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Contributors

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Introduction

Tom Beck

The concept for this issue of exposure originated with the exhibition Visual Griots. Works by Four African-American Photographers which was presented at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in 1996. A strong tradition of storytelling exists in African American culture, and the photographs in the exhibition demonstrated that tradition in contemporary photography. The exhibition explored issues of history, culture, and family, and the way photographs construct identities and narratives. The intention in this issue of exposure is to expand the idea of storytelling and apply it to a broader range of African American photographs both historical and contemporary. Presented are articles about Augustus Washington, Roland Freeman, William Earle Williams, and Stephen Marc—four photographers with very different approaches to storytelling.

The word "story" is derived from the Greek "inquiry" and the Latin "to see." The basis of the word is the essence of its function in narrative photography. Photographs by their nature are inquiries probing particular subjects, and they provide a means for the image maker to see and narrate the results of the inquiry. In fact, the word "narrative" itself comes from the Latin narrare which means "to relate," and photographs are perfectly capable of providing a structure through which ideas may be integrated and related to an audience. The story told by photographs actually exists somewhere beyond the image, or, in the case of an image series, between one image and the next. Each image provides symbols that guide the viewer to know the story. All stories are an illusion, since the dynamic unfolding of the story is already complete when the viewer comes to see it. One only discovers the story while viewing the imagery, and, of course, rarely sees all that there is to see in the first viewing. These qualities of photographic storytelling are exemplified by the great African American storyteller-photographers James VanDerZee and Roy DeCarava, both towering figures in the medium.

VanDerZee was a portrait photographer who enjoyed adding more to his images than would have been revealed by the subjects alone. For example, his 1920 portrait of World War I heroes Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts shows the two young men wearing their uniforms and seated on a bench with a gas mask propped up by the bench’s near leg. VanDerZee, of course, was telling about the heroes having been soldiers who faced battlefield dangers such as mustard gas. He further enhanced the story by adding a painted backdrop fireplace designating that the heroes were situated in the security of hearth and home—the very security for which they had fought. Also part of the story is the context that the heroes, like all African Americans at that time, had to overcome tremendous obstacles just to live day to day in American society.

Multiple printing was a technique that VanDerZee sometimes employed in his photographs to enhance their storytelling capacity. He would print smaller images onto the larger ones, particularly in making portraits, calendar images, and funeral photographs. The funeral photographs are especially good examples of his approach: an iconic image, a portrait from life, and/or a religious image was printed into an area that had been dodged out of the larger image of the deceased laid out in a casket. For example, the story told in his The Last Good-bye Overseas (circa 1941) is that of a soldier killed in battle who is watched over in death by flag-carrying soldiers, cherubs, and an honor guard of a lone soldier standing at the head of the deceased. VanDerZee's view was that the added images diminished the pain for viewers looking at a photograph of the dead. He was a very sensitive, optimistic, and easygoing person who helped others whenever he could.

DeCarava relates his stories not through studio photographs and multiple printing like VanDerZee, but through straight photography and serial imagery. When DeCarava came to photography in the late 1940s, he had already been a successful illustrator, painter, and printmaker. He inherently understood how to make symbols out of ordinary subjects. While VanDerZee's approach was from the pictorial photography style prevalent during his formative years in photography, DeCarava's style was somewhere between the photojournalistic styles of Kertész or Brassai and the documentary.
style of the Photo League. The soft printing and deep tonality that soon characterized DeCarava’s work were perfect for representing the murky world of people in the subways and their comings and goings on workdays, the subjects of DeCarava’s first major body of work. The story told by images such as Man coming up subway stairs (1952) is about the hard labor of African Americans and the frustrations they experienced.9

Harlem, the subject of DeCarava’s next substantial body of work after the subway photographs, was also produced in a series. Telling a story about Harlem and its people came naturally to DeCarava, since he was born and raised there. The aid of a Guggenheim grant in 1952 gave him the freedom to photograph, and he made many images, both indoors and out.10 Friends and acquaintances were the subjects of some of the images, but quite extensively photographed were the Murphy and James families,11 people who met the burdens of poverty with strong family values. The story told by these photographs is rich with loving family interactions such as in Shirley embracing Sam,12 an image that also appears in the DeCarava and Langston Hughes book The Sweet Flypaper of Life (1955). Langston Hughes, upon seeing DeCarava’s Harlem photographs, declared, “We have to get these published.”13 Hughes selected and sequenced the photographs to fit a fictional text telling a story about the people in the images. In many instances, the fictional text could not have been more accurate about the people depicted, because theirs was the story of many who lived in Harlem. DeCarava’s photographs are true to life, yet yield symbolic form.

The works of VanDerZee and DeCarava have served as inspirations to many; however, they did not originate Africa American storytelling in photography. Unknown to nearly everyone was Augustus Washington, the African American daguerreotypist who is the subject of Ann Shumard’s lead-off essay in this issue. Shumard introduces us to the ways that African American photographers constructed narratives in the early days of photography. One could argue that all photographs tell stories, or that none do. The argument in favor of photographic narrative contends that recorded is the photographic act and the event in progress at the moment of exposure, while the argument against contends that the image is static and without a story.14 The latter argument is weaker and defies reading images and drawing inferences. Washington’s images argue in favor of both the existence of photographic narrative, and evidence of an African American point of view.

Although more than a century separates Washington’s work from that of contemporary artist Roland Freeman, one binding similarity in their photography is the partnership formed between photographer and subject in making a portrait. Freeman tells a story, but his voice is almost in unison with that of his subject. Essayist Glenn Hinson describes not only the relationship between Freeman and his subjects, but also the boundary between truth and fiction in photography. Many photographers understand the inherently fictive qualities of every photograph but believe in the truthfulness of their intentions, as does Freeman.

Both Freeman and William Earle Williams use photography to document experience; however, great differences exist between their approaches and results. While Freeman primarily seeks to document the activities of people and their contributions to American culture, Williams, in his exhibition Gettysburg—A Journey in Time, is telling a story of historical detection and personal discovery. Issues of partnership do not enter into the equation for him as they do for Freeman. Williams is actually telling several stories at once, one of which, the history of African Americans at Gettysburg, has never before been told. The subtle and multiple levels to Williams’s narrative certainly redefine the form. Essayist Kimberly W Benston places Williams’s photographs in the context of the history of Gettysburg and then considers the functioning of the images in terms of history and the present.

On the surface, there would not seem to be two bodies of work more different than Williams’s gelatin silver prints and Stephen Marc’s digital ones; certainly the divergence of photography from traditional materials to digital imaging marks a turning point. The technology used, however, is only part of making an artistic statement, and Williams and Marc still have significant points in common, such as the reinterpretation of narrative, the expression of African American history and culture, and the search for a personal voice. Marc is on the cutting edge of inventing a new narrative based upon the seamless montage of images and ideas made possible by computers. His images resemble nineteenth century history paintings, on the one hand, and cultural icons and futuristic mindscapes on the other. Sometimes a viewer seems to be peering into Marc’s mind, and at other times, into the mind of some supernatural consciousness. Essayist Grant Kester deftly observes, prods, and questions Marc’s work, while examining political, visual, and social issues.
This introduction and the four essays that make up the current issue of *exposure* are together a small survey of African American storytelling in photography from the medium's beginnings up to the digital age. Portraiture was the means of storytelling for Augustus Washington in the early years as it has been for Freeman and Marc into the twenty-first century. The stories told by the photographers have become ever more personal as they have continued to be culturally revealing. DeCarava's work is more personal than VanDerZee's, but Williams's work is far more introspective than either of theirs. The essays that follow show that the approaches of Washington, Freeman, Williams, and Marc are as varied as they are rich in their narrations about African American history and culture. Photography has been one of the many media for African American storytelling, and like other arts, it has been wonderfully enriched by the tradition.

**Endnotes**


4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.


7. Ibid., 151.


10. Ibid., 19.

11. Ibid., 20.

12. Ibid., 93.

13. Ibid., 21.

In 1996 a remarkable daguerreotype by an early African American photographer was rediscovered (Figure 1). For years this long-lost object—the earliest known portrait of the radical abolitionist John Brown—was known solely through inferior copy images while the identity of its maker remained a mystery. But when the original daguerreotype surfaced at a regional auction and was subsequently acquired by the National Portrait Gallery, the impact of the striking portrait was matched only by the revelation that its maker was Augustus Washington, one of the nation’s first black photographers. In his unconventional depiction of John Brown, Washington displayed the aptitude for visual storytelling that would animate his most memorable daguerrean portraits.

Born the son of a former slave in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1820 or 1821, Augustus Washington was described in his youth as “bright beyond his associates diligent in his studies and very ambitious of rising in the world.” He was educated in private schools with white children until a change in public sentiment ended his opportunities for such schooling. At the age of twelve or thirteen, Washington was profoundly influenced by antislavery publications such as William Lloyd Garrison’s The Liberator, which instilled in him a hatred of slavery and prejudice and fueled his determination to become “a scholar, a teacher, and a useful man.”

Washington sought to further his education, and in 1837, on the advice of a prominent abolitionist, he enrolled in the Oneida Institute in Whitesboro, New York. He remained at the progressive school for nearly a year and a half, until a shortage of funds forced him to abandon his studies and seek steady employment. Settling in Brooklyn, Washington assumed charge of the African Public School and began to take an active role in the affairs of the city’s African American
community. Besides acting as a subscription agent and correspondent for the influential black weekly newspaper the *Colored American*, he organized mass meetings in support of a petition drive to secure unrestricted suffrage for New York’s African American citizens, and in August of 1840, served as Brooklyn's representative to the Convention of the Colored Inhabitants of the State of New York—in all likelihood the first statewide gathering of blacks in the nation.³

Although Augustus Washington earned praise for his teaching efforts in Brooklyn, he was anxious to resume his own education. For assistance in finding a school that “would receive and prepare for College, a colored student, without distinction on account of color,” Washington turned to friends in the abolitionist community. Inquiries were made on his behalf, and in 1841 he was admitted
to the Kimball Union Academy in Meriden, New Hampshire. After successfully completing his preparatory course, Washington was admitted to Dartmouth College in 1843—becoming the only African American member of the student body at that time.4

When Washington entered Dartmouth, the cost of attending the college could reach as much as two hundred dollars annually. Although he received twenty-five dollars per quarter from a benefactor, he faced the daunting task of paying the balance of his college expenses himself and was already in arrears when Dartmouth’s three-month vacation commenced in the winter of 1843. Washington had hoped to secure a teaching post during the lengthy break but was rejected by white schools because of his race and by black schools because of their reluctance to hire a teacher on a
short-term basis. With no other prospects before him, he returned home and approached his parents for aid, but his appeal proved unsuccessful. It was in this “emergency,” as Washington later termed it, that he “was favored in learning the Daguerrean Art, merely as a means to an end—for profitable employment during [school] vacations.”

Washington’s decision to practice daguerreotypy drew fire from his parents as well as Dartmouth’s president, but he remained undeterred. Thanks to patronage by the citizens of Hanover and members of Dartmouth’s faculty, he recouped the cost of his instruction and equipment within a month but put his camera aside out of concern that it “took my attention too much from my studies.” Another factor in his decision to cease his daguerrean activity at this time may have been the difficulty he experienced in replenishing his supplies. In a letter from New York dated July 19, 1844, Washington’s longtime friend and fellow abolitionist Lewis Tappan reported “The [daguerreotype] plates cannot be had at present... Be assured I regret this & am sorry for your disappointment.”

Despite the success of his first daguerrean efforts, Washington found himself $120 in debt at the close of his freshman year and was obliged to suspend his studies. Fully intending to return to Dartmouth at a later date, he left behind a personal library of 150 books, as well as his daguerrean apparatus, when he moved to Hartford, Connecticut, in the autumn of 1844 to take charge of one of that city’s two schools for black students.

Hartford offered more to Washington than just employment. Besides its importance as Connecticut’s capital, the city was a thriving center of commerce and culture, and home to a host of reform activities. Hartford’s African American community was energized by the presence of the Rev. James W. C. Pennington, a depot master of the Underground Railroad, whose Talcott Street Congregational Church served as a hub of regional antislavery activity. The church’s basement was also home to the North African School, where Washington conducted classes from the fall of 1844 until sometime in 1846. Despite a meager salary, he succeeded in repaying his college debts, and in the summer of 1845, he sent for the books and daguerrean apparatus he had left behind in Hanover. He still cherished the hope of one day resuming his studies at Dartmouth, but by the close of 1846, he had returned not to Dartmouth but to the practice of daguerreotypy.

On December 24, 1846, Washington advertised the services of his new daguerrean gallery in
the Charter Oak, the weekly newspaper of the Connecticut Anti-Slavery Society. Although he was not the first to offer daguerreotype likenesses to the citizens of Hartford and its environs, Washington would outlast his early business rivals and in 1851 could point with pride to the longevity of his studio, noting, "This is the oldest Daguerrian [sic] Establishment in this city."7

The fact that Washington initially placed long-running advertisements in the Charter Oak as well in the Ram's Horn, an antislavery newspaper published by African Americans in New York, strongly suggests that he hoped to attract the patronage of those sympathetic to the abolitionist cause.8 His success in this regard is evidenced by one of the earliest surviving portraits from his Hartford career—the recently rediscovered daguerreotype of John Brown (Figure 2).

Dating from 1846 or 1847, Washington's portrait depicts Brown during his brief tenure as a wool broker in Springfield, Massachusetts. Yet this evocative daguerreotype is anything but a conventional portrait of a would-be entrepreneur. In what was surely a collaborative effort between subject and photographer, Washington utilized pose and gesture to tell the story of Brown's early antislavery activism. In this carefully constructed image, Brown faces the viewer with one hand raised, as if repeating the dramatic pledge he had made in 1837 to consecrate his life to the destruction of slavery. Washington purposefully posed Brown with his left hand held aloft so that in the laterally reversed or "mirror image" daguerreotype, Brown's gesture "reads" as his right hand raised in oath taking.9 With his other hand, John Brown grasps what is thought to be the standard of his "Subterranean Pass Way"—the militant alternative to the Underground Railroad that Brown sought to establish in the Allegheny Mountains more than a decade before his ill-fated raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry.10 The result is a dynamic image that gives tangible expression to Brown's abolitionist fervor.

In the spring of 1847, Hartford's city directories carried the first listings identifying Washington as a daguerreotypist and documented the relocation of his studio from No. 9, Waverly Building to Kellogg's Building at 136 Main Street. Over the course of his career in Hartford, Washington often utilized city directories to publicize his business. In the racially segregated guides issued by Elihu Geer, Washington's name, occupation, and address appeared within the "Colored Persons" section of the directory, while the display advertisement for

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his gallery was included in that portion containing the names of Hartford’s white citizens and their businesses. Whether this placement was made at Washington’s request remains unclear but it undoubtedly would have worked to his advantage in attracting the patronage of Hartford’s white majority.¹¹

Washington further promoted his daguerrean enterprise by packaging his portraits in such a way that each daguerreotype became a miniature advertisement for his studio. At first, he merely stamped the gallery’s name and location in ink
on the silk pad within each daguerreotype’s case. When plain silk pads gave way to those made of embossed velvet, he began to employ die-stamped brass mats and customized leather presentation cases bearing his name and the address of his Main Street gallery. Just as this packaging identified Washington’s work to his contemporaries, it has aided modern scholars in recognizing daguerreotypes attributable to Augustus Washington.

From the outset, Washington sought the patronage of a wide range of customers by offering both affordable prices and an extensive selection of cases, frames, bracelets, lockets, and rings in which to house his “beautiful and correct Miniatures.” Surviving portraits from his Hartford gallery illustrate his success; they range from images of the city’s elite, housed in elaborate cases (Figure 3), to those of persons of humbler circumstances, whose likenesses were more simply packaged (Figure 4). While the conventional portraiture that appealed to Hartford’s citizens provided Washington with little opportunity for overt storytelling, there are subtle narrative aspects to a number of his portraits. Through the use of emblematic props, he succeeded in revealing something of the sitter’s interests or circumstances. A prominent businessman firmly grasps a rolled document, an aged woman’s wisdom is suggested by the book she holds, while the youth and innocence of a young woman are reflected by the delicate bunch of flowers that rest in her lap.

Testament to the popularity of Washington’s gallery and the scope of his clientele can be found in the words of a contemporary who observed, “Augustus Washington, an artist of fine taste and perception, is numbered among the most successful Daguerreotypists in Hartford Connecticut. His establishment is said to be visited daily by large numbers of the citizens of all classes.” Yet one segment of Hartford’s citizenry remains unrepresented in Washington’s surviving work. Of the fewer than one hundred Washington daguerreotypes that have been documented to date, none representing an African American sitter from Hartford has been found. Although Washington must have made such portraits, black patronage probably constituted a small percentage of his business. During the years that he operated his Hartford gallery, the city’s African American community was of modest size and the majority of its workers were employed in jobs that would have provided scant resources for luxuries such as daguerreotypes. However, Washington’s liberal terms, including the assurance that “in some instances, watches, jewelry and country produce [would] be received in exchange for Likenesses,” suggest that even a shortage of ready cash need not have proved an obstacle to trade.

Washington’s name was curiously absent

Figure 9 Attributed to Augustus Washington, Chancy Brown, Liberian Senate Sergeant-at-Arms, c. 1857, daguerreotype, 3 1/4 x 2 3/4 inches. Reprinted with permission of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
from Hartford’s city directories for both 1848 and 1849 but resurfaced in the directories published in May 1850. In September of that year, the federal census taker for Hartford recorded the names of Augustus Washington “Dagarian [sic]” and his wife Cordelia and noted in the appropriate column that the couple had married within the year.15 Virtually nothing is known about Washington’s bride, but there is reason to believe she quickly assumed a role in her husband’s business. When
Augustus Washington issued an ambitious broadside advertisement in July 1851 highlighting his competitive prices, wide array of products, and unique services, he proclaimed that his was the only Hartford gallery to offer a “Ladies’ Dressing-Room [with] a female in constant attendance to assist in arranging their toilet.”

By the early 1850s Augustus Washington was widely regarded as one of Hartford’s foremost daguerreotypists. Yet even as his enterprise prospered, Washington worried about the future. Disheartened by congressional passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which jeopardized the hard-won liberty of fugitive slaves and freemen alike, Washington turned his attention to the possibility of emigration. Like other abolitionists he had long opposed the efforts of the American Colonization Society to resettle freeborn and emancipated African Americans on the African continent, but after much consideration he came to view emigration to the West African nation of Liberia as the best course of action for himself and his family.

On March 29, 1853, Washington placed a lengthy advertisement in the Hartford Daily Courant announcing that he had completed the arrangements for closing his business in the coming autumn and would retire “not from a want of any further success or patronage but for the purpose of foreign travel, and to mingle in other scenes of activity and usefulness.” Accompanied by his wife and two small children, and carrying more than $500 worth of daguerrean supplies, Augustus Washington sailed for Liberia in November 1853.

Upon his arrival in Monrovia, Washington quickly opened his studio. Setting his price at three dollars for his cheapest picture and initially employing boys to advertise his business by word of mouth, he was soon taking from twenty to forty dollars’ worth of daguerreotypes each day. Based on the few surviving examples of his Liberian portraiture, it is clear that he attracted the patronage of some of the republic’s most prominent citizens, such as wealthy merchant Urias A. McGill (Figure 5). Washington’s portrait of the selfpossessed, patrician-looking Mr. McGill tells the straightforward story of the sitter’s prosperity. His fancy waistcoat and fashionably tailored coat mark him as a man of means who like other African American emigrants to Liberia achieved a level of economic success in Africa that would have been unimaginable for a black man in antebellum America.

Sharing the handsome double case that houses Urias McGill’s likeness is Washington’s appealing image of a young woman who in all likelihood was a McGill family member. In this portrait (Figure 6) Washington encouraged his subject to acknowledge the camera and allude to the purpose of the sitting by holding the very daguerreotype case that would shortly receive and preserve her finished portrait.

The lack of plentiful examples of Washington’s Liberian portraiture precludes fuller assessment of his clientele, but it is evident from his published advertisements that he hoped to foster broad-based patronage by inviting the public to call as patrons or visitors at his gallery, where all would “equally receive his polite attention.”

Despite recurring bouts of the malarial (or so-called “acclimating”) fever that plagued nearly every newcomer to Liberia, Washington persevered with his portrait business. For some months, however, he found it impossible to undertake a series of scenic views of Monrovia commissioned by the American Colonization Society. In the summer of 1854, he finally succeeded in taking several daguerreotypes of the city (now unlocated) which later were reproduced as wood engravings in publications issued by the Colonization Society.

Washington is also credited with producing a group of eleven carefully posed and constructed portrait studies (circa 1857), which may have been intended to serve as source material for a print representing the Liberian Senate in action. Rather than exhibiting the formal quality of studio portraits, the images that constitute the Liberian Senate group (Figures 7-10) seem to function more as preliminary sketches. This premise is buttressed by a circa 1857 watercolor (Figure 11) by Liberian artist Robert K. Griffin that represents the principal figures of the Senate in poses echoing those recorded in Washington’s daguerreotypes. Taken together, the watercolor rendering and the daguerreotypes would have provided much of the visual information needed by an artist in the United States to produce a print of the Liberian Senate chamber. While the American Colonization Society or one of its supporters may have hoped to issue such a print, modeled after images of the United States Senate then enjoying wide circulation, there is no evidence that such a project came to fruition.

When Washington settled in Liberia he expected to earn his livelihood as a daguerreotypist and by
operating a small store, but he soon concluded that these endeavors alone would be insufficient to secure his future in his new homeland. To generate additional income, he assumed teaching duties at the Alexander High School, built two rental properties in Monrovia, and began cultivating a few acres of the farmland he had acquired along the St. Paul River, roughly twenty miles from the capital.21 The farm that began in this modest way would later become one of Liberia's principal sugarcane growing concerns.

As he strove to balance the demands of his various enterprises, Washington continued his daguerreotypy, although difficulties associated with obtaining supplies from the United States often interrupted his business for lengthy periods. In June 1855 he reported, "I have not been daguerreotyping for a long time, because I found it difficult to make remittances for materials, and be without the use of my money so long. Still I have a few hundred dollars worth of work here, and am only awaiting the arrival of new materials." When advertising in the Liberia Herald the following year, Washington advised the citizens of Monrovia that, having just received a full supply of daguerrean materials from the States, he would be found "for a short time daily executing correct and beautiful miniatures at his room in this city."22

By 1857, Washington had enlarged the scope of his daguerrean business to include extended stays in the neighboring colony of Sierra Leone. In June of that year he advertised his services in Freetown's New Era newspaper and noted that his experience as a daguerreotypist included "six years of constant and extensive practice in America, previous to a residence of three years with occasional practice in Liberia." In language reminiscent of Washington's earlier Hartford broadside, the advertisement concluded by advising would-be patrons that "Mrs. Washington will be in attendance to receive ladies, and assist in arranging their toilet." Augustus Washington would later cite his efforts as a daguerreotypist in Sierra Leone, Gambia, and Senegal as contributing significantly to the economic success he achieved during his first decade in Liberia.23

As Washington's agricultural and trading ventures grew in importance and profitability, references to his work as a daguerreotypist appeared with less frequency in the pages of contemporary journals and newspapers. Although it is not known precisely when Washington ended his professional practice of daguerreotypy, after 1858 published references to his daguerrean career allude to past activity rather than recent practice. By 1860, when the Hartford Daily Courant published portions of a letter in which Washington discussed his commercial and agricultural pursuits, the newspaper prefaced the excerpts with a brief biographical sketch, observing, "[Washington] made money enough in Hartford, by daguerreotyping to take his family and self to Africa; there he continued his practice of taking daguerreotypes until he had accumulated money enough to buy and stock a sugar plantation on the St. Paul's river."24 In all likelihood, Washington laid his camera aside when revenue from his daguerrean enterprise was no longer required to support his other endeavors. Furthermore, by 1860, the daguerreotype had ceased to be the principal photographic medium, having been eclipsed over time by a succession of other processes. With the burgeoning popularity of paper-print photographs produced in seemingly endless quantities from wet-plate collodion negatives, the one-of-a-kind daguerreotype was rendered virtually obsolete.

As a daguerreotypist, Washington had been welcomed as a valuable addition to Liberia upon his arrival in 1853. However, expectations remained high that ultimately he would occupy a loftier position in the fledgling republic. Washington's own ambitions, though modest at first, assumed grander dimensions as he came to view his own destiny and that of his new homeland as inextricably intertwined. He began to take an active part in the public affairs of Liberia and was appointed to a judgeship (1858) before winning a seat in the House of Representatives in 1863. Twice reelected to the House and chosen as its Speaker, he won election in 1871 to the Liberian Senate, where he served a single term.

The successes Augustus Washington achieved in his public career paralleled those in his private ventures. His landholdings grew to encompass 1,000 acres, while he operated several stores and trading factories as well as a vessel for conducting coastal trade. In 1873, when Washington added newspaper editing to his roster of activities, an observer marveled at the range of his endeavors and worried that with so many irons in the fire something might give way or "come to grief."25

Then, in October 1875, the African Repository carried the following notice:

Hon. Augustus Washington, editor of the New Era, died at Monrovia on Monday, June 7 ... His death is justly mentioned...
as a calamitous event for his family and a severe loss to Western Africa generally. Mr. Washington was favorably known in the New England States, where he was prominently identified with various schemes for the elevation of his race. He acquired a high reputation as a skillful daguerreotypist at Hartford, Conn., from which city he removed to Liberia in 1853. Nothing could induce him to return to [the United States], having acquired a handsome property and freedom and a home in his ancestral land.26

Although the practice of daguerreotypy did not figure in his later life, Augustus Washington retained justifiable pride in his earlier daguerrean accomplishments and saw them as an integral part of his identity. By the time he published the first issue of his New Era newspaper in 1873, Washington had many recent achievements to his credit; yet in introducing himself to his readers, he chose to emphasize the endeavor that had first brought him acclaim, noting: “We were once an artist, without name, without business, and with an unpopular complexion. We toiled night and day, and in a short time it was said we stood at the head of the profession, with the largest gallery in Hartford, Connecticut.”27 Clearly, the skill once acquired “merely as a means to an end” had become one of the defining features of Washington’s life. It was by means of daguerreotypy that he had earned sufficient funds to finance his emigration to Liberia and to assure that, once there, he and his family could begin their new lives under agreeable circumstances. In Africa, income from his daguerrean enterprise supported his family and more importantly provided the seed money that launched his successful agricultural and commercial ventures. In daguerreotypy Augustus Washington found not just the “means to an end,”
but the means to begin anew.

Daguerreotypes can, at best, tell but a fragment of any sitter's story and Augustus Washington's portraits are no exception. But it is to Washington's credit that his best portraits retain the power to engage our interest and kindle our desire to know more about the lives and circumstances of those who posed for his camera.

Endnotes


7 Elihu Geer, *Geer's Hartford City Directory for 1851* (Hartford, May 1851), 144.


9 Proof that the portrait is an uncorrected, laterally reversed image, rather than one taken with the use of a mirror attachment, can be found by examining the buttons of Brown's waistcoat. In a corrected image the waistcoat would button left over right while in Washington's daguerrotype, the waistcoat worn by Brown is seen to button in reverse (i.e. right over left).

10 Information linking Brown's banner to his Subterranean Pass Way is derived from a note accompanying a copy print of the John Brown daguerreotype in the Boyd B. Stutler Collection, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston.


13 Geer's *Hartford City Directory for 1851* lists 167 individuals in its "Colored Persons" section. Of the 115 persons for whom occupations were noted, the majority were employed as laborers, waiters, washers (or washerwomen), cooks, and porters.


16 "The Washington Daguerrean Gallery."


26 *African Repository* 51, no. 4 (1875): 118.

27 *African Repository* 49, no. 8 (1873): 225 (reprinted from *New Era* [Monrovia], n.d.).
Crafting Fictions, Telling Truths: Creative Collaboration in the Photography of Roland L. Freeman

Glenn Hinson

The story lies in the picture. A carver details the head of a walking stick, his eyes tightly focused on the knife in his hand. An array of intricately carved canes rest against the workshop’s rear wall. Carved heads—a flamingo, an eagle, a dog—scatter across the workbench, each awaiting eventual union with a cane’s staff. A carved cobra, with wooden fangs bared, rises up from the floor. The whole emerges as a telling portrait of African American artistry (Figure 1).
The scene's details add to the narrative, suggesting subtexts perhaps not evident at first glance. A dark, clenched fist stands at the center of the canes, floating above the carver's smoothly shorn head. A wheel and paintbrush hang from the wall, testifying to the workshop's versatility. Bared wires overhead, a pipe angled across the wall, and rough stone behind the workbench suggest a basement location. And the curiously menacing glint in the eyes of the flamingo and eagle complement the death's head gaze in the right-most menace glint in the eyes of the flamingo and eagle.

The photograph's context adds yet more to the unfolding story. The image belongs to a larger project documenting community, tradition, and vernacular artistry in Black Philadelphia. It first appeared in a Smithsonian-sponsored exhibit—Stand By Me: African American Expressive Culture in Philadelphia—that opened in 1989 at Philly's Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum. The image also graced the project poster and the cover of the exhibit's catalogue. 'The carver, as identified in the photograph's label, is "master craftsman Milton Jews, who has been carving elegant walking sticks and figures for more than twenty years." The photographer and curator of the exhibit is Roland Freeman.

Those who know Freeman's work—a rich body of images and texts that explore the textures of African American folklife—would quickly recognize this photograph as one of his. The theme, the composition, and the conveyed sense of intimacy all characterize Freeman's images. All speak to his vision as a recorder of African American culture; all testify to his status as one of the nation's foremost visual ethnographers, a status that has emerged over more than thirty-five years of documentary photography. What the image does not reveal, however, is the process through which Freeman realizes his vision, a process best described as ethnographic collaboration. Freeman is not simply a sensitive photographer with an insider's access to the scenes he captures on film. Rather, he is a photographer who crafts his images with an eye toward story, and one who invites those in the photographs to help him tell the unfolding tale. What emerges are images that speak beyond the story of the photographed subject, invoking the broader world of experience of which the pictured scene is but a tiny part. The people in Freeman's images, in essence, become his consultants and collaborators, while the photographs emerge as the products of a shared vision.

Of course, this same claim can be made of most photographs of posed subjects. The very act of cooperation—of simply being in the picture—marks a kind of collaboration, drawing the subject into necessary collusion with the photographer. The image that emerges thus always, to some degree, tells a shared story. But the measure of this sharing varies widely from photographer to photographer. Many photographers freely claim the authority of their vision, asserting the artist's prerogative to wholly shape the artistic product. Their "subjects" are just that, contributors by virtue of their bodies but not their minds. Their role, in essence, is to help tell the photographer's story. Other photographers invite those in the images to join the storytelling process, helping to craft both image and intent. Here, the story is never predetermined; rather, it emerges in the conversations and negotiations that lead up to the photograph. The "subjects" thus become the story's co-tellers, engaged in active dialogue with the photographer.

Freeman is clearly of this latter school. As a consummate teller of stories (both oral and visual), he brings to his work a very particular vision, one that proclaims the integrity and expressive power of African American vernacular culture. This vision clearly guides Freeman's choice of topic and theme; it turns his eye toward the everyday artistry and sustaining spirit that remain hidden in most portraits of African American life. It does not, however, determine the content of his photographs. That unfolds in conversations with those being photographed, conversations certainly informed by Freeman's vision, but not wholly shaped by it.

These conversations, in turn, put a different spin on the "documentary" nature of Freeman's photographs. Most photographers who see themselves as "documentary" workers claim and celebrate the verité nature of their images; they present themselves as "documenters" rather than "manipulators," as those who frame and capture truth rather than those who create it. The fact that all photography, by virtue of the excision that reduces the fullness of reality to a bounded image—is necessarily an exercise in fiction somehow does not enter the discussion. Even when documentary photographers admit to this fiction, they nonetheless tend to minimize it, purposefully setting their work apart. Their images thus offer themselves as "more real" than their photographed analogues. "These," the photographs seem to declare, "represent captured truth."

But the nature of this "truth" changes when its boundaries are stretched by conversations with
those participating in its creation. No longer does “truth” lie solely in the photographer’s eye. The relative simplicity of a single vision vanishes, replaced by a growing complexity as other voices contribute to the story. Suddenly, the image must answer to new demands; for now the story it must tell has grown deeper, adding new texts and subtexts as the conversations unfold. As the story deepens, so too must the photograph. In so doing, it may depart altogether from that which presents itself to the eye, demanding instead a fictional construction that speaks to the newly negotiated narrative. The resultant image—now more of a “creation” than a visual “capturing”—still “documents” reality; it still testifies to experienced truth. But now it admits that to capture truth, sometimes you have to go beyond that which you see. The “real” no longer rests in the image; instead, it lies in the story the image tells.

Freeman long ago recognized the power of the jointly told story, and thus of the co-constructed image. While most of his photographs take a more straightforward “documentary” approach, many emerge as collaboratively fashioned ethnographic fictions, growing out of conversation, reflection, and experiment to yield images that have no existence beyond that of the fleeting moment captured on film. They knew, in other words, that the traditions that they represented might best be shaped and present to the story as well as other voices joined McGregory or me at a field site, the process of documentation and rapport-building was typically well under way, with initial interviews already conducted and project goals already thoroughly discussed. Not only did consultants know what to expect when Freeman visited, but they had also had time to reflect upon the ways that they—and the traditions that they represented—might best be captured on film. They knew, in other words, that they could shape the way that their story was told, and in so doing could shape the broader narrative that was to emerge from the Stand By Me project.

This broader story, in turn, emerged as a recurrent theme in conversations with project consultants. Again and again, we heard participants denounce the narrowly framed ways in which African Americans were portrayed in the national media. These critiques assumed particular significance for Black Philadelphians, whose city had become something of a national poster child for urban decay and moral corruption in the late 1980s. Freeman promised to tell a different story, a tale of vitality rather than collapse, a chronicle of community strength rather than community decline. Further, he could speak as a cultural insider. As has been the case with virtually all of Freeman’s documentation of African American communities, the potential for telling the rarely told story—and for telling it in ways that commanded public attention—invited both reflection and deep engagement from those who became his collaborators.

This shared context brings us to Milton Oliver Jews, and to the evolution of the photograph. I first met Jews in November of 1988, having heard of him from another Philadelphia woodcarver. Within a week of tapping an initial interview (and marveling at the array of carvings that I encountered), I returned to Jews’s South Philadelphia rowhouse with Freeman. Freeman immediately recognized the depth of Jews’s artistry, and quickly began asking about his background and influences. While so doing, he shared stories about other carvers whom he had photographed. Jews, for his part, was initially wary of this stranger who came in with cameras and what could be interpreted as a hustler’s enthusiasm. “Roland and I were feeling each other out at first,” Jews recalls. “We were like two bulls, circling around each other. But I liked him. And I liked him more, the more we talked.”

As the talk flowed, carvings began to emerge, pulled from closets and drawers and back rooms, yielding far more than I had seen in my initial visits. And Freeman began to shoot, posing Jews...
with some of his carvings, arranging others in artful juxtaposition, capturing still others in their solitary glory (Figures 2-4). Many of the shots were preceded by quick-developing Polaroids, each of which Freeman handed to Jews for comment and suggestions. These images, in turn, seemed to spark the retrieval of yet more carvings, until the living room was literally littered with exquisitely sculpted wood. The session stretched into the evening, marked throughout by stories, banter, and a palpably emergent sense of camaraderie.

Despite the evident geniality, however, this first session never became truly collaborative. Jews—though appreciative of Freeman’s solicitous commentary—never felt like a partner in the process.

“Roland was like a director,” he remembers, “but I didn’t have a storyboard. I had no idea what he wanted. Even though we were talking the whole time, I didn’t know what he was trying to say.” Freeman likewise expressed frustration, suggesting that the story still remained to be told. He had captured some telling images, and had perhaps even shot a suitable portrait of Jews. But none of the photographs really spoke beyond the particular moment. None, in other words, invited viewers to engage the broader story of which Jews was a part. And in this particular project—where the broader story was the story, and where the exhibit’s scope limited individual portrayal to single images—this wouldn’t do.
Seven months and many conversations later, we returned to Jews’s home. This time, however, both Freeman and Jews had been able to reflect upon what might constitute the most tellingly appropriate image. Freeman began the session by pulling out some catalogues of his earlier work and reviewing them with Jews, highlighting particular images while reexplaining the project’s broader goals. Jews, in turn, suggested that we go down to the cellar, where he did most of the rough work on his carvings. And so we did, following Jews down the narrow staircase that opened into his front room. As Jews flipped on the basement lights, we beheld a confined workspace whose rough walls and littered shelves offered a sharp contrast to the fastidiously tidy room that we had just left. Freeman had not even reached the bottom step before he declared, “This is the shot.”

But where was the shot? The space was long and narrow, with hanging lights that cast deep shadows and glaring reflections against the rough rock walls. At one end stood two tables, some chairs, and a refrigerator; at the other stood two workbenches set at a right angle, with a vise positioned in a darkened corner against the back wall. Exposed pipes and wiring crisscrossed the low ceiling, while a small radio graced a shelf near the stairs. Lengths of raw wood—limbs, blocks, and small planks—stood in corners and reclined on shelves, though no tools of the woodworker’s trade were evident. This was clearly Jews’s personal space, a private refuge crafted to meet his needs. It was also a space whose layout and lighting seemed to actively resist capture on film.

Freeman, however, clearly saw the space differently. “When he went down into the cellar, that’s when he started getting the flavor,” recalls Jews. “He was looking at it almost like you would a movie set, thinking about how he could make it different, how he could make it tell a story.”

Freeman immediately likened the space to other shops that he had known, shops in outbuildings in the rural South, basement shops in his childhood neighborhood in Baltimore. Thinking aloud, he was making connections as he surveyed the space, reflecting on artistic continuities and African American tradition. Jews responded in kind, reminiscing about the long, rewarding hours he had spent alone in the cellar, which he called his “retreat.” He then recalled how surprised he had been when he first met other African Americans in Philadelphia who carved canes. As he spoke, it became clear that he classed them and himself as “craftsmen,” while calling everyone else—all those who did not work in the arts—“laymen.” Jews clearly put Freeman in the former category. And both recognized the cellar as a “craftsman’s” space. This was clearly part of the story.

But how could this be conveyed? The answer seemed simple enough: Freeman would photograph Jews at work, carving a partially finished cane. The problem, though, was placement. When Jews angled himself into the corner with the vise, fitting himself into the shadowy space between wall and workbench and then leaning into his work, his face, his carving hand, and the head of the cane were all
obscured from view (Figure 5). Though lights could easily illuminate the darkened corner, no placement of the camera could possibly capture both the carving and the workspace. So Freeman suggested moving the vise, unbolting it from the worktable to which it was affixed, and shifting it to the adjacent bench. Though this would radically reorient the shop, it would face Jews toward the camera, while simultaneously opening up the wall behind him.

At first, Jews balked at the idea, flatly asserting, "I'm not going to pick up that vise." But when Freeman assured him that we would move it and later return it to its original place, he assented. The table to which we were heaving it, however, posed another problem. Its white surface promised a distracting glare in the photograph, threatening to draw the eye away from all else. A length of black velvet quickly resolved the matter, shrouding the offending whiteness while highlighting the grain in the board that Freeman set on the now-darkened workbench. While we wrestled the vise onto the board (notice in the final image that the stabilizing bolt-hole stands empty), Jews pulled tools from a drawer to lay at its base. To complete the effect, Freeman swept wood shavings from the floor and scattered them on the freshly fashioned work-surface. The foreground now readied, Freeman began mounting lights and shooting Polaroids. The
cellar's gradual transformation had begun.

Now another issue posed itself: how could the photograph convey the breadth and excellence of Jews's carving? At this point, the only carving in the entire cellar was the cane in the vise (which Jews had carried with him when we walked downstairs). No other piece of wood bore even a rough semblance of sculpting. So Freeman asked Jews to bring down some canes. The first armful brought the five that were most easily accessed. Freeman, however, wanted more, so Jews headed back upstairs and began pulling walking sticks from boxes under the beds. After the third armful, Jews seemed to take the search as a personal challenge, until he finally laid nineteen carved canes on the workbench.

Freeman was the one who suggested lining the canes across the back wall, balancing them on a plumbing pipe that slanted behind the workbench. But a quick Polaroid revealed a problem with this setup—the rough textures of the mottled white wall created a play of shadow and reflection that completely masked the canes' intricately sculpted surfaces. Again Freeman had an answer. After running up to his car, he returned with a roll of rough burlap, which he promptly tacked against the back wall (you can see the burlap's lower edge just above Jews's right elbow in the final image). Suddenly, the canes' carved details seemed to leap out of the background, commanding the viewer's attention. Jews was the first to admit that the burlap did the trick.

All three of us joined in arranging the canes, balancing them precariously on their tips (the gravity-flow sewage pipe upon which they rested tilted toward the ground) and hoping for the best. Polaroid after Polaroid led to several rearrangements, as sticks moved from side to side. Jews himself decided to place the clenched fist—not a cane, but a freestanding carving—directly in the center. The final spacing left two canes that wouldn't fit behind the workbench, so Freeman upturned a trashcan, set it next to the workbench, and rested the walking sticks there. Another length of black velvet—just visible behind the carved cobra—made the canes disappear (Figure 6).

Next came the tabletop, which stretched like an empty stage at the center of the emerging image. This time it was Jews who offered a new cast of characters, suggesting that a few unattached cane heads might enliven the picture. Out came a duck, a dog, a flamingo, an eagle, and a human bust, each of which found its way onto the open space. A chisel, an oil can, and assorted wood scraps completed the scene, reminding viewers anew that this was a shop rather than a stage.

The "shop-ness" of the space, though, had been cast into question by the cellar's gradual transformation. The burlap had effectively erased the rough walls, while the carefully arrayed canes lent an incongruous element of display to the scene. Although exposed beams, pipes, and wiring—along with vise, tools, and wood scraps—still testified to the shop's workaday function, much of the space's utilitarian face had been veiled. Other parts of the cellar, however, remained untouched, suggestively offering such tokens of household industry as hanging paintbrushes and a spoked wheel. Shifted over to the burlap-covered wall, these props added a touch of visual clutter to the image, invoking other sections of the shop while underlining the versatile functionality of the workspace.

Milton Jews completed the picture by bringing down the carved cobra that stood in his front street-side window. Of all his carvings, Jews remarked, this would someday be his "masterpiece." Earlier that morning, Freeman had photographed the cobra from the street; now he placed it on the floor in front of the upturned trashcan. With this final addition, every quadrant of the emergent image bore evidence of Jews's artistry. Now all that remained were slight shifts in lighting, camera angle, and object placement, as Jews and Freeman pored over Polaroids and pressed toward the final image. At last—more than four hours after we had first stepped into the cellar—Freeman declared himself satisfied. The story was told.

The story's telling, however, had completely transformed the space in which the tale unfolded. The photographed workshop bore little resemblance to the basement in which Jews typically worked, with only the workbench—the bench that once held the vise—anchoring memories of the original room. Everything else—from the velvet-cloaked table to the displayed canes to the very surface of the wall—had changed, all in the service of story.

Looking back on that afternoon session, Jews likened the cellar's transformation to the creation of a movie stage set:

You know how the film crew—the prop man, the story writer, all the others—can put things together to make you think you're in, say, someone's apartment, but it's all really just a set? Well, that's what Roland did. Putting the burlap on the background, covering things up with black velvet, moving the vise—he changed everything around. And then the
Figure 6 Roland L. Freeman, 1989, gelatin silver print. Reprinted with permission of the artist. This version of the final image makes the black velvet far more apparent—on the foregrounded table, draped over the side wall’s utility shelf, and behind the cobra.

way he played with the light—it was more like making a movie than anything else. And just like a good movie, the picture that came out of it tells you a story, a story that draws you in.

But is the story “true”? Does the photograph “document” an artist at work in his “natural context,” “objectively” capturing a moment that might have happened with or without the photographer’s intervention? Or does it merely “document” a carefully crafted fiction? Freeman argues that it does both. To the degree that the image captures the serene concentration on Jews’s face as he presses knife to wood, then it certainly documents both artist and artistic process. To the degree that it sets Jews in an invented setting (albeit a setting that Jews helped to create), then it documents an artful fabrication. But for Freeman, questions such as these—with their presumed dichotomy between a captured “real” and a created “unreal”—miss the point. The issues that most concern Freeman do not hinge on debates over degrees of manipulation. Rather, they address the degree to which an image succeeds in telling a story that transcends the portrayed particulars. The photograph of Jews is not only about a South Philadelphia woodcarver. It is also about a time-honored tradition of African
American cane-carving, about rural traditions resettled in an urban setting, about the personalized refuge of the workshop, and about artistry that arises in communities whose voices have historically been silenced but whose works speak with power and passion. It is hard to miss the message of the carved clenched fists, or of the flared cobras with fangs bared.

Most documentary photographers would say that they choose their images to speak beyond the evident. What sets Roland Freeman apart is not this claim to connoted meanings. Rather, it is the process through which these meanings are derived. The vision that guided this photograph—and that which has guided many of Freeman’s images—is not Freeman’s alone. Instead, it is a shared vision, a vision that strives to tell the stories of both presenter and presented, a vision crafted in collaboration. If Freeman’s early images of Jews—taken when the collaborative conversation had just begun—conveyed the photographer’s take on Jews’s story, then the image in Figure 1 conveys the stories that Freeman and Jews are telling together.

Perhaps the best measure of the success of this co-telling rests in the reaction of the image’s subject, the person who—some would argue—was caught in its misrepresentation. When Jews speaks about the photograph, however, he talks about neither the manipulated setting nor the awkwardness of being objectified. Rather, he dwells on the image’s ability to communicate multiple meanings:

"It’s a hell of a picture. And it’s a picture that will stop you. You can’t just look at it momentarily, and then go on about your business. No, you’ve got to stop. And you will analyze it, stop and look at it. And even then, you’ll never feel like you’ve seen the whole picture—you’ll have to come back and see it again. And every time you look at it, you see something different... It leads you in. Something about it will bring you back, as if it’s always got more to tell."11

Twelve years after the *Stand By Me* exhibit, Jews still keeps a mounted copy of the exhibit poster—which includes this image—in his dining room. A framed copy of the print graces his living room wall. And he’s saved all the Polaroids.

The photograph of Jews at his workbench cannot in any way be said to “represent” the work of Roland Freeman. No single image can make this claim. Freeman’s catalogue—representing more than thirty-five years of documentary photography across the African diaspora—is simply too broad to permit this sort of facile reduction. But the image does represent a particular approach to documentary storytelling, an approach that Freeman has developed, honed, and adopted as part of his methodological repertoire. Most of Freeman’s photographs do not follow this path to fruition. Most do not need to. But sometimes, as Freeman points out, the reality that one sees just does not tell enough of the story. Sometimes this reality requires a bit of embellishing, to bring out more stories. How does one know what these stories are? And how does one ensure that they are true to the experience of those being represented? The answer that Freeman offers is elegantly simple: invite your consultants to talk about their representation, and then invite them to help craft the representing image. The keys to conjuring up the stories and then filling them with truth are conversation and collaboration.

When Milton Jews talks about this image, he always acknowledges Roland Freeman’s mastery as a teller of photographed tales. Jews also acknowledges that his own stories also find voice in this image. “Maybe that’s why I can look at this picture every day and never get tired of it,” he says. “Because it’s a picture that talks to you. And it seems like it’s got a lot to say.” Recalling that long-ago day when his basement was transformed, he shakes his head and adds, “I really do think that we stopped time that day, and got a little bit more out of it.”12

**Endnotes**


these works has accompanied a national (and sometimes international) touring exhibit.


5 Freeman’s affiliation with the Smithsonian’s Office of Folklife Programs—now called the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage—dates back to 1972, when he began working with staff folklorists as a research photographer. Since that time, his photographs have been a regular feature of the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the nation’s preeminent celebration of traditional culture. The Smithsonian Institution served as the principal sponsor for the *Stand By Me* project, which also received funding from *National Geographic* magazine and in-kind support from the Philadelphia Folklife Project. Additional images from the Philadelphia project appeared in Roland Freeman’s photo-essay, “A Celebration of Life: Philadelphia’s African Americans,” *National Geographic* 178, no. 2 (1990): 66–91.


7 The following account draws heavily from my fieldnotes of 21 November 1988 and 28 June 1989.


9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

Memory, Mourning, and Revision: William Earle Williams’s Gettysburg—A Journey in Time

Kimberly W. Benston

I. Haunting Gettysburg

Among the many mythic narratives haunting our view of Gettysburg are actual ghost stories, tales of phantom presences, visionary disturbances, and other illusive phenomena that betoken our obsession with events irretrievably past but somehow incompletely assimilated to collective consciousness. As vernacular anecdotes these yarns constitute a sly, sidewise displacement of “official” historiography, reminding us how unsettled the once-convulsive landscape of Gettysburg remains in our national Imaginary, how disquieted we continue to be by what Lincoln termed the “unfinished work” of that fateful midsummer encounter between so many fragile embodiments of rival “American” visions. In whatever guise—ghastly warriors still stalking enemies in poses frozen in an eternity of futility, dark echoings of agonial cries that usher from the battlefield’s rocky coves, or inexplicable doublings of living visitors by visitations of the long-ago dead—these spectral emanations bespeak a scene of continued dialogue between the departed and the living, of communal memory suspended between mourning and forgetfulness. In short, in their persistent (dis)figurations of voice and visage, these legends mark Gettysburg as the uncanny site of an America ever held in abeyance between competing representations of a defining, but equivocal, moment of shattering determination.

Many of these ghostly battlefield fables involve frustrations or interruptions of photography, that most customary mechanism for recording our “experience” of momentous landscape, thus aptly suggesting an inherent disturbance in our shared efforts to “capture,” display, and disseminate fixed images of Gettysburg as a locus of historical encounter and social memory. One such story tells of tourists prowling Devil’s Den—that druidic clump of boulders to the south of the battlefield that formed part of the infamous “Valley of Death” after Longstreet’s terrible assaults on the Federal defensive line—who take snapshots of a taciturn, ragged Confederate soldier (assumed by the tourists to be a particularly effective “re-enactor”). Upon development of the film, the soldier is invariably absent, though every other detail of the pictures is rendered with pristine exactness. Summarizing this story’s axiomatic significance, the authors of Haunted Gettysburg (a representative collection of such tales) write, “It has been said that the spirit of that Confederate soldier, angry over being moved from his original resting place, still prowls the Den, causing cameras and film to malfunction for retribution.”1 If so, he perhaps doubles and displaces an “original” disturbance in the photographic archive of this place, repeating and reversing the construction of one of the Civil War’s most famous pictorial glosses, Alexander Gardner’s Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg, 1863. For as William Frassinato has shown, Gardner’s photograph was a staged image requiring the dragging of a dead Confederate body forty yards to its exact position within the center of the camera’s framed view of the cozy-seeming rocks of Devil’s Den.2 Taken together, ghost story and historical anecdote suggest the irruption of diachronic excess into the smooth surface of synchronic ideality, so that what purports to be historical “truth” (and its simple containment by the recording instruments of modernity, whether “the mirror with a memory” be that of historiography or photography) harbors within it the unacknowledged heterogeneity of traumatic contingency. This interplay of structure and event, of imagistic clarity and hallucinatory adumbration, plays out a drama of enigmatic (de)composition which reminds us that photography’s formal dialogue of absence and presence is inevitably implicated in a struggle for realization that is affective, cognitive, and political, as much as it is technical and aesthetic.

The entanglement of photography and Gettysburg, it seems, instigates a dialectic of formation and deformation that fractures the archive’s putative unity, insinuating a volatile immanence where the transcendence of certainty, nostalgia, and finality might seem to reign. William Earle Williams’s project of photographing the monuments, landscape, and general mise-en-scène...
of the National Cemetery and Military Park at Gettysburg embraces and explores this problematic conjuncture. In so doing, his work subtly places photography at the center of a reimagined national dialogue on race, history, and representation. Williams's exhibit, entitled Gettysburg—A Journey in Time, appeared from March 12 through April 18, 1997, at the Esther M. Klein Gallery in the University City Science Center, University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.1 By evoking and reinterpreting those pictorial, narrative, and historiographic conventions by which the tumultuous events of early July 1863 have long been evaluated, Williams enjoins us to a renewed conversation about the cultural imperatives that shaped and, in turn, were (re)shaped by the battle waged with such destructive and decisive fury in the hilly farmlands of Adams County, Pennsylvania. The first phase of a still-larger endeavor of photographing sites intimately connected with African American participation in the Union military effort to defeat the forces of slavery and fragmentation, Williams's Gettysburg portfolio was assembled across a decade’s period, from 1986 to 1996, and thus constitutes an evolving rumination not only upon this site and its overgrown mythography but on the dynamics of photographic imaging as a medium of social memory, historiographic meditation, cultural mourning, and political praxis.

To grasp fully the conceptual and affective import of this complex undertaking requires appreciation of the deeply layered, almost palimpsestic quality of Williams’s subject matter, for to step upon the fields of Gettysburg is immediately to become enmeshed in an ever-contested landscape overwritten by irony, contradiction, and (for all the certainty of its historical profundity) irresolution. From the moment Robert E. Lee retreated from his dream of cutting a swath from southern Pennsylvania through Philadelphia and perhaps into Washington, leaving behind him a spectacle of unexampled human loss, those fields, at once hollowed and hackneyed, cultivated and commodified, have been tabula rasa for innumerable imprints of revisionary social narration. They have served as a site of national reassessment and affirmation through successive, and sometimes contradictory, acts of public commemoration, communal self-display, and performative rites of consecration that invariably inflected contemporary circumstances while redefining conditions of future enactments. Keenly aware of this thick texture of social inscription, Williams’s project understands the objects of its lens to be products of prior projections as much as subjects of his own vision. Thus, through the photographs’ individual composition, sequential exhibition arrangement, and augmentation by accompanying text, Williams’s images cannily recall a variety of representational efforts to stamp definitive significance upon the site. In turn, his photographs emanate self-consciously at a crossroads of the iconic, the fantasmatic, and the “real,” asserting themselves at once as fresh interpretations of the scene and as meditations on how iconic images serve as embattled carriers of meaning.

Williams’s “Gettysburg” therefore doesn’t purport to be the place “itself,” but, rather, arises in self-conscious relation to a complex discursive field that places any given landmark—any monument, road, hillock, tree, barn, or marker, let alone any “random” branch or wheat stalk, any ancient rock or contemporary telephone wire—in dialogue with alternative occupants of its framed locale. As Alan Trachtenberg observes, “Williams has invented for us a Gettysburg consisting of multiple perspectives” resulting from a variety of presentational tactics.4 By shooting the same object from many angles, in varying lights and seasons, and at widely spaced intervals in the ten-year project, Williams invites us to grasp how the material data of Gettysburg, like images made of them, are situated at the junction of many possible readings, accentuations, and mediations, just as his project is itself to be seen as a temporally conditioned engagement or re-vision of the many intertexts it reassembles for our consideration. And by displaying prints dominated by monuments and markers alongside photographs that either minimize or eliminate those commemorative emblems, Williams historicizes the erection of the Park as a memorial landscape, asking us to recall the contingent (and often contested) circumstances that led to the flurries of monument production in the 1890s, early twentieth century, and 1960s, moments notably as pivotal to the evolution of African American citizenship as was the watershed battle that these monuments seek, in differing fashions, to explain. Inevitably, Williams’s Gettysburg pictures are possessed by something excessive to their empirical purchase, but what haunts them is the idea of history itself, that which Roland Barthes termed the punctum or wounding awareness that the photograph’s import is always partly elsewhere than in the instant(s) of the image’s actual production.5

If, for Barthes, the other time and space of the image is always past, its ontology always that of “the thing [that] has been there,”6 for Williams time extends itself more dynamically and unpredictably
from the picture’s uncertain present, animating a variety of pertinent pasts and summoning the viewer to contemplate the possibilities and risks of a doubtful futurity. We shall return to the latter challenge at the conclusion of this essay; first, we must consider concretely the dense intersection of recollections that Williams’s project evokes. Before one even sees the first picture in the exhibition, it is materially apparent that Williams’s Gettysburg is pointedly intertextual, as the viewer is greeted by the words of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address at the threshold of the gallery. As Williams has remarked, “Lincoln’s speech has only later congealed into what people take to be unambiguous meanings; in its moment, it was a politically-charged, open-ended address, rife with uncertainties.” Speaking not only from within what Garry Wills terms a “culture of revolution” but also upon a specific terrain still horribly scarred by the devastation of battle, and addressing himself directly to the freshly buried Northern dead, Lincoln enjoined the living not merely to remember the dead, but to “dedicate”—literally, to proclaim—not to “this ground” (“the brave men ... who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract”), but to “the great task remaining before us.” Lincoln’s address called to address the future, to fulfill its promise of universal equality, the constitutional principles of American citizenship, the Gettysburg Address, as Wills has argued, is a profoundly revolutionary document, indeed offers itself as a “consecration” not of a locality or even of any particular event taking place there (the speech is striking—and strangely memorable—in part, for its conspicuous lack of description) but of revolution itself, conceived as incomplete by virtue not only of the founders’ imperfect vision but of the nature of freedom itself. The “dedication” to which Lincoln directs us—though born of the moment’s urgent need to rally Northern will for a war whose toll has been painful beyond expectation or calculation—is, by the alchemy of rhetoric, fashioned more from classical conventions than from local details, not merely to an occasion or even an aim but to a mode of being.

The temporal syntax of Lincoln’s speech befits its revolutionary logic, as it moves from past (“Four score and seven years ago”) to present (“Now we are engaged in a great civil war”) to future (“that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom”): it is the syntax of elusive referentiality and deferral, of what Paul de Man calls the “temporal predication” of an “authentic” relation between consciousness and “nature” (by which de Man means Otherness, that of human experience as well as mere “environment”). It is also the syntax of a mourning which understands its own impossibility—that is, which envisions fulfillment only in a paradoxical turn from the object of bereavement to the passions and purposes that once bound us to what now is lost. “We can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground”: only the dead, who now occupy this ground, can invest their mourning there; we, by contrast, must give life to the dead by sustaining the action that once moved them, thus deflecting the energy of mourning into the perpetual project of communal reconstruction. But when the National Cemetery that Lincoln nominally helped to “hallow” in November 1863 was radically reshaped as the National Military Park in the late 1880s and early 1890s, this transitive and self-effacing mode of mourning gave way to commemorative practices designed to tame the revolutionary impulse of Lincoln’s republicanism, especially as it infused the racial economy of Reconstruction. Spurred by Northern white veterans bent on recuperating social authority in an age of American expansionism and black advancement, state legislatures supplied impressive sums not only to place nearly two hundred regimental monuments at strategic locations of the battlefield, but to celebrate what David Blight has termed a “culture of reconciliation” through elaborate dedication ceremonies involving both Northern and Southern veterans, politicians, and other dignitaries. Practicing a kind of civic pedagogy designed to shore up the nation as an “imagined community” free from its fragmented and inconclusive historical conditions, these rituals of commemoration excluded not just black participation but any memory of slavery as the War’s motivating force, while transforming the battle’s physical horrors into romantic reveries of premodern chivalry and common “valor.” If Lincoln assured the dead that the living could “never forget what they did here,” the memorial culture of the late nineteenth century threatened to turn Gettysburg into a kind of “organized forgetting” in which a museal sensibility displaced the arduous, self-critical task of mourning envisioned by the Gettysburg Address. Pious and affirmative, the monumental landscape was envisioned as a distraction from unresolved national trauma by a patronage standing at a full generation’s remove from the War but still ensnared in the “unfinished”
civil conflict sown by white supremacy. It sought to embalm the abiding ghosts of social strife in a literally iconic pastoralism that elided the messy disharmonies of the present and bestowed spurious coherence upon a field of ruins.

This juxtaposition of Lincoln’s speech and post-Reconstruction memorialization provides the fundamental historical framework of Williams’s project, defining “Gettysburg” as the site of a struggle over opposed forms of remembrance, mourning, and historical consciousness. That said, it must be admitted that my accounts of these alternative responses to national crisis and recovery are schematic and serve as touchstones or repositories of contradictory possibilities from which Williams draws in far less tendentious fashion. That is to say, Williams is not ultimately interested in either fetishizing Lincoln’s words or demonizing the veterans’ monuments; rather, he is concerned to (again) set each in motion as part of an ongoing debate about Gettysburg’s place in our cultural fabric, and this task impels him to disclose within word and object alike a dialectical potential repressed by their surface presentations and the continuing socio-political uses to which they have been put. In the case of Lincoln, this means that Williams will pursue the precise material conditions generating black involvement in a “cause” of “equality” to which Lincoln alludes without, however, bringing himself to mention the actual

Figure 1 William Earle Williams, Brambles, Culph’s Hill, 1990, gelatin silver contact print from 8 x 10 inch negative, 7 x 7 inches. Reprinted with permission of the artist.
circumstance either of slavery (which he had come to see as the essential meaning of the War) or of black participation in its violent abolition (which the battle at Gettysburg finally rendered inevitable, despite much staunch opposition among Lincoln’s political and popular allies). In the case of the regimental monuments, this means that Williams will penetrate the imperturbable semblance of Gettysburg’s statuary, its self-legitimizing claim to closure through spatial mastery, to bare traces of temporal, emotive, and ideological instability dormant within sculpture’s frozen aspect, traces revealed both in the statuary’s relation to context and in its own capacity to take on life within the very stillness of its imposing density. As we move past Lincoln’s words and approach Williams’s Gettysburg pictures for a closer look, then, we must keep in view the dense thicket of intertextual performances, motives, and still-evolving implications that these images revisit and challenge us to navigate anew.

II. Exploring Gettysburg

A dense thicket is literally what we encounter in the first photograph in Williams’s Gettysburg exhibition, notwithstanding our expectation of stately sculptural forms standing serenely within the eerie beauty of the south-central Pennsylvanian countryside. Williams has remarked upon the extraordinary freedom available to the contemporary photographer of Gettysburg: not only have the early battlefield scenes made by Brady, O’Sullivan, Gardner, and others, along with W H. Tipton’s later photo-album prints of monuments, been continuously recirculated through the cultural imagination, dominating our visual memory of the place without much contemporary supplementation, but also the Park has been maintained such that, as Williams says, “little impedes the making of pictures there.” It is all the more arresting, in every sense, to find oneself facing Brambles, Culph’s Hill, 1990 (Figure 1) as the first stop on our itinerary through Williams’s vision of the site, for here we confront an image that is aggressively not conventional in terms of inherited ideas of Gettysburg, or even of historically inflected landscape (let alone memorial) photography per se. Immediately, we stumble over the complacencies of our generic assumptions—that landscapes are governed by a perspectival logic clearly modulating foreground and background, directing the eye to norms of significance and beauty; that landscapes position us as looking out rather than looking in, thus “naturalizing” their presences, which seem to arise without human intervention; that, nevertheless, there is always a human figure implicit within landscape, if only as point of origin of the “view,” however absent human presence might be from the picture’s pictorial forms. What, we are forced to ask ourselves, makes this a “scene of Gettysburg”; where are we, and what does it feel like to be here? The impassability and relative opacity of this early winter overgrowth, sharpened by the cropped sky and relatively low spectatorial position, numbs our habitual narrativations of Gettysburg (so well supported by the photographic archive, which generally privileges clear planar discriminations and somewhat elevated prospects) and awakens a more generalized sense of landscape’s potential indecipherability, its evasive referentiality, or, at the least, its requirement of cultural “thematization” in order to become legible within the codes of “landscape” visualization. “Gettysburg” does not merely conjure a range of meanings within a boisterous web of chronicle, proclamation, and pageantry; in order even to become ground for this conflictual representational panoply, it must first be encountered by a consciousness bearing its own freighted history. Before presenting itself as archeological repository, Gettysburg was simply place, uninflected and unappropriated by events, stories, and interpretations. Brambles, Culph’s Hill brings to awareness how we create landscape by assigning scenes their own narrative values, thus enacting what Michel de Certeau describes as the transformation of “places into spaces.” As Williams has remarked, “The Park [with its plaques, markers, maps, statues, road signs, and tour guides] is not the place.”

By thus making the very character of pictorial space an initial protagonist of his vision, Williams first makes us experience afresh just how conditioned our sense of place is, as both an aesthetic and a cultural genre. But as the question, Where am I? modulates into the query, What do I see? what first presents itself as unarticulated wilderness begins to answer the demand for sense. For example, the image’s sharp distinctions between light and shadow that mark out a kind of X directing the eye to the picture’s center, and cross-hatchings of brambles that sweep our attention from left to right as if inviting us to “read” some unseen action beyond the print’s edges, function together to belie the absence of clear “textuality” in the scene, suggesting that it is our own criteria of judgment that initially efface the operations through which landscape emerges as socially intelligible expression. Brambles, Culph’s Hill reminds us that
mediating place and photography is engagement: the photograph must become an image, and, as image, the photograph, as Barthes says, "is always invisible: it is not it that we see." Foregrounding the photographic nature of his project—seeming to lack any discursive point of entry into the scene, what else are we viewing but the consummation of that process?—Williams makes us see both how "the real" is a product of multiple decisions and layered perceptions, and how the discourse in which we envelop such pictures as these necessarily alludes to the "invisible" norms of "reality" summoned by, but not limited to, the prints' material transcriptions. We see the photograph as something more than the outcome of a mechanical and chemical procedure only by transfiguring its marks into signs and inserting it into a system of signification and exegesis. But if Brambles, Culph's Hill undergoes such passage from mark to sign, from denotive imprint to connotative implication, what it comes to figure is the possibility—and perhaps even the necessity—of such passage itself.

I have suggested that this first picture in Williams's Gettysburg display begins by offering itself as "simple place," but this has turned out to be only partly true: we have come to see that, precisely because it is a "landscape," bearing traces of organizational choices that signal human intention, Brambles, Culph's Hill (and the many other pictures like it in the exhibition, for Williams periodically interrupts our progress through the many more immediately legible images with similarly occluded thicketst) lends itself to semiotic implications that arise in the relation between viewer and object. By scripting a gap between our experience of the picture as print and our transfiguration of it into image, however, Williams dramatizes the first order of this semiosis as an experience of time. "Gettysburg" first appears to us as an enigmatic, silent scene, whose "original" meaning is either lost or absent, a cipher that becomes expressive only through the deferral, the temporal detour, of interpretation. Its condition of meaning is thus established as a function of duration and figuration. But what is the time of Gettysburg as image, thus understood? It is not, I think, Barthes's "this has been"—although certainly the referential lesion opened against our anticipation of whatever narrative import we brought to the site defines our encounter with Brambles, Culph's Hill as a traumatic moment, one that thrusts upon us what Shoshana Felman calls the "radical shock of history" by virtue of its initial resistance to comprehension. Rather, it is the time of viewing, experienced in the movement between vision and thought—which, in turn, is an experience of history as that which is other to, yet also of, ourselves—that Williams strategically accents here. Gettysburg may be, indeed, a national memoryscape, but this is so for the memory that we bring to Gettysburg as much as for any that Gettysburg arouses once we are "there." Memory is to be understood, therefore, as unfolding through the act of spectatorship, which entails countless choices in calibrating the distance between eye and print, print and image.

For this reason, the "journey in time" delineated by Williams's exhibition arrangement is at once narrative and counter-narrative, on the one hand opening itself to the unpredictable temporality of historically contingent "meaning" and, on the other hand, refusing any predetermined, determinate horizon of historical implication. Williams's sequences and juxtapositions of images do not so much serve as mnemonic devices designed to trigger specific storytelling acts or metanarrative analyses (though they, of course, cannot be immune to, and perhaps also willingly invite, such responses) as they spur consideration of our means of remembrance, asking us to ponder the extent to which memorial imaging is always already inscribed into the recollected event, a ghostly significance that becomes embodied as "truth" only when excavated, when constructed retroactively. Williams activates this complex shuttle between experience-as-memory and experience-of-memory by confronting us with scenes redolent with our precise visual dilemma or stance, so that we are offered the uncanny sensation of discovering residues of our own intervention in the scene. Viewing, for example, the reflective ambiguities of a slate surface, half-corrugated, half-polished, with its double casting of light as luminescence and mottled shadow (Tennessee Monument, 1994), or sharing the vulnerable, partially unknowing sightline of an infantryman frozen in corroding granite effigy (2nd U.S. Sharpshooters Monument, 1986) [Figure 2]), we experience a frisson of recognition, as though our perception was always already elemental to what we see, as though what we have simply forgotten to include in our "memory" of the battlefield is the indwelling urgency and difficulty of our seeing it (itself an uncanny doubling of the "actual" cognitive haze in which the battle was fought, so immersed were the soldiers in black smoke, thick fog, and billowing dust). It is only through the spectator's intervention that Gettysburg can become what it "was"—the site of collective suffering, deferred recognition, and potential reckoning.
Entering upon the exhibition’s sequential trek, having cut a path beyond the momentary impasse of Brambles Culph’s Hill, we begin to experience a certain rhythm of presentation that emphasizes the plastic quality of landscape at Gettysburg, involving the viewer in a process of gradual and uncertain disclosure. As we observe among the various images of natural and sculptural form iterations and variations of texture, chiaroscuro, figure-ground proportions, perspective, and dynamics—pictorial qualities that together generate thematic tensions between surface and depth, inside and outside, lucidity and concealment—the requirement for concentrated discernment before each image is intensified even as we accept that no single shot can represent the narrative’s essence in an instantaneous totality. Each image, through the precision of Williams’s compositional craft, commands alertness, but in none can we indulge the Platonic-Augustinian ideal of simultaneity, that respite from the negotiations of prospect and retrospect which is the fundamental temporal grammar of the narrative sentence. In other words, sequentiality and the interplay of association and distinction it engenders become ends as well as means of Williams’s narrative method, and contextuality emerges as a value, not just a condition, of the scene’s “meaning.” Moreover, since no picture’s importance can be either minimized or exalted, our relation to the image, and to the objects it depicts, is what
Michael Fried (meaning nothing complimentary) would call “theatrical” rather than “absorptive,” since, as we have seen, our active apprehension is integral to rather than excluded from the object’s very ontology. The installation’s arrangement, with its looping shifts of tone, value, and subject matter, disrupts any possible identification with the object, or even with the “author’s” vision of it, and dissolves that condition of “wholly manifest presence” that Fried venerates in modern art. 22 If Williams’s Gettysburg “appears” to us, it cannot be the august presentness celebrated by Fried...
that we experience, but, instead, a flickering emergence dependent on an inexhaustible dialectic of “beholding” and “objecthood.”

It is we, then, who create narrative in Williams’s “Gettysburg,” guided by the directional energy and suggestiveness of the installation’s orchestrations. Perhaps the signal pattern of this organizational thrust obliges us to mime the process by which political/historical imperatives fashioned Gettysburg’s farmland into a funerary monument. Thus, along with scenes of disorderly copses, darkened rock formations, and indistinct vistas that continue to crowd various pictures, we are, after Brambles, Culpe’s Hill, introduced to the markers, slabs, obelisks, and memorials that define the social gravitas of the National Park. The very first of these encounters, the second picture of the exhibit arrangement, is extraordinary for the way it both extends and redirects our initial view of the landscape. Located deep in space, accessible by way of a path quietly framed by “natural” growth but clearly imprinted by human steps, the sculpture of 28th Pennsylvania Infantry Monument, 1987 (Figure 3) awaits us as an emblem of Gettysburg’s discontinuities and endurances. Paradoxically, it is the difference between humanly reshaped and haphazardly growing materials that (along with the pathway itself) figures the gap opened in the environment by American history, while it is the potential conflation of stone into grove, a spatial enfolding abetted by the tonal “rhyme” of sky, pathway, soft sunlight, and stone coloration, that indicates the aura of duration. Put differently, the recognition of the white element toward which the path draws our eye as a regimental monument of Gettysburg National Military Park—its staccato line of black marks differentiated from the setting’s leaves and tree limbs as some kind of runic braille telling who knows what tale of violent purpose—occurs with a displacing shock, a torsion of focus that entwines awareness and affect. To return to a Barthesian distinction, our grasp of the monument as a vehicle of coded “historical” information—as a feature of some studium or systematic knowledge—hinges on our experience of it as punctum, an unclassifiable emotive “sting” or “cut” that portends something external to any semiotic structure. The sensation that the monument might have remained unmarked is part of its remarkable appearance, and this potential evasion of reference is a necessary ingredient of the image’s pictorial composition. The monument’s “meaning” thus lies both within and beyond the conventional realm of semiological reason, for its offer is precisely the meaning of trauma, of an event that both wounds and eludes, that invites our glance and deflects any full comprehension.

In views such as these we come to understand why Williams cites his indebtedness to photographers like Evans and Atget, for it is the difficulty of (re)claiming human presence within a scene of palpable melancholy and estrangement, that “disinterested intensity of incidental configuration” which Siegfried Kracauer, following Walter Benjamin, located in the quasi-vacant spaces of Atget’s Paris street scenes, which Williams often heightens in framing Gettysburg’s monuments, obscured as they so frequently are in these images by their very likeness to the ground and growth of the environment (as, for example, in 5th Infantry New Hampshire Monument, 1986 or South Reynolds’s Avenue, 1988) or caught up as they can become in the evolving day’s drama of shadow and illumination (as, for example, in Pennsylvania Position Markers, 1987 and Oak Tree and Boulder 1994). The resultant interplay between symbolic assertion and enigmatic self-effacement, between monumentality and mourning, stirs in us what Benjamin called “an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency... to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.” This “spark of contingency” lends self-consciousness (and hence responsibility) as well as risk (and hence humility) to the narrativizations, the ideological proclamations, that we ascribe to, or enact before, these memorials. Ensnosed within a landscape of alternative yet echoic materials—“natural” details that might be allegorized variously as indifferent to, in sympathy with, or in struggle against human design—these pictures’ monuments import time into “Gettysburg,” not as the linear, definitive causality of chronicle, but as that which ruptures any such transcendental, omniscient notions of “history,” opening a place for the present to enter the past and glimpse therein a future that the past helped create but could not fully know.

From this perspective, perhaps the most remarkable images in Williams’s gallery of monument pictures are those of Southern memorials, which, in contrast to the 28th Pennsylvania Infantry Monument and other northern commemorative sculptures, are not generally elegiac but heroic, having been erected in the mid-twentieth century (well after the living memories of actual combatants had vanished) in outbursts of revisionary romanticism. Crafted as much to create
a reactionary continuity between an imagined chivalric Confederate glory and contemporary white resistance to black civil rights, these monuments often portray soldiers in poses of embattled grandeur and steely resolve, not vulnerable isolation or somber loss. Yet by framing the sculpture against natural elements (often tree branches) that both follow and counter the human forms’ gestures, while limiting light and distance so as to emphasize the homology of the various limbs’ straining darkness (a process often abetted by minimizing depth of field and compressing the sky into the

Figure 4 William Earle Williams, Mississippi Monument, 1990, gelatin silver contact print from 8 x 10 inch negative, 9 x 8 inches. Reprinted with permission of the artist.
the scene of wood and stone), Williams simultaneously extends the figures’ determination into a tautness more akin to anxiety or even imminent anguish and complicates the viewer’s task of measuring distance between eye and object, allowing us to consider contradictions within the scene’s gestural drama but preventing us from having any complacent embrace of sentimental identification or ironic disavowal. In North Carolina Monument, 1986, for example, a small band of ragged but persistent men seem at the verge of being absorbed by the grove that enwraps them, their guns and flag becoming just some linear elements among others in an Uccello-esque grid of clashing striations; and yet, thus loosened from the extravagant cliches of fanciful (im)posture, they become available for a mourning that remains conscious of their disastrous enterprise, especially when we share the figures’ disparate gazes up or out beyond the picture’s frame. Similar tensions between performance and recontextualization are dramatized in Mississippi Monument, 1990 (Figure 4), in which the contrast of motion and arrest, thematized in the motif of fatal combat, provokes consideration of how the figure’s “stance” is both empowering and disabling. Through tight focus and a savagely low-angle shot, the soldier’s powerfully unwavering aggression is mitigated by its partially self-concealing defensiveness; he seems as much bound by his own muscular belligerence as readied for defense of his “position” (an impression reinforced by the print’s precise rendering of every swirling fold of clothing, which encircles him in an agonizing choreography shared by the tangled branches behind). The figure’s defiant pose is menaced by a sensation of imbalance that produces in the viewer a vertiginous twinge, a feeling of dislocating irresolution or precarious suspension. These conflicts among figural, textural, and optical emphases are somewhat mitigated by the impression of dominating command that the statue exerts over the framed space, but the effect is nevertheless one of disjunction and turmoil, not integrative harmony or expressive assurance.

However we calculate these economies of positionality (in the soldier, in ourselves, in our relation to him, and so forth), possibly the most captivating surprise of this image is the dark hand hanging at the picture’s lower middle. Logically belonging to the fallen (Union?) soldier lying at the Mississippi hero’s feet, the hand visually floats free of any bodily association, its white tips setting off a blackness that possibly reminds us of the unspoken cause of the Southerner’s action, even as it binds both standing and fallen warrior by virtue of the mirroring between it and the foot to the picture’s lower left. Yet whatever the thematic implications of these sculptural arrangements, I am not further inclined to trace here some ideological allegory that might or might not inhere in Williams’s compositional scheme. Rather, it is the hand as punctum that “stings” me in this picture. It is precisely not knowing where to place the hand, spatially any more than conceptually, that dislodges it from my previsionary assumptions about Gettysburg and the Civil War, and that, by way of such quickened contingency, returns even these often mendacious (or at least self-deluding) Southern monuments to the imperatives, the unclosed historicity, of our culture’s ongoing psycho-social crisis, its incessant need to refigure the relation of agency to violence in the broader national project of emancipation.

III. (Su)staining Gettysburg

As Williams fashions this dialogic Gettysburg, interrogating conventions of both landscape and memorial representation, photography’s own “natural” inclination toward documentary transparency is both employed and subverted. This critical realism, which magnifies the importance of detail both for its function of anchoring a larger system of implication and for its capacity to uproot us from these received signifying orders, requires us not only to register contradictions in the scenes we view—contradictions of theme and gesture (as between Northern and Southern monuments), and also within textures, materials, light sources, camera placements, and other features of formal patterning—but to explore those contradictions dialectically, just as we learn to look at the Park’s memorializations for what memory has forgotten. In this respect, Williams’s approach to Gettysburg’s monuments can be further understood by comparing them with Tipton’s important commemorative photographs of the monuments done at the turn of the century with the aim of enforcing the institutional authority of veterans’ self-memorializing projects. Where Tipton is concerned to present the monument as a self-enclosed and self-sufficient inscription of unquestioned heroism and cultural capital, eliminating much sense of the statue’s surroundings and even highlighting the monument’s presence in the frame by post-printing line engraving, Williams insists not only (as we have seen) on situating the sculpture in an ever-changing environment, deflecting inscription by turning monuments to their sides and altering the camera’s standpoint and focus, but on shooting the “same” tableau over several years, allowing his own evolving sense of...
the enterprise to unfold new choices. In this way, Williams reminds us how monumentality seeks to freeze event, eliding contiguous discourses and continuing complexities that might reshape our understanding of moment and place, while seeking to release from the memorial imagination its potential for transformation, the interior and still vital temporality immanent in contexts wider than those allowed by memorial History.

In Gettysburg—A Journey in Time, then, hitherto invisible movements within the landscape, movements which the statues ambiguously "monumentalize" and which Tipton's images halt, become visible through the lens's agency. The camera, we begin to see, is itself a coded artifice of modern narrativization, affecting how we perceive the scene and hence how we experience the scene as event. What might have seemed peculiar to the installation's first "arresting" picture, Brambles, Culph's Hill, is integral to the whole endeavor—Williams makes us reconsider the medium itself, specifically revaluing its longstanding claim to be a superior eye, revealing what we have never seen before. In fact, his formally precise yet intricately turbulent prints of Gettysburg suggest that photography inflects and alters the dialectic of intentionality and impercipience that altogether makes possible our relation to any scene—a suggestion enhanced by Williams's decision to pursue the project with a large-format view camera, which imposes on the picture-maker its own requirements of temporal commitment (because of its cumbersome apparatus and delays between composition and exposure of the image) and studied visualization (because the ground-glass rather than the viewfinder is employed in framing the scene). As Ansel Adams crisply observed, the large-format camera's image is "specifically photographic and not merely a simulation of the 'view' before the camera." These photographs, patiently capturing signs of difference among the solid and enduring, reveal what the casual eye fails to note: that Gettysburg is the site of contestatory "visions," a hypothesis or ongoing experiment, upon which various cultural actors have attempted to impose a timeless meaning. Thus whatever stories we might
remember or compose as we take our trek through Williams’s exhibition, what remains crucial in these pictures are the myriad signs of change—the growth and decay of trees that were mere saplings during the frightful battle of 1863; the hillsides now flecked with buildings and crossed with telephone wires; the monuments themselves, broken or eroded or overgrown, if still present.

Here, then, the inherent link of photography to death, which Barthes and Benjamin so tendentiously insist upon, is given a new turn by Williams’s interfusion of landscape and funerary photography. By making present to us again fields once strewn with a “harvest of death” (to cite the caption-writers for O’Sullivan’s famous picture of bloated bodies dotting a shrouded battlefield hillside)—cf. Williams’s *Harvested Field, 1988* [Figure 5] and *Farm Detail, East Cavalry Battlefield, 1991* [Figure 6]) in terms that both deconstruct the “agrarian ideology” that underwrote early photography’s effort to naturalize Gettysburg’s destruction and denaturalize our own tendency to imagine ourselves now safely removed from a deathly conflict, which quite possibly represented the difference between emancipation and continued enslavement in dissolved Union, Williams’s images become a kind of *apophrades*, a return of the dead. And by layering temporalities within this spectral procession—the eras of the monuments’ placements in a landscape teeming with organic growths that both preceded and followed them; the battle to which those monuments allude; the passage of years evinced by the monuments’ erosions; the aging contemporaneity established by electrical wires, traffic lights, and Park Service roads; the moments when the photographs were themselves taken, portending the times of the prints’ development, production, and, ultimately, viewing—with the same delicate exactitude that the large-format lens affords the objects’ textures, Williams intimates the virtual interfusion of present and past, a connection whose materiality takes shape as a subtle injunction for us to reenter the bitter debate that failed to protect those monumentalized here or to completely liberate those for and against whom they fought: the black folk who, as Gettysburg’s memorial culture forgets to remind us, also fought vigorously for themselves.

Perhaps that is why, finally, what changes most in these photographs is not the monuments, the
landscape, or even the relation between them, but Williams's and our own relation to all these and to the medium through which he measures them. No more than we, as we entered the scene at Brambles, Culps Hill, does Williams possess a privileged, panoptic position beyond the scenic realm of Gettysburg; he does not look from a vantage outside the spectacle, disembodied and all-knowing, wielding an immaculate epistemological authority. Nor, on the other hand, is he the passive vehicle of a coldly detached, wholly precise recording instrument; the camera is not itself free from the unpredictable exchanges between perceiver and object, and it cannot erase from the image traces of its own citational operations. Instead, Williams emphasizes the mutual participation of subject, object, and medium in an event that unveils, rather than occludes, the transformation of "nature" into "history." Decentering the optical sovereignty that since the Renaissance has been conventional to landscape illustration, with its idealization of visual autonomy through sequestration of the eye from the world, Williams's photographs insist upon the corporeal involvement of human perception with the domain it occupies. And so, as his project unfolded, and his eye ranged among the monuments, between the monuments and the landscape, and within the landscape itself, what emerged most tellingly is the stain of his own image upon the scene.

What we have called the "critical realism" of Williams's Gettysburg is thus both performative and autobiographical, its narrative historicity at once collective (because dependent on spectatorship) and subjective (because the photographer's eye, hand, and body cannot be abstracted from the image to which we respond in kind). How is this dynamic of transformative engagement made clear to us? To approach this question, and to arrive at a provisional denouement of our movement among these ceaselessly provocative photographs, let us look closely at Plowed Field, 1987 (Figure 7), one of the most affecting—and, yes, haunting—of several images that record Williams's shadow upon the "field of vision." A cunning meditation on the complication of figure and ground in any production of "landscape" (understood in its root sense of a delimited system of shared assumptions about inhabited space), Plowed Field reminds us that a photograph of Gettysburg expresses an enunciatory point of view made possible by the mutual trespass of eye and object. Yielding all fantasies of imaginary plenitude and narrative mastery, the photographer thus likewise insinuates the entanglement of representation and reception, of author and audience, in the shaping of the image. Or perhaps we should say that Williams's shadow "figures forth" a reciprocity in the production of images of the body's phantasms and pulsations with the mind's discernments. Likewise, it is not only Williams's presence in the image that displaces the illusory metaphysics of classical vision (and the foreclosed symbolizations such visions sustain) but that of the camera itself: occupying contiguous positions, photographic apparatus and human agent together enter and share the space of the image, altering and being altered by what they jointly mediate.

Moreover, these aligned "agents" of vision inhabit a field that enacts its own planar colloquy with alternative claims to our attention, the shadow of a utility pole slashing diagonally against lines of plowed wheat that carry our view toward the
horizon’s recession. What binds these disparate elements—body, machine, stalks, utility pole—is not so much the convolutions of “natural” and “human” value they depict, but first, their commonly cultural determination, and second, their status in the image as images, as “shadows” of some putatively “original” or “true” presence. In this, they are fundamentally photographic emblems, bearing the elegiac burden of being what Susan Sontag resonantly describes as “richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them.” Such, I believe, is the “nature” of Williams’s Gettysburg—A Journey in Time, or rather, of that intersection of materiality, reference, and story; of trauma, trace, and image; of memory, mourning, and re-visions from which Williams’s project takes its name, and to which he invites us once again to “dedicate” ourselves.

Endnotes

1 Jack Bochar and Bob Wasel, Haunted Gettysburg: Eyewitness Accounts of the Supernatural (Gettysburg: Donny Bayne, 1996), 35.


3 The exhibition was hung by Mr. Williams and curated by Libby Newman; the accompanying catalogue, likewise entitled Gettysburg—A Journey in Time (Philadelphia: Esther M. Klein Art Gallery, 1997), includes an introductory essay by Alan Trachtenberg entitled “William Earle Williams’s Gettysburg Photographs” (5–9) This essay is herein cited as Trachtenberg.

4 Trachtenberg, 7–8.


6 Ibid., 76.

7 William Earle Williams, conversation with author, May 21, 2001. All other citations from Williams are from this interview.


14 “Without mentioning slavery or black people, Lincoln’s words tell us unforgettable that these events were of transcendent importance.” Trachtenberg, 6.


16 I borrow the term from Richard Wellheim (Painting as an Art [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987]) by way of Arthur Danto’s intriguing essay on tragic irony in the battle of Gettysburg (see “Gettysburg,” in Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], 242). Danto artfully sketches how the battle redefined “mere” agricultural landscape into military “ground” I would object only to his argument that prior to such appropriation, the Adams County countryside remained “unhematized” (248), for what is at stake is not a purely “natural” presence as against a violently “cultural” inscription, but alternative (and still competing) modalities of human impression upon an environment. I shall explore this dynamic of intersecting and contrasting “thematizations” later in this essay, when considering certain of Williams’s images that force us to confront overlapping systems of meaning within a single “view” of the current landscape.


18 Barthes, 6.

19 Indeed, Brambles, Calph’s Hill is itself repeated in the exhibition after we have begun to adjust our sights to more recognizable, decipherable depictions, as if to undermine any idea of any definitive triumph of narrative over scene, or scenic structure over place.


21 On the visual (and aural) confusions suffered by Gettysburg’s soldiers, see Kent Gramm, Gettysburg: A Meditation on War and Values (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), especially chap. 16.


23 Ibid., 125 ff.

24 Barthes, 27.


27 Ansel Adams, The Camera (New York: Little, Brown and


30 This theme of active black involvement in the enterprise of African American emancipation, which remains the vital subtext of *Gettysburg—A Journey in Time*, has become the explicit guiding thesis of Williams’s aforementioned venture of photographing sites intimately connected with the movements and actions of black troops in the Civil War. I hope soon to supplement the present essay with an exploration of this second phase of Williams’s project.


32 André Bazin crisply formulates key features of such idealist aesthetics as they might characterize an “ontology of the photographic image”: “[With photography], between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent.... The objective nature of photography confers upon it a credibility absent from other picture-making. We are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced.” *What Is Cinema?,* vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 13.

What is at stake in Williams’s contrary insistence on the inescapable, if incalculable, complementarity of “living” and “nonliving” agents in the image’s production is the nature of “truth,” just as the transdisciplinarity and conceptual cubism of his project call into question any narrative of Gettysburg that claims a final “objective” purchase upon Gettysburg’s roiling complexities.

Selves Forgotten and Remembered: Stephen Marc’s Soul Searching

Grant Kester

It is cruelly ironic, of course, that just as the need to establish our subjectivity in preface to theorizing our view of the world becomes most dire, the idea of subjectivity itself has become “problematic.”

Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity”

Speaking Bodies

New York City was rocked by yet another art scandal in 2001, precipitated this time by the inclusion of Renée Cox’s Yo Mama’s Last Supper (1996) in the Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The image features a nude Cox presiding over a reconstructed scene of the Last Supper. The offended party, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, condemned the work as “disgusting” and “anti-Catholic” and threatened to convene a “decency commission” in order to prevent the recurrence of such an outrage at a city-funded museum in the future. Only two years previously Giuliani’s delicate sensibilities had been offended by Chris Ofili’s elephant dung The Holy Virgin Mary (1996) in the Sensation exhibition (also at the Brooklyn Museum). It is, perhaps, not coincidental that both images objected to by Giuliani featured African or African American bodies (if one can speak of Ofili’s image in this way) posing as icons of Christianity. As Michael Kimmelman pointed out in the New York Times, Giuliani had no reaction whatsoever to an image of a partially nude white woman in a Christ-like pose that was also part of the Sensation exhibition (Wrecked [1996] by the British artist Sam Taylor-Wood). Giuliani apparently feels

Figure 1 Stephen Marc, untitled image from The Black Trans-Atlantic Experience, London, England, 1989, gelatin silver print. Reprinted with permission of the artist.
that any association between a black woman’s body and symbols of spirituality is so patently offensive that his attack required no further justification.

Giuliani’s vituperative attack on Cox’s work marks the enduring power in American society of what Franz Fanon succinctly termed the “racial/epidermal schema.” In her essay “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” artist and critic Lorraine O’Grady outlines the persistent reconstruction of the black female body at the matrix of white desire and fear. “A kaleidoscope of not-white females,” O’Grady writes, “played distinct parts in the West’s theater of sexual hierarchy. But it is the African female who, by virtue of color and feature and the extreme metaphors of enslavement, is at the outermost reaches of ‘otherness.’” The demonized black body obviously has a long history in American culture and continues to provide a potent resource for the white imagination; consider the figure of the depraved drug lord Evelda Drumgo in Ridley Scott’s film version of *Hannibal* (2001). Black bodies are criminalized, eroticized, incarcerated, and destroyed in America, but very seldom are they entitled to speak for themselves. It is not surprising, then, that a concern with the body, as a vehicle to address the broader cultural construction of African American identity, is central to the works of a younger generation of black artists (Lyle Ashton Harris, Thomas Allen Harris, Clarissa Sligh, Carrie Mae Weems, Pat Ward Williams, and Bill Gaskins, among others).

This interest in the symbolic politics of the body is evident as well in the work of Stephen Marc, a photographic artist who draws on digital media technology to construct elaborately detailed “visual mindscapes” that combine references to the African diaspora with images gleaned from his own travels and family history (Figures 1 and 2). After earning an MFA from the Tyler School of Art in the late 1970s, Marc taught at Columbia College in Chicago for twenty years before relocating to Arizona State University in 1998. His interest in the visual culture of the African diaspora was first elaborated in his 1992 book, *The Black Trans-Atlantic Experience: Street Life and Culture in Ghana, Jamaica, England, and the United States.* Here Marc focused on key sites of black culture within the English slave trade. Despite the myriad differences of location and culture among these sites, Marc’s concern was to identify the common connections in dance, music, ceremony, and fashion that define a black identity (what he refers to as the “collective family”). Marc’s images trace out the contours of a diasporic culture that transcends the...
Figure 3 Stephen Marc, untitled image from *Urban Notions*, c. 1983, gelatin silver print. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Figure 4 Stephen Marc, untitled image from *Urban Notions*, c. 1983, gelatin silver print. Reprinted with permission of the artist.
boundaries of geography through strikingly similar forms of cultural and spiritual expression.

Digital Diaspora

Marc's previous book, *Urban Notions* (1983), explored black urban experience through the visual rhetoric of street documentary (Figures 3 and 4). Although Marc's images in this book reflect the stylistic conventions established during the 1960s and 1970s by figures such as Garry Winogrand and Todd Papageorge (and earlier by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank), an even more important influence can be found in the work of the Harlem-based photographer Roy DeCarava. DeCarava sought to define a formal syntax appropriate to the photographic expression of African American culture through his explorations of the deep tonal range of the black and white print. Marc has discovered his own formal language in the complex interweaving of images, surface, and depth made possible by digital technology. Thus, in his most recent series of prints, *Soul Searching*, Marc has moved away from the fortuitous juxtapositions of straight documentation and the "decisive moment," using digital scanning and composition techniques to accumulate, combine, and recombine found and created images (Figures 5 and 6). The imaginary architectural spaces familiar to us from CAD-CAM software and computer games such as Doom and Myst become, in Marc's compositions, sites of cultural assemblage, in which bodies, masks, elaborately patterned faces, self-portraits, and family photographs are woven together into a dense fabric of cultural and historical references.

A key feature of these works is Marc's concern with surface patterning, which often spreads across and interconnects faces, bodies, landscapes, and other surfaces. He credits this in part to childhood memories of his aunt's crocheting and his uncle's meticulous auto detailing, but Marc's focus might also be viewed as a graphic expression of the underlying system of connections that link together the disparate strands of a diasporic culture. The patterning is thus not merely a "decorative" element, but refers as well to traditions of ritual (scarification, tattooing, face painting) that mark the identification of an individual with a given community or collective whole. Neither purely representational nor purely abstract, simultaneously ludic and restrictive, these markings suggest the necessary but ambivalent affinities that bond us one to another. In Marc's universe, bodies and faces
merge into architectural spaces and landscapes; the surface of skin becomes landscape becomes building. These fluid transformations give a sense of solidity and permanence, of "rootedness" to bodies that have, historically, been uprooted, transported, and stolen away from their native land.

Equally important in Marc's work is his use of montage. Here the accumulation of images—the building up of a visual archive of personal and cultural history so necessary to the preservation of a people subjected to incessant dispersal, migration, and fragmentation—finds a technical corollary in the almost limitless range of manipulations, layerings, and juxtapositions made possible by computer programs such as Photoshop.

We might think of the "history of montage in terms of two often interconnected tendencies. On the one hand is a tendency toward fragmentation, in which a given pictorial system is broken down and reassembled in order to reveal its contingent or arbitrary nature (as, for example, in Braque's or Picasso's early cubist portraits and still lifes). This is often expressed as a vehemently antirealist impulse, whose critical energies are directed at the norms of representation itself (here a composition of wine bottles on a café table top can be as challenging, in its own way, as the most overt form of agit-prop). On the other hand is an impulse toward the reconstruction of reality, often using the same disassembled elements to evoke a coherent narrative that references not simply representational codes per se, but also a given aspect of the social or political world toward which these fragments previously gestured (John Heartfield's anti-Nazi montages for AIZ are exemplary in this regard). It is this second, additive tendency that seems closer to the spirit of Marc's work, which uses the techniques of compositional fragmentation and recombination to evoke specific histories and stories. In fact, despite the sometimes chaotic density of his Soul Searching images, Marc describes these works as a form of "visual storytelling," the "visual equivalents," he writes, "of an oral history." For Marc, digitized images (of faces, bodies, and landscapes) become syntactical units within a broader cultural dialogue, literalizing the connection between his own family history and the long past of the black diaspora: from Central Africa to West Africa, from Ghana to Jamaica, from Jamaica to Charleston, from Charleston to Birmingham, from Birmingham to Chicago. While his images do not lend themselves to a single or unitary interpretation, neither are they...
intended to be stubbornly opaque or gratuitously indeterminate: they offer instead a resonant visual/hermeneutic field within which a key set of signs and symbols circulate, connect, and reconnect.

Lost and Found

It has become something of a commonplace in contemporary critical theory that the “centered” or self-identical subject, familiar to us from the Enlightenment philosophies of Descartes, Kant, and others, is inherently regressive, linked in an inexorable causal chain that extends from the level of individual acts of cognition to the vast structures of the nation-state.

Further, any claim to speak on behalf of a collective cultural identity implies an intolerably universalizing claim of a signifying authority. The solution to this vast, interconnected system of epistemological oppression must begin, then, at the level of the individual through a radical “self-forgetting,” a rejection of conventional models of the subject, and an ongoing attempt to de-center and dislocate any coherent sense of self before it can fully solidify. This involves, in turn, the rejection of a whole series of related discursive forms that are presumed to be dependent on this subject position, including conventional narrative structures based on semiotic or historical continuity, as well as notions of cultural tradition or commonality. In this neo-Nietzschean scenario, the weak “slave” mentality that fixates on past acts of injustice must be replaced by a continuous reinvention and reconstruction of self at the liberating threshold of becoming.11

In this context Marc’s concern with “storytelling” can seem hopelessly retrograde, relying as it does on the outmoded assumption that cultural traditions can be shared in common without immediately devolving into some totalizing dystopia. While “minority” subjects (to use Gilles Deleuze’s terminology) might be allowed to engage in these proscribed modes of identity and signification, it is with the understanding that they are merely the flawed anticipation of a truer or more fully “deteriorialized” form of being. Thus, as John Rajchman writes in his recent study of Deleuze, “What Deleuze terms minority always presupposes such a ‘people to come,’ born of an ‘absolute deteriorialization,’ even if, for reasons of strategy or sheer survival, it is necessary to compensate it with a counter-identity or counternation, as in what he calls ‘relative deteriorialization.’”12 Here the cultural traditions of an oppressed people, the evocation of a diasporic “community” or a Palestinian nation, for example, are viewed as “necessary” but clearly less than desirable, justifiable only as a kind of ontic “compensation” for a history of subjugation. It is this same question that Lorraine O’Grady raises in her work on black female subjectivity, cited at the beginning of this essay:

[When we look to see just whose subjectivity has had the ground shifted out from under it in the tremors of postmodernism, we find (who else?) the one to whom [Nancy] Hartsock refers as the “transcendental voice of the Enlightenment” or better yet, “He Who Theorizes.” Well, good riddance to him. We who are inching our way from the margin to the center cannot afford to take his problems or truths for our own.]13

While it is understandable that white Europeans
(or Americans) may wish to “forget” a past of slavery and colonialist violence (and the forms of identity that are the ostensible concomitants of this violence), the stakes of African Americans in this act of historical amnesia are considerably different. The conventions of narrative, subjectivity, and signification that have been so gleefully discredited over the last thirty years or more of critical theory are not the same for a privileged white philosopher or academic as they are for a writer or artist whose consciousness has been formed by a history of exclusion from these same conventions. The power to define and situate the self, to speak with some authority about and against the empirical “reality” of slavery, for example, was clearly a formative component of the African American literary tradition. Thus, from the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845), to Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself (1861), to Booker T. Washington’s Up From Slavery (1901), to Angela Davis’s If They Come in the Morning (1971), to Adrian Piper’s early performances, to Marc’s own Soul Searching we find a persistent concern with what might be termed the “narration” of self. While there are clearly valuable lessons to be learned from critiques of narrative or identity, we must also be cognizant of the extremely durable nature of certain systems of thought that persist in defining cultural production along a specific trajectory of cognitive or theoretical “development” which (implicitly) privileges Eurocentric forms of self-reflection.

In a culture that is so steadfastly dedicated to repressing the African American past, to assuming that the cumulative effects of four hundred years of slavery are rendered irrelevant by a national holiday, Black History Month, and a few decades of grudgingly accepted legislation (which are
even now being steadily dismantled), how do we "remember" this history and its ongoing effects on the distribution of power in our country down to the present day? How do we account for the recurrence of tribal songs from Sierra Leone hundreds of years later among the black slaves and ex-slaves of South Carolina, except through some concept of cultural tradition and continuity? Are we to deny this tradition any intrinsic value, to dismiss it as merely symptomatic or "compensatory"? Storytelling, as practiced by Marc, implies the ability to represent a given experience (both his own and that of the larger diasporic culture) from the perspective of a grounded or at least nominally centered position of subjectivity. It implies, further, a concept of historical and narrative continuity that will allow us to remember, rather than forget, past black selves. The problem that Marc confronts as an artist is not to "lose" or "forget" an already consolidated sense of self, or a coherent cultural tradition, but precisely to assemble one in the first place, by collecting up the cultural bits and pieces that have been scattered between West Africa and the South Side of Chicago by the forces of diaspora. If he has a larger mission as an artist, it is to challenge, in his own way, the historical erasure of the accumulated violence of slavery, and to celebrate the cultural forms that have persevered in its wake.

Endnotes

4 O'Grady, 268.
7 Stephen Marc, Urban Notions (Champaign: Ill: ATARAXIA, 1983).
10 Marc, "Soul Searching.
11 I have written about this outlook in more detail in a recent essay on Adrian Piper. See Grant Kester, "Out of Site, Out of Mind: The Art and Philosophy of Adrian Piper," Mix Magazine 25, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 40-45.
13 O'Grady, 271.
Contributors


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