

Lorraine O'Grady
in conversation with Adam Pendleton

Adam Pendleton: Around a decade ago, 2010, 2011, 2012, what were you working on? You had a solo gallery show called *New Worlds*, revisiting some of your photomontages from the *BodyGround* series, including *The Clearing*, alongside a video work called *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, from 2010/11. Can you speak about this moment and these different bodies of work and how they relate to one another? I'm particularly interested in the prominence of notions of landscape and world in the presentation of your work at this time.

Lorraine O'Grady: Your question gets right to the heart of why I make art in the first place. One of my goals in pursuing Both/And thinking is to imagine a balance between nature and culture. This balance is, for me, the primary redress to be made of the West's Either/Or binary, whose hierarchical tendencies produce such oppositions as “culture *or* nature,” “culture *better than* nature”—and “white *or* black,” “white *better than* black.” These, in turn, elide by a weird twist of syllogistic logic into predictably skewed deductions: culture is to nature as white is to black; therefore, culture is the same as white, and nature the same as black. It was important to me to embed both the body (my body) and the mind (my mind) equally in both culture *and* nature so as to dis-establish hierarchy and begin to establish equivalence. This process started as early as 1978, after doing *Cutting Out the New York Times*, when I began scripting *Rivers, First Draft* as part of a trilogy to be called *Rivers, Caves, and Deserts*. The Woman in Red was developed then. But before I could produce that piece, I entered the art world and the shock of encountering its segregation made me narrow my focus to politics, and in 1980 Mlle Bourgeoise Noire emerged. At the time, she felt somewhere between an interruption and an inconvenience, to tell you the truth. In 1982, when I did *Rivers, First Draft* in Central Park, the Woman in Red became a kind of prequel to Mlle Bourgeoise Noire. But *Rivers* had always been there as part of my mental furniture, both because I'd already scripted it and because it was an autobiographical work. The 1982 performance was where I first did a prototype of *The Fir-Palm*, the piece that would become the starting point of the series *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*, or *BodyGround*, which I did in 1991.

You asked about the period 2010–12. In 2010, I did *The First and the Last of the Modernists* for the Whitney Biennial. That fall, I was in the Buffalo Biennial, and I did the *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* video for it. But I should mention that at that point in time, I was also constantly un-archiving my career. By that I mean I was trying to bring old work back into the present. My decision to make the *Landscape* video was prompted in part by my feeling that *The Clearing*, which was part of *BodyGround*, needed more context than it had or, rather, that it could be amplified if I made a landscape video to accompany it.

You could say that by 2010 when I made it for Buffalo (and 2011, when I did the post-production), *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* was already something I'd been thinking of in some ways since the late 1970s. In Buffalo, the video became the central point around which two photomontages from 1991's *BodyGround*, the *Clearing* diptych and *The Fir-Palm*, were hinged. Conceptually, the photomontages both revolved around the *Landscape* video and went in and out of it. Looking back now, I think the idea of doing a landscape video had already coalesced when I subtitled *The Clearing* in 1994. When I first made *BodyGround* for the INTAR show in 1991, it was just called *The Clearing*. The clearing, of course, is the place where culture and nature meet. A clearing is literally a space that has been cleared out of nature. The demarcation and the joining are very clear, usually, because culture has dominated nature there. At INTAR, I called the left panel *Love in Black and White* and the right panel *Green Love*. But when I showed *The Clearing* on its own during my fellowship year at the Bunting Institute at Harvard in 1994 or 1995, I could tell that people didn't get it. And they were pretty upset by *The Clearing* and its imaging of interracial sex, to put it mildly. I felt that I had to do something to put the piece in a larger context than it was able to hold just visually, so I subtitled it. After that, it became *The Clearing: or Cortés and La Malinche, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, N. And Me*. With La Malinche being from Latin America, and Sally Hemings from North America, and me representing the Antilles, I was trying to make my idea of the co-creation of the Western Hemisphere, the inherent miscegenation of everything here, as obvious as possible. When I made the *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* video, I was including and surrounding it with the implications of all our stories. It was the most definitive statement I could make of the Both/And as constitutive of the recent and ongoing history of the Western Hemisphere. In some ways, what I was doing in 2010 was previsualizing the *New Worlds* show in 2012 at Alexander Gray, where I was able to show the installation at its intended scale. In Buffalo, the video had to be on a small wall monitor. At the gallery, it could be projected on the full wall, and each panel of the photomontages, the *Clearing* diptych and *The Fir-Palm*, was now 40" × 50". And the photomontages made another diptych with the video.

I'd been using the diptych idea since I began showing in 1980, with the performance of *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, and even in the performance of *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*. But in the 1990s I was beginning to isolate my ideas about the diptych as a formal scheme, so as to show how it executed a sort of shorthand attack on Western culture, how the Both/And dismantled the Either/Or of Western culture. For me, the *Clearing* diptych was paradigmatic of those ideas. But I'd made it thinking people were perhaps a little further along in their ability to understand things in the way I saw them. The first question I was immediately asked was, "Is this the before and after of this relationship?" And I had to say, "No, it's both/and . . . It's happening simultaneously, it's

the two parts that compose almost every human relationship, or certainly almost every erotic relationship that I know of, both ecstasy and exploitation simultaneously." I hadn't been making the ideas in my work so explicit to others before. Perhaps not even to myself. But with *The Clearing*, I had to get explicit. And that process was fully realized in the "New Worlds" show. Using landscape, both as a physical space and a mental idea, helped me get there.

AP: In 1980, as part of a public performance, you stated, "Black art must take more risks!" What kind of risks?

LO: Well, look, I will confess to not being as well educated about art in general, and Black art in particular, as I perhaps would have been if I'd been hanging around the art world. This was my entry point into that world. And I had seen a show called *Afro-American Abstraction*, which was at P.S. 1 [Contemporary Art Center], and I think the only way anything could have been at P.S. 1 at that time is if it were curated by a white curator. There were many different artists in the show, and they were making work at many different levels, so I can't say that I was uniformly addressing the comment, "Black art must take more risks," to all of the artists in the show. But the overwhelming impression I got was that the art in it was trying to prove something, trying to prove that it could do abstract art as well as any white person. And in looking over its shoulder at the white audience, I felt the work in the show as a whole was not taking enough risk. The artists were being more polite than they would have been if the show had been geared to a Black audience.

The show was a real eye opener for me. I mean, when I went to the opening, you can't believe what it was like for me. I was a Black, bourgeoisie bohemian. That's kind of what you would have to call me. I was traipsing around the world, doing my thing. If you'd asked me at the time, I'd probably have said my idea of heaven would be to hang out with Sartre and Camus on the Left Bank. It wasn't that I was self-isolated. Circumstances had basically isolated me in an all-white world.

So for me to walk into a space and see two to three hundred Black people, all of whom were, if not artists, at the very least artistic, it was just . . . everybody had an individualized way of dressing, everybody had an intelligence that reflected itself in the thoughts on their faces, and I just wanted to be around these people. A few months after the show closed, I saw a small article in *The Village Voice* saying that Linda Goode Bryant, who had just closed her place in Midtown [Just Above Midtown], was opening a place downtown in Tribeca, but she was going to have to build it from scratch. She'd lost her space uptown. So now she was going to do downtown. I hate to say this, but you always revert to certain parts of your background that you think might be of use. So here, instead of Miss Black Bohemian, I became Miss Black Bourgeoise again and

reverted to the lady who volunteers. I went down there and told them: “I’ll do anything, I’ll do anything: lick stamps, stuff envelopes, do anything you want me to do that will help.”

And sure enough they took me on, and that’s what I did. I was licking stamps and stuffing envelopes for about three weeks before someone figured out I could do something else, like write some of the stuff that went *into* the envelopes, and I became a sort of part-time PR person for them. It’s hard to imagine how tiny everything was at that time: you could actually call the *New Yorker* and find yourself on the phone with the editor of Goings on About Town. That’s what happened; I was having this conversation with this woman there and invited her to come to the opening of *Outlaw Aesthetics* at Just Above Midtown. I don’t know if it was just sensitivity on my part, or, more likely, my experience with the tones of voice of that particular world, but when she said, “Oh, they always put titles on their shows down there, don’t they?” I was so horrified. It made my blood run cold.

That was the point at which I realized that this situation I had entered was one of almost absolute segregation. Not to say it’s ever totally segregated. At that time, I would say maybe four or five Black male artists were showing in white spaces. And there were about two Black women who were showing in white venues. And then there was Adrian Piper—nobody seemed to know what she was. And that was it.

AP: And so this dynamic gave life to Mlle Bourgeoise Noire?

LO: Exactly. She decided that this situation, which had somehow become normalized for both Black artists and white artists, and for white institutions, was not the way it had to be. This was a construction. And it was a construction built for the convenience and satisfaction of white culture. That feeling sort of became my *raison d’être* at that moment. Before that, I had been making personal work. That’s why I went into art: to explain the world to me, not to them, to me. But now it seemed I was having to explain politics and how it functioned, not just to “them,” but to everybody. The Black art world at the time seemed resigned to the situation. After all, there may occasionally have been a few exceptions, but it had been like that for almost forever. But at the time, I felt anything that was a “construction” could be changed, So I thought I would go in and shout my poem, and “teach” them. That was my hubris.

AP: Hubris. Absolutely, yes. Avatars, alter egos . . . Where does your authority come from, Lorraine?

LO: Where does my authority come from? That’s a question that gets asked of everybody who’s the first. I mean, everyone who is the first at something has

to take the authority, it’s not given to them, and the only place they can take it from is within. But I’m sure everyone who is “the first” has a different story of how and where they found it within. Because, trust me, nobody would have suggested to me that I become an artist, so I took that permission from within. I think in my case it had to come from a bedrock confidence that had been built on a life of achievement at the highest level. If I’d had to wait for people to publicly recognize me, it would not have gone that way. But throughout my life, there had been semi-objective tests of my value, of my capacities. And I’d always passed those with flying colors. I was the first girl from Wellesley ever to pass the Management Intern exam, the elite entrance exam for federal service, when I graduated. There were all these proofs that I’d accumulated along the way of my capacities. For example, I’d had a translation business with just two main clients, the Encyclopedia Britannica and Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy*. I’d been accumulating these kinds of proofs since earliest childhood.

But, and I hate to say it, I was a little too cute for my own good for too long, which was a big problem. I had a lot of sources of confirmation, but the spark to ignite what you’re calling authority—I would say that came in two ways. The first was when I read Lucy Lippard’s *Dematerialization of the Art Object* and felt “I can do this.” I hadn’t been in the art world. I didn’t even know Conceptual Art was going on. But I knew, when I read that book that I had ideas like that all the time. I just hadn’t known they were art. I had no place to put them. But here I was reading that book and feeling, from page to page, that I can do this. And not only can I do this, but I can do it better than most of what I’m reading here.

I was at the School of Visual Arts, the place where much of the Conceptual Art movement happened . . . I was teaching there, and after the very elitist education that I’d had, SVA was so refreshing. I can’t even tell you. It was like a bombed out . . . I don’t know. It was crazy. The most energetic, insane things that you could imagine about the early ’80s were condensed at the School of Visual Arts at that time. I really wanted to connect to them.

I had the permission to think “I can do it,” but the question was, “How? How was I going to make it happen?” And one day I heard that Vito Acconci was teaching a class in a room just above where I was teaching at that moment. I just gave my students something to do and told them I’d be back later. Then I went upstairs to sit in the back of the room while I watched him. And as I was watching him, I was saying to myself, “Oh, so that’s what it is. Well, if he can do it, I can do it.” I told myself, “Acconci went to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. I went to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. He declared himself a visual artist and got taken seriously. Well, I’ll just do that myself.” I felt I had two levels of permission. There was a book that let me see that I could do it, that my mind was equal to it, and then there was a person who let me see that I was equal to it. So I did something that I might not have done without the confidence I

had. But sometimes I think I would have done it anyway, stupidly, without any examples, because I was never afraid to fail.

AP: So in relation to this past, what kind of avant-garde are you interested in today? And I say that with the assumption that you still think the avant-garde is a relevant or pertinent term today.

LO: Well, I certainly don't believe in "art for art's sake," which for some is an essential aspect of the term "avant-garde." In the poem *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* shouted at the New Museum, she raged against that idea. But I don't think that's the only thing the term is about. Beyond the "Historical Avant-Garde," which ends in about 1939, the term usually just relates to work that is innovative. Sometimes innovation can come from the community, but perhaps more often it comes from the individual; I really don't know. In fact, I think of my entire body of work as a kind of communal-individualist project in which I'm seeking the answer to that question. A lot of what is said about innovation is wishful thinking, especially when it comes to attributing it to the community or to the individual. Where you attribute it depends on which political/social side you're on generally. I sometimes think of myself as a scout who's reporting back on what I find. I'll be happy just to answer that question for myself. Look, we can't get trapped by the limits of language at any given moment, but we also can't get too cocky and think that things like theory and/or politics have eliminated the valid substrates of the older language. Language is as trendy as anything else, but the ideas it conveys shift very, very slightly, when you think about it. Just today I saw a pull quote in an article in *Frieze*—someone said, "We used to say that the personal was political, but I've now come to think that the political is personal." So . . . is that a change? It's certainly a shift from one perspective to another, but at some level everything has remained pretty much the same. At bottom, what the statement conveys is that the political and the personal are interconnected and mutually reinforcing and influencing. I don't think that changing the language has actually changed the facts, let alone the truth.

There just aren't that many ways of thinking about being an artist. I taught studio art briefly at the University of California Irvine, and one of the things that became apparent in teaching undergraduates, as well as graduate students, was that when you ask anybody, any visual artist, how old they were when they knew they were an artist, on average they say they were about five. That's when they usually figure it out, and that means that they go through all of their childhood and all of their adolescence in a very self-conscious way. By the time they get to middle school, they're really committed to their own personal vision of life and of the world in some ways. But at that time, when I was at UCI in the early aughts, the graduate school system in particular was devoted to weaning students away from their own personal vision. Individuality was something

that was frowned on. Students were trying to be politically relevant when that wasn't really what they felt like doing or were very good at. If you ask me what the difference is now, I would say that between 2000 and now people have become more used to seeing politics as an important, if not the most important, arena for artists to have at least something to say about. Perhaps they have gotten better at it, perhaps they have not. Those for whom politics have a direct impact on their life outcomes may have become a lot better at making the case in their work, but they can still be pretty clueless about the public policy needed to enable change, which usually just barely inches forward in a two-party system because of all the compromises that have to be made.

What did the phrase "avant-garde" mean when it was first used, I think early in the nineteenth century in France? My own connection to the term starts in the early twentieth century, with the Futurists and the Dadas and the Surrealists. That is, to me, the quintessential avant-garde. But I think the avant-garde really got going somewhere in the middle of the nineteenth century with the shift from Romanticism to Modernism. Since then, what's mostly changed is not the meaning of the term but the fact that people feel the term has been too comfortably co-opted by the ruling class. My own feeling—since I believe that we have to, as artists, speak only for ourselves, and not for anybody else—is that as an artist, I have to be able to exercise my political will *and* my personal desire. Both. Then, at the end of the day, let others figure out the efficacy of my having done that, since I won't be able to.

But I do believe that exercising both my political will and my personal desire will be more avant-garde, more innovative, than simply acting on exclusively political ideas.

AP: Around a decade ago you said that you were advocating for something you called "miscegenated thinking," an abstraction of miscegenation, pointing to a cognitive or conceptual hybridity, maybe something like Édouard Glissant's elaboration of the concepts of *créolité*, *Antillanité*, and creolization. Can you elaborate on what you meant? What might this mean today?

LO: In that 2011 article by Andil Gosine in the first issue of *ARC*, the extravagantly beautiful but now defunct journal of Caribbean art and culture, where I used the term "miscegenated thinking," I wasn't making a connection to Glissant. I hadn't really started reading him that much yet. I think I first became aware of the term *créolité* with the article by Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant when it came out in *Callaloo*. Their article, "Eloge de la créolité" ["In Praise of Creoleness"] had been translated there.¹ And I read it and thought that it was very similar to what I had been trying to

1. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, "In Praise of Creoleness," trans. Mohamed B. Taleb Khyar, *Callaloo* 13, no. 4 (Autumn 1990): 886–909.—Ed.

express when I said “miscegenated thinking.” But I was already starting to get to another point, another place, one much more connected to this philosophical question of the Both/And as a modification or replacement of the Either/Or. So I just slid through those concepts of miscegenated thinking and *créolité* and toward my own version of them, which was the Both/And. Glissant was older than those guys (they were all from Martinique) and a bit of a father-figure to them, so they may have been rebelling against him, I don’t know. Glissant’s own term was *mondialité* (“globality”), which if you can get rid of some of its “universalist” baggage, is a more capacious term, better suited to our era of “globalization.” It’s a term I can really get behind. Actually, I like parts of both terms, Creoleness and Globality. They feel like part of Caribbean-ness, the complex of intellectual and psychological attitudes which could be a gift to global philosophy from this strange string of loosely-swirled islands that stretches across the eastern waters of the Western Hemisphere and is bounded on all four sides by a gulf, a sea, and an ocean . . .

AP: Have you always been interested in archiving and preserving your work, Lorraine?

LO: No, I wasn’t always. I didn’t realize it was going to be so necessary. I kept things, mostly paper things, but not with any self-conscious thoughts or desires about building an archive. If I had had those ideas, I think I would have made a much better archive than I ultimately did. I don’t have anything remotely like Andy Warhol’s boxes, a total archiving of one’s life. I just had the paper generated by the work I was doing. But I did become aware that the archive was the only way I would be able to resuscitate a career that had been eclipsed in the late ’80s, with the canonization of Adrian Piper and David Hammons as foreparents—and as for everybody else: hit the road, Jack.

It wasn’t just happening to me. People like the California artists Senga [Nengudi] and Maren [Hassinger] weren’t recognized until three years after I was, because they had to wait for Kellie Jones to do *Now Dig This!*² I mean . . . and my God, I would say that Sam Gilliam has only been recuperated properly in the last three or four years, more recently, even, than Senga and Maren. So there was a whole generation of perfectly capable, even inspired, artists who were put by the wayside. Whatever that construction was for, it was a very effective structure. And anytime people don’t have to think about some of us now, they won’t. That’s it. So putting my archive up online was at least giving people a way to think about me if they wanted to.

AP: Has the vocabulary for others to effectively write and speak about your work yet been developed?

LO: I certainly have written enough to create that vocabulary, don’t you think? I’ve done my best. Seeing others adopt their own critical languages to discuss the work hasn’t happened as quickly as I would like, but I think it will start to happen rather quickly, not that long from now. Stephanie Sparling Williams is doing a book with University of California Press. It’s a very smart book and the first that will come out; it’s quite independently thought through, and she takes advantage of my vocabulary to create her own. I’ve noticed that in all of the press for my [Brooklyn Museum] retrospective—which is also an opportunity to discuss my book of collected writings, *Writing in Space, 1973–2019*, a book I think is still the fulcrum of everything, really—opportunities appear for others, at different levels of intellectual development, to find their own language to discuss me. But, so far, I would say it’s very rare when that’s achieved. A few articles do stand out for me. Catherine Damman in *Artforum* and Christina Sharpe in *Art in America* and a small number of others have taken really intellectually individualistic approaches to the work.

But by and large, it’s been slow. I’ve worked so hard to get away from the prison of biography. But I’ve apparently led too interesting a life in some ways, and so that often seems to overshadow the work. I don’t think the life and work should necessarily be separated but steps can still be taken. One big thing that I’ve had to do is use my website as a tool: I’ve put up a new version of my brief bio that concentrates on the both/and—basically, on the diptych and the anti-binarist argument. I thought it was going to take years for people to catch hold of that idea. But it happened almost overnight. As soon as it was presented, they got it. So the quickness of adoption of that rather complicated idea—it’s not that complicated, but it is if you’re not accustomed to thinking in that way—gives me the biggest hope I have that the language about my work will go beyond my language for it. I do think so. I’m not sure when—obviously, I would like it to happen today, but if it happens tomorrow or the next day, I have to be satisfied. Let’s hope I’m still here to see it. [*Laughter.*]

AP: Absolutely. So, speaking of Stephanie Sparling Williams—I love her ideas of “speaking out of turn” and the “alien avant-garde,” and I want to ask you a question that actually comes from a text she wrote specifically about Mlle Bourgeoise Noire and other artists from the ’80s. She asks: “What is the impact of an encounter with an art object that speaks (or exists) out of turn?”

LO: What do you think? I have to ask you. What do you think? I’m still in the vortex of it; I don’t know if I have an answer for that. What is the impact?

² *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980*, a major exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles that traveled to MoMA PS1 in New York and the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown, MA.—Ed.

AP: Well, when I'm listening to you, Lorraine, I think about how conveniently narratives are constructed. Adrian Piper, David Hammons, for example, there's space for them. But what about everyone else? For me, speaking out of turn is an issue of time and interruption . . . assuming that it really is possible to come too soon or too late. But it's also interesting to think about how material is activated or enacted in a continuous present, which is, for me, always a collapsing of the past and the future.

LO: One thing that's so astute about Sparling Williams's construction of "speaking out of turn," is that with the rising of Black Lives Matter in the wake of George Floyd, you can begin to imagine a whole culture speaking out of turn. I had a conversation yesterday with somebody who said, "People are just beginning to realize that you were having a conversation 40 years ago that people are just now becoming aware of." OK. Somebody else said, "You're filling a void." What was that void? What was the void that I was or am filling? I always felt that my ideas were totally clear, if only to me. But there were many, many levels of understanding needed between me and the people to whom I was presumably addressing the work. And so I didn't think that would ever happen for me, I really honestly didn't. I mean, this is like a miracle, what's happening now. So yeah, I came too soon. But did I? [*Laughter.*] It's very interesting to see what benefits there are for my having done what I did when I did it, and to have worked through it in a world and in a situation where it was not necessarily the most superficially relevant thing to be working through. But now, those who look attentively at what I did 40 years ago will be able to skip a lot of painful steps, if they know how to look at what I produced. And I think that's the biggest contribution that I can make to the culture really.

AP: You write, "There are so many co-existing tendencies in any given time. What is lost when the present reduces the past, ties it up with a ribbon, so it can move on to the future. Is that result necessary? Is it real?" How do you think, Lorraine, that the past decade might be reduced by the future? What would you want to save from it?

LO: It's such an interesting question. I mean, what do I know about the present? I'm not completely sure that I am the best person to ask what that present adds up to. Because I still have to deal with my present, which is a slightly different present than everybody else's present because I'm so much older. And so I find myself dealing more with what I hope for rather than what I think will be, when I think about what will emerge as being saved from this moment.

As you can imagine, I'm always in favor of the artist who is working for the work and not for themselves. My personal desires are always going to be in favor of that. So whoever those artists are now, I think they are going to make

their way from one body of work to another in a way that tells us something profound about the artistic process and hopefully about the world in this moment. The ones who are actually struggling to move from one body of work to the next, in a self-challenging way, are going to make the biggest contribution, from my point of view. They may be floundering at the moment, but you can see that they're struggling. And any time there's a struggle, there's a possibility of victory. And the artists who are too career-oriented, or rather, not work-oriented—I don't think history tends to deal very happily with those people. But that's not just in this decade. That's every decade.

Am I being simplistic, Adam? Please tell me.

AP: You're not being simplistic at all, Lorraine, not at all.

LO: Some of these are hard questions that you're asking, very hard questions.

AP: No, I understand. [*Laughter.*] This next question is quite straightforward.

In the *Artforum* piece from 2009 that I included in the *Black Dada Reader*, you write about "achromaticity," about limiting the spectrum of colors to black and white in a way that "heightens similarities and flattens differences." You were reflecting on *The Black and White Show*, which you curated at Kenkeleba Gallery in 1983. How do you use black and white?

LO: The less that there is to look at and distract you, the more there is to concentrate on. I think color is beautiful, but it's something I prefer to look at, rather than have. The way I dress, the way I make art—even when it's in color, it seems sometimes to be in black and white, which is very contradictory to everything I've been saying in some ways, that it's a reduction. So I would have to say that both things are true: that color provides complexity and black and white provides the simplicity of directed emphasis, and so I think that both are equally necessary. But in terms of heightening similarities and flattening differences, I do think that black and white does a clearer job than color. That's not the only task to be accomplished in the world, but that task I think is very well served by black and white.

AP: As the body changes, as you've changed, as we change, does resistance, or how we resist, change?

LO: I don't want to talk about my new performance work that much, but you know that I stopped performing for a multitude of reasons. First of all, I couldn't afford it anymore. I was financially supporting nearly all of that artwork myself in the beginning, and I was lucky that I had a little bit of money here and there. But I had to stop performing because I couldn't afford to. That way of working

was not on the top of funders’ lists. But I also had to stop performing for other reasons; I felt that I needed to make my work slower, so that people could understand it. Given its nature, I believe that performance can only live as myth. It can’t live as an intellectual force. So in order for my work—and I may only be speaking for my work—to move from the space of the mythic into the space of the intellectually influential, I had to slow it down. I had to put it in some form that people could look at and contemplate rather than just see one time, one day of their lives.

The final reason may be the most important in terms of the actual decision itself: I was aging. I was about 46 or 47 when I made *Rivers, First Draft*. And I was very aware that my body was not what it had been, that my face was not what it had been. And at the same time, I was also aware that this was a poignancy that would become part of the subject matter of the work, and I really was not interested at that time in talking about aging. There are some topics that seem to be so powerful, in and of themselves, that they overwhelm everything else that you might be trying to say, and aging is one of those topics. It can occlude other things that you are trying to accomplish.

I stopped performing because I felt that my body aging was too distracting to the arguments I was trying to make. Don’t look at me and my aging body and focus on that. As it is, I’m having a very hard time getting people past my interesting biography, or past some of these old pictures of me that may look more attractive than I look now. But to get past that, I felt that I had to leave performance completely behind, and now that I’ve gone back to performance, I am even trying further to eliminate considerations that will take away from the essence I want to discover, the essence of what I have to say—that’s what I want to do. And I realized that to do that, I had to totally eliminate all of the distractions, and so I am performing in costume and as a persona that has no gender, no race, no class, and no age. What’s left after all that is gone?

AP: Right. Transforming the body into an art object! [*Laughter.*]

LO: Right.

AP: What can Black Dada do for you, Lorraine?

LO: Oh Adam, this is the only place where I think we may run into some differences of opinion, or where I may have some things to say that may be a little controversial. Basically, I am not as interested in Black Dada as you are—I’m more interested in Futurism and Surrealism. I see Dada as a transitional art moment between Futurism and Surrealism, one with the kind of lasting effects that the brilliance of youth can always create, a moment of something new and important. I can’t deny their importance. But, let’s face it, these were all youths,

in their late teens and early twenties, with the exception of those older guys who hung around and provided theory, like Hugo Ball and [Richard] Hülsenbeck and so forth. Tristan Tzara was 19 when he arrived in Zürich. So this was a very different kind of art than what had been produced by the Futurists, who, of the three groups, are to me the most interesting, personally, as a Black artist. The Futurists were the oldest of the three groups. And they have suffered from something now, in the art world, that they suffered at the time in the real world, and that was a dismissal of them on what I would call racial grounds. You don’t have to be in Europe too long to understand that Northern Europeans don’t really like Southern Europeans, or are latently jealous of them. This is a generalization, I know, but I once lived in Copenhagen, and when summer came—my first summer in Copenhagen—you could tell that everything in the atmosphere had shifted, in the bars you went to, the clubs and so forth. And I asked somebody, “What’s going on? What’s different here?” And this guy told me, “The spaghetti boys have arrived.” [*Laughter.*] That meant that all the girls were going in another direction.

AP: [*Laughter.*] What year was this?

LO: It was 1961 or ’62. That was a long time ago. But, I would say that in 1909, what Marinetti and the other Futurists were fighting against was this sense that, after Italy’s great contributions to culture, they had been dismissed. That their region was considered a backwater, that they were not worth thinking about, that they had nothing to contribute to European culture. And, look, you can take whatever I’m saying as my own subjective point of view. It is. I don’t claim it to be anything else. But I can only tell you that for me, as a Black artist, what I felt that Marinetti and the Futurists were fighting against was something that I feel that Black artists are fighting against every day, and I think that they have more to learn from the Futurist techniques, such as their productive hyperbole that was intentional, like “Burn the museums!” and “Flood the canals!” and so on, than they do from the techniques of others in the historical avant-garde. More from the Futurists’ attitudes and the completeness of their response to European culture as a whole than from overturning the past of their fathers.

I don’t ever let myself be swayed by the popular white evaluation of things. The Futurists have been dismissed as fascists with such simplicity and such a desire to make oneself feel good, to pat oneself on the back. Whereas the fascism of the Futurists had a far lighter touch than the communism of the Surrealists, which was dark and unpleasant in many ways. Very judgmental, and so on.

I don’t let myself be swayed by those kinds of arguments. I have to look carefully at what’s actually going on. So when I look at the Futurists, I see a creativity that was almost unhinged, because it was so angry. But, at the

same time, it was so relatively mature, because it was being made by 39- and 40-year-olds rather than 20-year-olds. I feel that there's a lot more for me to learn from them than there is from the Dadas, even just in typography. I think that if you compare the Futurists' typographic ideas, including the calligrams of Apollinaire, with what the Dadas were producing, they're much more inventive. They had a bigger impact on the typography of the modern age, I would say.

The other movements were about the extreme disappointment of young people who had been subjected to a nineteenth-century education. If you're 19 in 1914, your teachers are often from the nineteenth century, your parents are from the nineteenth century, and the beliefs of the late nineteenth century were implacably about European superiority. They had just conquered half the world. And they were about the superiority of European culture, and above all, the rationalism of European culture, the way in which the European intellect had made nature subject to its will. And these were young boys who suddenly discovered that everything that their parents and their teachers had taught them was a lie. They were being drafted into a war where, if they went, they would be killed. People were killed as soon as they stuck their heads up above those trenches. And it was a war that nobody could explain. Nobody understood why they were there. I think the Dadas and Surrealists were reacting against their parents. But the Futurists were reacting against Europe.

Joan Retallack
in conversation with Adam Pendleton

Adam Pendleton: To begin with a simple question. How has time changed the way you figure yourself in relationship to your work?

Joan Retallack: That's a complex question! I know, from our earlier conversations, that you've been thinking of the period since the *Black Dada Reader* came out as a kind of decade-long gauge (possibly even test?) of developments in our poetics. But of course we've had a different ten years. The things you published in the *Black Dada Reader* from *The Poethical Wager* were not written during the time you were composing the *Reader*. I actually looked up some of the timestamps, so to speak. The first experience you and I had together, talking about *The Poethical Wager*, was in the early 2000s, during the lecture I gave at CCS [the Center for Curatorial Studies], at Bard. I'd been asked to choose a piece of my writing for attendees to read in advance. What I gave the organizer was the "Slef" Interview ["Inserting an H in Poetics: a Slef Interview"], which you read then, but was first published in 1996.

At the time you included it in the *Reader* (2015), it was just as vitally relevant to my work as it had been when I wrote it as an introduction to my coining of the conceptually loaded "poethics." Poethics, and the action of the wager, remain at the heart of everything I do. I've been deploying the poethical wager in response to an expanding range of cultural and socio-political concerns, including the global crisis of our catastrophe-bound Anthropocene. While something I've gladly welcomed over the past three decades is an increasing use of a variety of implications of "poethics" by others. Recently, I've been interested in Denise Ferreira da Silva's use in what she terms "Black feminist poethics." But, I must admit, I'm troubled by the widespread uncoupling of "poethics" from "the wager," which I consider the activating principle of poethical intervention.

On my part, poethical questions concerning the biological "female" versus the characterological "feminine" (in persons of any gender) and particularly the "experimental feminine" (lately blossomed into an "agonistic feminine") have come into the foreground as I've been incorporating the history of misogyny into my work. A couple of years ago, I wrote an essay titled "Alterity, Misogyny, and the Agonistic Feminine," discovering that the agonistic and the experimental have much to say to each other. This isn't so much a shift from one conceptual framework to another as additions and further complications of what you included in the *Black Dada Reader*.

AP: Can you describe your approach to the history of misogyny? I imagine it's also histories of misogynies, in the plural, correct?