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PART II

*Sarah Baartman's Legacy  
in Art and Art History*



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LISA GAIL COLLINS

## 6 **Historic Retrievals**

### *Confronting Visual Evidence and the Imaging of Truth*

*Visual documentation emboldens* and lends credence to myth. Similarly, visual corroboration of scientific theory enhances its power and extends its reach. Given this, it is not surprising that those who try to make such meaning have eagerly sought visual evidence that can explain or confirm racialized myths and theories. Producers of images have been a part of these systems of meaning-making, and some have used their skills to provide visual “proof” of the inherent difference and inferiority of people of African descent. In the first part of this essay, I examine some of these processes by charting two instances of collaborations between mythmakers, scientists, and image-makers during the first half of the nineteenth century. Specifically, I analyze the attempts to document Saartjie Baartman’s body as inferior by the acclaimed French comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier and the illustrators he commissioned to help him with his task. In addition, I study the efforts to reveal the essential difference of enslaved African people by Cuvier’s protégé Louis Agassiz and his hired photographer J. T. Zealy. Examination of these highly visual events enables me to unveil some of the ways images were complicit on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in offering “proof” for white supremacist notions and affirming racist claims to “truth” during the early 1800s.

Furthermore, as direct confrontation with these particular processes and histories is recurrent in contemporary art practice, I complete this essay with an aesthetic retort: an exploration of how several African American women artists approach these particular lineages of visual violence through their work. By laying bare how their art is in dialogue with these histories, I hope to chart the ways this work reveals, dismantles, and attempts to alter the course of these still visible legacies.

### **Visualizing Myth**

Slavery was dependent upon myths that attempted to explain controlling practices and beliefs.<sup>1</sup> For example, the myth of the Jezebel was created during slavery to mask the sexual and economic exploitation of black women. Jezebel was an abstraction, a violent creation, which slavery’s defenders worked to attach to the bodies of young black women. This abstraction constructed and portrayed black women—in science, law, and popular culture—as primitive, seductive, and always eager for sex. When employed to justify or enforce the status quo, myths can have material effects. The myth of the Jezebel, for example, worked to naturalize rape and other acts of sexual violence carried

out on the bodies of black women by white men, by suggesting that all sexual intercourse with black women was inherently consensual and thus rape was not rape.

Myths gain strength when linked to visual representations. Likewise, since myths work by creating compelling and desired stories, they frequently cannot be displaced by evidence that directly contradicts them. Perhaps nowhere is this more graphically revealed than in the tragedy of Saartjie Baartman, who was used and abused as a visual personification of myth: the myth of African difference and inferiority. Europeans paid to see Baartman, “The Hottentot Venus,” because they wanted to witness—ostensibly through the fact of her large protruding buttocks—a woman who was thought to embody “the essential black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being.”<sup>2</sup> Juxtaposition of the words “Hottentot” and “Venus” conjured up images of the ivory-skinned Roman goddess of love and beauty only to draw attention to the irreconcilable gap between the mythic muse and the African woman, for Baartman was thought by many to represent “the antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty.”<sup>3</sup> By putting down money to view Baartman, European viewers revealed their faith in the visual; they were eager to link the myth of African inferiority with a visible representation of this difference.

Baartman first appeared in England where visitors to Piccadilly and various shows outside of London viewed her as popular entertainment. However when she was taken to Paris in 1814, she was viewed in two types of venues. In addition to being displayed as a curiosity for the entertainment-seeking public, Baartman was also exhibited as an ethnographic specimen for the scientific community and, by extension, as a model for artists. After physically examining the young African woman, Cuvier employed a small cadre of artists to depict her likeness for a collection of illustrations showing the diversity of “flora and fauna” housed in the library of the French natural history museum.<sup>4</sup> For the creation of this art-in-service-to-science, Cuvier had Baartman pose entirely nude—something which she had not done at the popular shows—in the Jardin du Roi.<sup>5</sup>

These 1815 commissioned watercolor illustrations reveal two related yet somewhat competing strategies for attempting to document Baartman’s difference and answering Cuvier’s call for “accurate visual records.”<sup>6</sup> For example, Nicolas Huet le Jeune’s painting shows a clinical approach, one that portrays Baartman in strict profile standing on a wedge of earth which is sparsely covered with grass. Emphasizing her large backside by placing it at the center of the picture, lightening it in contrast to the rest of her body, and revealing its curves and crevices in comparative detail, the artist’s illustration makes evident that the interests of amusement-seekers and the interests of the scientific community were somewhat linked in their shared fascination with one part of the African woman’s anatomy. By employing an artistic approach that draws viewers directly and exclusively to the model’s posterior, the work suggests that Baartman’s value to science lies in the empirical investigation of her generous buttocks.

Léon de Wailly, another project artist, shifted somewhat from his colleague’s raw empirical approach. Wailly’s watercolor includes two views of the African woman. (See Figure 1.) In the foreground of his painting Baartman stands on a hill face forward, her eyes confronting the viewer. Just behind this representation of Baartman is a second depiction of her, and here she is shown in three-quarters view and appears substantially smaller as she is further removed in space from the viewer. In contrast to his peer’s portrayal, Wailly takes a step away from the former’s clinical style. Whereas Baartman in Huet le Jeune’s work fills the picture plane allowing the viewer scant sense of context,

Wailly's illustration positions her in a landscape of low hills with a pair of palm trees in the distance. This situating of Baartman in a place removed from the expected site of examination not only reminds viewers of the young woman's connections to a world beyond the circus and laboratory, but also affords the young woman the power of vision. Here she is represented as having the capacity to see. Thus, although she is shown from the side in order to enable an unhindered view of her backside, the placement of Baartman within an expansive setting symbolically allows her to look beyond the parameters of her containment. Accordingly, the front-facing Baartman looms large and commands her presence as her eyes pierce the viewer.

Baartman died shortly after she was pressed to pose for these illustrations intended for researchers in natural history. After her death, the scientific community's interest in her shifted somewhat from her prominent buttocks to her enlarged genitalia. Cuvier subjected her body to a thorough dissection. By closely examining parts of her genitalia, his study attempted to uncover the source of what was both popularly and scientifically thought to be the deviant sexual lasciviousness of African women. Cuvier's dissection report was first published in 1817, and in 1824 it was reprinted alongside the commissioned illustrations.<sup>7</sup> In his report, the esteemed scientist focused on the woman's already fetishized body parts and stressed her racial difference and inferiority by drawing attention to "any point of superficial similarity" between her body and manners and that of a monkey or ape.<sup>8</sup> In this way, although the illustrators had demonstrated two varying approaches for representing Baartman, both of their works were eventually placed within a narrative of racial deviance and used by Cuvier in an attempt to visually corroborate his claim of the African woman's inferiority.

Baartman's humanity was elided twice in Europe. While alive, she was displayed; contained in various exhibitions and pressed to pose nude, she was positioned as popular and scientific entertainment for those who longed to stare at a woman thought to be their opposite. After her death, her body was moved to a laboratory for further investigation and dissection and then to a museum shelf at the Musée de l'Homme, where her genitals were stored in a jar and sat ready for the next exploration. The desecrations of Baartman lay bare a desperate desire to strengthen myth by linking it to visual representations. A visual matrix of exhibition, dissection, and display enabled Cuvier and the community that produced him to believe they were documenting black female difference and containing African inferiority. This process makes apparent the hunger of the powerful to fix subjects of interest, to restrain them in order to capture what is thought to be the essence of their difference and the reason for their subordination. Relatedly, this process also reveals a sense of weakness on the part of the powerful, for the need to immobilize subjects suggests an unstable authority.<sup>9</sup> Both of these tendencies would be heightened a quarter of a century later in the United States with the arrival of photography.

## Documenting Science

Early photography and the institution of slavery are linked. Soon after the 1839 discovery in France of the daguerreotype—the first practical photographic process—photography was being used in efforts to document the essential difference of people of African descent.

In 1846, the celebrated Swiss zoologist Louis Agassiz arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Agassiz, who had dedicated his first book to Georges Cuvier and saw himself as his successor, was famous for his work in natural history, particularly his work on fossil fishes.<sup>10</sup> Before accepting a position at Harvard University, Agassiz toured and gave a series of lectures along the East Coast. In Philadelphia he had his first significant contact with black people. After this jarring encounter, he wrote a letter to his mother revealing how this experience had toppled his previous beliefs concerning the brotherhood of man.

It was in Philadelphia that I first found myself in prolonged contact with negroes; all the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type [genre] and the unique origin of our species. But truth before all. Nevertheless, I experienced pity at the sight of this degraded and degenerate race, and their lot inspired compassion in me in thinking that they are really men. Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large curved nails, and especially the livid color of the palm of their hands, I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away. And when they advanced that hideous hand towards my plate in order to serve me, I wished I were able to depart in order to eat a piece of bread elsewhere, rather than dine with such service. What unhappiness for the white race—to have tied their existence so closely with that of negroes in certain countries! God preserve us from such a contact.<sup>11</sup>

Agassiz's impassioned letter reveals a division in his thoughts concerning people of African descent: while he considers their plight at a distance, when they are simply a "sight," he writes that he is filled with pity and what he labels compassion; however, when he finds himself face-to-face with the black men who work in the hotel, especially as the men move toward him, he is overcome with horror and disgust. In his letter Agassiz contends that black bodies are repulsive to him, yet he is not able to shift his gaze from the faces and hands of the black men. Clearly, he is both repelled and compelled by the black Philadelphians. Perhaps Agassiz's violent reaction was due to the fact that these men were not contained as Baartman had been in Europe; instead, these men were both intimate with him and comparatively autonomous.

Black people were touching and serving his food, offering him bread, and most likely, cleaning the room where he washed, dreamt, and slept. As hands are tools of work, intimacy, and agency—they labor, touch, and enable movement—it is worthy of note that Agassiz locates his repulsion in the hands of black men. He claims to feel disgust at the sight of the "large curved nails" and the "livid color" of the palms, and his distress multiplies as the hands advance toward his plate. The sight of the laboring black hands—and in service to him, no less—sickens him. Yet he cannot protest their movement toward him, for he is also fixated on the faces of the black men.

Like his mentor Cuvier, Agassiz was curious about African bodies and sought to study anatomical details. In his study of Agassiz, art critic Brian Wallis draws attention

to the scientist's particular interest in "sorting and classifying" in order to gather evidence and make claims about the subjects of his studies. In addition, he reveals Agassiz's desire to apply this methodology to the study of African bodies. Concerning this Wallis contends, "In attempting to organize his data regarding Africans, Agassiz sought firsthand evidence."<sup>12</sup> However, Agassiz, like Cuvier, sought not only "firsthand evidence," but one-way contact. And thus he needed a site for his study, a place where he could explore black bodies unhindered by the relative freedom of their movement. Cuvier accomplished this through dissection. Agassiz achieved it through studying the bodies of black people in a location where their freedom of movement was severely curtailed—as an honored guest on a plantation.

In 1847 Agassiz arrived at the Charleston, South Carolina, plantation home of a zoologist colleague and his wife and immediately found an environment conducive to satisfying his scientific curiosities. There, as an honored guest, he eagerly walked the plantation fields, observing enslaved Africans and African Americans at work.<sup>13</sup> These observations, along with his experiences in Philadelphia and the pressures placed upon him by his white southern hosts, pressed him to transpose his theory of separate creation—which had been designed to account for the origins of plants and animals—to people. Agassiz now insisted that man had not one origin, but plural origins. This notion went against the prevailing—pre-Darwinian—manner of accounting for the origin of man. Most people at the time explained the phenomenon of apparent racial differences by way of the Bible, which asserts that all of the world's peoples are descendants of Noah's sons.

In March 1850, Agassiz gave a lecture at the Association for the Advancement of American Science in Charleston. After his lecture, in which he posited that races were distinct and neither came from a "common center" nor a "common pair," Agassiz conducted first-hand observations of African-born slaves and their children.<sup>14</sup> Along with his host, Dr. Robert Gibbes, Agassiz examined what Gibbes described as "Ebo, Foulah, Gullah, Guinea, Coromantee, Mandrigo, and Congo Negroes" on plantations near Columbia, South Carolina.<sup>15</sup> Through his research, the Swiss scientist sought "to define the anatomical variations unique to 'the African race'" as well as to see if these racial characteristics remained among descendants of African people born in the United States.<sup>16</sup> After completing his study—in which he recorded such factors as limb size and muscle configuration—Agassiz was assured that his subjects were indeed a separate race from his own.<sup>17</sup> Four years later he published an article in a volume entitled *Types of Mankind* where he declared the existence of eight human "types," which included the Caucasian, the Negro, the American Indian, and the Hottentot. This pro-polygenesis volume proved very popular, especially with slavery's defenders.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of his month-long study around Columbia, Agassiz asked his host to obtain photographic evidence for his research. Dr. Gibbes hired J. T. Zealy, a local daguerrean, to photograph the enslaved people whom Agassiz had studied. Fifteen of these daguerreotypes depicting enslaved Africans were discovered at Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in the mid-1970s. These 1850 pictures depict nude and semi-nude African men and women photographed from the front, side, and back. Some of the photos are labeled with first name, occupation on the plantation, name of the plantation, and slaveholder's name. As Agassiz was interested in both anatomical differences unique to African peoples and how these differences were or were

not retained in the United States, Zealy photographed both African-born slaves and their adult American-born children.<sup>19</sup>

Alfred, Fassena, Renty, Delia, Drana, Jack, and Jem are the names that accompany the daguerreotypes.<sup>20</sup> Delia was identified as the American-born daughter of Renty, who was thought to be born in the Congo, and Drana was labeled as the American-born daughter of Jack, who was said to be from Guinea. (See Figure 9.) Each person appears alone in the photographs. Most of the pictures focus on the chests, breasts, and heads of the enslaved; however, there are also full body shots. Ritual scarifications on the chest and cheek are evident in some of the pictures of the men. Yet the possibility of movement, contact, and agency—precisely the acts that had so disturbed Agassiz about the black men in the Philadelphia hotel—is prevented by the pictures. Here lies the place where Agassiz's project and the daguerreotype process mutually reinforced each other. As the daguerreotype could not capture motion, the enslaved people were positioned against headrests, away from and held steady for the photographer, rendering both contact and movement impossible. This inability of the daguerreotype to capture movement corresponded with Agassiz's project of trying to catalog difference without the burden of mutual contact or exchange.

Ironically, however, although movement on the part of the enslaved people was curtailed, looking straight at the white cameraman by way of the camera was required. In other contexts, this form of direct staring at a white man could have contradicted the slave codes and been deemed a punishable offense.<sup>21</sup> Yet although the necessity of this charged act and the newness of the medium might have momentarily disturbed established conventions, the central tenet of the slave codes—the maintenance of discipline and authority—was retained as the people in front of the camera were denied clothing while the man behind it was fully dressed. Because Zealy tried to create a visual record of the parts of the body that Agassiz had examined, mid-nineteenth-century social conventions of dress and modesty were disallowed in the studio and by extension in the photographs. Recalling the positioning of Baartman in the Jardin du Roi, these refusals attempted to negate the humanity of the enslaved Africans and African Americans and worked to position them as ethnographic specimens or types for scientific inquiry. At the same time, however, both cases betrayed a contingent authority, a somewhat precarious command that needed to be enforced continually and adaptively.

### *A Teacher and His Student: Georges Cuvier and Louis Agassiz*

Baartman's humanity was partially denied and her body was constructed as an object of curiosity through a visual process of exhibition, dissection, and display. Agassiz used a similar strategy in his efforts to document the enslaved African and African American people as essentially different from those in power. He carried out his study on a southern plantation because only there was he able to secure relatively one-way contact with African people. He was an honored guest on a plantation and given license to observe. He treated laboring Africans and African Americans as the pleasure-seekers and scientists had treated Baartman in London and Paris: as a curious exhibit. The process of

dissection, however, was different for Cuvier and his student. Whereas Cuvier had to wait for Baartman to die before he was fully able to explore her, Agassiz hired a photographer to examine the enslaved people further. The camera became, in this case, an instrument of dissection: it was used to locate and obtain difference. In this way, the work of the scientific laboratory was transferred to the photographer's studio, and the camera replaced the microscope. Furthermore, the daguerreotype process proved a useful tool for dissection as it insisted upon a static, fixed subject.

The third step, the display of difference, was accomplished in Paris through the shelving of Baartman's genitals. In the case of the Zealy photographs, this final step was achieved through the fixing of the hard copy, the daguerreotypes which would be cataloged and stored at Harvard. And similar to the jar that contained a piece of Baartman's body, the daguerreotypes were labeled and left, ready to be solicited from the archive.<sup>22</sup> Like the tragedy of Baartman, the Zealy photographs represent links between imperialism, slavery, and the visual documentation of difference, and they expose relations between the hunger for visual evidence, the abuses of science, and the complicity of visual media.

The use of Saartjie Baartman's body by Georges Cuvier and of the bodies of the enslaved African and African American people by Louis Agassiz makes plain the potential dangers of evidentiary projects that investigate black bodies for visual corroboration of theories of white superiority. In both cases, black people were denied freedom, subjected to containment, and pressed to pose for an imagemaker, so that he could try to capture and reveal their difference from those who exerted more power. Likewise in both cases, these acts hinted at the uncertainty of that power. Finally, in both instances the visual documentation of reputed differences was commissioned by science, and painters and photographers were readily employed.

## Photography and History

The fact that some of the earliest photographs of black people were created to demonstrate that people of African descent were a separate and inferior race challenges a central tenet of photographic history. Since the medium's inception, critics have frequently touted photography's democratic properties and potential.<sup>23</sup> Yet as Agassiz's daguerreotypes of enslaved African and African American people make evident, the medium is neither inherently democratic, as all do not have equal access to the camera or the ability to deny its gaze, nor does it necessarily foster identification or empathy with others, for just as it can be used to place people in contexts and tell stories of humanity, it can also be used in endeavors to dehumanize and catalog difference.

Photography is burdened by this legacy of visual violence. Yet the medium simultaneously holds promise; it is widely accessible, appealing to many, and has a long history both of exposing societal ills and of agitating for change. Nowhere is this dual nature of photography more evident than in representations of the disenfranchised, for images of the less economically powerful often reveal both the progressive and repressive tendencies of photography. Since the 1980s a number of African American women artists have grappled with the medium's complicated lineage, particularly in relation to the histories of people of African descent. Many of these visual artists previously worked

with documentary photography and still employ aspects of the genre; however, they have also shifted away from an “unmanipulated” or “straight” approach—often by juxtaposing images, incorporating text, and situating photographs within installations—in order to expose, critique, and dismantle the visually assaultive potential of photography while concurrently laying claim to its social power.<sup>24</sup> In the second part of this essay, I will analyze how a few of these artists approach the legacy of evidentiary projects and the visual documentation of difference—particularly the histories of Baartman and the enslaved African and African American people photographed by J. T. Zealy—and work to alter the course of these histories through their art.

## Exposing the Power of Looking

One project that does not explicitly include photography is nonetheless central to my discussion, in that it directly confronts systems of containing, looking, and naming—the exact systems which make evidentiary projects possible. It is a 1990 installation by conceptual artist Renée Green titled *Anatomies of Escape*, a multi-media, multi-unit, and participatory work installed at the Clocktower Gallery in New York City. This installation graphically exposes the power inherent in looking. Critical of the ways dominant forms of visual empiricism attempt to prove the inferiority of the less powerful and, thus, justify their subordination, Green draws viewers’ attention to these very processes. Likewise, by focusing on the ways black female bodies have been viewed by those with influence in the West, she places this specific history at the center of her project.

Evoking two of the most fetishized black bodies in European history, one section of the installation approaches the legacy of two women called Venus: “The Hottentot Venus” and “The Black Venus” (Josephine Baker). Keenly aware of the women’s bodily overvisibility, both in their time and in our own, the artist avoids reproducing a context for the continued consumption of their overexposed bodies; instead, she creates a contemplative site, a space to consider the structural mechanisms that enable some people to look and others to be looked at. Concerning this aspect of her project, Green explains: “Power is related to seeing and vision. Being able to see and name something implies a certain amount of power. I keep trying to make viewers aware of the process involved in seeing, so that it doesn’t just seem self-evident.”<sup>25</sup>

Drawing from anthropological, literary, and scientific texts and using objects such as platforms, display cases, screens, and binoculars, Green’s installation makes evident systems of “othering,” particularly the construction of the black female body as an exotic curiosity or an ethnographic specimen. In one piece called *Seen*, for example, subject positions are reversed as the unwitting viewer gets up on a stage to glean information about “The Hottentot Venus” and suddenly finds herself displayed as a black shadow for all to see. (See Figure 21.) As getting up on stage is necessary to understand the piece, participants are tricked into performing as a curio, partially mirroring the deception of Baartman. One shaken viewer explained her experience with the piece:

In order to get a sense of the work one had to ascend some stairs to what resembled a gallows or an auction block, masked off on one side by a lighted white scrim. There, stencilled on the floor, I read excerpts from the autopsy

report of the Hottentot Venus, and listened to a recording of Josephine Baker's voice. But my concentration was divided, because not only could I see people watching me like a performer on a stage, I sensed those I could not see observing my shadow through the scrim. I clearly recall my feelings of vulnerability and fear of exposure. My curiosity, in that context, had led me to experience a small, personal trial.<sup>26</sup>

*Seen* retells Baartman's story as well as implicating her past and present audience. It lays bare the power in defining vision. Through retelling and recontextualizing the saga of "The Hottentot Venus," as well as foregrounding the power relations involved, her work suggests that evidentiary projects can best be understood not as clear confirmation of a subordinate group's difference or inferiority, but rather as stark evidence of an imbalance of power.

## Returning to the Scene

Contemporary artists frequently point to the saga of "The Hottentot Venus" as a defining moment in the representation of black women in visual culture and one that needs to be retold, either to remind us of our past or to redirect our future. In her 1990–1991 photo-text installation *How to Read Character*, photographer Carla Williams joins artists such as Green, Lyle Ashton Harris, Renée Cox, Deborah Willis, and Joyce Scott, as well as writers Elizabeth Alexander and Suzan-Lori Parks, in returning to Baartman's trials and rearticulating their meaning. Like Green and others, Williams challenges systems of power, viewing, and defining through her art. Williams, however, places the woman from southern Africa directly within the context of mid-nineteenth-century science to pose her critique. *How to Read Character* is composed of six large black-and-white photographs of the artist paired with period images and texts. The accompanying texts serve as labels and referents for the pictures and are borrowed from influential works in phrenology and physiognomy.

Brashly challenging and mocking the desire to read bodily evidence for one's worth, one photo-text work consists of a juxtaposition of manipulated photocopies of Huet le Jeune's and Wailly's commissioned scientific illustrations of Baartman and a gilt-framed close-up of the artist's backside. (See Figure 17.) By reclaiming these examples of art-in-service-to-science, this bold pairing reminds viewers of the complicity of imagemakers in providing visual "proof" for scientists seeking to make racist claims to truth. This pairing also links biography and autobiography as well as past and present. By joining self-portraits—head shots and profiles of the artist's head as well as close-ups of her body—with nineteenth-century scientific works, the installation prompts viewers to reflect on the inanity, pain, and contemporary resonance of empirical visual practices that attempt to measure the majority of the world's peoples against a mythical European ideal and, not surprisingly, find the majority lacking.

Williams's installation, however, also does something else. By inserting her own body into history as both photographer and photographed, she offers viewers a rare image of an unclothed black woman who is in her own studio and trying to define her own representation. Tellingly, she uses her body to inform and instruct. When Carla Williams

began photographing her naked self, she assumed that there was precedent for her actions; at the age of eighteen it felt mature and right. Yet upon reflection years later, she realized that there was no precedent; she had never seen an example of a black female nude.<sup>27</sup> Thus, *How to Read Character* challenges historical and contemporary projects to define character and intelligence based on bodily criteria, and it offers us some of the first images of the unclothed black female body—produced by the model—in visual art in the United States.

To accomplish this, Williams pulls the black female body from the harsh gaze of positivist science. At the same time, however, she retains visual evidence of the body's embeddedness in science; that is, through her photo-text pairings she shows how the black female body has been partially constructed by nineteenth-century scientific theories and practices. Yet after reappropriating art-made-in-service-to-science, she also repositions the body as worthy of aesthetic and critical reflection. Williams frames the body in gold—the same body that was previously seen as an object of curiosity and as evidence of inferiority—and keeps the faith that the museum or gallery setting will both honor the gilt-framed body and serve as a site of positive instruction. Given that the shows of London, the gardens of Paris, and the natural history museum archive were all unable to serve Baartman in this way, perhaps only brave and compassionate interventions like this one will make positive instruction a possibility.

## Evidence of What?

Challenging systems of viewing and defining is also central to the photography of Carrie Mae Weems. After getting her start as a documentary photographer in the late 1970s and early 1980s in California, Weems began to question the genre's implications, particularly its convention of offering images of lone disempowered people, especially black Americans, to viewers for their curiosity, pity, and pleasure. She started to wonder if documentary photography could allow her to create images of African American people that would be able to “rise above the depiction of blacks always as the victim of the gaze.”<sup>28</sup>

Deeply interested in issues of intent, use, and influence, Weems frequently unmask the repressive potential of documentary photography at the same time as she continues to draw from it to create her art. Accordingly, her work often reveals a dual purpose of exposing the abuses of “straight” photography as well as expanding its possibilities. Of her engaged critical-participant approach, she explains:

Even after realizing the nontruth value of documentary photography, I find it still remains an important form to explore and use. That photographs are only half-true is just fine with me, indeed it's that one half-truth that is the half most interesting and in the greatest need of illumination.<sup>29</sup>

In the early 1990s Carrie Mae Weems embarked on a project to rework Agassiz's daguerreotypes of enslaved Africans and African Americans and to infuse them with new meaning. These explanatory photographs, which had been taken as visual docu-

mentation of the inherent difference of enslaved people, and which had implicitly attempted to explain and justify their enslavement, now were to take on a new role. The artist traveled to Harvard's Peabody Museum where the daguerreotypes are housed, took photographs of the images, enlarged them, reversed some of them, and toned them in indigo blue. Then she framed and repositioned the photographs as three triptychs and placed them at the opening of her installation on the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands, the place where Africa is often thought to be most present and Africanisms most evident in the United States. (See Figure 8.) In so doing, she symbolically reunites the family that these images quite possibly depict—for in the originals Drana was listed as the daughter of Jack—and places them in a cultural context where they can be viewed not as evidence of African anatomical difference, but as the creators and sustainers of a powerful and unique black diasporic culture.

The wresting of the black body from the grip of visual empiricism—where it has often been used by more powerful others observing it for evidence of deviance and difference—is central to the photography of both Williams and Weems. By retrieving and recontextualizing images, enlarging and framing them, and placing them on the walls of the gallery and museum, they attempt to honor the formerly subjugated by positioning them within the conventions of the portrait, the very form that those in control of their representation often choose for their own likenesses. Explaining this strategy of genre manipulation and critique, Williams offers: “The choice of representation, i.e., scale of images, framing, and lighting, is intended to comment on the history of the formal portrait, especially the fact that certain subjects were not given this kind of aggrandizement and importance.”<sup>30</sup>

Photographer and critic Allan Sekula contends that the photographic portrait is “a double system of representation capable of functioning both *honorifically* and *repressively*.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, he considers these tendencies to be opposing but related poles of portrait practices. Yet what the photographs of Williams and Weems reveal is that these double functions can be evident simultaneously. Their works do not erase the imprint of the repressive institutions that have used black bodies to corroborate theories of deviance and inferiority; instead, their photographs make plain the repression and compel viewers to reflect on this legacy and its currency in our present. However, their work also enables fresh and honorable ways of looking that allow us to see anew the images of black people found in mid-nineteenth-century popular culture and science. For instance, as Weems is a student of folklore and shares an affinity with anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, her positioning of the photographs of enslaved Africans and African Americans within a context of black diasporic folk practices and beliefs opens the possibility of understanding these people who look so intently at the camera and cameraman as conjurers using their skills of concentration to gain control over their predicament.<sup>32</sup> Of her interest in constructing new environments for these images, Weems states:

I wanted to uplift them out of their original context and make them into something more than they have been. To give them a different kind of status first and foremost, and to heighten their beauty and their pain and sadness, too, from the ordeal of being photographed.<sup>33</sup>

By traversing the boundaries of science, art, and popular culture and wielding various strategies of reclamation and recontextualization, the art of Green, Williams, and Weems presses us to reflect on the ways that visual images trafficked and continue to traffic in history.

## Undermining Proof

Undermining photography's use as evidence and proof has also been a recurring theme in the photo-text work of Lorna Simpson. Like Weems, Simpson's training is in social documentary photography; however, while still a young photographer, she turned away from this genre because she had become frustrated with viewers' limited expectations for it. Specifically, Simpson found herself troubled by the manner in which documentary photography purported to convey truth.<sup>34</sup> In addition, she was disturbed by the seemingly insatiable desire of privileged viewers to access and assess the "truth" of the less privileged—the typical subjects of the genre—in the comfort of the gallery or their living room chair. Thus in the late 1980s she set out to expose and interrupt this imbalanced visual relationship. To lay bare the established conventions of social documentary photography that encouraged savvy viewers to believe they could read a photograph as evidence of poverty or proof of dignity, Simpson tried to undermine this overly familiar exchange by giving "the viewer something they might not interpret or surmise, due to their 'educated' way of looking at images."<sup>35</sup>

One of the ways Simpson did this was by leaving a frequent site of documentary photography, the street, and bringing her models inside the studio. Obviously this strategy is not without risks—Zealy followed this same trajectory in bringing his subjects in from the plantation fields and into the studio. Yet Simpson uses this tactic not to decontextualize her subjects in order to define them and justify their subordination, but to press viewers to consider how they have associated and defined black people and, most importantly, to confront the processes through which they have done so. Indoors, Simpson has more freedom to place models into contexts of her own design. This freedom is crucial for her project because one result of "straight" photography is that certain groups of people become linked with certain locales; for example, African Americans have frequently been identified with the urban street in twentieth-century popular imaginations. Thus, the studio is where Simpson can best interrupt learned and limiting tendencies to read images of black people simplistically, while simultaneously encouraging viewers to participate in the creation of more nuanced interpretations.

Another strategy that Simpson employs to subvert the prevalent understanding of photographs as claims to truth is to deny access to her models' faces, the site which many look to for evidence of a person's interior life. Unlike either social documentary subjects, whom photographers pose as visual proof of various social problems, or Baartman and the enslaved African people, who were posed to provide visible evidence of their difference, Simpson refrains from giving viewers this form of definitive authority and control. Instead, she typically photographs her models from behind or presents just their torsos. This denial of access to the faces of her subjects frustrates our cravings

for the information that is usually provided for us in documentary photography, information that affords us a feeling of mastery over the subjects. Concerning this key aspect of her late 1980s and early 1990s work, the artist explains:

The viewer wants so much to see a face to read “the look in the eyes” or the expression on the mouth. I want viewers to realize that that is one of the mechanisms which they use to read a photograph. If they think, “How am I supposed to read this, if I don’t see the face?” they may realize that they are making a cultural reading that has been learned over the years, and then perhaps see that it is not a given.<sup>36</sup>

Discouragement of facile interpretations and superficial mastery is also enhanced by Simpson’s tactical use of text; she uses words to contradict and destabilize her images further. Simpson began inserting text into her work because she found “straight” photography inadequate to the task of conveying complexity. There were things, she says, “that the photograph would not speak of and that I felt needed to be revealed, but that couldn’t be absorbed from just looking at an image.”<sup>37</sup>

One of Simpson’s 1989 photo-text works, *Three Seated Figures*, demonstrates her signature tactics for dispelling viewers’ yearnings for simplicity and authority by presenting a series of images of a model’s torso in a stark studio environment surrounded by simultaneously pointed and open-ended text. (See Figure 15.) The piece consists of three large Polaroid prints girded by five engraved plaques. The pictures are repetitive and depict the body of a young black woman in a white shift; the woman is seated and appears virtually the same in all three pictures except for minor changes in the positioning of her hands. Framing her body on either side are the phrases “her story” and “each time they looked for proof.” Above the figure, where her forehead would be if it were visible, are the words “Prints,” “Signs of Entry,” and “Marks.” Seemingly connoting violation, these words as well as the spare white shift—a hospital gown? a slip? the insufficient dress of an enslaved woman?—evoke a sense of forced penetration. Furthermore, as the tops of the picture frames cut directly through the woman’s mouth, she is rendered mute. Perhaps recalling other black women positioned as curiosities and ethnographic specimens like Baartman and the enslaved women Delia and Drana, this woman is unable to verbally convey the horror of the violation of her bodily integrity or, more precisely, to be publicly heard.<sup>38</sup>

Visible signs or marks of violation, however, are missing from the triptych. This is indication that “her story” cannot be entirely found here. Although fragments of her story are indeed present and can be inferred by a patient and imaginative viewer, the work also tells another story, one that certainly concerns “her,” but one that is also systemic and larger than her. Through its subversion of documentary practices, Simpson’s *Three Seated Figures*—like the works of Green, Williams, and Weems—challenges systems of meaning-making that position the black female body as evidence of difference and deviance in order to enforce subordination. Yet Simpson’s work also complicates this critique by pointing to a central paradox in the search for evidence: that this search for evidence to justify dominant ideologies and practices has been matched with the simultaneous suppression of the history of this exploitation. Thus, although the

photo-text piece does not reveal “her story,” and in fact, all attempts to see and understand “her story” are consistently disallowed through the artist’s strategies of refusal and denial, the work exposes this frequently overlooked contradiction. By foregrounding, through its use of image and text, both the problem of the history of evidence (“each time they looked for proof”) and the evidence of this history (“her story”), Simpson’s work points to their entanglement and presses us to consider the complexity of both searches for visual evidence and searches for visible history.

Early nineteenth-century visualizations of black women’s bodies as contained, enslaved, and detained provided corroboration to scientific justifications for their subordination. The work of artists and intellectual historians Green, Williams, Weems, and Simpson invites viewers to participate in conversations about the contours and meanings of these legacies. Their work also poses questions about how this history can be represented. Taken together, their art serves as an artistic retort: it powerfully exposes, analyzes, and subverts violent visual legacies that have been in place since the first half of the nineteenth century. In addition, their bold creative interventions implore us to question and change the course of these still visible histories.

*Credit:* Collins, Lisa Gail. *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*. Copyright © 2002 by Lisa Gail Collins. Reprinted by permission of Rutgers University Press.

1. In this essay, I use “myth” somewhat ominously. I see it as a powerful way to describe the world, its inhabitants, and their relations. I also see myth as frequently explaining, justifying, naturalizing, and thus reinscribing the status quo.

2. Sander L. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* 12:1 (Autumn 1985): 212.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Vol. 4: From the American Revolution to World War I, Part 2* (Houston: Menil Foundation, 1989; distributed by Harvard University Press), 54.

5. Stephen Jay Gould, “The Hottentot Venus,” *Natural History* 91:10 (October 1982): 22.

6. Honour, 54.

7. Gilman, 240.

8. Gould, 22.

9. Richard Leppert, *Art and the Committed Eye: The Cultural Functions of Imagery* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 176. Informed by Michel Foucault’s notions of power, Leppert writes, “The presence of the Other—the Not Us—provides a visual measure by which distinctions of social and cultural merit may be drawn. To be greater, in other words, the lesser *must* be acknowledged. The danger to the greater that is posed by the lesser’s presence may be circumscribed by limiting the latter’s agency.” In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault described power as being “everywhere” and constantly in various processes of negotiation. He explained power as “a moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1990), 93.

10. Edward Lurie, *Louis Agassiz: A Life in Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 40, 81.

11. Louis Agassiz to his mother, December 1846. Original letter in Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; quoted in Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981), 44–45. Brian Wallis also quotes part of this passage in his investigation of Louis Agassiz’s scientific methods and their relation to museum and archival systems and practices. Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” *American Art* 9:2 (Summer 1995): 42–43.

12. Wallis, 44.

13. Lurie, 143.

14. Elinor Reichlin, "Faces of Slavery," *American Heritage* 28:4 (June 1977): 4.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 5.
17. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 53.
18. Lurie, 264. For more on Agassiz's theories and their influence on defenders of slavery, see George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper Row, 1971; reprint, Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 75.
19. As Congress had passed legislation prohibiting the importation of slaves into the United States in 1807—forty-three years before these pictures were taken—at least some of the African-born slaves whom Zealy photographed must have been illegally brought into the country. The illicit slave trade was not uncommon at this time. In fact, W.E.B. Du Bois charted the continuance of the trade from 1820 to 1860 and deemed the Act of 1807 virtually a "dead letter," for when Congress banned the slave trade they did not set up a national structure to enforce the act. Thus the ban, along with the development of new industries, led to an increased market for slaves and many people were willing to violate the law in order to cash in on this illicit market. See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Historical Studies no. 1, 1896; reprint, Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Org. Ltd., 1973), 109.
20. Wallis, 46. In his article, Brian Wallis publishes the daguerreotypes in their entirety for the first time as well as provides the names that accompany them.
21. Kenneth M. Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1989), 207–208. In his discussion of slave codes and their underlying "requirement that slaves submit to their masters and respect all white men," Stamp notes a North Carolina judge who understood a range of acts as constituting "insolence." Stamp quotes the judge's statement: "a look, the pointing of a finger, a refusal or neglect to step out of the way when a white person is seen to approach. But each of such acts violates the rules of propriety, and if tolerated, would destroy that subordination, upon which our social system rests." I am grateful to John S. Wright for pointing out this aspect of the slave codes.
22. For a helpful discussion of the relations between photography, the body, and the archive in the mid-nineteenth century, see Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). For a discussion of the links between ethnographic study, photography, and claims to truth, see Melissa Banta and Curtis M. Hinsley, eds., *From Site to Sight: Anthropology, Photography, and the Power of Imagery* (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 1986).
23. For an example of this tendency in the history of photography see Alan Trachtenberg, *American Daguerreotypes from the Matthew R. Isenburg Collection* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1990), 19. He writes, "The moment of the daguerreotype held perhaps the highest promise yet achieved in the United States for an art founded on egalitarian premises: an art of equal access to self-presentation."
24. For more on the strategies contemporary photographers employ to challenge the conventions of documentary photography, see Brian Wallis, "Questioning Documentary," *Aperture* 112 (Fall 1988): 60–71. For an analysis of the photo-text work of a select group of black women artists from the U.S. and U.K., see Kellie Jones, "In Their Own Image," *Artforum* 29:3 (November 1990): 132–138.
25. Russell Ferguson, "Various Identities: A Conversation with Renée Green," in *World Tour: Renée Green* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993), E56.
26. Julie Lazar, "Foreword," in Ferguson, *World Tour: Renée Green*, A1.
27. Carla Williams, "The Erotic Image Is Naked and Dark," in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: New Press, 1994), 133.
28. Susan Benner, "A Conversation with Carrie Mae Weems," *Artweek* 23:15 (7 May 1992): 5.
29. Kellie Jones, "A Contemporary Portfolio," *Exposure* 27:4 (Fall 1990): 30.
30. Carla Williams, "How to Read Character," quoted in Deborah Willis, "Women's Stories/Women's Photobiographies," in *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies*, ed. Diane Neumaier (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 86.
31. Sekula, 345.

32. For mention of conjurers and the practice of the “evil eye,” see Norman E. Whitten, Jr., “Contemporary Patterns of Malign Occultism Among Negroes in North Carolina,” in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973; reprint, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 406.

33. Vince Aletti, “Dark Passage,” *Village Voice* (22 December 1992): 102.

34. For an analysis of how practitioners assume that “socially concerned” photography reveals “truth,” see Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977; reprint, New York: Anchor, 1990), 106.

35. Regina Joseph, “Lorna Simpson Interview,” *Balcon* 5/6 (1990): 35.

36. Trevor Fairbrother, “Interview with Lorna Simpson,” *The Binational: American Art of the Late 80’s* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1988), 178.

37. Joseph, 35. For more on Simpson’s use of language, see Coco Fusco, “Uncanny Dissonance: The Work of Lorna Simpson,” in *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: New Press, 1995), 97–102.

38. See Saidiya V. Hartman’s powerful reading of this woman as a victim and survivor of rape in her essay “Excisions of the Flesh,” in *Lorna Simpson: For the Sake of the Viewer*, ed. Beryl J. Wright and Saidiya V. Hartman (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 62.