

## Images Dreamed from the Inside

### *The Ethics of Encounter in Feminist Photography Studies*

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**ABSTRACT** This article reflects on the process of researching and writing a critical-creative account of women and girls in photography history. It contemplates the challenges of drawing close to one's objects of study—both the textual materials of feminist media studies and the subjects they represent—and calls for feminist scholars to undertake this work all the same. Approaching photographs as vital objects of ongoing encounter, the article argues for the value of deeply researched yet also imaginative and inventive scholarly writing that attempts to dream images from the inside and, in the process, opens the scholar to being dreamed by the images. This can mean facing up to difficult personal experiences or reckoning with vexing ethical issues, such as the dangers of identification across time and place as across formations of race and class. The article argues that one of the ethical gifts of the photograph is how it both imbricates us and excludes us—a double gesture that can allow us to connect scholarship to life in our pursuit of the feminist future. **KEYWORDS** Critical-creative method, feminist historiography, Clementina Maude Hawarden, performance, photography, scholarly writing, Cindy Sherman, race, Carrie Mae Weems

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Over the last five years (*inexorably becoming six, please not seven*), I've been working on a book about the representation of women and girls in photography. This project has been an undoing. It has made me unlearn my habits of research, thinking, and writing.<sup>1</sup> Treating gender as a crucial problematic in photography history—and photography as a key technology in the construction of gender—the book is composed of a series of brief, critical-creative essays that analyze and range outward from specific images from across photography's histories. Each of these image-text pairs or diptychs may be viewed and read discretely, but they also accrue, within the book's five thematic chapters, toward associative, open-ended accounts of certain tropes and questions that have shaped the photographic representation of women and girls. The book explores the abstraction and reification of idealized female forms; the surfaces of the female nude, whose "bare" skin is densely laminate with meaning; the

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fleeting traces of women in flight from the visible, disappearing or disguised; the knotty attachments between and among women, materialized in and through photography; and the improvisational agency that defines women's photographic self-representations up to and including the selfie. In staging a series of encounters with photographs, I seek to elaborate a method of thinking and writing from the feminist model of photography that I theorize. That model understands the photograph as an object that entangles and a locus of encounter: of self and other, viewer and viewed; of past and present, here and elsewhere; of thought and feeling, observation and imagination. In these image encounters, I suggest, there is a feminist potential that may turn seeing and being seen into a transgressive, even liberatory, art.

This project has inspired me to retool my approach to scholarly writing so as to reflect formally and structurally on the photograph as a relational process, practice, and object, from the intersubjective scenario of image capture to the dynamic, unpredictable viewing relationships and experiences that images generate. And this labor has been undoing not only in intellectual or writerly terms. It has also required me to bring myself into my work with images in ways that are personally exposing, emotionally confronting, and, at times, ethically perilous. As I move through the project's final stages and anticipate the book's flight into the world from my nest of writing-scrawled notebooks and proliferating Word docs (*final draft*, *final FINAL draft*), I've been ruminating over the hazards of drawing close to our objects of study—both the textual materials of feminist media studies and the subjects they represent. In this article, I contemplate the risky proximity of image encounters by reflecting on my experiences in writing with two photographs by Clementina Maude Hawarden and Carrie Mae Weems—a writing that threatens to slide into personal projection or violent appropriation. Both images are drawn from a chapter of my book that attends to photography as a social form that enacts and depicts women's and girls' relationships with one another, approaching the photograph as a medium of encounter in a particularly direct way. With encounter as their theme, these images reveal that the ethics of encounter hinges on how the photograph both includes *and* excludes those of us who view it. I draw close, but the images—and the people they represent—draw away from me. And neither they nor I are stable and unchanging, already known and knowable, even as we meet in the vital togetherness of encounter.

Feminist film and media history, as Monica Dall'Asta and Jane Gaines have written, is a fantasmatic scene in which scholars are “constellated” with the women whose works and images they study. In this constellation, we scholars

become historical and our subjects become contemporary, located “in and for the present.”<sup>2</sup> We find transtemporal solidarity in the “unfinished business of world feminism”: the horizon we share.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, our measure of closeness with our subjects may be the ethical ground of our work. (*Still hedging, this deep into the project? Let’s call it epistemic humility, which, well, it is; let’s call it wearing one’s arguments as loose as you—I—like to wear your shirts. My shirts.*)<sup>4</sup> I’m persuaded of the value of appreciating photographs and other materials of feminist media-historical inquiry as oriented toward the future rather than the past.<sup>5</sup> “Roland Barthes was wrong,” as my friend (and fellow contributor to this special issue) Pardis Dabashi has written elsewhere; the stillness of the photograph, in which Barthes glimpsed the “catastrophe” and “defeat of Time”—the *that-has-been* of subjects that were once alive but are or will soon be no more—is not so much deadness as continuity, an endurance in(to) the present.<sup>6</sup> Hence the “civil contract” of photography, which Ariella Azoulay has theorized with respect to images of war and atrocity: our “civil duty toward the photographed persons who haven’t stopped being ‘there.’”<sup>7</sup> *That-has-been* is rather *that-is-now*. If we are present with the subjects we look at, and which we reconstruct in the time and space of our looking, then it is imperative, as Azoulay says, that we approach photographed persons not as “those relegated to the ‘past’ as ‘primary sources’ but rather as potential companions.”<sup>8</sup>

A similar orientation to historical people and events shapes Saidiya Hartman’s innovations in “close narration” in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, a touchstone for this special issue.<sup>9</sup> Hartman’s book includes intimate, re-creative accounts of photographs that sit alongside other pathbreaking work by photography scholars such as Tina Campt and Carol Mavor, as well as haptic and affective methods in film and media studies more generally.<sup>10</sup> When Campt, for instance, tunes her ear to the sonic frequencies of photographs from the archives of the African diaspora, she feels as ongoing vibrations “a tense grammar of colonization and black self-fashioning, as well as the tense relations of photographic subjects to the ethnographic gazes engendered by the history of colonial dispossession.”<sup>11</sup> Her extraordinary readings of a series of ethnographic portraits of Indigenous women at South Africa’s Mariannhill Trappist Mission in 1894 puncture a colonialist myth of “timeless Africans frozen in an unspoiled wilderness” (see, for example, figure 1). They do so by identifying the women’s “taut demeanor [as] an active, tense, and expressive practice of both restraint and constraint.”<sup>12</sup> The women perform an everyday practice of refusal in which photographic stillness entails an effortful holding and withholding, which serves to reactivate what Paula Amad has described, in the



FIGURE 1. *Holding and withholding*: A portrait of a Nguni woman, Mariannhill Trappist Mission, South Africa, 1894. Albumen silver print, image 13.6 x 10.5 cm, frame 19 x 13.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of the National Museum of World Cultures, CC BY 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons.

context of postcoloniality, as “the relational and unstable dynamics” of the dyad *see/being seen*.<sup>13</sup>

As Azoulay observes of photographs made in and through the world-shattering violence of imperialism, “There is always withdrawal or refusal.”

When the camera's shutter is released "to proclaim a new state, a new border, or a new museum—the people whose lives are forever going to be changed by the act are rebelling and do not let the shutter sanction such acts as *faits accomplis*."<sup>14</sup> Campt's readings thus relate a dwelling with or perhaps even *in* photographs as objects in which subjects endure, living and agential, within the scenario of capture. They are the result of rigorous historical and archival scholarship that pays "excessive attention" to the "infraordinary or quotidian" aspects of photographs and practices of dispossession, while cultivating an openness to alternative sensory experiences of and orientations toward images.<sup>15</sup> Campt gets close enough to hear the images' humming life.

To dwell with or in photographs, since they already dwell with or in me; to test this closeness as a wellspring of feminist possibility in reading and writing about photographs: this is what I've been trying to do in my encounters with images of women and girls from the daguerreotype to the digital age. Or perhaps, in the ongoingness of the *that-is-now*, I'm trying to dream the images as if from the inside. (*That makes for a better title—let's run with that.*) The dream, bound up with the sensing and feeling body, is sometimes seen as the enemy of reason, yet in many non-Western cultures dreams are sites of revelation to the extent that they cleave "an alternative social world."<sup>16</sup> "The dream is the self with other(s)," argues the anthropologist Jeannette Marie Mageo:

Here the presence of alterity in subjectivity is exposed. Dreams continually splice self with other, complicating "me"/"not me" recognitions. Dream characters are composites of people we know or have known in life and in tales, but also our feelings/thoughts in other guises and those of others about us that we have interiorized. In this regard, dream symbols are at once about the subject and the social world; everything in them has both allegiances.<sup>17</sup>

Like the dream, the photograph is a portal to another world—flush with but not identical to our own. Like the dream, the photograph is a zone of embodied, intersubjective encounter, which constitutes self and/as sociality—even if it remains contained in the mind or the frame. To look at a photograph can be to dream it, and to dream a photograph is to participate in its mutuality, to become embroiled in it. It is to enter the inside of the image while knowing that you remain, necessarily, outside of it. It is to look into the image and "out of" the image, a doubled perspective that travels the spatiotemporal volley of me/not me recognitions.

A kind of out-of-body experience, such an informed, intense, and imaginative mode of attention to photographs works paradoxically to disrupt and

clarify your psychosocial and bodily limits. This is a way of approaching images that serves, as the art historian Amelia Jones writes, to “*activate* rather than disavow or repress the processes of displacement, projection, and identification through which all intersubjective engagements take place.”<sup>18</sup> My diptychs of image and text are a processual performance of reading about and around particular images, of looking and looking at them, and of forming words to approximate what I find, see, and feel—without eclipsing how I find, see, and feel. Participating in a lineage of self-reflexive modes of historical writing that emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century, my image encounters attempt to approach women and girls who are made or who make themselves photographically visible to us in—rather than as—their “demanding, resplendent difference.” I cite here Della Pollock, who describes how the scholar and novelist Carol Mavor reads and writes nineteenth-century photographs of women in “body-time” to exceed the “fetishistic enchantment” of the images.<sup>19</sup> Subjective and provocative, and yet, like Camp’s work, grounded in a deep engagement with the images’ contexts and formal properties, Mavor’s writing responds to the charged intimacy and eroticism of the photographs she studies, their evocation of pleasures illicit or perverse. “Clementina seems to hold an insistent desire for Isabella,” Mavor writes of the two daughters of Clementina Maude Hawarden in her remarkable 1999 book *Becoming* (see figure 2).<sup>20</sup> Hawarden photographed her daughters countless times during their teenage years in the family’s multistoried South Kensington home—furniture pushed out of sight or turned into props, day dresses shrugged off for elaborate costumes—and Mavor traces desire along the sensual line of Isabella’s exposed neck and in the frankness of Clementina’s expression, its almost reckless edge.<sup>21</sup>

My own encounter with Hawarden’s portraiture flooded me with a desire to enter the image. Indebted to Mavor’s work, I had selected a portrait of the sisters, dated to 1863 or 1864, for inclusion in the chapter exploring photography as a relational medium staged between and among women and girls: friends, lovers, siblings, and mothers and daughters. Looking and looking at Clementina and Isabella’s closeness made me want to be one of them, linked in a pair, hands held or hooked over a shoulder. I found myself hunching closer to the photograph printed on the open book before me, and then, when I couldn’t get close enough, zooming in on its double on my computer screen. I was affecting nearness, a nearness in negative, like the diamond of space created by the two girls’ breasts and nipped waists, encircled by the nestling of layered petticoats, the stiff columns of crushed silk, the billowy nets of lace tulle. Theirs is a gathering that gathers, a vision of perfect togetherness that corrals fabric as a medium





FIGURE 2. *A gathering dream*: Clementina Maude-Hawarden, Grace (Isabella) Maude and Clementina Maude, c. 1863–64. Albumen silver print, 9 1/8 x 8 15/16 in. (23.2 x 22.8 cm). Gift of Paul F. Walter. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Digital image courtesy of MoMA, New York/Scala, Florence.

of love. Light, too, as a medium of love: light that is a sort of fabric that softens in shadowed waves from the curtains across the wall, and ripples onto Clementina's face, and folds in graduated shafts over the floor. Light that blazes in the paleness of Clementina's dress and the side of her face, almost obliterating her right eye. It's so dazzling, it's as if the young woman, not the sun beyond the door, is its source; so dazzling, it seems to make the small white flecks on the aging image sparkle in the air. Dust motes or glitter, a spray of tiny stars.

What got to me was the *why* of the image. The why, or tie, of relation as an inclusion that excludes, an embrace that casts out—to the world we can't see beyond the balcony door, the world that hems this private sanctuary. But also a bitterer *why*, which lives between my ribs: the tie that breaks or unravels, never

bound as well as it needed to be. *I spent a childhood among sisters who mostly did not like me or want to be near me, and whose lives slide, still now, away from mine. Two of my younger sisters are identical twins, and when we were little I was the only person who could reliably tell them apart; even the twins, looking at photographs of themselves, would identify self as other, other as self. I would be on the outside of the image trying to convince them that I could see them.* I wrote these lines and immediately got up from my desk. Everything in me compelled me away from the image. I didn't return to my writing for weeks.

I wanted to dream the image from the inside and I couldn't bear to do so, so acutely did I feel what I was using the image to explore: the promise and perils of relation, its tug-of-war between embrace and exclusion. So acutely and so *personally*, that is, the image dredging up the hurt of my lonely childhood and difficult family relationships—experiences no less painful for being commonplace. The bittersweet impossibility of the image's welcome—inviting me in by its relational conditions and utopian impulse and, in the same gesture, refusing me entry—became for me a shadow of other rejections.

This image encounter was an object lesson, a bodily one, in the idiosyncrasy, partiality, and situatedness of all my image encounters, as they condense desires and (dis)attachments that I don't necessarily recognize, at least at first—let alone register explicitly in my scholarship. It was a lesson in how, as I dream images from the inside, the images are dreaming me. For even as I conceive of these encounters as stagings of a flexible, often playful *I*—versions of me that reflect the disunity, motility, opacity, and above all the relationality of subjectivity, its formation in and through encounter—these performances, like all performances, have their limits. (*Your shirts, my shirts.*) As Michelle Meagher has argued with respect to Cindy Sherman's antiportraits, in spite of how the artist's work is “insistently read through the tropes of chameleonism, self-transformation, self-reinvention, and the fluidity of identity,” the characters she performs in her images are “only slightly distinct from Sherman herself” (see figure 3).<sup>22</sup> As “performative materializations of a specifically gendered habitus,” Sherman's overwhelmingly “white, thin, female, and feminine” characters are “variations on a theme,” or, in Judith Butler's terms, “improvisation within a scene of constraint.”<sup>23</sup> To look at a photograph can be to dream it, but to dream is, as Mageo says, to apprehend yourself in your social world, to discover your feelings and thoughts in other guises: to improvise within a scene of constraint.

Other image encounters broached the limits of my perspective in a different way—not the painful realities of my past but instead the specificity of my





FIGURE 3. *All performances have their limits*: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #56*, 1980. Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm). © Cindy Sherman. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

experiences, preoccupations, and blind spots as a white, middle-class woman, in connection to the generality of regimes of power. They made me face up to the potentially reifying effects of both distance and proximity—both the “view from above, from nowhere,” in Donna Haraway’s classic formulation, and the too-close view, claustrophobic and presumptuous.<sup>24</sup> In the same chapter on women and girls in relation with one another, I’ve arranged a movement of image-text diptychs of mothers and daughters, which includes an image from Carrie Mae Weems’s *Kitchen Table Series* (1990). Weems’s series is a sequence of twenty gelatin silver prints and fourteen text panels that unfold the story of a woman, played by Weems, on the “staging ground” of the kitchen table (figure 4).<sup>25</sup> The woman’s story is one of young love that curdles into domestic discord and violence, and of her eventual achievement, in pleasurable solitude, of “the fullness of her woman self.”<sup>26</sup>

Near the series’ midpoint appears a tableau in which the woman sits with her young daughter at the table applying lipstick. Trying out different routes into the image, I began narrating it as a conversation between mother and daughter, in which mimicry and repetition corresponds to the trope of mirrored reflection that galvanizes the image. I rolled back the action in my mind so I could set it in motion. The mother: *I select the shade and uncap the lipstick.*



FIGURE 4. *Our mirrors are mirrors*: Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup)*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 27 3/16 x 27 3/16 in. (69.1 x 69.1 cm). © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin.

The daughter: *I select the shade and uncap the lipstick.* The mother: *One of my hands is on the table, flat toward you. Almost a tether, almost a link. Without looking at you I know you follow me, a small beat behind, as I touch the lipstick to my lips.* The daughter: *Without looking at you I bring it to my lips. As if my face in the mirror is your face in yours.* The mother: *As if our mirrors are mirrors. As if you and I pass thoughts by the tie of our love and resemblance, in the equilibrium of our gestures.*

It was a way of looking, this narration, a way of attending to the small details that make Weems's scene. It was also, patently, a risk. I've always been afraid of heights, a fear that's only growing with the years, and I could feel it in this fanciful writing—how I lingered at the edge of a cliff, chancing a fall.

“Haptic visuality implies making oneself vulnerable to the image,” claims the film scholar Laura Marks, “reversing the relation of mastery that characterizes optical viewing.”<sup>27</sup> But, Campwt warns, the “potential for intense intimacy” is also the potential “for intimate violence.”<sup>28</sup> Was my ventriloquizing dream a cross-racial identification that grasps at others in possession? (*Is it still?*) Did it reproduce the harms of Blackness as fungibility, in Hartman’s terms in *Scenes of Subjection*, as nonparticularity, surrogacy, and disposability?<sup>29</sup> (*Does it still?*)

Several weeks before I’d begun working with Weems’s photograph, I’d written the following sentence in response to the idealized union of Hawarden’s daughters: *I know there are perils to such closeness, to boundary’s dissolution—in dust which only looks like glitter.* True relation—true encounter—requires distance, or else it tips into fixity, sameness, indistinction, appropriation. No doubt there are very different stakes to my dreaming of these two images, my wishing or pretending to be inside them and so to be someone I’m not—even if a straightforward sense of cultural equivalence or inheritance isn’t necessary to such identificatory moves. After all, my cathexis to the image of Clementina and Isabella measures my sense of alienation from their sisterly togetherness. *I know as well*, my text on Hawarden’s image continued, *that Clementina and Isabella, such beautiful girls, put on tenderness as a role, finding pleasure in the pose as much as in one another.* Likewise, Weems’s mother and daughter are playing roles under the spotlight of the overhanging lamp; the woman, as Salamishah Tillet writes, “teaches her girl-child the fragile ways of femininity even as [she] does not fully embrace or embody these same terms of womanhood herself.”<sup>30</sup> Mother and daughter are two particular but also generalized figures whose actions model our composition of ourselves through habits that are at once private pleasures and public obligations—our adoption of roles that belong to us and also to others.

In fact, performance is arguably just as critical to Weems’s practice as it is to Cindy Sherman’s. Whereas the racialized constraints of Sherman’s antiporraits have been minimized or ignored in discussions of her “fluid” performances—a concept of fluidity that takes the artist’s whiteness as its unmarked ground—Weems’s strategies of performance have, as she noted in a 2009 interview, been underappreciated because her work is usually read in the context of “the quagmire of race.”<sup>31</sup> To translate Weems’s image of a mother and a daughter at a kitchen table into a kind of script—while highlighting this fictive conceit of voice—is one way to recognize her work as an archetypal theater that opens onto issues of race but is not conceptually exhausted by them. It is, in turn, to adopt a strategy of performed encounter learned (or imitated, another mirrored reflection) from Weems’s work in image and text—and perhaps also

invited by it. “Weems’s character—a meta-figure—tests the particular disposition viewers bring to their encounter with her art,” Adrienne Edwards argues. “This slant suggests that we do not merely perceive the work but that the work perceives us. The images and text operate in a vector of mutual interpolation, in the ways of our being in the world, and thus make known the vital questions of our orientation to them.”<sup>32</sup> Our place in (encounter with) the image seems to find a symbol in the third, unoccupied chair that appears within the frame. As Peg Zeglin Brand observes, “The empty chair invites us in: to balance the triad, to partake in the ritual. But to assume the place of the third person at the table requires the revealing of one’s self.”<sup>33</sup> To make an entrance onto this stage is to share, with Weems, in the “vulnerability” of performance.<sup>34</sup> It is to put your body on the line, like she does. It is also to feel oneself at a precipice—at a cliff’s edge, or simply at an open door, where what appears to be an invitation may turn out to be a refusal. The empty seat, in such an intimate scene, is not necessarily for everyone.

I may still unwrite and rewrite the text that accompanies Weems’s image, find some less dicey way in (or out) of the photograph. Whatever form it finds on the printed page, my encounter with Weems’s image has made me reckon with the dangers of feminist constellation over time and place as across formations of race, class, and other structures of difference. As with Hawarden’s portrait of her daughters, the disclosures of this photograph have been both testing and illuminating for me as a scholar and as a person. These disclosures have been secured through acts of careful attention and description, underpinned by extensive research: a willingness to draw near to the image even if sitting at its table feels an imposition, or an exposure, too great. Description is often condemned as *merely* description, “accused of interrupting the flow of narrative, of stopping time in its tracks,” as Mieke Bal points out in relation to the novel.<sup>35</sup> However, far from being a thorn in narrative’s side, description *is* narrative, for Bal; more than that, narrative is itself a species of description, a writing (*-scription*) about (*de-*) that brings into existence what it renders. In the novel, description makes things happen, and that feels true in a different way in my descriptive and reflective encounters with photographs. Unlike (in most cases) a novel’s events and characters, the people represented in these images exist, or existed, outside of my writing about them. And this autonomous existence will be not only foregrounded by but also manifest in the images’ reproduction in my book, side by side with the text.

This structure distinguishes my image encounters from the many examples of ekphrastic writing that stand in for—and hence banish—real or imagined

artworks. As it happens, though, recent scholarship of ekphrasis theorizes contemporary applications of the form in terms of encounter. Ekphrasis is increasingly understood as an event of contiguity and reciprocity between image and text, in which both are enrolled in the pursuit of what rhetoricians call *enargeia*, an effect of descriptive vividness or clearness with aesthetic and sensory-affective registers.<sup>36</sup> Against a conventional notion of ekphrastic writing as being in competition or conflict with its objects, engaged in a “struggle for mastery” over art, the twenty-first century has seen the development of what Susan Harrow calls an “anti-hegemonic project of new ekphrastic forms that are defined by their refusal to colonize art and by their preoccupation with the visual image that obstructs its own incorporation by the textual medium.”<sup>37</sup> My project preserves such a sense of the image’s obstructionist, resistant force.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, I wrote earlier of the *disclosures of the photograph* because the images, more than my work with them, are the source of any revelations I stumble on. I’ve repeatedly felt—with the Hawarden and Weems images as well as many others—that I was being *made* to think or do things by the photographs, as if against my will: to return to painful memories, or reside in bad feelings, or wrestle with my complicity in whiteness as epistemic violence.

The experience of writing this book has convinced me that photographs can compel us to thought and action, putting pressure on us as we put analytic, affective pressure on them. Image encounters are embodied, situated responses to the potency and drama of photographs—objects that bear their own kind of *enargeia*, like the shock of an especially realistic dream. In classic rhetoric, *enargeia* describes the illusory effect by which a listener feels as though they are present at the events being narrated, events that seem to come alive before their eyes. The photograph, with its light-won purchase on the real, similarly involves us in its vivid world, but its illusion of presentness is not simply illusion, to the extent that it is founded in the photographic subject’s persistence in and through the image, their orientation toward the future in which we view them. And yet the photograph—along with those it depicts—remains mysterious. A site of contingency, allusiveness, and digressiveness, it declines to resolve its meanings or contain its excesses. This too is the photograph’s vitality, its activity, which we compound by our acts of spectatorship and interpretation.

The photograph’s currents of undecidable meaning occasion rich interpretative possibilities for those who encounter it—with ample room, I think, for inventive, responsive forms of scholarship that accommodate and interrogate the lived processes, movable attachments, and complex desires that underwrite them. Along with these interpretative possibilities the photograph carries a



weighty ethical burden. It requires that the license granted by its obliqueness—and the intersubjective contact between and among its subjects and spectators—does not produce only more fantasies of tyranny and domination, entrenching the power of the observer over the observed, the blunt force of seeing over the art of being seen. As Azoulay says, our task is to abandon a “traditional approach to photography that follows the one-point perspective of the photographic image and takes it as a given” and instead to take part in a countertradition of photographic encounter: “one of open options, potentialities, and reversibility.”<sup>39</sup> And yet: if encounter is what photographs are, what choice do we have but to dream and be dreamed by them? I have come to believe that an ethical gift of the photograph for feminist scholars is precisely how it imbricates us—and, just as importantly, excludes us. Drawing us in and casting us out, the photograph refuses the possibility of mastery or totalizing knowledge of the other or, indeed, the self. Image encounters can foster intellectual honesty and courage, helping us to connect scholarship to life in our collective pursuit of the nonhierarchical and nonviolent relations that are the foundation of the feminist future: its training and its telos. (*Courage . . . is that too old-fashioned a word? I can't think of a better one—and again I face my limits.*) ■

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## NOTES

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1. This project evolved in a convoluted way from an earlier digital project, *Object Women: A History of Women in Photography*, which I released on the social media platform Instagram from March to May 2018; see <https://www.instagram.com/objectwomen/>. For a short excerpt from the in-progress book, see Alix Beeston, “Blur,” *Modernism/modernity* Print+ 7, no. 1 (2022), <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/beeston-blur>.

2. Monica Dall'Asta and Jane M. Gaines, "Constellations: Past Meets Present in Feminist Film History," prologue to *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 13–25, at 21.
3. Dall'Asta and Gaines, "Constellations," 22.
4. Pardis Dabashi, "Introduction to 'Cultures of Argument': The Loose Garments of Argument," *PMLA* 135, no. 5 (2020): 946–55.
5. On the value of conceptualizing the future-orientation of unfinished film and media projects, see Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon, "Pathways to the Feminist Incomplete: An Introduction, A Theory, A Manifesto," in *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film* (University of California Press, 2023), 1–36, esp. 23–25.
6. Pardis Dabashi, "Judging by Its Cover, Part 1," *Modernism/modernity* Print+ 8, no. 3 (2024): <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/judging-its-cover-part-1>; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Vintage, 2000), 96.
7. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (MIT Press, 2008), 16. My thinking here is indebted to Laura Levin's insightful review of Azoulay's book, "The Performative Force of Photography," *Photography & Culture* 2, no. 3 (2009): 327–36.
8. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019), 16. See also Nadine Attewell, "Looking with Images: Chinese Diasporic Worldmaking beyond the Frame," *Modernism/modernity* Print+ 8, no. 1 (2023), <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/attewell-looking-images-chinese-diasporic-worldmaking>.
9. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (W. W. Norton, 2019), ix.
10. On how photographs mobilize Hartman's writing in *Wayward Lives*, see, for example, the chapter "Minor Figure," 13–35. Key works in photography studies and film and media studies include Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Duke University Press, 2012) and *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press, 2017); Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (Duke University Press, 1995) and *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (Duke University Press, 1999); Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Duke University Press, 2000) and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002); and Rizvana Bradley, "Introduction: Other Sensualities," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 2–3 (2014): 129–33.
11. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 50.
12. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 57.
13. Paula Amad, "Visual Riposte: Looking Back at the Return of the Gaze as Postcolonial Theory's Gift to Film Studies," *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (2013): 49–74, at 51.
14. Azoulay, *Potential History*, 7.
15. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 8. Campt derives the notion of the "infraordinary" from Georges Perec. As Perec asked in a 1972 essay, "How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise,

the habitual?” By “question[ing] the habitual”—the banal and commonplace—we can break through its “anaesthesia,” that which makes us “sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep.” For Perec, then, attention to the infraordinary enables us to come to consciousness of the everyday—or perhaps, to make the connection between his terms and those I pursue here, to *dream* the everyday. Perec, “Approaches to What?,” in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. and trans. John Sturrock (Penguin Books, 2008), 209–11, at 210. On alternative orientations to the image, consider Camp’s practice of sitting on the gallery floor and looking up at the works of art to “[break] down some of the traditional dynamics of spectatorship and visual mastery.” Tina M. Camp, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (MIT Press, 2021), 28.

16. Jeannette Marie Mageo, “Theorizing Dreaming and the Self,” in *Dreaming and the Self: New Perspectives on Subjectivity, Identity, and Emotion*, ed. Jeannette Marie Mageo (State University of New York Press, 2003), 3–22, at 8.

17. Mageo, “Theorizing Dreaming,” 9–10.

18. Amelia Jones, “The ‘Eternal Return’: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no. 4 (2002): 947–78, at 970.

19. Della Pollock, “Performing Writing,” in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York University Press, 1998), 73–103, at 82.

20. Mavor, *Becoming*, 41.

21. Mavor, *Becoming*, 41–42.

22. Michelle Meagher, “Improvisation within a Scene of Constraint: Cindy Sherman’s Serial Portraiture,” *Body & Society* 13, no. 4 (2007): 1–19, at 2.

23. Meagher, “Improvisation,” 6, 3; Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 2004), 1.

24. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99, at 589.

25. Adrienne Edwards, “Scenes of the Flesh: Thinking-Feeling Carrie Mae Weems’s *Kitchen Table Series* Twenty-Five Years On,” in Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series* (Damiani/Matsumoto, 2016), 9–15, at 11.

26. Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, 76.

27. Marks, *Skin of the Film*, 184.

28. Camp, *Image Matters*, 45.

29. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. 17–25.

30. Salamishah Tillet, “Around the Kitchen Table,” by Robin Kelsey, Katori Hall, Salamishah Tillet, Dawoud Bey, and Jennifer Blessing, in Carrie Mae Weems, *Carrie Mae Weems: October Files* 25, ed. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis with Christine Garnier (MIT Press, 2021), 75–85, at 80.

31. Carrie Mae Weems, “Compassion,” in *Carrie Mae Weems*, ed. Lewis with Garnier, 31–36, at 31.

32. Edwards, “Scenes of the Flesh,” 11.

33. Peg Zeglin Brand, “Introduction: How Beauty Matters,” in *Beauty Matters*, ed. Peg Zeglin Brand (Indiana University Press, 2000), 1–20, at 1.

34. Weems, "Compassion," 32.

35. Mieke Bal, "Over-Writing as Un-Writing: Descriptions, World-Making, and Novelistic Time," in *The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton University Press, 2006), 571–610, at 571. My thanks to Elizabeth Pender for drawing my attention to this essay.

36. See David Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere* (Ashgate, 2012), and David Kennedy and Richard Meek, eds., *Ekphrastic Encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts* (Manchester University Press, 2019).

37. Susan Harrow, "New Ekphrastic Poetics," *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 64, no. 3 (2010): 255–64, at 258.

38. See also James Elkins on how, despite protocols of scholarly work that deploy images primarily as ornaments or mnemonic aids to writing, "images already work as arguments, resisting, speeding, slowing, affirming, contradicting, and sometimes partly ruining the arguments that surround them." Elkins, "An Introduction to the Visual as Argument," in *Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing Through the Discipline*, ed. James Elkins, Kristi McGuire, Maureen Burns, Alicia Chester, and Joel Kuennen (Routledge, 2012), 25–61, at 26. But note that these protocols also reflect the difficulty and expense of reproducing images that are under copyright or housed in institutions that charge fees for their use. The rampant precarity and manufactured austerity of the modern academy prevents most scholars, especially those early in their careers or based at less wealthy institutions, from centering images in their work.

39. Azoulay, *Potential History*, 369.