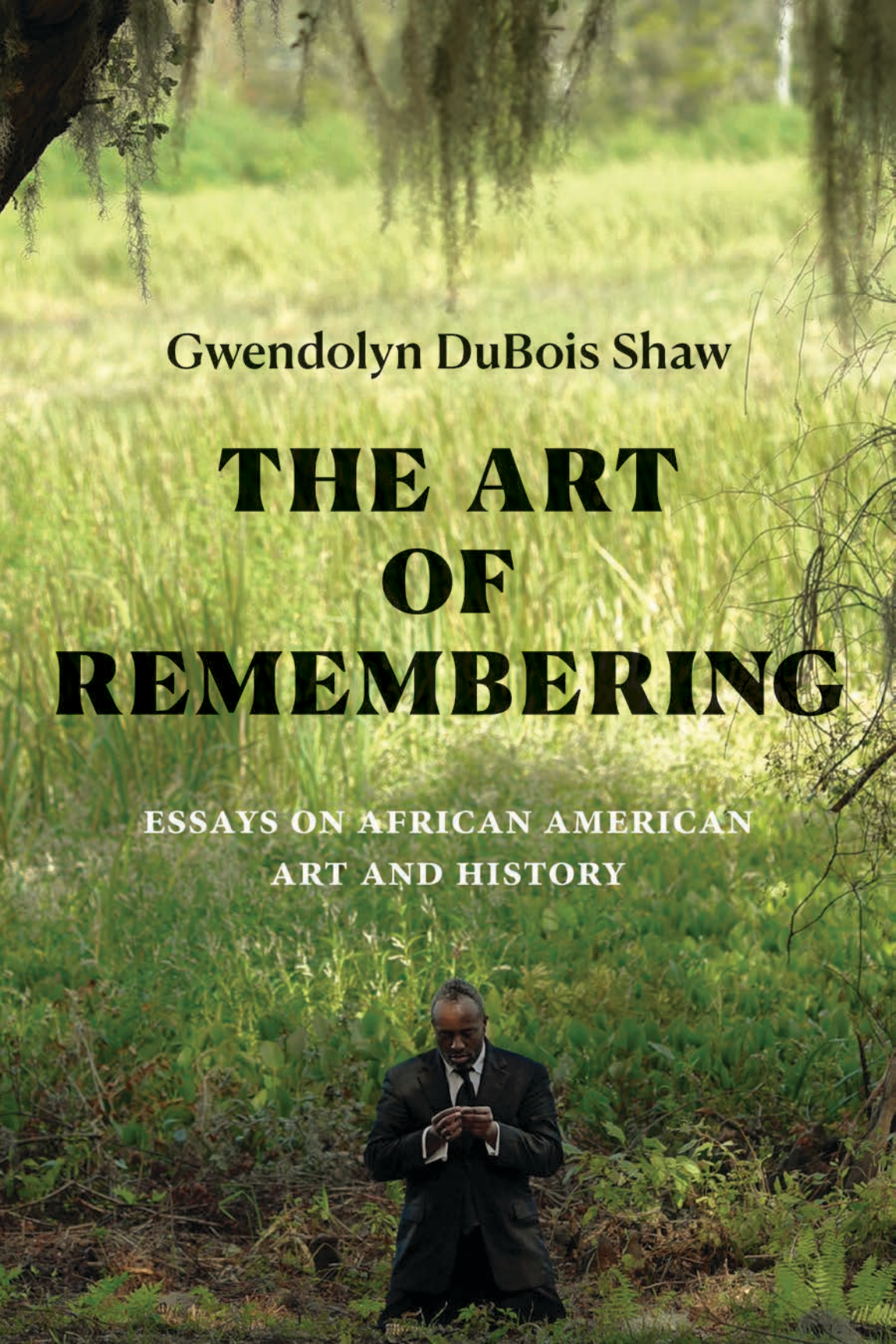


A man in a dark suit and tie stands in a lush, green forest, looking down at a small object in his hands. The background is filled with tall grass and hanging moss, creating a serene and somewhat ethereal atmosphere.

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw

THE ART OF REMEMBERING

ESSAYS ON AFRICAN AMERICAN
ART AND HISTORY

THE ART OF REMEMBERING

BUY

**VISUAL ARTS OF AFRICA
AND ITS DIASPORAS**

A SERIES EDITED BY

KELLIE JONES AND STEVEN NELSON

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw

THE ART OF REMEMBERING

ESSAYS ON AFRICAN AMERICAN
ART AND HISTORY

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**THE ART OF
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INTRODUCTION

As we maneuver the third decade of the twenty-first century, Black artists are experiencing an extraordinary level of visibility within the museum and gallery world. Their work fills the walls of blue-chip galleries and art fair convention halls and breaks records for contemporary and living artists at auction. Colleges and universities are scrambling to hire both emerging and senior specialists in African American and African diaspora art, just as art museums and exhibition spaces are recruiting highly trained curators tasked with building collections, conceptualizing relevant thematic shows, and organizing retrospective exhibitions of established Black artists whose contributions may previously have been overlooked or actively ignored by those same spaces. During the first week of October 2022, as I sat in my home office diligently revising this introduction, an exhibition devoted to the Black art community that Linda Goode Bryant had nurtured in the 1970s and 1980s at the legendary gallery Just Above Midtown had just opened at the Museum of Modern Art, and the Loophole of Retreat symposium, organized by curator Rashida Bumbray, visual theorist Tina Campt, and historian Saidiya Hartman on the occasion of Simone Leigh's landmark presentation at the Fifty-Ninth Venice Biennale, as the first African

American woman to exhibit in the US pavilion, was underway at that city's Giorgio Cini Foundation. The celebratory pictures of Black art world royalty celebrating at the Monday evening *Just Above Midtown* opening dominated my Instagram feed at the same time the livestream of potent Afrofemmergy appeared on YouTube.

In this moment, there is an undeniable appetite for the culturally specific visual discourses to which so much African American and diasporic Black art alludes, and it feeds a hunger in Black people's souls as much as it does in those who have no African heritage in their backgrounds. Whether it be futurist, pessimist, banal, abject, or baroque, art by Black artists that features Black people's bodies or engages with ideas of Blackness (both solid and liquid) has indeed captured the attention of the art world. But along with the rewards in this shift in visibility and plethora of platforms comes the question of what cost is being paid and how long this new Black Renaissance will last. It is a question that begs for our attention and deep consideration.¹ This book is an attempt to gather some of my early and more recent contributions and to claim a certain space within these discourses—a space that stresses the importance of history and legacy, of welcome and accessibility.

Written between 2002 and 2022, the essays assembled in this book touch on a large swath of African American art and representation, from the height of the British colonial period through to the current moment, as Black producers have worked to create primarily within the context of what is now known as the United States. These essays use various methodologies to engage and create African American art histories, both object based and biographical, but in each essay, theory is employed solely with the aim to make the work of Black artists more legible and accessible to fellow thinkers, cultural workers, and the audiences who seek to engage their production through in-person exhibitions, in books, or online. This emphasis on clarity comes in part from my own decades-long struggle with excessively complicated theoretical discourses and my desire to produce art history and criticism that can be immediately useful to people who may not have the luxury of devoting time to researching every other word that is used to describe or analyze a work of art. Accordingly, some of the essays included here first saw publication in museum exhibition catalogs or in print and online media. Also included in this collection are previously published journal articles (updated for this work), unpublished lectures, original essays, and new section introductions.

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Embracing Rememory

This is a book about engaging in a process of “rememory” in the practice of critical race art history and visual culture studies. I take the terms *remember* and *disremember* from Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, in which the protagonist Sethe uses them as descriptive mechanisms to elucidate the tactics and strategies that must be engaged for psychological survival to be possible following the unspeakable traumas of enslavement. Those who have survived to the period of post–Civil War Reconstruction in which *Beloved* is set must tell their stories to remember what they have purposefully disremembered. Similarly, Black people continue to navigate what Christina Sharpe identifies in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* as the enduring sway of “the wake” borne from the Middle Passage and slavery and must also remember that past by gathering up its pieces, like parts of a dismembered body communal, in ways that honor the sacrifices and journeys of the ancestors. As artists, critics, historians, and engaged viewers, we must acknowledge the reality of the epigenetic, that which moves with our DNA through time, as we seek dynamic strategies for remembering that will contribute to the making of new and more equitable worlds.

The concepts of remembering and disremembering that I cull from Morrison also inform the ways that I see some of the differences between art history and art criticism. The historian of African American art writes about what was, effectively remembering the disremembered from the materials that have been purposefully undervalued and disregarded by white supremacist historians of American art, whereas the critic of African American art has the latitude to focus on what is and what might have been, proposing new memories of Black artistic practices. In the essays that complete the final section of the book, I engage with contemporary art from both a critical and a historical perspective, providing context and comparative examples for objects and practices that I find compelling and interesting, while also trying to imagine what might be. Accordingly, my writing reflects a palpable distress regarding the ways that the voracious consumption of contemporary art has discouraged challenging curatorial didactics in exhibition environments and accommodated habits of minimal research by curators and other arts writers, whose interpretations, interventions, and insights might otherwise have had the potential to mediate in an assistive and generative way between artists and their audiences. This is, of course, a delicate dance. As a historian, teacher, and curator of historical and contemporary art, as a member of a broader arts community, I would like to be supportive of artists whom I believe

are doing important work, while also encouraging those whose efforts fall short to reconsider some of their strategies for culture making. But because we are in a moment of rising fascism and white supremacy, solidarity is important, and negative criticism must be given judiciously and with care.

This book also reflects my own personal desire to see things a certain way, from what theorist Mieke Bal, in her essay “Dispersing the Gaze: Focalization,” terms a very singular point of focalization. It reveals my desire to subvert the way that others see things, too—not solely to bring them around to my way of seeing but rather to make them question their own way of understanding the visual world. Because of this impulse, it is a very personal project, although it is not one in which I interrogate images of myself or my family members. Instead, it is a collection of essays in which the images that are important to me and that have impacted the way I see ideas, self, and society are allowed to take center stage. In it, I examine the competing mythologies that have accrued to objects and image worlds. I want to look hard at the cultural moments that produced these objects and the allegorical impulses, if you will, that often allow them to be read as showing one thing while (perhaps) meaning another. In some ways this approach is similar to the kind of critical fabulation that has been artfully perfected by historian Saidiya Hartman, in which the critic “flatten[s] the levels of narrative discourse and confus[es] narrator and speakers . . . to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse.”² And even though I value the ways that this approach augments and enlivens archives that have purposefully excluded Black voices, I remain primarily interested in utilizing existing voices and objects as evidence, without melding my voice into those of the ancestors. That said, there are moments when I opt for a more speculative mode of interrogation to prompt the reader’s consideration of alternative interpretations and internal dialogues.

In this book I discuss works of art that have kept me up at night and that have plagued my days with hours of fretful handwringing about the veracity of the content, creation, and the relevance of my own critique. I work to center objects, some of which have been with me through the past three decades, beginning with work done in graduate school, and will probably remain vexing to me long after this book is published. Many of these works of art and the lives of the artists who made them present questions of experience and representation that cannot be easily or satisfactorily explained away, which is undoubtedly why I have taken up the challenge of their explication and why some readers will surely find even my best efforts wanting. I can offer no guarantees of satisfactory conclusions. Perhaps this is due to my own

skepticism regarding the idea of truth and the possibility of a truthfulness of the stories that have been spun around objects, images, and the individuals who made them. I am not an Afro-pessimist in the vein elucidated by Frank Wilderson III in his recent book *Afro-pessimism*, where living in Blackness becomes akin to a state of a perpetual cycle of slavery; I still find solidarity with many people of color, while also having lost all faith in the possibilities of decolonizing the institutional contexts of the university and the museum, in which I have labored for the past thirty years.

I understand the importance of evidence and facts, but I am a natural nihilist, and “truth” has always eluded me as something fixed and inviolable. I often find that the evidence can be interpreted in multiple ways. Scholarly obsessions with truth that manifest in the need for established canons and Ur-stories to support their origins are a big part of what makes the academic practice of art history so terribly frustrating while also being incredibly interesting at the same time. Because of art history’s traditional dependence on national and other sorts of geographic boundaries, specific chronological demarcations, and cultural traditions to subdivide an otherwise untenably broad area of study, scholars in emerging subfields have often felt compelled to actively engage in similar activity to establish an equitable footing for the locus of their intellectual interests. I believe that if disciplines like art history and the field of American art in which I was trained, as well as the various semi-agglutinated subfields like African American art history that it both contains and ignores, are to continue to expand and prosper in the twenty-first century, it will only be through the reexamination of the problematic myths that have been formed out of a necessity to assuage a misplaced sense of national, racial, or cultural inferiority. As art historians (and the cultural critics who push back on or trample our gates), we must repeatedly turn our attention to finding the disremembered fragments of history that have been ignored and remembering them.

The disremembered narratives of Black creativity and self-representation that lurk at the edges of American art history have often reminded me of the apocryphal stories that were cited in the survey courses of my first and second year of college to explain Old Master paintings that depicted obscure episodes from the Old Testament and the life of Christ or the Virgin Mary. It strikes me that many of the stories that have become these biblical apocrypha, stories whose canonicity was doubted by Jewish rabbis and Christian church fathers, are the ones that meant the most to me as a Black woman, including the stories of Lilith, Judith, and Susanna; stories that were excluded from various versions of the Bible, including the one that Americans know best

today, the King James Version. These apocrypha, or hidden writings, were often ignored by early rabbis, while competing Christian sects argued over them. Since ancient times there has been competition over which version of the Hebrew Bible is the most accurate. Whether it is the Septuagint (an Egyptian version of the Bible from the third century BCE that was commissioned by Ptolemy II Philadelphus and written in Alexandria, which is not only the longest but supposedly the most authentic version of the Hebrew Bible), the Palestinian version, or the Babylonian version, there has long been doubt as to which books are in fact the authorized word of God: that is, the truth. The books that remained in each version of the Bible were the ones that (in that moment) were viewed as religiously acceptable and did not contradict established social mores. These canonical stories were emotionally moving and compelling to readers, and they kept communities together by reinforcing moral standards and social unity. Extracanonical texts that did not meet at least one of these criteria were often relegated to the realm of apocrypha because of their disruption of the status quo and their inability to be fully integrated into the dominant narrative.

Despite the concerted exclusion of extracanonical apocrypha from the religious texts we are familiar with today, such stories persisted and continued to impact popular understandings of the narratives that they were originally created to modify. For example, it is an extracanonical text that gives us the names of the three wise men (kings or magi) who visited Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. Apocrypha are with us; they haunt the margins and impact the present regardless of whether we want them to take center stage. And yet embracing apocrypha is different from the contemporary practices called *revisionist history* or *alternative history*, in that those two terms imply a rewriting or rejection of an established narrative and chronology. Embracing apocrypha is also different from the strategies of critical fabulation, which imagine a “what if” scenario in the presence of an unfillable absence.

In many ways, religious apocrypha are akin to the modes of disremembering and remembering that have resulted from the trauma that has been present in the Black lives that are at the center of novels like *Beloved*, which employs the presence of a ghost as a manifestation of a purposefully suppressed past, or the paintings of Titus Kaphar that derange the historical traditions of Black marginalization in portraiture. “What if identity had to be constituted out of a strategic amnesia,” asks literary critic W. J. T. Mitchell, “a selective remembering, and thus a selective *dis(re)*membering of experience?”³ Would the shape of the self and its representation be affected by the

piecemeal evidence that has been allowed to stay visible and the buried bits that have been recovered?

For me, some of the work that the historian of African American art might engage lies in the realm of remembering a past that has been profoundly impacted by white art historical coloniality. In recent years historians of American art have more explicitly engaged decolonial research methods and pedagogical approaches, aiming to dismantle what Aníbal Quijano has termed the “coloniality of power,” a condition that has enabled the hegemonic structures of power governing forms of knowledge, including ideology, to endure from the era of European conquest to the present moment.⁴ As a result, more diverse subjects, objects, and alternative histories have offered a counterweight to mainstream narratives, helping to elucidate the ongoing problem of Americanist art historical coloniality. This book examines the ways that the dominant culture’s need for a coherent history often causes alternate stories of cultural objects and artistic practices to be assigned a place outside of the accepted canon to satisfy or maintain the status quo.

Lessons in Remembering

In 2005 Kara Walker (b. 1969) completed a portfolio of fifteen lithographs that featured her signature black, silhouetted forms superimposed over mass media illustrations selected from the 1866 publication *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War*. The artist titled this work of appropriation and adaptation *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*—in reference to the series’ direct engagement with a specific historical construct that had been produced by the dominant organ of a recolonizing force.

With a circulation that reached nearly 500,000 by the end of the Civil War in 1865, the illustrated magazine *Harper’s Weekly* was one of the most popular sources of news among Northern, pro-Union audiences. The magazine supplied readers on the home front with stories and wood engravings that reproduced images of battle and daily life among the troops by illustrators such as Winslow Homer and Thomas Nast. Following the end of the conflict, the magazine’s editors, Alfred H. Guernsey and Henry M. Alden, carefully selected articles and images from back issues to create a two-volume history that both expanded on and reframed what had come before. In a conciliatory move to shed the pro-Union, antislavery position that had characterized the magazine during the war, Guernsey and Alden chose two titles for the new publication: *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War* and *Harper’s*

Pictorial History of the Great Rebellion. However, in both volumes Guernsey and Alden purposefully minimized the Black presence and participation in the war as their reporters and illustrators had recorded it. They chose not to republish most of the hundreds of illustrations of the enslaved, the freed, and the freeborn African-descended people who had originally been included in the magazine. In so doing, the editors recast the conflict as a disagreement over states' rights and a struggle for economic dominance between white men, some protecting the livelihoods of planters in an agrarian South, and others representing the interests of an industrial North that was struggling to absorb waves of European immigration.

In its recognition of the recolonizing action that was at the heart of the source material, *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* reflects Walker's ongoing artistic practice of remembering the disremembered parts of nineteenth-century American visual culture. As her black figures (who may also be read as racially Black figures) engage in provocative and oblique dramas, they make visible to us the continuing impact of racism and perceptions of racial difference on the way that factual events are recorded in both words and images.

Walker's work also helps viewers to draw a direct line between the historical demonization and degradation of Black people that flourished during the period following the era of Civil War and Reconstruction to the civil rights and Black Power movements and the contemporary era of Black Lives Matter and calls to defund the police. "I'm interested in . . . the fact of slavery's influence on the American system," Walker related in a 2002 interview, "and the power of its influence over the American imagination."⁵

If the writing of history is about certitude in facts; if it is about assembling a chronology, recording things that happened, and delineating the things that were; if it is about providing information and facts to a reader in a way that fixes an event or series of events in time, so that they may be known and understood, then *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* serves as a profound remediation of the act of factual exclusion performed by the original volume's purposeful elision of the Black presence in the Civil War. It is also representative of Walker's provocative insertion of Black figures, both real and imagined, into the historical image worlds that were created in the immediate aftermath of the devastating national reckoning over slavery and political union that was the American Civil War. The kind of remembering that Walker achieves here operates from the margins of history. It is unfixed and uncertain. It seeks to elucidate history, but it does not determine its course or alter its interpretation; it elucidates it instead.

The remembering of history, as practiced by artists like Walker, is about the expansion and explanation of narrative by bringing to light facts that have been purposefully set aside or actively ignored, that which has been disremembered. Like critical fabulation, it finds the given boundaries of “what was” to be insufficient, and by offering more, it asks us to imagine “What if?” In this way, the intellectual embracing of the purposefully disremembered and consciously neglected expands the possibilities of history by acknowledging the existence of multiple forms of knowledge and multiple ways of understanding an event or interpreting an object. Embracing rememory allows for interpretation and the creation of narrative to be both speculative and open-ended; it is also about flavoring and augmenting, rather than revising or repositioning. To embrace remembered art history is to think beyond canonical interpretations of works of art or objects of material and visual culture to ask, “What else did we once know that has now been disremembered?”

In a nod to the power of history and the structuring of rememory as an act of conscious procession, this book is divided into three parts that proceed chronologically. Each one is prefaced by an introduction that frames the chapters that follow it within a historical and methodological context as well as within a personal one. The first part focuses on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the second on the twentieth century, and the third on the last thirty years.

I begin in the colonial period in New England with a discussion of a portrait frontispiece of the poet Phillis Wheatley, questioning the identity of the maker of the original portrait and examining the impact that the printed frontispiece had on the representation of subsequent generations of women writers who followed Wheatley in the Anglo-American world. An essay on the work and world of the portrait profile cutter Moses Williams follows, taking us to Philadelphia in the period of the early republic and considering the ontological position of Black artisans, their bodies, and those of Indigenous Americans. The next essay discusses the role of portraiture in the formation of enslaved and free Black families before the Civil War. The final essay in this section examines the career of the painter Edward Mitchell Bannister, both before and after the war, and the ways that legacies of slavery still permeated the landscapes that he made in Rhode Island well into the 1870s and 1880s.

The second part of this book takes up questions of race, identity, and diasporic history in relation to modernism, museums, and memory. It begins with a biographical sketch of the sculptor May Howard Jackson, whose representational sculpture often dealt with the same issues of racial ambiguity that impacted the artist’s own life. The next essay focuses on modernist work made by Jackson’s nephew, the sculptor Sargent Johnson, who is often associated

with the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance, despite his being based across the country in the Bay Area of California. At the center of the essay that follows is an early-career representational drawing of a Dan mask from Africa made by Norman Lewis, whose mature abstract painting is now seen as integral to a full understanding of abstract expressionism; the impact of Mexican muralism on other Black artists of his generation comes next. The last two essays in this section focus on work made in the last third of the twentieth century that engages other ways of knowing, both spiritual and phenomenological, by sculptor Barbara Chase-Riboud and painter Richard Yarde.

I close the book with a group of essays that examine the nexus of art and race in the current century. I begin with an exploration of what it meant for artists in New Orleans and elsewhere to create art after the remarkable material, social, and spiritual destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina. It is followed by an exploration of photographer and installation artist Carrie Mae Weems's use of focalizing perspective to engage complicated interracial histories; a discussion of the impact of *30 Americans*, the landmark exhibition of contemporary African American art drawn from the Rubell Family Collection; and a look at the work of two performance artists, Sheldon Scott and Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, who engage in independent reparative practices that deal with histories and contemporary realities of dispossession and disenfranchisement in the African diaspora in the American South. The final essay in the book began as an opinion piece about the highly problematic photographic practice of Deana Lawson; it has been revised and expanded for this volume. In many ways, this final essay is a manifesto for the kind of work that I hope to produce from here on out, a challenge to myself to always come correct and never forget why I am doing this work.

Remembering the Self

In the past decade, a trend has emerged in the work of African American art historians and cultural critics who concern themselves with Black art and visual culture to remember their own selves in the pages of their scholarly texts. Whether it is Darby English's interweaving of his personal and professional struggle to come to terms with police violence against Black people through a limited curatorial practice at the Museum of Modern Art in *To Describe a Life: Notes from the Intersection of Art and Race Terror*, or the "Confessions of an Unintended Reader: African American Art, American Art, and the Crucible of Naming" provided by Kirsten Pai Buick, which describes her own

coming into visibility as a Black art historian, we have become increasingly comfortable with placing our own experiences in dialogue with our discipline. This stems, I would argue, from an increasing realization that our stories matter and have always informed what we write about and why we persist despite the antagonism that often greets our efforts.

My own interest in researching and writing about African American art, artists, and representations of Black people began in the early 1990s when I realized that the stakes of doing art history extended beyond the academy or the museum and into the streets. In 1991, fresh out of a college experience that had included two years of art school and three at a large research university, I began working on a master's degree in art history at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). My first year of coursework was irrevocably marred by the urban rebellion that occurred after the acquittal of the LA Police Department officers who were on trial for the spectacularly brutal beating of motorist Rodney King. On April 29, 1992, I watched the announcement of the verdict on the television at Jimmy's Coffee House on campus. Later that day, looking down from the university's perch between the elite neighborhoods of Bel Air and Westwood, I could see the fires burning down in South Central Los Angeles, a world that I had never entered and knew little about beyond its representation in the media. When the mandatory curfew was lifted the following week, a friend and I drove down to South Central to volunteer at a church that was accepting donations and serving as a hub for relief work. The streets were a war zone. After a week of violence and destruction, army tanks filled the parking lots of burned-out strip malls, and members of the National Guard surveilled a physically, emotionally, and spiritually devastated community.

Up until then, I had been studying nineteenth-century European sculpture, but now I worried that it might be a pointless endeavor. How could I spend my time and energy researching and writing about a cultural tradition that seemed to have little to offer the very real people who were in desperate struggle in the communities around me? At the end of the school year, I returned home to San Francisco, and then, with the encouragement of art historian Janet Berlo, who had been a visiting professor at UCLA while I was there, I applied for a museum internship at the Saint Louis Art Museum (SLAM). Berlo had convinced me that spending time in a museum, being with the objects, might help me to discover what I wanted from art history and what I might do with a graduate degree.

My application to SLAM was successful, and in 1993–94 I spent a year in St. Louis as the third Romare Bearden Graduate Museum Fellow (this important program continues almost thirty years later) before going on to a

similar diversity-focused fellowship at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In both positions (because of my own Blackness), I was expected to know something about African American art, and at SLAM I was tasked with directly engaging the local African American community. However, I had never received any formal training in African American, American, or African art. As a Northern Californian from Santa Cruz, a mostly white university town by the beach, I was also an outsider to the Black community of St. Louis (just as I had been to the Black community in South Central). I sensed in some way that I was entering the suffocating racism of another world to understand the thinly veiled oppressive alienation of my own. As a result, I took it on myself to begin to acquire proficiency in aspects of Black life, culture, and art that were separate from my own unique experience as the product of a mixed marriage between a middle-class, Black, Pan-Africanist photographer and jazz producer and a white, Jewish (later, out lesbian) sociology professor, AIDS activist, and prison researcher who met as fellow members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. My parents named me Gwendolyn after the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks and DuBois in honor of W. E. B. Du Bois. At both SLAM and SFMOMA, I found that racism, sexism, class hierarchies, and my unfinished graduate degree repeatedly hindered my progress. While I could not change who I was or where I had come from, I began to understand that not having my MA or a PhD would always limit my opportunities and that it was something that I could change.

During my year at SFMOMA, I applied to the art history PhD program at Stanford University, where I would ultimately specialize in American art. Because Stanford's art history department did not offer any courses on African American art, and the faculty teaching American art included almost no Black artists, objects that engaged Black culture, images of Black people, or writings by Black scholars in their lectures or on their syllabi, I chose to write most of my seminar papers on works that contained images of Black people, portraits of Black sitters, or art that was by African American artists. I also questioned my professors about these omissions. In response to my query about why there was no section on African American art on the list of readings required for PhD students in American art, my adviser, Wanda Corn, immediately suggested that we add one—and then asked me what I would like to include. I requested that articles by Richard J. Powell and Judith Wilson be included. To that Corn added selections from James A. Porter's 1943 book *Modern Negro Art*. In a lecture class on American art since 1940, Alexander Nemerov focused a single week on a Black artist: Jean-Michel Basquiat. When I asked him about this choice,

he said that Basquiat was the only African American artist for whom he had found art historical writing or criticism that he felt was of sufficient quality (he had assigned essays by bell hooks and Robert Farris Thompson), and, he explained, there was the problem of “the indignity of speaking for others,” which he ascribed to Michel Foucault. When I finally located this phrase, I learned that it had been uttered by Gilles Deleuze in 1972, at a conference where he congratulated Foucault on elucidating the power relationships that cause “difference” to be co-opted by the dominant culture and minoritarian voices to be overlaid by neoliberal advocacy.⁶ While I understood this position, I knew there was much that I still had to learn about African American art and art history, and I needed someone to help me locate this knowledge—I did not care if that mentor was Black or not, I just cared about the artwork and the contexts in which it was created. A quarter century later, I was flabbergasted to see that Nemerov was teaching a course titled Black Aliveness—based on Kevin Quashie’s book *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being*—which promised students in its online course description “intense discussion and emphasis on developing powers of black aliveness in one’s own writing.”⁷ It would appear that the possible indignity of speaking for the other has been supplanted by the irresistible allure of self-manifesting Blackness.

By the time I advanced to PhD candidacy, I had carved out a niche for myself working on portraiture and the representation of Black identity in American art as well as the challenges that negative imagery and stereotypes had presented to those interested in creating sympathetic and humanistic images of Black people in the United States since the British colonial period. I was interested in the ways that Black self-identity and imposed identity could be made visible through portraiture of all kinds, paintings, silhouettes, prints, photographs, and contemporary performance art, theater, and film. Before I received my PhD, I was hired as an assistant professor of African American art at Harvard University, where I spent the first five years of my professional teaching career. Not only was I the first tenure-track faculty member to specialize in African American art at Harvard, but for my first two years I was also the first full-time appointment in American art, period. All along the way, I kept telling myself that Black art mattered, that Black representation mattered, and that Black art history could do important things in a country that was constantly eating its young and tearing itself apart over issues of difference and inequality.

Thirty years after I first began graduate study in the history of art, I still believe that Black representation of all kinds matters. I have invoked this mantra almost every day over the past two decades as a professor of art history,

first at Harvard University and now at the University of Pennsylvania, and throughout as a curator working with various collecting museums and non-profit art galleries. In many ways, these exhibitions and my other public-facing writing have been the work that has been the most rewarding and meant the most to me on a personal level. I have long believed that it was my mission to help bring Black art to broader audiences outside of the academy and that curatorial practice was the best way to make that happen. However, I am saddened that despite these efforts, not much has truly changed regarding the art world's understanding of Black artistic representation in the time I have been working in the field of art history. We are constantly (re)introducing audiences to the Black artistic experience. The 2022 iteration of the *Afro-Atlantic Histories* exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, reminded me of a less focused version of the *Two Centuries of Black American Art* exhibition organized in 1976 by David Driskell for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.⁸

Throughout this book issues of Black representation are centered and remembered. Each essay explores instances of the self-construction of identity that African-descended artists and patrons have actively engaged to establish a sense of humanity in the face of the dehumanizing structures imposed by the colonialist and imperialist societies that have dominated North America since the late eighteenth century. By remembering the connective tissue between an artist's lived experiences and the external constraints placed on them, these essays explicate and place in context the lives and art of Black artists from the nineteenth century to the present. They consider the ways that the epigenetic traces of trauma carried by the descendants of the formerly enslaved "living in the wake" may be witnessed in portraits, representations of the landscape, and elsewhere. I have worked to place artists and the objects they make at the center of each essay, and some of the essays are indeed more information driven than thesis driven. This is due to the foundational and truly groundbreaking research that is presented on artists such as Richard Yarde and May Howard Jackson, for which there are no monographs, no major exhibition catalogs, and very little extant scholarship to be found. The project of this book is not to present a general critique of the field or to try to define its parameters per se. Rather, these writings are an argument for the continued viability of the subfield of African American art history as vitally integral to a history of both diasporic African art and especially American art—whose practitioners had long tried to underplay African American art's kinship and importance to a dynamic remembering of the discipline of the history of art itself.

Notes

Introduction

1. A note on terms: Throughout this essay I use the terms *Black* and *African American* to refer to peoples of African descent born or living in the United States. You will also see the terms *black* (without capitalization) and *African-American* (with a hyphen) used by other writers. While I have preserved the original style of these terms for citational accuracy, my preference is for the capitalized *Black*, which implies a broadly, but not monolithically, shared ethnic identity, like *Jewish*; and for *African American*, which emphasizes the temporal and continental bridging that the bodies of people of African descent represent in contemporary American life—and, grammatically, I do not feel that the hyphen is necessary.

2. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 12.
3. Mitchell, “Narrative, Memory, and Slavery,” 200.
4. For a discussion of the ongoing nature of the colonial project, see Quijano, “Coloniality of Power.”
5. Walker, “Kara Walker Interview,” 168–69.
6. Foucault and Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power,” 209.
7. The full course description reads:

ARTHIST 261: Black Aliveness (AFRICAAM 261, AMSTUD 261A). Based on Kevin Quashie’s 2021 book ‘Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being,’ this seminar will explore moments of possibility, love, and being in works of literature and art. With Quashie as our guide, we will look closely at poems, stories, photographs, and paintings by, among others, Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, Toi Derricotte, Gordon Parks, and Henry

Ossawa Tanner. Featuring intense discussion and emphasis on developing powers of black aliveness in one's own writing.

Description of ARTHIST 261 from Stanford University's ExploreCourses, accessed July 24, 2023, <https://explorecourses.stanford.edu/search?view=catalog&filter-coursestatus=Active=on&page=0&catalog=&q=ARTHIST+261%3A+Black+Aliveness&collapse=>.

8. See Driskell, *Two Centuries*.

Chapter 1. Facing Phillis Wheatley

This chapter combines, in much-expanded form, portions of my article “‘Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles’: Silhouettes and African American Identity in the Early Republic,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 149, no. 1 (March 2005): 22–39, with ideas developed in “‘Interesting Characters by the Lines of Their Faces’: Moses Williams’s Profile Portrait Silhouettes of Native Americans,” in *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now*, ed. Asma Naeem (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, 2018), 60–73. Exhibition catalog.

1. Many variations on the frontispiece have been reproduced in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. In addition to its publication in the beginning of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, the original engraving of the frontispiece adorned the cover of Bickerstaff’s *Boston Almanack for 1782*. After Isaac Bickerstaff’s various adaptations, the portrait was reproduced repeatedly throughout the nineteenth century. The version that accompanied the 1834 edition of the poems, which included Margaretta Odell’s anonymous memoir of Wheatley, was relatively faithful to the original, but the book resting on the table was greatly reduced in size. An unlocated and undescribed portrait of Wheatley, possibly the original painting from which the frontispiece was taken, would be displayed at the Columbianum exhibition in the Pennsylvania state house between May and July 1795 to celebrate the establishment of the new republic’s first academy of art (see Bellion, “Illusion and Allusion”). In 1856 a hand-drawn version of the image, which eliminated the book and chair and changed the colonial pewter inkstand into a more contemporary glass bottle, was included in E. and G. Duykinck’s *Cyclopedia of American Literature*, and Benson J. Lossing’s volume *Our Country, or, Brief Memoirs of Eminent Americans*, from 1859, featured a variation that changed the shape of the table at which Wheatley sits from oval to rectangle and smoothed her wooly hair into gentle waves. However, neither of these later versions faithfully reproduced the upward gaze that so powerfully animates the sitter in the original: an expression of intelligence that establishes Wheatley as a divinely inspired, reflective individual rather than as an enslaved person. See Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*.

2. Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*.