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**Strategies of Il/legibility: Lorraine O'Grady, Gayatri Spivak,  
and Visual Decipherment**

Courtney R. Baker

This essay seeks to explicate a practice of visual reading that respects the dissembling practices of women of color. To greet this challenge, I discuss the promise of a visual reading praxis that could respect the opacity and illegibility of women of color performance and image as strategic complications of hegemonic interpretation. I argue for a practice of reading that leans into both the promise and the productive frustration of incomplete decipherment. I maintain that such reading can function as an ethical praxis of criticism and analysis.

The works with which I am generally concerned, and which serve as points of analysis in this essay, are elaborately constructed, complexly performed visual images. The first is the costume of the Bengali American postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak. The second is the artwork of the African American artist Lorraine O'Grady. I analyze these works in order to underscore the intentionality of women of color as creative makers. Additionally, I focus on their works to underscore the imperialist impulse of a visual reading praxis oriented toward fixity. The leap from the European imperial taxonomies of humankind to the classification of artwork and non-European subjectivities is not so great.<sup>1</sup>

Spivak's and O'Grady's deliberate expressions announce themselves as having at best a complicated relationship with a consensual notion of the real. Rather, it is reading—and, through my attempt here, writing—unfolding over time, not instantaneously available, that activates their work (labor) and their works (image). I argue, moreover, that these objects are less artifice than artifacts in the sense that they are aesthetic signposts of meaning. They are the products of self-

conscious creative and intellectual production—features that have historically been aligned exclusively with men, whiteness, and the global North.

Here, I am displacing, too, the authority and expectation of a philosophically disinterested judgment (i.e., a judgment that presumes that valuations of taste can be cleanly divorced from embodied assessments) favored by modernist art criticism, celebrated most powerfully by the art critic Clement Greenberg in the post–World War II US art movement.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I offer an orientation that arises from a situated utterance and a deeply politically interested position.

The critical aesthetics scholar Stephen Best has offered an alternative mode of aesthetic approach by proposing that art viewers “think like a work of art.” This radical posture acknowledges and incorporates the space between the seer and the seen as an essential locus of fluctuating knowledge. Rejecting the presumption that proximity equates to certainty, Best offers a scheme of aesthetic relation that endows the visual artifact with its own autonomy. In his book *None Like Us*, Best interrogates the art viewer’s conceptual shift from “representation to matter, figuration to literality” as an expected but not exclusive drive toward conclusive meaning—“an undertow, or gravitational pull, in one particular direction, an incessant drive toward the literal.”<sup>3</sup> For Best, the “literal” denotes the actual, a consensus of meaning that circulates within a discourse of real meaning. In my analysis to follow, I retain Best’s skepticism about the real and play—in a deconstructionist sense—with the implications of the word *literal* as indicating that which is inscribed (on the body or in the frame) as a locus of a thwarted desire for fixity and a site of productive intellectual play.

The works presented by Spivak and O’Grady are concerned with race and gender as devalued bodily markings. These markings are not abstract symbols but politically charged codes. The objects, then, do not permit the reader or viewer an objective distance or a disinterested perspective. In fact, through a juxtaposition of these and other visual codes, organized or explicated in such a way as to deny a linear or coherent narrative of the woman of color subject, these objects, by appealing to the visual sense, disrupt the ostensibly natural practice of reading. These visual scenes are jarring and unsettling for this reason. I am privileging the visual scene in these objects because the visual here actively denies a linear narrative organization of information.

I would like to take a moment to define certain terms, as this project is as much about the potential fluidity of signs as about the myriad meanings conveyed by those signs. This essay offers the notion of seeing as a form of reading. While vision is foregrounded in both works as *presentation*, their meanings—while elusive and subversive—are usefully broached as *representations*, thereby recommending a method that engages the object of study as texts within a field of significations and

signs. As is perhaps apparent, with this gesture I am activating the methodologies of semiotics and poststructuralism locatable in the explorations of culture heralded by such figures as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and especially Stuart Hall.<sup>4</sup> While vision or, more properly, visual encounter is foregrounded in these works, the viewer-cum-reader is compelled to consider that which can be seen prior to that which can be logically inferred, deduced, or extrapolated. The structure of logic in these works is deferred. The narrative structure is collapsed, and the reader is left to consider the terms (images or words) being presented. It is my intention to argue that the strategic foregrounding of the visual is able to deny linear narrative organization and thereby open up a space for an irreducible subjectivity.

The bodies at issue here (i.e., both the bodies in the works to be analyzed and the bodies who produced the works) have worked to escape the colonizing practices of hegemonic reading. Although these bodies are racially and sexually marked, they refuse to be read as receptacles of prescribed meanings of essential identities. These bodies have become complicated, fragmented. It is therefore not simply coincidental that the producers of the works I discuss are both women of color.

Having thus explained what I take to be the two fundamental positions to consider in the art of reading, I offer my readings of the two works—one presented as a selection of theoretical writing, the other as a work of visual art.

In the “Culture” chapter of Spivak’s book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), the author presents the reader with her costumed body as a text for an analysis of labor and transnational movements of capital. Near the end of the chapter, amid a more conventional Marxist analysis of the garment industry, labor, and global markets, Spivak describes the clothing on her body at a specific moment in time and space. She uses “the example [of] Gayatri Spivak on a winter’s day at an opening in New York’s New Museum” to “place the export-based garment industry in transnationality” and to “explain that transnationality [does] not primarily mean people moving from place to place.”<sup>5</sup> She describes the “cheap” and “unattractive” top that was mass-produced in Bangladesh by an English-based, international clothing company, and contrasts it with the “exquisite” sari made by a weaver’s collective in Bangladesh. Spivak goes on to describe the teamwork, tradition, and craftsmanship involved in the collective, and explains how private subsidizing is needed to maintain the collective in the face of the colonization of the international garment industry. She then states, “Thus I was standing in the museum wearing the contradiction of transnationalization upon my body, an exhibit, though no one knew it.”<sup>6</sup>

What I am interested in here is less the issue of transnationalization per se than the author’s offering of her body as an exhibit that is both seen and not seen.

There are at least two layers to this notion of “seeing and not seeing”: first, there is the idea that the visual field yields a phenomenological complexity that the act of writing cannot; then there is the issue that what we, the readers, are presented with is not really Spivak’s body but Spivak’s text. Our reading is thus doubly frustrated. Were we present in the museum with Spivak at this moment, we would have her body and the contradictions written on it immediately available to us, but we would not know how to read it, nor to read it at all: “*an exhibit, though no one knew it.*”

We are therefore reliant on Spivak’s writing and, moreover, her instructions on how to read her body for information about transnationality. But the text that guides the eye operates like a frame, hedging the view and, by extension, the available interpretations: “*an exhibit.*” I choose the word *hedging* deliberately here because I do not think that the frame that Spivak has used is absolutely limiting. There is a great deal that is outside the frame to which Spivak alludes (the Bangladeshi collective, the international clothing company). The object, then, of the reader’s gaze is not a simple, contained body but a highly complex one, adorned with multiple layers of meanings or terms whose absolute meanings, in the spirit of Derridean deconstruction, are endlessly deferred. As a result, the project of reading Spivak’s body/text simply (i.e., as simplistic) is equivalent to not seeing it at all.

“I don’t know whether to read it or to look at it,” or words something to that effect, were spoken by a visitor to the studio of the artist Lorraine O’Grady.<sup>7</sup> The object with which the visitor was having so much trouble was *Studies for Flowers of Evil and Good* (1998).

The work consists of digitized palimpsests, displayed as diptychs, that present three overlapping layers of portraits, paintings, and text. The layers consist of Pablo Picasso’s painting *Les Femmes d’Alger*; a portrait of Charles Baudelaire and his black paramour of twenty years, Jeanne Duval; text from either Baudelaire’s poetry or of the artist’s invention (meant to represent the language of Duval); and photographs of O’Grady’s female ancestors. In the press release from the work’s 1998 exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery, the work is succinctly described thus: “In these diptychs, a Nadar photograph of Baudelaire is juxtaposed with a Baudelaire drawing of Duval. Each is layered with crops from Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, as well as with text constituting an imaginary dialogue.”<sup>8</sup>

Picasso’s 1907 painting *Les Femmes d’Alger* is often understood to represent a watershed moment in the history of Western art. As the art historian Hal Foster notes, the painting marks “a bridge between modernist and premodernist painting, a primal scene of modern primitivism. . . . The painting presents an encounter in which are inscribed two scenes: the depicted one of the brothel and the

projected one of the heralded 1907 visit of Picasso to the collection of tribal artifacts [most notably African masks] in the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadero.”<sup>9</sup>

The layers of O'Grady's work form a palimpsest, with each image struggling with another to articulate meanings, to tell the story of modernist aestheticism, of interracial love, of the experience of gender and racial hierarchies. The stories intersect, overlap, and occlude. A painted face hovers ghostlike over Baudelaire's shoulder. The familiar words of his poetry disappear into shadows, are cut off by Picasso's hard angles. In other images, Baudelaire's pen-and-ink sketch of his “mistress” is deepened by the shading in the painting overlay.

The (dis)organization of the terms in this work (the Picasso painting, Baudelaire, Duval, the written text) effectively obscures any easily available meaning. The terms themselves are immediately available. One might begin to read this work thus: “Baudelaire is the father of modernist aesthetics. Picasso is the great modernist painter. Blackness and womanhood are repressed subjectivities.” Of course, the terms are not innocent; they are iconographic. But any attempt to reduce the work to a singular meaning remains frustrated. If a value judgment is being made here, for example, on the status of modernity or Picasso, then it is quite convoluted.

I am intrigued by the related tropes of “the exhibit” for Spivak and “the visual art object” for O'Grady as texts that are set off, framed, removed from the continuum of “the real” as exemplars. What is significant about the moment described by Spivak, and what led me to read this section more closely, is her privileging of the exhibit as a useful method of practicing deconstructive self-reflection. Indeed, it seems that the museum is the only space in which such a reflection could occur. Spivak becomes an exhibit in the space of the museum. The museum here operates as a deferring mechanism. It signifies a space in which the complicating effects of temporal and spatial contexts may be momentarily bracketed. In the museum, Spivak sees her body not as she really is but as she wants to: in this case, for the purpose of furthering a critique of capitalist transnationalism. I do not wish to challenge the purity of that desire to see one's self (or one's object of study) as one wants to. I suspect it is, in fact, deeply problematic to suggest that any space might provide a venue for pure analysis. Nevertheless, I believe it is still the visual that holds the possibility of exposing those desires. The experience of viewing O'Grady's work (and O'Grady's experience in composing the work) foregrounds desire. Out of the consternation of not knowing whether to look or to read emerges the desire to “just look,” to “just read,” to “read or look in the proper order” or in a “useful order.” For me, I am capable only of reducing my encounter with this work to a desire to know, a desire that is quickly followed by an art lover's impulse to “do right” by the work.

I want to offer the project of reading the visual as denaturalizing the concept of reading as knowledge production. In ideal circumstances, the visual is nonnarrative. Its offering of objects and icons to the visual sense is unbiased in that it does not indicate a beginning point or a priority. Visual reading, then, is a project of narrating the reader's desire through the excavation of an elected intellectual agenda. In this scenario the focus of the reading process could then be transferred from the objective (the intellectual agenda) to the subjective (the narrative of the reader's desire). The knowledge produced would inevitably form a dialect of sorts, between the goal of the critical analytic work and the agency of the reader (now author).

As the art historian Stephanie Sparling Williams explains of O'Grady's *Studies*, thwarting the impulse to fix a reading of Black women was inherent to the artwork's process, not just its ultimate form. Williams notes that O'Grady located a paucity of records of Duval in the archives from which to draw for her piece. In the artist statement that accompanied the work's premiere at the ICA Boston, O'Grady acknowledged her own desires to know and, indeed, perhaps, to fix an image of Duval that could reflect an image of herself in another era and another country. As she explains of the text in the work, "Her words are a fiction, written by me, to fill the silence of this woman-without-speech, and I know that I am as guilty as Charles. I too am using Jeanne."<sup>10</sup> O'Grady's awareness of "using" Duval as Baudelaire had, to pursue a deeper knowledge of not only Duval but of herself, amplifies rather than diminishes the critique of intellectual and aesthetic entitlement that is, I argue, central to the work. In this, O'Grady enacts what Williams calls a "speculative orientation" in which "accumulated voice and presence 'out of turn,' deployed conceptually to render the figure of Jeanne Duval physically and intellectually present."<sup>11</sup> Speculatively and spectrally, Duval is sited as a figure of recalcitrant knowledge, ultimately and by design visible but not knowable.

Visual reading as I have envisioned it here is a sort of autoethnographic performance. In attending to the visual, in working through one's relationship to a visual object, one produces a unique textual interpretation, a spectacle of analytic encounter. Spivak's writing and reading of her own body is an example of that type of spectacle. O'Grady's productively frustrated reading (and writing) of Duval is another. Although the immediacy of their bodies is displaced for us (the readers of their texts), we nevertheless have another object available to our gaze: the spectacle of their self-reading. Visuality in this project of reading is thus mirrored and repeated. What begins with a look, ends with a look. The possibility of new, unique readings therefore remains open, and the final word, the ultimate judgment, is endlessly (and I think happily) deferred.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, we may consider the Nazi regime's obsession with art hoarding as perhaps the most conspicuous example of aligning hierarchies of man with hierarchies of art. The apotheosis of this endeavor is to be located in the 1937 *Degenerate Art* exhibition. See Olaf Peters, ed., *Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937* (Munich, Prestel, 2014); and Neil Levi, "Judge for Yourselves!—The 'Degenerate Art' Exhibition as Political Spectacle," *October* 85 (1998): 41–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/779182>.

<sup>2</sup> See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Michael Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 32, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478002581>.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972); Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974); Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Stuart Hall, "Recent Developments in Theories of Language and Ideology: A Critical Note," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, edited by Stuart Hall et al. (London, Routledge, 1992), 147–53, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203381182-20>.

<sup>5</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 414, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjsf541>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lorraine O'Grady, conversation with author, April, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> "Studies' for a Work in Progress on Charles Baudelaire, the First Modernist Poet, and His Haitian-Born Wife, Jeanne Duval," Thomas Erben Gallery, September 1998, <https://www.thomaserben.com/exhibitions/lorraine-ogrady-studies/>.



<sup>9</sup> Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October* 34 (1985): 45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778488>.

<sup>10</sup> O’Grady, quoted in Stephanie Sparling Williams, *Speaking out of Turn: Lorraine O’Grady and the Art of Language* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 151, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520384224>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.