A Postmortem On Postmodernism?*

Wilson's slide lecture, delivered just prior to O'Grady's publication of "Olympia's Maid," tellingly inflects T. Feucht-Haviar's later discussion of subjectivity as a critical category needed to oppose regimes of knowledge acquisition and production based in compromised forms of power relations.

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Postmodernism has been especially problematic for artists of color, at the same time that it has gained them greater visibility than ever before. A few examples:

(SLIDE 1L)** Adrian Piper is one of the artists whom I have long considered a pioneer African-American post-modernist. Yet, Piper, a philosophy professor deeply enamoured of Kantian metaphysics, firmly rejects postmodernism's anti-rationalist philosophical premises.

(SLIDE 1R) Similarly, but for quite different reasons, Carrie Mae Weems has taken me to task for characterizing her work as "postmodern." To Weems, such labels smack of Eurocentrism.

(SLIDE 2L) With Lorna Simpson, we have yet another wrinkle--an African-American photographer whose work gained immediate acceptance as "postmodern" by mainstream critics and curators, while the race and gender-specificity of her images, though frequently praised, went largely unexamined--except by critics of color, such as Kellie Jones, Yasmin Ramirez and Coco Fusco.

To the extent that postmodernism has been a privileged discourse

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* Judith Wilson, "A Postmortem On Postmodernism?" Unpublished slide lecture delivered during a panel of The American Photography Institute, New York University, June 12, 1992. It was recovered from O'Grady's personal library in 2011. In a telephone conversation with O'Grady in June 2011, Wilson indicated that the lecture was read from the manuscript, but that she may have added closing extemporaneous remarks as a "finished" ending.

** For images and titles, see Slide List at end.

within the artworld for the past decade or so, these artists' ambivalence toward and their ambiguous status with respect to that discourse can be seen as the simple consequence of a long history of denial, insult and exclusion. In the tendency of someone like Piper to reject a theoretical program that celebrates difference and radically critiques the interface of political and cultural power, I am reminded of the self-defeating rigidity and caution that the legal scholar Patricia J. Williams has described in The Alchemy of Race and Rights. Contrasting her own behavior with that of a white colleague, Williams writes:

> Peter . . . appeared to be extremely self-conscious of his power potential . . . as white or male or lawyer authority figure. He therefore seemed to go to some lengths to overcome the wall that image might impose. The logical ways of establishing some measure of trust between strangers were an avoidance of power and a preference for informal processes generally.
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> On the other hand, I was raised to be acutely conscious of the likelihood that no matter what degree of professional I am, people will greet and dismiss my black femaleness as unreliable, untrustworthy, hostile, angry, powerless, irrational, and probably destitute.

As a result, Williams comes to understand that "one's sense of empowerment defines one's relation to the law, in terms of trust/ distrust, formality/informality, or rights/no-rights..."

When an artist like Carrie Mae Weems bridles at being labeled a postmodernist and insists on the exclusively non-European nature of her concerns, I am reminded of Williams's confession:

> I am afraid of being alien and suspect, of being thrown out at any moment; I am relieved when I am not. At the same time, I am enraged by the possibility of this subsurface drama-waiting-to-happen. . . . [A]t the same time I am embarrassed by all these feelings. . . . I can't kill and I can't teach everyone. I can't pretend it doesn't bother me; it eats me alive. So I protect myself. . . . I don't deal with other people if I can help it.

The situation of artists like Lorna Simpson, who gain mainstream recognition of only those aspects of their work that conform to dominant cultural values or experiences, calls to mind the words of another author I have recently been reading--Toni Morrison, who, in Playing in the Dark, notes that:

> Like thousands of avid but nonacademic readers, some powerful literary critics in the United States have never read, and are proud to say so, any African-American text.

Morrison is distressed by the existence of powerful and putatively well-informed white intellectuals who feel no regret about their ignorance of black literature. But I submit that the behavior of critics who publicly assess individual black authors or artists without bothering to acquaint themselves with the histories of cultural practice by African-Americans or other people of color demonstrate an equal degree of irresponsibility and contempt.

(SLIDES 2R & 3L) Thus, for example, a work like Lorraine O'Grady's 1991 diptych, Dracula and the Artist,--with its left panel subtitled "Dreaming Dracula" and its right subtitled "Dracula Vanquished by Art"--gains additional interpretative dimensions when it is compared not only with similar work by, say, Sandy Skoglund or other white (or, for that matter, black) contemporaries of the artist. It also seems worth considering how O'Grady's work operates in comparison with images by her African- American predecessors--(SLIDE 3R) like this untitled photograph by James Van Der Zee.

Both artists flaunt their disinterest in conventional photographic naturalism. Both create works that operate narratively--representing sequences of events organized according to principles of causality. Yet, Van Der Zee's use of painted backdrops and multiple exposures ultimately results in Pictorialist clichés. While, O'Grady--who neither shoots nor develops her photographic images, but functions like an art director with respect to advertising photos--achieves something far more strange, reminiscent of Surrealism, but less dream-like than cinematic. Such work challenges traditional photography's emphasis on craft, on one hand, and its illusions of transparency, on the other.

At the same time, though, O'Grady's work retains a cultural specificity that does not so much defeat meaning as force its reconfiguration. I

suspect it is this aspect of photographic practice by artists of color that leads some viewers to conclude their work is not postmodern. For, how can subjects be de-centered and specific at the same time? Or, are members of groups who seek subject status necessarily engaged in some enterprise other than postmodernism?

In an essay entitled "Interrogating Identity," Homi Bhabha has written that the postcolonial condition is characterized by "repeated negations of identity" and "the impossibility of claiming an origin for the Self . . . within a tradition of representation" based on "stability of the ego, expressed in the equivalence between image and identity."

Put simply: European colonialism set off a chain of displacements. Shifts in the ways that Western Europeans conceived of the world and their location in it, as well as physical shifts of population, technology, and wealth, altered existing political, social and cultural configurations--not only in Europe, but in all of the territories Europeans colonized. In the Americas, an indigenous population was conquered and enslaved. When Native Americans proved inefficient as forced laborers, millions of Africans were imported as replacements. Thus, even in the colonial era, much of the Americas would seem to have been culturally hybrid. Yet, European political and economic dominance tended to overshadow such conditions. Thus, the non-European populations of most colonized areas lapsed into a kind of social and symbolic invisibility--or at least obscurity.

In the postcolonial era, former colonizers have not just lost or relinquished control of old colonial possessions. The colonizing nations themselves have been transformed by the influx of migrants from their former territories. Conceptual habits die hard, however, and thus members of previously dominant groups tend to ignore, discount or otherwise misread the character of those with whom they now share a plural culture. It is this conflict between ill-fitting externally imposed identities and a history of multiple origins that makes the Self a sort of Sisyphean stone for contemporary people of color. (SLIDES 4L & 4R). Yet, as the Jamaica-born black British sociologist Stuart Hall has noted, this destabilization of identity has become "the representative postmodern experience".

In contemporary art theory, dislocation--the ability to reside everywhere and nowhere at once--is frequently regarded as an

intrinsic feature of photography. This conception of the medium, of course, stems from Walter Benjamin, who observed that, thanks to mechanical reproduction, "the cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art." Because of its attendant ability to undermine "the authority of the object," photography has become the medium of choice for many artists engaged in the postmodern project of dismantling the truth-claims of representation. (SLIDES 5L & 5R)

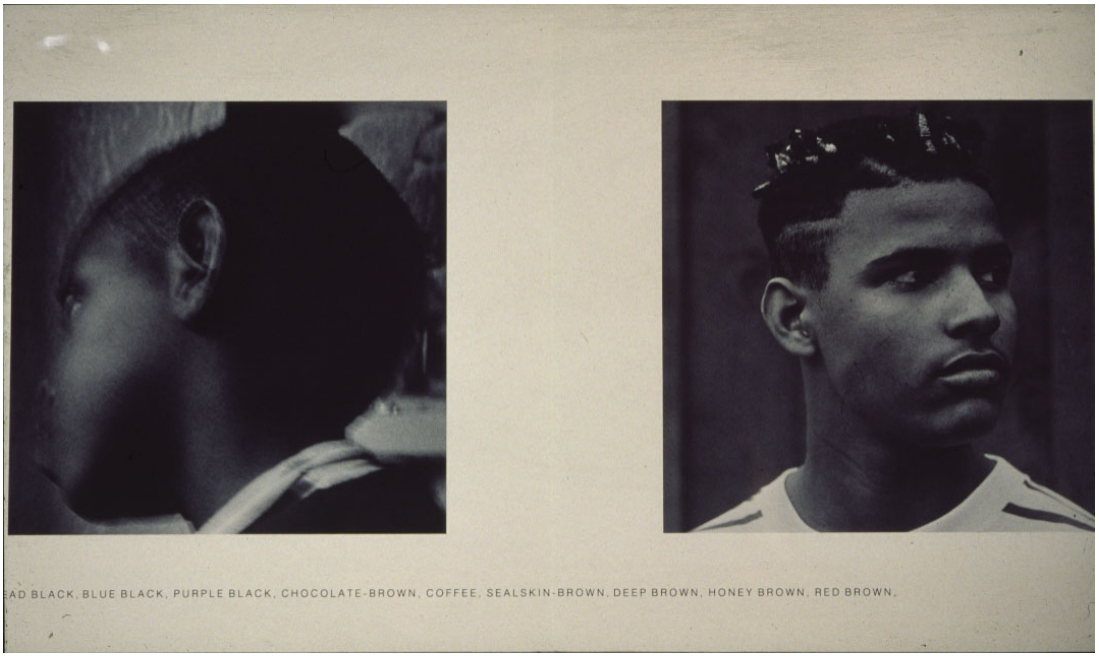
A high-stakes enterprise, for artists committed to social change this deconstruction of images ostensibly involves unhinging the lopsided power relations between those who traditionally view and those who are traditionally viewed, while simultaneously exposing the pretensions of representational illusionism. However, the British art critic John Roberts has noted the political insufficiency of postmodern strategies that claim to be radical solely on the basis of photography's ability to "initiate some kind of 'epistemological rupture' in the field of vision."

Roberts argues that "we might speak of issues around gender, race and sexuality as being central to the postmodernist problematic" because they replace dominant codes with repressed meanings, rather than descending into mere meaninglessness. (SLIDE 6L)

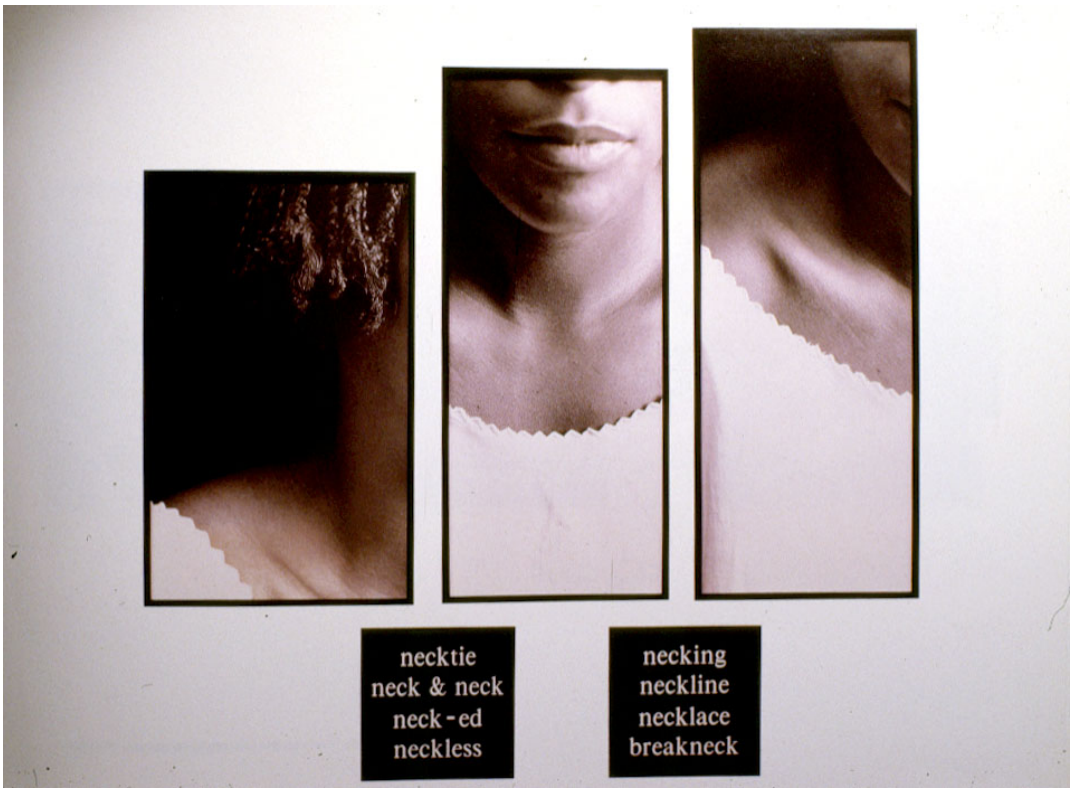
SLIDES

1L. Adrian Piper, The Mythic Being: I/You/(Us) (1975)

1R. Carrie Mae Weems, Then What? (1990)



2L. Lorna Simpson, Necklines (1989)



2R. Lorraine O'Grady, Dracula and the Artist: "Dreaming Dracula" (1991)

3L. Lorraine O'Grady, Dracula and the Artist: "Dracula Vanquished by Art" (1991)

3R. James VanDerZee, Wedding Day, Harlem (1926)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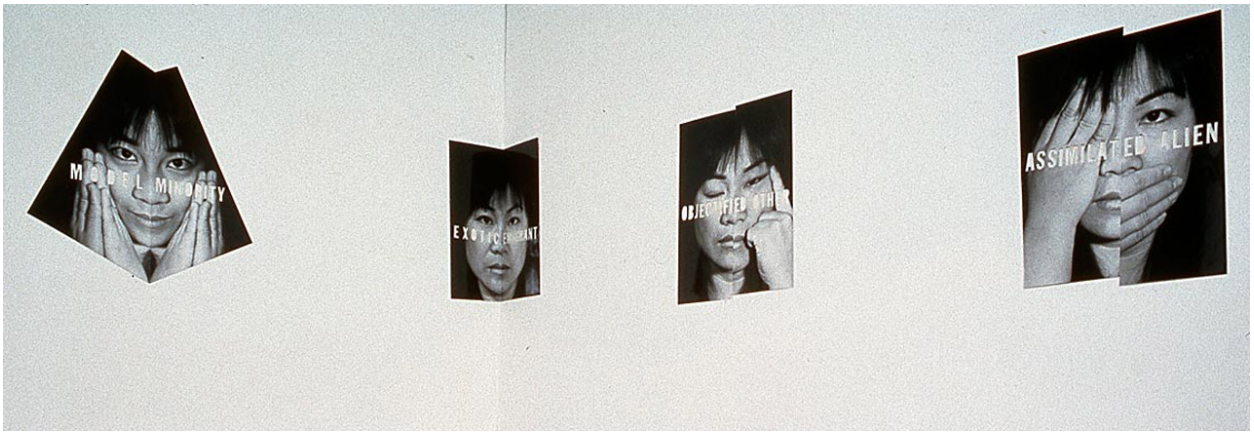
4L. Ingrid Pollard, Pastoral Interlude (1986)

Ingrid Pollard, Pastoral Interlude, Searching for Seashells; Waves Lap My Wellington Boots, Carrying Lost Souls of Brothers and Sisters Released Over the Shipside, 1986

4R. Diane Tani, Duel (1989)

5L. Yong Soon Min, Make Me (1989)



5R. Lyle Ashton Harris, The Miss America Triptych: Untitled #3 (1988)

6. Pat Ward Williams, Accused: Blowtorch, Padlock (1987)