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INTRODUCTION

Photographic Returns

Photographic Returns: Racial Justice and the Time of Photography is about contemporary photography that has one eye on the past. It studies art produced in the twenty-first century that draws into view historical moments of racial crisis and transformation in the United States that have also figured prominently in the history of photography. In concert with the work it addresses, the book calls attention to historical events that are known photographically, and in this way it is about the photography of history as much as the history of photography. It proposes that there is a temporal recursivity intrinsic to photography, a backward and forward movement inherent to the medium that invites such returns. The book highlights the fundamental oscillation of photographic time, as it also underscores the ways a number of artists deploy the temporal disruption of the photograph to expose the unfinished work of racial justice in the United States and the racialization of rights and privileges that persists today. As the book invites one to consider the time of photography, it also asks one to contemplate the well-past time of racial justice.

The photograph is emblematic of the way a past continues to inhabit and punctuate a present, and also one of the central vehicles through which that temporal collision takes place. As the artists studied here return to earlier moments they do so by returning to photographs, both heeding and initiating a chain of fluctuating temporalities. Their images refer to and call forth other images. They follow photographs to variously trace, bend, pierce, truncate, extend, and fold time, drawing viewers back and forth across mutable time lines.

When I began writing this book, I set out to consider the present, not the past. I wanted to focus my attention on contemporary art, rather than the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs that had captured my imagination for so long. But in the course of my exploration, I found that the past persistently returned, and that contemporary photography brought conflicted pasts into view in unexpected ways. I discovered a striking coalescence of American artists working with photography in the first decade of the twenty-first century, artists of different generations, genders, races, and regions, who turned their attention back to historical moments of contest over the future of racial justice in the United States.

The artists studied here include Rashid Johnson, Sally Mann, Deborah Luster, Lorna Simpson, Jason Lazarus, Carrie Mae Weems, and Taryn Simon. They do not constitute a school or a movement, and in style and technique their work varies widely. Much of the work is political, but it is not uniformly so, and it often announces itself as such only obliquely. By curating the work of these artists together, I stage a conversation in which political import is animated by my readings and accrues across the separate case studies. I have identified a common current that runs through the work, a pattern of historical revelation and return, a unifying impulse to look to historical moments in order to negotiate the present, an inclination that is activated by photography's temporal dynamic. The specific returns examined here highlight legacies of antiblack racism and resistance, legacies that have situated the artists and their viewers in the present in significantly different ways. Indeed, the white artists do not carry the same burden as their African American peers in negotiating what Darby English has called "black representational space,"[1] but my reading of their work suggests that the history of antiblack racism in the United States has indelibly shaped the worlds they inhabit.[2]

The convergence of artists working on the temporal push and pull of historical moments of racial crisis and resistance suggests a shared impetus, a common motivation, a prevailing concern. Yet it is difficult to say what specific pressures animated these artists and compelled them to produce this work in the first decade of the twenty-first century, what hopes, ambitions, anxieties, and, more profoundly, what unconscious impulses, sent them back to earlier moments of conflict. A number of the artists have noted personal influences that will be detailed in the subsequent chapters, but I am more interested in their collective inclination to produce work with a backward look in this decade, and the way that shared impetus suggests that they were attuned to broader cultural influences and powerful, albeit inchoate, affective

forces. What defined this decade in the United States? Among many registers of precarity one might cite the attacks of 9/11, the War on Terror, the revelation of torture at Abu Ghraib prison, the detentions at Guantanamo Bay, the exponentially increasing incarceration of men and women of color, Hurricane Katrina and its deadly aftermath, the financial crisis of 2008, and the increasingly felt effects of climate change. Some of the artists may have been spurred by a millennial reckoning, a desire to contemplate the century passing as a new century turned forward. Others perhaps, and one artist explicitly, were compelled to come to terms with what the presidency of Barack Obama meant in the long fight against antiblack racism in the United States. Certainly these events informed my own thinking during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and more recently, during the years I have been writing this book: the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin; the police killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Laquan McDonald, Philando Castile, and so many others; and the countervailing response of the Black Lives Matter movement initiated by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors have loomed large in my mind, bringing the work of the artists studied here, as well as the images to which they refer, into sharper focus as part of a history of antiblack violence as well as resistance to it. Indeed, one of the fundamental premises of this book is that how different pasts are activated and become visible is profoundly influenced by the present that one inhabits. Historical work is never only about a past; it is also about finding a way through a present and imagining a future.

In their reckonings with US history, the artists studied here also wrestle with photography, highlighting its extraordinary temporality, its materiality, its particularity as well as its expansiveness. Their work is about photography as much as it is about history and what any given photograph might be said to represent. In this light, it is striking how many of the artists have turned to analogue technologies and even nineteenth-century processes, such as wet-plate collodion. In the digital age they have chosen to work slowly, to encumber themselves with heavy cameras and messy chemistry and darkrooms, or they have collected and compiled paper prints, or they have sought to amplify the materiality of the ephemeral image by printing it on metal plates or felt panels. In the same decade in which many artists sought to understand the proliferation of images in the era of digital photography, smartphone cameras, and social media, to explore the new ways in which people make, share, access, encounter, and use images now, these artists have turned to analogue and antique forms.[3] In doing so, they create a moment of pause in the rush of

the digital era, highlighting the ways in which photography can slow down as well as accelerate time.

Returning to earlier moments, these artists also return to periods in which the individual photograph had the potential to endure in a less crowded and fleeting visual terrain. Rashid Johnson, for example, styles himself after a portrait of Frederick Douglass, said to be the most photographed American of the nineteenth century, with 160 distinct images, an impressive number for the time that diminishes entirely in the era of the selfie.[4] A number of the other artists recall photographs and photographers included in *TIME*'s 2016 selection of "100 Photos"—"The Most Influential Images of All Time"—which range across three centuries, from Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826) to Nilüfer Demir's photograph of Alan Kurdi, a drowned Syrian refugee boy, taken in 2015.[5] Among them, Jason Lazarus evokes David Jackson's postmortem images of Emmett Till made in 1955, Sally Mann conjures Alexander Gardner's Civil War photographs made at Antietam in 1862, and Lorna Simpson recalls James VanDerZee's portraits of stylish African Americans made in the 1930s. Carrie Mae Weems works directly with three of the photographs on *TIME*'s list, including John Paul Filo's photograph of the Kent State University Massacre in 1970, as discussed in chapter 6. These contemporary artists return to iconic images, to photographs that have become stand-ins for expansive, mobile, and sometimes contradictory meanings. They bear witness to photographs and to photography itself at a moment in which it is difficult to predict whether any single image, or one hundred singular images, can and will have staying power in the years to come. As the curators for *TIME*'s "100 Photos" note, "In 2016 alone, hundreds of billions of images were made."[6]

Photographic Returns studies the time of photography, focusing on its fragmentation and multiplicity, its repetition and recurrence. The photograph encapsulates a temporal oscillation, always signifying in relation to a past and a present, and anticipating a future. It refers to the moment of its making as well as the many possible moments of its viewing. One might make similar claims for other kinds of representation, but the time of the photograph is distinguished by the relative instantaneity of its production and its famed indexicality. The photograph records the often imperceptible increment of time in which a camera shutter opens to expose a negative or sensor to reflected light, and in this way it seems to stop time, or to wrest a moment out of the flow of time. It makes visible a constellation of forces and things that came together in front of a camera's lens for a fraction of a second, draw-

ing a moment into view in a way that it was never experienced. It functions as a trace of its subject, of light, and of time itself, and in this way it feels forever tethered to the moment of its making, intrinsically bound to the moment it records. But this stopping of time is also the starting of another time, the temporal trajectory of the photograph itself, and that time is multiple. Iconic images in particular accrue varied meanings for different generations, significations that are not fully effaced as they are transformed and passed on. In other words, the photograph does not return from a single past, the moment of its making, but accumulates the many pasts through which it passes, both synchronically and diachronically. The photograph is a record of a moment and its many possible receptions, and in this way it is always of pasts and presents and futures.

This book proposes that the temporality of photography informs historical understanding by exposing the openness of the present to the past. The photograph is an emblem of temporal disturbance that shows, quite literally, how a past inhabits a present.[7] For Roland Barthes, the photograph is a form of "temporal hallucination" that catapults a past moment into a viewer's present.[8] Despite a tenacious faith in the fixity of the image, the photograph does not preserve a past that is stable and accessible. It delivers a mutable and multiple past into a varied and shifting present. Indeed, the changing meaning of an image over time highlights the instability of the past, and the ways one comes to know a past differently in a mobile present. But this is not to say that the photograph is the standard of a kind of historical relativism, for even as an image is made legible within specific cultural discourses that shift and change its meaning over time, one of the photograph's striking characteristics remains its indexical status as a trace. The photograph presents a kind of brute fact, but one that is not necessarily meaningful. Bringing the visibility of photographic evidence into legibility is the work of artists and scholars, and fundamentally the task of this book. The photograph carries a tiny shard of reflected light into the moment of its viewing, offering a tiny flash of a past to a viewer who needs it.[9]

Among the artists discussed here, Rashid Johnson and Sally Mann look back to slavery and the Civil War, Lorna Simpson returns to the Harlem Renaissance, and Jason Lazarus and Carrie Mae Weems recall the civil rights movement. The periods and problems they explore have been central to the history of photography in the United States, just as photography has shaped the ways in which one understands their significance today. The Civil War, for example, was the first war in the United States to be covered by photog-

raphers, and illustrations made after photographs circulated widely for a national audience in *Harper's Weekly*. In the twentieth century, photographs from the civil rights movement became the most iconic images of antiblack racism and the African American struggle for civil rights in US history. For contemporary photographers and conceptual artists, such images provide touchstones for thinking about history's hold on the present, as well as historical amnesias and blind spots. While many of the artists studied here return to specific images and events, others recall widespread photographic practices invented and institutionalized in the nineteenth century. Deborah Luster and Taryn Simon turn their attention to police and prison photography, engaging disciplinary forms of visual inscription such as the mug shot and the crime scene photograph. My reading of their work points to systemic racism and the contemporary crisis of race and citizenship Michelle Alexander has called "The New Jim Crow."[10]

As *Photographic Returns* highlights the fluctuating temporality of photography, it also calls attention to the material history of the medium. Jason Lazarus collects snapshots that represent a range of popular twentieth-century analogue forms, while Sally Mann and Deborah Luster employ nineteenth-century photographic techniques. Mann, for example, uses an antique large-format view camera and wet-plate collodion, reenacting the photographic process of Alexander Gardner who photographed Civil War battlefields long before her. Mann's practice seems designed to accentuate the materiality of her images and the process of making them, and in this way it encourages one to employ what Elizabeth Edwards has called a "'material hermeneutic'" that moves "the analysis of photographs from questions of representation alone to questions of material practice."[11] In league with the artists studied here, this book invites one to take note of the material history of photography and its changing forms as well as its discursive parameters.

As photographers like Mann emphasize the making of their work, they highlight the performativity of photographic practice on both sides of the camera. Carrie Mae Weems's images are especially salient in this regard, as she and her collaborators have reenacted iconic civil rights era photographs, re-performing the poses and postures of people caught on film in moments of crisis. In some of the images she leaves video cameras on tracks visible in the frame, highlighting the performative staging of her scenes. Like Weems, Simpson and Johnson also underscore the performance of subjects for the camera, drawing out the collaborative work that takes place in the photographer's studio as people craft their images for later viewers.

Weems remakes documentary images in the realm of art, and the other artists studied here similarly transfer images from one institutional location to another, from the prison to the museum, the newspaper to the classroom to the gallery.[12] As they bring images from one era into another, they also move them from one discursive context to another. The artists mine a wide array of photographic genres, including police and prison photography; documentary, scientific, taxonomic, and ethnographic photography; portraiture, landscape, and the snapshot. They highlight, transform, and denaturalize the genres they engage. Focusing on photography per se, as well as specific modes of photography, they call attention to the medium itself and its many cultural forms. In this way, they refuse to allow the photograph to be conceived as transparent and foreground the work of photography in producing culturally legible subjects.[13]

The Photography of History

As Roland Barthes proclaimed, "The same century invented History and Photography."[14] And so perhaps it is not surprising that the two would be intimately intertwined. But for Barthes, the simultaneity of the two inventions in the nineteenth century presents "a paradox," because if history aims for narrative progression, photography offers temporal rupture.[15] In the almost two centuries since their advent, the relationship between history and photography remains perplexing, as well as generative, and it is this evocative correlation that provides the impetus for this book and the work that it studies.

The photograph heralded an age in which people were "no longer able to conceive *duration*," according to Barthes. "The age of the Photograph is also the age of revolutions, contestations, assassinations, explosions, in short, of impatiences, of everything which denies ripening."[16] Photography proffers what Walter Benjamin called the "dynamite of the split second," presenting flashes, fragments, and fleeting instants.[17] In this way it unsettled nineteenth-century understandings of history founded on advancement and unfolding, even as it was coterminous with them.[18] Photography inaugurated a new way of conceiving history, of apprehending a past in felt fragments.

Writing in the early twentieth century, almost a hundred years after the advent of photography, Benjamin embraced the photograph and its fleeting instants as the emblem of a new historical method. He understood that the photograph, like the historical materialist he celebrated, "blast[s] open the continuum of history."[19] In Eduardo Cadava's words, "The photographic image . . . interrupts history *and opens up another possibility of history*."[20]

Benjamin celebrated photography as a revolutionary art form, and he used photographic language to describe his radical historical method.[21] He sought to intervene in the narrative of history as progress, and he drew on the temporal disruption of the photographic image to make his case for historical materialism. In his aphoristic essay "On the Concept of History," he proclaims: "The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again."[22] Such a moment of recognition strikes when one sees a past repeating in the present and refuses to acquiesce to history's narrative of progress.[23] Grasping "the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one,"[24] the historical materialist rejects the idea that the past remains discrete from the present by seizing upon the repetition and return of an image, by taking hold of it as it "flashes up" like a photograph in the present. Photography provided an apt language for Benjamin's historical method because it also disrupts a narrative of historical progression, offering up disjointed views of a past that seeks recognition in a present. As Benjamin called on photography to interrupt a narrative of history as progress, the artists studied here deploy photography to unsettle a narrative of social progress, using the photograph to bring to light the unfinished work of racial justice.

The Civil War was the most profound revolution in the nineteenth-century United States, and it exposed a rupture in the definition of the human inaugurated by slavery that would persist in its wake. As discussed in the first two chapters here, these radical transformations also figured photographically in images made at Civil War battlefields and in portraits of the newly emancipated making claims to freedom and self-possession. Rashid Johnson looks back to Frederick Douglass, who powerfully conjoins slavery, the Civil War, photography, and emancipation in his lecture "Pictures and Progress," discussed in chapter 1. For both Douglass and Johnson, separated by a century and a half, photography provided a fitting medium for registering the rupture of radical transformation as well as the burden of cultural inheritance.

Although photography challenges the conception of duration, the photograph itself endures, transporting a moment into unknown futures, and this is another aspect of its temporal disruption. The image persists, and as it does so, it opens onto new possibilities and enters into new configurations. As the image endures, its meaning changes. A photograph may snap into focus years after its production; it may be seen and understood in a new way at a new time, by a different viewer.[25] This unending aftereffect of the photograph is a dynamic central to the work studied in this book, in which artists engage

images from a past and make them visible for new audiences in new ways at new times.

In many respects, the artists studied here engage the historical dynamic Benjamin celebrates. But they do not wait for historical revelations to reveal themselves in flashes. Instead they return to earlier moments and images with purpose, in order to invite consideration of a present in light of a past. Benjamin proposes that history contains images like photographic negatives that remain latent until future events conspire to make them recognizable. In his "Paralipomena" (or supplement) to "On the Concept of History," he states, "If one looks upon history as a text, then one can say of it what a recent author has said of literary texts—namely, that the past has left in them images comparable to those registered by a light-sensitive plate. 'The future alone possesses developers strong enough to reveal the image in all its details.'"[26] Benjamin employs the striking photographic imagery of light-sensitive plates and developers to describe the work of the historical materialist who brings images from the past into view in a new constellation in the present. The artists studied here, working with photography, become the developers of past images, engaging them in new patterns that open the photographs to new considerations, just as this book also draws the artworks and their referents into view in relation to specific constellations of past and present.

One of the places historians and artists find photographs is the archive. As I have argued elsewhere, archives stake a claim to history that is always contested and that many artists and scholars and activists have challenged by creating counterarchives that make visible alternative historical agents and narratives.[27] Further, for scholars such as Ann Stoler and Elizabeth Edwards, even those institutional archives most invested in colonial projects reveal tensions, contradictions, and conflicts in the practice of power.[28] For Edwards the photographic archive is "a place of potential" in which "meanings come in and out of focus, double back on themselves, adhere silently."[29] In other words, although the archive is often an institutional repository invested with authority and defined by material as well as conceptual constraints, it is not a static collection. Indeed, despite its institutional and ideological limitations, its absences and erasures, the archive preserves records that can be put into dynamic play in unanticipated ways. This is due in part to the nature of the photograph itself: "Photographs are very literally raw histories . . . their unprocessed quality, their randomness, their minute indexicality, are inherent to the medium . . . they are ultimately uncontainable."[30] Despite the structures that work to direct photographic meaning in the archive, the photograph is a

contingent record, and from its random details artists and scholars can generate new historical visions.[31]

The artists studied here return to the archive as a site of potential, and they underscore the malleability of photographic evidence. All of them are heirs to the critique of photographic transparency that Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler, and John Tagg made so forcefully in the 1970s and 1980s.[32] As they engage and activate photographs as historical artifacts they also undermine them as stable records and authoritative evidence. But the work does not end there; indeed, in many ways that is where it begins, with the photograph as the unsettled and yet necessary link to a past that is also in play.

Not all photographs wait to be found. Some return uninvited. Indeed, as Ulrich Baer has argued, photography might be said to share the structure of trauma.[33] Like the traumatic flashback, the photograph perpetually replays a moment that seems to exist outside of time.[34] Traumatic histories flash up in the present across these chapters: slavery; the Civil War; the murder of Emmett Till; the assassinations of the civil rights era; police, prison, and crime scene photography; misidentification and wrongful conviction. Studying artworks that call forth photographs from these earlier moments, this book seizes on images that will not stay in place, and deploys the instability of the photograph to reconsider a past that is not fixed.

The photograph folds the past into the time of its viewing; it retains what is no longer present. This is the aspect of the photograph's temporality that so startled Barthes, its trenchant hold on a moment that is always already past, its embrace of a subject that is absent.[35] The photograph mirrors the dynamic of melancholia, in which the bereaved subject refuses to relinquish what has been lost. However, rather than understanding melancholia narrowly as a form of emotional arrest, following David L. Eng and David Kazanjian I consider melancholia a more expansive and generative temporal disturbance. In their reading of Freud, Eng and Kazanjian propose: "In melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present." "Melancholia might be said to constitute . . . an ongoing and open relationship with the past—bringing its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present."[36] The photograph also carries "ghosts and specters," "flaring and fleeting images" of a past into a present. Its subject is both absent and close at hand, both then and now. Photography, like melancholia, opens a present to a past.

Despite its emphasis on history, the temporal direction of *Photographic Returns* is not only backward looking. The book also thinks with Benjamin about the way futures reside in photographs, waiting for the moment in which

they can be recognized. As he outlines in a striking passage in "Little History of Photography," Benjamin saw such futures in "the tiny spark of contingency," the accidental detail, recorded in a photograph: "No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it."[37] In the photograph one might find unexpected futures projected out of a past. Seemingly random details might hold the key to other worlds. As Baer has argued, "each photograph opens onto a future that, from *within* the image, is still radically undecided," and therefore photographic pasts might beckon still unanticipated futures.[38] In league with the temporal movement of the photograph itself, this book looks back to move forward.

This backward and forward momentum is most explicitly on display in the first chapter, which offers a reading of Frederick Douglass's early thoughts on photography inspired by Rashid Johnson's performative portrait after Douglass. Writing about photography in 1861 and 1865, Douglass had relatively little technological history to look back on, and indeed, his thoughts are mostly forward looking. Nevertheless, he also intuited that the persistence of the photograph might prove both a promise and a problem for later generations. By keeping a past alive in a present, the photograph could function as an impetus to change as well as a drag against transformation. Responding to Douglass a century and a half later, Johnson takes up both the potential and the burden of photography, highlighting the photograph's dual nature in a self-portrait that is both an homage to Douglass and an irreverent play on impasse.

Photographic Returns engages Benjamin's conception of history to explore the ways in which a past continues to inhabit a present in photographic fragments. The artists studied here put images of a past into play in their own present moments, and viewers understand their work in relation to still other temporal frames. The book invites readers to attend to this temporal dynamic without remaining locked in a historical loop. It encourages a conceptual telescoping of time that allows one to see an ever-shifting present in light of pasts that harbor their own alternative futures.

Photographic Returns focuses on contemporary artworks produced in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with the exception of one piece made in

1995, and another project that is ongoing. The works refer to photographs dating from the 1840s to the 1980s, and the chapters are organized in the chronological order of their historical touchstones. The case studies focus on discrete series and sometimes even a single photograph, situating the images in the historical constellations that flash up around them.

The first two chapters present the widest temporal gap between artwork and the images that inspired them, looking back from the twenty-first century to the mid-nineteenth century. In chapter 1, Rashid Johnson's *Self Portrait with My Hair Parted Like Frederick Douglass* recalls the many photographic portraits of the famous nineteenth-century orator and fugitive slave, as well as his thoughts about the social power and promise of photography. The first chapter is weighted toward Douglass, as if pulled by his gravitational force, but also because many of the considerations of the book unfold from Douglass's early and foundational questions about the effect of photographs on subsequent generations, the transformative power of what was for him a new technology. Looking back at Frederick Douglass's lecture "Pictures and Progress" through the lens of Johnson's work, the first chapter examines the abolitionist's surprising celebration of photography as an objectifying medium. Douglass found progressive power in the technology's capacity to alienate the self, a position one would not expect the formerly enslaved to embrace. As he highlighted photography's progressive potential, he also understood the persistence of photographs to be both a conserving and a conservative force, and Johnson's self-portrait after Douglass testifies to that doubled dynamic. The chapter explores Douglass's complicated embrace of photography as a medium of objectification as well as progress, as a link to the past and a call to the future viewer that Johnson would become.

The second chapter focuses on Sally Mann's Antietam photographs, made at the site of the bloodiest one-day battle of the Civil War, a battle that persuaded President Lincoln to announce the Emancipation Proclamation. Antietam was also the first US battlefield to be photographed before corpses were buried, and Alexander Gardner and James Gibson's gruesome images made in 1862 were circulated widely. Mann worked at Antietam much as her famous forebears did, with a large-format view camera and hand-coated wet collodion glass plates. But unlike those of Gardner and Gibson, Mann's photographs are dark and almost unintelligible. They draw attention to the opacity of the photograph and unsettle ideas about historical reclamation. Ultimately, Mann's Antietam photographs refer less to the site of the infamous battle and

more to Gardner and Gibson's early views. Her work proposes that photography, rather than place, bears the weight of the past.

Like Sally Mann, Deborah Luster also uses nineteenth-century photographic technologies. Chapter 3 explores how her project *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* intervenes in the history of police and prison photography, as her portraits of incarcerated men and women challenge the legacy of visual inscription that frames "the criminal." Luster works both in and outside of the prison, recalling not only the visual history of the mug shot but also that of the crime scene photograph. In *Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish* she returns to crime scenes in New Orleans years after the fact to photograph empty, haunted sites. Her images subtly record a history of structural and systemic violence marked in the urban landscape.

Chapter 4 focuses on Lorna Simpson's enigmatic artwork *9 Props*. The piece is an oblique homage to Harlem Renaissance photographer James VanDerZee and the studio portraits of stylish African American men, women, and children he made in the 1920s, 1930s, and beyond. Working with gaffers at the Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington, Simpson made reproductions of the vases that populate VanDerZee's studio in black glass. She then photographed the black vessels as surrogates standing in for VanDerZee's human subjects. Printing her images on felt, Simpson plays on the haptic qualities of the photograph and its status as a material trace. Displacing VanDerZee's central subjects, and highlighting the props in the studio, she underscores the production of an image, the performance of the subject for the camera, and the collaboration of photographer and subject in creating a forward-looking record of aspirations and dreams.

Jason Lazarus's photograph *Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, Day of Exhumation, June 1st, 2005 (Alsip, Illinois)* launches chapter 5, a meditation on photography and melancholia. It proposes that Lazarus's equivocal photograph provides an emblem for the perpetual return of images of Emmett Till that first circulated in 1955. Those images communicated the horror of Till's murder to a segregated viewing audience, even as they also failed to capture the terrible crime itself. Lazarus's image evokes the paradox of spectacle and absence that characterized Till's murder and that continues to be marked by the repetition and return of Till's photographs over fifty years later. Elaborating on the link between memory and melancholia set forth by *Standing at the Grave*, the chapter also looks to Lazarus's ongoing project, *Too Hard to Keep*. Here the artist solicits submissions of images that people can no longer

bear to keep and arranges them in installations of anonymous snapshots. The project engages the mutable nature of photographic meaning as images enter into new relations with other photographs and viewers.

Carrie Mae Weems's *Constructing History* (2008), the focus of chapter 6, exemplifies the most literal of photographic returns studied in this book, namely the reenactment of historical photographs. Weems looks back to iconic images from the civil rights era to reperform and reproduce them with her collaborators. She responds to the felt history of photography, and her reenactments amplify the embodied nature of the photograph's affective charge. As her images refer and defer to earlier photographs, she invites one to consider the role of photography in "constructing history" as well as memory. There is a striking recursivity in the work that comments not only on the relationship of photography to history but also on the nature of photography itself. Chapter 6 frames *Constructing History* as a form of photographic reenactment that calls attention to the disruptive time of photography.

The final chapter explores Taryn Simon's false returns. It studies *The Innocents*, a project in which Simon photographed wrongfully convicted subjects after their exoneration and release from prison. Like Luster's work, Simon's also comments on the historical use of photography in policing and the prison, highlighting specifically the problematic use of the mug shot in eyewitness identification procedures. *The Innocents* offers a critique of photographic evidence, but it is an ambiguous reconsideration that relies on the medium it troubles. Photographing some of her subjects at the scenes of the crimes for which they were convicted but did not commit, Simon folds time around incarceration, orchestrating a false return that situates her subjects on unstable photographic ground. By powerfully bringing into view the victims of mistaken identification, the project also unwittingly obscures other innocents, namely the victims of violent crime.

Photographic Returns concludes with a brief coda that reads Dawoud Bey's *The Birmingham Project* as emblematic of photography's temporal oscillations. Bey's work looks back, but also forward to a viewer whom it asks to take up the unfinished work of racial justice.

Photographic Returns is about the place of photography in history, and the place of history in photography. It explores historical moments of racial crisis that have come to be known photographically, and considers the ways in which a past travels and transforms via photographs. The artists studied

here look back to charged moments in the history of the United States and the struggle for African American civil rights that have also figured prominently in the history of photography. There is an important politics to their returns, a vital dynamic that looks back in order to reflect on the present and imagine a way forward, a critical practice that this book engages and expands.

NOTES

Introduction

1 Darby English, "Beyond Black Representational Space," in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 27–70.

2 In *Photographic Returns* I am interested in the way a disparate and diverse group of artists has embraced a dynamic of historical return in the early twenty-first century, a dynamic that specifically engages the temporality of photography to consider multiple moments of racial injustice that range across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Other recent studies of race and visual culture that draw on a dynamic of return tend to focus specifically on slavery and its haunting afterimages. Huey Copeland's *Bound to Appear*, for example, focuses on four African American artists—Glenn Ligon, Renée Green, Lorna Simpson, and Fred Wilson—who produced large-scale installation works about slavery between 1991 and 1993. In the work of these artists Copeland identifies a shared practice and politics of rejecting figuration and turning to objects as substitutes for absent bodies in order to give form to "the political–ontological position of black subjectivity" (10). Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013). For another discussion of slavery, visual culture, and "returns," see Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson, "Perpetual Returns: New World Slavery and the Matter of the Visual," *Representations* 113 (winter 2011): 1–15. Kimberly Juanita Brown studies the afterimage of slavery's memory in black women's literary and visual representations, attending to the dynamic of repetition through which slavery is negotiated in the contemporary moment. Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). Janet Neary shows how contemporary artists adopt the formal strategies of nineteenth-century slave narratives to reveal a strategy of visual resistance that was already present in those narratives. Janet Neary, *Fugitive Testimony: On the Visual Logic of Slave Narratives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). Cheryl Finley traces the afterlife of the slave ship icon in the work of twentieth-century black artists and writers. Cheryl Finley, *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

3 See, for example, Penelope Umbrico's *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* (2006–), penelopeumbrico.net/index.php/project/suns/, accessed February 2, 2017. Kate Palmer Albers discusses this project and others in "Abundant Images and the Collective Sublime," *Exposure* 46, no. 2 (fall 2013): 4–14. In her own discussion of photography and time in the wake of the digital revolution of the last twenty-five years, Sarah Greenough proposes that many artists "have intensely scrutinized photography itself, examining what it is conceptually, ontologically, and physically." Sarah Greenough, "The Memory of Time: Introduction," in *The Memory of Time: Contemporary Photographs at the National Gallery of Art*, Sarah Greenough and Andrea Nelson, with Sarah Kennel, Diane Waggoner, and Leslie J. Ureña (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2015), 2.

4 John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: Liveright/W. W. Norton, 2015), ix.

5 Ben Goldberger, Paul Moakley and Kira Pollack, TIME Inc., 100 Photos, The Most Influential Images of All Time, 100photos.time.com, accessed February 3, 2017.

6 Ben Goldberger, Paul Moakley, and Kira Pollack, TIME Inc., 100 Photos, The Most Influential Images of All Time, http://100photos.time.com/about, accessed February 3, 2017.

7 My thinking along these lines is influenced by the critical method Elizabeth Freeman has called "erotohistoriography." For Freeman, erotohistoriography is not about the desire for a past, but about finding a past in a hybrid present. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 95. In her efforts to narrate "counter-histories of slavery" and to write "a history of the present," Saidiya Hartman also "strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past." Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 4. Christina Sharpe's "wake work," which she deems "a method of encountering a past that is not past," is also resonant here. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 13. I am also indebted to the impulse that informs what Leigh Raiford has described as "critical black memory," which "implies the negotiation, the *use* of history for the present." Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 63.

8 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (1980; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 115.

9 As Mary Ann Doane has argued, "The concept of the index . . . seems to acknowledge the invasion of semiotic systems by the real." Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 70. For a powerful defense of the photograph as an inadequate but nevertheless necessary form of historical evidence, see Georges

Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

10 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, rev. ed. (New York: The New Press, 2011).

11 Elizabeth Edwards, "Photography and the Material Performance of the Past," *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (December 2009): 150.

12 For an analysis of the transformation of photographic meaning as images move from one discursive location to another, see Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (winter 1982): 311–19.

13 The photographic returns studied here have noted precedents. Mark Klett's rephotographic survey project (1977–79) is a salient example in which he and a team of collaborators rephotographed scenes from nineteenth-century survey photography of the American West. Following in the footsteps of Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson, they worked to reproduce the views of their predecessors, placing cameras in precise positions and re-creating the same lighting effects over a hundred years later. One might also look to Joel Sternfeld's *On This Site: Landscape in Memorium* (1996) for another kind of return, in this case to sites of violent crime that did not always figure photographically. Some of the places Sternfeld photographs are associated with infamous photographs, such as the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, now the National Civil Rights Museum, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, but in many cases his images and text seek to make violence visible in seemingly obscure and innocuous places.

14 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 93.

15 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 93.

16 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 93–94. It is no accident, perhaps, that Barthes's ruminations on photography's disruptive temporality in *Camera Lucida* are permeated by grief at his mother's death. For, as Dana Luciano has argued, grief might be said to resist the time of modern progress. According to Luciano, "The radical reorganization that we understand as the advent of modernity constructed a new vision of time as linear, ordered, progressive, and teleological." Concurrent with the new understandings of time as progressive and linear, however, a culture of grief developed in the United States that resisted the forward momentum of modern time. "The pronounced nineteenth-century attention to grief and mourning . . . responds to anxiety over the new shape of time by insisting that emotional attachment had its own pace—a slower and essentially nonlinear relation to the value of human existence that defended it against the increasingly rapid pace of progress." Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 2.

17 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," second version, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3, *1935–1938*,

ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2002), 117.

18 According to Michael S. Roth, "The dialectical conception of history as embodied duration—the notion that every historical moment contains both layers of the past and seeds of the future—was the field in which photography was inserted in the mid nineteenth century. However, photography's ability to break a 'moment' down into the instantaneous radically disturbs the easy immanence associated with historical narratives that rely on dialectical unfolding." Michael S. Roth, "Photographic Ambivalence and Historical Consciousness," *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (December 2009): 83.

19 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, *1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2003), 396.

20 Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 61; emphasis mine.

21 As Cadava has argued, "Benjamin conceives of history in the language of photography." Cadava, *Words of Light*, 3.

22 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 390.

23 As Vanessa R. Schwartz proposes, "Benjamin believed that history was a constellation of past and present through which the present would find an image of itself and thus see more clearly." Vanessa R. Schwartz, "Walter Benjamin for Historians," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (December 2001): 1724.

24 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 397.

25 See my discussion of the malleability of photographic evidence in "The Evidence of Lynching Photographs," in *Lynching Photographs*, by Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 10–41. In her definition of the "event of photography," Ariella Azoulay includes the potentially "infinite series of encounters" in which, after they are produced (if they are produced), photographs may be seen by distant, unknown viewers at unpredictable future moments. Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, trans. Louise Bethlehem (2010; repr., London: Verso, 2015), 23, 26.

26 Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" in Eiland and Jennings, ed., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 405.

27 Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). Ann Cvetkovich and Wendy W. Walters have explored the ways artists and writers challenge official archives that erase, silence, and subordinate the lives of black and lesbian and gay people. Cvetkovich studies alternative archives made by lesbian artists as practices of fantasy made material in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), and Walters examines how contemporary African diasporic writers revisit the official data of

the archive to propose aspirational imaginings in *Archives of the Black Atlantic: Reading between Literature and History* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

28 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

29 Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 4.

30 Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 5. As Roland Barthes proclaimed, "The Photograph is pure contingency and can be nothing else." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 28.

31 Edwards has more recently studied the ways in which the material practices of the archive seek to contain and control photographic meaning through the directives of the label, the mount, and the archival box. Edwards, "Photography and the Material Performance of the Past," 130–50. For a reading of the latent meanings that reside in the colonial photographic archive, see Gabrielle Moser, "Developing Historical Negatives: The Colonial Photographic Archive as Optical Unconscious," in *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*, ed. Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 229–63.

32 Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (winter 1986): 3–64; and Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1983* (Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984); Martha Rosler, *Martha Rosler, 3 Works: 1. The Restoration of High Culture in Chile (1972); 2. The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems (1974); 3. in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography) (1981)* (Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

33 Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002). Margaret Iversen uses the language of "exposure" to draw an analogy between the psychic trace of trauma and the indexical trace of the photograph. Margaret Iversen, "Exposure," in *Photography, Trace, and Trauma* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1–16.

34 According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is characterized by its "unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance." Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

35 For Barthes, the photograph is "a bizarre *medium*," and once again, "a temporal hallucination." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 115.

36 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, *1914–1916*, trans. James Strachey (1917; repr., London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243–58. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3–4. For other discussions of photography and melancholia, see Sharon Sliwinski, "On Photographic Violence," *Photography and Culture* 2,

no. 3 (November 2009): 303–16, especially 309–10; José Esteban Muñoz, "Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in VanDerZee, Mapplethorpe, and *Looking for Langston*," in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 57–74; Shawn Michelle Smith, "Photography between Desire and Grief: Roland Barthes and F. Holland Day," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 29–46.

37 Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, *1931–1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 510. Benjamin outlines a radical temporal nonlinearity in his writing on history and the futurity of the photograph's "spark of contingency," and recently scholars have begun to understand such disruptions of linear time as queer. As Elizabeth Freeman proposes, "many queer historiographers . . . take their cue from Walter Benjamin": "Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' powerfully critiques the notion of time as a flat plane on which events march forward in sequence. It suggests a potentially queer vision of how time wrinkles and folds as some minor feature of our own sexually impoverished present suddenly meets up with a richer past, or as the materials of a failed and forgotten project of the past find their uses now, in a future unimaginable in their time." Elizabeth Freeman, "Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, nos. 2–3 (2007): 163. Achille Mbembe offers another model of time as multiple and mixed with his theory of "entanglement." According to Mbembe the "time of entanglement" in the postcolony "is not a series but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones." Achille Mbembe, "Introduction: Time on the Move," in *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 16.

38 Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 181. As Baer has also proposed, "Every photograph is addressed to a beyond that remains undefined" (182).

Chapter 1

1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (1980; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 12.

2 Johnson made a series of portraits of homeless men called *Seeing in the Dark* using the Van Dyke process. Amy M. Mooney discusses this work in her entry on Rashid Johnson in *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 86, no. 1/4 (2012): 58–59.

3 Huey Copeland, "Rashid Johnson: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago," *Artforum* 50, no. 10 (summer 2012): 303.

4 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), intro. by John Edgar Wideman (New York: Vintage/Library of America, 1990), 8.