



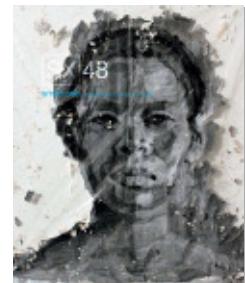
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Flow and Arrest

Huey Copeland

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Flow and Arrest

Huey Copeland

We start with a story. In 2002, while researching the dissertation from which my first book, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America*, would emerge, I had the opportunity to pose for the artist Lorna Simpson. Her practice had already become a locus of my thinking about aesthetics, slavery, and the aporias of representation, so I eagerly agreed to serve as her model. With characteristic economy, Simpson made good use of the photographs resulting from our session, eventually deploying them in a range of artworks that together comprise her 2002–03 exhibition *Cameos and Appearances*. Yet however reproduced, framed, or occluded, those initial Polaroid images are also documents of an encounter in which the “art historian” became the “subject” of “his artist’s” “objective” gaze, leaving each of the quoted words estranged from itself and underlining an entanglement in the artistic procedures that I set out to describe.¹

Estranged and entangled: these terms begin to articulate not only the queer experience of belatedly gazing at myself through Simpson’s lens but also that of reading the critical engagements with *Bound to Appear* commissioned by *Small Axe* and penned by two black literary scholars, Stephen Best and Hortense Spillers, whose work has long mattered to my own. Like Simpson’s photographs, my book bears the name of a single author, but it is necessarily a collaborative affair: every writer will admit—at least in his acknowledgments if not through his method—that his work is a condensation of social, conceptual, and material relations that encompass an array of attitudes, objects, practices, and interlocutors. The present company

1 I here revisit thematics first explored in Huey Copeland, “Outtakes,” *Art Journal* 67, no. 4 (2008): 20–32.

is no exception. Best, whom I first encountered while a graduate student at Berkeley, makes brief but vital appearances in the book's first chapter on Fred Wilson and the third on Glenn Ligon, whose art provides the opening frame for his remarks here. The field-turning scholarship of Spillers, whom I met only recently, has been an invaluable touchstone for my thinking and that of countless others with an investment in black thought and emancipation. Unsurprisingly, then, the means of argumentation and modes of address that these two writers adopt in reading *Bound to Appear* refract not only their own intellectual commitments and personal dispositions but also those of the book itself.²

Spillers's and Best's divergent responses make for a generative pairing that reveals the dynamic tensions within black cultural discourse today and that begins to suggest the flows and arrests that animate the book. In attempting to move away from the models of "historical ontology" that, by his lights, undergird *Bound to Appear* as well as his own previous scholarship, Best offers a white queer understanding of radicalism meant to intervene both within African American studies broadly construed as well as within the increasingly trafficked discourse on contemporary black abstraction, particularly in relation to the work of Mark Bradford.³ As a result, Best focuses less on what *Bound to Appear* specifically enacts and more on what its contentions and silences might otherwise enable; by contrast, Spillers offers an immanent critique that reads the text closely, innovatively, inimitably. In so doing, she brings out the urgency of *Bound to Appear*'s approach to the visual and presciently suggests how its claims might extend the material scope and intellectual preoccupations of African diasporic artistic discourse. Both writers have my thanks; in the pages that follow, I will address individual comments by each before closing with a meditation on the implications of Spillers's thinking for my current scholarship.

Ultimately, to consider these texts together is to be challenged and gratified by my work's positioning as a spur for black thought, a revelatory scrim for various writers' projections onto, investments in, and desires for critical work at the intersection of art history and black studies. It is also to reckon with the book's errors and omissions, while appreciating its achievements as an intellectual intervention and a professional milestone, without which I could hardly occupy the positions I am now privileged to hold. Even more important, reading Spillers's and Best's accounts is an occasion to think further about what a black radical art history might be both methodologically and conceptually, especially as my own thinking has evolved in the years since *Bound to Appear*'s completion in 2012.⁴ In responding to these particular essays and to the critical field that has begun to emerge around the book, I aim to shed fresh light on

2 Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 3; hereafter cited in the text. In this issue of *Small Axe*, see Hortense J. Spillers, "Art Talk and the Uses of History," 175–85; and Stephen Best, "Come and Gone," 186–204.

3 For one measure of this discursive shift in regards to race and abstraction, compare Dawoud Bey, "The Ironies of Diversity, or The Disappearing Black Artist," www.artnet.com/magazine/features/bey/bey4-8-04.asp, with Adrienne Edwards, "Blackness in Abstraction," *Art in America*, January 2015, 62–69.

4 In this sense, the present essay functions as the conceptual pendant to Huey Copeland, "Feasting on Scraps," *Small Axe*, no. 38 (July 2012): 198–212.

its operative assumptions and to position it amid the personal, intellectual, and professional networks from which it emerged.⁵ For this rare opportunity and for his tremendous patience, I thank *Small Axe* editor David Scott, who, in soliciting my response, has returned me to the primal scene of my intellectual formation—with all the pleasure and difficulty that entails—and enabled me to rethink *Bound to Appear* from an estranged distance now that the book has properly begun its life in the world of which it was always a part.

First Things

Thanks to Spillers's inquisitive engagement with and brilliant riffs on *Bound to Appear*'s primary works, a detailed reiteration of each of the book's chapters seems redundant here. I do want, however, to articulate the text's key claims as a way of spelling out why, in fact, it came to appear. For the sake of the uninitiated reader, let us begin with the dust jacket, the site where an authorial framing of the book comes to an end and the reader's encounter with it begins:

At the close of the twentieth century, an appreciable number of black artists began to figure prominently in the mainstream American art world for the first time. Thanks to the social advances of the civil rights movement and the rise of multiculturalism, African American artists in the late 1980s and early '90s enjoyed unprecedented access to established institutions of publicity and display. Yet in this moment of ostensible freedom, black cultural practitioners found themselves turning to the history of slavery.

Bound to Appear focuses on four of these artists—Renée Green, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, and Fred Wilson—who have helped shape the field of American art over the past two decades, in part, through large-scale installations that radically departed from prior conventions for representing the enslaved. Huey Copeland shows that their projects draw on strategies associated with minimalism, conceptualism, and institutional critique to position the slave as a vexed figure—both subject and object, property and person. At the same time, these artists pointedly engage the visual logic of race within modernity and the challenges negotiated by black subjects in the present. As such, Copeland argues, their work reframes strategies of representation and rethinks how blackness might be imagined and felt long after the end of the “peculiar institution.”

These lines are, of course, meant to produce a particular audience for *Bound to Appear* and to solicit its purchase with the promise of the new, as emphasized by that opening sentence's final words, “for the first time.” Whatever its promotional value, the rhetoric of “firstness” does offer a starting point from which to elaborate the book's innovations in relation to the various fields within art history that it means to engage and contest, particularly as these concerns are not exhausted by Spillers's and Best's essays.

A few things ought to be said right off the bat: *Bound to Appear* is the first historically oriented study to consider the four artists in question as a group and to recognize the thematic

⁵ For an exemplary account of the book's aims and ambitions, see Kim Bobier's review in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 34 (Spring 2014): 116–18.

links and formal convergences between their postminimal practices of the early 1990s. As such, the book joins a small number of volumes focused on the art of that decade, which has become a burgeoning site of study and recollection in cultural discourse in the United States and abroad.⁶ What's more, *Bound to Appear* is the first scholarly monograph to home in intensively on contemporary approaches to slavery in the visual field, examining a quartet of temporary installations—Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992); Simpson's *Five Rooms* (1991), executed in collaboration with vocalist Alva Rogers; Ligon's *To Disembark* (1993); and Green's *Mise-en-Scène* (1991)—that are distinguished by their visual recalcitrance, spatial dispersion, use of recorded sound, and archival engagements (see fig. 1).

Rather than depicting heroic actors or sympathetic victims, as had many previous painted and sculpted reckonings with the slave past, these artists deployed an array of everyday materials—Wilson, a set of shackles (among numerous other things); Simpson, jars of rice; Ligon, shipping crates; and Green, printed fabric—that were meant to conjure the economies in which the enslaved were enmeshed and to function as active participants in the multisensory ensemble comprising each installation. Unlike their artistic contemporaries, who were equally invested in figuring slavery at the same historical juncture, each of the artists examined in *Bound to Appear* drew on visual as well as sonic cues to stage an immersive bodily encounter with *things*—either objects touched by the enslaved or surrogates for them that brought home the captive's fraught ontological status, from the nineteenth-century earthenware jug made by one Melinda and featured in *Mining the Museum* to the scenes of bondage visualized in eighteenth-century engravings and subsequently translated into Green's own version of *toile indienne*.

Bound to Appear argues that by mapping the material worlds of transatlantic slavery, these projects avoid the trap of foisting an imagined subjectivity on the enslaved, instead producing forms of “antiportraiture”—a term borrowed from the critic Lauri Firstenburg—that demonstrate how captive bodies were literally and figuratively woven into the texture of everyday life and consumption within capitalist culture.⁷ The installations thereby variously reveal how structural dynamics undergirding slavery and resistance to it—redress (*Mining the Museum*), objecthood (*Five Rooms*), fugitivity (*To Disembark*), and diaspora (*Mise-en-Scène*)—continue to inform the production of black bodies as fungible properties despite the apparent successes of the civil rights and multicultural movements, whose rhetorics are often haunted by older and far from liberatory assumptions.

6 Recent exhibitions in this vein include *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash, and No Star* at the New Museum (2013) and *Come as You Are: Art of the 1990s* at the Montclair Art Museum (2015). For two contrasting reckonings with the art of the decade, see Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002); and Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

7 On the dangers of identification in the context of enslavement, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). On the antiportrait, see Lauri Firstenberg, “Autonomy and the Archive in American Reexamining the Intersection of Photography and Stereotype,” in Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds., *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: International Center for Photography and Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 317–19.



Top left: Figure 1.1. Fred Wilson, *Metalwork 1793–1880*, 1992–93. Silver vessels in Baltimore Repoussé style, 1830–80, maker unknown; slave shackles, c. 1793–1872, maker unknown, made in Baltimore. From the exhibition *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, the Contemporary and Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore. Courtesy Pace Gallery © Fred Wilson

Top right: Figure 1.2. Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, *Five Rooms*, 1991. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York

Bottom left: Figure 1.3. Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark*, 1993. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist; Luhring Augustine, New York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

Bottom right: Figure 1.4. Renée Green, *Mise-en-Scène*, 1991. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo: Bernard Renoux. Courtesy the artist and Free Agent Media

As is stated in the book's introduction, "The primary impact [of these installations] is *not* of a replaying of the trauma of slavery, which would imply that repressed horrors have somehow been recovered or bubbled up from a temporal interregnum" (9; italics added). Indeed, what must be stressed, particularly in light of Best's misreading, is that these projects and *Bound to Appear*'s framing of them are *not* primarily intended to act as historical recoveries that enable or even accede to what he terms the logics of "witnessing," "mutuality," or "compassionate resuscitation."⁸ Rather, the improbable forms of these works and the surrogates for captive bodies that they held out are meant to underline the difficulty of establishing any relation to the past, to the other, even to the "self"; what would it mean to "identify" with a glass container of rice or a shipping crate? These facts begin to account for the overall tone of the installations: melancholic, as Best points out,⁹ but also absurdist, given the enormity of the task at hand. In other words, *Bound to Appear* proceeds from the works' assumption that slavery is structurally constitutive of Western art and culture, regardless of its visual, social, or political acknowledgment within hegemonic discourses.

This assumption also speaks to the historical interest and formal difficulty of the installations, which, in refusing the visual clichés associated with slavery, point out the inadequacy of any representational framework to figure captive subjects, whose ghosts are everywhere present—in the halls of the Hirshhorn Museum where Ligon first installed *To Disembark* and in the actual slave quarters that Simpson and Rogers occupied in making *Five Rooms*. Indeed, all four of the works' material complexity, brief exhibition periods, and emphasis on corporeal engagement pose considerable challenges to retrospective narration even with the best of documentation. Accordingly, *Bound to Appear* features a robust image program—thanks to a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant—that reproduces many pieces by these artists for the first time in order to restore unacknowledged aspects of their practices to the field and to provide illustrated guides to installations usually known through the same handful of photographs.

In its ambition to make these works freshly available for reference, engagement, and critique, the book proceeds in full knowledge of the archival and discursive forgetting that too frequently attends African American art.¹⁰ And at stake is not just the writing—or even the "righting"—of the recent art historical past. In the book's interpretation of them, the shared visual strategies and temporal arrival of *Mining the Museum*, *Five Rooms*, *To Disembark*, and *Mise-en-Scène* continue to matter deeply for imagining the possibilities of critical artistic practice. These works instance and engender a brief interval when four like-minded practitioners pointedly defied the demands for recognizable imagery and recognizable difference imposed on them as black artists in the context of a multicultural art world hungry for easily

⁸ Best, "Come and Gone," 193.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 189–90.

¹⁰ For a useful elaboration of this problem, see Sharon F. Patton, "Bibliographic Essay," in *African-American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 283–99.

registered and consumed iterations of alterity. Of course, as the book's conclusion spells out, the approaches that these artists developed for figuring the enslaved in the early 1990s were in many ways transitional within their oeuvres and certainly not the only means available for addressing the slave past, as evidenced by the silhouettes of Kara Walker (197–206). What they model, then, and what the book describes is the search for critical modes of representation in a moment when the black figure, as pictured in American art and culture—remember Willie Horton, Rodney King, and O. J. Simpson—seemed to be more overdetermined than ever, reduced to either victim or menace.¹¹

By bracketing the image, Wilson's, Simpson's, Ligon's, and Green's "circumlocutive" interventions—to borrow a word from Spillers¹²—rerouted the visual logic of identification on which political and communal claims are often based, instead offering a peculiar brand of poststructuralist realism that brought to light the ongoing effects of slavery as well as the barriers posed time and again to the political recognition of black subjects, to say nothing of the social will required to bring about some semblance of racial justice.¹³ As Spillers reminds us at the outset of her essay, the recent high-profile murders of several unarmed black men by white police officers, especially those that were digitally recorded, underline both how little and how much the "truth" of the image matters to the social and legal reproduction of white supremacy.¹⁴ Then as now, the works gathered together in *Bound to Appear* hold out means through which to explore this quandary and, as Spillers suggests, to "recalibrate" our response both to the "emergency" at hand as well as its "emergence" from the economies of seeing and not seeing brought to bear within transatlantic slavery.¹⁵

In Search of a Method

Back in 1998, these concerns certainly were not on the tip of my tongue, but I had already begun groping toward them in an undergraduate thesis on contemporary black queer art and culture.¹⁶ Though support for my project was strong, I was nagged by suspicions that

11 This retreat from the figure in the late 1980s and early 1990s is not limited to artists of a single generation or mode of making as demonstrated by the trajectory of painter Barkley Hendricks. See Huey Copeland, "Figures and Grounds: The Art of Barkley L. Hendricks," *Artforum*, April 2008, 149. For accountings of the crises around the visual production of black, particularly male, subjectivity in the early 1990s, see Elizabeth Alexander, "Can you be BLACK and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 91–110; Robert Gooding-Williams, ed., *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Kobena Mercer, "Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 130–70.

12 Spillers, "Art Talk," 179.

13 On this score, see Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson, "Perpetual Returns: New World Slavery and the Matter of the Visual," *Representations* 113 (Winter 2011): 1–15.

14 Spillers, "Art Talk," 175n1. On "the social reproduction of white supremacy," in the context of the 1990s New York art world, see Huey Copeland, "Unfinished Business as Usual: African American Artists, New York Museums, and the 1990s," in Alexandra Schwartz, ed., *Come as You Are: Art of the 1990s* (Berkeley: University of California Press and Montclair Art Museum, 2014), 32.

15 Spillers, "Art Talk," 185.

16 Huey Copeland, "Darrel Ellis, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Glenn Ligon: New Conceptions of the Black Male Body in American Art" (BA honors thesis, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1998).

my intellectual interests were inappropriate as the objects of further study or as the basis for a successful career in art history. One adviser rather offhandedly put it to me like this: leave behind all that my-fabulous-black-body stuff of the last five minutes and do the sensible thing, which, to his mind, meant enrolling in graduate school out west to write a dissertation on nineteenth-century French painting with an éminence grise. My father, ever the pragmatist, concurred with this plan, though for very different reasons: art history was already enough of a gamble for a black gay man, so why redouble the opportunities for the expression of the homophobic and antiblack sentiments that would surely be leveled not only against me but now also against my work? In those moments, I experienced the visual as what critic Michele Wallace has called a “negative scene of instruction,” freighted with the “image anxiety” and the “outray” against it that Spillers identifies as vital to “the African American critical posture.”¹⁷ My mentor’s and my father’s comments served to bring into focus my own anxieties in the face of the discipline’s unstated presuppositions: namely, that the work of contemporary African American artists could not support the kinds of rigorous inquiry that is the hallmark of the most innovative scholarship in the field, and that visual technologies of race are ancillary to the discipline, its key sites of interrogation, and the signal achievements art history takes as its objects.¹⁸

As my sister-girl Krista Thompson has noted, the suppression of race, slavery, and the contributions of African diasporic peoples has long been central to the operations of artistic discourse, whether in the writing of the late-nineteenth-century British aesthete John Ruskin or those of the mid-twentieth-century American critic Clement Greenberg.¹⁹ We hardly need look back so far to see how elisions of blackness and of black artists manifest themselves in the literature. Take one example drawn from my undergraduate reading, Thomas Crow’s 1996 book *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent*. Despite its titular emphasis on dissent, in Crow’s accounting, racial movements and counterhegemonic visual cultures are mostly ignored or briefly invoked as fodder for white artists such as Andy Warhol. The lone African American practitioner whose work is illustrated in Crow’s book, Betye Saar, is mentioned not so much because of her work’s visual acuity but because it exists at all, providing evidence that even that most often and easily excluded of figures, the “colored woman artist,” received a measure of presence, visibility, and opportunity thanks to the era’s upheavals.²⁰ While *The Rise of the Sixties* is now more than a decade old—and, admittedly,

¹⁷ Michele Wallace, “Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture,” in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 41; Spillers, “Art Talk,” 178. For an expanded accounting of the “African American critical posture,” see Hortense J. Spillers, “Introduction: Peter’s Pans: Eating in the Diaspora,” in *Black, White, and Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁸ See Wallace, “Modernism.”

¹⁹ Krista Thompson, “A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States,” *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (2011): 23.

²⁰ Here, I mean to invoke Adrian Piper, “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists,” in *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 2, *Selected Writings in Art Criticism, 1967–1992* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 161–73.

an easy target—it nonetheless exemplifies how art history continues to sidestep questions of race and their complex entanglement with the constitution of the visual field.²¹

Since the publication of Crow's book and my own moment of paterno-pedagogical misfire, a veritable cadre of artists and art historians invested in black art and culture have emerged, shifts that reflect what Spillers identifies as "the quiet revolution . . . in American higher education," which enabled a refashioning of "notions of tradition, of canonical significance" and the accommodation of "new knowledges."²² It is in this milieu, often associated with market and institutional drives toward "diversity," that *Bound to Appear* took shape and with which it took issue: despite the openings that it effected, American multicultural discourse in the visual arts tended to analogize identitarian positions rather than to think structurally about how the economies of racialization differentially position black subjects in relationship to power.

It was a desire to think in these terms that, in part, drove my decision to head west after all in search of that éminence, T. J. Clark, and to write a dissertation in dialogue with his pioneering approach to the social history of art, which emphasizes the importance of cultural context in interpreting singular objects and enables a range of productive deformations as to what that context might mean and how it might matter. In the hands of my primary advisor, Anne M. Wagner, questions of identitarian position could be productively explored in relation to the work of art, the positioning of the artist, and the discursive construction of both: hers was a feminist method that could be extended and retooled in efforts to work through modern and contemporary art's deep imbrication with the historicity of blackness and to engage African American artists as sophisticated makers of forms inflected by but not overdetermined by their identities.²³

Like its author, *Bound to Appear* benefited much from these lessons. In narrating the installations, the book aims to give each project its proper due and to enable a thinking of all four comparatively—their facture, ambitions, afterlives, and address—without prizes one over another or failing to reckon with the limitations that differently impinged on their making and reception. While the first half of the project emphasizes the negotiation of constraint and the

21 Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996). Ironically, Crow's text echoes—though does not engage—with the groundbreaking Mary Schmidt Campbell, ed., *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963–1973* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985). Such suppressions of race continue to mar even the most compelling engagements with art of the 1960s and 1970s as evidenced by Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); and Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics, and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

22 Spillers, "Art Talk," 175. Here, I have in mind the work of Renée Ater, John Bowles, Kirsten P. Buick, Anne Anlin Cheng, Romi Crawford, Kellie Jones, Amy Mooney, Kym Pinder, Richard A. Powell, Leigh Raiford, and Shawn Michelle Smith, in addition to the scholars cited elsewhere in these notes. For a useful gloss of the emergence of a critical mass of black artists and art historians in the 1990s, see Lisa Gail Collins, "A Visual Paradox: Art and Aesthetics in African American Thought," in *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 1–10.

23 See Anne M. Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism in the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For another example of how Wagner's work on gender might be taken up in addressing questions of race, see Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 20–21.

second half the quest for a semblance of freedom, each chapter attempts to understand how one artist came to slavery as an aesthetic locus as well as the social, discursive, and historical conditions that enabled her or him to take up and participate within a larger discourse on the recrudescence of the “peculiar institution” in American cultural life since the 1960s. To do so, *Bound to Appear* in fact moves in the “centrifugal” fashion that Best advocates,²⁴ casting a multilayered network of contexts and constituencies around each installation, from renewed interest in slavery’s narratives on the part of scholars, writers, and the general public, to increased attention to the history of the black subject’s scripting within Western narratives of art and representation. There are necessarily risks entailed in such a writerly tack, particularly of closing the gap between historicization and interpretation, but this approach is uniquely equipped to foreground the imbrication of blackness and the visual, the material and the discursive, the aesthetic and the ideological, the work and the world, particularly in the face of cultural protocols that would prize them apart.²⁵

In this sense, *Bound to Appear*’s methods also quietly reflect the transformation of advanced artistic discourses since the 1960s, when the divisions between art, art history, and criticism truly began to fray, a blurring of boundaries that Green’s work as a writer, artist, and organizer compellingly models.²⁶ Accordingly, the book takes its formal and methodological cues from the works that it engages, which also define many of its structures and structuring conceits. Each chapter, for instance, is divided into roughly the same number of sections as the installation that it treats by a marker—stars, numbers, quotations, or titles—meant to alternatively stage the work’s unfolding. In this way, the book manifests a nuanced mode of art writing—the slow-witted might even call it sly—that enters into the creative field engendered by its signal works: *Bound to Appear* is also, as Spillers suggests, an “act of revision and correction in light of Western legacies of modern art forms . . . in relationship to . . . specific cultural imperatives,” always already caught up in, if estranged from, the installations’ modes of signification.²⁷ While these moves are embedded in the book itself, they are not necessarily announced as a result of its author’s need to demonstrate both discursive “mastery” over a field and to write “objectively” about artists who had become friends and interlocutors as well as “subjects” of inquiry. In the end, it was my father, in a righting of his own, who most clearly brought home the fundamental link between *Bound to Appear*’s structure and my own experience in a series of sticky note responses he penned after reading the book: “*Unsite* of blackness seems to be the discovery that you so eloquently unsited in this magnificent

²⁴ Best, “Come and Gone,” 193.

²⁵ For a cogent critique of *Bound to Appear* on just these grounds, see Rachel Haidu, “Striking the Ground,” *Oxford Art Journal* 37, no. 2 (2014): 218.

²⁶ The possible examples are many, but here I have in mind the artistic/academic collective Our Literal Speed, as well as the writing of Rosalind Krauss, in particular, her “Poststructuralism and the ‘Paraliterary,’” *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 36–40, and *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

²⁷ Spillers, “Art Talk,” 176. For a fine meditation that takes the book’s writing seriously, see Levi Prombaum’s review in *Immediations: The Research Journal of the Courtauld Institute of Art*, no. 3 (2014): 138–41.

work artform. . . . It is amazing to envision how you and your mother arrive at your black consciousness in diverse means.”

Few responses could be more gratifying or on point. My father’s emphasis on the book as an *artform* resonates with the commentaries here in suggesting an approach to contemporary art, only intimated by the book, in which the situatedness of one’s own knowledge of the artworks and artists in question, might lead both to a creative scripting and—to repurpose a phrase of Spillers’s—a “liberatory aim . . . in the very unknowing,” without sacrificing an ideal of “objectivity.”²⁸ In deploying that last word, I have in mind not its classical meaning but its reframing through the lens of Niels Bohr’s philosophy-physics in the work of feminist theorist Karen Barad. She is intent on undoing distinctions between the observer and the observed, the discursive and the material, the temporal and the spatial, the epistemological and the ontological, underlining that our apparatuses determine not only what we “know” but also what at any given moment can be said to *be*. This approach, which is anticipated by and resonates with those of African diasporic theorists such as Edouard Glissant, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and David Scott, “refuses the representationalist fixation on words and things and the problematic nature of their relationship, advocating instead a *relationality between specific material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differently enacted* (i.e., discursive practices, in my posthumanist sense) *and specific material phenomena* (i.e., differentiating patterns of mattering).”²⁹

Viewed in this light, *Bound to Appear* can be considered an apparatus necessarily inseparable from its “objects,” one that puts pressure on the categories of person and thing in order to move toward an expanded conception of materiality, blackness, and representation that can encompass the whole of the universe in its unfolding. While the book does not arrive at this end, crucial to it and to Barad’s work is an emphasis on those facts and forces that are part and parcel of material phenomena but that are constitutively excluded from the processes of measurement and narration—still present, still felt, even if unaccounted for and unseen.

Blackness as Model

My thinking in this vein, like Barad’s, would be hard to imagine without the work of black and postcolonial theorists, who were intent on understanding the complexity, depth, and political import of expressive cultures constitutively marginalized by hegemonic discourses. In attempting to do so, such thinkers—here, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Houston Baker, and Spillers herself come first to mind—turned away from essentializing and reductively formal modes of

28 Ibid., 185. For an exemplary recent work undertaken in this mode, see Nana Adusei-Poku, “Rooted In but Not Limited By: Re-iterations of Post-Black Art” (PhD diss., Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, 2015).

29 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 136 (italics in original). It is worth noting that throughout her book, Barad aims to debunk the lay epistemological understanding of Heisenbergian uncertainty on which Best relies in favor of Bohr’s emphasis on ontological indeterminacy. See Best, “Come and Gone,” 194–95.

interpretation and, like so many American academics of their generation, instead embraced poststructuralist theory, which emphasized the contingency and constructedness, the fundamental undecidability of the signifier. Yet more than merely exulting in the multiplicity of the racial mark, African American poststructuralist thinkers posited blackness itself as both the prime figure of and ground for the aporias of Western knowledge. The conjunction of racial and sexual difference might then be understood as structured by what Spillers, in her seminal 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” called “a signifying property plus,” which emerges from the black female body’s central position within the economies of colonial enterprise, the dislocations of war, and the logic of transatlantic slavery that transmutes subjects into objects and back again.³⁰

This thinking in its turn draws inspiration from the writings of Frantz Fanon, especially his essay “The Fact of Blackness”; much the same can be said of *Bound to Appear*.³¹ Thanks to Fanon’s example, blackness has become a lens through which to approach race and the construction of the modern world, most saliently for me as modeled by Saidiya Hartman. In fact, it was in the context of Hartman’s 1999 graduate seminar Histories of Slavery that my dissertation began to crystallize and in dialogue with her first book that it began to take shape. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman examines the everyday scenes of violence and suffering that have constituted the enjoyments of whiteness since the nineteenth century, posing a crucial challenge to discourses on the visual that has yet to be systematically answered, even as her critique has been rigorously extended in the work of scholars such as my comrades-in-arms Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson, “who have taught me more than I can say about the blackness of things” (xiii).³²

By Best’s lights, *Bound to Appear* can be situated alongside Hartman’s volume because of its exploration of the “afterlife of slavery” through the lens of “historical ontology.”³³ Although I am honored to be included in this company, I do think it is important to bring out the difference of my project as an art historical study from that of Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, which peels back from the spectacle of black suffering, refusing to reproduce the formerly enslaved Frederick Douglass’s infamous account of his aunt Hester’s beating in the 1845 *Narrative of the Life*. *Bound to Appear* does not perform a similar gesture, given its investment in what remains of the visual, but instead explores the artistic strategies of Hartman’s generational cohorts: Wilson, Simpson, Ligon, and Green produce absence as well as presence,

³⁰ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black, White, and Color*, 203. My extension of Spillers’s thinking here draws upon lines first published in Huey Copeland, “In the Wake of the Negress,” in Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz, eds., *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 484.

³¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

³² See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, as well as Saidiya V. Hartman, “The Position of the Unthought: An Interview by Frank B. Wilderson, III,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201; Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); and Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

³³ Best, “Come and Gone,” 189–91.

enacting what Spillers aptly identifies as “the paradox of the negative” by which referents are engendered through their very cancellation.³⁴ In its emphasis on considering modes of refusal as themselves assertions, the book owes just as much to the work of Fred Moten, who, in his introduction to *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, takes Hartman’s resistance as a fulcrum with which to plumb the rich veins opened up by practices of foreclosure and negation within African diasporic culture, enabling a rethinking of Western art, culture, objecthood, and materiality in light of the constructive and corrosive touch of blackness.³⁵

For Moten, blackness is “that dangerous constitutive supplement,” whose trace subtends the visual field and whose denigration gives shape to the human.³⁶ Or as *Bound to Appear*’s introduction puts it:

Blackness functions, then, as both a free-floating trace unmoored from individual subjects and as a concrete index of power relations that reveals the deep structure of modernity’s modes of visualization, the despotism on which they rely, and the ways that they might be contested in the present. At once abstract and bodily, literal and metaphorical, the ultimate sign of aesthetic negation and the prime marker of the socially negated, blackness marks those historical forces that continue to differentially engender subjects and objects in the modern world, everywhere shaping a cultural unconscious in which the individual effects of racialization assume a shifting texture despite the unyielding ruthlessness of their overarching logic. (11)

Here, blackness becomes a *site* that artists on both sides of the color line—Pablo Picasso, Cindy Sherman, Kara Walker—have occupied in grounding their formal innovations. This approach provides means through which to take hold of the present by elaborating the racialized regimes that continue to shape art, politics, being, and the very structure of our imaginary. And it is this imbrication that spurred the book’s framing of Wilson, Simpson, Ligon, and Green’s art in relation to a black radical tradition as named if not solely articulated by Cedric Robinson in his *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*.³⁷

As Best notes, to take up Robinson’s volume in relationship to the work of thriving contemporary African American artists is to extend and “twist” the senior scholar’s critical framework, especially given its interest in those historical acts of inward-directed violence whose aim was less rebellion than the preservation of autonomy.³⁸ In *Bound to Appear*, the black radical tradition emerges as the site of a primary process—always entangled with the means of its own making—that encompasses the aesthetic and the political, the material and the discursive, the avowed and the excluded, Robinson and Moten, the political collective and the individual scholar, conjoinings that arrive only in and through each other. Even if we accept the relatively straight and narrow—yet perversely prescriptive—terms in which Best

34 Spillers, “Art Talk,” 184.

35 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

36 Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 202.

37 Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983; repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

38 Best, “Come and Gone,” 196.

frames Robinson's argument, the works that the book examines at length square well with an anti-individualist account of black radicalism aimed at securing ontological totality. Look back to the wooden museum crates that dominate Ligon's *To Disembark*, each installed with speakers playing a variety of musical tracks and inspired by Henry "Box" Brown's escape from slavery by shipping himself to freedom and Philadelphia in 1849. Are not these works, these conflations of captives with their containers, records of a violence undertaken by bodies against themselves to preserve a collectivity, producing a noisy negative sociality that at once seduces and repels the viewer, filling her ears and institutional space with KRS-One's "Sound of da Police" and other ballads of black emergency?

In moving toward his account of what he terms "black ascesis," that "long genealogy of sustained and practiced antipathy to appearance in the black tradition," Best selectively lights upon several quasi-abstract canvases by Mark Bradford composed of tattered billboards, posters, and advertisements pilfered from the streets of South Central Los Angeles and subjected to further ripping and abrasion in the artist's studio. For Best, these works record acts of antisocial inscription, visual immurement, and actual violence that connect them both to a black radical tradition and to queer practices aimed at reconceptualizing the grounds of the social "through the performance of antirelationality."³⁹ Despite its tendency to flatten out the immense formal, thematic, and material diversity of Bradford's practice, there is much to appreciate in Best's interpretation of his art.⁴⁰ Such a reading, however, might be more convincingly undertaken by thinking Bradford's work in relation to the black queer and feminist traditions that the artist has claimed as his own and which, strangely, have no bearing in Best's account.⁴¹ For as Spillers and so many others have shown, queering, with all the sense of failure and incompleteness that it entails, is part and parcel of the operations of blackness, allowing Moten, for instance, to see how the late abstractions of Piet Mondrian index an engagement with African diasporic culture not through its literal enfolding or material enactment but through the paintings' openness to and infection by black sound.⁴²

The difference here is more than rhetorical. While Best seems at pains to escape from blackness as a "historical ontology," what animates *Bound to Appear* is an engagement with black *political* ontology—grounded, in Wilderson's words, in "accumulation and fungibility as a grammar of suffering"—which demands a radical disruption of the touchstones and categorical divisions of Western art, culture, and theory.⁴³ Thus, each of the book's chapters deploys

39 Ibid., 194, 200.

40 For alternative accountings of Bradford's art that rhyme with yet ultimately depart from Best's, see Huey Copeland, "A Range of Convergences," *Parkett* 89 (2011): 152–59; and Steven Nelson, "Mark Bradford's Allegorical Impulse," in *Mark Bradford: Merchant Posters* (New York: Sikkema Jenkins, 2006), 8–13.

41 For the relevant comments by the artist, see Huey Copeland, "Painting After All: A Conversation with Mark Bradford," *Callaloo* 37, no. 4 (2014): 817, which might be productively considered in relationship to Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

42 See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; and Fred Moten, "Case of Blackness."

43 Best, "Come and Gone," 190–91; Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 55.

an approach to the object—Marxist, psychoanalytic, literary, anthropological, or aesthetic—to at once seize upon its insights and reveal its limitations: none of these frameworks can fully account for the particularity of embodied black experience or even the viewer's encounters with the book's prime installations. As Spillers so provocatively notes, these works unfolded within the institutional frame the better to make the institution seem “quite beside itself,” to queer it, to *unsite* it, to momentarily open a space for the reimagining of relations between persons and things only perceptible through a black apparatus.⁴⁴ Rather than relying on any single fantasy of form, or “naively” subscribing to a singular theory, *Bound to Appear* moves promiscuously among them to demonstrate how blackness deforms and so recasts all that it touches: if black studies is, as Robinson once averred, “the critique of Western civilization,” then there is perhaps no better place from which to articulate this tactical undoing than art history, a discipline long dedicated to the celebration of masterpieces no matter the bodies crushed beneath their weight.⁴⁵

Seeing beyond Sight

What, then, is *Bound to Appear*? At its best, the book strives toward a transdisciplinary encounter between art history and black studies, between the difficulty of figuring slavery in the present and the disruption of the aesthetic undertaken by artists since the 1960s: African American writer Toni Morrison meets European American artist Robert Morris, each differently aiming to travesty that taken to be constitutive of representation.⁴⁶ While Best clearly understands the installations’ debt to and difference from Morrison’s writing, particularly in *Beloved*, what he does not countenance, and what the book is at pains to illuminate, are the ways the artworks’ staging of the black body’s “appearance-in-disappearance” brings them into a discrepant historical and conceptual relation with the most radical gestures of twentieth-century artistic practice, which has time and again figured its advances into the visual field through techniques of aesthetic withdrawal, misdirection, and impoverishment.⁴⁷

In bringing together such ostensibly distant histories, strategies, and thinkers, at times too seamlessly, *Bound to Appear* not only foregrounds the importance of enslaved bodies to modern constructions of materiality but also emphasizes the strategies that black subjects have deployed in contesting their depictions within the visual field, which might be read—to borrow a phrase from art historian Griselda Pollock—as “avant-garde gambits” in their own

44 Spillers, “Art Talk,” 181.

45 Cedric J. Robinson, “Capitalism, Marxism, and the Black Radical Tradition: An Interview by Chuck Morse,” *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* 3, no. 1 (1999), as quoted in Fred Moten, “Black Op,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1743.

46 I borrow the notion of the travestying or negation of form and its constitutive importance to the modernist tradition from T. J. Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” in Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (London: Routledge, 2000), 78.

47 Best, “Come and Gone,” 189–94.

right.⁴⁸ In this vein, I think first and foremost of Harriet Jacobs, the author of the 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, who appears throughout the artistic practices discussed in the book, thanks to her brilliant mode of escape from the sexual and physical abuse of her master by imprisoning herself in a garret hardly larger than a coffin for nearly seven years, while using letters to project apparitions of herself up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Produced as a readymade, fantasized as a part-object, and forced to bodily enact her own “social death,” Jacobs faced, and developed means of resistance to, conditions whose structures anticipate much of what we take for granted as modernist aesthetic innovation.⁴⁹ Viewed in this light, the most vaunted achievements of the twentieth-century avant-garde, from Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 *Fountain* to Morris’s 1961 *Box for Standing*, cannot help but read as aestheticized rehashings of Jacobs’s survival tactics, now enacted with uncanny objects in the gallery rather than upon fleshly things on the plantation.⁵⁰

In engaging such narratives, *Bound to Appear* aims to reorient genealogies of modern and contemporary art and to underline the complex imbrication of beauty and terror, enabling a complication not only of African diasporic cultural production but also of the Western object world, which becomes constitutively darkened.⁵¹ However, blackness is not imposed as the final word on the installations in question; rather, it opens up the works’ dialogical construction and complex material entanglement.⁵² Accordingly, the book weds close looking and social engagement to make clear how the very process of vision itself is deformed by race and racial will. As the book’s introduction makes clear, this is an ethical as well as a methodological intervention: “The modes and methods of art history matter to the project of African diaspora studies because they emphasize the merits of looking with sustained attention to objects in all of their multiplicity. Conversely, such an approach ought to matter deeply to black subjects, who have been at once produced as things and denuded of complexity, a depth and differentiation that the procedures of artistic discourse might freshly give us to see” (19–20).

While the book’s reliance on black poststructuralist theory is certainly novel within the field, the attempt to bring varying interpretive approaches to bear on a single art work has been vital in art history for some time; in many ways, the formalist/historical divide that Best aims to reinstantiate has been of waning importance in the discipline at least since the mid-1990s.⁵³ Now, in the wake of black visual, cultural, and postcolonial studies, in the midst of

⁴⁸ See Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

⁴⁹ I borrow the quoted phrase from Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁵⁰ For a related treatment of Jacobs’s ruses, see Fred Moten, “Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape: Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis,” *Women and Performance* 17, no. 2 (2007): 217–26.

⁵¹ On the blackening of the object world, see the most incisive commentary on the book to date: Sampada Aranke, “Objects Made Black,” *Art Journal* 73, no. 3 (2014): 86–88.

⁵² For a sustained consideration of these questions, see Kobena Mercer, “Art History and the Dialogics of Diaspora,” *Small Axe*, no. 38 (July 2012): 213–27.

⁵³ On this score, I think, in particular, of the art historian James Meyer’s accounting of his own approach: “In combining aspects of formal, structuralist, and social art historical analysis, this book reflects what I hold to be a larger tendency of current scholarship to integrate these methodologies as the divide between these interpretive camps, which once seemed



Figure 2. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 130.5 × 190.0 cm. RF644, Photo: Patrice Schmidt. Musée d'Orsay © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

object-oriented ontologies, and with the triumph of the so-called performative turn, we have the opportunity to reimagine what the visual and the aesthetic are in ways that speak to the contemporary art world's preoccupations—performance art, social practice, ecological intervention—and to reframe them in relationship to more expansive aesthetic models deriving from outside of the canonical Western tradition.⁵⁴ Despite her stated remove from such disciplinary debates, Spillers, I think, fully appreciates this fact as well as *Bound to Appear*'s attempt to transform art history by taking slavery as a site that is both too far and too close, creating “*a distance* on the one hand . . . but not enough of a distance, on the other,” that at once directs and disallows our seeing.⁵⁵

Perhaps no better example comes than in her meditation on the white female figure who sat reading on a chaise longue while decked out in pajamas made of Green’s signature toile as part of the artist’s 1994 exhibition *Taste Venue*. My reading of this fabric, itself inextricably

so salient, has diminished of late. . . . No doubt, it is the nature of such debates to remain unsettled and to return.” See James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 9.

54 One example in this vein is the exhibition *En Mas!*: *Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean* at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans (2015).

55 Spillers, “Art Talk,” 178.

caught up in the history of the transatlantic slave trade, put Spillers in mind of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (fig. 2): if, as I argue, "Green's choice and repeated use of toile reveal how every mode of capitalism . . . is haunted by the body of the slave, who incarnates the changing form of the commodity" (192), then might we not, Spillers proposes, draw a connection between the two reclining women, the French painter's prostitute and the installation artist's model, both engaged in the traffic of immaterial value and propped up by the apparition of blackness?⁵⁶ With uncanny prescience, Spillers's question anticipates both the directions of my own work and of art histories to come, which rethink Manet's canvas in light of contemporary practices in order to bring out the ways that the social deforms form and the formal nurtures fantasies of the social.⁵⁷ Contrary to Best's presumptions, such a protocol of reading does not rely on a causal relationship between formal appearance and social acknowledgment but seeks



Figure 3. Wangechi Mutu, *A'gave you*, 2008. Mixed media collage on mylar, 93 x 54 in. Courtesy the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

56 Ibid., 180–81.

57 Here, I have in mind a recent tour-de-force reinterpretation of Manet's picture, which carefully reconstructs the histories of racial labor in nineteenth-century France. See Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Still Thinking about *Olympia*'s Maid" (forthcoming in *Art Bulletin*). In the reading of *Olympia* that follows, and throughout this section of the essay, I draw from my current book project, "In the Shadow of the Negress: A Brief History of Modern Artistic Practice," whose key contentions are outlined in Copeland, "In the Wake of the Negress," 480–97.

to understand how the logic of recognition can foreclose the seeing of what so abundantly appears.

To wit, in reviewing his previous treatment of *Olympia*, in many ways the authoritative account of the painting, my erstwhile mentor T. J. Clark lamented how “the snake of ideology” prevented him from seeing the canvas’s black maid as a full participant in the scene despite the fact that she occupies half of the composition, instead reducing her to another of the white woman’s attributes as did initial critics of the work, often with the dismissive mantra, “the Negress, the bouquet, the cat.”⁵⁸ Clark’s overlooking underlines how the black figure becomes the ground of both further forgetting and of productive contestation. My own return to the painting—so central to my earliest art history lessons—has come in light of works by the Kenyan-born, New York-based artist Wangechi Mutu, best known for ferocious collages such as *A’gave you*, which conjoin blackness, the feminine, the animal, and the machinic into singular figures that suggest the entire world stuffed inside the African female body and tortuously turned inside out (fig. 3). As such, Mutu’s art might be said to challenge what Mel Y. Chen, following linguistic theory, calls the “*animacy hierarchy*,” which conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of non-living material in orders of value and priority.⁵⁹

So reframed, Manet’s painting and the responses that it spurred take on a different cast. For although the black maid, Laure, has been discursively produced as stilled, partial, and deeply conventional, her coupling alongside those other creatures suggest that what was at stake in the work’s initial reception was, in no small measure, the very definition of what counts as being alive, human or otherwise. We might recall the critic Félix Jahyer’s observation that in order to see *Olympia* as installed at the 1865 Salon “you need the eyes of a lynx”; or the caption that accompanied the cartoonist Bertall’s caricature of the painting in which he declared that the work itself is “the bouquet of Exposition”; or, the writer Théophile Thoré’s oft-noted charge that the strange disordering of categories in Manet’s painting was testament to his “pantheism.”⁶⁰ Unlike its inspiration, Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538), where the figure’s attributes recede into the background, offering little resistance to a viewer’s delectation in the female form, *Olympia* presses its human, plant, and animal others onto the same plane. This is the success and the scandal of the picture so exacerbated in the caricatures of it and in critics’ likening of the white women and her cohorts to ink, dirt, apes, and India rubber, an undoing of the order of things and the genres of art that represent them.

58 T. J. Clark, preface to *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), xxvii; Félix Dériège, “Salon de 1865,” *Le Siècle*, 2 June 1865, as quoted and translated in Clark, *Painting of Modern Life*, 98.

59 Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 13 (italics in original).

60 Félix Jahyer, *Etude sur Les Beaux Arts, Salon de 1865* (Paris, 1865), 283; and Bertall, *Manette, ou La Femme de l’ébéniste, par Manet*, *Le Journal Amusant*, 27 May 1865; as quoted and translated in Clark, *Painting of Modern Life*, 85 and 97, respectively. Théophile Thoré, *Salons de W. Burger, 1861 à 1868* (Paris, 1870), 2:532.

Olympia thus represents what Chen might call a mode of “queer animacy” whose conjoining of forms of life, which threaten to leak out of the canvas and transform the viewer, is a kind of “improper affiliation.”⁶¹ It is such modes of impropriety, I would argue, that Laure signals, that Mutu embraces, and that blackness at once marks, enacts, and makes visible, allowing it to serve as the grounds for an ontology, an ethics, a method, a “critical posture” of “philosophical ‘disobedience,’” to quote Spillers, in relation both to disciplinary protocols and modes of visual arrangement.⁶² Blackness holds out the possibility of the ongoing disarticulation and reconstruction of art history so that the discipline might allow us to think the ties linking Laure and Harriet even as they come in and out of view. *Bound to Appear* aims to move us one small step in that direction, toward an art history beside itself: the journey has already begun, but if experience has taught me anything, there is never flow without arrest.

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61 Chen, *Animacies*, 98, 104.

62 Spillers, “Peter’s Pans,” 5.