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The Decentralization of Subject in African American Feminist Photography

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Who makes the images? Who are the subjects? Who is the intended audience? Though these questions are key factors in contemporary art criticism, they have a greater significance for artists that fall outside of the circle of the white patriarchy. For these artists, focus has been put on how the subject matter can shape our perception of color, gender and class. The notion of subject has always been important in the perception and understanding of art, holding the key to the viewer’s ability to interpret the work. With the introduction of Post Modernism, there was a major shift regarding the notion of the subject known as decentralization, or the decentering of the subject. This decentralization also allowed for the establishment of a new discourse for many minority groups such as African Americans, women, and the gay community, that had previously been misrepresented or excluded from the art world. As a result, each minority group discovered its own means of representing its agenda while also following the current decree of decentralization within the Post Modern movement itself.

African American women represent one minority group that gained representation through the Post Modern movement. These women established a specific means of decentralization of the subject that differs from all other representations of decentralization in Post Modern art. Within the social construction of a black identity, where one is highly visible yet unrepresented, there has been a growing presence of a visual aesthetic that has been directing relationships towards images, towards the process of image making. The following artists and images deal not

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only with the blackness of images, but also the gender. The photographic works of Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Clarissa Sligh, all illustrate this phenomenon, while calling to our attention other issues such as racism, lack of representation, stereotypes of black women, and historical misrepresentation. This discourse defines and illustrates the unique nature of the decentralization of the subject in African American feminist photography, while addressing how these women have created a photographic subculture of documentation and representation. This follows a process whereby colonized and subjugated people who, by way of resistance, create an oppositional subculture within the framework of domination, recognizing that the field of representation (how we see ourselves, how others see us) is a site of ongoing struggle (hooks 1995: 57).

Decentralization as a means of representation in Post Modernism is rooted in the discourse of Modernism. In the Modernist movement, there was a subject present within the work. With this subject, there was a notion of the “self” that was obtained and able to be expressed through its presence. This self was the “truth,” as if what the viewer was seeing was in fact the subject as the subject. As a result of this expression, the self was then viewed as authentic. Post Modernism uses this concept of the subject; however, there is a shift in representation. The shift is in the subject as “self.” There is no longer a figure or person that represents itself for what it truly is. This method is used by these Post-Modern artists to serve as a critique of historical narratives and critique the cultural and historical contexts that create and shape identity. Their work is in direct opposition to the way the black and female body historically has been represented.

The representation of the black, female body is especially significant in terms of the history of photography. It is the very nature of photography, beginning in the mid-1800’s, to document empirically. As the photographic image was believed to reproduce with measurable accuracy the physical reality of its subject, it became inextricably linked to the idea of representing empirical truth. Development of an archive of evidentiary portrait photography was linked to a fascination with phrenology  and physiognomy. These practices asserted that the nature of individual character could be scientifically correlated with physical characteristics, that the surface of the body, and especially the face and head, bore the outward signs of the inner character (Sekula 1986: 10). This unified system of representing and interpreting the body had become a visual corollary that did irreparable damage when combined with the study of anthropology; the “truth apparatus of the camera” provided irrefutable visual evidence of distinct racial types, positioning particular groups within a “natural social order” (Sekula 1986: 33). The work of these black, female artists challenges the traditional discourses of this documentary history. This paper shows how they examine and subvert the relationship between conventional photographic representation and racist and sexist ideologies.

This representation of the black, female form by the patriarchal, now confronted by artists relegated to the status of “Other,” have blurred the boundaries of the photographic subject. The result was the creation of an unstable state of identity, that reflects back to the viewer some perception of his or her own identity and subsequently places or locates it in the patriarchal society. In turn, the conditions of identity that determine how the black, female subject is seen and sees herself have been variously described as a double-consciousness, alienation
and invisibility.

The photographic works of Lorna Simpson illustrate the representation of subject and decentralization for a black feminist artist. Her photographs and texts create a history of the black, female body that details the processes of racial and gender formation. She has developed, in a series of generic body images of black females, a figure of resistance to the spectator’s historically conditioned reading of the evidentiary photographic portrait. Her photographs represent a reversal of the devices of evidentiary photographs, simultaneously acting against the forces that have shaped her own archive of the body.

In her image entitled “Back,” Simpson portrays an image of a generic black woman effaced from the camera. The viewer is unable to gain anything from the female portrayed in the “Back” image. Nothing is reflected back to the viewer from the image. The text “Eyes in the Back of Your Head” that accompanies the image, however, implies that the woman in the image is in fact watching the viewer. This counters the white male discourse of black, female identity in that there is a delineation of subject/identity within African American art. In Post Modern art, feminist artists gain their identity through the construct of the white, heterosexual male, while African American women reclaim their identity and illustrate it through their own construct.

Lorna Simpson’s figure of a generic black woman inverts the objectifying structures of the dominant gaze and of evidentiary portraits. Her constructions of the black and female body resist not only the gaze, but also a racial variant of the gaze that has structured a photographic embodiment of a representation of difference. Her image “Back” depicts a woman not portrayed as anything other than an African American woman. This is the means by which the artist makes the subject resist interpretation in an effort to break down the system of domination that encloses her: “institutions controlled by the dominant group such as schools, the media, literature and popular culture as the initial source of externally defined, controlling images” (Collins 1991: 95). However, the subject in Simpson’s work is itself sincere and true, nothing more or less than that of a black woman. This decentering of the subject through representation of the subject is an example of the decentralization within African American feminist photography that resulted from the schizophrenic discourse. The replacement of the “white-defined” African American woman with that of the “black-defined” woman results from the consciousness raising calls to the attention of black women that “while self-definition speaks to the power dynamics involved in rejecting externally defined, controlling images of Black womanhood, the theme of self-evaluation addresses the actual content of their self-definition” (Collins 1991: 107). By Simpson replacing the “white” woman with her woman, she is thereby validating not only her existence, but also that of the African American woman in a society that selectively represented them. Because all dominant images of identity were formed by the white male, the representation of the African American woman before Post Modernism is suspect. Subsequently, the discourse of the African American woman was established by the white man. This “representation, hardly neutral, acts to regulate and define the subjects it addresses, positioning them by class or by sex, in active or passive relations to meaning. Over time these fixed postions acquire the status of identities... Hence the forms of discourse are at once forms of definition, means of limitation, and modes of power” (Linker 1984: 392). Post Modernism allows for the voice of African American women to be heard. In turn, this leads to a recognition and subsequent surfacing of a white male definition and division of power. Simpson uses this method to validate her existence in her employment of the subject. Simpson’s subject is, as a result, the subject herself. She (the subject) is represented as authentic, therefore having a sense of self as Simpson shifts the decentralization of the subject within the definition of the white male construct. She replaces the male’s definition or interpretation of the African American woman with that of the African American woman’s African American woman. She decenters the subject using the historically constructed definition of African American women and shifts it to that of a self definition that is formed out of the Post Modernist theory of discourse.

The concept of decentering the subject allows for the emergence of another aspect in Post Modern art significant in black feminist work: the gaze. As a structure for representing the female body, the patriarchal or male gaze historically reflected norms of gender by presenting the female figure as a passive object. As Craig Owens illustrates in his essay, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post-Modernism,” the “moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality” (Owens 1983: 70). It has been transformed into an image. The presumption of the “right to look” is fundamental to the instrumental function of photography, while the privilege to see and interpret is unmediated by the different relations of the subject and viewer (Trachtenberg 1989: 53).

Lorna Simpson’s work counters the patriarchal male gaze that has been historically recognized with her images of the generic black woman that is effaced. Her refusal to provide the physical evidence, shielding parts of the body and face necessary for intrusive, empirical readings, is her primary weapon against the assumed rights of the dominant spectator. She disrupts the power of the gaze by employing segmented bodies, serial images and aloof, anonymous figures with their backs to the camera and viewer. As a consequence, the viewer is
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not allowed to be a voyeur. The denial of access is the effective means to challenge the dominant gaze. The work “Back,” as mentioned before, counters this element of the gaze in that it reflects the gaze back to the viewer with the text “Eyes in the Back of Your Head.” This text references the effaced woman and embodies her with the ability to be watching the viewers themselves. This inverts the concept of the viewer watching with that of the viewer being watched. As a result, Simpson’s work attempts to deny the history of the male gaze. This is a result of the patriarchy’s definition of the black woman throughout history. The issue of watching that is referenced in Simpson’s work lends itself more to that of surveillance. The reference to looking in Simpson’s work also references the viewer in that it exposes the concept of the right to look. This right is recognized as the gaze. Simpson brings up issues of control and power as seen through the gaze of another. In her images, we are unable to see the face of the woman portrayed; we are unable to see the “person” in the body. The viewer is unable to project onto the subject his or her own construct of the subject’s identity; the only identity that the subject then possesses is that of her own. Her references to looking refer to her personal experiences of oppression as recognized through her vantage point as an African American woman.

One particular work by Simpson that illustrates many of these ideas is the piece entitled, “You’re Fine/You’re Hired” (1988). The piece is based on a true experience where Simpson had to take a physical exam before she could be hired as a secretary. The woman in the image is positioned in a classic 19th century pose of a frontal, reclining nude, yet the figure is fragmented into four sequential images, the body is clothed and the viewer only sees her from behind. The positioning of the woman with her back to the camera illustrates the stance of the artist in her challenging the traditional role of the woman in art. She is also illustrating her inability to identify with the theories and discourse of white feminist artists, mostly pertaining to the gaze. The text that boxes in the image of the woman from all sides contains the title of the piece on the top and bottom. On either side of the figure is text that lists various medical procedures that she underwent, anatomical parts, and the position that she applied for. Surrounded by medical terminology and labels that define her as subordinate, she is reduced to disembodied parts. The dress is a hospital gown and she reclines on an examination table. The juxtaposition of the text “You’re Fine/You’re Hired” holds a double meaning: first, she was subjected to the physical violation of these medical tests to determine her status of being “fine” and, second, her reclining position within the job suggests additional physical violations or uses, that she would indeed be violated, as the text indicates her position, by being “hired.” The fragmentation of the figure is employed to represent the organization of the body, directing the viewer’s gaze to that which makes the body intelligible and useful, in a strategy of reorienting vision. She is once again decentering the white, male view of the woman and replacing it with her empowered and validated self that addresses historical dispossession and the exercise of power on the body. In a sense, she retaliates against her oppressors through this piece in that she counters the iconographic style of 19th-century art and turns it around so that it no longer has the same context for the audience that created and perpetuated it.

Another image that focuses on the history of the body combined with medical history is “Guarded Conditions” (1989). These biological and medical concerns in her work disclose a complex physical reality that defines her representation of identity. In the photograph, a solitary figure stands as a symbol of victimization. Dressed in a shapeless, white gown and standing on a wooden pedestal, the woman is located in various situations of institutional surveillance: slave auctions, hospital examination rooms, and criminal line-ups. For Simpson, the repetition of the figure with a turned back and arms folded behind them, transforms the row of figures into sentinels, a silent collective of guardians against the text below the photograph stating repeatedly, “Sex Attacks/Skin Attacks,” text that determines the precarious social position of the black female subject.

The works of Lorna Simpson illustrate the intrinsic nature of the decentering of subjects in African American feminist photography while also illustrating opposition to the white, heterosexual constructs of Post-Modernist theory. Her work also illustrates the levels of oppression that exist in society today. It calls to our attention issues such as racism, the lack of representation of African American women, subsequent stereotypes, and, most importantly, historical misrepresentation. This misrepresentation caused the creation of a discourse based on the idea of identity in African American feminist work, and in turn grounded African American feminist artists in the Modernist discourse of the self while still being contextualized within Post Modernism. The method that Simpson uses to convey these harsh truths is that of subtle prodding. Her images are not bombarded by apparent and boisterous racial and other references. Rather she approaches her work by making the viewer aware of the racism, misrepresentation, and stereotypes almost on a subliminal level while looking at the image. The meaning derived from the images is more of understanding and empathy rather than that of animosity. Simpson’s ability to produce images that explore meaning and reveal the truths about African American feminist photographers in the movement illustrate her ability and strength to be a Post Modern subversive. She undermines the very construct that built
and defines her existence, replacing it with understanding, empowerment, and validity.

Lorna Simpson’s images of black female bodies are provocative and progressive precisely because she calls attention to aspects of black female identity that tend to be erased or overlooked in a racist, sexist culture. Her work counters the stereotype. In mainstream art photography, the vast majority of images representing black females are full frontal views of the face or body. These images reaffirm the insistence of a sort of surface understanding where what you see is what you get. Simpson’s images interrogate this assumption, demanding that the viewer take another look, a different look. Her black female presence counters racist and sexist stereotypes through the pronounced rejection of the fixed static vision of our identity. Yet Simpson’s concern is not simply to interrogate but to look again, to see what has never been seen, to bear witness. Against a backdrop of fixed, colonizing images where the black woman is represented as mammy, patriarch, or servant, Simpson constructs a world of black female bodies that resist and revolt, transform, and recover. Her images of black female bodies are initially different in that many of them are not frontal images. Backs are turned, bodies are sideways, and specific parts are focused on and repositioned in a manner that disrupts conventional ways of seeing. The intent is that viewers look beyond the surface, beyond the race and gender of the subjects.

Another example of African American feminist art that counters the white male defined theory of a delineation of subject/identity, is the work of Carrie Mae Weems (Lacan 1992: 609). As in Simpson’s work, the photographs of Weems challenge the traditional discourses of documentary photography. The photographic images of Carrie Mae Weems focus on how race and gender situates her within a cultural context of exile, as she resists the forms of domination that try to keep her in place. She defines herself as an “image-maker,” creating photographic, oral and written responses to long traditions of storytelling. The challenge has been to recast in her own voice her photographic imagemaking and the larger African American folk tradition. Combined with an expansive vocabulary of verbal systems, photographs and mass-produced objects is an attempt to transform the representation of African American women and reconfigure the racial experience, in essence to reclaim control over the imaging of blackness. Weems’s play with the impositions of position and point of view acquire historical perspective given recent changes in identity politics. Such revision is evident in Weems’s own introduction of class and gender into the racial discourse of her narratives (many of which deal with her identity as an educated black woman from a working class background), and in her critique of feminist theory’s avoidance of the issues of black representation.

For black women, the mastering role of the photographic apparatus has racial overtones that are unsettled by Weems’s skillful parries with her subject’s positions. For example, in the “Untitled” series of 1990, Weems presents a fictional tableau of the struggle within black relationships that moves the viewer beyond the colonizing gaze of the stereotype towards an understanding of African Americans as people in an attempt to confront deep-rooted fictions of the self. In the “Untitled” series, Weems constructs a woman’s story as a series of photographic chapters, developing a story in which a woman sorts out conflicts between her ideals and needs in relation to her lover, her child, and friends within a setting of domestic ordinariness.

The narrative proceeds through a space that is fixed rigidly by the immobile position of the camera or viewer, the kitchen table that serves as a barrier before the figure, and an overhead light that both recalls the bare bulbs of interrogation rooms and a metaphor for the illuminated examination by the artist of the woman’s life.

Told in an autobiographical third person, each of the characters establishes a voice. While each tells his or her own story, we begin to see the distances between men and women, families, and ethnic groups. The photographer serves as the model protagonist, which allows the viewer to identify with not only the subject but the artist as well. The black female subject provides a figure for the identification of the spectator, who assumes the position established by the camera. The double victimization of black women by the gaze is at once invoked and deflected. The final set of photographs are without text, with only the woman remaining in the image, the male figure having left. Her direct, face to face confrontation across the kitchen table assures us of her ability to endure. Through the eyes of the black female persona that she has created, she lets us know that she will not, nor will her protagonist, be allowed to vanish or self-destruct under the withering effects of the gaze. Instead, the female figure gazes directly at the viewer as an equal, taking full control of her own space and possession of her sense of self in the process.

Weems’s interests compel recognition of race and representation even as it moves beyond race to an exploration of gender and power with universal implications. An example is the work, “Mirror/Mirror,” where a black female, her back to the viewer, looks into a mirror that possesses not her own reflection, but that of a white woman reflecting back at her. The image is accompanied by text below the image that states: “Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked, ‘Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who’s the Finest of Them All??’ while the mirror’s response is “‘Snow White, you Black Bitch, and Don’t You Forget It!!’”
Kathleen

By becoming a white woman in the mirror reflection, the text directed towards the black woman establishes a structure of power that objectifies, judges, and demeans the African American identity. This marginalization of the other "is not only based on some deeply rooted elements of self-deception in the American character but also on the need to maintain the power structures that support this deception" (Sims 1990: 113).

This process of marginalization and defamiliarization takes a familiar image, a familiar frame of reference, and through a series of displacements challenges us to see it in a new way. Here the images are structured in a manner that appears simple and straightforward, while in actuality, the meanings of the images are altered by the text. One may initially assume that these images are familiar, but the use of text displaces, subverts, and changes the meaning. In the "Mirror/Mirror" piece, who is really the one looking in the mirror? Is it the white face gazing out at the black woman? Is it the black woman confronting generations of white women who seek affirmation regarding notions of what is considered high beauty? Or is it a viewer outside of the picture frame? Regardless, the piece displaces the sense of a fixed location because the meaning depends on the direction from which one gazes at the piece. The result is a mirror of the Post Modern emphasis on the fragmented sense of self.

A third photographer, Clarissa Sligh, uses photography as a means of self-examination. Her choice of photographic techniques is directly linked with her subject matter. Using historic, non-silver techniques such as Van Dyke and Cyanotype printing, Sligh incorporates family photographs, images from historical texts and sociological studies to construct visual narratives. In particular, Sligh would construct not only the image, but prior to that the negatives, "cutting them up, taping them together, with type and marks. This way of working was ideal for me, as I was trying to piece fragments together" (Willis 1995: 11). Also combining text with the images, she creates a series of experiences, both individual and collective in an attempt to move beyond the defensive posture of merely responding to the objectification and misrepresentation by others.

In "Played House," the artist's first constructed photograph, Sligh used a self-portrait as a child that she found, combining it with the words, "He was her husband when they played house." As she states in Aperture, "This image of me as a young person struck me: it seemed to capture everything about me as an adult...the girl looks directly at the camera, appears very wary, serious, and sad. Under that childlike stillness, there is so much anger...I find it amazing that the image speaks to me about a reality I could not face when I made it" (Willis 1995: 4). The telling of her own story from a first-person perspective is crucial, since personal narratives have a subversive power that challenges white male or official histories that can distort records or write a group of people entirely out of existence.

Other projects have presented equally complex challenges to the artist in terms of facing her own history and recording her own reality, while resisting the historical practice of imaging African Americans as "other" in a photodocumentary tradition. "Who We Was," part of a larger project called "Reunion," incorporates images from an anthropology book and combines them with a repetition of words that is a motif in a number of Sligh's images. This project, through a complex montaging of writing, history, and photography, asserts the reality of African American self-respect, endurance, and links to the past. Sligh asserts that much of Africa is to be found in the culture of African Americans, delving deep into the essence of the African American experience, enlivening, and reconstituting its spiritual past at the same time shedding light on links to the present. One of the pieces had the text "We Didn't Know Who We Was, But We Knew We Wasn't Who You All Said We Was" overlapping images of tribal people and Sligh's childhood photographs of her family in an attempt to formulate a sense of identity out of the fragments of family and history. Working with fragments of identity is a key factor for artists existing as the "other," allowing them to reclaim their heritage, histories, music, and language once lost as a result of objectification and marginalization. From the perspective of the artist as a participant and an observer, Sligh considers the images and voices of the past, using them to create historically introspective imagery that addresses anger at the distortion of her identity and exclusion from reality, while searching for representation.

That representation has been found in the marriage of photography and text. Photography has been, and is, a means of using fragmented images to connect oneself to a recuperative, redemptive history that enables one to construct an identity, images that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye (hooks 1995: 64). Few contemporary artists have worked with images of the black, female body in ways that are counterhegemonic. Simpson, Weems, and Sligh have breathed an existence into a subjugated figure that had previously been refused a place of authority and voice that would have allowed her to be a subject in history. In turn, they create by their own gaze an alternative space where the female figure is both self-defining and self-determining. Many of the photographed figures have turned their back on those who cannot hear the subjugated knowledge. In turn, the artists have turned their backs, in a manner similar to the figures that they photograph, on art practices that have traditionally been informed by racist and sexist
ways of thinking about both the female image and blackness. Resisting these images, these artists have learned to divert the gaze, much in the same way one shields a body from a blow. The gaze has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people, where we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other, and also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. Subordinates in relations of power learn that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional. Looking at images with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to assess critically the construction of white womanhood as the object of a gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. Rather, black women created a critical space where the binary opposition of woman as image, man as the bearer of the look, was continually deconstructed.

We are taught that to remain safe, we must stay within boundaries. Though this usually means family, community, and country, there is an earlier boundary, the body, our body that is the first site of limitations. Calling attention to ways in which contemporary scholars and artists have engaged in a historical understanding of body politics, a black, feminist theory has begun with a call to reassess the body in relation to the question of race. In turn, visual aesthetics of the black body must engage an iconography within a framework of the "other" to frame fully the way images are created and talked about. This engagement with "otherness" indicates that there is a growing body of work that can provide and promote critical dialogue and debate across boundaries of class, race, and gender. This dialogue, especially from the first-person perspective, is crucial, since personal narratives have a subversive power precisely when the "official" history is a distorted record that has written a people almost out of existence. These artists have forced a re-reading of history, and the history of the image, by insisting that we see black feminist photographers as a distinct group with its own traditions. For black women, taking the role of participant and observer has constructed a knowledge of the self that emerges from the struggle to reject controlling images and replace them, in an approach to imaging African Americans by and for themselves.

endnotes

1. The Futurist Movement is an example that illustrates the concept of the subject as authentic within Modernism.
2. This serves as a function of Jacques Lacan's "Mirror Phase" in that we cannot separate ourselves from our perceptions of viewed identity constructs.
Kathleen D. Adrian

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