

WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?

Cultural Difference in Photographic Theory and Practice

And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack. And you may find yourself in another part of the world. And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile. And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife. And you may ask yourself—well . . . how did I get here?

—lyrics by David Byrne and Brian Eno, *Once in a Lifetime*¹

Dislocation—in America, the sense of permanent displacement romanticized by Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* and Kerouac in *On the Road* and alternately celebrated or condemned as “highway culture” by social critics and planners;² in Britain the disorienting effects of a whole host of economic and cultural shadows cast by the twilight of empire³—is said to be one of the key traits of postmodern living. As a result, groups formerly viewed as “outsiders,” inhabitants of society’s margins, increasingly find themselves—or at least their familiar states of ruptured, discontinuous identity—at the center of various postmodern discourses. Thus, for example, Jamaica-born Black British sociologist Stuart Hall is able to speak of a “general feeling which more and more people seem to have . . . that they are all, in some way, recently migrated.”

As Hall points out, the first question “every migrant faces” is “‘Why are you here?’”⁴ Another way of putting it, “What are you doing here?” retains the previous interrogation’s accusatory tone, but extends the range of implied transgression to encompass not only past motives but also present activity. Both lines of inquiry concern us here.

In contemporary art theory, dislocation—the ability to reside everywhere and nowhere at once—is frequently regarded as an intrinsic feature of photography. This conception of the medium, of course, stems from Walter Benjamin, who observed that, thanks to mechanical reproduction, “the cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art.” Because of its attendant ability to undermine “the authority of the object,”⁵ photography has become the medium of choice for artists engaged in the postmodern project of dismantling the truth claims of representation.

A high-stakes enterprise for artists committed to social change, this deconstruction of images ostensibly involves unhinging the lopsided power relations between those who traditionally view and those who are traditionally viewed, while simultaneously exposing the pretensions of representational illusionism. Yet this two-pronged deconstructive program is the target of what strikes me as the most comprehensive critique of what I and other students of art by people of color have long viewed as a stunning absence in prevailing accounts of postmodernism in the visual arts.⁶ At the outset of a book on the nexus of art and politics in contemporary theory, British art critic John Roberts notes the political insufficiency of those postmodern strategies that base their claims to radicalism exclusively on photography’s ability to “initiate some kind of ‘epistemological rupture’ in the field of vision.”⁷ A tendency to settle for semantic disruption alone, according to Roberts, deprives these tactics of any positive role in the collective struggles of the politically and culturally oppressed. It is at this point that questions of photographic theory and photographic practice cluster around the concept of dislocation—the “Why are you here?” and the “What are you doing here?”—converge.

[A]ny critique of the established, dominant systems of meaning will degenerate into a mere refusal to signify unless it seeks to find its meanings . . . in signs which are already present, fighting for room—meanings rooted in actual forms of life; repressed meanings, the meanings of the dominated.⁸

With this admonition by Marxist art historian T.J. Clark in mind, Roberts explains, "This is why . . . we might speak of issues around gender, race and sexuality as being central to the postmodernist problematic." Despite their centrality, Roberts observes that gender, race and sexuality either have not been the focus of "explicit account(s) . . . of the production, consumption and criticism of art" or have been treated in ways consistent with a view of postmodernism as the end of meaning.⁹

Discourses of ethnicity,¹⁰ gender and sexuality take center stage in the art of David A. Bailey, Sutapa Biswas, Lyle Ashton Harris, Roshini Kempadoo, Yong Soon Min, Ingrid Pollard, Diane Tani and Carrie Mae Weems—U.S. and British artists of African or Asian descent who employ photographic techniques in decidedly postmodern ways.¹¹ Their subversive approach to representation is announced by a wide range of departures from photographic convention: with the exception of Harris and, in a sense, Bailey (whose *Family Pictures* depend on the juxtaposition of words and images, but employ written texts that appear in images), all of the artists supplement visual images with verbal texts. Techniques ranging from collage, montage and serial imagery to a form of projection allow Bailey, Biswas, Harris, Kempadoo, Tani and Weems to replace the unitary and static assumptions of traditional photography with an ethos of multiplicity, flux, disjunction. And the use of nontraditional formats, monumental size or environmental modes enables Biswas, Harris and Min to underscore their images' character as constructed objects. Yet none of these artists seems content to merely illustrate postmodern tenets. Instead, each places the critique of representation at the service of specific socio-cultural struggles. Again though, it should be noted that this double play fulfills ideals (while exceeding the general practice) associated with progressive postmodernism.¹²

Min's *Colorblind*, like Biswas' *Infestation of the Aorta*, is a work that conflates the politics and physics of vision. Born in Korea and currently based in New York, Min travels frequently throughout the Third World, investigating the local struggles of artists of color in various nations. Her art's focus alternates between examinations of Asian-American identity and explorations of identities other than her own. *Colorblind*, with Min's face and hands seen behind a veil of words, narrates one of the most chillingly absurdist outgrowths of South Africa's apartheid system—the internalization of racist categories to such an extent that scores of non-Whites petition each year to have their racial designation changed.¹³

*** Editors' Note:** Judith Wilson here refers to eight of the ten artists whose photographic works are included in *Disputed Identities*. Works by two artists, James Luna and Vincent Stokes, were added to the exhibition too late for inclusion in this article. See "Disputed Identities/Photography," page 4, for a description of their works.

Designed like the charts used to detect color blindness, the composition features a 'hidden' text—the word "whitewash" written vertically at the work's center—visible only to viewers able to distinguish chromatic as well as tonal differences. The correspondence of physical and conceptual problems encoded here is emphasized by the presence of the artist herself—neither Black nor White, but a member of the "yellow race"—miming self-imposed blindness with the gesture of covering her eyes.

In a catalog essay for the exhibition *Autoportraits*, a group show organized by the Brixton-based Afro/Asian photography collective, Autograph, Stuart Hall described the predominant mode as "not so much representation as inscription," with images, "positioned, worked on" rather than recorded, serving as "something to be written upon and 'read'" by artist and viewer alike.¹⁴ Sutapa Biswas seems to take this description literally in her multi-media construction *Infestations of the Aorta—Shrine to a Distant Relative*.

At the center of the piece is a black and white photographic enlargement of the mouth of a Buddha figure, mounted on the wall. A trio of litho transparencies bearing a single image—an Indian mother, the artist's aunt, holding her child during a traditional naming ceremony—hangs suspended approximately three feet in front of this. By focusing light on these transparencies, a shadowy replica of the image is projected onto the surface of the photograph behind it. Layered, multiple, fragmentary and fugitive, the work's formal traits mirror the existential states that are the subject of this three-dimensional meditation on bonds of kinship and codes of identity mediated by physical and historical distance. But as the artist has stated, the result is a construction in which contradictions are left purposely "unresolved," and relationships remain open to change.¹⁵

Like Min and Biswas, the show's other participants also treat questions of cultural identity. Roshini Kempadoo, an Indo-Guyanese artist living in Britain, shares Biswas' interest in family ties and cultural distances. But Kempadoo, unlike Biswas, insists on her right to claim Britain and her ex-colonial birthplace equally as "home."¹⁶ For the American, Lyle Ashton Harris, sexuality conditions self-recognition as much as cultural origins. He has defined the use of large scale in his photomurals as a "celebratory act of defiance, a response to my experience of marginality as a Black gay man."¹⁷

With the Black British and Asian-American photographers, Ingrid Pollard and Diane Tani, identity is thrown into relief negatively and shown to be a product of the dialectic of assimilation versus alienation. The insertion of the Black female figure into images of the quintessential "English landscape" in Pollard's *Pastoral Interludes* series successfully thwarts viewer expectations, informing us of the extent to which even such supposedly neutral icons as the land are always culturally specific—always a particular land associated with a particular history and set of inhabitants. For Tani, in works like *Duel* and *Boiled*, cultural myths and stereotypes are sites of contested identities. The Asian child dressed in

cowboy gear, with one hand poised to draw his toy gun from its holster and a smug, confrontational stance, advertises assimilation at the same time his dramatic effect depends on an antithetical set of preconceptions about Asian-Americans. That the child's Western garb may be a sign of either cultural self-definition or cultural surrender is indicated by the words "My move or yours?"

David A. Bailey and Carrie Mae Weems—one a Black British, the other a Black American photographer—have both touched on issues of identity in ways that call attention to the role of art itself in shaping self-conceptions. In Bailey's *Cultural Productions* series [shown at the Mappin Gallery, Sheffield, England, June/August 1987], artworks redolent of European tradition are shown in a Black person's grip. While Pollard made a similar point by displaying full-figure images of Black women, Bailey achieves his jarring effects through a form of visual synecdoche. By pairing Eurocentric artworks with images of Black hands, Bailey hints at a crucial question for artists of color—can they seize the West's cultural legacy and make it their own, or is the very urge to do so evidence of self-alienation?

In a review of *The Other Story*, the first major survey of post-World War II Afro/Asian art in Britain, Mark Sealy maintains that "as long as artists of African, Asian and Caribbean descent rely on the European tradition," they will remain consigned to art history's margins. The alternative, Sealy proposes, is to turn away from "this very exclusive club" and emulate the Black British pop music moguls, Soul II Soul, who have managed to "create [their own] business and keep [their] identity."¹⁸ But Sealy's advice depends on an underlying essentialism that would be unacceptable to Bailey, who speaks of "the construction of Blackness" and for whom identity is not a singular, immutable, biologically determined entity.¹⁹

Carrie Mae Weems' *Blue Black Boy* comes from a series in which she examines the paradoxical grouping of a rich variety of actual skintones under the racial epithet "Black." In *Blue Black Boy*, a hyperbolic description coined by Blacks themselves reminds us of its diametric opposite—the "milk and roses" complexion of Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*. Like Bailey, Weems taps art historical references here. But, as is true of all her work, she also relies heavily on African-American vernacular traditions. In doing so, Weems assumes what John Roberts has designated the central task facing artists of color residing in the West: "the recovery of non-European and non-white history and experience"—in an effort to "consciously resist the categories of the 'exotic' and 'different'."²⁰

That there is much to be gained from this reclamation of lost or suppressed histories can be illustrated by a brief look at the African-American example, where one of the chief problems in the construction of a general art history is the role (or roles) of photography. For, within the early phases of the Afro-American tradition,²¹ there is an extraordinary linkage of photographic and non-photographic practices. Working in different regions and at different times, all three of the nineteenth century's most prominent Black painters—Robert S. Duncanson

(in Cincinnati and various Canadian sites), Edward Mitchell Bannister (in Boston, New York and Providence), and Henry O. Tanner (in Philadelphia, Atlanta and eventually France)—are known to have engaged in commercial photography at some stage in their careers. But the precise character and extent of Duncanson's association with the prominent Black Cincinnati daguerreotypist and creator of panoramas, James P. Ball, remains unknown, while no trace has been found of Bannister's solar prints and the few extant examples of Tanner's photography have so far failed to generate comparisons with his paintings, despite awareness of his study with Thomas Eakins—a staunch advocate of the use of photography as an aid to scientific accuracy in painting.

Does the prevalence of photography among these nineteenth-century Black painters—as well as Jules Lion, Robert Douglass and David Bowser—retroactively confirm postmodern claims for the medium's democracy? Did Black painters of the past century embrace photography to a greater degree than their White counterparts? If so, why? Was the attraction simply one of economic expediency—photography's greater commercial viability as opposed to the vicissitudes of painting for a living? Or do the numbers of Blacks who were drawn to photographic modes then in their infancy refute dismissals of African-American activity in the visual arts as technically timid, stylistically imitative, conceptually conservative?

And the camera work of nineteenth-century Black painters is, at best, only half the story. . . .

The bulk of Black commercial photographer James P. Ball's subjects were White, an obvious consequence of racial demographics in the places he lived and worked—Ohio, Montana, and Oregon—during the second half of the nineteenth century. In at least two instances though, Ball recorded the presence of non-Europeans in a far corner of the American West. Both sitters, unlike their White counterparts, are nameless—suggesting that neither image was commissioned by its subject. While the Black subject goes completely unidentified, the Chinese male's occupation and the name of his employer have survived—leading one to suspect that “Joe” Ming, not his cook, was Ball's client. Both works are thought to be albumen prints, cabinet cards made between 1891 and 1900 while Ball operated a studio in Helena, Montana in partnership with his son.²²

Formally, the portrait of an *Unidentified Black Youth* is the more intriguing of the two images. Photo-historian Valencia Hollins Coar contends that Ball's “inventive use of photographic montage in this image” makes it “one of the most interesting of” his extant works.²³ Why did Ball abandon his customary, relatively naturalistic idiom here? If we are correct in reading the bust-on-a-half-shell format as an invitation to view this young man as a “black pearl,”²⁴ to whom was he so precious—to the photographer or some member of his family? to the youth's relatives? to some segment of the Montana town that is reputed to have had a “significant and influential black community” at this period?²⁵

Although Ball's 1893 portrait of ‘Joe’ Ming's Cook

displays less technical invention, it seems at least as formally compelling in its deployment of an uncharacteristically stark, geometric composition—the pair of stepped, pyramidal forms constituted by the seated cook and the Chinese table beside him, and the play of simple vertical-against-horizontal/light-against-dark areas in the background.

Accustomed to dominant group representations of all non-Europeans as more or less equally exotic Others, one is startled by the contrast between Ball's treatment of a fellow Black as a subject from whom signs of cultural difference are largely erased and his treatment of the Chinese cook. We view the latter subject at a distance, rather than at the intimate range of the other photo. And this distance not only replicates the psychic gulf between the presumably Occidental viewer and the Oriental subject, it also serves to place the sitter far enough away to exhibit his full costume in all its fascinating foreignness. We see ‘Joe’ Ming's cook across the chasm of cultural difference, seated as if on stage—a spectacle for the visual consumption, it seems, of curious Westerners, Black and White!

Any adequate assessment of the significance of this pair of photos requires that analysis of their visual codes be linked to scrutiny of the actual socio-political positions of Blacks and Chinese with respect to one another and the dominant culture in late nineteenth-century Montana. In other words, to recover this missing chapter of photographic history, we must ask what these non-White people were doing in the Far West at the time. For the sense of dislocation we so readily identify with the postmodern condition seems almost as evident in these early specimens of African-American photography as it is in the work of the contemporary artists featured in this show.

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Notes

¹ Lyrics by Byrne and Eno from the 1980 Talking Heads album, *Remain in Light*.

² I am thinking of, on the one hand, such statements as Marshall Berman's claim that, while “the distinctive sign of nineteenth-century urbanism was the boulevard, a medium for bringing explosive material and human forces together; the hallmark of twentieth-century urbanism has been the highway, a means for cutting them asunder.” On the other hand, there is Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's celebration of “the strip” as a design paradigm in their influential *Learning from Las Vegas*. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), p. 165. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

³ See, for example, the discussion of post-World War II British youths' fascination with the material excesses of American popular culture as an antidote to Britain's economic austerity in Dick Hebdige's *Hiding in the Light* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 45-76.

⁴ Stuart Hall, “Minimal Selves,” in Lisa Appignanesi, ed., *JCA Documents 6: Identity* (London: The Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), p. 44.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Francis Francina and Charles Harrison, eds., *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 218.

⁶ For a discussion of this gap in recent American art criticism,

see my essay “Seventies Into Eighties—Neo-Hoodooism vs. Postmodernism: When (Art) Worlds Collide,” in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* [exhibition catalog] (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990), pp. 128-135.

⁷ John Roberts, *Postmodernism, Politics and Art* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.* [T.J. Clark, quoted in Roberts], p. 25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰ I have substituted “ethnicity” for “race” both because of the latter's mythical character, as detailed in Anthony Appiah's “The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race,” and because of the tendency to use the term “race” in ways that reduce cultural pluralism to a narrow contrast of the two poles of color, as indicated by Sunil Gupta in an essay entitled, “Black, Brown and White.” Appiah in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., “Race,” *Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 21-37. Gupta in *Coming On Strong* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 164-166, 178. I recognize that this substitution too is problematic, as Gupta points out in his remarks on the ways in which the term “ethnic” has been employed. Gupta, “Introduction,” *Fabled Territories* [exhibition catalog] (Leeds City Art Galleries and Viewpoint Photography Gallery, 1990), pp. 5-8.

¹¹ Apparently, the Eurocentric bias of much postmodernist art criticism has led some artists of color to dissociate their own nontraditional practices from postmodernism. During a recent panel on cross-cultural dialogue at the Photography Sesquicentennial Project Conference in Philadelphia, for example, Carrie Mae Weems questioned my application of postmodern theory to the history of African-American photography, declaring that her own work had “nothing to do with” this imported theoretical framework. While I do not doubt that Weems and other artists of African or Asian descent may be inspired by phenomena outside the hothouse of European-derived, academically fashionable, post-structuralist theory, I also do not see how this situation prevents such artists' products from exhibiting postmodern traits.

¹² I am using the term “progressive postmodernism” to distinguish work that combines a critique of representation with an overt or implicit critique of existing power relations, as opposed to work that merely departs from modernist aesthetics.

¹³ The bizarre notion that the content of genetic codes can be altered by judicial decree is not unique to modern-day South Africa. In Spain's New World colonies, where a parallel caste system obtained, affluent individuals whose ambitions were thwarted by a lack of the requisite pure Iberian pedigree are known to have petitioned for a change of racial status. Leslie B. Rout, Jr., *The African Experience in Spanish America: 1502 to the Present Day* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 127, 156-159.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, “Autobiography—Black Narcissus” (extract from the catalog essay), *Autograph: The Newsletter of the Association of Black Photographers*, no. 10 (February/March 1990).

¹⁵ Sutapa Biswas, unpublished statement, 1990.

¹⁶ The artist has written that her work “is an exploration of a sense of belonging . . . to neither one specific culture or another. The idea that the sense of home can be sited in two places, . . . the Caribbean and Britain—physically, mentally and emotionally.” Roshini Kempadoo, “Constant Transformation,” unpublished statement by the artist.

¹⁷ Lyle Ashton Harris, “Personal Statement,” source unknown.

¹⁸ Mark Sealy, “The Other Story,” *Autograph: The Newsletter of the Association of Black Photographers*, no. 9 (December 1989/January 1990).

¹⁹ David A. Bailey, “Introduction,” *Appropriation and Control: A Photographic Exploration of Black Images by David A. Bailey* [exhibition catalog] (London: Camerawork), p. 5.

²⁰ Roberts, op. cit., p. 32.

²¹ I am thinking of the tradition constituted by trained U.S. Black artists, working in fine arts media.

²² Valencia Hollins Coar, *A Century of Black Photographers: 1840-1960* [exhibition catalog] (Providence, RI: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, March 31-May 8, 1983), pp. 10-11, 36-37.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁴ I am indebted to Lauri-Ann Hinkman, a student in the survey of Afro-American art history I taught in spring 1989 at Syracuse University, for identifying Ball's “black pearl” iconography.

²⁵ Coar, op. cit.