

PREFACE

“WE WILL BE / WHO WE WANT / WHERE WE WANT / WITH WHOM WE WANT”

“People can’t help but feel the history because they see what their old parents went through in the old quilts,” confides Mary Lee Bendolph, an Alabama-born, African American artist and quilt maker. “They see that resentment and hurt. It stick to the skin and that make them feel sad and sorry.”¹ I have written this book to trace the lives and works of more than fifty twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American and Black British artists working in painting, photography, sculpture, mixed-media installation, assemblage, video, and performance. Across the generations, the art-making traditions of African diasporic women, children, and men have been born of suffering, struggle, and survival. Living lives in which the harrowing realities of white racist forces of discrimination have never lost their grip, artists “feel the history.” Against a backdrop of legal, political, social, cultural, intellectual, ideological, and philosophical systems of disenfranchisement endured by Black peoples across the African diaspora in the United States, the United Kingdom, and beyond, they bear witness to “what their old parents went through.” Black artists have come to terms with hidden histories, untold narratives, and missing memories by developing experimental art practices. They take control of the parameters of representation by challenging formal and thematic boundaries to arrive at a new “Black lexicon of liberation,” as theorized by the Black British painter Donald Rodney. He, together with vast numbers of other historical and contemporary African diasporic artists, interrogate the stranglehold exerted by dominant forces effecting the corporeal, emotional, physical, and creative subjugation of all Black peoples.² Black artists have staged multiple resistances by any and every means necessary to do justice to the imaginative inner lives of Black women, men, and children. They visualize *black* to body-and-soul-destroying traumas and tragedies by telling the untold—

and unimagined, because previously unimaged. Stories that “stick to the skin.”

The aim of this first comparative history of African American and Black British art is to begin to map African diasporic visual cultures and art practices that typically remain beyond the pale of national and international exhibition and curatorial agendas within a white-dominant art world. These continue to be at risk from oversimplified and even willfully distorted scholarly analysis, given the racist parameters of western academia. I come to grips with the divergent as well as overlapping challenges experienced by African American and Black British artists by cutting across an array of national, social, political, historical, and cultural contexts, time frames, and art movements. Artists repeatedly confront insurmountable barriers regarding the exhibition, collection, patronage, funding, preservation, and critical analysis of their artworks. All the twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists that I discuss are preoccupied—as were their seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century forebears—with the fight for the right to their artistic no less than political freedoms. Working with a politicized aesthetic and aestheticized politics, they adopt self-reflexively experimental, radically revisionist, and cutting-edge practices. They refuse to shy away from a dual commitment to artistic eclecticism and hard-hitting subject matter, and endorse strategies of formal and thematic resistance across their paintings, sculptures, drawings, performance, video, digital, and street art in a determination to re-present and reimage African diasporic bodies, memories, histories, and narratives. As the South African-born painter Gavin Jantjes argues, African diasporic artists are committed to the search for “a Black art” undergirded by “a new visual language—a new voice—a new set of conventions within visual art which articulates, expresses and creates consciousness.”³

Any investigation into African American and Black British artists soon reveals unmapped yet powerfully present African diasporic art-making traditions. On both sides of the Atlantic, through their practices Black artists name and shame, debunk and destabilize the dehumanizing political, social, and cultural realities generated by centuries-long systems of transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. These remain a force with which to be reckoned for Black lives as lived in the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, South America, Africa, and India. Grappling with these traumatizing legacies, these artists visualize *black* to white supremacist agendas that are intent on the historical and legal, let alone cultural and aesthetic, commodification, appropriation, and marginalization of African diasporic peoples. Black histories, narratives, and memories emerge as sites and sights in which these artists bear witness to untold and unimagined white-inflicted atrocities and abuses as well as enact strategies of dissidence and defiance. As their lives and works testify, Black painters, photographers, sculptors, and mixed-media artists endorse a “new visual language” with which to engage in acts and arts of aesthetic, philosophical, political, and cultural resistance.

For African diasporic artists working in the contemporary era, no one definition of resistance fits all. As was the case for those living at the height of US chattel slavery, and during the eras of British colonialism and imperialism, these artists endorse strategies of artful opposition and protest to interrogate formal and thematic boundaries and develop a “Black lexicon of liberation” as per Donald Rodney’s theorization. This alternative visual framework encompasses a gamut of resistance strategies, including martyred tragedy, revolutionary overthrow, militant activism, satirical play, and subversive tricksterism.

David Hammons, an African American installation artist, is one pioneering figure engaged in a lifelong quest to do justice to the uncensored and unsanitized corporeal and spiritual realities of Black lives. He encapsulates the issues at the heart of this book by sharing Rodney’s determination to cut to the heart of the protest aesthetic galvanizing African diasporic artists, then and now, when he says, “I’m trying to find a new *fuckin*g vocabulary that I’m not used to, that frightens me to deal with.”⁴ Whereas African American and Black British artists bear the burden of representation, as scholars our burden is of interpretation. As they engage in diverse strategies of formal and thematic experimentation in the search for a “new *fuckin*g vocabulary” that “frightens,” ours is the quest to find an alternative critical language in order to begin to do justice to the full gamut of their signifying practices. I have written this book as a warning that we are not there yet.

A powerful place from which to begin this search for a new scholarly framework is by examining three key works by seminal yet under-researched artists: *Woman with Earring* (1982), a monumental drawing in pastel, gouache, and candlewax carbon by the British painter Claudette Johnson, which appears on the cover of this book; *Cargo of Middle Passage* (1989, fig. 1), a stark mixed-media print by Nigerian photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode; and *Do or Die* (1992, fig. 2), an unequivocal self-portrait by Renee Cox, a Jamaican photographer and performance artist living in the United States. That none of these artists have been the subject of extended scholarly treatment is staggering given their works’ significance within African diasporic art histories. In these particular works, they foreground Black female and male nudes as an interrogation and transgression of representational boundaries. Johnson’s *Woman with Earring* shows a nude Black woman in an expressive pose celebrating her physical beauty. She confronts the viewer with a masked and unreadable facial expression in a powerful gesture of self-affirmation and authoritative defiance. “The black women in my drawings are monoliths. Larger than life versions of women, invisible to white eyes and naked to our own,” Johnson notes. “They are women who have been close to me all my life—with different stories. They are not objects. Every black woman who survives art college fairy tales & a repressive society to make images of her reality—deserves the name artist.”⁵ In this breathtaking portrait she chose to execute on a “larger than life” scale and in a rich array of black, brown, and sepia hues, Johnson’s monolithic Black female subject is irreducible to the specificities of any lived context, reflecting instead the experiences of an array of female subjects—“women who have been close to me all my life.” Timeless, context-less, even mythical, her iconic subjectivity dominates the picture plane in defiance of white voyeuristic attempts to commodify or appropriate Black womanhood.

Working with strategies of both revelation and concealment, Johnson exhibits one of her Black subject’s breasts but denies access to the other. She prominently includes one leg, but with it protects the genitalia from view. In this as well, she rejects the objectifying lens that has been focused on African diasporic female bodies for centuries. She alludes to the ways in which Black women have been subjected to invasive bodily examinations—conducted by white auctioneers valuing their enslaved property—physical abuse—in widespread rape and sexual violations by slaveholders, colonialists, and imperialists—appropriation—in the anthropologist’s gaze—caricature—as per white western artists’ search for types—medical violation—in scientific racism’s equation of Black subjects to specimen status—racist persecution—



1 Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Cargo of Middle Passage*, 1989. Gum bichromate print, 30.5 × 20.5 cm. Photo: © Rotimi Fani-Kayode, courtesy Autograph ABP, the estate of Rotimi Fani Kayode, and Revue Noire.

in repeated criminalization and even demonization—and voyeuristic consumption—in widespread exoticization and pornographic display. While this drawing may well have come into artistic existence from the abstract black line that encircles the backdrop, Johnson imagines her Black female subject as physically liberated and psychologically free. Her body defies the formal boundaries of the painting's frame. In combination with the emotively charged color symbolism celebrating “black is beautiful,” Johnson's intricate crisscrossing lines, dots, and shading suggest scarification, but also survival in the face of wounding. The skin markings also call the viewer's atten-

tion to the incisions themselves that the artist has made into the paper. As testaments to missing narratives, experiences, and autobiographical histories, they are formally responsible for generating the texture not only of the Black woman's body but of her abstractly patterned, predominantly white backdrop. Here, the artist successfully inscribes Black subjectivities into her aesthetic process as white paper becomes indivisible from Black skin. She bears witness to the Black woman's struggle not only to survive “art college fairy tales & a repressive society” but to “make images of her reality.”⁶ Johnson has been subjected to unjust neglect and widespread dismissal

2 Renee Cox, *Do or Die*, 1992. Black-and-white photograph. Photo: courtesy the artist.



within the white official UK national gallery and museum systems. And in works like this she celebrates her rejection of art historical systems that are intent on marginalizing Black female creativity, her defiance against widespread forces of social and political oppression.

According to Johnson's visual aesthetic, she—no less than her Black female subject—is engaged in strategies of radical self-imaging and “deserves the name artist.” In an anti-explicatory manner, she provides only suggestions of “different stories” regarding physical and psychological narratives, which she deliberately leaves unexplained. Her Black female figure is suspended in a social, political, cultural, and historical no-place, which invites the view-

er to engage in acts of imagining. Johnson's fundamental interest is not solely in visibilizing Black lives “invisible to white eyes” but also in dramatizing realities that are “naked to our own.” *Woman with Earring* is an artwork created by a Black woman for a Black female audience. And Johnson's work remains in a Black British woman artist's hands. *Woman with Earring* is currently in the collection of Lubaina Himid and freely accessible to audiences in the “Making Histories Visible” archive located at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK.

“Both aesthetically and ethically, I seek to translate my rage and my desire into new images which will undermine conventional perceptions and which may reveal

hidden worlds,” explained Rotimi Fani-Kayode regarding the radically politicized and imaginatively creative ethos undergirding his photographic practice. Throughout his lifetime, he remained committed to “an imaginative investigation of Blackness, maleness and sexuality, rather than mere straightforward reportage.” “Working in a Western context,” he was under no illusion that “the African artist inevitably encounters racism.”⁷ Kobena Mercer argues that Fani-Kayode, who was born in Lagos, Nigeria, and subsequently lived in the United States and the United Kingdom, had a “biography . . . shaped by the characteristic diaspora experiences of migration and dislocation, of trauma and separation and of imaginative return.”⁸ He was a tireless experimenter with symbolism, allegory, and myth. Working to keep meanings circulating and committed to political and cultural resistance, he engaged in creative play and arts of radical dissidence. His monumental gum-bichromate print *Cargo of Middle Passage*, a symbolic and allegorical self-portrait, generates the visual drama of “hidden worlds.” His nude body inhabits a position of confinement to provide a performative reenactment of the human “cargo” of the Middle Passage. His knees, close to his body, conceal his genitalia and reject spectacularized and sensationalized representations of Black bodies. Here and elsewhere, Fani-Kayode endorsed a strategy of visual withholding by refusing to reenact scenes of physical abuse and sexual violation for mainstream consumption. His poignant realization that “millions of my ancestors were killed or enslaved in order to ensure European political, economic, and cultural hegemony of the world” remained a formal and thematic catalyst for his work.⁹

While Fani-Kayode’s body betrays no explicit sign of mutilation or wounding, the atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade appear in abstract terms via his use of color symbolism. He drenches this print in swaths of blood-red color, and his body appears against a darkened backdrop to evoke the hellish space of the slave ship hold. Fani-Kayode deliberately reshapes the lower half of his body to ensure that his torso resembles a triangular form—he worked with his own physicality to testify to his haunting realization that “millions of my ancestors were killed or enslaved.” Here he renders his literal as well as symbolic evocation of transatlantic slavery, or the “triangular trade” as it was infamously known, inadmissible. He suspends his body against a blank void in which he imaginatively rather than explicitly references the slave ship hold. As a result, his body functions as a surrogate memorial to missing bodies, histories, and narratives that have been whitewashed out of existence by the Middle Passage. The work images back to Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz’s conviction that “established forms of visual culture

available in the long eighteenth century”—and I would argue the nineteenth, twentieth, and even the twenty-first centuries as well—“were largely unable to accommodate the slave trade, and in particular the middle passage, hence these cataclysmic events became almost invisible and virtually unrepresentable.”¹⁰ As works by Johnson, Cox, Fani-Kayode and all the artists in this book confirm, a shared recognition of the fallibility of words and images operates as a catalyst to formal experimentation and imaginative re-creation. Across their bodies of work, they develop a “new visual language” in which to represent the unrepresentable and visibilize the invisible regarding the hidden histories of slavery, colonialism, and empire.

Fani-Kayode’s body also resembles a crucifix, thus invoking themes of martyrdom and victimization alongside empowerment and defiance, bearing witness to his preoccupation with an “imaginative investigation of Blackness, maleness and sexuality.”¹¹ The artist complicates his status as a survivor and witness by covering his eyes with his hands to deny viewers access to his face. He has survived, his portrait proclaims, but at what spiritual and corporeal cost? He refuses to testify to physical and psychological atrocities that can only ever be imagined and that remain beyond the pale of “straightforward reportage.” This print exists in call-and-response relation to a black-and-white photograph that he gave an identical title and produced in the same year. According to this work, his body emerges not from the blurred hues produced by a textured blood-red filter but in the crystalline precision presented by the light and dark contrasts of a monochrome photograph. The traces of red dye in evidence in the painterly strokes at the edges of the print accentuate its status as an imaginary re-creation and simultaneously reinforce the seeming scientific accuracy in the photograph. The latter is suggestive of the documentary mode, a genre the artist dismissively associated with “straightforward reportage.” He registered his dissatisfaction with the signifying possibilities of this monochrome print not only with this crimson-hued print but also with four gum-bichromate prints he symbolically titled *Work in Progress*. In these he again avoided stark contrasts in favor of texture and grain in which his face and torso all but disappear. Confronted with the unspeakable and seemingly unseeable atrocities of the Middle Passage, Fani-Kayode privileges the emotive possibilities of an “imaginative investigation” into transatlantic slavery. He investigates internal landscapes and psychological states that remain poignantly off-limits as far as any “straightforward reportage” is concerned. In the works, allegorical, symbolic, mythic re-creations of enslaved subjectivities circulate in revisionist relation to atomized, spectacularized, and commodified white racist fantasies of “Blackness.” Fani-Kayode’s self-imaging

strategies constitute an unequivocal declaration of independence: “Photography is the tool by which I feel most confident in expressing myself.”¹²

Formal and thematic differences aside, *Cargo of Middle Passage* and Johnson’s *Woman with Earring* have in common a determination to render a face and body as monolithic and monumental rather than individual and fallible. Fani-Kayode’s radically revisionist visualizing back to the Middle Passage as a site of unmemorialized lives and deaths is made exceptionally poignant by the fact that he created this print in the same year as his premature passing. A testament to life in death, *Cargo of Middle Passage* dramatizes the enslaved Black subject—and by extension the Black artist who remains incarcerated within systemic forces of oppression—as both a presence and an absence, a locus of disintegration and destruction, and of self-recreation and reimagining. Using his own face and body as a catalyst to historical reconstruction, narrative retelling, and radical memorialization, the artist animated his conviction that “an awareness of history has been of fundamental importance in the development of my creativity.” His experimental and revisionist practices re-created a gamut of African diasporic experiences that have otherwise been invisibilized out of existence in the official records. He registered his visual opposition to a traumatizing reality according to which the “history of Africa and of the Black race has been constantly distorted.” He took heart from the incendiary power of his thematically hard-hitting and formally experimental works by conceding, “It is no surprise to find that one’s work is shunned or actively discouraged by the Establishment.” Fani-Kayode’s realization that “Black is still only beautiful as long as it keeps within white frames of reference” testifies to his revisionist determination to develop a radically self-reflexive visual repertoire. Across his allegorical, symbolic, and mythical works, he, like Johnson, reconfigures and redefines beauty according to Black rather than “white frames of reference.” “I feel it is essential to resist all attempts that discourage the expression of one’s identity. . . . In my case, my identity has been constructed from my own sense of otherness, whether cultural, racial or sexual.”¹³ Even a very brief examination of Fani-Kayode’s work betrays his interest in the powerful intersections between identity and autobiography. He confronted vital issues at the heart of African diasporic art-making traditions related to competing constructions of nationhood, race, class, gender, and sexuality.

“I realized very soon that using myself, and the human body, was the best way for me to express my artistic aspirations.” Renee Cox, here speaking of her photographic work, underscores Fani-Kayode’s conviction regarding the aesthetic and political possibilities of the artist’s body,

but with a key difference: “Identity politics, empowerment, race and women’s issues are the dominant forces that motivate me to create.” Cox’s *Do or Die* offers a powerful point of comparison with Johnson’s *Woman with Earring* and Fani-Kayode’s *Cargo of Middle Passage* as a visual testament to her preference “to represent women of status and stature.” Like Fani-Kayode, she engages with taboo issues surrounding incarceration and confinement by relying on her nude body, here as the basis for a performative enactment of the historical and contemporary legacies of slavery. Working with a Black female rather than male body, however, she reinforces Johnson’s celebration of womanhood. She develops an experimental practice according to which she bears witness to the “different stories” originating within African diasporic female experiences. Cox presents neither an aggrandized monolithic figure breaking free of the constraints of the page (as in Johnson’s imagining) nor a minimalist self-portrait dramatizing a fight for survival in the face of martyrdom (as in Fani-Kayode’s self-representation) but like them presents a scene intended to provoke a dramatic reaction. “My goal has often been to produce art that will take people out of their comfort zone and produce healthy discourses.”¹⁴

Cox takes a dramatically different approach from Fani-Kayode, who chose to place his hands over his eyes as a poignant testament to the unimaginable and even unimageable realities of human suffering experienced during the transatlantic slave trade. Cox takes her audiences “out of their comfort zone” by withholding her self-portrait. She invisibilizes her physiognomy by putting a black bag over her head, a confrontational visual strategy that suggests an impending ceremonial execution or even an officially mandated assassination. Cox’s deliberate removal of her face has a dual consequence. On the one hand, the bag potentially denies her subjectivity. Her transgressive decision to reveal rather than conceal her breasts and genitalia runs the risk of associating Black women’s bodies with objectified display. Here she foregrounds a key theme dominating her work: the history of the transatlantic slave trade and US plantation slavery as dehumanizing systems that resulted in Black female sexual violation and victimization through ritual abuse, rape, and enforced childbearing. Viewers cannot fail to see the symbolism in the silhouetted form of an outbuilding projected on the wall behind her, which recalls the shotgun houses of the US South. On the other hand, Cox’s decision to deny viewers access to her face functions as an act of self-preservation. Her recognition of a Black woman’s seemingly unresolvable physical vulnerabilities during slavery has become a catalyst to protecting her psychological realities. Ultimately, in this

portrait she offers up Black women's bodies as no sites of disempowerment by celebrating Black female beauty and sexuality. No spectacle of martyrdom, her exemplary musculature stands in poignant contrast to Fani-Kayode's thin frame and Johnson's figure's scarred skin. Her elegant shoes evoke high fashion, suggesting that Black women's irrepressible strategies of beauty and creativity work in conjunction with their exemplary physical prowess to defy dominant systems of dehumanization and invisibilization.

Standing with her back against a brick wall in *Do or Die*, Cox shores up her unequivocal symbolism by working with a complex relationship between shadow and substance. The artist's hands, shackled in white chains and held out to the viewer, take on a very different symbolic power in the projection on the wall behind her, resembling as they do the outline of an automatic rifle. Now no longer white but black, these manacles are transformed from emblems of physical restraint into icons of empowerment. Working with the "human body" not only as a powerful testament to her "artistic aspirations" but as a social, political, and cultural weapon, the artist presents us with two things simultaneously: a representation of Black female supplication and a representation of Black female vengeance.

The three artists just discussed work across divergent media and national contexts—Johnson and Fani-Kayode against a Black British backdrop, and the Jamaican-born Cox in an African American context—and employ varied radical strategies and subject matter to articulate their individual "Black lexicons of liberation." Radical resistance and arts of imaginative remembering lie at the heart of all the African American and Black British art-making traditions I map in *Stick to the Skin*.

Over decades and centuries, African diasporic artists have and continue to work with every weapon in their arsenal in a fight to do justice to the histories and legacies of transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and empire. They interrogate formal and thematic boundaries and reject any and all straitjackets working to set limits on their practices in their lifelong war against the racist stranglehold exerted by a white supremacist political imaginary and a dominant scopic lens that invisibilizes Black lives, let alone Black artistry. As *Stick to the Skin* lays bare, storytelling traditions and oral cultures frequently undergird these artists' practices. In the following pages I will explore how narrative, memory, history, and the body manifest across African diasporic art-making traditions, and how memory can offer a shifting and conflicting source for visual representation. I trace the charged arena of official public and private commemorative practices, and

also grapple with the ways these artists bear witness to unofficial ancestral recollections. A fundamental issue in *Stick to the Skin* is a preoccupation with history. As self-appointed researchers, historians, memorialists, and storytellers, the artists discussed here wage a war against the racist biases in white dominant records.

For the majority of the artists I examine in this book, the body is a locus not only of trauma and atrocity, but of subversive self-empowerment, and indeed a catalyst to their diverse representational strategies. Here I address a fundamental concern raised by Stuart Hall regarding the body as a stimulus to both experimental aesthetic practices and radical protest for African diasporic artists. Hall does justice to the myriad ways in which the "black body" is "presented as a moving signifier": "first, as an object of visibility which can at last be 'seen'; then as a foreign body, trespassing into unexpected and tabooed locations; then as the site of an excavation. . . . This is the body as a space or canvas, on which to conduct an exploration into the inner landscapes of black subjectivity." For Hall the body is also "a point of convergence for the materialization of intersecting planes of difference—the gendered body, the sexual body, the body as subject, rather than simply the object of looking and desire."¹⁵ The African American and Black British artists I discuss interrogate female and male bodies as loci of transgression, alienation, otherness, individualism, exoticization, and sexuality, and of aesthetic reenvisioning and radical empowerment. Black bodies, memories, histories, and narratives define these artists' search for a "Black lexicon of liberation." No one genre, theme, interpretive paradigm, or scholarly language fits all. African diasporic artists endorse myriad forms to cover a multitude of meanings and arrive at new visual languages.

In writing *Stick to the Skin*, I am inspired by Audre Lorde's conviction that the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." The lives and works of African American and Black British artists make abundantly clear that it is not the "master's tools" but the "tools" of enslaved women, men, and children that can ultimately succeed in destroying, let alone "dismantling," "the master's house."¹⁶ African diasporic artists develop numerous "lexicons of liberation" via the "slave's tools," which run a gamut from satirical tricksterism to revolutionary protest. In their calls to arms, they betray a shared determination to image resistance and imagine freedom by any and every means necessary. Visualizing multiple declarations of artistic and political independence, they bear witness to the rallying cry of Zanzibaran-born Black British painter, curator, and writer Lubaina Himid: "WE WILL BE / WHO WE WANT / WHERE WE WANT / WITH WHOM WE WANT."¹⁷