Now You See Me, No You Don't: Lorna Simpson and a Pin-Up's Photographs

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the complexities of identification and historical representations embedded in African-American contemporary artist Lorna Simpson's work *LA-57 NY-09* (2009). I argue that this work challenges the ways in which photography has been used since the nineteenth century to fix African-American women as racial types such as Mammy, Jezebel and Hottentot. I propose that because black female bodies are marked by these historically constructed racial stereotypes, both Simpson and the anonymous model can only perform an inevitably unsuccessful masquerade of (white) femininity, in this case, represented by the pin-up genre. By employing the masquerade, Simpson also engages with self-portraiture, which is expected to reveal a subject's inner and coherent self. But the artist thwarts this expectation through the masquerade, troubling the fantasy of a unitary self and instead revealing black female subjectivity to be a complex and multi-layered set of constructions.

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Dedication

To Mac: for his love, support and ability to always make me laugh.

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Now You See Me, No You Don't: Lorna Simpson and a Pin-Up's Photographs

I enter the gallery and on the far wall I see a grid pattern of twenty-five black-and-white gelatin silver prints. Each measures 7-by-7 inches, and together they make up the work *LA-57 NY-09* (2009) by African-American contemporary artist Lorna Simpson (See Figure 1). I come close and see a woman with wide eyes, an inviting smile, and glistening black skin. In some photos she looks back at me, while in others she is turned away. Sometimes she is lounging outside on the grass, and other times she is seated on a bench indoors. Wearing a variety of 1950s-style shorts and dresses, she exposes her long and shapely legs. She presents herself in playful, sometimes provocative ways. At one point she leans back on her arms, arching her back, resting her cheek on her bare shoulder, and tilting her head upwards whilst keeping me within her sights. She is almost always smiling, and she is most certainly always aware she is being watched. Who is she?

The unidentified African-American woman I am looking at was photographed in Los Angeles during the months of May to August, 1957, creating a pin-up portfolio. As I look even closer, I realize that in addition to this model there is another woman in the photographs. The second woman is Simpson, who has cast herself as the *doppelgänger* of the original model. The artist restages the majority of the model's poses, and juxtaposes her images against the original photographs. Simpson found these images on eBay and

combined sixteen of them with nine images of her replicated poses.[1] By re-posing as the model, the artist inserts herself into her own work for the first time, maintaining a constant dialogue between the past and present and challenging the ways race and gender have been oversimplified and stereotyped in representations of African-American women.[2]

This paper examines the complexities of identification and historical representations in Simpson's work *LA-57 NY-09*. I argue that this work challenges the ways in which photography has been used since the nineteenth century to fix African-American women as racial types such as Mammy, Jezebel and Hottentot. I propose that because black female bodies are marked by these historically constructed racial stereotypes, both Simpson and the anonymous model can only perform an inevitably unsuccessful masquerade of (white) femininity, in this case, represented by the pin-up genre. By employing the masquerade, Simpson also engages with self-portraiture, which is expected to reveal a subject's inner and coherent self. But the artist thwarts this expectation through the masquerade, troubling the fantasy of a unitary self and instead revealing black female subjectivity to be a complex and multi-layered set of constructions.

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[1] Brooklyn Museum, "Lorna Simpson: Gathered," accessed April 2012, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/lorna_simpson/.

[2] Kimberly McClain, "A Different Perspective: An intern visit to Lorna Simpson's Studio," Studio Museum, Harlem, July 5, 2011, accessed April 2012, http://www.studiomuseum.org/studio-blog/features/different-perspective-intern-visit-lorna-simpsons-studio.

Figure 1: Simpson, Lorna, LA '57- NY '09, 2009; gelatin silver prints, 7 x 7" each of 25. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94.

To understand how the artist troubles racialized and gendered cultural assumptions regarding black female subjectivity, this paper is structured in four parts: First, I discuss Simpson's past photographic works and the strategies employed to

examine race and gender in order to compare how *LA-57 NY-09* shares the same themes, but differs in approach. Second, I briefly review the black pin-up in 1950s America, demonstrating how the artist's use of the genre exposes the masquerade of white femininity performed by the anonymous model and Simpson. I argue that this performance is revealed to be unsuccessful because of the ways in which black female sexuality is conventionally coded in representational politics. Lastly, I examine the stereotypes conditioning representations of the black female body, beginning in the nineteenth century, which have led to black women being both hyper-visible and invisible in American culture. And, I review the development of photography during the nineteenth century in America when the artist challenges expectations of the self-portrait to reveal the inner self.

To frame my analysis of *LA-57 NY-09*, I draw upon the theories of Amelia Jones and Mary Ann Doane for the masquerade, and briefly discuss Frantz Fanon's post-colonial theory when I look at the possibility of the anonymous black model in *LA-57 NY-09* appropriating her colonizing culture. I examine fixed stereotypes and how it affects black women's subjectivity through the writings of Stuart Hall, while Maria Elena Buszek's literature informs my summary of the history of the pin-up. Finally, I reference the writings of bell hooks, Carla Williams and Deborah Willis to discuss constructed historical representations of the African-American woman, and look at photography in the nineteenth century and its links to criminology and biology through the writings of Allan Sekula.

Simpson's Past Works: Looking at the Black Female Figure

Lorna Simpson, born in Brooklyn, New York in 1960, first came to prominence as an artist in the mid-1980s producing large-scale black-and-white photo-texts. Early in her career she worked with documentary photography, but soon began to question photographic authority and truth, and to explore how photography and representation are influenced by racist ideology.[3] During this period in her work, according to art critic Holland Cotter, Simpson was inspired by a new kind of art activism in the form of multiculturalism: "by approaching race as a dynamic and changing experience rather than as a fixed state, it opened up options for art. They could play with identity, prod it, stand back from it, move in close."[4] Throughout the 1980s and early '90s, Simpson challenged the assumptions that circulate in representations of the black female subject by employing three distinct strategies within her photographic works: the presentation of the back of her subject to the viewer, the fragmentation of the photographed subject, and the combination of image and text. With these strategies, Simpson created what Lauri Firstenberg calls her "signature anti-portrait convention."[5] Simpson both engages with and refuses the expectations of the traditional portrait by refusing to offer a "whole" body. The viewer is

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[3] Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, "Lorna Simpson," accessed December 2012, http://www.mcachicago.org/archive/collection/Simpson-txt.html.

[4] Holland Cotter, "Exploring Identity as a Problematic Condition," *New York Times*, March 2, 2007, accessed April 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/arts/design/02lorn.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[5] Lauri Firstenberg, "Autonomy and the Archive in America: Reexamining the Intersection of Photography and Stereotype," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: International Center of Photography/Harry N. Abram, 2003), 317.

thus denied recognition and identification with the subject. This tactic disallowed the spectator to read the female's physical features, therefore refusing the assumption that a photographic portrait is a substitute for a person. Marianne Kinkel succinctly writes about the expectations that surround portraiture: "Likeness not only assures a seemingly transparent relationship between a portrait and subject, it supports claims that an internal essence and an abstract type can be inferred from external physical features."[6] Simpson refuses these claims by producing fragmented figures and/or having the subject defy the viewer's gaze.

According to author bell hooks, when Simpson's black female subject shows her back to the viewer, she creates "an alternative space where she is both self-defining and self-determining."[7] hooks is commenting that the artist's female subject no longer sees herself reflected through someone else's gaze or their conditioned readings of her, but instead is free to define her own reality and recount her own experiences. The artist's subjects are also turning their backs on the history of documentary photography, which, since the nineteenth century, has been used to identify and fix social types (I will return to this subject later in the paper). In *Guarded Conditions* (1989), for example, a black woman is photographed six times in a shift dress with her back to the viewer and her hands folded behind her, denying not only the gaze of the viewer, but also physical clues that may influence how the viewer sees her.

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[6] Marianne Kinkel, *Race of Mankind: The Sculptures of Malvina Hoffman* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 4.

[7] bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*: *Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 95.

In order to refuse visual access to the face and body, the artist also fragments the body and crops parts of the face in her photographs. In some works, such as *Necklines* (1989), which depicts three different views of a black woman's neck pieced unevenly together to make up one photograph, either the subject's body is separated into parts using multiple frames, or the photograph is cut into sections and then placed back together. In still other works, Simpson does not photograph the whole body of her subject, but instead plays with the placement and composition of the body, as in *Coiffure* (1991). This work consists of three black-and-white photographs: one of a black woman, back to the camera and cropped at the shoulders, the second of braided hair, and the last of the inside of a mask. Simpson comments on why she does not offer a face to the spectator:

> 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… 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.[8]

By excluding and including different parts of her subjects, the artist composes a puzzle where she both reveals and resists racialized and gendered assumptions of black female subjectivity.

Finally, Simpson's combination of image and text draws the viewer's attention to negative stereotypes of the African-American woman. The artist's text sometimes appears

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[8] Trevor Fairbrother, "Interview with Lorna Simpson," in *The Binational: American Art of the Late '80s: German Art of the Late '80s,* ed. David Ross (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1988), 178.

printed on plaques or written below an image, as in *Waterbearer* (1986). Once again, a black woman in a white shift dress appears with her back to the viewer. With outstretched arms, she pours water from a metal jug held in one hand and a plastic jug held in the other. The text underneath the photograph reads: SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER, THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED, ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY. This text reflects how the black subject's account or testimony is often negated in a white society. The text adds another layer of complexity to the image by building tension between the subject and the viewer, revealing how language contributes to the construction of stereotypes. The words and phrases the artist uses are not self-explanatory, but sometimes contradictory and unexpected. The viewer must try to connect the words to the image, thus allowing for personal interpretations of the photograph. By placing responsibility on the spectator to interpret meaning from the photograph, Simpson directs the viewer's attention to their conditioned ways of seeing and thinking about the Other.

Although the artist's works explore the relationship between visual representation and subject formation, and have been called "refined and impassioned" by some critics such as *The New York Times*' Holland Cotter,[9] the artist received some criticism during the 1990s. For example, art critic Joshua Decter writing in *Artforum* called the artist's work "visually elegant," but also "treading the murky waters between (self) objectification and narcissism," suggesting that Simpson's subjects in fact represented the

[9] Cotter, "Exploring Identity as a Problematic Condition."

artist.[10] Seemingly annoyed that the artist's photographic subjects "stubbornly" refuse the "violative gaze of the stranger," Decter comments that the artist is "unwilling to complete the gesture of (self)portraiture."[11] This critique has become a basis for discussion, resulting in a tendency to identify Simpson's black female subjects as either universal victims or stand-ins for the artist's experiences. Ironically, Simpson's work interrogates this desire to know and classify people. The artist does not present her black female subjects as universal victims, nor are they meant to act as symbols of her own personal struggle; instead they are shaped by pasting together, according to Simpson, a mix of her own and other black women's experiences.[12] The ambiguity in her work is intended to open up interpretations and experiences viewers might bring to the image, prompting them to start asking questions of the image and themselves.

By 1994, perhaps because of critics' desires to identify the black subject in her work as either victim or Simpson, or because she wanted to experiment with new formulas, the artist removed the figure from her photographs, directing her attention instead to architecture, objects and landscape, and exploring materials such as felt while still working with similar themes. In 1997, the black figure returned but only in Simpson's moving pictures, film and video works, in which, as critic Okwui Enwezor notes, "identity of the female kind would be rendered quite visible and play a crucial role

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[10] Joshua Decter, "Lorna Simpson," *Artforum*, January 1, 1994, accessed February 2013, http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Lorna+Simpson.-a015143646.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Deborah Willis, *Lorna Simpson* (San Francisco: The Friends of Photography, 1992), 57.

in her exploration of the multiplication of feminine roles and identities."[13] In *LA-57 NY-09* the artist returns to the figure (and the question of self-portraiture) with a vengeance. While continuing to address issues of gender, race and identity, Simpson now inserts her own body into her work. Unlike past works, *LA-57 NY-09* allows visual access to both Simpson's and her subject's body, without fragmentation or the use of text. Yet, as will become clearer, allowing visual access does not result in revealing the inner characters of Simpson or her subject. In this respect, the artist continues to deny the expectations of traditional portraiture.

The Black Pin-Up: (Un)Intentional Masquerade of White Femininity

By (re)producing the genre of pin-up and inserting herself into *LA-57 NY-09*, Simpson both employs and subverts self-portraiture by performing the masquerade of white femininity. Through the masquerade, the artist illustrates that the desire to reveal the inner, coherent and stable character of a person cannot be satisfied. According to Efrat Tseëlon, the masquerade "replaces clarity with ambiguity…phantasmic constructions of containment and closure with constructions that in reality are more messy, diverse, impure and imperfect."[14] It is an exaggerated performance, a disguise or caricature.[15] By

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[13] Okwui Enwezor, "Repetition and Differentiation: Lorna Simpson's Iconography of the Racial Sublime," in *Lorna Simpson* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2006), 124.
[14] Efrat Tseëlon, "Introduction: Masquerade and Identities," in *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality*, ed. Efrat Tseëlon (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.
[15] Ibid., 2.

performing the masquerade as pin-up, the anonymous model and Simpson produce overstated and contrived poses, ranging from coy to seductive. Each pose follows conventions of ideal white femininity. But the black pin-up is not recognizable in white mainstream American culture and, therefore, the image of the model and Simpson can only be referenced through racial stereotypes.

Pin-up imagery originated in the nineteenth century when actresses and burlesque performers would use their photos as business cards.[16] Maria Elena Buszek writes that women's potential was bound to sexuality, which was "tied to their level of visibility in the public sphere."[17] Thus, the more visible a woman was, the more sexually available she was presumed to be, because she was seen as advertising her sexuality for public consumption. In the United States, pin-ups were mass-produced during and after the Second World War. The photographs were called pin–ups because they were meant to be "pinned up" for private and or public display. The pin-up created a fantasy of what an ideal woman should be for both males and women. Paradoxically, the pin-up represented sexual availability, but also a strong, progressive, and aggressive woman. Buszek writes that as these images of pin-ups reached a wider audience, ordinary women began to imitate them, "finding subversive pleasures through her look and attitude."[18] A woman was expected to be a virgin and a vamp; therefore, the pin-up could play both characters, posing playfully and overtly sexual one moment, and coy and shy the next.

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[16] Maria Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 43.

[17] Ibid., 29.

[18] Ibid., 187.

Into the 1950s, the pin-up became associated with well-known names such as Bettie Page, Brigitte Bardot, Jane Mansfield, and Marilyn Monroe. Pin-up photographs of black females on the other hand were marginalized, found only in black magazines or advertisements. The magazine *Ebony*, founded in 1945, set out to replace negative imagery of African Americans with more positive ones, according to publisher John H. Johnson.[19] Johnson wanted to present a different black subject, one of success and affluence, not only to white Americans, but to black people as well. The magazine also focused on the postwar black female. Buszek claims that the desire to prove that black women were just as beautiful as white women led to the use of pin-up imagery in the magazine.[20] But as hooks points out, for African-American women, mass-media and pop culture "constructs our presence as absence [and] denies the 'body' of the black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it phallocentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is 'white.'"[21] Thus, because images of white women existed in mainstream American culture, black women often attempted to attain the same status by appropriating the same clothes, hair and poses.

In order for the anonymous black model in *LA-57 NY-09* to pose like a white pin-up and thus adhere to the standards of beauty within white American culture, she performs a masquerade of white femininity. With regards to the masquerade, Luce Irigaray states, "…a woman has to become a normal woman, that is, has to enter into the

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[19] Maurice Berger, *For All The World To See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 62.

[20] Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls,* 250.

[21] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 118.

masquerade of femininity…into a system of values that is not hers, and in which she can 'appear' and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men."[22] Women must therefore put aside their own desires and instead project the desires of men. Subconsciously, a woman realizes that only by becoming a product of men's fantasies can she be seen or become visible in society.

In *LA-57 NY-09*, the model unintentionally performs the masquerade, whereas Simpson intentionally performs femininity, a point that becomes clearer on closer inspection of the photographs themselves. In Figure 2, for example, the woman sits smiling on a bench indoors with two circular pillows nearby, slants her legs, and crosses one leg behind the other, while folding her arms behind her head. Simpson duplicates the pose in Figure 3, wearing similar clothes, sitting on a bench, with one similar circular pillow. In another image, the anonymous model is standing outside, looking away from the camera with a backdrop of Los Angeles bungalows in the distance. Simpson restages the pose outside, but includes shrubbery and a tree instead. The artist's images are not exact copies of the original model's photographs. Simpson includes and excludes objects and backgrounds, thus subtly manipulating what the viewer expects to see. As well, some photographs of the model are not reposed by the artist, breaking the pattern of copying or reiteration of images.

By engaging with the performance of masquerade, the artist reflects on the different layers of identification that inform black female subjectivity, thus refuting the

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[22] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 134.

limited, constructed and negative stereotypes that mainstream society has assigned to them through historical representation. In this respect, Simpson's practice is itself informed by artists such as Cindy Sherman, who likewise employs masquerade to point out the fabrication of femininity. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) in particular illuminate Simpson's work. In this series of sixty-nine black-and-white photographs, Sherman poses in private and public spaces, disguised as ambiguous Hollywood movie characters. Although each character is a fictional creation of the artist, the viewer still recognizes these women from images in popular culture. The spectator may also mistake these film stills for self-portraits, but elements of portraiture are being manipulated and thwarted by the artist.

Mary Ann Doane comments that for an artist to intentionally perform the masquerade they must create a lack or gap between the self and the image they are constructing.[23] Through her repeated images, Sherman constantly reflects back to the audience what femininity is supposed to be, causing the representation of femininity to become excessive, thus intensifying its artificiality.[24] By performing the masquerade of womanliness intentionally, a split or disconnect needs to be created between the image one is expected to portray by white patriarchal society and oneself.[25] This disconnectedness can be seen in *Film Stills* when the artist overacts or exaggerates

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[23] Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 66.

[24] Amelia Jones, "Performing the Other as Self," in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 76.

[25] Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," 66.

gestures and poses as for example, when her face is streaked with tears and running mascara, or when she acts frightened in an apartment. The distance or gaps destabilize the image by altering it, so that what has been produced is not what men expect to see.

Like Sherman, Simpson signals to the viewer that she is intentionally performing the masquerade by creating a gap between the copy and the original. For example, in Figure 4, the anonymous woman sits on a floor wearing a dark dress while bending her legs, and leaning back on her arms. The hem of the model's dress falls slightly, revealing her thighs. Resting her head on her shoulder, the woman appears to be looking at the camera. Simpson, however, restages this pose twice, each time with a difference. In Figure 5, the artist wears a white dress and looks down and away from the camera. She also includes a shoe off to the side. Here Simpson is creating a distance by breaking the appearance of the choreographed pose, and destabilizing or disrupting the original image by including something that is unexpected or out of place (the shoe). In Figure 6, the artist appears posed with the shoe still remaining in the frame. The shoe is a prop, part of a costume, or disguise that is used within the masquerade. By deliberately adding the shoe to the picture composition, Simpson is pointing out the fabrication of femininity. The high-heeled shoe represents the costumes that women wear in order to express womanliness. The right props or objects are necessary to create a genuine representation.

According to Helen Molesworth, writing in regards to Sherman's work, the "specificity of objects"[26] plays a crucial role in constructing identity. In the anonymous model's photographs, objects from glass decanters, pineapples, silk pillows, a stereo, plants and telephones are chosen and deliberately placed within her images. The unidentified woman unintentionally constructs representations of femininity because this is the norm—the accepted way of presenting herself in a white society. Simpson, on the other hand, does not include all the props that the model does in her photographs. In fact, the artist's settings are minimalist compared to the model's interior and exterior spaces. Molesworth writes that props are what give these representations and images strength.[27] If the props are missing or misplaced, the image of womanliness is weakened and, therefore, so is the power and authority of the representation.

By including the shoe, Simpson may also be signaling to the viewer that she is set and costume designer. The artist in each photograph, although restaging the model's poses, still has control over her image and representation. Molesworth comments that "identities are not only performed through clothing and gesture: these performances of the self happen in spaces that are chosen and arranged either by ourselves or others."[28] In other words, although the artist is borrowing imagery from the model's portfolio (much in the way that props and poses are borrowed from mainstream culture), she has some control over how she arranges her poses and props. The self-portrait, Amelia Jones writes,

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[26] Helen Molesworth, "The Comfort of Objects," *Frieze Magazine*, September-October 1997, accessed April 2013, https://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_comfort_of_objects/.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

is "potentially more empowering--imaging of the self" when used by artists.[29] This self-portrait affords the female artist control, where she becomes author and subject, the photographer and the photographed. Jones comments that when women present themselves as subjects, they subvert the tendency to imagine the female body as a "speechless and dominated object."[30] At the same time, according to Jones, the female artist "insists on herself as looking as well as showing, as subject as well as object."[31] Female artists, like Simpson, do this by gazing defiantly back, showing that they are not passive, therefore undermining the viewer's gaze, as well as being the photographer, the one that shapes and controls their own representation.

The black model, unlike Simpson, unintentionally performs the masquerade of femininity, appropriating the white standard of beauty constructed and borrowed from Hollywood images and films. Therefore, the anonymous model appropriates white mainstream imagery of the pin-up to assimilate her colonizing culture. Frantz Fanon writes that the black subject is psychologically disoriented when having to negotiate being black in a white man's world.[32] When told that the black man does not fit the white norm (which is upheld as superior to the black), the black subject feels compelled to assimilate the white-dominated culture he lives in. In order to do this, the black man must

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[29] Jones, "Performing the Other," 94, note 1.

[30] Ibid., 69-70.

[31] Ibid., 84.

[32] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 90.

appropriate the white standards of appearance and success.[33] The result is internalizing the colonizer's culture, thus oppressing one's many black identities, causing a split between the black man's consciousness and his body.[34] Gwen Bergner writes that the white man's gaze "produces a psychic splitting that shatters the black man's experience of bodily integrity..."[35] Therefore, the black man cannot successfully assimilate because underneath the white mask is a subject who is separated from himself. Missing from Fanon's writing on the white mask, however, is the black woman and the effects appropriating white culture has on her. Bergner comments:

> Black women—even educated, upper-class black women—cannot make the same claim to intellectual and social equality with white men that educated, professional black men can…. Thus black women's attempts to inhabit the whiteness that Fanon consistently defines in masculine terms become mimicry, a feminine masquerade both of race and gender.[36]

In other words, Bergner contends, black women are not traumatized by appropriating white culture because they do not feel they need to compete with the white man.

The pin-up, however, is a troubled category for the black model because the black woman has often been associated with her sexuality, being either oversexed or desexualized. The pin-up is also based on sexuality because her purpose is to seduce and tempt the male viewer. But the black pin-up does not move into the mainstream. Marginalized in magazines like *Ebony*, she is both seen and unseen. Historical

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[33] Ibid., 91.

[34] Ibid., 9.

[35] Gwen Bergner, "Who is that Masked Woman? The Role of Gender in Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks," *PMLA* 110 (1995): 78.

[36] Ibid.

representations have fixed her as a type, marking her body as a fetish, a specimen and spectacle. It is because of these historical representations that the anonymous model is simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible in the white imaginary and thus unable to move into the mainstream of ideal beauty.

Retracing The Black Female Body: Looking Back at Historical Representations To See Ahead

The ways in which black women have been represented in the past have a bearing on how the viewer of *LA-57 NY-09* may see the African-American woman and how the contemporary black woman sees herself. *LA-57 NY-09* and Simpson's past works examine how historically constructed representations of African-American females have been produced only to be read, according to author Beryl J. Wright, "as a linguistic code that supported prevailing power relationships."[37] In other words, negative stereotypes of African-American females, which have classified them as mammy, slut, servant, or scientific specimen within American historical visual representations and cultural discourses, have been created for white patriarchal purposes. These labels, writes hooks, send the message to the "rest of the world that the black woman is born to serve," to dominate, to use at will, and for display.[38] It is against this backdrop of images and meanings, hooks suggests, that Simpson's work interacts and intervenes in order to open up new ways of seeing the black female body.[39] By inserting her own image into *LA-57*

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[37] Beryl J. Wright, "Back Talk: Recoding the Body," *Callaloo* 19 (1996): 397.

[38] hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 97.

[39] Ibid.

NY-09, Simpson asserts control over her own representation, thus creating counter-narratives to these prevailing stereotypes. To understand how the artist's art produces counter-narratives pertaining to the black female, and how she uses past representations to comment on the present, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the history of representations of the black female body, as well as photography's role in creating and disseminating these representations beginning in the nineteenth century.

Although negative representations of the black subject can be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when European and English explorers entered Africa,[40] it was in the nineteenth century that stereotypes proliferated and corresponding visual images began to receive wide dissemination in the United States and Europe.[41] After the age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, characterized by the search for and the development of knowledge and reason,[42] the nineteenth century was marked by advancements in science, technology, exploration, and world's fairs in the Western world; for example, the daguerreotype was introduced in 1839, the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland was established in 1843, Charles Darwin's *Origin of*

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[40] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in America Culture,* ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 17.

[41] Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, *Black Women, Cultural Images and Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 27.

[42] Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment: New Approaches to European History, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3.

Species was published in 1859, and London hosted the Great Exhibition in 1851.[43] The development of photography, an obsession with measuring, cataloguing, and classifying within the natural sciences and criminology, and the abolition of slavery in England and France helped shape the ways in which the black female body in America was read.[44] At the same time, colonization in Africa, Latin America, and Asia expanded.[45]

The colonization of Africa from the nineteenth to the twentieth century meant, according to Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, that "the attention to the Other was at once paternal and protective as well as oppressive and exploitive, regarding enslaved people as property and a source of free labor rather than as human beings."[46] This racist ideology, based on degradation and ownership, helped keep the black subject under the control of the white European. Using scientific and comparative methods such as measuring the size of craniums, analyzing facial structures, and observing differences in skin colour and genitalia, Europeans deemed the black person sexually deviant, morally deficient, and physically inferior to whites.[47] The desire to explore and catalogue aided in

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[43] Carla Williams, "Naked, Neutered, or Noble: The Black Female in America and the Problem of Photographic History," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in America Culture,* ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 185.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., 1.

[46] Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 8.

[47] Williams, "Naked, Neutered," 185.

the development of natural sciences such as anthropology, phrenology, and physiognomy.[48]

The black female became associated with colonial domination, possession, and property. As Willis and Williams note, "the black woman especially bore the metaphorical weight of comparisons between women's fertility and the abundant riches of the conquered lands, 'penetration' into and 'conquest' of places like the 'Dark Continent.'"[49] Caroline A. Brown describes the black female body as "a body of myriad signs, contradictory meanings, marked by surplus and fragmentation."[50] Conflicting labels Europeans used for the black woman included a Mammy figure who was considered a caregiver and nursemaid, a Jezebel who was exotic and hypersexual, a savage, seen as uncivilized and inferior, a slave who represented a labouring body, and Hottentot, a body for display.

In the Antebellum American South, the black female was represented as a desexualized Mammy and/or an oversexed Jezebel in relation to the slave-slave owner relationship. Mammy, according to author Maya Angelou, was a rotund figure with large breasts, fat "embracing arms," and dark black skin.[51] The archetype is portrayed as jolly and smiling, and at other times as casting a disapproving look to her white employer, or

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[48] Liz Wells and Derrick Price, "Art or Technology," in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 1996), 9.

[49] Willis and Williams, *Black Female Body*, 8.

[50] Caroline A. Brown, *The Black Female Body in American Literature and Art: Performing Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 32.

[51] Maya Angelou, "They Came to Stay," in *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America,* ed. Brian Lanker (New York: Steward, Tabori & Chang, 1989), 8-9.

white children in her charge. Seen as nurturing, the Mammy was also stern, unforgiving, (producing "castrating behaviour"), yet submissive.[52] Wearing layers of clothes with a handkerchief covering her head, Mammy was made to appear undesirable, unthreatening, and unattractive. Defenders of slavery constructed the Mammy figure to symbolize what they wanted others to believe was the caring and nurturing relationship that existed between the slave owner and slave, as opposed to a physically and sexually abusive one.[53] This mythical figure, however, could only exist in contrasting relation to the image of the white woman.[54]

According to Brown, the unattainability of the white woman "justified the sexual surrogacy of the black woman."[55] The white woman was considered delicate, innocent, unsullied, and sexually unattainable. Looking for a sexual surrogate for the white woman brought about the construction of the Jezebel figure, who was the opposite of Mammy. Willis and Williams contend "the traditional stereotype of the sexually aggressive, dark-skinned black was forsaken for a Jezebel whose near-white appearance was generally the result of coercive sexual relations between white men and black slave women," therefore, Jezebel's seductive manner and open sexual availability was used as an excuse or justification for sexual abuse during slavery.[56] This figure was sexualized, seductive and desired, with physical characteristics closer to that of the white woman ideal. The Jezebel

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[52] Ibid., 8-9.

[53] Steven Deyle, "Review: Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth Century America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 39 (2009): 612.

[54] Brown*, Black Female Body*, 37.

[55] Ibid., 38.

[56] Willis and Williams, *Black Female Body*, 4.

was a mulatto or fair-skinned black female who had straight hair and thin lips. Confusion over the role she was meant to play in society during slavery, and the labels that others have ascribed to her, stripped the black woman of subjectivity.

Other representations created by white patriarchal cultures in the nineteenth century also marked the black female body. For example, black women appeared as specimens for display and spectacle. For those who could not travel to colonized Africa, world's fairs exposed the curious viewer to the "exotic" colonies and their people. In 1867, Paris' *Exposition Universelle* was the first to put living African subjects on show for European audiences.[57] Willis and Williams write that during that time, "in the interest of science and education, no moral concern restricted the display of the naked colored body," and these live exhibits supported the evolutionary theories of the day by displaying the Other as primitive and sub-human.[58]

One of Simpson's early works, *You're Fine, You're Hired* (1988), makes reference to the black woman as specimen for display. Similar to the popular reclining female poses of paintings in the nineteenth century, like Diego Velázquez' *Rokeby Venus* (1647-51),[59] the subject in *You're Fine* lies on her side on top of a white sheet. But instead of gazing directly at the viewer, or into a mirror like the *Rokeby Venus* does, her back is towards the spectator and her face cannot be seen. The anonymous black female

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[57] Ibid., 2.

[58] Ibid., 3.

[59] National Gallery, London, "The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus)," accessed December 2012, http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/diego-velazquez-the-toilet-of-venus-the-rokeby-venus.

wears a white shift dress, leaving her legs and arms exposed. The dress droops slightly at the back, revealing the curve of her neck. The serpentine line of her body is interrupted by frame panels, which separate the photograph into four consecutive parts. By refusing a visually legible body, Simpson is rejecting a cohesive narrative for the subject. The viewer is unable to read the subject, making her inaccessible, and thus unknowable to the spectator. However, although the viewer's gaze is interrupted by the picture's framing device, and by the subject not revealing her face, he or she can still read her gender and colour. People tend to see skin colour and gender as primary markers of difference, thus the body becomes a site through which damaging stereotypes are constructed.

At the same time, as Simpson engages the body as a site for constructing representations, she undermines the information her subject's body may offer by including text with the image. On the right side of the image are the words: PHYSICAL EXAM, BLOOD TEST, HEART, REFLEXES, CHEST X-RAY, ABDOMEN, ELECTROCARDIOGRAM, URINE, LUNG CAPACITY, EYES, EARS, HEIGHT, WEIGHT. On the left side are the words: SECRETARIAL POSITION. The accompanying text directs the viewer's attention away from looking at the woman as an erotic subject and towards regarding her as a medical one. Despite the reclining figure having what Wright calls a "strong historical connection to the erotic gaze," the gaze the artist may also be trying to disrupt is the public gaze of surveillance, which Wright comments "assumes the right to look for purposes of identification and control; a gaze

that collects data for a public archive of the body."[60] In this case, the black female body is looked at as a biological subject on display for scientific and medical purposes.

Perhaps Simpson is also making reference to the biological dissection and display of Saartjie, or Sarah Baartman, who was a South African Khoi exhibited in Europe from 1810 to 1815.[61] A British army surgeon travelling on an African ship and the brother of Baartman's Cape Town employer brought her back to England and promised Baartman money if she agreed to exhibit herself.[62] Fascination over Baartman's body was due to the differences from the white ideal in the shape and size of her genital and buttocks area, which Europeans considered overtly sexual in nature. Baartman became a spectacle, an object of curiosity and fetish. Willis and Williams posit that this kind of exhibiting of a female was allowed to happen because of Baartman's race, and that it was because of her physical difference that she was "classified on scientific grounds as primitive and therefore disgusting…"[63] Baartman's physical difference was reproduced in drawings, which often portrayed her as a caricature. After Baartman's death, a plaster cast was taken of her body, and her genitals were placed in jars to be exhibited in the Musée de L'Homme in Paris.[64] After her death, Baartman was physically examined, held up for public scrutiny, and dissected for display.

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[60] Wright, "Back Talk," 400.

[61] Willis and Williams, *Black Female Body*, 59.

[62] Ibid., 60.

[63] Ibid., 61.

[64] Ibid., 63.

Simpson comments that *You're Fine* was inspired by a job interview she had that required her to take a medical exam for a secretarial position.[65] Through this invasion of privacy, advancement in Simpson's professional career was now tied to her body. While the artist uses references such as Baartman to comment on the present condition of black women in America, her subject also resists Baartman's fate. The subject may appear to be a passive receptor of the gaze, but by turning her back on the viewer, and denying visual access to her face, she actively refuses that gaze. Simpson is, as Enwezor writes, "abolishing the façade and the distraction of the gaze."[66] The artist empowers her subject by giving her a choice to deflect the gaze, a choice Baartman likely did not have at her disposal.

Other African-American female artists such as Carla Williams, a contemporary of Simpson, have also referenced historical representations of black women in their work. Williams directly acknowledges Baartman in her work "Venus" from the series *How to Read Character* (1990-91). The artist pairs a profile of her own posterior within a gilded frame with accompanying illustrations of Baartman. Williams took several pictures of parts of her backside, with different exposures and focus lenses, and then pieced them together to create a composite picture. In this way, Williams is also referencing the dissection of Baartman's body and how she was seen as a collection of parts. Lisa Collins comments that by including drawings of Baartman, Williams reminds "viewers of the complicity of imagemakers in providing visual 'proof' for scientists seeking to make

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[65] Wright, "Back Talk," 400.

[66] Enwezor, "Repetition and Differentiation," 117.

racist claims to truth."[67] It was through the employment of the image that scientists of the nineteenth century offered "evidence" of the inferiority of the black female. Williams references historical representations of the black female body, and reimagines the past through her own image.[68] At the same time, Williams offers the viewer a different way of seeing the black body. Although the artist keeps her image attached to nineteenth-century science by including drawings of Baartman, she also presents her own image in a gold frame that is reminiscent of the paintings found in national art museums. Williams elevates her image from that of scientific specimen to fine art.[69] Black women artists, like Williams and Simpson, use their own bodies to redefine identity discourse, and disrupt photography's tendency to function as a source and marker of power and authority.

Simpson, for example, also makes reference to the black female body for display and spectacle in *LA-57 NY-09*. The pin-up performs to be looked at and desired, and thus becomes a spectacle for the male gaze. But as discussed through the examples of historical representations, the black female body is already uniquely fetishized. Stuart Hall speaks about fetishism as "the fixing of particularly sexual imagery in relation both to race and to gender" and how it is an aspect of negative stereotypes.[70] Like Baartman,

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[67] Lisa Gail Collins, "Historic Retrievals: Confronting Visual Evidence and the Imaging of Truth," in *Black Venus 2010: They Called her "Hottentot*, ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 79.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid., 80.

[70] Stuart Hall, "Representation and the Media," Transcript of Lecture at the Open University, 2005, accessed April, 2013, http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/409/transcript_409.pdf.

the black model is hyper-sexualized in relation to the white woman. The anonymous woman's body in *LA-57 NY-09* is marked with these historical representations.

By the end of the nineteenth century, European visual representations of black women in Africa reached America through paintings, postcards, prints and photographs. Photography's main feature, as Liz Wells writes, was considered to be its "absolute material accuracy…which encouraged people to emphasize photography as a method of naturalistic documentation."[71] In this way, photography played a crucial role in propagating negative black female stereotypes. According to theorist Allan Sekula, photography promised realism, as well as the ability to distinguish those who were upstanding citizens from those who belonged to the dangerous classes.[72] Therefore, the photograph became a tool used to define the other in order to distinguish between the "generalized look" and one of social deviance.[73]

Photography served to categorize people into types in science and also in criminology. In 1882, Alphonse Bertillon's police archive in France helped to establish a system that would catalogue criminals using their mug shots and fingerprints.[74] A person was further identified using measurements of the head, body, individual markings and personality characteristics. These mug shots, or portrait photography, were produced in grid formation. This typology using portraiture was employed to compare and highlight differences between those who were considered normal and deviant. At the same time,

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[71] Wells and Price, "Art or Technology," 14.

[72] Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 5.

[73] Ibid., 7.

[74] Ibid., 36, note 54.

two branches of the social sciences, physiognomy and phrenology, were becoming more popular. These sciences claimed that by studying parts of the body such as the head and face, a subject's inner character could be determined. Also in the 1880s, Charles Darwin's cousin Francis Galton used photography and classification to further his theories on eugenics in England.[75] Galton's photographic images of people of different races were also displayed in a grid pattern. Blacks were subjected to comparisons against whites, and by using the image as evidentiary proof, were relegated as sub-human, assigning blacks to a lower rank within white patriarchal societies. The purpose of eugenics was to use knowledge of hereditary background towards the improvement of the human race.[76] Sekula states that it was Galton's "interest in hereditary and racial betterment" that led to his study of biological cause of a criminal's behaviour.[77] The connection between behaviour, or one's inner character, and biology was now firmly established.

Employing portraiture to establish a person's subjectivity was also practiced in the United States, during a time when blacks were still enslaved (abolition would not come into affect until 1865).[78] Photography was used to argue either against slavery by producing images of cruelty, or for the continued enslavement of blacks, proving their inferiority to whites, both physically and in terms of character. For example, in 1850, Swiss scientist Louis Agassiz commissioned Joseph T. Zealy to take a series of

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[75] Ibid., 42.

[76] Ibid., 18-19.

[77] Ibid., 19.

[78] Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, The Abolition of Slavery and the Thirteenth Amendment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 233.

daguerreotypes of slaves in South Carolina.[79] Agassiz wanted to prove his polygenesis theory that blacks were inferior and, therefore, belonged to a separate human race.[80] The images are of male and female slaves (clothed only from the waist down) from the front and profile, resembling criminal mug shots. These profile images created a racial typology, attempting to prove through photography that the black's physical appearance will lead to the revelation of his or her flawed character.

Simpson recalls the typologies used in nineteenth-century criminology and science, as well as the racial typology constructed in the slave daguerreotypes, when exhibiting *LA-57 NY-09* in a grid formation. By referencing the nineteenth-century grid, the artist directs the viewer's attention to the conditioned readings that burden the black woman when she is presented in unfamiliar visual representations, such as the pin-up**.** Therefore, because the viewer may not recognize and relate to the black pin-up images (due to their being either marginalized or excluded in pop culture), they may revert back to the types they are familiar with when looking at the black model.

Hall speaks about images as not only something that can produce recognition, but also knowledge, and therefore "what we know about the world is how we see it represented."[81] Representations are, according to Hall, the source of subject

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[79] Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, eds. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003), 165.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Hall, "Representation and the Media."

identification: "identities are constituted within, not outside representation."[82] Therefore representations are not assertions of a person's identity, but instead play a role in producing them. Molesworth acknowledges the viewer's desire to often try and read a subject (as a whole being) and a type through photography, but this desire is never realized because in the end, identity is fragmented and cannot be pinned down.[83] According to Graham Clarke, "photographers have been concerned to express in the single image an assumed inner being…thus character revelation is the essence of good portraiture."[84] But the linear relationship between visual representation and inner revelation of the subject is flawed. First, as Clarke points out, photography mirrors the world in which it was produced: "the photographic image contains a photographic message as part of a practice of signification which reflects the codes, values, and beliefs of the culture as a whole."[85] In other words, the photographer decides what subject to depict, how it should be framed, inevitably mirroring socio-political beliefs of their society. Secondly, a person's true self cannot be revealed through portraiture because it is not, as Enwezor writes, "a window into the soul of a subject."[86] Instead, as seen with the anonymous model in *LA-57 NY-09*, subjectivity is constructed by performance, fluid identity-positions, and masquerade.

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[82] Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 4.
[83] Molesworth, "The Comfort of Objects."
[84] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 101.
[85] Ibid., 28.
[86] Enwezor, "Repetition and Differentiation," 117.

Consider Looking Again

By presenting masquerades and performances, Simpson provides the viewer with different ways of seeing the black female: as complex, affected by historical representations, but also capable of engaging and transforming the past, while remaining in a constant dialogue with it. The artist is also pointing out to the viewer that because black women are more complicated than their historical representations, their inner character is not coherent and stable and, therefore, cannot be fixed and revealed through the self-portrait. According to Hall, representation should not be looked at as a "mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak."[87] In order to interrogate the relationship between the viewer and the image, Hall posits, one has to interrupt the exchange of the image and "its psychic meaning, the depths of the fantasy, the collective and social fantasies with which we invest images, in order to, as it were, expose and deconstruct the work of representation which the stereotypes are doing."[88] The stereotype works to fix a meaning or a limited range of characteristics to a person. Ideologies attempt to condition a fixed set of meanings, characteristics or definitions to an image. Hall states that this is a powerful way to circulate constricted possibilities of what a person is or can be.

Simpson, aware of the limitations representations and stereotypes present the African-American woman, further confuses the viewer's reading of the anonymous model

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[87] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003), 245.

[88] Hall, "Representation and the Media."

by not revealing anything about her. The artist blocks the spectator's expectations or desires to know the inner character of the anonymous model by reflecting on all the representations, masquerades and performances that surround her, making the anonymous woman more complex than perhaps originally seen. By confronting the viewer with their possible negative readings of the black model, Simpson also uses these stereotypes as a platform to speak from, delivering new ways of seeing the African-American woman. The artist's work asks us to consider the act of looking: consider the person behind the camera, and the message he or she is trying to communicate; consider the past and the effects it has had on the present; consider the performances played out in front of the camera; and lastly, consider that the photograph cannot reveal a person's self.

I see them, two women in a series of twenty-five black-and-white photographs making up Lorna Simpson's work *LA-57 NY-09*. Upon first impression, they seem to look and pose the same, but they do not. They perform not only for the camera, but also for those who watch them. Both women are always aware they are being watched. The original model is almost always smiling as she contorts and displays her body. Yet she seems disconnected to her image all the while continuing to keep connected to the viewer through the gaze. The other woman is Simpson. She is the model's reflection. She attempts to mirror the anonymous woman's poses and performances of identities, but in the end, she possesses her own complex subjectivity. I may see them, but through their repeated images, they are still not knowable to me. I cannot pin them down to one representation or one identity. There is more to these black women than meets the eye. My question "Who is she?" can never be answered.

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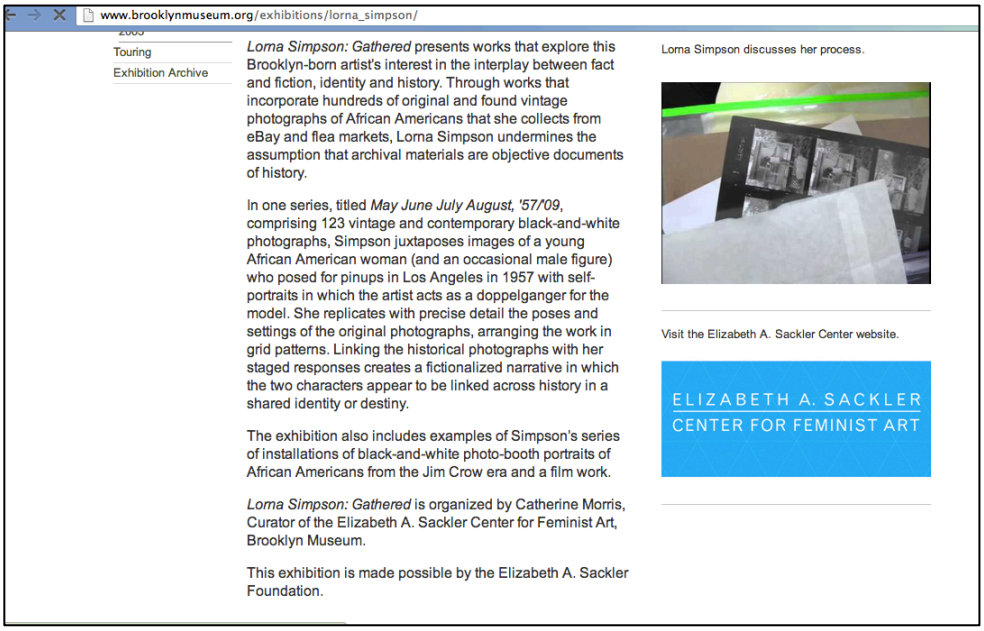
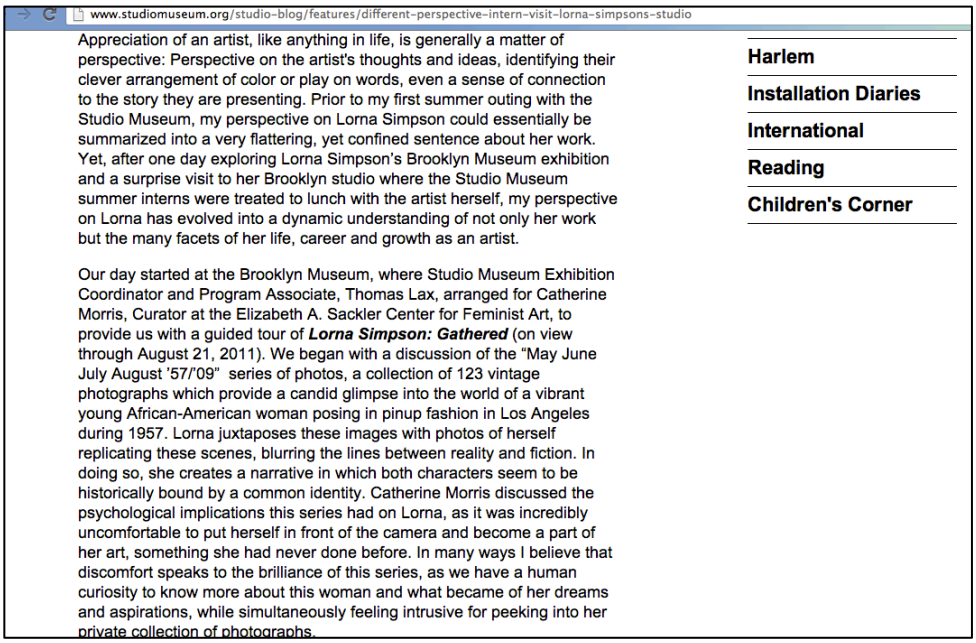
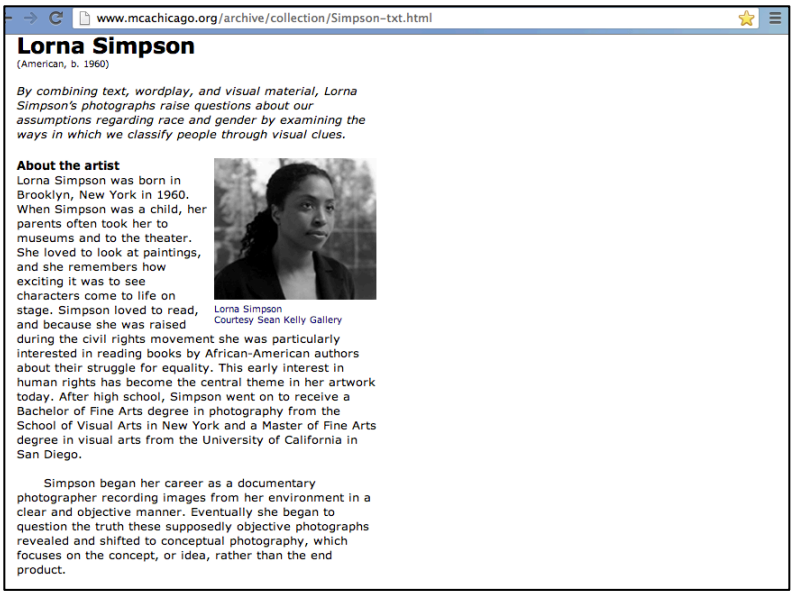
Appendix A: Brooklyn Museum. “Lorna Simpson: Gathered.” Brooklynmuseum.org. Accessed April 2012. http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/lorna_simpson/.



Appendix B: McClain, Kimberly. “A Different Perspective: An intern visit to Lorna Simpson’s Studio.” Studio Museum, Harlem. July 5, 2011. Accessed April 2012. http://www.studiomuseum.org/studio-blog/features/different-perspective-intern-visit-lorna-simpsons-studio.



Appendix C: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. "Lorna Simpson." Mcachicago.org. Accessed December 8, 2012. http://www.mcachicago.org/archive/collection/Simpson-txt.html.



www.mcachicago.org/archive/collection/Simpson-txt.html

Lorna Simpson

(American, b. 1960)

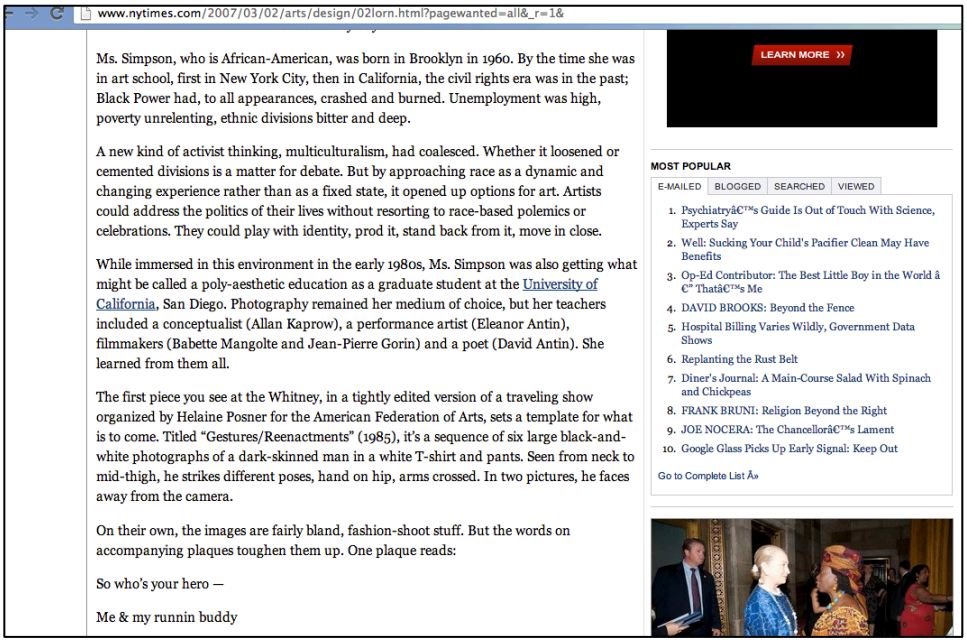
By combining text, wordplay, and visual material, Lorna Simpson's photographs raise questions about our assumptions regarding race and gender by examining the ways in which we classify people through visual clues.

About the artist

Lorna Simpson was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1960. When Simpson was a child, her parents often took her to museums and to the theater. She loved to look at paintings, and she remembers how exciting it was to see characters come to life on stage. Simpson loved to read, and because she was raised during the civil rights movement she was particularly interested in reading books by African-American authors about their struggle for equality. This early interest in human rights has become the central theme in her artwork today. After high school, Simpson went on to receive a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York and a Master of Fine Arts degree in visual arts from the University of California in San Diego.

Simpson began her career as a documentary photographer recording images from her environment in a clear and objective manner. Eventually she began to question the truth these supposedly objective photographs revealed and shifted to conceptual photography, which focuses on the concept, or idea, rather than the end product.

Appendix D: Cotter, Holland. "Exploring Identity as a Problematic Condition." *New York Times,* March 2, 2007. Accessed February 6, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/arts/design/02lorn.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.



www.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/arts/design/02lorn.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&

Ms. Simpson, who is African-American, was born in Brooklyn in 1960. By the time she was in art school, first in New York City, then in California, the civil rights era was in the past; Black Power had, to all appearances, crashed and burned. Unemployment was high, poverty unrelenting, ethnic divisions bitter and deep.

A new kind of activist thinking, multiculturalism, had coalesced. Whether it loosened or cemented divisions is a matter for debate. But by approaching race as a dynamic and changing experience rather than as a fixed state, it opened up options for art. Artists could address the politics of their lives without resorting to race-based polemics or celebrations. They could play with identity, prod it, stand back from it, move in close.

While immersed in this environment in the early 1980s, Ms. Simpson was also getting what might be called a poly-aesthetic education as a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego. Photography remained her medium of choice, but her teachers included a conceptualist (Allan Kaprow), a performance artist (Eleanor Antin), filmmakers (Babette Mangolte and Jean-Pierre Gorin) and a poet (David Antin). She learned from them all.

The first piece you see at the Whitney, in a tightly edited version of a traveling show organized by Helaine Posner for the American Federation of Arts, sets a template for what is to come. Titled "Gestures/Reenactments" (1985), it's a sequence of six large black-and-white photographs of a dark-skinned man in a white T-shirt and pants. Seen from neck to mid-thigh, he strikes different poses, hand on hip, arms crossed. In two pictures, he faces away from the camera.

On their own, the images are fairly bland, fashion-shoot stuff. But the words on accompanying plaques toughen them up. One plaque reads:

So who's your hero —

Me & my runnin buddy

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7. Diner's Journal: A Main-Course Salad With Spinach and Chickpeas
8. FRANK BRUNI: Religion Beyond the Right
9. JOE NOCERA: The Chancellorâ€™s Lament
10. Google Glass Picks Up Early Signal: Keep Out

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Appendix E: Decter, Joshua. "Lorna Simpson." *Artforum* Magazine, January 1, 1994. Accessed February 6, 2013. http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Lorna+Simpson.-a015143646.

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JOSH BAER GALLERY

Treading the murky waters between (self)objectification and narcissism, Lorna Simpson offers something like an in absentia presence within the realm of the picture. The camera is there to be stubbornly refused, like the violative gaze of a stranger. Yet it is the artist who has set herself up as that stranger, unwilling to complete the gesture of (self)portraiture, an unwillingness reinforced by the cropped-out face and the overlays of text that seem designed to recode the body under observation. The image/text interplay seems to propose the following admonition: You cannot name me, and therefore you cannot anchor me to a predetermined social or psychological type.

In much of her past work, Simpson seemed to implicate the viewer as the purveyor of a social, cultural, sexual, or racial stereotype of black womanhood, and deployed the work as an instrument of confrontation through which we are solicited to observe the unraveling of our own fatal assumptions. Even though the work has remained somewhat free of a hard-lined didacticism, her highly mediated, abstracted mode of virtual (self)portraiture tends to invoke a schematic, archetypal image that could easily be misread as an emblem for all African-American women. The body is reworked as a social text that "speaks" through the disembodied, yet tacitly authoritative voice of the artist. In terms of strategies of authorship, Simpson wants to have her cake and eat it too. Ironically, the strength and weakness of Simpson's work has always stemmed from the same place: a persuasive conceptual sensibility that exudes the look of formula.

Now, a coolly detached romanticism seems to have migrated into the artist's work, most of which is preoccupied with some form of desire. Simpson's photo-text constructions evoke fragmented diaristic entries--haunting souvenirs of situations and people, which cannot be completely recovered through the unreliable agencies of desire and memory; sensations of loss and absence prevail. The coupling of photography and text here reveals a basic gap between the impulse to express and the difficulty of finding the appropriate language for that expression.

In Time, 1993, 22 black and white photo-linen images of a hand grasping candles at different stages of burning is fronted by four stacks of engraved glass panels featuring almost invisible registrations of the same images, as well as text fragments that suggest the contemplation of temporality. A memento (mori?) for what might be understood as a romantic, not merely musical, interlude, Duet, 1993, is comprised of two black and white images of piano feet that mirror each other. Stack of Diaries, 1993, consists of a black and white photo (really a kind of photo-painting) of a stack of diary books; in front of this putative inventory of the written self has been placed a multileveled metal stand that holds stacked glass panels, with black-lettered text-fragments rendered in subtly distinct styles (bold script, italics, etc.) pressed into the glass suggesting an interplay of "voices" apparently extracted from longer entries. Encountering splintered phrases such as "within a year, the carefully maintained entries she made were maintained by him," "depending on how difficult a period his writing," and "as the time passed handwriting in his diary shifted from his to hers," we are asked to reconstruct a situation which might have triggered such a confusion (or merging) of identities. For better or worse, this compels us to seek out the biographical dirt, the meat behind the poetics; but our desire is finally thwarted.

Visually elegant, yet somewhat irritating in their cloying ambiguity, Simpson's new works endeavor to tease out layered meanings from the symbolic correspondences of word and image, but the most pronounced effect here is a not-so-unusual mix of dank sentimentality and barely sublimated nostalgia.

Joshua Decter

Appendix F: Molesworth, Helen. “The Comfort of Objects.” *Frieze Magazine*. September-October 1997. Accessed April 2013. https://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_comfort_of_objects/.

https://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_comfort_of_objects/

Much has been made of the fact that Sherman is both the object and the taker of her photographs. What emerges from this viewing, however, is the total construction of the images - the plethora of choices both big and small that the artist has made in order to build each one. She has chosen the locales, props, and costumes as well as the genre, lighting, and expression. More than the agent and object of her own drama, she is also the interior designer and art director. These professions arbitrate the taste of our culture, creating fantasy spaces (either in our living rooms or in the living rooms of the movies) that provide the cues for our performance of ourselves. Exhibited together, the Untitled Film Stills show us that identities are not only performed through clothing and gesture: these performances of the self happen in spaces that are chosen and arranged either by ourselves or others. They demonstrate how a successful performance depends on having the right props.

https://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_comfort_of_objects/

Some Film Stills articulate this problem of taste's public dimension better than others. The opportunity to see them all together shows their uneven quality. This is not a bad thing, for the weaker images point toward an understanding of how the stronger images work. The more expressive Sherman is (when she is crying, or looking scared in a nightgown in an apartment building hallway) the less convincing the image, the less evocative of the generic type. When she 'acts' and loses the surface of her blank gaze, the photographs veer toward a botched sentimentality. Likewise, the images where she has not controlled the mise-en-scène (long shots of Sherman sitting in a tree, standing in front of a mission-style church, sitting on a sloping hill) lack the specificity of objects (ashtrays, necklaces) that go into the fabrication of an identity. They lack, in other words, the power of Sherman's choice of objects. Strength in these images comes from the props - the kissing seahorses on the glass motel door of Untitled Film Still # 7 (19??), the hide-away bar of Untitled Film Still #49 (19??).

Appendix G: Hall, Stuart. “Representation and the Media.” Transcript of Lecture at the Open University. 2005. Accessed April, 2013. http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/409/transcript_409.pdf.

CONTESTING STEREOTYPES – Positive Images

STUART HALL: If you think of an area in which an enormous amount of work has been done in media studies, which is the area of stereotyping – gender stereotypes, class stereotypes, racial and ethnic stereotypes – you will see the way in which stereotyping is exactly an attempt to fix. Every time you see this kind of image, these are the limited range of characteristics, which one assumes is going to be implicated in the image. It's how a stereotype functions. People have assumed that therefore what this is doing is a powerful way of circulating in the world a very limited range of definitions of who people can be, of what they can do, what are the possibilities in life, what are the natures of the constraints on them. I mean, the image is producing not only identification, which I talked about before, it's actually producing knowledge; what we know about the world is how we see it represented. So the struggle to open up stereotypes is often a struggle to increase the diversity of things which subjects can be of – the possibilities of identities which people have not seen represented before – it is very important; that is "the politics of the image."

Now, as you may know, there have been a number of different strategies with respect to this. The most common strategy is what is sometimes called "positive representation," where you have a negative field of stereotypes, and you try to intervene in it to represent the negative group in a more positive way; you try to reverse the stereotypes. But I want to say to you that there is a problem in attempts to *reverse* stereotypes in this way because it's as if you could guarantee that, having put positive images of Black men and women in the place where negative images existed before, you could somehow maintain a positive regime of representation in the place of the stereotyped representation that you had before. But the actual practice suggests to us that, just as unfortunately, you can't fix, I mean, just as impossible for them to fix *bad* representation, so it's almost impossible for us to fix *good* ones.

Appendix H: Figures

Figure 2. Simpson, Lorna, LA '57- NY '09, 2009
gelatin silver prints; 7 x 7" each of 25.
Collection Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis, T.B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2010

Figure 3. Simpson, Lorna, LA '57- NY '09, 2009
gelatin silver prints; 7 x 7" each of 25.
Collection Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis, T.B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2010

Figure 4. Simpson, Lorna, LA '57- NY '09, 2009
gelatin silver prints; 7 x 7" each of 25.
Collection Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis, T.B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2010

Figure 5. Simpson, Lorna, LA '57- NY '09, 2009
gelatin silver prints; 7 x 7" each of 25.
Collection Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis, T.B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2010

Figure 6. Simpson, Lorna, LA '57- NY '09, 2009
gelatin silver prints; 7 x 7" each of 25.
Collection Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis, T.B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2010