Women Portraits*, from *The Sea Island Series*, 1992. Chromogenic color print. (Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.)

unlike the "signing voice" of speech and reason—exemplified by the plaints of grievance that issued from *Mining the Museum*—the black singing voice has long functioned as a site of positive valuation, rooted in the body, that is capable of undermining and critiquing the regnant logics of Western culture.[64] Alva Rogers, a classically trained singer, was the natural choice for this assignment. She, you'll remember, had worked with Wilson on *Spoils* and modeled for Simpson on several occasions, but Rogers is perhaps best known for her star turn in Julie Dash's luminous 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, which focuses on a Gullah family at the turn of the twentieth century.[65] Having lived in the area for three months while filming, Rogers brought her own set of experiences and associations to *Five Rooms* that departed from Simpson's. Indeed, her approach rhymed more with contemporaneous efforts, such as Weems's *The Sea Island Series*, a set of quasi-ethnographic texts and lushly rendered photographs documenting ritual and folkloric practices, which were anchored by large-scale reprints of Zealy's photographs, now enlarged and tinted a rich indigo as if to make new demands on their viewers (1991–1992; fig. 2.16). In this body of work, Weems set out to understand how various sites and subjects in the region might represent unbroken links to African linguistic patterns, modes of belief, and conceptualizations of space.[66] While Simpson's choice of materials purposefully eschewed the forms of black cultural production invoked in Weems's pictures and for which South Carolina is best known—metalwork, carpentry, and basket-weaving—Rogers's songs deftly alluded to the material histories of the Sea Islands.[67]

According to the vocalist's script, upon walking into the first room, the viewer tripped off a motion sensor that played a continuous "loop of ocean sound effects." After four bars the first vocal track kicked in, Rogers singing the chorus to her original composition "Islands": "Islands / islands with brown faces / islands / way stations for slavery." After this song faded out, Rogers's voice could again be heard

"just above a whisper" chanting the children's song "Them Bones."[68] As with Simpson's objects, water, connection, and displacement were the key themes of Rogers's songs. And as in Simpson's work, where bottles of water suggested improbable bodies for photographic figures, in Rogers's composition, "brown faces" not only populated the islands but also defined them in a strongly, strangely anthropomorphic way: "Islands *with* brown faces." Such tactics bypassed the endless stream of clichés associated with slavery in favor of resonant formal linkages drawn between image and object, sight and sound, body and material that indexed the constrained position of the captive subject.

Fittingly, in the second room, Simpson installed the small wooden hut that filled the space from floor to ceiling (see fig. 2.9). Plaques naming various tactics of slave resistance—"arson," "conspiracy," "sabotage"—were laid around the baseboard of the structure. Although redolent of African architectures, Simpson patterned her building on the smokehouse at Boone Hall Plantation, a beautifully preserved estate not far from Charleston. Just large enough to stand in with arms outstretched, the circular hut and the texts at its base encouraged a looping navigation as viewers read about acts of defiance, which, for black subjects in America more often than not return to haunt their actors. Not only are blacks subjected to an insane violence, but black resistance feeds into the stereotype of savagery that justified such violence in the first place.[69] The wooden structure called attention to this transhistorical logic even as it referred back to a specific incarnation of it: plantation smokehouses—larded with stores of dried meat that were key to slave subsistence—were often both targets of black pilfering and preferred sites of black punishment.[70]

In metaphorically evoking such realities, the hut also quite specifically turned exhibitiongoers to the scene of South Carolina history. Most of Simpson's text panels in room two name acts rather than persons or events, but several repeat the phrase "Stono Rebellion of 1739," singling out the infamous uprising in which a band of slaves was said to have killed at least twenty whites before being hunted down and brutally murdered themselves.[71] This cue also speaks to the most famous episode of insurrection in Charleston. Denmark Vesey, a free African-born carpenter, orchestrated a revolt that was intended to end white rule in the city and that was slated to begin on Sunday, July 14, 1822, in honor of the French revolutionary storming of Bastille prison on the same day in 1789. According to some estimates, the uprising would have involved thousands of black coconspirators, many of them armed, but their plans were discovered in late May. Rolla and Ned Bennett, two slaves owned by Thomas Bennett, the governor of the state at the time and the builder of the mansion, were allegedly key players in Vesey's plot. The dependency was completed after the two men and Vesey were hanged, but through Simpson's chosen texts and Rogers's lamenting voice, they might be said to linger on.[72]

The soundtrack in this space was the first verse of "Islands"—"Brown faces / Came here / Against their will / In shackles and chains"—which played over a backdrop of talking drums from Chad.[73] When she activated the motion sensor

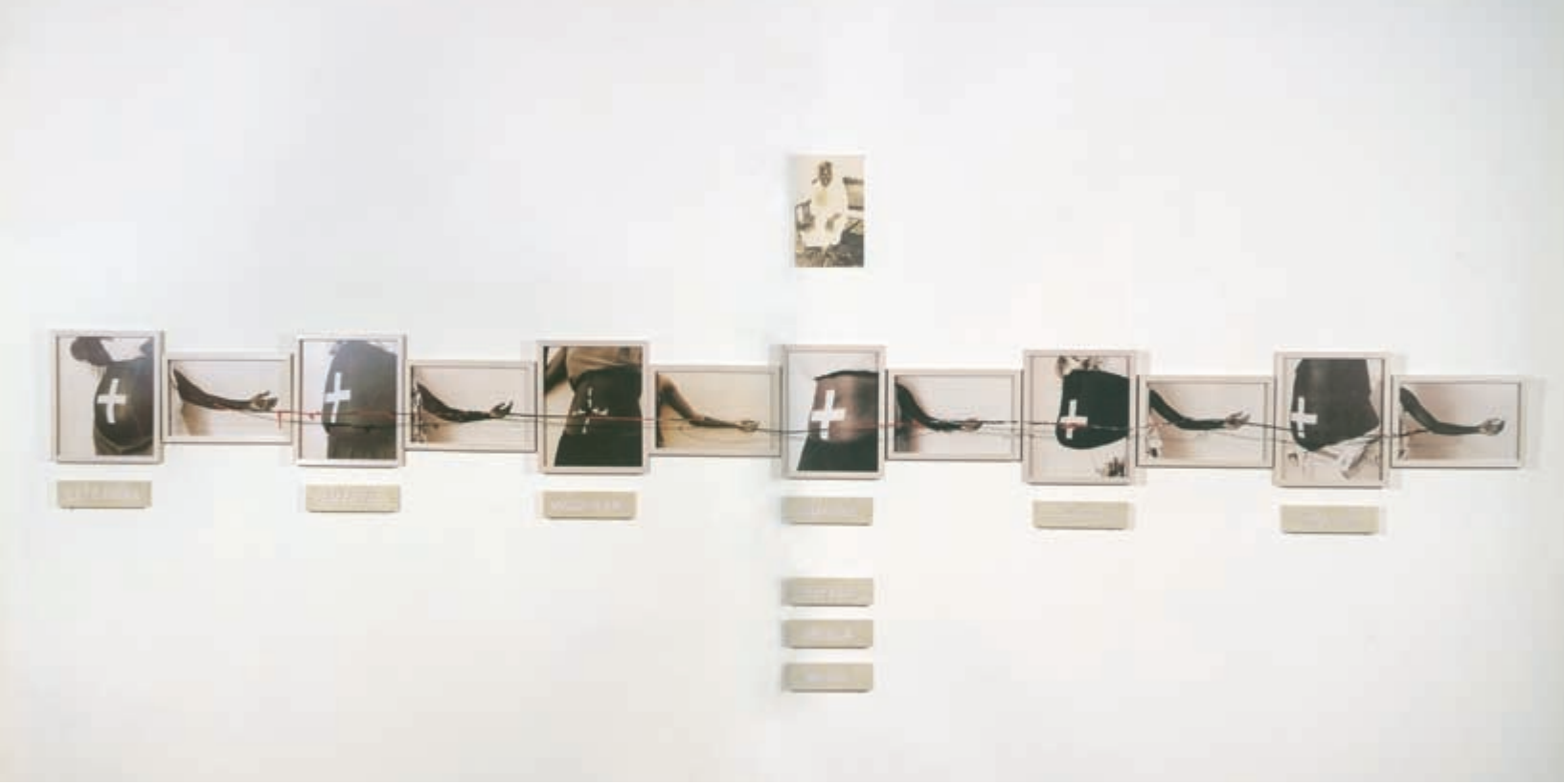
in this room, the viewer brought forth sounds that recalled the memory of absent African bodies even as the lyrics she heard recalled enslaved subjects whose very faces were liable to be shackled. Indeed, the visage was a site through which masters attempted to read both the temperament and ethnic origin of prospective purchases, ever in search of docile subjects hailing from regions noted for agricultural production in line with their own plantings.[74] Cast in this light, the turning back of Simpson's figures takes on another level of meaning, registering not only a refusal of the invasive gaze that would specify and dissect but also a small gesture of defiance against those globe-straddling regimes that would script the body in the language of pecuniary interest.[75]

Closer to home, the Bennett family earned much of its wealth through the cultivation of rice fields tilled by slaves. Thomas Bennett Jr. owned a mill still preserved in the city, and appropriately, rice was the dominant aspect of the next chamber (see fig. 2.12).[76] The third room was entered along the dependency's rear entryway, and the sonic accompaniment this time was Rogers using a Southern accent to read formulae for hoodoo rituals; her texts were adapted from the instructions on how "To Rent a House" and "Confounding an Enemy," published in Zora Neale Hurston's 1935 collection of black folklore, *Mules and Men*.[77] The images of turned-back women were again repeated, and the large jars of rice were alternately labeled with a temporal designation, the names of different species, or the amount of land that might be planted with the given quantity contained in its jar: "rice after the war," "Madagascar gold," "19 acres."

In this way, the process of substitution that made slaves into things was hammered home, pointing up the status of the enslaved woman as injured person and object of property, defined by her mobilization to supply the needs of the other but disallowed from asserting herself either on her own behalf or on that of her kin.[78] As theorist Frank B. Wilderson III might put it, in *Five Rooms*, "the Black has sentient capacity but no relational capacity. As an accumulated and fungible object, rather than an exploited and alienated subject, the Black is openly vulnerable to the whims of the world, and so is his or her cultural 'production.'"[79] In other words, everything can be taken away, leaving us with woman as rice: the enslaved female produced as nothing more than her productive capacity, frozen in the circuitry of exchange.[80] It is this figurative tactic that allowed Simpson to intimate the captive subject's position within the spatial, economic, and disciplinary matrices of the antebellum South in ways that were at once resolutely conceptual and affectively charged.

4.

Given her production of the black female body as a set of fragmented things and isolated figures, her apparent disinterest in producing an "accurate" historical narrative, and her bracketing out of South Carolinian material and discursive



2.17
Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Umbilical Cord*, 1991. Polaroid prints. (Image Courtesy of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists. Photograph by Hakim Raquib. Courtesy of the artist and Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, Miami, FL.)

tradition, how is it that Simpson imagines connection beyond the false identity that would equate one black woman with another? In answering this question, we ought look more closely at the photographs Simpson deployed in *Five Rooms*, in particular at the cable of synthetic hair that connects the three nude and one clothed figures. The braid's valence is multiple to say the least, prompting a consideration of the phantasmatic yet historically grounded relations that Simpson means to forge among subjects. Within the terms that *Five Rooms* holds out, that relation cannot be accounted for within progressive or naturalist paradigms. It is neither, in historian George Brown Tindall's words, a "bright thread of Negro Progress" in the "dark tapestry" of South Carolina history, nor is it an "umbilical cord" like the decorative wire that runs between generations of pregnant African diasporic women as in a 1991 phototext by Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons (fig. 2.17).[81]

In contrast to such determinant connections, I would contend that Simpson's braid functions as a transitional object that reveals the logic not only of the installation but also of her practice as a whole, articulating a "separation that is not a separation but a form of union."[82] These lines derive from another text of Winnicott's on the significance of transitional objects and transitional phenomena. In his essay of that name, the psychoanalyst devotes several pages to the case of a young boy who seized on string as a way of negotiating the temporary loss of his mother.[83] As Winnicott argues there and elsewhere, the child's choice of transitional object makes every kind of sense: string connects, communicates, and denies separation. If the child develops according to the normative schema, the string becomes a thing in and of itself that "symbolizes the union of two now

separate things, baby and mother, *at the point in time and space of the initiation of their separateness*."[84]

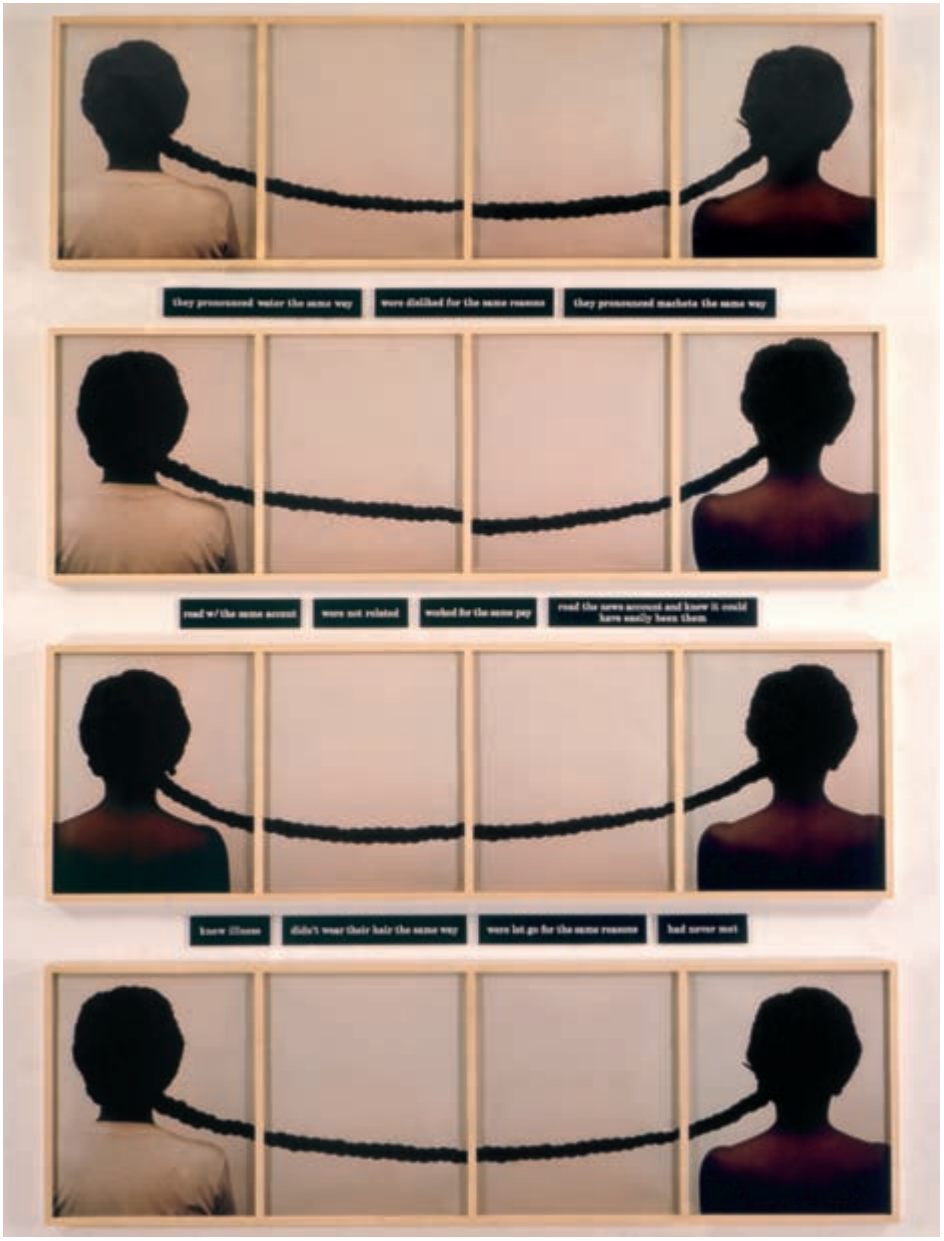
Less like the connections articulated by her African diasporic contemporary and more like the plait that connected artists Ulay and Marina Abramović for seventeen hours in a 1977 performance, the artificial braid in Simpson's oeuvre figures a contingent form of relation across space and time that must be fabricated, may eventually be undone, and that opens onto diverse artistic and discursive traditions (fig. 2.18).[85] Consider *Same*, whose sixteen pictures are based on the ones that appeared in the installation (1991; fig. 2.19). Here, Simpson creates a material connection that, due to its performative status, links two subjects together without presuming to transcend the radical incommensurability that pertains between them. Indeed, the texts in this work lay out the tenuous grounds upon which a contemporary relation between similarly raced and gendered subjects might be established: "they pronounced water the same way / were disliked for the same reasons / read w/ the same accent / were not related / worked for the same pay / read the news account and knew it could have easily been them / knew illness / didn't wear their hair the same way / were let go for the same reasons / had never met." What connects the women in these photographs is not simply the unchanging facts of black female oppression, but a willingness to be connected, to unconsciously mirror each other, even though such reflexiveness can never render them identical.

The pictures reveal Simpson's antiessentialist notion of belonging, which is brought to the fore in *Five Rooms*: having to spell out some connection to slavery in explicit terms required the artist to explicitly picture the connections that link black subjects to each other and to those on the other side of the color line.[86] Spillers reminds us that for the enslaved woman, filial ties, despite their liability to be fractured, constitute the "'threads cable-strong' of an incestuous, interracial genealogy."[87] Thus, the women's photographic contact in the first and third rooms serves as the background for water and rice, objects not only of consumption and production but also of a communion that unites them with a host of other figures both because of and despite the vicissitudes of slavery. Touching each other across space and time, Simpson's women establish links to the past that carry on unseen in the present. We are each solicited to join this corporeal circuitry, asked to perambulate these spaces, to explore their textures, and to wonder what braids might momentarily link us into the system of exchange.

In *Five Rooms* as elsewhere in her work, Simpson pictures what I would call a tending-toward-blackness—a leaning into and caring for—that implies an ethical concern marked by a reckoning with and acceptance of the social death that has historically bound black subjects to each other and to the substratum of Western culture.[88] As Jacob suggests, "Simpson sees her race eroded by poverty and a social structure that keeps it at a repressed, unhealthful level, the underclass of society from slavery days to now."[89] The statistics provide abundant support for this contention: in 1989, black median income was 83 percent that of whites; the poverty

2.18 (above)
Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Relation in Time*, October 1977. Performance, seventeen hours. Studio G7, Bologna. (© Marina Abramović. Courtesy of Marina Abramović Archives and Sean Kelly Gallery, NY.)

2.19 (below)
Lorna Simpson, *Same*, 1991. Sixteen color Polaroid prints, eleven engraved plastic plaques. 302.3 x 208.9 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)



rate among African Americans remained at nearly 30 percent, virtually unchanged since 1980; the infant mortality rate among blacks was more than twice as high as that among their white counterparts; and black women still tended to be heavily concentrated in low-level service jobs such as cleaning and caretaking.[90] In addition to highlighting such continuities, Simpson's photographs pose the question of disconnection, of how coalition might be imagined between African American women circa 1991 in light of growing disparities of class, privilege, politics, and culture. At the time critic Michele Wallace noted that, despite the emergence of powerful voices within the representational field, from talk-show host Oprah Winfrey to novelist Alice Walker to Simpson herself, the late 1980s and early 1990s were a moment of crisis for black women's organizing, which could rarely be unified around a singular front.[91]

In retrospect, Simpson's project constructed a basis for relationality in terms that underlined the common predicament of black women, emphasizing what it has meant to be a subject understood as an object and laying out the grounds of affinity based on the simple facts of material existence. The artist suggests as much in "Mannered Observation 2002," a text that resonates with the wonder and ambivalence of unexpected mirroring between individuals.

> There were two women. They sat across from me, at different points during my ride on the C train, leaving Brooklyn. The woman to my right had a scar on the left side of her face that was long and straight and extended from her eyebrow down around the outer portion of her cheek, ending at her jawline. She exited the train at Fulton Street. A few minutes later I noticed another woman to my left. She had a scar, slightly raised by keloiding, on the right side of her cheek. The scar was long and extended from her eyebrow and curved down around the outer portion of her cheek along her jawline. I shifted my attention to the dark reflection of myself in the window, so that I did not appear to be staring at her so intensely. My reflection, punctuated by streaming blue and white lights, reminded me that I have a small scar on the right side of my face that extends from just below the corner of my eye to the upper midpoint of my cheek.[92]

In creating this community of women based on their scars, Simpson carefully sidesteps a notion of bodily connection predicated on shared victimization in order to consider how diverse pasts, whether marked by violence or accident, manifest themselves formally. Through such implausible commonality, Simpson creates chains of signification, material and visual, linguistic and photographic, that might differently link subjects to each other.

I am not arguing, of course, that such linkage happens to the same degree between all subjects or that the artist's work opens itself to viewers indifferently: surely that access is conditioned by race, class, gender, and the systems of discrimination that guide the production of these categories. Rather, I want to claim that Simpson's practice reveals the assumptions upon which black female subjec-

tivity are formulated and presents them as what Spillers calls the "zero degree" from which all subjects might take their bearing.[93] To argue otherwise would be to ignore the tremendous violence that Simpson's work brings into the frame, if not into view, particularly in the fourth room of her installation. There, gorgeous black-and-white photographs of the trees just outside the window, labeled simply with their species name, wended their way around a small space covered in ceramic tiles (see fig. 2.10).

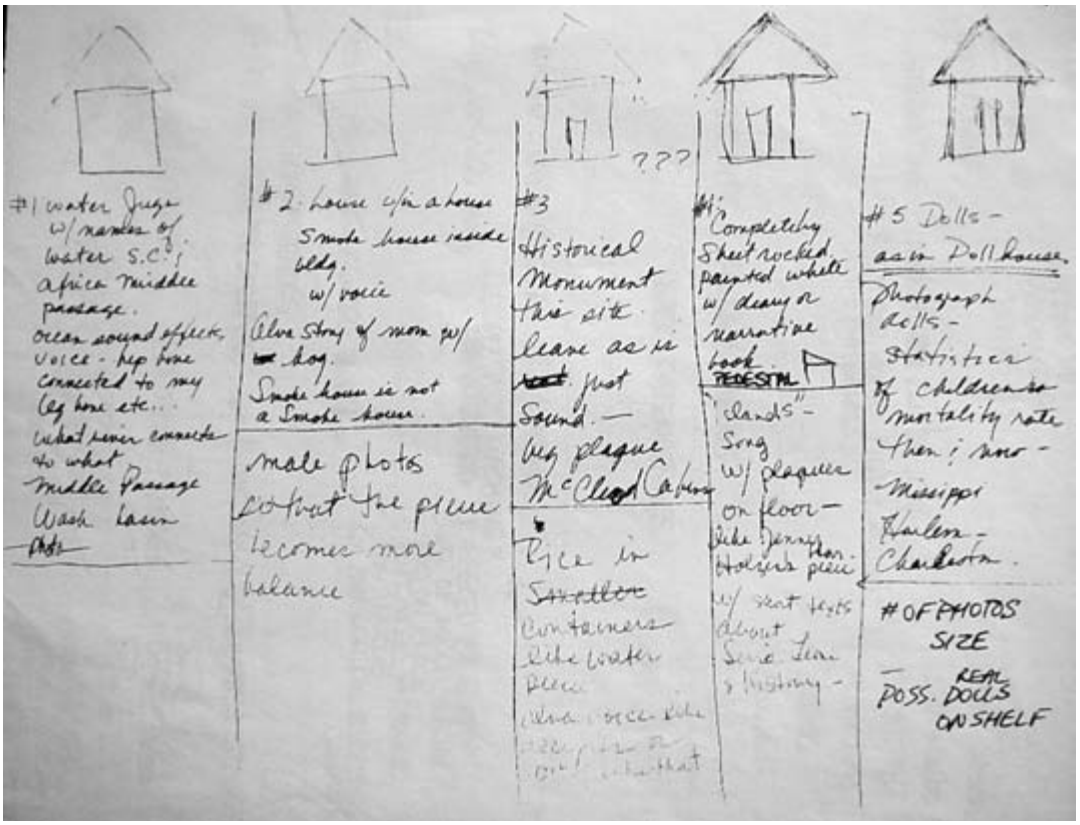
The viewer's appreciation of these specimens was almost immediately colored with pathos. Speakers emitted Rogers's rendition of "Strange Fruit," a lyric made famous by Billie Holliday that describes lynched black bodies swinging from branches. This song was preceded by Rogers's reading of a passage from the Book of Psalms (135:17): "they have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not. They have ears, but they hear not; neither is there any breath in their mouths." The experience of these voicings was likely made even more chilling by both tracks' undercurrent of ambient noise, recorded in a cathedral, that further amplified the echoing effected by the room's ceramic tiles.[94]

All of this combined to create a palpable sense of spaces haunted by quite specific histories germane to particular populations, an emphasis on the terror of the quotidian that might well have turned the informed viewer back onto the site—the area's local lynching tree was, after all, just two miles away.[95] As is so often the case in Simpson's work, the photographs in this room cast us to other sites and sights, yet our apprehension of them is qualified by her emphasis on a rigorous structural logic. The result is a set of keys for understanding the appearance of blackness and the construction of slavery as terms that are always already spectral, a fact that Roger's singing served to amplify in limning the presence of subjects long lost to sight, to history, and our understanding of it. If Simpson's object choices gave us the material coordinates of the enslaved, then Rogers's voice populated that network with "haints," figuring the ghosts left in the machinery of capital and refiguring our sense of how and where the slave past might manifest itself.[96]

Ironically, given her apparent attunement to the implications of her chosen location, it was not Simpson's initial choice. According to the itinerary of the artist's first trip to Charleston in December of 1990, she visited eight different former slave dependencies scattered throughout the Charleston area, from the American Sightseeing Building to the beautifully preserved Bocquet House.[97] Of these, her first pick was the last on the list, a group of six slave cabins on James Island located on a large tract of land once used to grow cotton by the McLeod family (fig. 2.20).[98] In addition to the slave quarters, the property included a big house, an avenue of live oaks, and a large field; it was, in other words, a classic plantation. Despite repeated appeals on Simpson's behalf, the staff of the Spoleto Festival was unable to secure the location for her use.[99] But a few months before the exhibition was scheduled to open, it appeared that the McLeod site might still be available and the installation was being planned accordingly.

A fax to Jacob dated March 6, 1991, shows sketches for each of the five ten-by-

2.20
McLeod Plantation slave cabins. (Photograph by the author, 2010.)



2.21
Preliminary drawing for *Five Rooms*, 1991. (Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, *Places with a Past* Archive, 57-012. Photograph by the author, 2005. © Lorna Simpson, Courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

fourteen-foot cabins that Simpson planned to use, along with descriptions of the contents to be placed in each (fig. 2.21). The elements depicted here are both familiar and different from those found in the final installation: the first space would have featured a wash basin, a soundtrack of water effects, and jugs of water labeled with the names of local rivers. The second would have contained a smokehouse and photographs of a male subject. The third cabin would either have been left as-is and labeled with a plaque reading " McLeod Cabins" or it would have featured water bottles filled with rice and Rogers reciting recipes. The fourth was to be covered with Sheetrock and painted white to resemble a contemporary gallery space with text panels placed on the floor commenting on the history of Sierra Leone and a diary placed on a pedestal where visitors could record their reactions. The fifth cabin was slated for dolls "as in Dollhouse," to be accompanied by statistics on contemporary child mortality rates.[100]

This document suggests that the major forms of the installation as well as Simpson's concerns in conceiving them, remained consistent. Here is how the artist explained her McLeod-oriented vision of *Five Rooms* in a proposal of January 4, 1991:

> This particular site, with its ordered rows of cabins, would allow me to create a series of five separate small works, each independent and self-contained in a cabin. The temporary installations would consist of framed photographs, objects arranged on shelves, and an audiotape that can only be heard within each cabin and activated when one enters. . . . The artwork will focus on the experience of Africans on James Island and Charleston, and link that to contemporary African-American experience. Issues of memory, identity, and race will be a part of this work, as with many of my past works.[101]

The artist's statement helps clarify that *Five Rooms* as it was eventually presented at the Bennett house was a work ghosted by the memory of what it might have been, structured by a site of which most viewers had no knowledge. And like the actual version, the would-be-*Five Rooms* accords neatly with Simpson's reigning interests in seriality, structure, and repetition. This fact, I think, underlines that it is not so much the specifics of literal sites of subjection but blackness and slavery as sites, as structures in and of themselves, that preoccupy the artist. Indeed, the haunting of the actual installation by its unrealized alternative productively highlights the relationship between various enslaved communities: whether sited in the urban center, on the plantation, or in maroon settlements, slaves maintained cultural and filial ties in the face of geographic separation.[102]

For her part, in moving from the McLeod cabins to the Bennett dependency and from visual constructions of the black woman to the material residues of slavery, Simpson remained true to her primary concerns, even if her means for making them visible shifted. Her work, it might be said, effectively challenged distinctions between "functional" and "literal" sites, as defined by the art historian James Meyer. In his groundbreaking account of the transformation of site-specific

practices from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, Meyer argues that more recent work such as Wilson's *Mining the Museum* is marked by its ideological interrogation of a given place, which is conceived as a functional site, an "informational" or "allegorical" "mapping of institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them." Taken at face value, this definition also speaks well to Simpson's deployment of the black female figure in her phototextual constructions; likewise, Meyer's accounting of previous artists' concern with the physical and material determinants of a literal site—"an actual location, a singular place"—would seem to accord with Simpson's *Five Rooms*.[103]

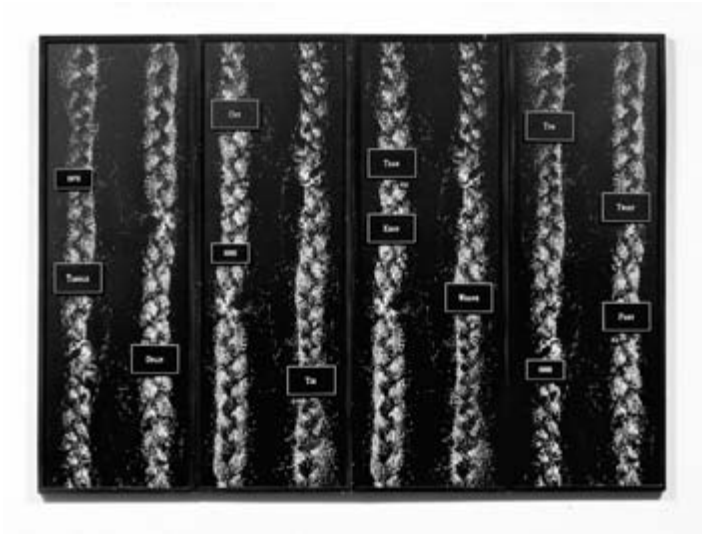
I would argue, however, that in *Guarded Conditions* and its sisters, the artist spelled out the circumstances governing the functional site of African American femininity, while in *Five Rooms* she rendered a literal site resonantly functional. In Simpson's practice, the black female body as an avatar of subjection is understood to be a phantom, a universal figure that is both functional and literal at once, tethered to specific histories yet free-floating and always at hand. The specificity in her work never derives entirely from a singular location, but from the structures governing the appearance of blackness at any place or time. It makes sense then, that she went on to install the first of her five rooms at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago for her 1992 retrospective, suggesting that the legacy of slavery is always available for activation and it is the viewer's responsibility to establish a relation to it (fig. 2.22).

2.22
Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer, installation view. MCA Chicago, November 21, 1992–March 14, 1993. (Photograph © Museum of Contemporay Art Chicago. © Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

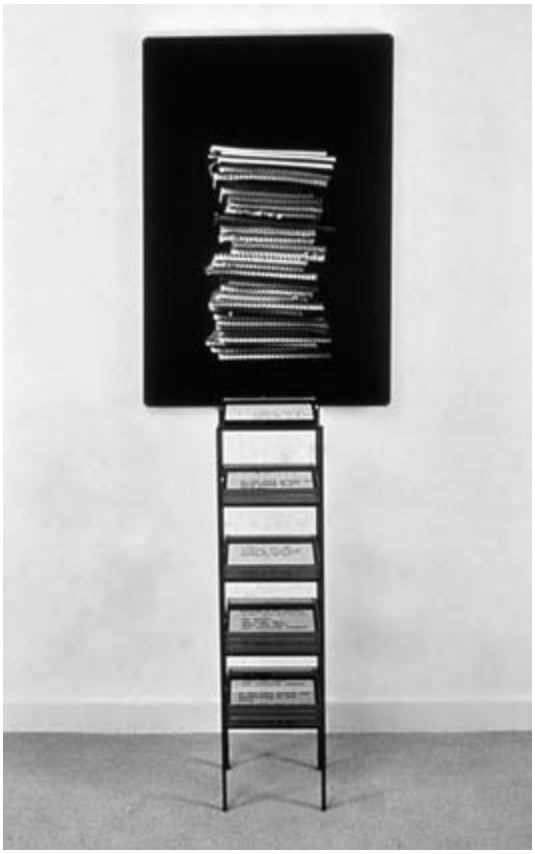
Just as her earlier work shows little interest in explaining to her viewers "how it really is" to be a black woman, *Five Rooms* was only partially about educating audiences didactically or creating a transparent narrative of black folks' sojourn in the U.S.[104] While its chambers might be thought to follow a sequential logic that provides a particularly American historical telos—from Middle Passage (room one), to resistance (two), to labor (three), to lynching and Reconstruction (four), to reproduction (five), the work can also be imagined to reveal the moods, attitudes, and postures of an absent African diasporic female subject as she is processed within an apparatus. Simpson's objects pose slavery not as a set of characters or episodes but as a set of structuring New World conditions that continue to be felt by embodied persons in her own time, even as Rogers's songs remind us of the narratives we do have by summoning up countless others that have been lost to history proper yet live on in the very structure of the material world.

It is this dual vision that connects *Five Rooms* to *Down by the Riverside*; both projects bear the marks of their respective authors' investment in and critique of the structuralist imaginary. As Joyner notes in his introduction, his kaleidoscopic approach to the history of slavery in South Carolina was informed by the work of the *Annales* school in the 1930s and that of later historians who aimed to address the totality of the cultural, environmental, political, and economic structures in which quotidian subjects emerge.[105] Just as his text would recruit the voices of the formerly enslaved in order to qualify and recast the remains of the master's archive, so Simpson's installation productively deformed images of slavery by emphasizing the thingness of enslaved bodies and the counterhegemonic soundings that issued from them. In *Five Rooms*, blackness is "already made," capable of being evoked with the lightest of touches.

As the final chamber of her installation demonstrates, Simpson had reconciled herself to these facts and set out to make use of them (see fig. 2.11). In the fifth room, viewers again heard the refrain from "Islands" and were confronted with prefabricated morsels: a circle of black kewpie dolls hung like a curtain from the ceiling, its dimensions precisely rhyming with those of the hut in room two. This element of the work reflects on the historical reproduction of oppression in both literal and figurative terms as indicated by the words "son" and "daughter" that marched along the walls. Here, black children are figured not through affecting images that might pull on the heartstrings but through hard plastic objects, commodities first and foremost. In this way, Simpson located the logic of the ready-made in the crucible of slavery, which, according to Harriet Jacobs, produced its subjects as "God-breathing machines . . . no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend."[106] Although it is the closing note of *Five Rooms*, Simpson's ensemble of transitional objects suggests the new pathways to blackness and becoming that she would go on to explore. In concluding this chapter, it is to these pathways that I want briefly to turn in order to register their wide-ranging effects.



2.23 (below)
Lorna Simpson, *1978–1988*, 1990. Four gelatin silver prints, thirteen engraved plastic plaques. 124.5 x 177.8 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)



2.24 (right)
Lorna Simpson, *Stack of Diaries*, 1993. Photosensitive linen, steel, etched glass. 206 x 71 x 46 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

5.

Around the end of 1992, so the story goes, the figure slowly began to disappear from Simpson's art.[107] Or at least its absence could no longer be critically explained as a logical extension of her established themes, as could earlier works like *1978–1988*, a phototext that mapped the passage of time through those now familiar braids and that was smoothly slotted into the discourse of what cultural theorist Kobena Mercer called "black hair/style politics" (1990; fig. 2.23).[108] Suddenly adrift without the exegetical anchor of the black female body and now confronted with all manner of increasingly sculptural synecdoches for its presence, several commentators explained Simpson's apparent about-face through a reversal of the terms previously applied to her practice. Consider critic David Pagel's reaction to an exhibition featuring Simpson's *Stack of Diaries*, a resolutely nonfigurative construction, nonetheless scaled to the body, that is composed of glass plates on a steel shelf and a photograph of the eponymous stack (1993; fig. 2.24). He opined that this work and its fellows were no longer about "specific politics," but "wide-ranging aesthetics," that "seduction" rather than "confrontation," was their mode, and that the artist herself was now "whisper[ing]" instead of "declaring." In the final analysis, Pagel found this new approach considerably less compelling, much "too bland and generic" when compared with the "biting energy of [her] earlier photographs."[109]

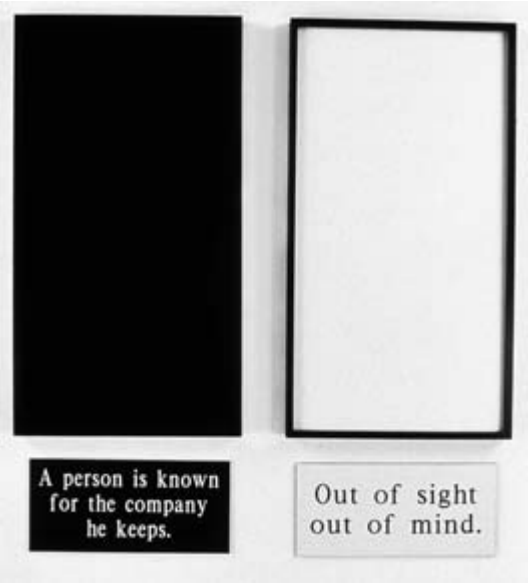
2.25
Lorna Simpson, *Standing in the Water*, 1994. Three serigraphs on felt panels, two video monitors, ten etched glass panels. Overall dimensions variable. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

This turn in the reception of Simpson's work was anticipated by Bradford R. Collins, who penned the only review of *Places with a Past* to dwell at length on *Five Rooms*. In his accounting, the artist's "estheticized attempts to enlist our sympathies on behalf of the historic victims of racism, though moving, seemed less effective than [her] conceptual photo works that implicate the viewer in present-day structures of racism."[110] Curator Thelma Golden was doubtless aware of how such myopic readings, hungry for allusions to contemporary black dereliction, could easily mutate into full-fledged backlash. She took the completion of *Standing in the Water*—a 1994 installation composed of etched glass plates, felt strips, video, and sound (fig. 2.25)—as the occasion to put the question on everyone's mind to the artist herself.

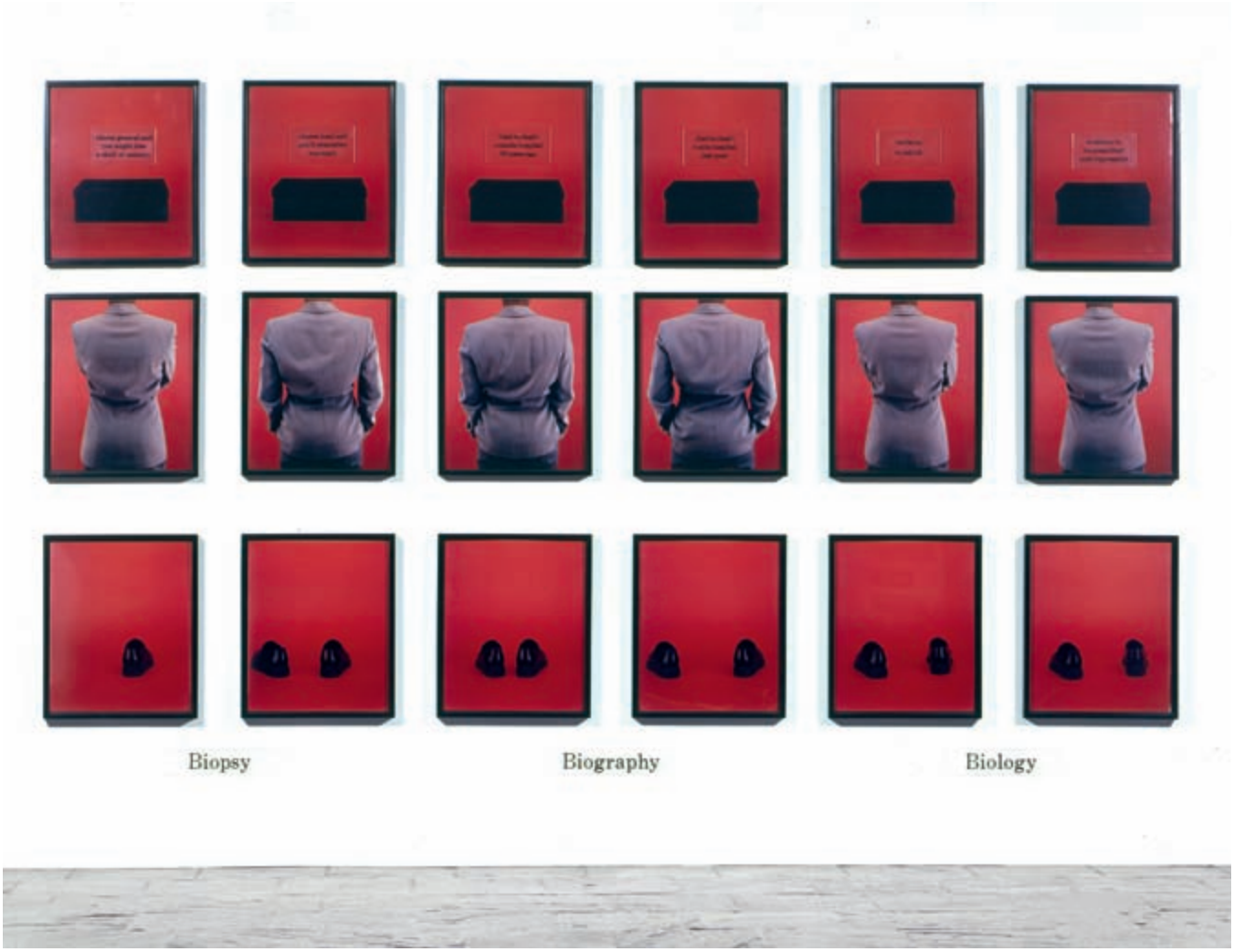
> The figure, your colored, gendered figure, seems to have moved out of the work. Our colleague Kellie Jones, our homegirl, art historian, and curator, and I have only half-jokingly referred to this shift by titling the new piece "Bye, Bye Black Girl". . . . But I think I understand this shift. . . . By denying viewers a figure are you disallowing them a place to "site" the issues so specifically, as you have similarly denied access to a face in the past?[111]

Simpson's reply? "Not really. . . . I am just trying to work through these issues without an image of a figure. My interest in the body remains."[112]

In *Standing in the Water*, that interest diversely manifested itself. Speakers placed on either side of the room emitted a soundtrack of aquatic effects. Among the concerns enumerated in the video were the plight of enslaved Africans who



2.26
Lorna Simpson, *Untitled*, 1989. Two gelatin silver prints, two engraved plastic plaques. 76×40.5 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)



2.27
Lorna Simpson, *Bio*, 1992. Eighteen color Polaroid prints, six engraved Plexiglas plaques, three engraved plastic plaques. 248.9×411.5 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

jumped ship, the "promise of showers" held out to Jews on their way to the camps, and the memory of a "first time pissing in the ocean." These evocations, printed in white text, scrolled down the work's two small monitors—in the top unit over an image of a water pitcher, on the bottom over footage of rolling waves. Both televisions were embedded in the far wall of the gallery facing the entrance, which was separated from the exterior space by a cream-colored scrim. Moving inside, the viewer would have first encountered three five-by-twelve-foot lengths of felt printed with images of the sea, which became more legible as she approached the video monitors. Surmounting the felt panels were glass squares, each featuring the same photograph of a pair of shoes, yet differently tinted to suggest varying degrees of submersion.[113]

By January of '94, when *Standing in the Water* opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, these were the sole traces of the body that had guided Simpson's art and would continue to haunt it. In a 2002 interview, the artist connected the withdrawal of the figure at this moment to personal feelings of loss related to the death of her mother and of many friends from AIDS.[114] Such an assertion cannot be discounted, yet the transition that Simpson describes was in fact evidence of earlier processes of substitution and emptying out seen at work in, say, *Untitled* of 1989 (fig. 2.26). In this piece, two blank photographs are placed side by side—one black, the other white—and limned with texts that subtly evoke the dynamics of racial visibility through a refusal of rather than a reckoning with the object world. It was only in the wake of *Five Rooms* that Simpson began to produce head-on photographs of readymade goods with unprecedented frequency, means that allowed her to differentially bring blackness into play without necessarily bringing the black body or any other racialized referent into the frame.

The titles of these pieces—*Wishbones* (1993), *5 Candles* (1993), *9 Props* (1995)—begin to tell the tale; *Bio* definitively makes the case (1992; fig. 2.27). In this sprawling work, whose six tripartite antiportraits pointedly recall *Guarded Conditions*, the artist has replaced the feet and head of her figures with shoes and shoeboxes. As such, the piece visually and thematically recalls another feminist conceptual intervention, Mary Kelly's *Interim Part I: Corpus* (1984–1985), in which crisply rendered images of black handbags and other items of clothing stand in for the bodies of female subjects given voice in the work's alternating text panels.[115] Similarly, in *Bio*, photographic substitution arguably makes the work's textual commentary on the production of black women's lives within the long-standing regimes of Western biopower that much more poignant through its emphasis on bodily loss and subjective haunting. Ultimately, Simpson's encounter with slavery in Charleston not only allowed such part-objects to enter into her work, but to do so as signs for those bodily fragments and lost haints that have consistently shaped black women's horizons of subjective possibility.

To wit, in 1994 Simpson executed *Wigs (Portfolio)*, a wall installation featuring images of hairpieces bought at the local hair superstore printed on felt that was relatively disembodied, but that made slavery "material" through its use of

2.28
Lorna Simpson, *Wigs*, 1994. Fifty waterless lithographs on felt. 235 x 636 cm. (© Lorna Simpson, courtesy of the artist and Salon94, New York.)

historical texts (fig. 2.28). Two captions are particularly germane. One recounts the experience of escaped slave and Underground Railroad conductor Sojourner Truth who "was asked that she display her breasts to confirm her sex during a meeting that she might have been a man masquerading as a woman." Another is lifted almost verbatim from *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, the extraordinary narrative of William and Ellen Craft, a married couple who escaped bondage in Georgia in 1848 through a brilliant disguise: knowing "that slaveholders have the privilege of taking their slaves to any part of the country they think proper, it occurred to me that as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape."[116]

Here, Simpson uncharacteristically relies on specific narrative episodes to do her work: a speaking subject is recruited that describes impersonation and concealment as historical exigencies. The corollary wig thus becomes a type of transitional object that lends itself to both the covering over and revelation of blackness. The other texts peppering the work—a psychoanalyst's interview with the mother of an avowed fetishist, for instance—make clear that black resistance is but one of many ways in which wigs allow for alternative constructions of identity without acceding to or refusing the gaze. Indeed, the work's gridded serigraphs seem to invite visual scrutiny as well as bodily contact, emphasizing divergent modes of perception and the need to think them together in imagining their absent locus.

Making sense of this shift in Simpson's work requires one final turn of the psychoanalytic screw. In her account of subject formation, theorist Kaja Silverman argues that each of us comes to apprehend ourselves as a self not only through the jubilant encounter with our reflected image famously described by Jacques Lacan in his essay "The Mirror Stage," but also, as the lesser-known psychoanalyst Henri Wallon maintains, through the sum of our physical contacts with the world, resulting in an apposite bodily identity that is keyed to tactile, cutaneous, and erotogenic sensation. Silverman terms these two schemas the visual imago and the sensational ego, respectively, and though they must be "laboriously stitch[ed] together" for a unified corporeal schema to be achieved, their disalignment "does not seem to produce pathological effects."[117] Psychoanalysis, despite its limitations, importantly teaches us that such troubled coexistence is always at issue in the construction of the self and its world, whether through the play of the image, the felt surface of the body, or the apprehension of transitional objects. Winnicott reminds us in "The Mirror-Role of the Mother and Family in Child Development," an essay inspired by Lacan's, that tacking between the imaginary and the actual is vital to the development of the subject's "psychosomatic interrelating and object-relating" capacities.[118] The same can be said of Simpson's art, in which divergent modes of perception continually haunt, undermine, and prey on each other.

Time and again her works underline the slipperiness of our grasp on the world by holding open the perceptual gap that some inevitably navigate with greater ease than others. For it is the plight of the black subject not only to recognize such disjunctures, but also to inhabit them in order to preserve the bodily ego from the objectifying images of blackness that litter the cultural landscape and doggedly cling to black skin.[119] Simpson's work tarries precisely in such interstices—between the particular and the universal, the functional and the literal, the visual and the sensate, the image and the thing, the structural and the historical, the phantasmatic and the factual—but above all, in the space between the subject and the object that has defined the bodily, psychic, and structural predicament of African diasporic peoples from slavery to the present. As befitting its status, the transitional *Five Rooms* ensconced viewers in the thick of these contradictions, requiring that both the artist and the viewer reckon with slavery and its objects, which continue to haunt the site of blackness, wherever it may be. It is precisely the question of the African diasporic subject's location—or lack thereof—that animates the next chapter's exploration of Glenn Ligon's fugitive tactics.

If niggers could fly, where would we alight? We orbit a treeless world, nest on eaveless clouds, unable to stop flapping our wings for even a second, in constant migration to nowhere.

PAUL BEATTY, *The White Boy Shuffle*, 1996

3.1
Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (1776–1865)*, 1991. Oil stick and paint on paper. 76.2×55.9 cm.
(Courtesy of the artist.)

3

Glenn Ligon and the Matter of Fugitivity

My subject, then, fellow-citizens, is AMERICAN SLAVERY. I shall see this day and its popular characteristics from the slave's point of view. Standing there, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this Fourth of July. Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," 1852

In 1991, Glenn Ligon set out to draw a history of American freedom (fig. 3.1). He began by inscribing the year 1776 into the upper-left-hand corner of a red ground before proceeding to record what came next: 1777, then 1778, 1779, 1780. Occasionally, splotches of paint undermine the numbers' rectitude; gradually, the dragging of black oil stick and plastic stencil decreases their clarity; and every other line or so, a year is cut in half by the paper's right edge. Such incidents of smear and shadow hardly count, because one year after another, the story and the drawing unfold, the digits dutifully plodding across the surface until they meet its margin, wrap around it, and continue onward. When their journey concludes, it does so abruptly, even anticlimactically, leaving a jagged red strip beneath the year 1865. "Liberty and justice for all" have somehow arrived, their uncertainty intact.

In its movement from the Declaration of Independence to the abolition of slavery, *Untitled (1776–1865)* marks out the disparity between instances of American emancipation so as to materialize the distance between the realities of black op-

pression and the myths of white freedom. In drawing these moments together like so many links in a chain, Ligon's work not only points to the lapses of memory that have been required for the republic to imagine itself, it also suggests how the selective occlusion of the past continues to falsify our imagining of the present. Executed for the artist's show at New York's Jack Tilton Gallery, which opened—perhaps not coincidentally—on July 2,1991, just days before the United States independence holiday, *Untitled (1776–1865)* can hardly do otherwise. Ligon's understated indictment thus seems to echo Frederick Douglass's scathing assessment of the nation's hypocrisy and thereby keeps alive, nearly one hundred and forty years later, his still-pressing question: "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?"

Both men, I would argue, implicitly answer "nothing," though the ways each goes about giving shape to nothingness—to the lack of voice, autonomy, and personhood that characterizes the position of the black subject—are, of course, purposefully different. Unlike the former slave, whose oration unfolds with dizzying rhetorical brilliance, Ligon dispenses with words and settles for the unassailable march of numbers themselves. Yet like Douglass, who cannot rejoice—"*I*," he declares, "must mourn" on the Fourth of July—Ligon has made a somber drawing, a listing that runs together, collapsing dates and darkly compressing time.[1] Here, it is not the clock but the artist's hand that keeps on ticking, patiently inscribing each numeral in its place within a grid while physically registering the occasional errors that arise in the course of such an exercise: an errant "18" crops up between 1824 and 1825, and the year 1855 is missing altogether, but the work's core proposal still holds.

As did Douglass, Ligon understands the political disavowal with which assertions of black freedom are met, and like so many modernists, he mourns for a loss that we still cannot get over, a difficulty brought into his then-present by the conceptual pendant to *Untitled (1776–1865)* (fig. 3.2).[2] Beginning where that drawing left off, *Untitled (1865–1991)* makes even less of a claim for the epochal status of its featured dates, merely holding out another cascade of digits that eventually halt at the year of its execution. The accounting of American history in these pieces cleaves along the date of abolition, materially enacting the disjuncture between eras of black oppression. Yet the works' almost identical modes of rote execution also intimate how the effects of the "peculiar institution" continue to induct us into the future even as we ostensibly move ever further from the primal scenes of the antebellum past. Taken together, these untitled drawings make manifest the grounds from which this chapter departs: namely, that slavery, its legacies, and the modes of resistance to them were of formative importance for Ligon's conception of history as well as his aesthetic means in the late 1980s and early '90s, a tendency most dramatically evinced by his large-scale installation *To Disembark* (1993).

Curiously, such engagements were rarely considered in the initial accounts of his art. Just a few weeks before his opening at Jack Tilton, the up-and-coming painter was the subject of a Sunday *New York Times* profile. In the accompanying photograph, Ligon emerges warily from behind one of his trademark antiportraits,

3.2
Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (1865–1991)*, 1991. Gouache, oil stick, and graphite on paper. 76.2×56.5 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

bodily doubles, in which first-person assertions of identity—frequently appropriated from texts by canonical African American authors such as Ralph Ellison—are repeatedly stenciled in black paint onto a white ground until the words become illegible (fig. 3.3). In her write-up, critic Roberta Smith situated the artist's practice not within traditions of black radical critique, but in relation to his seemingly antithetical personal experiences, beginning with his daily childhood commute from a South Bronx housing project to a West Side private school and ending with his shift from painterly abstraction to a multimedia practice pointedly engaged with social issues. Ligon's peripatetic life had, according to Smith, enabled his art to "negotiate an unusually effective course between the visual and the linguistic, the visceral and the cerebral, and the personal and the political."[3]

In the quotation that gives the profile its title, Ligon confirms his status as a nomad ever marooned between such antinomies: "Lack of location is my location. I'm always shifting opinions and changing my mind."[4] More than just a clue about his personal disposition, this statement sums up an attitude toward identity in terms quite befitting the moment. These were, after all, the salad days of identarian critique, epitomized by cultural critic Stuart Hall's well-known declaration of "the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject."[5] Such interventions

3.3
Nancy Siesel, *Portrait of Glenn Ligon*, from the *New York Times*, June 1991. (© Nancy Siesel.)

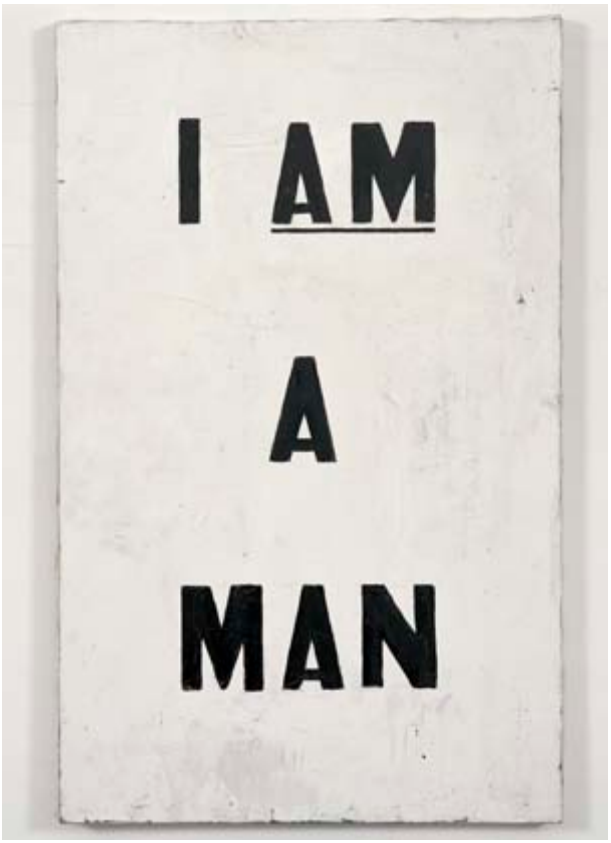
aimed to trouble the fixity so often presumed whenever race rears its impossible head, though, as we saw in Lorna Simpson's case, for all the talk of hybrid and performative selves, mainstream criticism by and large further trivialized the work of black artists even as it was brought forward to capitalize on the reigning taste for alterity.[6] Fully aware of the limitations imposed on practitioners of color during what he would later call the age of "High Multiculturalism," at the time, Ligon acknowledged his investment in African American history, but was careful to hedge his bets toward the ambiguous.[7] When Smith asked if he considered himself a political artist, he responded: "I don't have any problem with the term if it means you're doing art about real life and about what's most important to you. But sometimes it's used as a pejorative to criticize work that pushes a specific agenda. I hope my work is more open-ended, more about questioning positions than establishing a single position."[8]

This assertion has established something like an interpretive baseline for the whole of Ligon's practice, which has modeled a topical diversity and aesthetic promiscuity shaped by his social positioning as a gay man of African descent, even as his work interrogates the bases of social positioning as such. In the last fifteen

years, he has gone on to recruit household furniture items in fantasizing the image world of black queer youth (*Twin*, 1995); to videotape a session with his therapist in order to deconstruct his anxieties about the trajectory of his practice (*The Orange and Blue Feelings*, 2003); and to create neon sculptures featuring the words "negro sunshine"—a phrase culled from Gertrude Stein's 1909 novella "Melanctha"—in glowing foot-high letters (*Warm Broad Glow*, 2005).

However, it is the paintings on fabric, as distinct from the drawings on paper, that initially garnered Ligon a place as one of the foremost artists of his generation. Consider the earliest work included in his retrospective, *Unbecoming*, which opened at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art in 1998 (1988; fig. 3.4). In this untitled painting, Ligon reiterated, destabilized, and subtly queered the declaration of manhood featured on the placards held out by protesting Memphis sanitation workers in 1968 as guards against scopic and bodily harm. The most recent painting in the exhibition cast the first five paragraphs of James Baldwin's 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village"—an account of the writer's self-imposed exile to Switzerland—as a dark monochromatic screen that visually figured the writer's double negation as black and gay (1997; fig. 3.5). These two pieces functioned as bookends for Ligon's work of the previous decade, underlining how his art has consistently looked back to earlier moments for its historical and formal articulations.

Along with any number of practitioners in the early 1990s who evoked the socially marked body through figural surrogates—his *1993 Whitney Biennial* cohorts Janine Antoni and Byron Kim spring most immediately to mind—Ligon was influenced by conceptualism's linguistic turn, minimalism's phenomenological address, and feminist critiques of media imagery. His wide-ranging engagements with and reframing of these practices have since become exemplary of how contemporary artists might take up yet ultimately resist univocal assertions of identity.[9] In his groundbreaking essay for the *Unbecoming* catalog, Richard Meyer argues that



3.4 (left)
Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988. Oil and enamel on canvas. 101.6×63.5 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

3.5 (right)
Glenn Ligon, *Stranger in the Village (Excerpt) #10*, 1997. Oil stick and coal dust on linen. 243.8×365.8 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

Ligon mobilizes language and its disappearance to demonstrate that particular subjects always necessarily exist in excess of the limits imposed by categories of racial or sexual difference.[10] Darby English has taken this line of thought to its logical conclusion in a series of rigorous meditations that explain how the artist dodges convenient dichotomies, sidestepping essentialist reductions of identity by rendering the Other an image always on the move.[11]

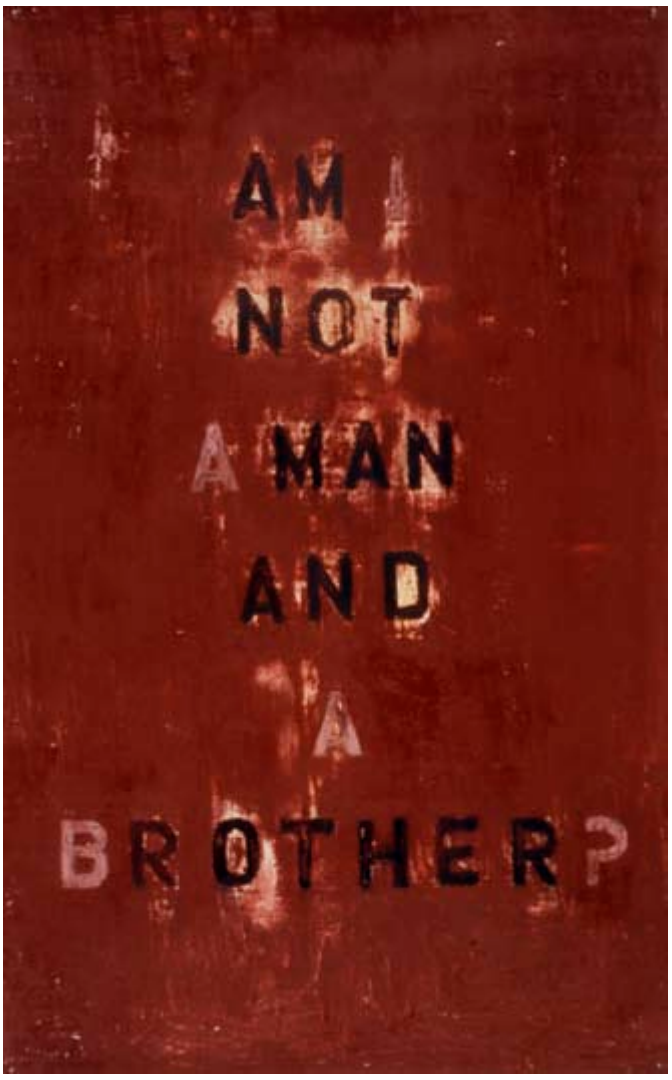
In their sustained attention to Ligon's practice, these art historians' readings help us to comprehend the relation between the artist's open-ended approach to language and his investment in revisiting specific figures and episodes. For Meyer, Ligon's work models a "dialectical engagement" with the past, while English suggests that history subtends his "compositional method."[12] What I want to emphasize is that for this artist, history *matters*. If Wilson's work was haunted by the past and Simpson's structured by it, then Ligon's aesthetic means reflect an understanding of how formations aimed at illuminating the contingency of the self are part and parcel of the epistemes of violence that continue to produce marked subjects. As Ligon would write of African American artistic masters David Hammons and Sun Ra in his 2004 essay "Black Light," "not being from *here* is a movement toward placelessness, toward the utopic, *and* a deep critique of American society. Their genius was to employ a postmodern concern with the emptying out of the self as a critical strategy, one that might have particular resonance with a people historically positioned at the margin of what was considered human."[13]

These comments are, I think, equally applicable to Ligon's own varied practice and contingent self-positioning, which root conceptions of the decentered subject in black peoples' storied tactics of survival and critique in the modern West. Indeed, over the course of his career, Ligon has consistently engaged the postures and visual technologies that produce black folks as runaways who define the limits of belonging and productively figure the aporias of representation. Whether he focuses on James Baldwin's eloquent prose or the protesting sanitation workers' blunt declaration, in bringing our attention to these men's words and demanding that we attempt to reread them, Ligon brings their fates to bear on the structuring of the self past and present, black and white, queer and otherwise. In so doing, he limns both their positions and his own, that sense of being continually unmoored, which historian Harold Cruse described as the lot of the Negro intelligentsia as a whole, that "rootless class of displaced persons who are refugees from the social poverty of the black world."[14]

These facts of social fugitivity have directed Ligon's practice and its reflection on the unmoored status of the black and the queer in the modern era. Just as important, his art reveals an attunement to and understanding of the ways in which marginalized subject positions are anticipated by the placelessness of the enslaved, who, as novelist Toni Morrison argues, were long ago forced to negotiate the "postmodern" problems attendant on the dissolution of the self, the symbolic, and the social.[15] This contention is borne out both historically and theoretically. The captive not only provided the linchpin of an emergent capitalist economy,

but also served as the prime object for the emerging regimes of knowledge, power, and vision that have differentially produced the Western subject. The specular and panoptic modes of seeing that constituted the enslaved—on the one hand meant to display their abjection through an obscene violence, on the other to maintain their subjection through omnipresent surveillance—have been integral to the evolving production of the racialized body as a knowable site whose very being is not just revealed in the skin but rooted in the flesh.[16] Not dissimilarly, the homosexual has been produced as an unimaginable figure who provides a boundary marker for the commons: his intangible desires may remain invisible, but his difference can eventually be hunted back to his body by the very same discourses of natural history and comparative anatomy on which scientific racism relied.[17] Lost somewhere in these intersecting and historically interdependent binaries, the black queer subject is constructed by opposing modalities of imagined negativity and social visibility.

Ligon's figurative "lack of location" might be aligned, then, with the place from which a black radical queer critique emerges.[18] Yet in fabulating selves through previous articulations of marked positionality, in considering the links between the shifting horizons of any individual subject and the structural coordinates of alterity, his work has been everywhere touched by the discourse of the slave, that avatar of ultimate historical and subjective difference. An untitled work from 1989 goes straight to the heart of the matter (fig. 3.6). In this instance, the maroon ground of the paper has been reworked almost to the point of excoriation, though



3.6
Glenn Ligon, *Untitled,* 1989. Oil on paper. 121.9 x 76.2 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

3.7
Anonymous, *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?*, 1837. Woodcut on woven paper, 26.7 x 22.8 cm. (Image courtesy of the Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Washington DC.)

3.8
Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark*, 1993, installation view. Ten lithographs, nine wood crates with sound. Overall dimensions variable. (Courtesy of the artist.)

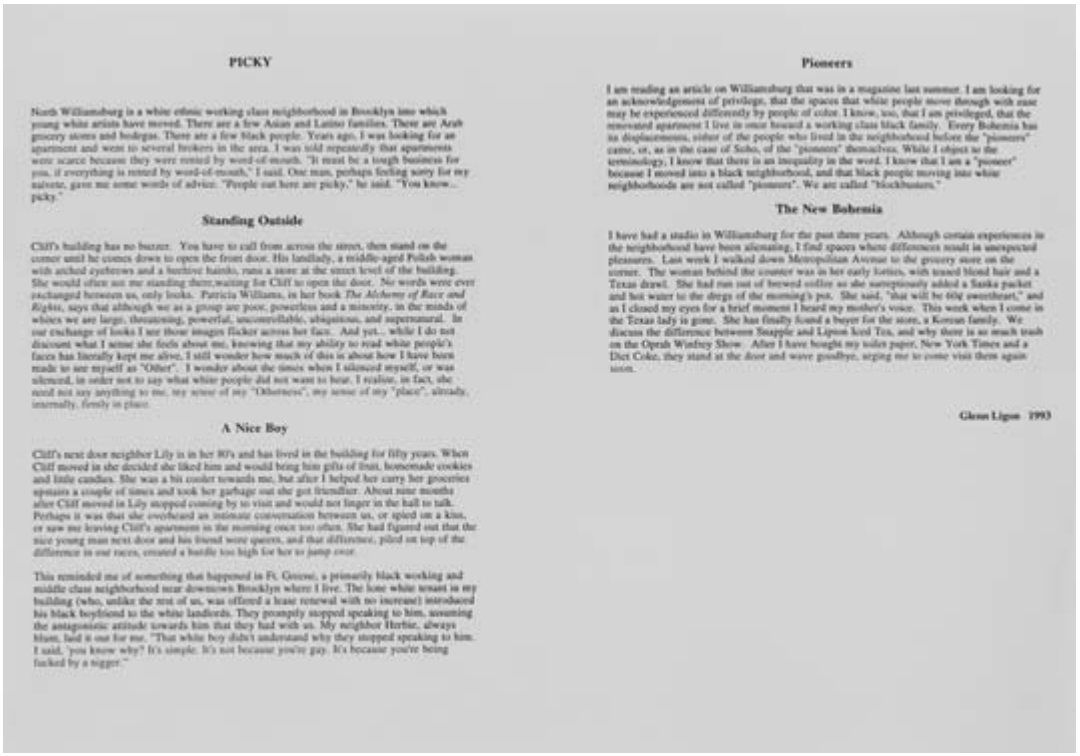
the stenciled text embedded within it can be made out readily enough: "Am I Not a Man and A Brother?" An inversion of the 1968 protesters' declaration and a rhetorical ploy much like Douglass's, this question was initially devised by the eighteenth-century British Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade as a caption to accompany stock figures of half-dressed supplicating slaves. Subsequently, the pairing of image and text was translated, revised, and reproduced throughout those nineteenth-century slave-holding societies in which abolitionist discourse had gained a foothold (1837; fig. 3.7).[19] The scabrous surface of Ligon's drawing seems to memorialize the image's storied transmission while also recasting its ventriloquizing text. Instead of an inert motif that would again empty the enslaved of particularity, the work holds out an inimitable linguistic terrain. Indeed, the drawing's very facture seems to crumble even as it freshly articulates an appeal to those ties of kinship and community that the black subject has historically been denied in his placement at the limit of and as an embodied locus for modernity's modes of violence and visualization.

It is the legacy of these modes, either inaugurated in slavery or passionately posed against it, that haunts Ligon's practice and directly animates *To Disembark*,

first shown at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC fig. 3.8). In this work, Ligon pointedly figured himself as a fugitive slave in prints and sculptures based on antebellum sources, and throughout his practice of this period, he emerges as a runaway subject. Making the case will require looking more closely at Ligon's early work, revisiting his haunts, recontextualizing his references—in short, repeating his returns. In the process, I want to foreground those forms of experience that often could not be registered by painting, focusing on works where Ligon's visual tactics directly engage the racial technologies and spatial sites that inform the lives of runaways in the present and that take their measure from the lingering traces of the peculiar institution. In so doing, I hope to make vivid the critical practice that emerges when one takes the vicissitudes of race and sex as seriously (and lightly) as does Ligon (himself). For in his work, blackness, slavery, and its aftermaths are not simply agencies of oppression or marks of foreclosure, but expansive openings through which we might begin to see the modern, the aesthetic, and ourselves differently. It is with this aim in mind that I now want to think further about where Ligon's "lack of location" placed him in New York circa 1993 and what that vantage afforded his imagining of the past.

> Am I, I wonder, a thing among things, a body propelled along a track by sinews and bony levers, or am I a monologue moving through time, approximately five feet above the ground, if the ground does not turn out to be just another word, in which case I am indeed lost? Whatever the case, I am plainly not myself in as clear a way as I might wish.
>
> **J. M. COETZEE**, *In the Heart of the Country*, 1976

In 1993, Ligon executed *Picky* for the group show "Trespassing," an often-overlooked work that is nonetheless key to understanding the ambitions of his early oeuvre (fig. 3.9).[20] Comprising a negative Photostat map of Brooklyn and a positive photocopied text pinned to the wall, it conjoins an early reproductive technology—the Photostat was invented in 1907—with the one that effectively replaced it. As such, the work partakes of the black-and-white visual economy of Ligon's text canvases, yet for all of its high-keyed contrast, possesses little of the paintings' seductive appeal. If the *Strangers in the Village* nod to the work of modernist painter Ad Reinhardt, then *Picky* pays tribute to the conceptualism of Joseph Kosuth, particularly his *White and Black* (1966), which renders dictionary definitions of the work's titular terms as a negative Photostat diptych. Almost in compensation for this bare-bones aesthetic, in *Picky* we are given a rather different access to Ligon's "voice": instead of "a monologue moving through time" that hovers above the ground of social relations, the work offers a series of racially inflected scenarios played out in the then–newly gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood of North



PICKY

North Williamsburg is a white ethnic working class neighborhood in Brooklyn into which young white artists have moved. There are a few Asian and Latino families. There are Arab grocery stores and bodegas. There are a few black people. Years ago, I was looking for an apartment and went to several brokers in the area. I was told repeatedly that apartments were scarce because they were rented by word-of-mouth. "It must be a tough business for you, if everything is rented by word-of-mouth," I said. One man, perhaps feeling sorry for my naivete, gave me some words of advice. "People out here are picky," he said. "You know... picky."

Standing Outside

Cliff's building has no buzzer. You have to call from across the street, then stand on the corner until he comes down to open the front door. His landlady, a middle-aged Polish woman with arched eyebrows and a beehive hairdo, runs a store at the street level of the building. She would often see me standing there,waiting for Cliff to open the door. *No* words were ever exchanged between us, only looks. Patricia Williams, in her book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, says that although we as a group are poor, powerless and a minority, in the minds of whites we are large, threatening, powerful, uncontrollable, ubiquitous, and supernatural. In our exchange of looks I see those images flicker across her face. And yet... while I do not discount what I sense she feels about me, knowing that my ability to read white people's faces has literally kept me alive, I still wonder how much of this is about how I have been made to see myself as "Other". I wonder about the times when I silenced myself, or was silenced, in order not to say what white people did not want to hear. I realize, in fact, she need not say anything to me, my sense of my "Otherness", my sense of my "place", already, internally, firmly in place.

A Nice Boy

Cliff's next door neighbor Lily is in her 80's and has lived in the building for fifty years. When Cliff moved in she decided she liked him and would bring him gifts of fruit, homemade cookies and little candies. She was a bit cooler towards me, but after I helped her carry her groceries upstairs a couple of times and took her garbage out she got friendlier. About nine months after Cliff moved in Lily stopped coming by to visit and would not linger in the hall to talk. Perhaps it was that she overheard an intimate conversation between us, or spied on a kiss, or saw me leaving Cliff's apartment in the morning once too often. She had figured out that the nice young man next door and his friend were queers, and that difference, piled on top of the difference in our races, created a hurdle too high for her to jump over.

This reminded me of something that happened in Ft. Greene, a primarily black working and middle class neighborhood near downtown Brooklyn where I live. The lone white tenant in my building (who, unlike the rest of us, was offered a lease renewal with no increase) introduced his black boyfriend to the white landlords. They promptly stopped speaking to him, assuming the antagonistic attitude towards him that they had with us. My neighbor Herbie, always blunt, said it out for me. "That white boy didn't understand why they stopped speaking to him. I said, 'you know why? It's simple. It's not because you're gay. It's because you're being fucked by a nigger.'"

Pioneers

I am reading an article on Williamsburg that was in a magazine last summer. I am looking for an acknowledgement of privilege, that the spaces that white people move through with ease may be experienced differently by people of color. I know, too, that I am privileged, that the renovated apartment I live in once housed a working class black family. Every Bohemia has its displacements, sister of the people who lived in the neighborhood before the "pioneers" came, or, as in the case of Soho, of the "pioneers" themselves. While I object to the terminology, I know that there is an inequality in the word. I know that I am a "pioneer" because I moved into a black neighborhood, and that black people moving into white neighborhoods are not called "pioneers". We are called "blockbusters."

The New Bohemia

I have had a studio in Williamsburg for the past three years. Although certain experiences in the neighborhood have been alienating, I find spaces where differences result in unexpected pleasures. Last week I walked down Metropolitan Avenue to the grocery store on the corner. The woman behind the counter was in her early forties, with teased blond hair and a Texas drawl. She had run out of brewed coffee so she surreptiously added a Sanka packet and hot water to the dregs of the morning's pot. She said, "that will be 60¢ sweetheart," and as I closed my eyes for a brief moment I heard my mother's voice. This week when I come in the Texas lady is gone. She has finally found a buyer for the store, a Korean family. We discuss the difference between Snapple and Lipton Iced Tea, and why there is so much trash on the Oprah Winfrey Show. After I have bought my toilet paper, New York Times and a Diet Coke, they stand at the door and wave goodbye, urging me to come visit them again soon.

Glenn Ligon 1993

3.9
Glenn Ligon, *Picky*, 1993. *Above,* detail, photostat. 22.9×22.9 cm. *Below*, detail, photocopy, 40.6×58.4 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

3.10
John Baldessari and George Nicolaidis, *Ghetto Boundary Projects*, 1969. Five archival ink-jet prints, text, and sticker. Each photograph and text, 20.3 × 30.4 cm; sticker, 5 × 7.6 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and LACMA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art Ralph M. Parsons Fund.)

Williamsburg.

Their protagonists subtly snubbed by "picky" real estate agents and bemused by the invisibility of white privilege, these narratives bring home the fact, as the passage titled "Pioneers" puts it, "that the spaces that white people move through with ease may be experienced differently by people of color." Here are the closing lines of that same vignette:

> Every Bohemia has its displacements, either of the people who lived in the neighborhood before the "pioneers" came, or, as in the case of Soho, of the "pioneers" themselves. While I object to the terminology, I know that there is an inequality in the word. I know that I am a "pioneer" because I moved into a black neighborhood, and that black people moving into white neighborhoods are not called "pioneers." We are called "blockbusters."

In its attunement to the tendentious relation between dark skins and property lines, between blackness and value, this narrative harkens back to John Baldessari and George Nicolaidis's *Ghetto Boundary Project* of 1969 (fig. 3.10). In that work, two thousand stickers were affixed to "telephone poles, street signs, etc. along

[a] fifteen mile boundary" in order to demarcate the "thickly populated area" of southeast San Diego "inhabited by minority groups often as a result of social or economic restrictions."

In drawing out the limits of the "ghetto" as supplied by the San Diego Planning Commission, the *Ghetto Boundary Project* orchestrated a street-level encounter with the lines of force meant to reify public space, cordon off the city, and stigmatize colored subjects. Like Ligon, its authors were interested in the disjuncture between the policing function of the grid as imposed from above and the lawlessness of spatial practice as experienced on the ground. Such radical incommensurability is underlined by *Picky*'s juxtaposition of white-on-black map and black-on-white text and theorized by Michel de Certeau in his essay "Walking in the City." He argues that the bird's-eye view of space, as employed by the urban planner, presents a fictional viewpoint intended to render the illegible masses of the city a "*transparent text*"—a vantage at odds with the messiness of life in the streets and the particularity of the subject's wandering through them.[21]

Viewed in this light, Ligon's anecdotes point to the structural affinity between the gaze that fixes the apprehension of the city and the hallucinatory stare that pins down the meaning of blackness: whether merely analogous or nearly identical, such ways of seeing share a dream of epistemic mastery that *Picky* quite cogently picks apart. To be a black pedestrian on that map and to suffer through the experiences described within it, is to *be* a boundary marker, to carry the fright of "the ghetto" in all its clichéd menace, to endure the process of "epidermalization," which, as philosopher Frantz Fanon shows, constitutes the black subject as a *text transparent* to the anxieties thrown up on his skin.[22] In *Picky* we are made to understand how racial difference functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy imposed from without and above yet nevertheless felt. Consider the passage titled "Standing Outside":

> Cliff's building has no buzzer. You have to call from across the street, then stand on the corner until he comes down to open the front door. His landlady, a middle-aged Polish woman with arched eyebrows and a beehive hairdo, runs a store at the street level of the building. She would often see me standing there, waiting for Cliff to open the door. No words were ever exchanged between us, only looks. Patricia Williams, in her book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, says that although we as a group are poor, powerless, and a minority, in the minds of whites we are large, threatening, powerful, uncontrollable, ubiquitous, and supernatural. In our exchange of looks I see those images flicker across her face. And yet . . . while I do not discount what I sense she feels about me, knowing that my ability to read white people's faces has literally kept me alive, I still wonder how much of this is about how I have been made to see myself as "other." I wonder about the times when I silenced myself, or was silenced, in order not to say what white people did not want to hear. I realize, in fact, she need not say anything to me, my sense of my "Otherness," my sense of my "place," already, internally, firmly in place.

This text describes one particular black-white relation, a shadow play of projections that installs and undercuts a sense of "place" in the same paradoxical moment. For even as the narrator's psychic position is hard-wired externally and internally, it is that very fixity that denudes him of singularity, ejecting him from the here and now into a space of phantasmatic projection.

Seen everywhere and wanted nowhere, it is as if the black subject cannot proceed to where he is going because his specter has always arrived before him, a predicament that Ligon mordantly summed up in a 2002 *New Yorker* article: "You try getting your post-black ass into a taxi in Harlem."[23] Lack of location, indeed. Whether waiting for the cab that will never stop, or channeling the latest ode to indeterminacy, what Ligon's statements point to and his art bears out, I want to argue, is a notion of fugitivity—as a transitory state of being, a way of wandering to survive, and a protocol of reading—that emerges as a critical response to the black subject's positioning on the margins of the human in the modern West. To be colored, Glenn or otherwise, is "to be part of a community of souls who h[ave] experienced being permanently invisible nobodies; 'black' [is] a designation for those who h[ave] no place else to go."[24]

This is Patricia J. Williams's claim in the 1991 book that Ligon cites in narrating his encounter with Cliff's landlady. It is no accident that the essay from which he pulls her words is in large part given over to what happened in Howard Beach on December 20, 1986. Three black men, stranded in the working-class Queens neighborhood by their stalled car, were viciously attacked by a group of ten or so white teenagers. One of the men lost the use of his eye. Another, Michael Griffith, lost his life when he was hit by a car while trying to run away. By all accounts, the men did nothing wrong except to be black. Of the insights that emerge from Williams's account of the episode, as well as the protracted public debate that followed Griffith's death, the most telling is no doubt the most obvious: any black person can fall victim to an attack if in the wrong place at the wrong time.[25]

Such possibilities are key to the spectacular discursive machinery organized around black masculinity in the public sphere that Ligon would address time and again in his work of the early 1990s. Take the *Victim Studies*, a series of ink-on-paper drawings after photographs depicting black men like Yusef Hawkins who were caught in neighborhoods where they were not welcome and paid the price with

3.11
Glenn Ligon, *Victim Study (Yusef Hawkins)*, 1990. Ink on paper. 7.6×5.1 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

3.12
Glenn Ligon, *Profiles*, 1990–1991, installation view. Eight paintings, oil stick on canvas. From left to right: *Son of a Role Model*, 95.6×56.5 cm; *A Loner, Shy and Sad*, 81.6×56.2 cm; *Little Brother with a Big Brother*, 66.4×56.2 cm; *Peaceful Demeanor and High Scores*, 46×56.2 cm; *Strict Discipline and Class Cutting*, 63.8×56.2 cm; *Learning Disability and a Temper*, 66.4×56.2 cm; *A Sharp Dresser with a Strut*, 76.5×56.5 cm; *Success with Girls*, 81.6×56.2 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

their lives (1990; fig. 3.11; 1990). Like Wilson's *The Last Murdered Black Youth* (1989), these works send up the long artistic tradition of the memento mori in order to mourn the deaths of particular individuals and to illuminate how race differently inflects every subject's sense of mortality. Other pieces from this period, such as the *Profiles*, turn their sights on the visual and linguistic presumptions governing the processes of abstraction that render African Americans moving targets (1990–1991; fig. 3.12).

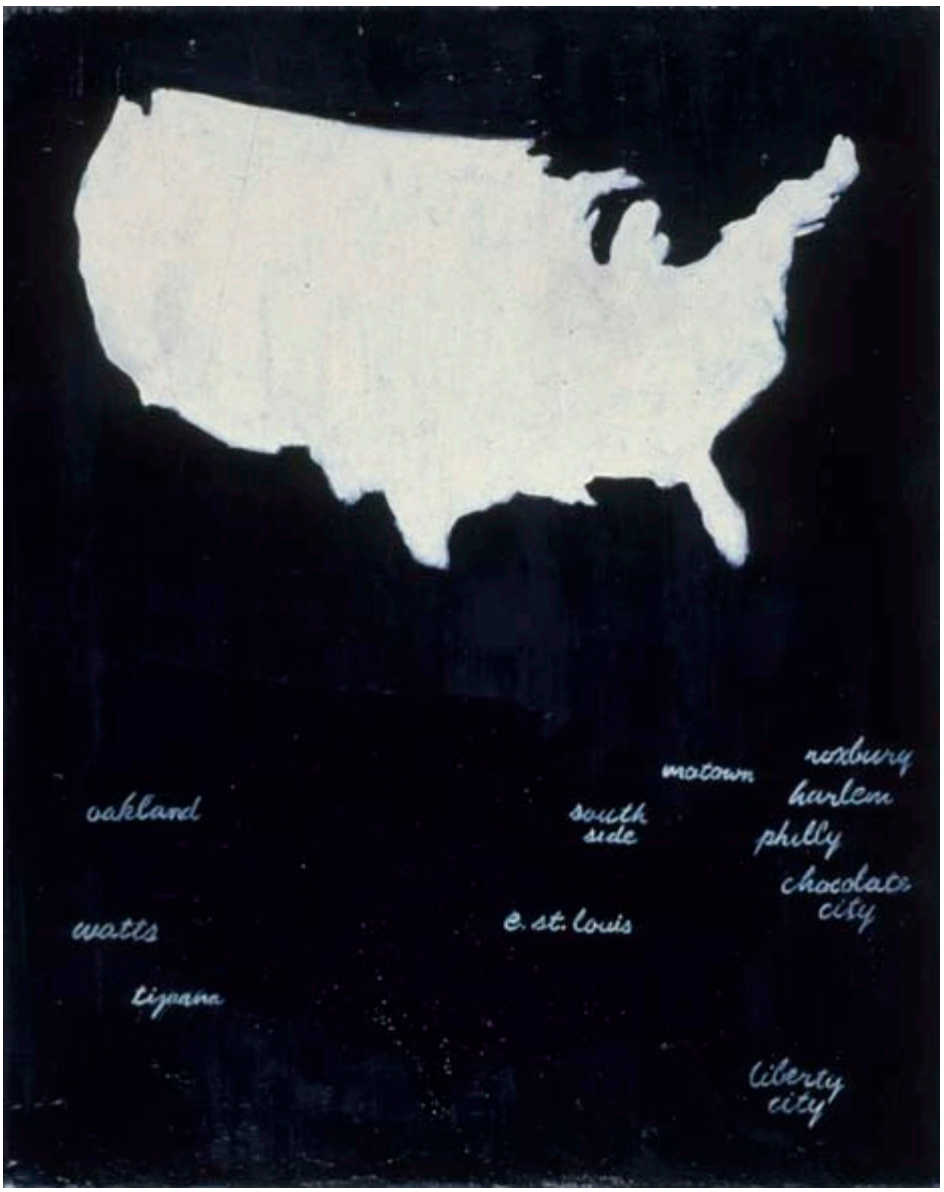
This series consists of eight text paintings based on the *New York Times*'s biographical sketches of the youths indicted and wrongly convicted in the notorious Central Park jogger case. In its multipart deconstruction of the visual logic of criminalization, this suite falls neatly within a lineage of Western history painting that extends from Édouard Manet's renditions of the execution of the Mexican emperor Maximilian (1867–1869) to Gerhard Richter's paintings of the German Baader-Meinhof group (1988). Yet Ligon, true to his own antiportrait impulse, eschews the depiction any individual to focus on how black subjects enter into representation. In certain canvases, for instance, he tweaked his stenciling technique so that a literal profile emerges from the text, recalling the physiognomic and photographic traditions that have been mobilized to empty out the particular black male subject so as to better fill in a spectral black male image.

Likewise, in *Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap*—his first work to move pointedly away

3.13
Glenn Ligon, *Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap*, 1992, installation view. Four banners, silkscreen on canvas. 457.2×152.4 cm each. (Courtesy of the artist.)

from painting and toward a broader imagistic field—Ligon appropriated the male figure gracing the paperback cover of psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs's 1968 classic *Black Rage*, blowing up the silhouette hundreds of times and mounting it on large banners so as to comment on the inflationary media obsession with menacing black male figures (1992; fig. 3.13).[26] In taking up *Black Rage*—a fiery polemic that located the root cause of African Americans' potentially explosive anguish in the depredations of slavery—the artist draws out the fact that all of us have been complicit in the ongoing production of blackness as a site of horrified fascination. While this work spoke to a moment saturated with worries over endangered and endangering black masculinity, it also effectively disarticulated the spectacle's production of racial conflict as a battle for recognition between straight men.[27]

In all of these instances, a degenitalization of the figure destabilizes gender and sexuality, thereby highlighting the vulnerability of all black subjects ever since the economies of the transatlantic trade undid distinctions between masculine and feminine in producing fragments of mere flesh.[28] The terrors of slavery—itself predicated on the theft and inconsequentiality of black life—have not only rendered the black body the ultimate signifier of negativity in modern thought and metaphysics but have also determined the realities of placelessness as black folks in America have encountered them from slavery through Jim Crow to the present.[29] Excluded from a society predicated on the despotism of property relations and continually exposed to the fatal projections of a violence administered and sanctioned by the agencies of the state, the position of the black subject, is, in a sense, no position at all. Rather, blackness is the marker that makes place intelligible as such, consigning people of African descent to a location of utter vulner-



3.14
Glenn Ligon, *Two Maps*, 1990. Oil and enamel on canvas. 76.2×50.8 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

ability within civil society.[30]

In another painting, *Two Maps*—which, like his text works, bears a strong affinity to the art of Jasper Johns—Ligon stacks white America on top of black, making clear precisely where colored folks do and do not belong (1990; fig. 3.14). Yet in its diagrammatic simplicity, this work also covers over intraracial conflict, producing a unified image when in fact the African American community is often riven by divisions of class, gender, and, perhaps most deeply, sexual orientation. Cultural theorist Robert Reid-Pharr argues that if the denigration of the black gives whiteness its coherence, then it is the striking of the homosexual that falsely promises to restore the bonds of blackness by refusing myths of African deviance developed

3.15
Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991–1993, installation view, detail. Ninety-one book pages, seventy-eight text pages, metal frames. Overall dimensions variable. (Courtesy of the artist.)

to justify transatlantic slavery and by upholding European bourgeois notions of the familial matrix. Consequently, the black queer subject is produced as incommensurable to the demands of politics proper and antithetical to an imagined black polis.[31]

Like his contemporaries who also sought to articulate the visual logic of black queer difference, such as Lyle Ashton Harris, Kobena Mercer, and Marlon Riggs, Ligon plumbed these exclusions and their material effects for the photographic structuring of a communal image. Indeed, the late 1980s and early '90s were a watershed moment for African diasporic gay cultural discourse, witnessing the publication of poet Essex Hemphill's anthology *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991) and the debut of Isaac Julien's groundbreaking film *Looking for Langston* (1989).[32] For his part, Ligon executed *Notes on the Margin of the "Black Book,"* a sprawling phototext created between 1991 and 1993 that interpolated photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's images of nude black men with cultural commentaries indicative of the range of opinions generated by the white gay artist's work as well as the disruptive force of interracial homoerotic desire (fig. 3.15). Unsurprisingly, one of Ligon's narratives in *Picky* spoke directly to this cultural flashpoint in a section entitled "A Nice Boy":

> Cliff's next door neighbor Lily is in her 80s and has lived in the building for fifty years. When Cliff moved in she decided she liked him and would bring him gifts of fruit, homemade cookies and little candies. She was a bit cooler towards me, but after I helped her carry her groceries upstairs a couple of times and took

her garbage out she got friendlier. About nine months after Cliff moved in Lily stopped coming by to visit and would linger in the hall to talk. Perhaps it was that she overheard an intimate conversation between us, or spied on a kiss, or saw me leaving Cliff's apartment in the morning once too often. She had figured out that the nice young man next door and his friend were queers, and that difference, piled on top of the difference in our races, created a hurdle too high for her to jump over.

This reminded me of something that happened in Ft. Greene, a primarily black working and middle class neighborhood near downtown Brooklyn where I live. The lone white tenant in my building (who, unlike the rest of us, was offered a lease renewal with no increase) introduced his black boyfriend to the white landlords. They promptly stopped speaking to him, assuming the antagonistic attitude towards him that they had with us. My neighbor Herbie, always blunt, laid it out for me. "That white boy didn't understand why they stopped speaking to him. I said, 'you know why? It's simple. It's not because you're gay. It's because you're being fucked by a nigger.'"

A perfect storm of racial, sexual, and class antagonism, these lines give voice to the complex crosscutting of prejudicial notions that produce the subject's exclusion, whether as faggot, nigger, or the lover of both. Yet as Lily's unwillingness and Herbie's plain talk suggest, despite the revulsion with which it might be met, homosexuality is a social construction that has been mobilized for the instauration of racial difference and aligned with heteronormative notions of white citizenship, which, as ever, depend on blackness to be their antithetical counter.[33]

Positioned at the intersection of these modes of abjection and refusal, the black gay subject is a locus without a place, representing one site where the contingencies of identity and their visual articulation might be brought to the fore.[34] In Ligon's art, such possibilities for self-making, as well as the conditions that would foreclose them, are visualized through a range of operations: literalizing, queering, deforming, displacing, erasing, hyperbolizing—the list could easily go on. My point is that the artist's aesthetic means are determined not only by the media he aims to confront but also by his movement between black and queer modes of appearance, whose psychic effects and political legacies his pieces variously summon. Ligon's works, I want to say, model tactics—in de Certeau's sense of "calculated action[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus"[35]—aimed at disrupting the logic of the image. By pressing the verbal against the visual, the painterly against the conceptual, the past against the present, the individual against the group, the black against the queer, his art gestures to an exterior in order to carve out a space for being grounded in the historical positioning of subjects cast as fugitives in life and in representation. It is with these dynamics in view and the early '90s works at hand that I now want to turn toward *To Disembark*.

You see, whites want black writers to mostly deliver something as if it were an official version of the black experience. But the vocabulary won't hold it, simply. No true account really of black life can be held, can be contained, in the American vocabulary. As it is, the only way that you can deal with it is by doing great violence to the assumptions on which the vocabulary is based. But they won't let you do that. And when you go along, you find yourself very quickly painted into a corner; you've written yourself into a corner.

JAMES BALDWIN, "Last Testament," 1989

In *To Disembark*, many of the concerns addressed in Ligon's work of the early 1990s—the production of racial and sexual difference, the limits of American cultural politics, and the expansive capacities of placelessness—are historically moored and so conceptually clarified through a multiplicity of forms that compulsively refer to slavery.[36] To create the work, Ligon drew on both generic framing conventions and highly specific historical episodes that he encountered while perusing the collections of the New York Public Library and an archive at New York's South Street Seaport. The exhibition occupied two "rooms" created from a single gallery that was divided in half by a wall constructed specifically for the occasion.[37] In one area, entered via a short passage to the left of the exhibition signage, viewers confronted nine wooden shipping crates bearing international symbols for fragility (see fig. 3.8). The variously constructed containers were modeled after the conveyance in which Henry "Box" Brown shipped himself from captivity in Richmond to freedom in Philadelphia in 1849, where, upon arrival, he broke into a hymn based on the Bible's fortieth psalm (though his own subsequent ballad would be sung to the tune of the popular air "Uncle Ned").[38]

Ligon's boxes—scattered evenly about the room and all of roughly the same dimensions (thirty by thirty-six by twenty-four inches)—pay appropriate homage to Brown's sonic celebration. Each is outfitted with a tape recorder that emits audible sounds, from a heartbeat to Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" to Billie Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit." Hung at regular intervals on the walls were ten offset lithographs that faithfully reproduced the format of nineteenth-century runaway handbills. In the adjoining room, viewers encountered nine frontispieces to slave narratives that were never written, fictive texts loosely based in the artist's biography (fig. 3.16, above). Opposite and perpendicular to this wall were three drawings in oil stick, each eighty by thirty inches and each deploying a different sentence from Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me": "I remember the very day that I became colored," "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," and "I do not always feel colored" (fig. 3.16, below).[39]

What this description makes clear is that Ligon posed in the roles of the missing slave and again underlined the contingent place of the African American subject through recourse to the antiportrait. Every part of *To Disembark* pointed up

3.16
Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark*, 1993, installation view. From *Directions: Glenn Ligon: To Disembark*, 1993, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Etchings, wall drawing (*above*); wall drawings (*below*). Overall dimensions variable. (Photography by Lee Stalsworth. Courtesy of the artist.)

the black male body's absence from the representational frame, holding out indexes of its presence that betrayed nothing of the figure's actual location. As such, the project deploys the discursive materials of slavery to illuminate the structural coordinates of black being both past and present. Ligon might thus be said to comprehend, on a formal and a political level, the famous dictum from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers."[40]

For the philosopher as for the artist, the memory of the past that volatilizes out of a moment of crisis cannot simply be held up as an example to be avoided, but rather, must be held onto as revealing the exigencies that make our own moment possible in all of its ruinous tilt. In forging a link between the obstacles encountered by the fugitive slave and the dangers faced by the contemporary black subject, Ligon enacts a kind of repetition familiar to students of African American culture, so that history, text, and performance become circulating quantities always subject to reiteration and renewal.[41] In the process, he asks a question most eloquently posed in his own words: "Who are the other 'masters' from which we flee?"[42]

Historically, visuality itself—thanks to its frequent denigration of the black image and its despotic manifestation in the white look—has been construed as the mastering conceit from which African Americans have sought refuge. Everywhere haunted and pursued by the gaze, black cultural practitioners past and present have often turned to the word in posing alternative articulations of the self; Ligon was no exception.[43] In the late 1980s, the artist slowly came to realize that language could provide the basis for approaching what he called "a whole body of things"—a whole body of blackness that could not otherwise be registered.[44] Words mattered because they expansively referred and, just as important, they ably rerouted, bracketing the metonymic chain of associations—"tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency"—which, as Fanon teaches us, are set off by the sight of dark skin and doggedly pursue black subjects.[45]

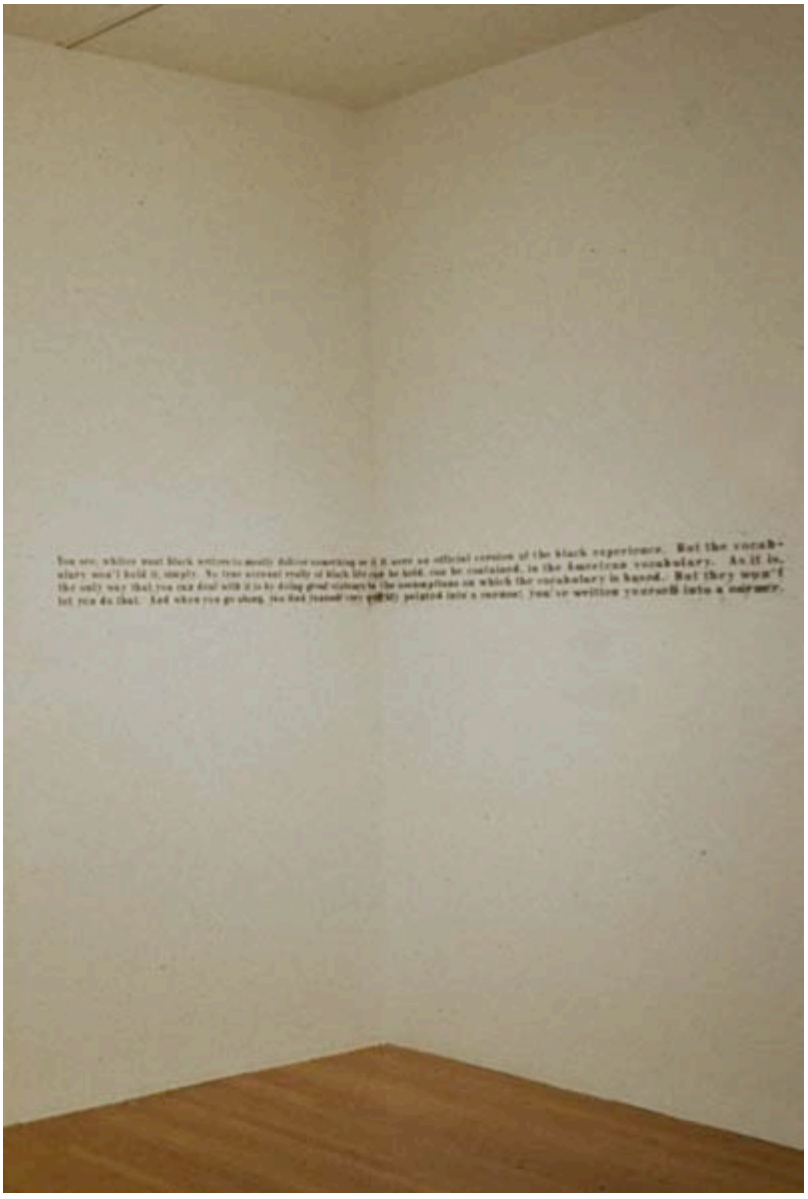
In updating Fanon's laundry list of racial phantasms circa 1993, we might add the visage of "Willie" Horton, the "high-tech lynching" of Clarence Thomas, and of course, George Holliday's harrowing amateur videotape of Rodney King being senselessly beaten.[46] Ligon, like other contemporary African American artists, such as Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, and Danny Tisdale, felt compelled to address the demonization of black male subjectivity emblematized by such images.[47] More than ever, the word was the faculty deemed most capable of doing so. Language could take race out of the imaginary and make it a function of a larger symbolic system, revealing and short-circuiting the scenarios of violence and terror that have long given blackness its objective weight within the collective psyche and

throughout the mainstream media.[48]

At roughly the same time, black literary theory was rising in prominence within the academy, due to the efforts of scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr.; across the cultural landscape, there was growing acknowledgement of African American achievement in letters, from the approbation that greeted Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) to the canonization of "lost" writers such as Hurston. These developments were surely not lost on Ligon, whose work manifests a voracious appetite for the printed word. Yet he also well knew that language has never constituted a site of unfettered black expression: as part of his 1992 exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the artist stenciled Baldwin's comments on the limits of the American vocabulary directly onto the wall (fig. 3.17). Any attempt to read this text required the viewer to go along with it, to walk into a corner and so bodily experience the situation that the writer figuratively described.[49] Through the deployment of Hurston's text, in *To Disembark*, Ligon similarly aligned the facticity of black discursive constraint with the physical support of the gallery itself, the literal ground of white institutionality and artistic discourse.

Like the identically inscribed canvases that preceded them, these wall drawings transmute affective mantra into projective blur, figure into ground, word into image, white into black (1990–1991; fig. 3.18). This visual effect is again the result of Ligon's deductive procedure as he drags his stencil along the surface, one line after the next: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. I feel most colored. . . ." Regardless of the material on which the sentence is inscribed, Ligon eventually leaves us in the dark, grasping at phrases that are a foregone conclusion. In these works, the artist relies on language in its corporeal and metaphorical dimensions to cast blackness less as fact of perception than as a frame of mind dependent on the presence of whiteness for its meaning. The one is literally illegible without the other. Or as Fanon stated about the making of men in modernity, "the Negro is not. Any more than the white man," both caught up in an antagonistic bind that disallows mutual recognition and therefore the attainment of the human on either side of the color line.[50]

In performing this impossibility and its perpetual recurrence within representation, Ligon stages the murkiness of racial thinking and runs headlong into the dilemma thrown up by Fanon's negative ontology of race: black being cannot be accessed rationally, though its affective contours can be intimated in the gaps that structure hegemonic modes of speech. Indeed, while Ligon's text paintings can be read as both printed page and flattened image, when viewed obliquely, the letters float above and recede into their grounds, becoming three-dimensional halations that illuminate the deceptions of the gaze and gesture toward other arenas of perception.[51] All of which makes a certain sense, particularly if we follow the lead of theorist Kara Keeling: she argues that it is the plenitude, contingency, and symbolic import of black feeling, which opens onto those fugitive states that the black image, in its liability for stereotypical reduction, would seem to preclude and that



3.17
Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (James Baldwin)*, 1992. Acrylic, oil, and pencil. 312.4 x 25.4 cm. (Photograph by Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY. Courtesy of the artist.)

3.18
Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, 1990–1991. Oil stick and gesso on panel. 203.2 x 76.2 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

black letters can only obliquely manifest.[52] As the wall drawings intimate, every discourse can become a site of foreclosure, particularly given the dialectic of "I" and "we" that can at once bolster possibilities for black collective action and stifle the particularity of individual lived experiences.[53]

This tension is exemplified by the life and work of Ligon's source. A prolific novelist, journalist, and ethnographer who came to prominence during the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was nearly expunged from historical memory and roundly excoriated by her contemporaries for what they perceived as all manner of political incorrectness.[54] As if to drive this point home, Ligon culls his lines from

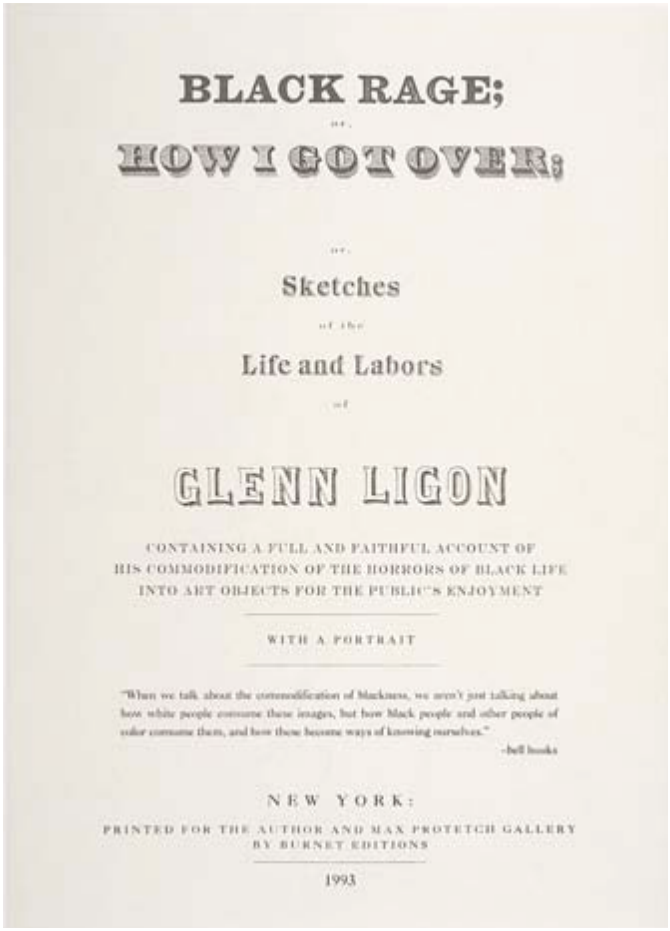
a text larded with stereotypes that seem to fly in the face of its insistence on the contextual character of racial identity; in fact, "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" has often been cited as a prime example of Hurston's intransigence, even regression, by those who otherwise laud her writing as a model of black critical practice.[55] When cast as a darkening image, the author's words suggest how projective investments in racial filiation tend to cloud African American voices and, ultimately, to outstrip the command of language altogether.

The wall drawings thereby attest to Ligon's interest in the at once censoring and spectacularizing frameworks in which black being has been presented for public consumption, whether in the case of contemporary practitioners of color expected to speak compulsively of their identity, Negro writers straining at the bonds of decorum, or ex-slaves attempting to prove their humanity through demonstrations of literacy. On this score, it is worth quoting the artist at length:

> I recently became interested in slave narratives because their modes of address and the conditions under which they were written had certain parallels to my questions about audiences and cultural authority. . . . I was interested in contemporary traces of the conditions under which former captives wrote their narratives. For example: what are the conditions under which works by black artists enter the museum? Do we enter only when our "visible difference" is evident? Why do many shows with works by colored people (and rarely whites) have titles that include "race" and "identity?" Who is my work for and what do different audiences demand of it?[56]

In asking such questions, Ligon does not posit an equal, direct, or analogical relation between himself and the slave. Rather, he looks for traces of those modes of subjection that have dispossessed the black subject and insistently conditioned his speaking, ever attentive to those threads that might be said to structure the possibilities of black expression and the figuration of the black "I."[57]

It is this imperative that directs the titling of Ligon's *Narrative* frontispieces, which also revisit texts previously figured in his oeuvre. In *Black Rage, Or, How I Got Over*, the artist combines the title of Grier and Cobb's polemic with a 1951 gospel hymn made legendary by Mahalia Jackson in introducing a text that promises "a full and faithful account of his commodification of the horrors of black life into art objects for the public's enjoyment" (fig. 3.19). By roping book and song together, Ligon articulates the ways in which black aspiration is reproduced as spectacle, either anguished or transcendent. The third title of the narrative, "Sketches of the Life and Labors," refers back to accounts provided by nineteenth-century ministers of the gospel, thereby situating the artist as a proselytizer for an autocritical engagement with his work and the production of blackness more broadly.[58] Since slave narratives were often prefaced or concluded by the verifying testimony of white citizens, Ligon provides a quotation from cultural theorist bell hooks that is meant to revise this tradition and license his own discourse: "When we talk about



3.19
Glenn Ligon, *Narratives (Black Rage, Or, How I Got Over)*, 1993.
One from a series of nine etchings with chine collé. 71.1 x 53.3 cm.
(Courtesy of the artist.)

3.20
Glenn Ligon, *Narratives (Incidents in the Life of a Snow Queen)*, 1993.
One from a series of nine etchings with chine collé. 71.1 x 53.3 cm.
(Courtesy of the artist.)

the commodification of blackness, we aren't just talking about how white people consume these images, but how black people and other people of color consume them, and how these become ways of knowing ourselves." The plays on convention in each *Narrative* thus construct historical continuities while also bringing forth constitutive disjunctures.

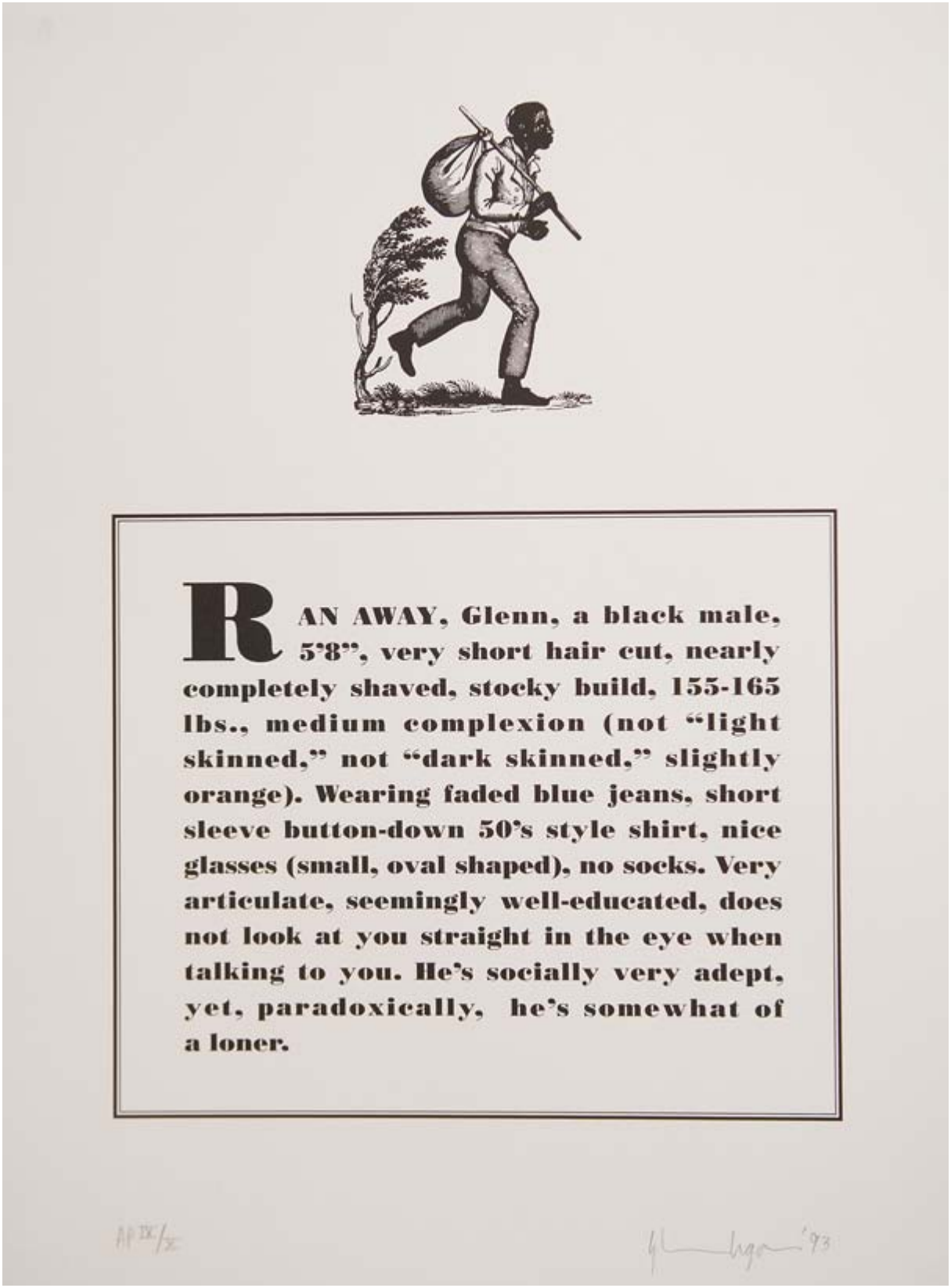
The page entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Snow Queen*, for example, riffs on Harriet Jacobs's 1861 narrative, replacing the *Slave Girl* of her title with a present-day derogatory term for black gay men attracted exclusively to whites (fig. 3.20). Through this transcoding, Ligon recovers the queerness of Jacobs's text, from her attempted escape in blackface sailor drag to her description of a male slave's sexualized humiliation at the hands of his young master.[59] Although the tactic of cross-gender impersonation is not unheard of in accounts provided by former runaways—just think back to how Ellen Craft disguised herself as a white gentleman to abet her and her husband's escape—references to homosexual practices on the

plantation are exceedingly rare within the archive of slavery.[60] Ligon hyperbolizes such incongruity within the print by narrating the fictive author's "fall" toward homosexuality in nineteenth-century language rich in metaphors of whiteness as light, blindness, and snow, and by calling on contemporary black gay writer Hilton Als's account of drawing close to white men "in a climate so cold."

These temporal gaps are singularly united in the title of another frontispiece, *The Narrative of the Life and Uncommon Sufferings of Glenn Ligon, A Colored Man, Who at a Tender Age Discovered His Affection for the Bodies of Other Men and Has Endured Scorn and Tribulations Ever Since.* This author's plea for sympathy and confession of guilt are recast by the print's brief eighteenth-century epigraph, taken from the journals of Samuel Sewall. A Massachusetts judge who fought for abolition and ultimately regretted his role in the Salem witch trials, he shows no tolerance for a slave charged with "forcible Buggery," who to his mind, is rightly "Condemn'd."[61] Such testimony from a liberal-minded speaker underlines the ways in which culpability continues to be hunted back to those bodies and behaviors that define the limits of social being. Taken together, Ligon's prints make palpable the difficulty of imagining radical difference within the American framework and limn the circumstances that continue to erase gays and lesbians of color from a culture that demands quickly categorized and easily devoured apparitions of blackness.

In their emphasis on the multiplicity of Ligon's possible affective identifications, the autobiographical fragments trotted out in the *Narratives* resist such totalizing racial and sexual scrims, just as the *Runaway* prints stage the artist's successful escape from the very modes of epistemic violence to which he was never entirely available in the first place. Both bodies of work purposefully draw from the extant well of figures and typefaces developed to frame the enslaved, assuring a formal affinity between the prints and their sources. In line with the frontispieces of nineteenth-century slave narratives, Ligon's etchings are executed with chine collé, in which a fine sheet of paper is affixed to a cheaper backing material.[62] However, his *Narratives* leave the scale of the book behind, assuming dimensions more fit to a portrait.

Similarly, the *Runaway* lithographs—printed on creamy paper with rich dark brown inks—possess a sumptuous facture and idiosyncratic structure that is a far cry from the utilitarian look and feel of the standardized woodcut handbills that inspired them (fig. 3.21). Compare a Ligon print with those deployed in *Mining the Museum*, or better, with one produced in 1838 for William Burke of Bardstown, Kentucky, and later published in Marcus Wood's seminal *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (fig. 3.22).[63] Despite their shared icons and typefaces, the text of the artist's broadsheet is notably stripped of all references to a master in pursuit. It also increases the size of the words "RAN AWAY," opts for symmetry over economy, and separates verbal signs from visual ones, which float freely in luxurious expanses of unmarked paper. Not unlike Andy Warhol's monumental silkscreen suite *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* (1964), which was



3.21
Glenn Ligon, *Runaways (A Loner)*, 1993. One from a suite of ten lithographs. 40.6 x 30.5 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

3.22
Anonymous, Runaway advertisement, 1838. Woodcut on paper. (Courtesy of Marcus Wood.)

based on mug shots lifted from New York City Police Department files, Ligon's images selectively recall in order to aesthetically queer both their sources and the criminalizing apparatus of which they were part.[64]

Fabricated with the assistance of master printmaker Gregory Burnet and the backing of the artist's gallery, *To Disembark*'s printed matter is the result of techniques associated with nineteenth-century large-scale image manufacture, though they are intended for an art market that prizes limited runs and the artist's hand. Each print is inscribed with an edition number and Ligon's signature, which index his engagement with the market for black authenticity even as the *Runaways*, in their production and referents, signify his removal from such networks of circulation.[65]

> RAN AWAY, Glenn, a black male, 5'8"ć very short haircut, nearly completely shaved, stocky build, 155–165 lbs., medium complexion (not "light-skinned," not "dark-skinned," slightly orange). Wearing faded blue jeans, short sleeve button-down 50's style shirt, nice glasses (small, oval-shaped), no socks. Very articulate, seemingly well-educated, does not look at you straight in the eye when talking to you. He's socially very adept, yet, paradoxically, he's somewhat of a loner.

This text is one of ten descriptions written by unnamed friends of the artist. Without telling them why, Ligon instructed his accomplices to describe him, to render him in words as if he had gotten loose from language's grip. Accordingly, this writer has chosen first to concentrate on the formal qualities of the subject in question, restlessly compiling an array of data that seem appropriate to a police report, but are equally fitting as an update of a runaway advertisement.[66]

In a certain sense, Ligon's directive recalls that animating another Baldessari project, *Police Drawing* (1971). To create this piece, the artist entered a classroom,

switched on a video camera, and left the assembled students—whom he had never met—to describe his likeness to a police sketch artist. Despite their structural affinities, Ligon's and Baldessari's works diverge not merely because of the races of their targets, which overdetermine the force and aim of the policing gaze, but also because of their witnesses' different levels of familiarity with their respective subjects.[67] Consider the tenor of the *Runaway* cited above. With its breathless clauses and elliptical closing assessment of the artist's interpersonal behavior, the paragraph wants to characterize Ligon as a subject, to sketch a portrait in shorthand that gives some clue as to what it might be like to bump into the artist on the street or at an opening: the two final sentences bear the marks of time spent, of having acquaintance with Ligon's idiosyncrasies, the tics that constitute his presentation of self. What the description achieves, however, is not so much a lasting image as a set of rapidly thrown off impressions that register most forcefully on the level of appearance. Ligon refuses to cohere into a tangible picture, becoming a fantasized absence, though the outlines of a figure do emerge possessed of considerably greater specificity than that allowed by the fugitive icon.

In each *Runaway*, the descriptive text is paired with a visual header, generic male or female figures that operate in contradistinction to the specificity aimed at in the prints' language. These images have no pretensions to serve as representations, but work more along the lines of symbolic placeholders that mark out the runaway slave's structural location. Without the aid of language, the image can only serve to alert the reader that something is amiss, that some species of black flesh has gotten loose from its moorings within the social hierarchy and must be put back in its place. This, of course, was the function that the runaway slave bulletin performed in its heyday as shown by Burke's advertisement:

> $150 REWARD. RANAWAY from the subscriber, on the night of the 2^{d} instant, a negro man, who calls himself *Henry May*, about 22 years old, 5 feet 6 or 8 inches high, ordinary color, rather chunky built, bushy head, and has it divided mostly on one side, and keeps it very nicely combed; has been raised in the house, and is a first rate dining-room servant, and was in a tavern in Louisville for 18 months. I expect he is now in Louisville, trying to make his escape to a free state, (in all probability to Cincinnati, Ohio.) Perhaps he may try to get employment on a steamboat. He is a good cook, and is handy in any capacity as a house servant. Had on when he left, a dark cassinett coatee, and dark striped cassinett pantaloons, new—he had other clothing. I will give $50 reward if taken in Louisvill [*sic*]; 100 dollars if taken one hundred miles from Louisville in this State, and 150 dollars if taken out of this State, and delivered to me, or secured in any jail so that I can get him again.

While exhaustively detailed—down to the part in Henry's hair—this description lacks all the insouciant charm, psychological probity, and queer sensibility displayed in Ligon's prints, instead focusing on the vagaries of the hunt and the res-

titution of property. "$150 REWARD" puts the cash on the table right up front, though this sum would have been a mere fraction of the exchange value of the slave, which might well have been in the vicinity of a thousand dollars, especially given the numerous talents of the fugitive in question.[68]

In making this assertion, I rely here as elsewhere on the work of John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, two of the foremost historians of runaway populations. As they aver and as the sliding scale of Burke's reward suggests, the most money was to be made in recapturing escapees who had somehow managed to make it North, and advertisements like this one served to heighten the intensity of the gaze that fell on black bodies. Every dark figure might be searched for telltale signs of fatigue, disorientation, or foreignness that might transform an unattended person back into a fungible asset.[69] For the large portion of runaways—like Henry, mostly males in their late teens and twenties—fleeing was a dangerous proposition with no guarantee of success, the possibility of recapture looming everywhere as owners attempted to reassert control over what they saw to be rightfully theirs.[70] But despite the prospect of whipping, further mutilation, and separation from their kinfolk, slaves did run away—especially those like Henry, whose proximity to the master classes and comparatively decent living conditions made them more rather than less prone to abscond. Secreting away the self, fully cognizant of one's value, was the penultimate act of defiance amidst a range of resistive tactics that included sabotage, willful incompetence, outright rebellion, and most extreme, suicide. Captives seized on whatever means available to frustrate the repression of slavery, to refuse its way of life, and subsequently upset the myth of the docile slave so prevalent in pro- and antiabolitionist imagery.

In this respect, fugitives no doubt succeeded. Although the advertisement circulated in aid of Henry's procurement does not dwell too long on his psychological makeup, many masters felt it necessary to qualify their descriptions with a battery of behavioral as well as physical characteristics. As Franklin and Schweninger remind us, slave owners developed a complex lexicon of terms intended to telegraph the color, proportions, and persona of the runaway. Adjectives like proud, artful, plausible, cunning, amiable, polite, wily, and deceitful reappeared with astonishing frequency in the descriptions given by masters, registering the individuality of the slave but also constituting a shifting portrait of the fugitive.[71] For above all, slavery's status quo was endangered by the fugitive's ability to dissemble, to put on a false impression that allowed him to pass for what he was not, to make his disposition absent just as his body would subsequently become. The runaway slave signified the onus of property to be recovered and the threat of the peculiar institution gone awry, its order undone and its objects restored to themselves, even if only momentarily. Consequently, the fugitive is a figure who muddies and disturbs fantasies of the idyllic antebellum South, leaving the confines of the plantation in order to inhabit a placeless horizon. Just as the runaway sought to move beyond his status as property, to duck the system of surveillance and representation meant to curtail, restrict and ultimately cease his sojourn, his vivid absence remained a

3.23
Glenn Ligon, *Runaways (Nice teeth)*, 1993. One from a suite of ten lithographs. 40.6 x 30.5 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

blight in the memory of his owner and a bastion of hope for those still enslaved.

The whole of *To Disembark* seeks to explore this liminal condition, just as Ligon's larger practice consistently thematizes the trope of fugitivity in its limiting and liberatory capacities. As elsewhere in his work, repetition becomes a substitute for the ability to access a storehouse of black collective memory that in point of fact was never available and that exists now only as a set of traces whose refiguring allows us to recollect the disappearance of the runaway subject.[72] "Glenn" and "Henry" are summoned through the force of word and image, which serve as surrogates for black bodies no longer available either as sight or as property, objects of speculation that have disappeared. Though they seem to occupy vastly divergent historical situations, there is a sense in which all of these figures are fleeing from the same master: the white overlord has been replaced by the specter of the symbolic order for which he claimed to stand.

Another print, which includes a scene of a white gentleman clasping the shoulder of a half-dressed slave, helps illustrate this contention (fig. 3.23). The text here is rather more laconic than in the first *Runaway* addressed, but because of that, even more striking in its foci.

> RAN AWAY, Glenn Ligon. He's a shortish broad-shouldered black man, pretty dark-skinned, with glasses. Kind of stocky, tends to look down and turn in when

> he walks. Real short hair, almost none. Clothes non-descript, something button-down and plaid, maybe, and shorts and sandals. Wide lower face and narrow upper face. Nice teeth.

This time around, the writer has made no attempt to characterize the artist's persona but has stayed true to the facts as they presented themselves, an emphasis on the data of visual perception summarized in that final clinching phrase: "nice teeth."

It is precisely this type of proscription imposed in representation and by institutional structures that Glenn and Henry are running away from. The stakes are different but the problematic remains, since it is in the disjunctions as much as in the continuities that the resonance of Ligon's work lies. Just as a missing person is not the same as a fugitive slave, "nice teeth," is not the same as saying "good teeth," the latter an index of health, a selling point for the slave master, the former a compliment of purely cosmetic nature paid to a friend. Both assessments speak to appearance, but the one serves to indicate value and the other to register its attainment, to cast the artist within a particular socioeconomic milieu, going along swimmingly with "something button-down and plaid maybe, shorts and sandals." As ever, language *places*, makes evident some kind of real or imagined societal location.

Which is not to say that Ligon's practice imagines language to be suspect by virtue of its ability to prescribe or interpellate the subject, since it is those very qualities in which his work takes such pleasure. Despite the fact that several different writers with rather different voices have taken stabs at describing the artist, their words do end up resting on a set of shared terms, as evidenced by the following *Runaway* text, headed by the emblem of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, that seems to combine and reorder the other two.

> RAN AWAY, Glenn. Medium height, 58¢male. Closely-cut hair, almost shaved. Mild looking, with oval shaped, black-rimmed glasses that are somewhat conservative. Thinly-striped black-and-white short-sleeved T-shirt, blue jeans. Silver watch and African-looking bracelet on arm. His face is somewhat wider on bottom near the jaw. Full-lipped. He's black. Very warm and sincere, mild-mannered and laughs often.

In this case, the artist's race appears very late in the passage, almost as an afterthought bracketed by "full-lipped" and "very warm and sincere, mild-mannered and laughs often." What becomes apparent here is the way that the black male body in any description, however benign, bears some relation to a history of stereotype and racial prejudice.[73]

Ligon is well aware of these mechanisms, and every aspect of *To Disembark* works to point up the historical and ongoing conditions in which African Americans enter the cultural frame.[74] In fact, he has gone on to exhibit the various ele-

ments of the installation in a number of different exhibitionary and discursive configurations; the frontispieces, for instance, were published as a single cohesive group apart from the installation.[75] *To Disembark* is not, then, a site-specific project in the original sense of the term, which implied the physical inseparability of the work from the site in which it was executed, as in the case of, say, Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), whose moldering fragments can still be found on the campus of Kent State University. Instead, like that of his contemporary Renée Green, Ligon's installation represents a mode of site-sensitive practice, in which the peripatetic status of the work of art indexes that of the black body, thus referring us back to the racialized frameworks of institutional display regardless of locale.

Just as the artist turned to installation to turn the genre out, so his objects figure the self as a set of tactile surfaces and texts without a sure autobiographical referent: the *Runaways* declare his absence, the wall drawings are haunted by the hand that executed them, and the frontispieces, despite their offerings of accompanying portraits and their declarations to be written by the artist himself, are unstable and conflicting revisions of a life story that cannot be countenanced.[76] Ligon comes to us as a fugitive from history, a figure who models the various modes of narration deployed by him and others to contest the past. In so doing, he produces incident rather than authenticity, questioning the viewer's demand for forms of blackness that ostensibly give life to the subject but often only manage to reiterate his social death.[77]

> A number of persons soon collected round the box after it was taken in to the house, but as I did not know what was going on I kept myself quiet. I heard a man say "let us rap upon the box and see if he is alive": and immediately a rap ensued and a voice said, tremblingly, "Is all right within?" to which I replied—"all right." The joy of the friends was very great; when they heard that I was alive they soon managed to break open the box, and then came my resurrection from the grave of slavery.
>
> **HENRY "BOX" BROWN**, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*, 1851

The most striking aspect of *To Disembark* is surely the set of crates that shape the viewer's movement through the space. With them, Ligon moved into three dimensions for the first time, a shift informed, I would contend, by the difficulty of bringing enslavement into view in purely imagistic or textual terms: in Brown's box, he recovered a form capable of marking the slave's conflicted status as both person and property, of spatially charting the black subject's lack of location, and of figuring the body without requiring its appearance, thereby avoiding the spectacular representation of suffering souls.[78]

3.24
Samuel Worcester Rowse, *The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia*, 1850. Lithograph. 34 x 45.4 cm. (Virginia Historical Society [2005.149].)

For his part, Brown would make himself a rather different sort of spectacle following his escape from slavery: for a while, he was the toast of the abolitionist lecture circuit, where he would arrive at certain venues by box and burst forth with a Houdini-esque flourish in a reperformance of his miraculous "resurrection" (1850; fig. 3.24). However, he was not immediately free from the recriminations of his masters, and not merely because his flamboyant showmanship did not accord with prevailing notions of behavior appropriate for a grateful former slave.[79] The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act forced him to flee to England and there reconstitute his most useful public relations tool, a large multipanel panorama entitled *Mirror of Slavery*. Unlike his widely read and much circulated narrative, song, and image, Brown's moving panorama—composed of scenes depicting the evils of slavery and once featured in town halls throughout the northeastern United States—is no longer extant. But in the surviving list of the work's some forty tableaux, we find evidence of Brown's awareness of the recursive turnings of subjection.[80] While the final image is said to have figured an immense jubilee in celebration of "Universal Emancipation," two previous scenes depict "Nubians Escaping by Night," followed somewhat later by "Nubian Slaves Retaken."[81]

Escape, it seems, is never definitive and freedom never absolute. Yet in enduring a nearly thirty-hour imprisonment within its confines, Brown marked his curious transport as the focal point of a parodic tactic that made visible the pecuniary underpinnings of enslavement only to undo them: box as cell, slave, and talking commodity all at once. Perhaps the greatest irony that emerges from his adventure, then, is that this particular slave can only attain some semblance of

worth through an elaborate act of masquerade in which he literalizes his status as thing. In accomplishing this feat, a perverse rewriting of the Middle Passage, Brown pointed up the despotic relations between people that undergird capitalist production, while also describing the slave's aporetic position within them.[82] So framed, his box not only signifies on slavery's metaphorics of life, death, and rebirth, but also on its economics, the mechanics of monetary flow that governed the institution, that still exert a tenacious grasp on the subject and that have come to emblematize Western modernity's cult of cargo.[83]

Brown's sojourn can thus be seen as a mode of black radical critique that disturbs and upends even the logic of Karl Marx's well-known disquisition, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret." In this chapter of *Capital*, Marx ventriloquizes the modes of speech conferred on commodities by classical economists in order to lambaste the theory that objects have inherent value outside of exchange and to enact the impossible notion that things might give voice to their own desires.[84] Yet Brown's performance—like the testimony of so many ex-slaves—gives weight to the idea that the commodity does, indeed, speak. Theorist Fred Moten argues that "that speech, constitutes a kind of temporal warp that disrupts and augments not only Marx but the mode of subjectivity that the ultimate object of his critique, capital, both allows and disallows."[85]

This complex stew of capital, fetishism, and subjection is part and parcel of Ligon's turn to Brown's story as the structuring conceit of *To Disembark*. He does not, however, leave the slave a void stuck in a box. Rather, the artist's maneuver short-circuits the logic of capital itself and forces us to realize the duplicity of its constructions, the arbitrariness of its object choices. Henry Brown's box is, after all, just a box. Likewise, the commodity fetish is not so much the object itself, its material worth, or even its symbolic force, but its power to accrue meaning as value and to reproduce the network of exchange.[86] *To Disembark* points to these hyperbolic processes of systematization and makes the slave disappear from their routes of commerce even as it conflates a whole set of fetishistic models with a single gesture—the commodity, the absent body, and the Western sculptural object.

In particular, Ligon's boxes evoke both the museum installations of Marcel Broodthaers and the "specific objects" of Donald Judd.[87] More strikingly, they recast the gestalts of Robert Morris with a twist, recalling the minimalist practitioner's *Untitled (Battered Cubes)* of 1965, as well as his 1974 audio installation *Voice*, composed of an eight-channel stereo system and fourteen wooden boxes covered with felt.[88] The most salient referent, however, is Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961, fig. 3.25), which consists of a music player nestled within a wooden container that relays the sound of the work's construction in homage to Marcel Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise* of 1916.[89] Ligon's production process, however, resounds more with Warhol's Factory, in which much of the activity of and creative responsibility for object manufacture was delegated to a cast of fellow practitioners. As in the case of his prints, the artist outsourced the fabrication of *To Disembark*'s crates, this time to studio mate Jim Donahue, who had seen Samuel

3.25
Robert Morris, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961. Walnut and recorded tapes (original) and compact disc (reformatted by artist). 124.4 x 24.7 x 25.4 cm. (Image courtesy of Seattle Art Museum 82.190, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bagley Wright. © Robert Morris / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York.)

Rowse's image of Brown's resurrection and knew that his friend was working on a project about slavery. Aside from this information, Ligon's instructions to his collaborator—an artist and set designer then employed part time, aptly enough, at the Williamsburg outfit Box Art—were these: Donahue was to build and stencil an internally varying set of plywood crates that maintained some fealty to their lost oak inspiration while also taking into account the metrics provided by his own body and those of other *Runaway* writers.[90]

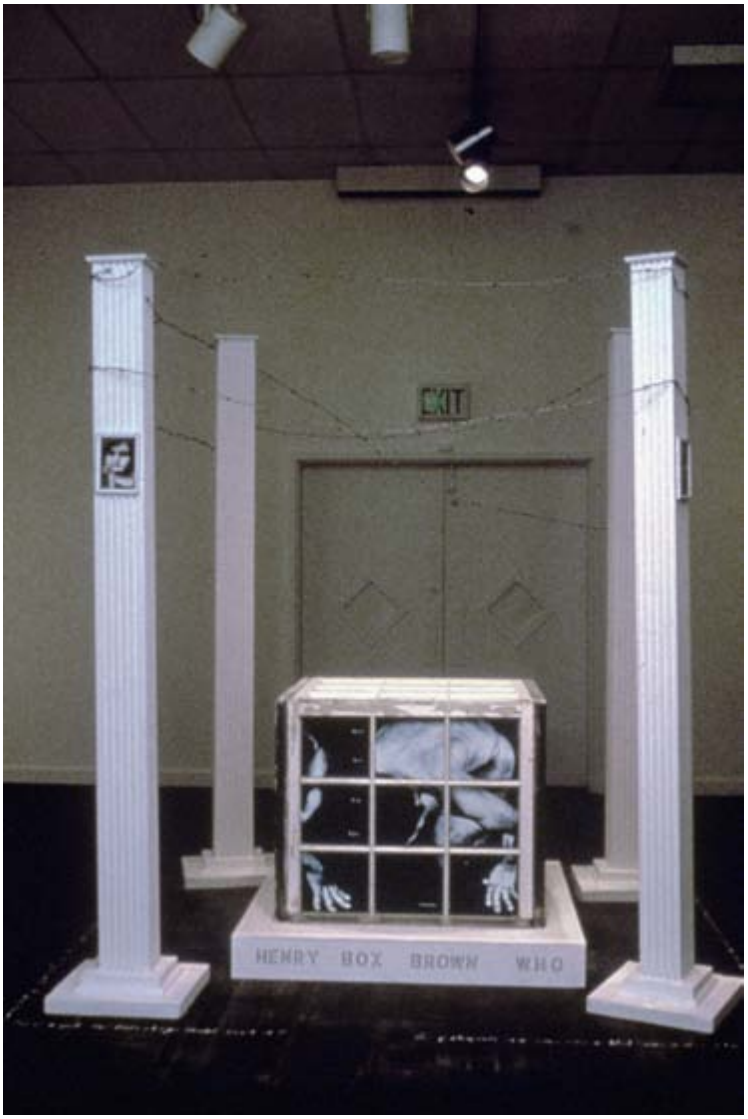
In the resulting constructions, which might be renamed *Boxes with the Sound of Self-Making*, Ligon's corporeality is again displaced so as to bring forth both the relational predication of the "I" and every subject's liability to be produced as an inert yet animate object. At the same time, the singing voices of the installation, much like those heard in Simpon's *Five Rooms*, alternatively found and locate black subjectivity within the realm of the sonic. In each crate, the noises of a thing imbued with an ability to sing itself are recoded as the voice of an absent narrator

describing a journey; as an ensemble, the boxes take viewers on an aural traipse through musical history to better suspend them on that perilous road where the benighted object becomes black subject.[91] From the performances of the McIntosh County Shouters, which revive the slave tradition of the ring shout, to gangsta rapper KRS-One's "Sound of da Police," which equates New York police officers with plantation overseers, *To Disembark*'s recordings give voice to the affective and existential noises of black emergency as they spool out within commodity culture and continually put pressure on the boundaries of the human.[92]

Even more important, the crates articulate the historical anteriority of African American resistive tactics aimed at simultaneously undoing and exploiting the conflation of persons and things that has shaped the contours of blackness and the direction of Western three-dimensional aesthetics. For if, as art historian Rosalind Krauss argues, modernist sculpture is "essentially nomadic," effectively defined by "its negative condition—of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place," then Ligon's boxes and his means of producing them can be said to condense and literally replay these histories through the black body in a recursive loop.[93] Of course, that body as site and surface—the fetishized object of the racializing gaze—is purposefully absented, throwing us onto the skin of an object, which, in its plain yet multivalent materiality, undoes distinctions between modern, minimal, and site-specific modes of making through focusing on the structural rather than the visual dereliction of African diasporic subjects. In this sense, the crates function as a kind of corporeal armor, a bodily cladding that both secures the opacity of its contents and solicits the viewer's phantasmatic projections only to expose the arbitrariness of their moorings.[94]

To be sure, Ligon is not alone in his purposive recasting of Brown's conveyance as material object, attesting to the resonance of Brown's journey as a metaphor for black experience in terms that are uncanny, wondrous, demonstrative, and accusatory.[95] The section on the Underground Railroad at the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, for example, has since 1988 featured an eerily animated effigy of Brown that emerges from and disappears into a large crate marked "Adams Express" (fig. 3.26), endlessly performing the fugitive's departure and arrival to vivify the experience of enslavement for the edification of the museum's audiences, particularly its youngest patrons.[96] Most influential for Ligon, however, was artist Pat Ward Williams's *32 Hours in a Box. . . . And Still Counting* (1987; fig. 3.27).[97] In this work, a rectangle of text written on the floor describes contemporary scenes of racial discrimination and encloses four white pillars mounted with images—a violin, a doll's eye, a rose, and a skyscraper—which, in their turn, frame Williams's iteration of Brown's box. Her construction gives us two views of a black man doubled over in a container, revealing the contortions of his body beneath the latticework of its walls. Like panes of a window filled with photographs rather than glass, the sides of the structure function according to a logic of visual and historical transparency. Thus, the work's title underlines the perpetuity of collective black incarceration, while the text inscribed along its base—"HENRY

3.26
Henry "Box" Brown installation, National Great Blacks in Wax Museum. (Photograph by the author, 2008).



3.27
Pat Ward Williams, *32 Hours in a Box...And Still Counting*, 1987. Cyanotype prints in window frames, photocopies, wood pillars, and text. 243.8 x 243.8 x 243.8 cm. (Collection of Peter Norton.)

BOX BROWN WHO ESCAPED SLAVERY ENCLOSED IN A BOX 3 FEET WIDE AND 2 LONG"—demands a cyclical movement around the sculpture.[98]

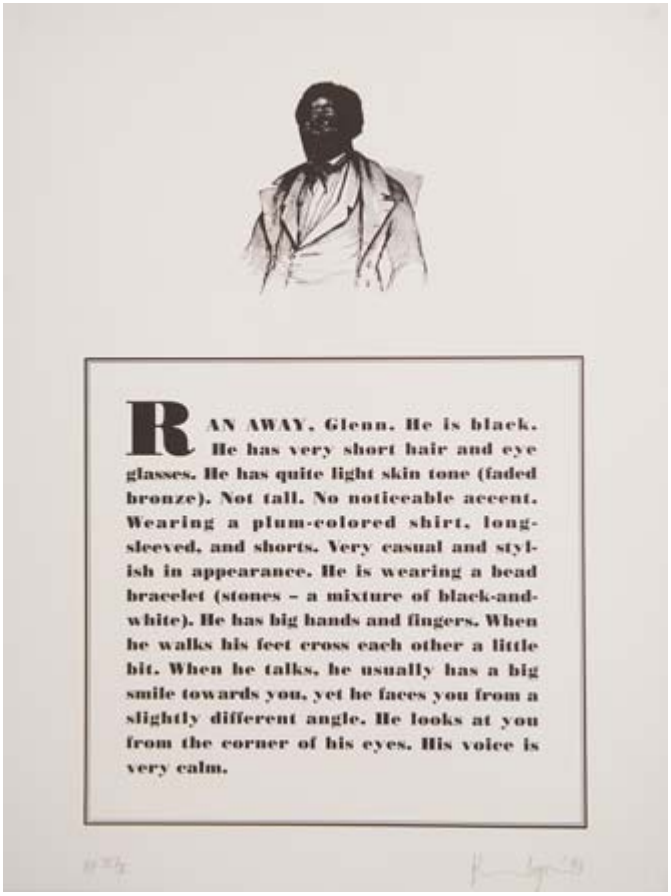
What enables *32 Hours in a Box*'s feint of interpretive closure is a collapse of historical frames that constitutes slavery as a generative metaphor that asymptotically engages the present through recourse to an irrefutably tragic past. It is a canny maneuver, one that weaves Brown and his latter-day avatar into a seamless narrative in which fugitivity signifies only the promise of new forms of subjection. Because despite the promises of civilization held out by the photographs on the pillar, even if he were to escape his cell, the man depicted in the work would surely not receive the same warm reception that greeted Mr. "Box" Brown. Williams's figure can look forward neither to hearty applause from white liberal supporters

nor a book contract, but to the intractable reality of racialized aggression summed up so succinctly by the work's external ring of text and its loops of barbed wire. In this sense, *32 Hours in a Box* could not be timelier: its date of execution coincides with the apogee of an unprecedented uptick in the incarceration of African Americans that, since 1976, has seen the prison replace the ghetto as the prime site for the degradation of black life and the production of black masculinity as abject, dishonored, and inherently criminal.[99]

Such concerns are, to a certain extent, evoked by Ligon's work as well. Clearly, both his and Williams's projects are invested in the former slave's narrative and pay heed to the dimensions of his incongruous carriage in order to reframe the conditions of the present. Visually, the similarities seem to end there. Ligon shows no desire to offer us a freshly minted photograph of the isolated black male body imprisoned. Nor does he construct an index of the real that eclipses the distance between now and then, making crystal clear the continuities between the two. Such divergences are ultimately symptomatic, I think, of Ligon's and Williams's differing understandings of how history ought to be conceived. For Williams, the past reads as a deferral of the present that must be vigilantly reimagined: representation becomes an aid to memory and history a refracting lens through which to judge the course of current events. Ligon, on the other hand, embarks on a path of re-presentation that interrogates the regimes of viewership that subtend the afterlife of slavery.[100] The boxes in *To Disembark* evoke a whole host of fugitive subjects who function as the opaque loci of a discursive field indicative of the visual forms that constructed the runaway and allowed him differing degrees of autonomy: the broadsheets' prescriptive account of personality, the narratives' confining conventions, and the painted word's inevitable fading from particular declaration to predictable if inscrutable blackness.

Seen from this retrospect, Brown's own manic proliferation of autoexpressive media takes on a renewed poignancy. In addition to his performances, panorama, images, and hymn, the fugitive reconfigured his 1849 narrative two years later in order to get right what his white amanuenses could not see fit to print.[101] Not dissimilarly, the likeness of Brown that provided the frontispiece to his first narrative is itself a generic type, which served as the portrait for another ex-slave's narrative and which appears as the header for another of the *Runaways*, as if to intimate the black subject's constitutive exchangeability as object of slavery and subject of contemporary art (fig. 3.28).[102] Then as now, African American cultural practitioners have played numerous modes of representation off of each other to secure some space for the articulation of an autonomous self within verbal and visual regimes intent on their singular scripting.[103]

In addition to their critique of the ongoing production of black dereliction as commodity form, Ligon's various modes of figuration in *To Disembark* reflect those aspects of slavery that continue to resonate with understandings of the self on all sides of the color line. In particular, nineteenth-century legal discourse on the runaway provided a model for intellectual property law's commodification of im-



3.28
Glenn Ligon, *Runaways (Very Calm)*, 1993. One from a suite of ten lithographs. 40.6 x 30.5 cm. (Courtesy of the artist.)

age, word, and voice, opening onto the analogical similarities between the fugitive subject and the fungible aspects of subjectivity that map capitalist culture's ever increasing subjugation of personhood to possession.[104] Ligon's ensemble casts the processes of theft and reification that shaped the production of the fugitive in the present tense, absconding with the properties of others to create a liminal space for the expression of black sounds and queer desires in excess of the representations that would constrain them.[105]

With that said, we are now ready to disembark. As we have seen, Ligon is a master of felicitously chosen words that are capable of sampling multiple histories, traditions, and theoretical suppositions that find themselves evoked, only to be detained, echoing the complexity of the artist's own position within a set of discourses that overlap and oppose one another. *To Disembark* emblematizes this tendency within his practice: in Ligon's lexicon, the titular phrase means not so much to reach the end of a journey as to endlessly retrace its course in search of openings always under threat of disappearance. This is what his installation effectively demands of us as we shuttle between wall and floor, past and present, the humorous and the horrifying. Moving through the work's numerous visual and aural registers means positioning oneself in relation to the history of slavery, unveiling the

recursive logic of stereotype, and engaging with the artist's multiple "selves." To disembark, then, is to assume responsibility for the production of meaning, to run away from the prison house of language, and to reconstitute ourselves in the traces we leave in our wake. The installation is a spatial text and our movement within it becomes a bodily reading as we recode Ligon's words, turning them over in our hands, poaching them to arrive at our own meaning.[106]

As the viewer navigates the work, she is seduced by the materials on the wall and drawn close by the sounds emerging from the boxes, which recalibrate not only her bodily awareness of black visibility but also her sense of the circumstances that inducted her into the museum. Neither fully mooring us before the prints, nor entirely subjecting us to the sculptural demand, *To Disembark* relies on a contingent relation to the visual that is not dependent on a point of mastery but that understands the placelessness from which the gaze originates.[107] In its spatial breadth and affective complexity, the work demands a kind of aporetic looking, a reading askance, a fugitive walking meant to refigure the self even as it is contained in the box of blackness. It is from that location, the placeless place of the fugitive, where the present freshly comes into view, though the prospect that *To Disembark* offers is a damning one.

Can blackness ever appear other than through the scrim of its debilitating visual, institutional, discursive, and physical constraints? Are African American artists still unable to come to full voice within mainstream artistic discourse despite their increasingly splashy landings on the shores of culture? Have black queer subjects just gotten off the boat, able to articulate themselves openly but still denied a place within African American culture at large? Do these arrivals signal not so much advancement as the beginning of a new even more insidious stage in the exploitation of black difference and perversity? Who, in other words, is arriving from where and when and with what avenues for redress? All of these queries fall somewhere close to the mark, though to privilege one more than the others would likely be to hamstring the discursive force of Ligon's work, if not to miss the point of his multiple voices altogether.

To get closer to the tenor and texture of those voices, it is helpful to turn back to Gwendolyn Brooks's deceptively slim volume of poetry from which the exhibition takes its name. Published in 1981, her *To Disembark* looks to the recent past of black resistance movements in America and abroad in order to measure distance traveled, to take stock of the present political crisis, and to mourn the men and women lost in the arrival of a revolutionary black consciousness. This epochmaking moment in black culture often motivates the poet's descriptions, whether she is elegizing "Young Heroes," pointing out scenes of senseless black death, or condemning the petty slights and false self-importance of current black leaders.[108] Ligon took up this volume, I would contend, because it evokes material circumstances on the ground so vividly and because it describes how blackness gets figured, felt, and lived at a moment when one journey has ended and another has begun. In this sense, Brooks's text seems to set out the ambitions for the artist's

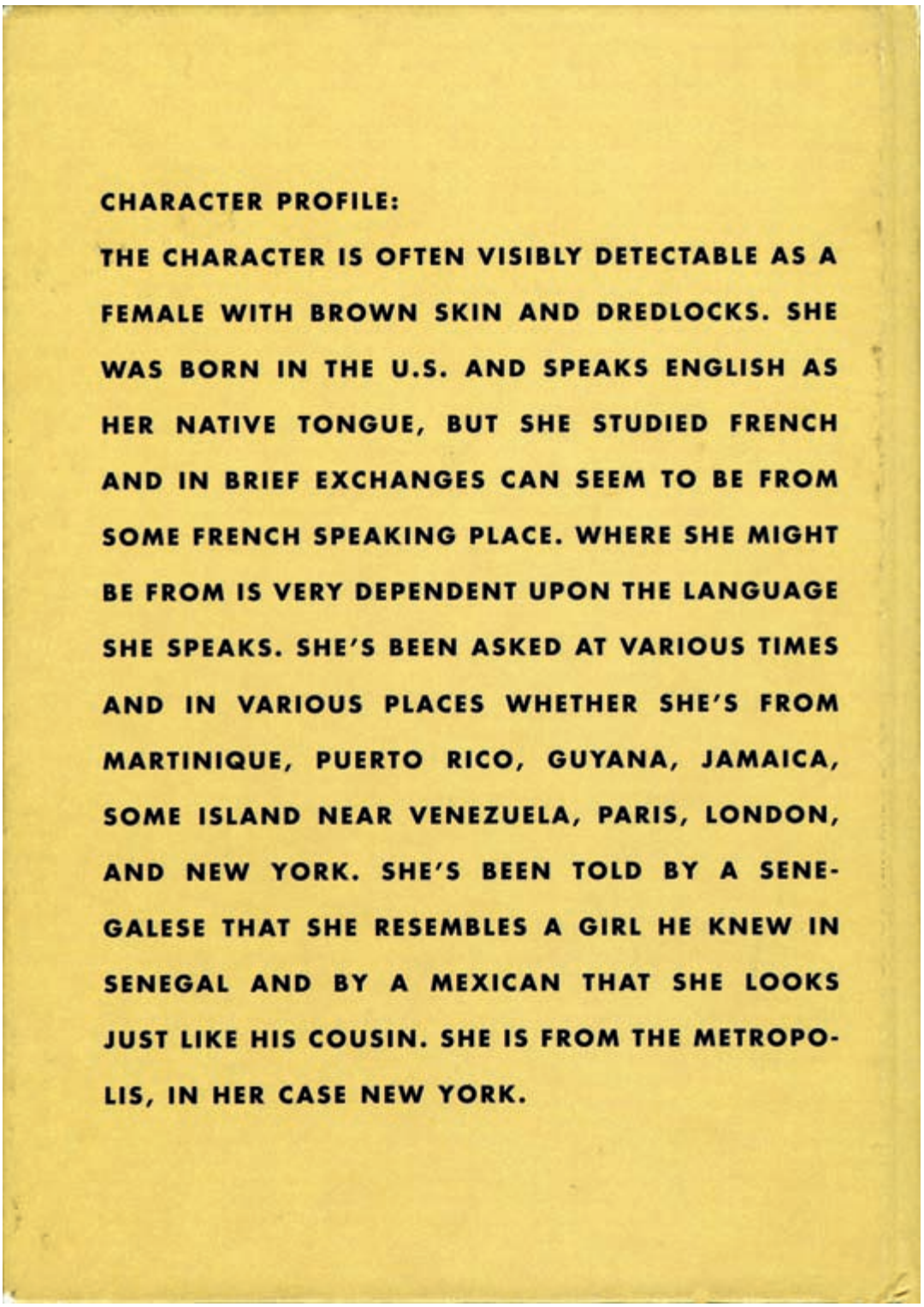
installation, which is also underwritten by the imperative to assess the current situation through the lens of history and to mourn its future.

In Ligon's practice, the subject darkened by the optics of race and sex arrives over and over again—from slavery, from segregation, from rebellion and persecution and catastrophe—though he never comes any closer to arriving at a destination that would either emancipate him or entirely foreclose his individual possibilities. It is this sense of a missed encounter with the present, of a mourning without end, that haunts Ligon's installation.[109] Arising like a flash in the moment of danger, slavery serves as the meditative node where the contours of blackness now come into focus. In reaching back to the past, Ligon reaches out for what cultural historian Saidiya Hartman calls the fugitive's dream, "a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood . . . . of an elsewhere, with all its promises and dangers, where the stateless might, at last, thrive."[110]

In their contingency and multivalence, the artist's visual means suggest the difficulty of keeping that dream alive and the wily disposition needed to do so, an ability to adapt and abandon and abscond, ever attentive to the losses such fugitivity entails and the liberation it promises. In the aftermath of the revolutionary upheavals of the 1960s, an agonistic engagement with the global order of things often seems impossible, especially given the economies that would constitute us and render the world as always already packaged, delimited, boxed—or, to use a term of the contemporary transnational shipping industry—containerized.[111] Under these conditions, there is little hope for escape, but there are perhaps no better tactics of evasion than those developed by fugitives who have long had to survive as material and phantasmatic grist for the machinery of capital and who have managed to do so by taking wing regardless of where they might land. For a clearer idea of what such a flight might entail, we must now to look to the trajectory of Renée Green.

The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. The duty of the writer is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present. This exploration is therefore related neither to a schematic chronology nor to a nostalgic lament. It leads to the identification of a painful notion of time and its full projection forward into the future, without the help of those plateaus in time from which the West has benefited, without the help of that collective density that is the primary value of an ancestral cultural heartland.

ÉDOUARD GLISSANT, "The Quarrel with History," 1976



4.1
Renée Green, "Character Profile," from *Certain Miscellanies: Some Documents* (Amsterdam: De Appel Foundation, 1996). (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

4

Renée Green's Diasporic Imagination

THIRD PERSONS

> The character is often visibly detectable as a female with brown skin and dredlocks [*sic*]. She was born in the US and speaks English as her native tongue, but she studied French and in brief exchanges can seem to be from some French speaking place. Where she might be from is very dependent upon the language she speaks. She's been asked at various times and in various places whether she's from Martinique, Puerto Rico, Guyana, Jamaica, some island near Venezuela, Paris, London, and New York. She's been told by a Senegalese that she resembles a girl he knew in Senegal and by a Mexican that she looks just like his cousin. She is from the metropolis, in her case New York.[1]

This is how Renée Green wryly described the fiction known as herself on the back of her 1996 book *Certain Miscellanies* (fig. 4.1). Visually, the disposition of the passage recalls Ligon's text paintings, yet Green's words neither comprise an independent work of art nor shy away from speaking forthrightly of their subject: hers is a third-person account meant to construct both a telling portrayal and a tenuous distance from it. To craft her description, Green carefully held herself at arm's length as she considered her conditions of appearance, her varied means of speaking, and the ability of both to produce affective and ideological responses that would somehow place her, whether for good or ill. What emerges is another kind of antiportrait—in this case, the self-construction of a peripatetic contemporary artist—which, even more than Ligon's, Simpson's, or Wilson's actively elaborates the multiple positions the artist might occupy as well as the provisional and contextual nature of identification itself.

While the critical thrust of Green's accounting may now be clearer, its origins and standing within her practice are rather less straightforward. The passage in question, entitled "Character Profile," comes from "Scenes From a Group Show: Project Unité," an essay first published in 2000. However, Green originally penned the text in 1993 as a means of narrating and coming to grips with the six days she spent camping out in an apartment on the seventh floor of one of several housing projects or Unité d'Habitations, dreamed up by the famed architect Le Corbusier. The building in which Green stayed, located in Firminy, France, was partially empty when she arrived and had for years sat in a state of relative disrepair, facts that flew in the face of its designer's utopian aspirations. It was precisely this failure that made the location a prime site, in the eyes of curator Yves Aupetitallot, for artists such as Green, Tom Burr, Mark Dion, and Christian Philip Müller—all associated with a new wave of institutional critique—to productively explore the ongoing contradictions of urban central planning.[2]

Green did not disappoint. Staged as a cinematic treatment, "Scenes from a Group Show" witnesses her becoming ill, trying to write, wrangling payment from her sponsors, and encountering other inhabitants as she reflects on what it means for her, an African American woman, to participate in a group exhibition featuring mostly privileged white artists in a space permanently occupied by primarily lower-class sub-Saharan and North African immigrants. All too cognizant of such discrepancies, the artist, in a gesture of ambivalent solidarity, donned a quilted vest emblazoned with the word "immigration" in glow-in-the dark letters (fig. 4.2). As she wandered throughout the building thus adorned, Green signaled the process of her own movement to and within the site, thereby marking how subjects temporarily sharing the same spatial location have arrived there through divergent historical trajectories of violence and displacement.[3]

4.2
Renée Green, *Secret (Black and White Photographs)*, 1993. 16.5 x 24.5 cm each. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

4.3
Renée Green, *Partially Buried*, 1996, installation view. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. (Photograph by Tom Warren. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

Words were not the artist's sole means for documenting this performance or the project as a whole, whose various iterations would each be called *Secret* in reference to a recently published volume of Le Corbusier's studies of nude female figures.[4] Green made a video, recorded several of her conversations, and produced a series of Polaroids whose ultimately cloudy appearance, she mused, seemed to index the ghostly presence of Le Corbusier himself.[5] "Character Profile" comes to us, then, as a fragment of a temporally expansive and wide-ranging project that is nevertheless grounded by the vivid and accessible account on offer in "Scenes from a Group Show." Taken together, the passage and the ensemble of which it is part begin to suggest the multivalence of Green's oeuvre, which, like the artist herself, has moved recursively and self-reflexively through numerous geographical locations and amongst a range of media over the last twenty years in investigating the flows of bodies and ideas that have shaped the present. On the one hand, she has documented the flows of hip-hop culture between the United States and Germany in the large-scale installation *Import / Export Funk Office* (1992); on the other, she has narrated a series of epistolary exchanges between fictional characters in the maritime film *Endless Dreams and the Water Between* (2009).

Green is likely best known, however, for *Partially Buried in Three Parts*, an exploration of the global remnants of American art and radicalism circa 1968 (1996–1999; fig. 4.3). That piece took its inspiration and its title from a work executed by earth artist Robert Smithson, who partially buried an abandoned woodshed on the campus of Kent State University in 1970. In 1985, the roof of the building collapsed and was soon bulldozed over, but its memory lives on, in large part, because six months after *Partially Buried Woodshed* was created, national guardsmen gunned down four student protesters.

This history resonated deeply for Green, whose mother was a student at Kent State at the time of the massacre. In response, she created a multimedia reading and lounging room at New York's Pat Hearn gallery that included period wall hangings, photographs of black activists, research documentation, books such as James Michener's account of the murders, and her own single-channel video work. Green subsequently shot *Übertragen / Transfer*, which featured interviews with intellectuals in Germany who recounted their memories of Kent State and of U.S. social protests movements more broadly. When she was invited to participate in Korea's Kwangju Biennale in 1999, the artist continued this exploration: the resulting video brought together slides taken by her father during the Korean War, texts by artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and archival footage of the Kwangju Uprising of 1980 in which many student protesters were killed.

In each case, Green works accumulatively, grounding her projects in aspects of personal narrative in order to make transnational connections among shards of the past and to literally unearth long-neglected histories. In the process her art has become central to reckonings with the imbrication of travel, identity, and site-specificity since the early 1990s. Hailed as a model of both *Kontextkunst* and critical nomadism, Green's practice has subsequently given rise to a flood of citations even more numerous than the rich network of references that pepper her art and even more voluminous than her own steady output of critical essays, books, curatorial projects, and conferences as well as her accompanying descriptions of each.[6] Through such means, the artist has produced an estranged textual self that variously complements and stands in for the visual experience of her work. Just as important, Green's writings often provide the primary access to her art and effectively direct interpretations of it, connecting thematics within her projects, which are often either physically remote or otherwise difficult to examine first hand.

This makes a certain sense given the bricolaged nature of her practice, her emphasis on the discursivity of art making, and her approach to the histories that inform it. Here is how Green elucidated the point in an early interview, conducted in 1991: "I have been thinking about genealogy not as a complete history, but as a fragment. And that's the way I often work, with little bits and pieces. Being a diasporic subject myself, I have no linear history. No one truly does, but I think I'm acutely aware of not being able to find some direct trace back ten generations."[7] In expanding on this comment, Green would turn away from her own family narrative or the lack thereof to place herself and her readers on firmer textual ground:

> I've been thinking quite a bit about the ideas of Michel Foucault regarding genealogy, especially his discussion of origins. He said that genealogy—and he referred often to Nietzsche in his discussions of genealogy—opposes the search for origins. Genealogy instead involves an attempt "to follow the complex course of descent . . . to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the

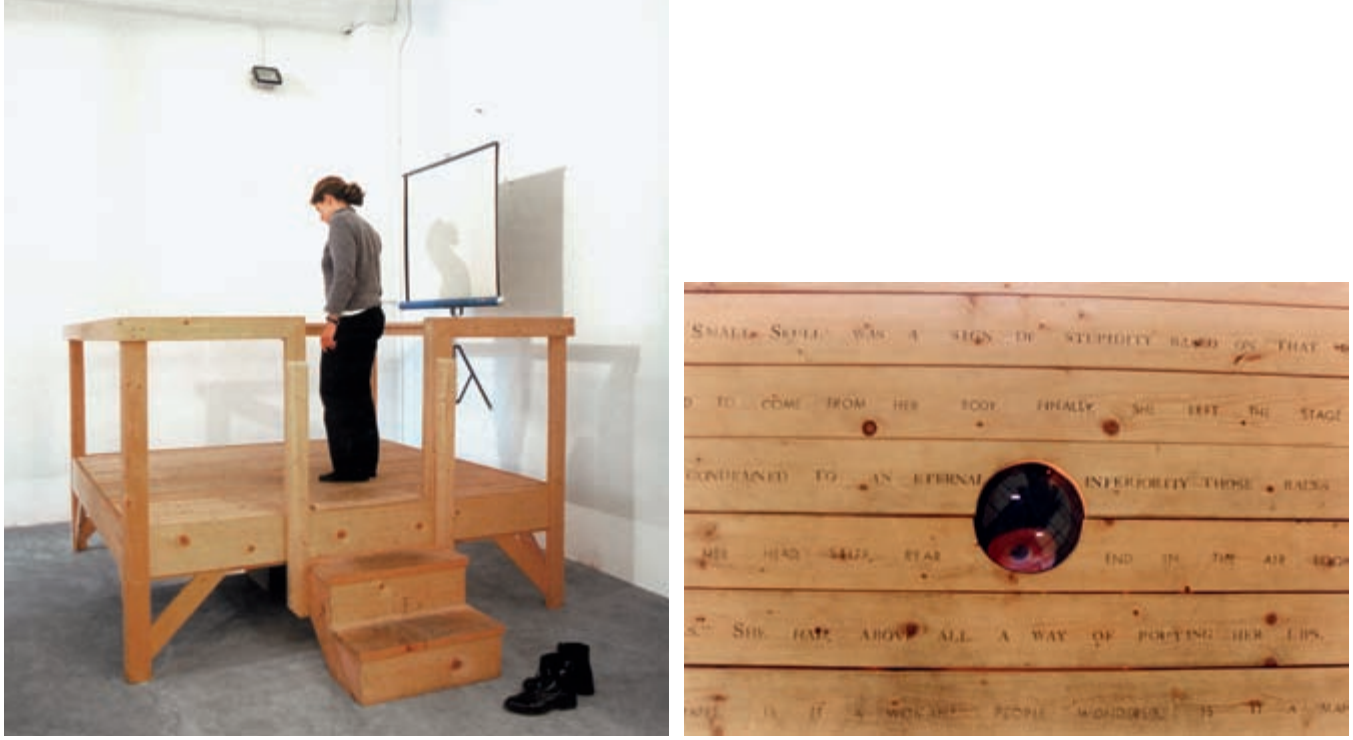
errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us."[8]

Foucault's conceptualization, duly footnoted in the interview as deriving from his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," indeed does provide a useful lens through which to analyze Green's art, working procedures, and the involvement of both with the historical production of race. The titles of even a few pieces written on her practice suffice to tell the tale: "A Genealogy of Desire," "Genealogical Interventions," "Genealogies of Contact."[9] In their miming of the artist's language, these texts underline that to enter her world is to confront head-on both the belatedness of art-historical writing and the descriptive challenges posed by installation in the wake of an artist's definitive articulations.

To be sure, Green's critics get much right about her art. Yet they also run the risk of mirroring those aspects of her varied lexicon—the nods to Foucault, Smithson, and conceptual artist Adrian Piper chief among them—that are closest at hand and most legible within the discursive economies of contemporary art without sufficiently interrogating them or their *détournement* in Green's practice. More important, such reiteration renders less tangible the artist's material engagements with the histories of the African diaspora, which describes the forcible dispersal of black peoples from the continent as well as efforts to create political and cultural community in the wake of that displacement.[10] These economies, as articulated in Green's work, point up no less than the deep structures of the modern world that have shaped the futures and fortunes of subjects on all sides of the color line.

Consider, in this light, *Seen*, part of the artist's 1990 Clocktower Gallery exhibition *Anatomies of Escape*, which examined the spectacular representation of sexualized black female bodies in Europe. The piece focused on the American performer Josephine Baker, whose onstage antics made her the toast of Paris between the world wars, and on Saartje Baartman, aka the Hottentot Venus, who was displayed throughout Europe in the early nineteenth century for the sake of "objective" scientific examination and prurient public interest. The work was comprised of a bare-bones wooden structure, reminiscent of both the stage and the auction block, that viewers mounted one at a time (fig. 4.4, left). Once positioned there, they could hear Baker singing a seductive come on in French; looking down, they noticed that the planks of the floor were inscribed with Baartman's autopsy report (fig. 4.4, right).

In so doing, each viewer became the object of precisely the kinds of scopic energies to which the historical figures were subjected, both held up as a specimen to be gawked at by other gallerygoers and distorted into a projection by a piercing light that cast the viewer's shadow onto a white screen. In this emphasis on the spectator's corporeal captation within the work's very structure, *Seen* differs from analogous efforts to reframe racialized histories of display, such as Simpson's *Guarded Conditions*, in which a black female subject is photographed on the block, and Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's well-known 1992 performance,



4.4
Left, Renée Green, *Seen*, 1990. Wooden platform, rubber-stamped ink, screen, motorized winking glasses, magnifying glass, spotlight, sound. 207 x 207 x 136 cm. *Right*, detail from *Seen*. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

in which they posed in a cage as *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* for audiences from Chicago to Madrid.[11] By contrast, Green's architecture in *Seen* created a critical mirror without physically requiring such an apparatus or its storied subjects to appear: in standing on the stage, the spectator became the target of a gaze predicated on a desire for knowledge that glanced off of its original locus, beaming forward in time to take the viewer as its mark.

Seen, like Green's practice as a whole, can thus be described as an attempt to provide critical fragments that, in reframing the viewer's sense of self, undo the presuppositions of Western history in order to open onto a different set of narrative and conceptual possibilities in which African diasporic subjects might thrive. Theorist Homi K. Bhabha argues in his postcolonial critique of Foucauldian notions of history that for such possibilities to emerge, the discourse of modernity must be rewritten as a "narrative of alterity that explores forms of social antagonism and contradiction that are not yet properly represented . . . cultural enunciations in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences."[12] If Green's work can be understood as a kind of genealogy, it is one that recollects the constitutive forms, material traces, and embodied encounters that black folks have left across the Western world. Her constructions of art and self purposefully constitute a kind of peculiar archive, one without a home or an order to call its own, which is meant to both pose and respond to the question of diaspora.[13] What is needed, then, and what this chapter aims to enact, is a critical approach to her practice not unlike that advocated by art historian Emma Chubb: in reading Green's work, she argues, we must always read it askance, in an attempt to run both in and out of step with the artist's cited influences and favored procedures. In taking up this challenge, I hope to tell a story about Green's art with the *petit récits* of the black subject's history foremost in mind.[14]

4.5
Renée Green, *Mise-en-scéne*, 1991. Work commissioned by the Ateliers Internationaux Collection Frac des Pays de la Loire. (Photography by Bernard Renoux. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

Accordingly, we might offer another profile of the artist in question; it too will necessarily be bound up with the slanting versions of the self on offer in her prolific discourse and the accounts of it.[15] The character remembers Amadou Diallo. She and her brother have been pulled over by the Newark police for driving while black.[16] Although she originally hails from Ohio, she has become a cosmopolitan modern. She well understands the relation between the society of the spectacle and the art of racial profiling, though she is more likely to riff on Sun Ra than to quote Guy Debord in naming her work.[17] Judging from the title of her college thesis, "Discourse on Afro-American Art," she has long known her history and she knows "her" history, so she actively refutes the clichéd expectations piled on her as a "black artist."[18] She is skeptical of any identarian imposition, no matter how helpful or supposedly altruistic. In a word, she is not interested in "play[ing] other to your same."[19]

Over the years, Green's refusals have registered. More than any of the artists considered in these pages, she has escaped from what Darby English calls the trap

of "black representational space" to become the poster girl for critical antiessentialism, particularly in Europe, where she lived for much of the mid and late 1990s.[20] Yet in her pointedly estranged relationship to identarian formations, Green operates from a displaced notion of self, a position that is and is not one, which has been central to the articulation of black identity and to the artist's interrogations of Western discourse.[21] As the artist herself has stated, the ramifications of this radical dispossession continue to be felt in the present: history, to her mind, is "an activity reflecting lived lives which relates to something that is very present. It is not something distant."[22] What I hope to get at in this chapter is Green's belonging within an African diasporic tradition that takes visual and textual estrangement as one of its central procedures and black subjects' responses to the despotism of the past as appropriate models for writing the present. In her art, dispersal is at once a historical fact, an ethical stance, and a guiding formal principle.

To make the case, I will focus on her early work, particularly *Sites of Genealogy* (1990), with the ultimate aim of exploring how the artist brings the enslaved subjects most forcefully crushed by the past into view through her installation *Mise-en-Scène* and the numerous subsequent iterations of its most visible element, her own version of a classic French toile (1991; fig. 4.5). In this work, whose title translates as "placed in the scene," Green reveals the continuity of the modes of violence, vision, and resistance that have differentially produced marked subjects as images and things by turning us both toward and away from imaginary specters while demanding that we confront the hard evidence of form. Always mirroring the conditions of production and her place within them, never content to let objects speak for themselves, the fictional Green whose work I want to narrate practices a mode of critique that renders each of us a "she" in question.

OF OTHER MIRRORS

The period 1990–1991 was a vital moment in the evolving trajectory of Green's practice. Although she had worked in a variety of capacities since graduating from Wesleyan University in 1981—as a curator at the Drawing Center, an educator at the New Museum, a helping hand at Just Above Midtown, and an editor for several publications—these years in New York marked the first public iteration of the thematics and operations that have since characterized her practice.[23] Tellingly, research and writing played pivotal roles. In 1990, Green completed her stint in the rigorously critical Whitney Independent Study Program and in the following year, she published reviews of what were to become major touchstones of postidentarian discourse such as Russell Ferguson's coedited anthology, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Of this volume, she wrote:

> *Out There* indicates possible routes for those "New World *bricoleurs*" who take up the banner of the "new cultural politics of difference" of which Cornel West

4.6
Renée Green, *Sites of Genealogy*, 1990, detail (basement with jars). Mixed media. Dimensions variable. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

> spoke. There is no clear map to follow, yet whether exile or nomad, one can be stimulated, comforted, and encouraged by the voices of fellow travelers. Perhaps this book will help you, as it did me, fuel up before going back "out there."[24]

In these lines, Green describes her own position and the course she was then following as an artist: by the early '90s her work featured prominently in group shows including the Whitney Museum's *SiteSeeing: Travel and Tourism in Contemporary Art*, whose title productively outlines the preoccupations that her projects up to that point at once examined and refined.

Let us briefly consider the key works of this period. In *Idyll Pursuits*, first installed in Caracas, Venezuela, Green examined her relationships to nineteenth-century American antecedents who had likewise gone South to explore, document, and paint; in *VistaVision: Landscape of Desire*, executed in Vancouver, British Columbia, she focused on her conflicted attitude toward the histories of African conquest that undergird the collections of the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial gallery at the American Museum of Natural History; and in *Bequest*, a site-specific work commissioned by the Worcester Museum of Art in Massachusetts, she delved further into the uneven economies of transnational exchange that shape cultural institutions along lines of descent that all too frequently divide black from white. In each of these works, as she had in *Seen*, the artist orchestrated a complex spatial interplay of images, texts, and theatrical devices, as well as fabricated and extant architectures, to situate the viewer within a tendentious *mise-en-scène* that required bodily perambulation and studied reflection to understand one's place and possibilities within the histories brought into view. Yet it is another early installation, *Sites of Genealogy*, that not only best brings into focus Green's visual tactics and the discourses with which they engage but also enables a reconsideration of her art through the lens of slavery, whose third persons have often marked her practice and whose strategies of resistance productively deform extant understandings of it.

4.7
Renée Green, *Sites of Genealogy*, 1990. *Left*, detail (artist on perch). *Right*, detail. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

Sites of Genealogy was steadily constructed at the PS1 Museum in Queens over the course of ten months as part of the group exhibition *Out of Site*. The work occupied the building's attic, basement boiler room, and the stairwells through which they connect, as if to underline the disparate metaphorical valences and histories of caste formation that keep these areas apart. In the boiler room, Green deployed a set of mason jars filled with coal, most of which hugged the wall in an unruly line. She plucked several of these containers from the mass, mounted them to the wall on plinths, numbered them from one to nine, and stamped them with adjectives describing their contents such as "sooty" and "dusky" (fig. 4.6). In so doing, Green formally recalled Marcel Duchamp's 1938 assemblage, *Twelve Hundred Coal Bags Suspended from the Ceiling over a Stove.* Yet while that work, first shown in a Paris exhibition of surrealist paintings, aimed to effectively negate the space and logic of the canvasses amidst which it was installed, Green's project unfolded in a previously untrafficked space, bringing to light the actual functioning of the museum and casting the viewer onto another site equally redolent with dark associations.[25] To wit, the jars faced lines of text printed on the opposing wall that Green lifted from Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son*, whose "brute Negro" protagonist, Bigger Thomas, accidentally murders Mary Dalton, the white daughter of his employers, and stuffs her body into their boiler room furnace in a bungled attempt to avoid discovery.[26]

Green made the attic of the museum considerably more luminous in appearance and, at first glance, tone. She filled an alphabetically labeled set of jars with everyday substances like marshmallows and instant coffee as well as coal. Most strikingly, she constructed a lattice of white thread that cordoned off the center

of the space; here too, the artist invoked a Duchampian work in order to recast it. Where her precedent's 1942 New York installation, *Sixteen Miles of String*, had radically complicated viewers' access to artworks with a tangled labyrinth that indexed his sense of exilic dislocation during World War II, Green used similar means to block access to and create a safe haven for her own person (fig. 4.7, left).[27] Occasionally, she would sit at a desk in her ad hoc office and type up her thoughts, using an old machine and drawing from an immense stack of paper. Alternatively, she might mount the ladder positioned at the crux of two horizontal bands of string and peer through a telescope and onto the exterior of the building. To achieve this prospect, Green removed the slats covering the windows, placed them on the floor and the walls, and labeled them with chapter headings from Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* of 1861 (fig. 4.7, right). Like Wright's novel, this slave narrative describes the harrowing journey of a young black subject. Its protagonist, Linda Brent—a pseudonym for Jacobs—is in search of a freedom that is as elusive as she would be constrained, holed up in an attic for seven years in a desperate bid to evade her master's pursuit.

Despite the emotional and historical force of these works, most critical accounts of *Sites of Genealogy* are strangely bloodless in their affect and effectively estranged from the present, focusing on how the installation reveals Green's interest in deconstructing the taxonomies of racialized display or in physically enacting the constructedness and specificity of historical knowledge.[28] These entirely reasonable foci are due, in part, to the artist's pointed decision—detailed in the unpublished proposal for the project—not to spell out either text's key developments, which are only vaguely alluded to within the work itself.[29] In an interview conducted around the time she executed the piece, Green explained her turn to Wright's and Jacobs's accounts as part and parcel of a genealogical investigation of the present, "because [both] contain certain recurring narratives" that continue to speak to the literary, political, and psychic predication of black subjects seeking liberation.[30]

These writers' fictional avatars, in other words, provided windows not only onto the enduring social and actual deaths that structure black being, but also onto the sites of affinity and disidentification that informed the artist's own predicament and her aesthetic response to it. For Green, Wright's antihero is surely the antimodel despite his often-noted metaphorical aptness as a reflection of black consciousness. Recall, on this score, theorist Frantz Fanon's brilliant gloss on the behavior of the novel's protagonist:

> It is Bigger Thomas—he is afraid, he is terribly afraid. He is afraid, but of what is he afraid? Of himself. No one knows yet who he is, but he knows that fear will fill the world when the world finds out. And when the world knows, the world always expects something of the Negro. . . . In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. To put an end to his tension, he acts, he responds to the world's anticipation.[31]

Rather than react as she ought or explode as she justifiably might, Green literally

leaves Bigger and the world's expectations down in the basement, opting instead to occupy Jacobs's metaphorical attic, which despite its limitations, offers greater room for maneuver.

Close attention to this narrative, I want to argue, affords a useful framework for freshly parsing the logic and ambitions of Green's work as a whole. While all of the artists treated in this study paid heed to Jacobs's account, even occasionally referencing it in their work—think back, for instance, to Ligon's "Snow Queen" frontispiece—it is Green who most fully explored the ramifications of the enslaved narrator's fugitive tactics for a contemporary practice. Indeed, given the contents of the text—its games of cunning, feints with power, and above all, its deployment of the fictional "Linda Brent" to describe the narrator's experiences—it is only fitting that *Incidents* should provide a source of inspiration for one of the artist's first major works and that Jacobs should be the thinker to whom she turns.

Even more than the average slave narrative, which necessarily constructs a fictional self to accord with white standards of decorum, Jacobs's identity was purposefully fabulated in order to shield her and her children from continued pursuit.[32] Yet what comes across most forcefully in Jacobs's form of displaced self-accounting is neither a litany of the forms of violence to which the female slave is subjected, nor merely the malice of the institution's practitioners, but the methods of subterfuge she devised to avoid being entirely possessed by them. In her case, the active spurs to such ruses were multiple, but her troubles began when her owner James Norcom, the narrative's Dr. Flint, began to sexually solicit his charge just after she turned fifteen.[33]

Her movements watched and her solitude ruptured, Jacobs experienced time and space as everywhere contaminated by her master's presence and overwritten by his compulsions. In the face of such relentless pursuit, she—like so many other captive women who found themselves in similar circumstances—had few options. In the end, this slave girl did submit, but not to Norcom. Rather than be forced into a sexual relationship with a man she actively despised, Jacobs took a white lover of her own choosing, the narrative's "Mr. Sands"—based on the actual figure Samuel Tredwell Sawyer—who she hoped might afford her some respite from the increasingly hostile advances of her master.[34] In doing so, Jacobs set in motion the first of a whole string of subjective inversions that turned the ironclad law of slavery back on itself, thus recasting her narrative in different terms and allowing her "something akin to freedom."[35] The efficacy of these tactics ultimately led to her escape, but not before a seven-year stay in that tiny garret tucked away above her grandmother's house. In order to duck Norcom's ever more determined attempts to make her recognize the totality of her subjection and to figure her as nothing more than the vessel of his desire, Jacobs had to remove herself from the field of visibility altogether. Though trapped in darkness, at least it was a shadow of her own design.

As she lay entombed in her "loophole of retreat," Jacobs bored a small hole into the wall, transforming a self-imposed prison into a seat of surveillance from

which she could track the comings and goings of Norcom as he passed through the streets below, oblivious to her presence.[36] For his part, convinced that his most prized possession had carried herself off to the North, Norcom circulated an advertisement at every public place in the vicinity to lay claim to Jacobs's appearance in the wake of her absence. Here is the rendition of that document produced in *Incidents*:

> $300 REWARD! Ran away from the subscriber, an intelligent, bright, mulatto girl, named Linda, 21 years of age. Five feet four inches high. Dark eyes, and black hair inclined to curl, but it can be made straight. Has a decayed spot on a front tooth. She can read and write, and in all probability will try to get to the Free States. All persons are forbidden, under penalty of the law, to harbor or employ said slave. $150 will be given to whoever takes her in the state, and $300 if taken out of the state and delivered to me, or lodged in jail.[37]

Short, clear and concise, the notice aims to provide its reader with a vague mental picture of the girl in question. Of course, the tacit assumption upon which the text hinges is that there is a network of eyes, a continual crossfire of looks and double takes meant to ensure the enforcement of white discipline and to help realize the dream of plantation society as panopticon in practice.

To get at the roots and consequences of this network of gazes for Jacobs's work in, on, and against the specular field in which she was embedded, we must turn to a somewhat different Foucault than the genealogical one on offer in the Green literature. As the theorist showed in his well-known discussion of the prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in *Discipline and Punish*, in the late eighteenth century, structures of surveillance were not only rendered as architectural members but also internalized by an emergent population of self-regulating subjects.[38] By cosseting herself in the garret with its narrow peephole, Jacobs literalized this kind of control as well as its association with the carceral, but, paradoxically, her position gave her a narrow but highly delimited prospect, allowing her to become both the castrated wielder of the gaze and the absent subject of its purview. This strategy held profound implications for readers of her narrative as well, who were confronted with the choice of sympathizing with Jacobs's embodied positionality or aligning themselves with the ostensibly transcendent vision of the master classes. What her tactics of resistance went to show is that to side with the vision of Norcom or the edifices he represented would be to place an unfounded faith in the visual technologies of slavery and the transparency of blackness that Jacobs would everywhere undermine.[39]

Consider once more "Flint's" description in the runaway slave advertisement, which appears in the narrative without the traditional figurative header usually associated with such notices. Despite its apparent semantic precision, the text could conjure the slave body, but with no sure knowledge of its precise identity if and when "Linda" was found by a third party. Knowing this all too well, Jacobs

exploited the promiscuity of language and the instability of its projections to revise Norcom's assertions in producing the narrative of herself. In fact, according to scholar Sarah Blackwood, the actual runaway ad that Norcom ran in the July 4, 1835, issue of the *American Beacon* differs importantly from the one that Jacobs constructs for her readers. It is she who introduces the detail of the tooth, declares her ability to read and write, emphasizes her own intelligence, and excises Norcom's ascriptions of corpulence and vanity.[40] As ever, in fashioning an alternate self meant to appeal to her white narrators, Jacobs also produced a meditation on the possibilities contained in the linguistic and visual forms of the "peculiar institution." Her plays with and on the runaway ad thus not only anticipate the revisions of the form enacted across the diaspora by contemporary artists such as Ligon, Christopher Cozier, and Hank Willis Thomas, but they also intimate how she would eventually exploit the radical instability of language to provide the basis for her most cunning ruse yet.[41]

To hear her tell it, Jacobs enlisted the aid of her friend "Peter" in ferrying letters she addressed to her grandmother up to Northern cities—Boston, New York, Philadelphia—where they were promptly sent by post right back to North Carolina and into the waiting hands of Norcom, who she knew would intercept her missives.[42] Through this astonishingly simple and canny tactical maneuver, Jacobs stomped out any suspicion that she still might be in the area and sent her erstwhile master on a series of wild goose chases up and down the eastern seaboard. By constructing a visual apparatus—letters and loophole—that allowed her to remain undetected while seeming to appear in a place she was not, Jacobs created a literal and figurative space for herself where she simultaneously occupied both poles in slavery's economy of vision. As the letters produced an illusory visibility that seduced her master into a search with no fetishized object at its end, so the loophole conferred an actual invisibility that offered no actual purchase on the body in question. In this way, Jacobs capitulated to the familiar staples of slavery's discourse in order to situate herself in a position to parody and confuse them all the better: call me unchaste and I will be, hound me endlessly and I will let you, make me an object and I will be one. The heart of Jacobs's tactic lie in her willingness to skate on the knife edge separating agency from subjection, an ability to insinuate herself within the circuitry of slavery, redirect its course, and prod it along until it slowly implodes.[43]

It is in her ability to transform the slave's noncapacity into a productive positionality of critique that Jacobs anticipates the Foucauldian concept of the mirror also described in "Of Other Spaces." In that essay, the theorist aims to differentiate between utopias—unreal visions of the world perfected "that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society"—and heterotopias, in which "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." Foucault identifies the mirror as the intermediate phase between these spaces: it is utopian because it is a "placeless place," an unrealized accretion of structures, and heterotopic because its exists in reality and makes us present to ourselves. As he summed up, "it makes

this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there."[44] The mirror, I contend, defines the space that Jacobs constructed between the utopic vision of herself on offer in the letters and the position she physically occupied in the heterotopic nightmare of the loophole, which, not unlike Henry Brown's box, was home, hotel, womb, and coffin all at once.

As this outline of Jacobs's performative ruses begins to suggest and as the uncanny resemblance between the narrator's wanted ad and Green's "Profile" makes clear, the lessons that *Incidents* offered left their mark on *Sites* in strategic, material, and metaphorical terms. For one, Jacobs's rescripting of Norcom's ad resonates with Green's recasting of Duchamp in light of the discursive and material conditions of production and constraint historically faced by black subjects. By positioning herself as a scribe typing up reminiscences in a cramped space that nonetheless provided her with a privileged telescopic viewpoint, the artist secured her affinity to Jacobs's narrator, much as she would otherwise enact her strategies of subjective inversion.

The numbered and lettered mason jars in both areas of the installation provide a case in point. These objects seem to literalize and thereby upset discursive demands that black artists produce easily contained "black work," opening instead onto Western culture's storied associations with darkness as evil, dirty, and lack that both precede and root themselves within African diasporic subjects' historical production as objects of scientific classification.[45] Similarly, the work's implied spatial and temporal progress up from the darkness of the basement and into the light of the attic is effectively undone when considered in relation to the historical anteriority of Jacobs's text as well as the conditions she faced, which were arguably even more despotic than those confronted by Bigger Thomas.

Of course, unlike Wright's functionally illiterate protagonist, Jacobs had language at her disposal, which Green everywhere makes use of in strikingly analogous ways. She too would produce a text—the proposal "Sites of Genealogy"—that alluded to her present conditions even while holding back from full disclosure. She also materialized language as a physical thing to construct the ground, walls, and viewpoint from which her shifting textual self might be glimpsed but never entirely accessed. And like Jacobs, in the course of her installation, Green was both there and not there, sometimes appearing at her typewriter, but for the most part lost in the wind. This left the viewer to her own devices, to walk among the slats on the floor, to peer through the thicket of string, and to fantasize a subject to whom she might have access only via traces of activity that would turn her back onto the facticity of the site and her own corporeal presence. In this way, *Sites of Genealogy* critiques hegemonic regimes of seeing and creates alternative visions of black subjects by putting the viewer's body at the center of the equation through a logic of subjective inversion, which leads, in the artist's words "people to act out, even in an unconscious way, certain ideas having to do with power, movement, and the way places and positions are designated."[46]

4.8
Ellen Driscoll, *The Loophole of Retreat*, 1990–1991. 243.8 x 243.8 x 396.2–cm camera obscura, 304.8 cm-diameter rotating wheel of objects, 7 suspended columns with lights and lenses, 670.5 x 50.8-cm accordion book. Mixed media. (Photograph by George Hirose.)

DISCREPANT GROUNDINGS

For Green, I would argue, an embodied encounter with ideas is not only independent of but effectively opposed to any attempt to recreate a physical sense of what the enslaved endured. On this score, it is worth comparing *Sites of Genealogy* to sculptor Ellen Driscoll's *The Loophole of Retreat*, first shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris in December of 1991 (fig. 4.8). This large-scale installation literally immersed the viewer within an aestheticized update of Jacobs's attic, complete with objects and figures meant to bring out the similarity between the architectural structure of the garret and a camera obscura.[47] Green refuses to offer such sureties for her viewers either spatially or corporeally, instead emphasizing our distance from and inability to access the actual position of the enslaved even as her structural location is everywhere materialized. Physically shuttled between elements, the viewer is left not with a totalizing narrative that in reproducing the slave's experience would obliterate her, but with traces of the past that she must imaginatively reconstruct to arrive at meaning.[48]

Here as elsewhere, Green throws the problem of black being onto her audiences, frustrating visual access to the dark bodies burdened with it. Indeed, the lone image included in *Sites* was a photocopy, tucked away in a corner behind a curtain, which paired a profile of Baartman's posterior with an image of a bustle,

4.9
Renée Green, *Sites of Genealogy*, 1990, detail (view through fabric opening). (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

the nineteenth-century fashion that the Hottentot's physiognomy infamously inspired (fig. 4.9).[49] With this choice, Green was able to illuminate the debts that Western culture owes to the bodily forms of black subjects and to expand on the critique of figurative representation enacted on the stage of *Seen* and subsequently spelled out in the pages of her 1995 essay "'Give Me Body.'" There, Green suggests that the increasing visibility of artists obsessed with corporeal transformations in the 1990s, such as Matthew Barney, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Elke Krystefek, is emblematic of an investment in freakish forms of subjectivity that can be traced back to the voyeuristic economies that rendered Baartman and Baker as spectacles and that index the legacies of a normativizing biopolitics.[50]

As does this text, Green's installations critically examine the racial groundings of the present, reflecting and dispersing them through a process that again recalls Jacobs's. For if the narrator of *Incidents* helps us to bring the other Foucaults percolating within Green's oeuvre into view, then she also provides a model for the artist's "discrepant engagement" with history. Writer Nathaniel Mackey uses this term to describe "practices that, in the interest of opening presumably closed orders of identity and signification, accent fissure, fracture, incongruity, the rickety imperfect fit between word and world."[51] In its embrace of dissonance and refusal of narrative closure, Green's art certainly fits this description as do Jacobs's means of projection.

What's more, the discrepant visualizations achieved by the narrator's letters and loophole open a space in which to consider how the artist's tactics both rhyme with and depart from the mirroring operations of Smithson, who would inspire *Partially Buried*, and of Piper, on whose work Green published while still in college and to whom she is often compared, as an African American woman working in a conceptual vein.[52] In a 1992 conversation, the younger artist sought to clarify her links to these antecedents: initially they mattered to her for their abilities to question "the critical apparatus," by crossing "various boundaries in terms of writing."[53] These particular influences—she also cites the work of Lawrence Weiner and Mar-

cel Broodthaers in the course of that conversation—importantly licensed her own concurrent activities as a practitioner, critic, and intellectual organizer.

Nonetheless, further visual comparison is telling. Take Piper's self-construction in her account of *Some Reflective Surfaces*, a multimedia performance she staged at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1976. In her discussion of that work, Piper describes her "voluntary self-objectification" in terms that resonate strongly with her *Mythic Being* series, begun in 1973, in which she donned male drag to better attract and dispel the stereotypes imposed on black subjects.

> When I confront You, my only tools, my only weapons, are my appearance and my movements. My appearance tells You who I am: My dress tells You what I am, my body tells You its history in its behavior, my face tells You what I think of You in smiles and grimaces. My appearance tells You more than I want You to know (but not enough): My efforts to conventionalize, to neutralize my gestures, to empty them of messages for You inevitably fail. Even if my behavior and my appearance mean nothing, You read them nevertheless. You create a history for me which I am pleased to wear.
>
> ["You" here is me][54]

In its personalized address, reflexive structure, and reckoning with the inevitability of the Other's projection, Piper's text anticipates "Character Profile," yet like Jacobs, Green never acquiesces to being a reflective surface, confounding such ascription both through recourse to the third person and to the fugitive status of her own bodily presence.

Likewise, whereas a work such as Smithson's *Chalk-Mirror Displacement* (1969) uses mirrors to both unify and fracture a heap of raw material, casting the viewer inward toward the work and outward toward the world, Green's art sidesteps the physical limitations of such a maneuver by actualizing the lines of vision that construct the possibility of being and seeing otherwise (fig. 4.10).[55] Thus, while Green shares with Piper an investment in the political-ontological predication of black being and with Smithson an interest in the dispersive capacities of the object, in her work, these tendencies are formally and affectively crossed in a discrepant relation: Green consistently seeks out and recombines those critical insights offered by her historical antecedents and fellow travelers that might aid in illuminating diasporic subjectivities and sensibilities. In her art, as in Jacobs's ruse, such illumination occurs with and without a body as its visual locus, enabling a certain kind of freedom not from embodiment, objecthood, or materiality, but from the impositions that accompany them, which shift across time as well as space.[56]

Listen, on this score, to how Green described the time she spent in and out of PS1 while working on *Sites*. Here are her remarks from "'Give Me Body'":

> I/my persona returned again and again to the space for over a year to type a contemporary journal. In contrast to *Incidents*, this character, for example, could

4.10
Robert Smithson. *Chalk-Mirror Displacement*, 1969. Mirrors, chalk. Seven mirrors, 25.4 x 152.4 cm; diameter, 304.8 cm. (Collection: The Art Institute of Chicago. © Estate of Robert Smithson / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Image courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York / Shanghai.)

> come and go. She describes walks from the subway and tries to decide whether to rush out and see a Hanne Darboven show at Leo Castelli Gallery. Yet she reflects on the past, as Jacobs's words appear on stamped wooden markers forming a winding path on the floor leading to the window and list each phase, chapter by chapter, of the heroine, Linda Brent's, attempts to gain freedom; typing her words charts a distance, which is still traceable, between then and today. . . . From the ladder within the string triangle formed around her desk, she can see through the window across the water to Manhattan from her location in Queens. A local voyager, between history, memory, and places, she hears the sound of the sea on a tape loop. The last stop to freedom for Linda Brent was Manhattan.[57]

In recreating the physical, social, and writerly confines that Jacobs negotiated, Green marked out the historical distance between herself and her source, indexing the discontinuities between the demands made on a young girl by her master and those made on an emerging African American artist by cultural institutions. At the same time, she materialized the structures and discourses that have hemmed in black subjectivity from slavery to the present as well as the means her antecedents used to contest them.

In positioning Green's work within such a lineage, my aim is not to replace one set of theoretical frames with another or to delimit the play of references that in-

form her engagements with the figures of the explorer, the exile, the nomad, and the fugitive.[58] Rather, what I want to argue is that her practice and the historical imagination that undergird it can be productively viewed as a reflection on and of the differential meaning of migration in the modern era, above all, within the African diaspora, whose fractious discourse requires the articulation of both linkages and fissures across time, space, and nation.[59] It is in these interstices, in the misrecognized gaps between subjects and histories, where Green might be said to operate. As evidenced by the title of her first retrospective *World Tour* (which brought together *Import/Export Funk Office*, *Idyll Pursuits*, *Bequest*, and *Mise-en-Scène*), by 1993 when the show opened at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Green herself had effectively begun to retrace precisely the kinds of travel explored in her work, becoming, in writer Joe Wood's apt locution, a "one-woman diaspora."[60] Or, as he somewhat differently put it, "Renée, like most black artists, is stuck in Limbo, without a sanctuary, she's a black in a white place, without a black place, her home is 'in the head,' and moves, moves, moves."[61]

Such movement characterizes both Green's sojourns across geographical boundaries and her work in and out of institutions of cultural production. However, in reflecting on this peripatetic status and its conditions of possibility, Green's work does not so much home in on, say, the economies of airplane travel or the difficulties entailed in negotiating various constituencies, but on her own embodied experience in the sites she visits.[62] The artist is an inveterate walker, or better, a wanderer whose sojourns through different cultural spaces on the level of the street, the body, and the architectural detail not only determine the materials she lights upon, but also her sensibility as a whole.[63] Green's walking, I want to say, constitutes a kind of *petit marronage*—defined by historian Richard Price as the practice among New World slave populations of "repetitive or periodic truancy with temporary goals"—that both references past strategies of African diasporic resistance and that recalls the sojourns of those lost to the archive.[64] This operation renders the artist a kind of archive as well, perpetually displaced in a voluntary but nonetheless haunted performance of the black subject's political-ontological homelessness.

Green's mode of grounded engagement is epitomized by two videos, each roughly an hour long, that she made in 1992 and that would serve as the basis for her later exploration of the Portuguese empire. That project, *Tracing Lusitania*, eventually took the form of a conference, a book, videos, and an installation, all of which explored the subject's production within and negotiation of the contact zone, a notion Green borrowed from anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt.[65] The first of these pieces is entitled *Walking in Lisbon*. In it, a camera follows Green through the city's cobblestone streets over the course of a day, sometimes closely, sometimes at a distance, panning in and out, at one moment offering a street view, at another providing a close-up of the artist. Despite these vacillations, the piece follows a clear structural logic: the camera tracks the artist until she steps out of view, then focuses on an object left in the scene—a heap of shoes, another person,

4.11
Renée Green, *Walking in Lisbon* (stills), 1992. Color VHS, sound. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

plants in a garden—and then cuts to another site where the artist enters the frame again (fig. 4.11).

The second video, *Trip to Ceuta*, begins trained on Polaroids of the artist—the perfect size, it seems, for a passport—and slowly pans out to reveal the room in which they sit, leading to a slow movement through the space as a whole. From the bedroom, Green walks out into the streets of Lisbon and boards a boat as the camera surveys the port, with its great cranes and containers, signs, to be sure, of the reach of global capital. As the artist approaches the island of Ceuta, located off the coast of Morocco, the lens focuses in on two signs, one for Philips Oil and another that declares, simply, "Africa." Once there, the camera moves through a beautiful if faded Muslim-inspired citadel, where someone offers Green tea, per local custom. Not long after, the scene shifts to a nightclub filled with loud pumping music, disco balls, and flashing lights, the prelude to a performance; the room soon fills with people dancing together in various configurations and couplings. The music abruptly stops and we are back in the bedroom where Green is preparing for bed. It is here that the piece ends.

In both works, reminiscent of the structuralist films of Chantal Akerman, such as *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), the camera lovingly tracks the protagonist, making no effort to explain the particular significance of her being in Lisbon in the first video or of her destination in the second.[66] The particulars are worth spelling out. In 1415, Ceuta became Portugal's first African possession, though it was ceded to Spain in 1668. Even today, the island remains a site of territorial conflict, and Morocco's claim over it has resulted in tightly controlled regulations over who may or may not enter.[67] This complex set of social and historical factors, which have shaped Ceuta's culturally diverse and politically ambiguous present, are indexed only obliquely in Green's films through the passport, architecture, and tea ceremony shots. The artist's aim in these videos is not to provide us with a documentary account, but to conjure up the texture of her experiences as well as those placeless subjects who cannot be represented in its frame. It is with this in mind that I want, finally, to turn toward Green's 1991

installation *Mise-en-Scène*, in which her wanderings again play a central role in an effort to track how the incessant flows of persons and things that have come to emblematize the global present might be marked, in fact, literally woven into an interrogation of the shifting status of the enslaved, that diasporic subject *par excellence*.

THE FABRIC OF SUBJECTION

Green executed *Mise-en-Scène* while living at La Garenne Lemot, a beautiful chateau located in the equally stunning village of Clisson. The artist's quarters were just up the river and a short tram ride away from Nantes, whose regional contemporary art center commissioned her to produce a work as part of its international studios program.[68] Nantes was a major slave port in the eighteenth century, and when Green arrived, little of this history was mentioned either in institutional or popular discourses.

However, as the artist recalls in "Collecting Well is the Best Revenge," (1995) her most detailed account of *Mise-en-Scène*'s genesis, in voyaging to the city she had an intimation of its connection to the transatlantic trade, particularly in relation to the textile industry, which provided the basis for her research. Indeed, Green begins her narrative description of the project with her childhood memories of toile, a white cotton fabric decorated with pastoral and historical scenes, usually printed in a single color using a copperplate. Her essay goes on to describe the materials and figures she has come upon in sussing out the history of toile production in the region, from Henri Clouzot's indispensable 1927 catalog *Painted and Printed Fabrics: The History of the Manufactory at Jouy and Other Ateliers in France 1760–1815* to a recent *New York Times* article entitled "Nantes Journal: 'Unhappily, a Port Confronts its Past: The Slave Trade.'"[69]

Unsurprisingly, given the recursive, complex, and multipronged nature of Green's practice, this research resulted in multimedia installations—of fabric, furniture, video, music, models, and clothes—that would take several forms in various sites across the globe, often possessing the domesticated look and feel of a salon or decorative arts museum. In this sense, Green's work harks back to that of Broodthaers, particularly the first version of *Un Jardin d'Hiver*, or *Winter Garden* (1974; fig. 4.12). This installation mobilized café chairs, potted palms, and television monitors to construct a clichéd *Décor*—as Broodthaers named the genre of which such projects were part—in order to highlight the banality of the museum as a corporatized space as well as its unmarked complicity with the botanical, material, and ideological fruits of colonization.[70] As did *Un Jardin d'Hiver*, the first iteration of *Mise-en-Scène* modeled aspects of both ludic surrealism and rigorous site-specific practice, but in doing so the piece even more fully opened onto those histories of racialized violence that impinge on the construction and presentation of diasporic archives, subjects, and possibilities.

4.12
Marcel Broodthaers, *Un Jardin d'Hiver*, in *Carl André, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Victor Burgin, Gilbert & George, On Kawara, Richard Long, Gerhard Richter*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, January 9–February 3, 1974. Mixed media, installations variable. (© 2013 The Estate of Marcel Broodthaers / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York.)

The work primarily comprised several boxes, the contents of which I will address in turn, though it seems useful first to describe the ensemble as whole (see fig. 4.5). In the middle of the room, three elongated card files formed an equilateral triangle. Behind them was a low table, with one box below, marked "Ambiance" (atmosphere) that contained a hidden tape player, which emitted the strains of the eighteenth-century Baroque composer Rameau's "Pantomime." Thus, in Green's installation, unlike those of her cohorts, music provided not an alternative site of engagement with the black voice, but a "civilized" backdrop that threw into relief the modes of barbarism elsewhere hidden within the installation. However, the box on top of the table, contained a personal cassette player that featured a recorded tape of the artist's conversation with the Nantes-based urban historian Jerome Dyôn. The box labeled "Clès" (keys), was framed on either side by two small plastic shrubs that recalled the look of a traditional French garden. In front of this faux greenery, the artist placed pedestals for magnifying glasses and cotton gloves that viewers could use as they consulted the various texts, tapes, and images in the installation. All of these elements were placed against samples of toile indienne—so named for its origins in the subcontinent—that also adorned the diagonally facing wall.

4.13
Renée Green, *Mise-en-Scène*, 1991, detail (photographs of the fleur-de-lis brand). (Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

At the very center of the installation was another box, scaled to the body and holding a hidden treasure. Marked "Trésor cache," it opened to reveal two stacks of photographs depicting human skin stamped with the *fleur de lis*, the sign with which African captives were branded upon their disembarkation in the West Indies (fig. 4.13). These images constituted one figure of blackness that Green encountered during her archival research into the history of the slave trade in the Loire Valley and its ties to the international economy. Viewers were also meant to engage a black plastic folder labeled with a question mark that contained typewritten citations culled from texts by the likes of Sherlock Holmes and Aby Warburg as well as an excerpt from Hugh Honour's seminal 1989 tome *Slaves and Liberators*, the first part of the fourth volume of *The Image of the Black in Western Art*.[71]

These materials cast the visitor to the installation in the role of detective, a scenario bolstered by the artist's inclusion of surveillance photographs in the "Clès" box that depict various objects she noticed while walking through the city. These included stuffed animals in the Natural History Museum, African heads above building entrances, the front window of a restaurant called "L'esclave" (the Slave), and exotic plants in the Botanical Garden (fig. 4.14). As in *Walking in Lisbon* and *Trip to Ceuta*, like a surrealist *manqué*, Green brought together not so much traces of her own desire as the lineaments of the city's uses of blackness, thus giving the lie to Nantes's sunny promotional materials, which emphasized its origins in the Middle Ages and its glorious nineteenth-century architecture but conveniently skipped over the atrocities committed in the intervening period.[72]

Undoubtedly the most important material the artist seized on, however, was the toile indienne, which also covered the couch that Green had simply taken from her room at the chateau. The particular fabric that covered her couch, called "L'Indépendance Américaine," features scenes of Christopher Columbus, George

4.14
Renée Green, *Mise-en-Scène*, 1991, details. Clockwise from upper left: photographs of Nantes, African heads; photographs of Nantes, botanical garden; photographs of Nantes, L'esclave restaurant; photographs of Nantes, tourist postcard. (Photographs by the author. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

Washington, and Pocahontas.[73] In using it, Green ironically indexed her own Americanness as well as toile's occasionally commemorative function. For her wall hangings, she decided on a print much closer to the location at hand: "Le Mouton chéri" (the gentle shepherdess), which was first produced by the Nantes firm of Petitpierre et Cie around 1780 and whose images were based on two lost paintings by François Boucher (fig. 4.15).[74]

4.15 (left)
Renée Green, *Mise-en-Scène*, 1991, detail ("Le Mouton chèri"). (Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

4.16 (right)
Renée Green, *Mise-en-Scène*, 1991, detail (cut-out revealing Chambon image). (Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

As Clouzot tells us, Nantes was one of the most active centers of toile production in pre-Revolutionary France, producing some hundred and twenty thousand pieces a year. The firm of the Petitpierre brothers, established in 1760, was a quite successful manufactory and "Le Mouton chéri" was one of their most popular designs.[75] The patterns used in Green's installation thus intimated the sense of play and gaiety that marked the social life of eighteenth-century France, yet the history of the fabric has always been haunted by a darker economy that Green's installation pointedly brought to light. Toile has been long associated with modes of clandestine production: between 1686 and 1750, more than thirty decrees were issued to halt the importation of the fabric from India and to curtail its production in France, since it was viewed as a threat to local modes of textile production. The fabric's immense popularity, however, could not be denied: aristocratic ladies would simply wear their newest fashions at their country homes rather than at court or in public.[76] These facts doubtless appealed to Green—she was sure to enumerate them in "Collecting Well"—but most important for her purposes was the fabric's imbrication with the triangular trade: African slaves were sold to New World colonies in exchange for raw cotton, which was sold to merchants who produced textiles that were then used to purchase slaves.[77]

This economy, of course, was obscured by the pleasant imagery that Green chose, so to mark its visual absence and to reveal it, she cut a hole in both curtains. Beneath the opening in the fabric hung above the fireplace, she placed a photocopied detail of an engraving entitled *Marché aux esclaves* (The slave market), which was first published in Chambon's 1764 treatise *Le commerce de l'Amérique par Marseille* and later reproduced in Honour's compendium (fig. 4.16). The image, one of the first to visually represent the trade, "depicts an Englishman licking a Negro's chin to ascertain his age, & to determine from the taste of his sweat if he is sick."[78] With this move, Green introduced an entirely different sense of "taste" into her calculated decor. Like the small hole through which Baartman's posterior appeared in *Sites of Genealogy* and the discrepant mirroring of Green's practice as a whole,

her cut into the fabric can be taken as a mode of cultural performance that builds the ruptures of the past into itself, offering visual evidence of the economies of violence that the rest of the installation would so assiduously track through the look of the archive.[79]

To wit, the three open card files in *Mise-en-Scène* were arranged in an equilateral triangle to formally reiterate the mapping of the transatlantic slave trade within the space. One box contained cards listing African languages, another the names of slave ships, and another a simple procession of years—1716, 1717, and so on. These crates, these peculiar archives, only offer us a fragmentary record. Yet in their bodily shape, suggestive of coffins stuck end to end, they ask us to recollect the confines experienced by the enslaved during the Middle Passage, to place the bodies of captives into the scene of history, and to reconsider what materials might best articulate how slavery's legacies come to be made manifest in, on, and through the corporeality of black subjects regardless of their historical location. In *Mise-en-Scène*, the viewer is bodily and metaphorically "placed in the scene" of Green's archival tracing and given the tools to uncover the depredations that made possible both the production of toile and the financial success of the region.

In this regard, the thinking of conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner offers insight into Green's aesthetic strategies. As he argued, "in the gallery you attempt to set a mise-en-scène, a presentation that politically and morally is concurrent with how you feel about the relationships of human beings to the society."[80] The intersection between the totality of the ensemblic scene that Green sets and the multiple artifacts that constitute it, however, can also be thought of as thinking through the political ontology of blackness and its performative means. Theorist Fred Moten has argued that "the ensemble—the complex phenomenal object—is what asserts itself at the moment when phenomenon and object each appear in and as the eclipse of the other."[81] Cast in this light, *Mise-en-Scène* emerges as a construction of space, music, text, image, and talk that bodily immerses the viewer while holding in tension each figure's meaning for and as a trace of black being lost to the archive. In so doing, the installation brings home the difficulty of finding a language to speak of the enslaved and echoes those multiple iterations of self enacted by former captives to freshly ground themselves in the wake of their being as property. For just as liberated slaves underwent an ontological translation in the movement from one state of unfreedom to another, *Mise-en-Scène* would itself become subject to continual flux, refusing to fall into proper representational categories and revisiting the constitutive antagonisms that shape the social field.[82]

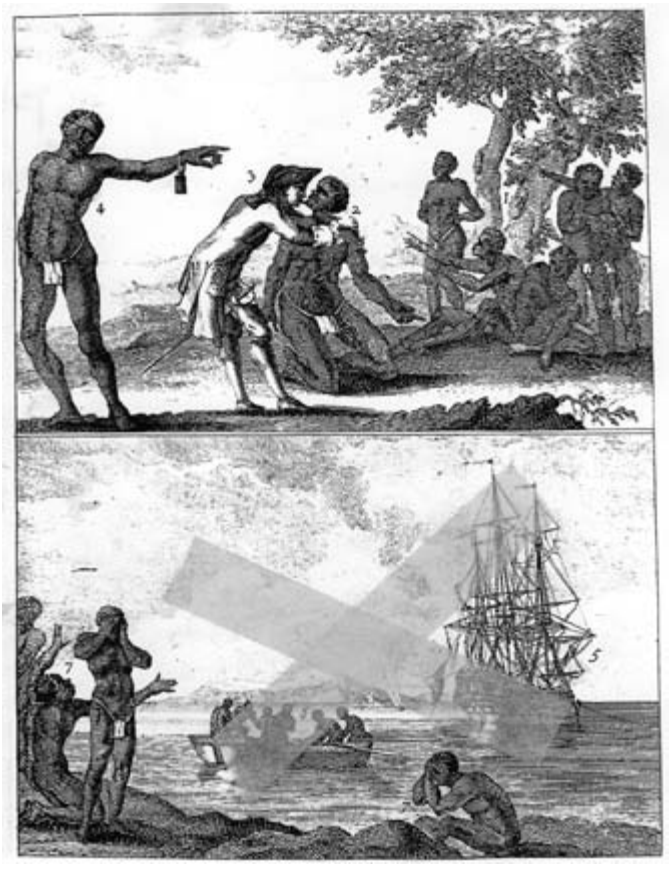
Green brought a sample of toile with her when she first ventured to Nantes; when she returned to the United States, she began to produce it herself. In 1992, while in residence at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, she created her own pattern for both fabric and wallpaper based on a locally sourced floral motif featuring various romanticized heterosexual couples and inspired by analogous prints she had seen in France.[83] To craft her silkscreen designs, Green

4.17
Renée Green, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, *Mise-en-Scéne: Commemorative Toile*, 1992. Pigment on cotton sateen upholstered furniture, pigment on paper-backed cotton sateen wallpaper. Dimensions vary with installation. (Photograph by Will Brown. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

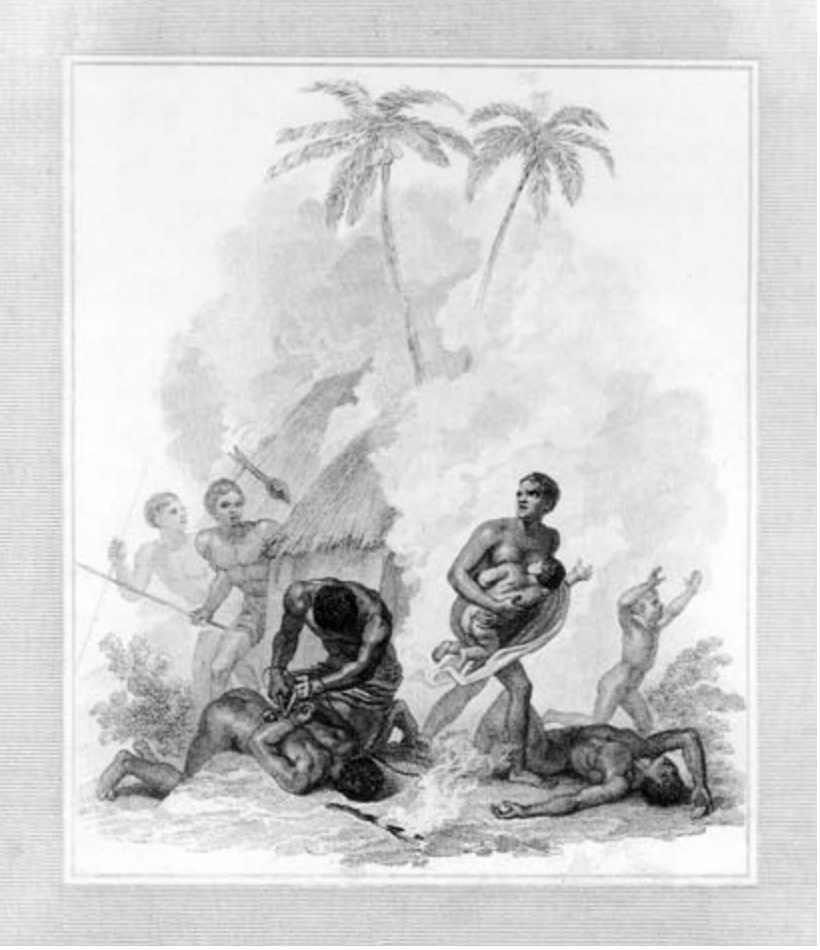
took advantage of the very logic and history of toile production itself: thanks to the proliferation of European engraving technologies, eighteenth-century French artisans were able to mix, match, and recombine images from various sources in constructing novel patterns for their fabrics.[84] The silkscreen process allows an even greater range and number of combinations due to its reliance on techniques of photomechanical reproduction.

Briefly, the artist selects a visual motif and then transfers it to a plastic transparency, which is placed atop a screen covered in photo-sensitive emulsion. When the screen is exposed to light, the visual pattern is burned into the screen and printing can begin as soon as the materials are dry. This process necessarily produces a discrepant multiplicity of images, which rhymes neatly with both the visual and conceptual preoccupations of Green's practice. For as one might expect, in making her own silkscreens, the artist selected images with quite a different tone that made visible the black presence haunting the cloth's history. Indeed, where the curtain she had produced in Clisson figured a hole through which the detail of *Marché aux esclaves* was visible, in Philadelphia, this image—along with a host of others culled from Honour's volume—became incorporated into the pattern itself : the cut became part of the coverage (fig. 4.17).[85]

The images that Green selected from *The Image of the Black* and those she eschewed clarify the logic behind her choices as well as her work's disposition toward the visual historicity of blackness. In Honour's volume, the Chambon engraving is reproduced above another that features African subjects bemoaning their fate, an image, which, in Green's photocopied mock-up for the silkscreen, is emphatically covered over (fig. 4.18). The decision not to print the fabric with this second image—meant to create sympathy for the enslaved—helps to bring Green's ambitions into focus. The declarative covering over of the second image suggests that she was interested primarily in scenes that underlined the interplay between



4.18
Renée Green, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, mockup for silkscreen after Laurent after Chambon, *Marché aux esclaves* (illustration for *Le commerce de l'Amérique par Marseille*), 1764. Copper engraving. 24.9×19 cm. *Mise-en-Scéne: Commemorative Toile*, 1992. (Photograph by Will Brown. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)



4.19 (left)
Robert Smirke, after William Henry Worthington, *Capture of Slaves in Africa*, illustration for James Montgomery, *The West Indies, a Poem in Four Parts in Poems on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: Robert Bowyer, 1809). Engraving. 16.3 x 14.2 cm. (Photograph by Janet Woodard, Houston / The Menil Foundation.)

4.20 (right)
Renée Green, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, cut-out for silkscreen after W. Grainger after Thomas Stothard, *The Voyage of the Sable Venus* (illustration for Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies of the West Indies*), 1801. Copper engraving. 20 x 16.4 cm. *Mise-en-Scéne: Commemorative Toile*, 1992. (Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

subjects, allowing her interventions to rhyme with and ultimately depart from the lovers' vignettes already present in her base fabric. This emphasis on the inter-subjective aspects of power and desire in the practice of slavery also led her away from the more obvious figurations she might have selected. Rather than give us the supplicating slave, the slave ship icon, a runaway print, or a Blake illustration, Green figures those aspects of the history of slavery that are all too often left out of the record in order to show the multiplicity of uses to which black bodies were put and the range of positions they were conscripted to occupy in fact and fantasy throughout the West.

Consider the images included in the print, the various media in which they were rendered for silkscreening, and the lifeworld of slavery onto which they open. The artist selected, for starters, William Henry Worthington's *Capture of Slaves in Africa*, produced for James Montgomery's 1809 work *The West Indies, a Poem in Four Parts*, part of a volume of verse celebrating the abolition of the slave trade (fig. 4.19). The engraving situates the terror of slavery not on some imagined New World plantation, but in Africa: on the right, one tribal group attacks and enslaves another, and on the left, a young woman attempts to flee with her child. In this way, Green not only highlights the complicity of black subjects with their own dereliction, but also the significance of gender as a site of articulation, exchange, and constitutive vulnerability, all of which is amplified by another print included in the toile, *The Voyage of the Sable Venus*, seen here as a photocopied cutout ready

4.21
Renée Green, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, silkscreen after Charles Gaucher after Charles Eisen, frontispiece for G. T. Raynal, *Histoire philosphique et politique des Européens dans les deux Indes, Allegory of Nature*, 1773. Line engraving. 14 x 9 cm. *Mise-en-Scéne: Commemorative Toile*, 1992. (Photograph by Will Brown. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

to be made into a screen (fig. 4.20). In this engraving by W. Grainger (after a lost painting by Thomas Stothard that appeared in Bryan Edwards's 1801 edition of *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies of the West Indies*), the black female subject becomes a site of visual delectation through her own design. Modeled after the *Medici Venus*, this image originally ran alongside an anonymous poem that describes the African female's desire to move to the plantations of Jamaica of her own accord, a preposterous rewriting of the Middle Passage, which places the blame squarely on the black subject and her insatiable appetites.[86]

Other images, however, emphasized not the innate differences between black and white, but their essential similarity (fig. 4.21). For instance, Green created a screen that depicts Nature as a white woman in a glade who suckles a white infant and a black one on two of her six breasts, while in the background white slavers batter dark-skinned folks. This scene originally appeared in the illustrated 1774 edition of Guillame-Thomas Raynal's famous *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Philosophical and political history of the settlements and trade of Europeans in the East and West Indies), which created parallels between the enslavement of blacks and the treatment of all subjects in the grip of despotism and which would have profound repercussions for the rhetoric around slavery in late-eighteenth-century France.[87]

Such proto-abolitionist sentiments were, of course, always under threat of foreclosure, especially as the French and Haitian revolutions ramped up. In this period, slaves were granted freedom and citizenship, but after the massacre of white soldiers in Saint-Domingue in 1791, abolitionism withered.[88] Accordingly, Green also includes in her fabric, *Revenge Taken by the Black Army*, an image that depicts the hanging of French officers by the Haitian general Dessalines (fig. 4.22). While this print—here seen at three different stages of the silkscreening process—brings black revolutionary violence into view, in so doing it threatens to justify stereotypes of black barbarity and to give credence to the shifting logics of the "code

4.22
Renée Green, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, transparency, screen, and fabric color test (*clockwise from top*) after J. Barlow after Marcus Rainsford, illustration for *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti, Revenge Taken by the Black Army*, 1805. Line engraving. 20.8 x 17.5 cm. *Mise-en-Scéne: Commemorative Toile*, 1992. (Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

noir." First promulgated in 1685, the "black code" became even more restrictive in the next century. In 1711, interracial marriage was forbidden; between 1716 and 1762, blacks arriving in France were not automatically guaranteed their freedom; in 1777, the king denied access to the country to any subject with black blood; and in 1802, the code was reinforced with the restoration of the monarchy.[89]

Administrative decrees thus deeply shaped the black presence and the treatment of migrant subjects in France, an issue to which Green was certainly sensitive—as we have seen in Firminy—and which is engaged in her pattern through a Louis Mosquelier engraving that appeared as the frontispiece to Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Voyage à l'Ile de France* (Voyage to Mauritius 1773; fig. 4.23). This text was less an indictment of slavery *tout court* than of the caprice of the master class in Mauritius that directly contradicted the code.[90] De Saint-Pierre's appeal on behalf of the slave was couched in a language of sentiment and suffering whose aim was to modify rather than to abolish slavery. The image depicts a black man holding up the code in one hand and chains in the other, all for the visual satisfaction of a young white master who is surrounded by other objects of natural history. In choosing this domestic setting of study and contemplation, Green emphasizes a black/white relation that nevertheless might open onto the

4.23
Renée Green, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, wallpaper after Louis Mosquelier after Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune, *Homo sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto* (frontispiece for J.-H. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Voyage à l'Isle de France*), 1773. Line engraving, 13.2 x 8.6 cm. *Mise-en-Scéne: Commemorative Toile*, 1992. (Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

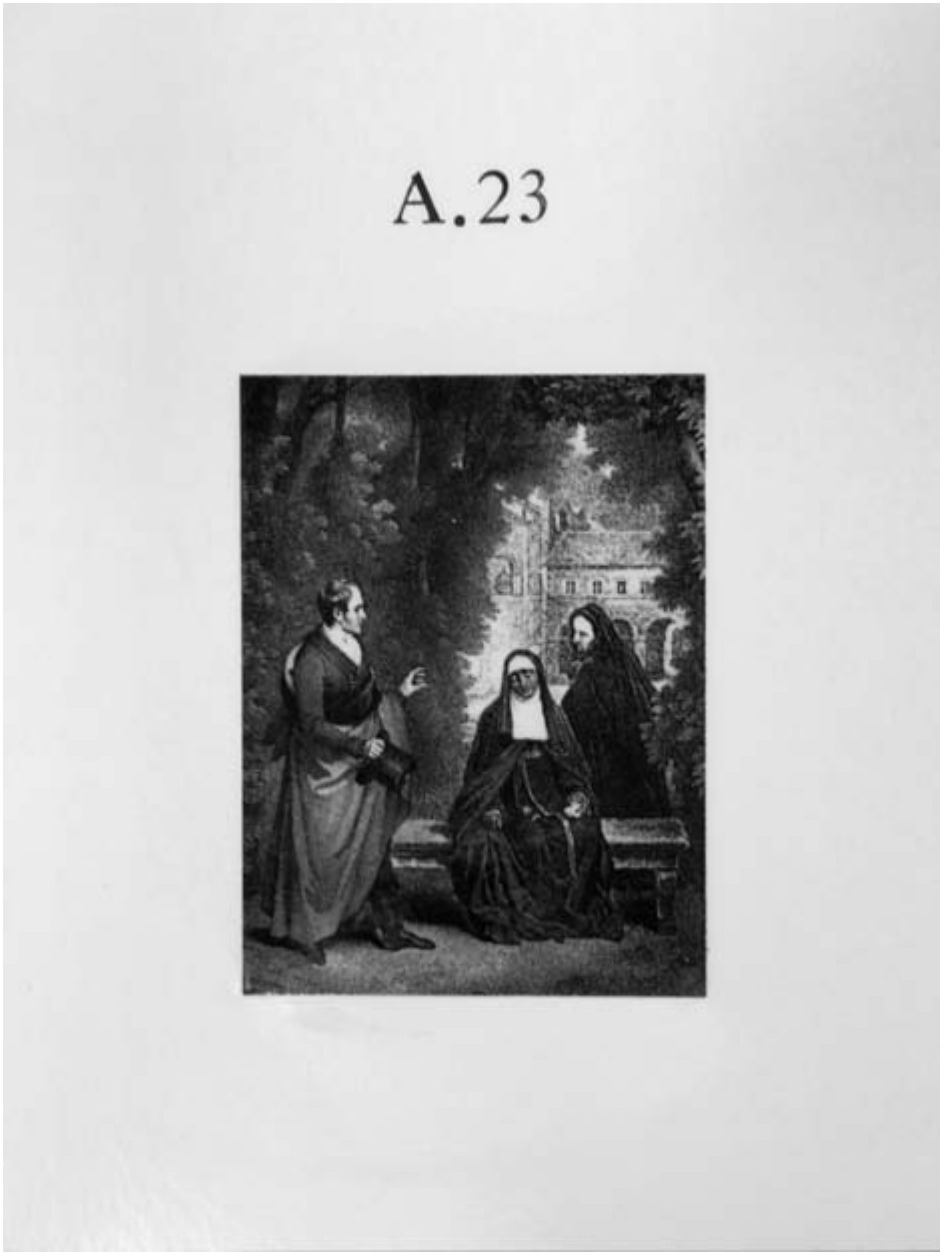
possibility of being another kind of racialized subject: the image is captioned with a quotation from the famous Roman slave Terence that reads "Homo sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto" ("I am a man and nothing that is of interest to man is foreign to me") and so tries to imagine what it might mean for black and white subjects to be engaged in an economy not always entirely scripted, even if necessarily shaped, by racialized epistemologies.[91]

Through this visual interplay of signs and referents, Green reminds viewers of slavery's many incarnations, creating an archive hidden in plain sight that redacts and recasts the most exhaustive set of tomes on the visual production of blackness ever produced. Just as important, the toile's various references provides a structural antiportrait of a particular, fantasized French literary figure. Her name is Ourika. Not only is she featured in the fabric—in an 1824 engraving by Alfred Johannot based on a now-lost painting by François Gérard—she is also given visual and textual pride of place in Green's retrospective accounting in "Collecting Well" and among the laminated photographs collected in the original iteration of *Mise-en-Scène* (fig. 4.24). The image shows Ourika, a Senegalese-born, French-bred nun, shadowed by one of her sisters and engaged in conversation with a doctor, who recoils in shock at the sight of her blackness.[92] In its presentation, the image rhymes neatly with the opening scene of Claire de Duras's eponymous narrative, which took as its point of departure the true story of a toddler rescued from enslavement by a colonial administrator around 1788 and given as a gift to the Duchess of Orléans.[93] The text began as an anecdote told by Duras in her salon and was published anonymously in 1823 in a private edition. By the next year, *Ourika* had become a runaway bestseller.[94]

As the image suggests, the story is framed by the discourse of the doctor who has been charged with relieving the melancholy of a young nun. In recounting her origins to the physician, Ourika emphasizes the experience of being torn from her mother, so that although she is rescued from the natal alienation of slavery, she suffers from an experiential alienation within French society due to her race.[95] For a time she lives blithely enough as a companion to her benefactress and as a source of dark fascination to those around her, but Ourika's illusion of belonging is shattered when she overhears the racist aspersions cast on her future prospects by a friend of her adoptive mother. These words force her to realize that she has no home to return to, that she is "cut off from the entire human race," from love, from marriage, even from fellowship with her white "brother" Charles, who eventually becomes the object of her more tender affections, which are, of course, doomed.[96]

While discussions of black liberation give our heroine some hope, once she hears of the massacres in Haiti, she realizes that she belongs to "a race of barbarous murderers": without an alternative framework for imagining herself and the position of black female subjectivity, she is completely undone.[97] Ultimately, in a poignant enactment of both Green's and Jacob's visual ruses, Ourika "supposed [herself] invisible," removing all mirrors, covering her skin, and wearing a veil to prevent her or others from coming into contact with the spectacle of her blackness.[98] Rather than accept her fate as a martyr, protégé, charity case, or exotic curiosity, Ourika turns to God for consolation and acceptance before finally dying of despair.[99]

John Fowles, the "re-discoverer" of Duras's novella, insists that this narrative is merely another iteration of "the eternal étranger of human society."[100] The epigraph to the novella, a quote from Lord Byron, "This is to be alone, this, this is



4.24
Renée Green, *Mise-en-Scène*, 1991. Laminated photograph after Alfred Johannot after François Gérard, *Ourika*, 1824. Steel engraving. 30×50 cm. (Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

solitude," seems to confirm this interpretation, but I would suggest that Duras's achievement consists in her ability to take up and recast the Romantic poet's assertion through an attention to what solitude might be in structural rather than in merely sentimental or affective terms for black female subjects adrift in the *socius*.[101] Her text was equally audacious for its depiction of life during the terror of the French and Haitian revolutions and for its figuration of a black female heroine, making it the first European text that aimed to represent a specific African diasporic subject.[102]

Green's fabric choices and images might be seen, then, as one way of constructing the discursive and visual world that the real Ourika, who allegedly died at sixteen, might have faced: hers was the mother captured in Africa and then sold at the market; she is the black baby suckling at the white breast of "Nature;" she too would become the victim of the *code noir* despite her intelligence; and confronted with Dessalines's murderous vengeance, she felt disgust rather than revolutionary fervor. Perhaps most tellingly, despite her decision to become a bride of God, the fictional Ourika was ultimately fantasized as a kind of Sable Venus.

As literary theorist T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting has argued, unlike Duras's sympathetic identification, in later male-authored works, above all in Gaspar de Pons's subsequent 1825 poem "Ourika, l'africaine," the protagonist is represented as an avatar of the havoc wrought by black blood. "I have brought this fervor to these icy climates, / Where my appearance alone declares that I am a stranger there; / The whites have taught me their lying virtue, / Which cannot contain my mad desires."[103] By these lights, her inherent savagery, sexuality, and modes of dissembling rather than her social alienation is what lead to the black female subject's inevitably tragic end. For Pons, in other words, Ourika is not a victim but an embodiment of all that is believed to define *négresse* sexuality. In his account, the titular character merely dons a white mask through which the demonic nature of blackness necessarily emerges, seeping through the cracks of a civilization she can poorly mimic, but never properly belong to.[104]

What emerges from Green's print, then, is a kind of structural antiportrait not only of Ourika but also of black femininity as produced in Europe and most famously visualized by Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une négresse* (1800; fig. 4.25). This painting graces both French and English editions of Duras's text as well as a host of others that invoke black women's history, such as Maryse Condé's novel *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* (I, Tituba, black witch of Salem), suggesting that any figuration of a particular black female subject must always do the work of representing the class of such beings in their eternal captivity.[105] So considered, the images and texts that Green recruits in her fabric obliquely manifest the shifting uses to which particular constructions of African diasporic being are put. Yet because these subjects are purposefully presented without contextualizing information that would replay their discursive constitution as transparent texts, they literally come to us as "opacities" that "can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics."[106] These lines are borrowed from theorist Édouard Glissant, whose vision of the diasporic practitioner's responsibility to the past speaks to Green's practice as a whole and to the various changes she rang on the form of her installation, which model and contest the always already appropriated and utterly available status of black femininity. Indeed, the circulation of Green's toile sparked another global economy of blackness that emerged from the triangular trade but that cannot be accounted for through that lens alone: in her hands, to think about the circulation of blackness circa 1991 required a consideration of the transnational flows of artis-

4.25
Maryse Condé, *Moi, Tituba, Sorcière Noire de Salem*, featuring Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait d'une négresse*, 1800. Oil on cloth. 81×65 cm.

tic discourse that directed the movement of both artists and objects.

To make the case, it is necessary to retrace Green's various mobilizations of her fabric. The original incarnation of *Mise-en-Scène* took its place alongside the three other installations that comprised *World Tour*, and a version of it appeared at London's Institute of Contemporary Art in the same space that played to host to Broodthaers's 1975 installation, ironically titled *Décor: A Conquest*. This coincidence was both spatial and tactical: like her Belgian antecedent, Green would ring a series of changes on her staged environment in order to defuse the summative demands of institutional formats like the retrospective and to critically engage the various economies of artistic display in which her work was enmeshed.[107] Perhaps not unsurprisingly, Green's fabric—the metonym *par excellence* of her various *décor*—has continued its restless movement over the years, installed as a covering or backdrop with a rotating cast of musical and photographic accompaniments in Dallas, Amsterdam, Venice, and Lausanne. The highpoint of the material's transnational presence was arguably 1993. In that year, the work was on view in a variety of forms and locations, most expansively at Vienna's Galerie Metropole in an exhibition called *Commemorative Toile* (fig. 4.26).

4.26 (left)
Renée Green, *Commemorative Toile*, 1993, installation view. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

4.27 (right)
Renée Green, *Commemorative Toile*, 1993, installation view. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

In the first room of the installation, which looked onto the street through four large plate glass windows, the artist included drapery, wallpaper, and furniture to make it seem like a decorative arts display, antiques show room, or formal sitting area complete with "chorical" music by Händel, Schönberg, and Mozart, whose portrait hung on the wall (fig. 4.27).[108] The second area was more akin to a domestic interior with a TV showing Green's video of one of her trips home to Cleveland and with a soundtrack provided by the contemporary band Siouxsie and the Banshees. This second room was accessible through the first not only in terms of its spatial connection but also through visual means: the far left storefront window revealed a chair against a toile backdrop framed by curtains through which one could see—via another cut circular hole—the video playing in the second room. In addition, the communicating passageways between rooms were decorated with a series of framed sections of the fabric.

Green displayed another version of this work at the Fabric Workshop beginning in April, where the focus was on furniture—wallpaper, an upholstered chair, an armchair, a chaise longue, and drapes, along with a wooden table that functioned as a display case (fig. 4.28). A few months later in Venice for that year's biennale, Green built a grey platform that rolled on casters on which she mounted a tall dark wood frame—not unlike a four poster bed—from which she hung the fabric (fig. 4.29). The back of the structure supported a dark red velvet curtain: in front of it was a single chair and behind it were several more wrapped in plastic with an "Ambience" box. Then in 1994, Green mounted a version of this work as

4.28 (above)
Renée Green, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, *Mise-en-Scéne: Commemorative Toile*, 1992. (Photograph by Will Brown. Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

4.29 (right)
Renée Green, *Commemorative Toile*, 1993, installation view. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

part of a video installation, now entitled *Taste Venue*, at New York's Pat Hearn Gallery. In revisiting this piece, the artist outfitted her gallerist and several friends in pajamas made from the fabric (fig. 4.30). At the same time, she placed versions of her toile in traveling and group exhibitions such as *The Social Fabric* (1993) and *Embedded Metaphor* (1996).

In each of these iterations, the fabric serves to underline how a third person, the body of the slave, lingers on in the various forms that consumption and display assume within contemporary culture, whether the museum, the archive, the shop window, the tour, or the material itself. More to the point, Green's choice and repeated use of toile reveal how every mode of capitalism—from primitive accumulation, in which people and goods are acquired by force, to industrial production, in which wage labor is sold—is haunted by the body of the slave, who incarnates the changing form of the commodity.[109] As a result, Green's work can be said to consistently critique the logic of capital and problematize all of our positions in relation to it, while keeping in mind, if not at hand, those material remnants that might provide the ground for a different imagining of the past.

I would argue that the artist herself models this process and that her installations are a spur for us to continue it. "What," she asks, "happens when the archive disappears? How do we retain access to memory and history?" "How can a relationship with the past exist in which memory functions as an active process, allowing continual reconsideration, rather than as a form of entombment, to which archives and museums are sometimes compared?"[110] As evidenced by *Mise-en-Scène*'s formal devolution, Green's archives are living ones that demand constant historical reimagining. Although her visualization of slavery in this work began in the box of blackness, it has continued to shift with her own movement, underlining that to take slavery seriously demands a discrepant mirroring of those economies of persons and things that would keep the darkness of the past and our own best selves from coming into view. As such, Green's work provides a fitting final object of monographic study and a useful introduction to the alternative modes of figuring slavery that have proliferated since the 1990s.

4.30
Renée Green, *Taste Venue*, 1994, installation view. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media.)

All black people in America want to be slaves just a little bit. . . . It gives people heaping teaspoons of dignity and pride.

KARA WALKER, "Ill-Will and Desire," 1996

E.1
Kara Walker, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Negress and Her Heart*, 1994. Installation view of *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2008. Cut paper on wall. 457.2×1524 cm. (Photograph by Joshua White. Artwork © Kara Walker, Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.)

Epilogue

ALTERNATE ROUTES

IN SEPTEMBER 1994, just a few weeks before *Time*'s "The Beauty of Black Art" issue hit newsstands, Kara Walker (b. 1969) burst onto the New York art scene with *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (fig. E.1).[1] In this installation, as elsewhere within her oeuvre, Walker cut black construction paper into silhouettes and affixed them to white walls to outline a panoramic landscape. The artist populated her "inner plantation" with figures that referred to but radically departed from the stock characters featured in classic narratives of the antebellum South, such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1937).[2] Among the grotesqueries in Walker's scenario, a young master exults in the ministrations of his female counter, a Confederate gentleman's head disappears up the backside of a broom-wielding wench, and an additional pair of bandy legs sticks out from beneath the hoop skirt of a Southern belle who stands poised to kiss her unsuspecting swain.

Here, slavery's sexual, reproductive, and scatological economies take center stage, all manner of illicit congress enacted in and through those opaque shades that would otherwise politely obscure the institution's techniques of violence from view. Through such means, Walker not only sullies sentimental accounts of nineteenth-century American life but also reconfigures the cultural forms of the era, from the sculptures of Edmonia Lewis to popular racist caricatures, though she most incisively recasts her chosen medium.[3] By exploiting silhouette's defined edges and amorphous centers, she carves out images capable of physically and psychically unmooring both place and racial identity, everywhere confronting her audiences with phantasms of enslavement given a precise optical form.[4] As *Gone* suggests, throughout her art—silhouettes, drawings, note cards, light projections, paintings, and films—Walker does not so much bracket as immerse us in the psy-

chodrama of the black-white relation from the perspective of, in her words, "an Emancipated Negress".[5]

By now, the flare-ups that her art has ignited among various African American constituencies are relatively well known, but the gist of the critique bears repeating. In the most outraged condemnations, Walker is said to trivialize human suffering and recklessly reproduce images of black abjection, which are effectively naturalized when divorced from their historical context. Most cutting is the charge that the work degrades her enslaved ancestors by using their oppression as a vehicle to exorcise her own experiences of sexual exploitation at the hands of white men. All, of course, for the delectation of white critics and collectors and the artist's benefit: a MacArthur "genius award," a handful of museum retrospectives, and a stack of lushly illustrated articles and books devoted to her practice.[6]

The cumulative impact of all this discursive production—call it the "Walker effect"—means that almost any consideration of slavery in contemporary American art, including my own, must in some way reckon with her practice, the fallout arising from it, and the artist's attendant reactions. Indeed, despite, or perhaps because of, her successes, on more than one occasion Walker has fanned the flames with offhand but incendiary pronouncements. Whatever the response to them, the substance of Walker's verbal and visual articulations lies in the excessive semantic potential of slavery's personal, psychic, and ghostly legacies both past and present.

OF COURSE, it is precisely such excessiveness that the artists considered in this book attempted to marshal, disrupt, or redirect through recourse to the material and spatial coordinates held out by their object-oriented installations of the early 1990s. It would be wrong-headed, however, to draw a hard-and-fast distinction between their work and Walker's on these grounds alone, not least because the latter's visual techniques also raise the question of how to picture the enslaved, and in an artistic language that again purposefully presents the viewer with myriad difficulties.[7] Like Walker, Wilson clearly has an investment in using silhouette and in drawing attention to the affective contours of racial discourse; Ligon's entire body of work might be seen as the construction of multiple selves, each as fictive as the "Negress" herself; Simpson is just as concerned as her younger peer with the sites black female subjects are called on to occupy; and Green has increasingly seen fit to mobilize her toile as a wallpaper without the contextualizing balance of words and objects. In fact, all of these artists have increasingly come to interrogate the past of slavery within the now ascendant aesthetic framework of moving image installation. This shift is anticipated by Green's videos of Ceuta and realized in Ligon's recasting of the *Death of Tom* (2008); Simpson's dual projection *Corridor* (2003); Wilson's study of Othello, *Turbulence II (Speak of Me as I Am)* (2001); and Walker's numerous forays into film, beginning with her 2004 animation *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions.*

Each of these works is deserving of sustained attention as are the implications of the artists' oeuvres for a subsequent generation of practitioners—Leslie Hewitt, Rashid Johnson, Dave McKenzie, Wangechi Mutu, Adam Pendleton, and Mickalene Thomas come foremost to mind—who have been enabled by their explorations of how modern conventions of artistic practice and display are inextricably bound up with the historical production of black subjectivity. What I want to underline here, however, is that Walker's emergence signals the unprecedented viability of slavery as the basis for a successful mainstream artist's entire career, even as it marks a reembrace of the imagistic plane in which previous African American practitioners, such as Jacob Lawrence and Betye Saar, sited their work in and on the peculiar institution (see figs. I.3 and I.4). As such, Walker's art indexes another turn of slavery's imaginary screw and helps make sense of the visual logic driving approaches to the period among younger artists. Whether the redux of contemporary advertising imagery in the photographs of Hank Willis Thomas, the blinged-out drawings of Tamasha Williamson, or the pop-inspired music videos of My Barbarian and Michael Paul Britto, figurations of slavery in the post-Walker world frequently deploy images that rhyme with the spectacularizing visualization of black being in order to more trenchantly critique it. These works anchor viewers in place before a wall so as to better effect their subjective undoing rather

E.2
Kara Walker (with Klaus Burgel), *Golddigger*, 2003. Twenty-two-karat gold and mixed media. Gold elements by Klaus Bürgel from Kara Walker›s imagery, text typed by Kara Walker on hand-distressed notecards. Edition of 10. 146 x 50.8 x 50.8 cm. (© Kara Walker, Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.)

E.3
Edgar Arceneaux, *Failed Attempt at Crystallization III*, 2003. Glass, sugar crystals, mirror, wood, text book (Alex Haley, *Roots*). 140.9 x 45.7 x 50.8 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.)

than require them to navigate the complexities of a physical location as did the projects of their antecedents who are the primary subjects of this book.

To be sure, objects do occasionally have a place in more recent gambits. Walker, for her part, produced the sculptural ensemble *Golddigger* in collaboration with her then-partner, the jeweler Klaus Bürgel. The resulting work comprises a Plexiglas vitrine containing tiny gold replicas of instruments used in the torture of the enslaved, which the accompanying placards suggest were gifts from "wealthy white landowners[s]" to their "most cherished black prize[s]."[8] (2003; fig. E.2). To take another example, in his sculpture *Failed Attempt at Crystallization III*, Edgar Arceneaux neutralized a copy of Alex Haley's *Roots* with an accretion of sugar, as if to underline the epic narrative's current inability to signify anything but its own status as a cultural relic (2002; fig. E.3). Finally, of works in this vein, Robert A. Pruitt's *For Whom the Bell Curves* is an undeniable tour de force: gold chains hung from the wall remap the key points of the transatlantic slave trade, though the work's facture and title simultaneously recall Eva Hesse's rope pieces of the late 1960s, the stylistic proclivities of a small-time hustler, and the eponymous—and infamous—1994 tome *The Bell Curve*, which reminded everyone that scientific racism is alive and well (2004; fig. E.4).[9]

E.4
Robert Pruitt, *For Whom the Bell Curves*, 2004. Twelve gold chains. 119.3 x 152.4 cm. (Collection Studio Museum of Harlem, New York. Photograph courtesy of The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. © Robert Pruitt.)

These are works whose dark humor and discursive punch depend on tactile presence, though not, I think, of the sort mobilized in *Mining the Museum*, *Five Rooms*, *To Disembark*, or the first incarnation of *Mise-en-Scène*. In those installations, materials such as silver, glass, wood, and cloth materialize the long shadow cast by slavery's economics and pinpoint the subject's precarious position within them, offering inert matter that both armors the black body and allows for its reappearance in terms that bring forward the enslaved subject's structural functioning as material, transparency, pattern, and ornament within Western culture.[10] By contrast, in the sculptural work of Walker and her successors, there is hardly a body to speak of: the accoutrements presumed to belong to slavery's subjects—yokes, texts, and diagrams—are fashioned from precious materials, thereby replaying the institution's alchemy without requiring the black body, either as absence or presence, to achieve its transubstantiations.

Above all, the installations executed by Green and her cohorts do not come easily to hand. Rather, they are activated by the viewer's navigation of a particular space and her phenomenological encounter with objects rendered on a bodily scale. Remember the postural changes involved in moving from Ligon's whimsical prints to one of his talking boxes; imagine standing behind a Simpson photograph and beside a jar of rice, invitations to affinity qualified by the sound of "Islands"; think back to Wilson's refraction of spectatorial attention to *Maryland in Liberia* with the presence, in every direction, of wares made by blacks in America; and consider once more how Green sent visitors shuttling among boxes and clues so they might "discover" the histories of racialized subjection always already present within them. In each case, it was not simply an issue of the boundless haptic replacing the evil optic. Images and objects as well as sound were needed at a particular moment within aesthetic practice and within four related professional trajectories to frame the revisitation of slavery as a critical strategy capable of figuring blackness otherwise.

THE SUBSEQUENT WANING OF SUCH STRATEGIES WITHIN ADVANCED ART is not, I would argue, a regression but a strategic demurral that reflects the specialness of the installations in question as well as the limited temporal and spatial intervals in which black radical possibilities necessarily unfold within the visual field.[11] For even before these works appeared, the ground beneath them was beginning to shift. In the early '90s, "installation art" was already being consolidated by the very institutions whose functioning it had set out to disrupt as suggested by *Dislocations*, the Museum of Modern Art's 1991 exhibition of site-specific projects.[12] In this milieu, critical artists of all stripes, from Joseph Kosuth to Jimmie Durham, were called on to manage and represent the conflicted pasts of cultural sites.[13] At the same time, slavery's material forms began to take center stage within American mainstream museums, often displayed in ways that borrowed from and conventionalized the radical exhibitionary practices of Wilson and his peers.[14]

These shifts in the United States were matched by a growing international awareness of the visual legacies of racial bondage: the first venue devoted entirely to slavery and emancipation, the Pompey Museum, opened in Nassau, Bahamas, in 1992. Around the same time, touring exhibitions that traversed the African diaspora were set in motion, including *A Slave Ship that Speaks: The Wreck of the Henrietta Marie*, organized by the Mel Fisher Historical Society of Key West, Florida. These interventions licensed and informed subsequent scholarly and curatorial work throughout the decade, arguably culminating in the 2000 publication of Marcus Wood's indispensable survey *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in Eng- land and America, 1780–1865*.[15] Subsequently, a rich literature has begun to emerge, which, while not necessarily focused on the relation between slavery and the visual, nonetheless productively acknowledges how a range of cultural artifacts bear the marks of what Morrison terms the institution's world-making and world-breaking effects.[16]

In particular, there has been a veritable explosion of publications, exhibitions, artworks, and symposia focused on the slave past in the wake of the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade in 2007.[17] These days, slavery seems less like a "blind memory" in the visual field and more a site for the production of value that is constantly returned to through iconic forms that suggest the visual dynamics through which Africans came to be seen and were urged to see themselves as slaves, while also fostering new means of identification and resistance across and within the diaspora. The study of four disparate artists' practices, installations, and their afterlives has, I hope, gone some way to show that the techniques and forms of seeing that constituted the enslaved still exert a tenacious grasp on subjects in the present thanks to the definitively unfinished nature of freedom and the expansiveness of slavery's deep structure: aspects of its legacy are always differently coming into view, underlining how our approach to its memory in the visual field must necessarily be shifting and recursive, ever alert to both the promises and perils of slavery's perpetual returns.

In particular, it is worth noting those commemorations that speak directly to the once unmarked sites and figures engaged in *Mining the Museum*, *Five Rooms*, *To Disembark*, and *Mise-en-Scène*. In 2005, the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of African American History and Culture opened in Baltimore with a permanent installation featuring an array of objects—shackles among them—associated with the material culture of slavery (fig. E.5, top left). In 2001, Charleston's Boone Hall Plantation freshly restored and outfitted its slave cabins with documents, quilts, mannequins, and interpretive videos meant to provide an overview of slavery in South Carolina and its place within a larger African American narrative (fig. E.5, top right).[18] There is now an entire plaza dedicated to Henry "Box" Brown on the tourist-friendly Canal Walk in his hometown. The centerpiece is a metal reproduction of his crate commissioned by the Richmond Historic Riverfront Foundation that is etched with a crude outline of the human form, inviting passersby to place themselves within it (fig. E.5, bottom right).[19] In Nantes, thanks to the efforts of a local society

E.5
Clockwise from left: Reginald F. Lewis Museum Permanent Gallery featuring Addison Plantation slave shackle, 2012. (Shackle courtesy of the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab / Jefferson Patterson Park Museum. Photograph courtesy of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture.) Boone Hall Plantation, slave cabin interior, detail, 2010. (Photograph by the author). Henry "Box" Brown Monument, detail, 2008. (Photograph by the author.) Mémorial de L'Abolition de L'Esclavage (Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery), Nantes, France, 2012. Wodiczko+Bonder, Art, Architecture, Design, Cambridge, Massachusetts, (© Krzysztof Wodiczko and Julian Bonder. Image courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York. Photograph by Philippe Ruault.)

founded in 1992, Les Anneaux de la Mémoire (The Shackles of Memory), the city recently opened a memorial to the enslaved designed by conceptual artist Krystof Wodiczko and architect Julian Bonder (fig. E.5, bottom left).

While these interventions reflect a dramatic social and political sea change on the level of representation—emblematized by the U.S. Senate's woefully belated June 18, 2009, apology for slavery—the lasting import of rhetorical returns to the "peculiar institution" remains to be seen: revolution on the ground, let alone, reparation to the national fabric has never seemed less tenable. Perhaps most touching of the symbolic gestures, in 2008, members of the Toni Morrison Society, along with the novelist and representatives of the National Park Service, dedicated the first of what are intended to be many benches with accompanying plaques that commemorate not only the enslaved but also victims of subsequent forms of racial violence (fig. E.6).[20] More than twenty years after Morrison fantasized *Beloved* as substitute for them, the markers have finally begun to take their places.

E.6
Hilary Solan, *Bench by the Road Project*, 2008, Sullivan's Island, South Carolina. (© Rand McNally. Reproduced with permission, R.L. 11-S-021.)

IN THE INTERVENING YEARS, Green, Ligon, Simpson, and Wilson would make their own "a-memorials," temporary installations that question how one might remember the enslaved and that link past conditions to the dereliction of the present.[21] What I have tried to capture in this book is the contours of a moment in which a quartet of postminimal African American artists engaged the phantasmatic character of slavery and in so doing freshly inflected both the "blackness" of their own practices and those on which they relied. Like the work that it examines, then, this book has been not so much "about" slavery as about the visual structures, logics, and modes of speaking arising from it that continue to inform the present. I have argued that these of artists did not simply examine the black body as a contested site always overwritten by the mechanics of resistance and oppression but showed how that body's absences, presences, and surrogates signify within and in relation to the sites which have been so crucial to its figuring.

At some times they met with greater success than at others, in part, because each artist came to slavery within the context of a particular site and from a different point within his or her professional trajectory. *Mining the Museum* effectively launched Wilson's international art career and has often served as a template for his subsequent museum interventions; Simpson's *Five Rooms* has been all but forgotten, even though its discrepant position within her oeuvre provides a vital lens for understanding the logic of her material choices. For both of these practitioners, engaging slavery was a formal and institutional experiment: the resulting works record their attempts to register and negotiate the still harrowing psychic effects engendered by encounters with the institution's various sites, artifacts, and physical remainders. By contrast, Ligon's and Green's projects, situated within traditional art museum contexts, required the fabrication of slavery's material in order to both critically engage modern aesthetic histories and to align their projects with the critical thrust of their work as whole. Although his first installation, *To Disembark* condenses the questions everywhere animating Ligon's fugitive practice into an expansive spatial and sculptural form; Green's *Mise-en-Scène* was yet another iteration of her work in and on the promises and perils of the diasporic subject's fraught global circulation.

Despite such differences, for all four artists slavery *haunted*, *mattered*, *structured*, and *reoriented*: while I have emphasized one of these aspects in each of the foregoing chapters and in developing concomitant analytic frameworks, each of the installations may be considered in light of the dynamics of redress, objecthood, fugitivity, and diaspora explored throughout these pages. Ultimately, in deploying or mimicking the institution's traces, these practitioners made clear that the black body is bound to appear due to its vital place in the American cultural imaginary, yet in their work, that appearance was momentarily rescripted through an engagement with the brute facticity of the thing. In so doing, they created antiportraits intended to grant the black subject an opacity and inscrutability long denied her by concealing her very surface, that site of scopic desire, projection, and surveillance so crucial to the construction of race and its effects.[22] Viewed from this van-

tage, the installations I have explored hold out a dream rooted not in a time or place, but in a fantasy of altered relations between people and things. It is radical dream, to be sure, but if we allow ourselves to inhabit the site from which blackness emerges, anything is possible.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1 Jack E. White, "The Beauty of Black Art," *Time*, October 10, 1994, 66.

2 Ibid., 68.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 71.

7 William L. Van Deburg, *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 160.

8 Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge," *Time*, October 10, 1994, 75.

9 Henry Louis Gates Jr., "'What's in a Name?' Some Meanings of Blackness," in *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 143.

10 For an expansive treatment of this historical episode, see Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

11 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987). My accounting of the novel and its effects is informed by Arlene R. Keizer, "*Beloved:* Ideologies of Conflict, Improvised Subjects," in *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 21–47.

12 Toni Morrison, "A Bench by the Road," *World: Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 3, no. 1 (January/February 1989): 4.

13 On this score, see Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 299–305.

14 The definitive history of this artistic tendency remains Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

15 Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 7–8.

16 See William Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), as well as two particularly trenchant responses to the exhibition: James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 189–214; and Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art, or

White Skin Black Masks," in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), 181–208.

17 Elisabeth Sussman, *1993 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1993). Other key exhibitions in this vein include Jean-Hubert Martin, *Magiciens de la terre* (Paris: Editions Centre Pompidou, 1989); and *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990).

18 Michael Brenson, "Black Artists: A Place in the Sun," *New York Times*, March 12, 1989.

19 Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: New Press, 1990).

20 David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

21 For useful accountings of the "culture wars" within and beyond the art world, see Richard Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1992); James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); and Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine, eds., *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

22 Richard Meyer, "Vanishing Points: Art, AIDS, and the Problem of Visibility," in *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 225–75.

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CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 3

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63 Wood, *Blind Memory*, 87–89.

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65 Meyer, "Borrowed Voices," 15.

66 Rosenzweig, *Glenn Ligon: To Disembark*.

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75 Glenn Ligon, "Narratives," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7, no. 1 (1994): 31–40.

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88 Kimberly Paice, "Catalogue," in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Foundation, 1994), 256.

89 Ibid., 104.

90 James Donahue, conversation with the author, October 2, 2010.

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96 The "Box" Brown display was designed and curated by museum cofounder Dr. Elmer P. Martin (Joanne Martin, email to the author, July 27, 2010).

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CHAPTER 4

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5 Green, "Scenes from a Group Show," 121.

6 Peter Weibel, ed. *Kontextkunst: Kunst der 90er Jahre* (Cologne: DuMont Verlag 1994), 368–77; James Meyer, "Nomads," *Parkett* 49 (Summer 1997): 205–9.

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Art, October 1991, 125–27; Joshua Decter, "Renée Green: Re-Mapping Narratives of History and Identity," *Forum International*, January–February 1993, 49–53; Jennifer A. González, "Renée Green: Genealogies of Contact," in *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 205–49.

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1987), 28.

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EPILOGUE

1 The work was featured in *Selections Fall 1994: Installations*, September 10–October 22, at New York's Drawing Center. The reading of Walker's art that follows draws, in part, from Huey Copeland, "In the Wake of the Negress," in *Modern Women: Women artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 484.

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4 English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 110–12.

5 Anne M. Wagner, "Kara Walker: 'The Black-White Relation,'" in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Patterson, and Mark Reinhardt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 91–101. In terms of Walker's shifting personas, here I have in mind the title of her 1997 installation *Slavery! Slavery!*, which concludes, "All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker an Emancipated Negress and leader of her Cause."

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16 See her remarks in Paul Gilroy, "Living Memory: A Meeting with Toni Morrison," in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), 221.

17 See, for starters, Ana Lucia Araujo, ed., *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*

(New York: Routledge, 2012); Tim Barringer, Gillian Forester, and Barbaro Martinez Ruiz, *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Glenda R. Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, eds., *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and the Landscapes of North American Slavery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Cheryl Finley, "Schematics of Memory," *Small Axe* 15, no. 2 (2011): 96–116; Douglas Hamilton and Robert J. Blyth, *Representing Slavery: Art, Artefacts, and Archives in the Collections of the National Maritime Museum* (Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2007); Angela D. Mack and Stephen G. Hoffius, eds., *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2008); Maurie McInnis, *Slaves Waiting for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Lowery Stokes Sims, Kathleen Hulser, and Cynthia R. Copeland, *Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery* (New York: New York Historical Society, 2006); and Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post–Civil Rights Imagination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

18 Rick Benthall, correspondence with the author, Boone Hall Plantation, Mount Pleasant, SC, December 7, 2010.

19 The work was commissioned by the Richmond Historic Riverfront Foundation and produced by Ralph Appelbaum Associates in conjunction with Johnson Atelier. Katherine Wilkins, assistant librarian, Virginia Historical Society, correspondence with the author, December 13, 2010.

20 Felicia R. Lee, "Bench of Memory at Slavery's Gateway," *New York Times*, July 28, 2008; Toni Morrison Society, "The Bench By the Road Project," http://www.tonimorrisonsociety.org/bench.html (accessed April 26, 2012).

21 For an incisive critique of the commemorative impulse, see Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24.

22 On this score, see Glissant, "For Opacity," in *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004) 252–57; and Fred Moten in Charles Henry Rowell, "'Words Don't Go There': An Interview with Fred Moten," *Callaloo* 27, no. 4 (2004): 957.

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