

#### Research article

Mary Pena\*

# Black Public Art: On the Socially Engaged Work of Black Women Artist-Activists

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**Abstract:** Inaugurated at the Brooklyn Museum of New York in 2017, the path-breaking exhibition "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85," centers the creative expressions and lived experiences of black women artists within a primarily white, middle-class, heteronormative mainstream feminist movement. Engaging visual mediums, artist-activists rendered a black feminist politics through cultural and aesthetic productions. In so doing, artists recast extant representations of black social life, demanded inclusion within cultural institutions, and created black-oriented spaces for artistic engagement. In the contemporary global political climate of anti-blackness, artists craft socially engaged practices that creatively intervene in public space and the cultural institutional landscape. Through a critical analysis of Carrie Mae Weems' *Operation: Activate*, Simone Leigh's *The Waiting Room*, and LaToya Ruby Frazier's *Flint is Family*, this essay concerns recent interventions that mobilize an expansive approach to art combined with activism. The myriad practices of Weems, Leigh, and Frazier recompose sites of political engagement and empowerment that enact a broader praxis of reimagining social worlds. These projects belie the representational fixity on which art economies hinge, gesturing to material formations that elicit tactile modes of relation, and challenge the bounds of subjects and objects in the world.

**Keywords:** Black Women Artists; Space; Materiality

Staged in the public realm, as relational ensembles that foreground collective histories, and incite alternative politics of being are some of the resonant actions that move through the social practice art of contemporary black women artists. Eliciting participation and modalities of engagement, these public practices redefine art making as a zone of experimental sociality—a genre-forming reorientation with far-reaching spatial implications. Such public actions convey what Katherine McKittrick names "black women's geographies in the black diaspora," an expanded notion of geography that highlights the overlapping material and symbolic configurations of space, place, and location instantiated through black women's everyday expressive acts (x, xix). McKittrick emphasizes a spectrum of creative methods and techniques that undermine spatially constituted hierarchies of race, class, and gender within prevailing geographic arrangements. In the spirit of McKittrick's conceptual frame, this essay explores an array of socially responsive projects created by visual artists Carrie Mae Weems, Simone Leigh, and Latoya Ruby Frazier, who enact radical relationalities that rework dominant spatial logics.

From highly traveled streets to visitor-centered museums and circulating popular magazines, Weems' *Operation Activate* (2011), Leigh's *The Waiting Room* (2016), and Frazier's *Flint is Family* (2016), animate spatial histories in varied locations with multifarious publics. Embodying political locations as black women within the hierarchically organized U.S. social landscape, Weems, Leigh, and Frazier mobilize a variety of specific contexts, forms, and materialities that articulate visions of racial justice and spatial

<sup>\*</sup>Corresponding author: Mary Pena, PhD Candidate, Anthropology and Museum Studies, University of Michigan, MI UNITED STATES, E-mail: marypena@umich.edu

equity. As such, these multivalent expressive acts coordinate what I will refer to here as black public art, a fluid model of practice that seeks to redress the overwhelming terrain of anti-blackness inflecting social environments, with broad and particular reverberations across the black diaspora. Whereas the field of public art is often exemplified by a spate of state-funded iconic sculptures in public places between the 1960s and 1980s, the contemporary wave of social practices by black women artists resonates with an alternative history of audience-centered work that Suzanne Lacy distinguishes as "new genre public art" (19). This artistic lineage, galvanized by feminist, leftist, and racial-ethnic politics, combine diverse artistic media with collaborative methodologies and a nuanced sense of audience concerning issues pertinent to social life (Lacy 25).

The working principles and sensibilities of new genre public artists, such as Adrian Piper and Judith Baca, represent "the aesthetic expression of activated value systems," that in effect disrupt normative codes which structure the visual social field (Lacy 30). Branching from this radical lineage, black public art emerges as a multiplicity of practices steeped in valorizing black social life, irreducible to the race and gender identities of the artists or the public arena of its orchestration. The term references a dynamic model of practice pursing social justice, rather than a category that fixes singular artistic strategies as representative of a plurality of black experiences. In Troubling Vision, Nicole Fleetwood illuminates how "blackness and black life become intelligible and valued, as well as consumable and disposable, through racial discourse" (6). These codes of difference are spatially organized in a visual field that renders racial marking and circumscribes forms of sociality. This study of black public art, then, arises from the intersection of blackness and space, tracing contemporary interventions that negotiate the terms of spatially constituted social negation. These projects extend carefully composed spatial encounters, invoking lived epistemologies and locations, that brush against the grain of violent state apparatuses and abiding power structures embedded in the U.S. cultural landscape—specifically museums, medical facilities, public streets, and circulating media.

Within the field of public art, the meanings and principles of staging art in the public realm has historically been manifold. Curator Nicolas Bourriad's foundational term, "relational aesthetics," foregrounds the "whole of human relations and their social context" as basic principles for work that challenges the representational mode of art objects divorced from social worlds (113). In One Place After Another, Miwon Kwon theorizes publically sited work as a "peculiar cipher between art and spatial politics" with a genealogy of paradigms that represent overlapping and competing definitions of the site—spanning a physical location to a diffuse art establishment to the identification of sites with specific communities (2). The community oriented approach corresponds with new genre public art models that, at times, invoke the paradigm of institutional critique which subverts the framing power of museums vis-à-vis a diffuse art ideological system. In the public art field today, as Kwon stresses, "the actuality of the location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate" (26). Attending to the spatial matrix of racializing discourses, I endeavor to critically trace the multi-layered articulations of site that interface against the cumulative pressures of anti-blackness.

This essay hews less to the formal contours of public art, and more to what it enacts in social spaces that constrain black existence. The myriad practices of contemporary black artists navigate the overwhelming, everyday repercussions of slavery, what Christina Sharpe calls, "the wake," a multivalent process connoting the relentless grip of imminent death, manifested in both slow and sudden forms of devaluing black humanity (2). Sharpe's formulation of "wake work" conceives material and aesthetic methodologies as vital disruptions within structural arrangements that incessantly diminish subjectivities at the nexus of race, gender, sexuality, and class (17). The creative interventions of Weems, Leigh, and Frazier, whose oeuvres coalesce disciplines of sculpture, photography, and performance, mobilize principles of social practice to address the mounting deluge of violence that marks the quotidian. I argue that the socially responsive work of Weems, Leigh, and Frazier craft spatial acts that transform the terms of visual art and public space. The material rescripting of hegemonic spatial codes using artistic strategies occasion sites that summon, interrogate, and cultivate transgressive forms of care among publics. Using an expansive approach to art combined with activism, their practices choreograph modalities of political engagement and social empowerment that destabilize corrosive structural arrangements.

# Black Feminist Politics and Art Praxis: Rupturing Institutional Silences

Black visual culture in the United States encompasses complex genealogies that register struggles over institutional visibility and a fundamental ambivalence towards accounting for visual art and artists. In The Art of History, Lisa Collins articulates this difficulty in terms of a tension between long-standing concerns over mainstream depictions of black subjects and a disregard for the material contributions of visual artists. This "visual paradox," as Collins describes, underpinned debates between activists and cultural leaders during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which hailed artistic forms such as jazz, literature, and theater as visionary vehicles for social change and liberation (1). For many years, black women visual artists, in particular, created work outside of the purview of accepted narratives of transformative expression and art-historical rubrics of recognition. The works of black women artists, for example, were deemed illegible by art categories such as political, performance, or media art (Lacy 25). In bold defiance of structural disavowal, black women visual artists agitated for institutional representation within traditional, white dominated museums and galleries throughout the 1960s. The legacy of this activism is crucial to understanding the progression of black women's object-based work in museums to more processbased, audience-specific work in the public realm. Accenting this progression does not assume a linear historical trajectory; but rather, lays stress on evolving artistic sensibilities in relation to limited evaluative frameworks for engaging black women's multivalent cultural production.

The trailblazing exhibition *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85*, reflects on the under-recognized contributions of artist-activists to art history, civil rights, and feminism. In a curatorial collaboration between Rujeko Hockley and Catherine Morris, inaugurated at the Brooklyn Museum in New York City and subsequently at three additional venues across the United States, the show spans an array of cultural, political, and aesthetic projects, generated amid civil rights and second-wave feminist movements to center the experiences and political interests of black women. Featuring over forty artists marshalling African-American and Afro-Caribbean perspectives, the exhibition organizes an ensemble of visual practices across film, performance, video art, photography, printmaking, and painting that render a black feminist politics in evocative configurations of objects, happenings, and affects. This multimodal constellation of groupings, as varied permutations of thought and practice, engage the body as lived materiality from which racial-sexual schemas are contested. Composing images in a range of styles, from portraiture to performance documentation and conceptual interrogations of visual codes, the artists relay surges of love, pleasure, rage, desire, and refusal. In the spirit of a still living history, the work of black women artists braid discourses of visual art, feminism, and civil rights to theorize the meanings and political implications of their embodied experiences (Morris and Hockley 18-19).

Moving through the L-shaped exhibition space, teeming with art objects and ephemera that situate black women's cultural forms within a galvanizing historical context, viewers track how artists reclaimed power through collaborative political spaces. Materialized in letters, pamphlets, posters, and magazines, the historical forging of artist collectives and black-oriented spaces for creative expression as an alternative to mainstream institutions, is well documented among a cadre of visionary artists and organizers. This material archive centers the voices and trials of artist-activists who crafted community networks to support artistic engagements and organize actions against the racism and sexism embedded in traditional art venues. One of the opening works of the show, Maren Hassinger's *Leaning* (1980), evokes an abstract landscape with entwined wire bundles, dispersed across the floor, that intimate the complexities of black women's placemaking. By the 1970s, as black women-led collectives expanded the terrain of interrelated art spaces,

<sup>1</sup> Notably, the "Where We At" group, initiated by Faith Ringgold, Dindga McCannon, and Kay Brown in 1971, resulting in the first exhibition of black women artists; the Just Above Midtown (JAM), a gallery founded by Linda Goode Bryant in 1974, aimed at providing a platform for black artists; and the Rodeo Caldonia High Fidelity Performance Theater, a black feminist collective launched in Fort Greene, Brooklyn by Lisa Jones and Alva Rogers during the mid-1980s; See Jones, Lisa. "When The Rent Was Cheap & The Art Was Everything: Remembering Rodeo Caldonia," in *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85: A Sourcebook*, edited by Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley, Duke University Press, 2017, pp. 121-26.

museums conceded to demands for inclusion by producing exhibition ghettos in marginal physical spaces, such as the lobby or cafe areas of museums (Cahan 253). This spatial segregation worked in tandem with a proliferation of outreach programs, framed as audience development, which conceived communities of color as inadequately equipped audiences for art appreciation (Cahan 255). Conversely, the community-based practices of black women-led collectives involved extensive interaction and socioeconomic investment in marginalized neighborhoods, laying foundational tenets of socially engaged practices.





Figure 1. Brooklyn Museum. Digital Collection and Services. We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85. [04/21/2017-09/17/2017]. Installation view.

Invoking and branching out from these interlaced commitments to art and activism, the socially engaged work of Carrie Mae Weems, Simone Leigh, and Latoya Ruby Frazier in the twenty-first century, responds to mounting incidents of anti-black violence in the U.S. at a time of global political turmoil. Amid widespread intersecting movements against social injustices—with rampant far-right nationalism, white supremacy, anti-immigrant hostilities, and extra-legal police violence—the creative actions of contemporary black women artists gesture toward alternate possibilities for civic belonging and social living. While the laudable oeuvres of all three artists have etched striking counter-narratives of black femininity and family life, their public projects-specifically, Weem's Operation: Activate (2011), Leigh's The Waiting Room (2016), and Frazier's *Flint is Family* (2016)—reconfigure the spatial terms of restricted forms of citizenship. Frazier's photography series confronts persistent environmental racism caused by state failures to invest in safe water infrastructure for black majority residents of Flint, Michigan; Leigh's exhibition-cum-clinic at the New Museum in New York City touches upon the historical devaluation of black women's bodies by medical discourse and practice; and Weems' public campaign of dispersed printed statements throughout Syracuse, New York forms a textual geography that contests brutal police violence. Situated within uneven geographies, each project pursues restorative tactics that destabilize spatially encoded hierarchies of social value, which influence differential access to the protections and resources attached to citizenship (Cox 5).



Figure 2. Brooklyn Museum. Digital Collection and Services. We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85. [04/21/2017-09/17/2017]. Installation view.



Figure 3. Brooklyn Museum. Digital Collection and Services. We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85. [04/21/2017-09/17/2017]. Installation view. Carrie Mae Weems, Family Pictures and Stories, 1981-1982.

## **Material Calls to Action: Stirring Public Space**

As a dynamic model of practice, black public art, and *Operation: Activate* in particular, acts to transform broad and particular manifestations of anti-blackness that organize shared social spaces. Calling attention to silenced divisions within the Syracuse neighborhood of upstate New York, photographer Carrie Mae Weems' public art campaign foregrounds the social configuration of a particular place, implying its racial-ethnic, cultural, political, historical and economic conditions. The physical emplacement of the project articulates with culturally coded materials, namely billboards and lawn signs, to alter spatialized meanings that structure race and racism. In an interview, Weems states that the project intends to "start a conversation with the community, and the perpetrators," and "assist in the effort to end violence, to activate space through the use of bold images and graphics and to build public awareness" (Case). This textual geography of rallying messages throughout the artist's neighborhood unsettles discursive forms that undergird fraught social relations within a culturally diverse city plagued by violence.

A scoring of emphatic texts against the backdrop of monochrome images and glaring white or red surfaces, *Operation: Activate*, rattles the visual consciousness of spectators navigating the streets of Syracuse. Ranging in scale, the material diversity and specificity of a rotating digital billboard, and dispersed analog signs and matchbooks, form clamorous nodes in a spatially extensive fabric of social activation. This work is composed by "Social Studies 101," an artist collective, including Tanya Rice, Jo Shonalda Jackson, and Petra Szilagyi, that spearhead a multipart initiative encompassing a youth program, collaborative photography, performances, and a billboard project (Cembalest). The mode of multiplicity percolates through a chorus of actions and ensemble of messages. Billboard texts assert: *With Sadness We Are Watching Our Young Men Die in Vain, Our Failure to Respond is the Problem*, and *Be Alert, Be Engaged, Be Responsible*—in bold caps and exclamation points that augment the phrases' sounding; lawn signs declare: *We Are Sick of Your Reckless Violence and Your Shameless Disregard for Life*; and matchbooks state: *The Ever Present Threat of Violence Takes a Toll*, and *Contrary to Popular Belief Your Life Does Matter*. The changing address, the tone, and the register of these textual inscriptions imply multiple audiences, as they solicit a vigilant attention that retunes public affect and incites new arrangements of civic responsibility.

Engaging an authorial voice in its manifold valences, these textual invocations seize upon its capacity to register both an intimate presence and a piercing disembodied extension; what comes to the fore is something atmospheric, a historically-specific sentience concurrently anchored in and emanating from multiple materialities of protest. The apparent "quiet soundings" of the verbal form of these text-images invite listening practices that integrate conventionally distinct acts of sight and touch (Campt 13). The clamor of these verbal images exceed their frames, provoking a somatic resonance occasioned by the insistent indignation that marks their phrasing. The matchbooks' physicality beckons their handling: the tactile trace of their lettering, the eyes focused attunement to their phonic layering. The artist's voice brought to bear on billboards and signs invokes an untenable blindness in the face of mounting violence,

as it gestures to new kinds of intimacy in social space. Taking inspiration from Paul Gilroy's formulation of sonic politics in the *Black Atlantic*, Tina Campt affirms the sonic registers of images, audible and felt, as powerful conduits of substantive transformation (Campt 6).

The strategic emplacement and dispersal of diverse signs occasion varying degrees of proximity that inflect such processes of transfiguration. The billboard, situated at a busy streetside parking lot, disrupts transient spaces of residents' everyday mobility where the conspicuous display of advertisements typically constructs denizens as consumers. Large-scale inscriptions of rallying messages supplant the billboard, as an everyday cultural artifact of consumer society. This appropriation of quotidian arrangements alters the meaning, function, and resonance of public objects with an otherwise unambiguous functionality. Weems' assemblage of material signs address viewers as social and political actors amid daily movement through a local neighborhood. While the signs recall artistic precedents such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres' Untitled (1989), a billboard bearing key dates of U.S.-based LGBTQ+ struggles, Operation: Activate emphasizes how state violence is differentially addressed and calls on individuals otherwise unresponsive to anti-black violence to take intentional action. Weems' signs of protest forge the groundwork for social environments whereby proximal and geographically distant inhabitants share a sense of personal responsibility for one another. Under the suffocating grip of a biopolitical state that disavows the accord of life (Foucault 241), these graphic interventions activate public space through manifestations of voice and presence that demand an astute attentiveness and accountability for mounting loss.

Weems' anti-violence campaign refuses the privileging of pain as a universal experience for rousing empathy. One billboard depicts a monochrome portrait of black women and women of color with sorrowful expressions and arms crossed against their chests, overlaid by the text: With Sadness We Are Watching Our Young Men Die in Vain—Stop the Violence! The symbolically potent image of a wake compels viewers to account for their relations to purveyors of violence and contend with the emotional labor of devastated communities. In Scenes of Subjection, Saidiya Hartman elucidates that the visibility of pain as a conduit for shared feeling not only tends to exploit suffering bodies, but doubly negates "the materiality of black sentience" (19). Indeed, the legibility of black suffering is often predicated on leaps of imagination and embodiment whereby pain is assimilated through a figurative exchange of location. The combined image and text emanates a complexity of emotions, from sadness to indignation, in vigils that demand the cessation of crimes against black lives, rather than mere empathy. By paying heed to the visuality of clamorous signs, Operation: Activate invites us to feel, imagine, and practice alternative modes of relating to one another in otherwise uneven landscapes.

# Care as Radical Praxis: Decolonizing Museums

Whereas Carrie Mae Weems activates public streets with text-images, Simone Leigh uses physical spaces of the New Museum in New York to challenge biomedical violence. Through a simultaneous rescripting of dominant museum paradigms and medical visitation procedures, The Waiting Room (2016) subverts the logics and optics of institutional enclosure. Created as a social practice project in solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives, Leigh's spatial enactment of insurgent healing practices attends to the failures of distinct institutions meant to care for cultural objects, ailing bodies, and their attendant communities. Leigh, an artist primarily known for her sculptural explorations of African diasporic femininity, molds a curated program of public and private gatherings dedicated specifically to the empowerment and wellbeing of black women. Such gatherings, conceived as *care sessions*, comprise a six-week herbalism course and holistic care workshops including community acupuncture, massages, and an "Afrocentering" dance class created by anthropologist Aimee Meredith Cox. As the architecture of healthcare facilities fold into the museum's white cube, these sessions animate relational zones of intimacy that upend colonial modalities of display and visual possession. Participation within the museum space elicits varied forms of touch—somatic kneading, puncturing, grounding, and movement that unsettle spectatorial paradigms of looking. These healing practices inscribe a restorative labor that subverts the routine negation of sentient bodies.

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Similar to Leigh's weighty repertoire of ceramic cowrie shells and voluminous huts, indexing black women's bodies as carriers of knowledge and interchangeable value, this intricate social sculpture is replete with symbolic gestures.<sup>2</sup> On the fifth floor of the New Museum's architecturally less public exhibition and classroom spaces, *The Waiting Room* consists of a reception room, lined with piled white sandbags and a wall apothecary of textured herbs displayed in rows of glass jars. These material cues, inspired by free clinics run by the Black Panthers in the 1960s and a secret society of African-American nurses and healers, called the United Order of Tents, reanimate historical practices of physical and spiritual protection aimed at repelling pervasive violence. Leigh orchestrates community-centered techniques of care that engage histories of struggle against taxing physical, psychological, and sensorial violence. In a delicate articulation between visibility and bodily risk, this social sculpture valorizes black women's clandestine care work in semi-concealed adjacent rooms, outfitted with meditation cushions and massage tables, and private after-hour workshops. Within the meditation room, a video flickers images of Leigh's *Free People's Medical Clinic* (2014), a former spatial action offering accessible health services in Brooklyn, New York. As a reiterative staging, *The Waiting Room* models relational possibilities that disrupt the workings of institutional regimes.

While the exhibition-cum-clinic augments former engagements, it is envisioned as a site of remembrance and redress. The interactive space honors the memory of Esmin Elizabeth Green, who passed away at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn after waiting twenty-four crushing hours for medical treatment. As the exhibition broadsheet recounts, Green collapsed to the floor, where she lay unattended for over an hour. Leigh's practice highlights the temporality of the visitation room as a rippling effect of the Middle Passage—adherence to the waiting-time of the hold, burdens the body. This durational circumscription, for Christina Sharpe, strains social understandings of care: "what does it look like, entail, and mean to attend to, care for, comfort, and defend, those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death..." (38). Leigh's social practice work is steeped in creating new meanings of care within anti-black terrains, and implicates museums in the process. Unlike prior artistic rearrangements of museums, from Fred Wilson's reinstallation of collections in 1992 to Mierle Laderman Ukeles' redefinition of care as maintenance in 1973, Leigh's artistic labor constructs a pragmatic arsenal that counteracts geographic capture, tapping into somatic forms of audience-specific knowledge and collective healing arts.





Figure 4. Installation View, Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room, New Museum, 2016. Photo credit: Erin Sweeny.

Partnering with wellness practitioners, scholars, and artists, the exhibition-cum-clinic also hosts dialogic spaces for collective catharsis that work toward reinterpreting civil disobedience. In particular, artist Chitra Ganesh led a talk on disobedience and anthropologist Vanessa Agard-Jones presented research on uneven distributions of toxicity. In an interview, Leigh asserts:

<sup>2</sup> Cowrie shells and textured huts are recurring forms in Simone Leigh's work. See *Cowrie (Sage)*, 2015; *Hammer Project: Simone Leigh*, 2016, installation, Hammer Museum, California; *You Don't Know Where Her Mouth Has Been*, 2012, installation, The Kitchen, New York.

I wanted to expand the idea of medicine to include other self-defense and care mechanisms like strategy, or even desire, as alternatives to the stamina and obedience that is expected as normative behavior. Herbalism and dance would fall into the category of knowledge that resists the market and capitalization (Sayej).

This work conceives self-care as a radical act of civil disobedience, and validates the needs and epistemologies of black women within institutional spaces. By occupying the museum with performative acts of care and defiance, Leigh and collaborators stretch the traditional contours of art and medicine. Amid a changing institutional landscape, wherein museums grapple with new curatorial strategies and implement reforms cast as social responsibility, Leigh's artistic labor concretizes a project rooted in political activism and social collaboration. As such, her practice reworks traditional configurations and tensions that percolate within art economies, linking artists, objects, institutions and their audiences (Bishop 2). Recalibrating the artist's role as producer of discrete, presumably commodifiable objects, Leigh mobilizes an ethics of stewardship inherent in museums to attend to pressing conditions affecting particular audiences. This reconfiguration of care foregrounds the specificity of black women's historical role as caregivers and continual exposure to biomedical violence, which disrupts lingering colonial optics within museums and mediates art processes directly related to social lives.



Figure 5. Installation View, Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room, New Museum, 2016. Photo credit: Erin Sweeny.

## Haptics of Refusal: Reimaging Broken Familyhood

Similar to Simone Leigh's emphasis on black women's bodily health, LaToya Ruby Frazier's Flint is Family (2016) addresses the life risks posed by environmental racism with photography. Juxtaposing black-and-white aerial views of a post-industrial landscape with medium shots of closely-knit generations of black women, Frazier intervenes within a collective national imaginary supported by mass media. Commissioned by Elle magazine, the documentary photographer creates an image series on the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, a predominately low-income African-American community afflicted by an environmental catastrophe. With this commission, Frazier brings a practiced participatory methodology and subversive orientation to the documentary form to bear on an enduring national crisis. Countering popular expectations, this photographic series depicts Flint families in empowering ways, centered on the daily actions of Shea Cobb, a poet and singer, and weaving out to the collective resistance and supportive networks forged among community members. Enacting a politics of refusal, Frazier undermines the commonplace display of suffering bodies tied to the documentary ideal of catalyzing justice with imagery that exposes harmed bodies. Although the rampant toxicity of the city's water has produced adverse bodily effects, including skin rashes, hair loss, and other maladies, Frazier focuses the camera on community-building strategies that combat disastrous environmental conditions. With carefully shaped light and shadow, posed collective portraits of black women highlight social bonds in relation to birds-eye views of the water plant and the Flint River, swarming with pollutants.

Months after the intense two-year political battle for clean drinking water, Frazier's pictorial narrative

rejects a neat ending to an ongoing struggle. Two striking images of a mother's hand pouring bottled water into a child's gaping mouth and a street sign demanding the removal of lead together speak to persistent realities. Another stark aerial image depicts Shea Cobb standing on the Flint River Trail surrounded by a rippling body of dark water. Engulfed by the river, this visual composition emphasizes the overwhelming environmental hazards that threaten the bodily health of Flint residents. The aerial image coupled with portraits of women-led families juxtaposes the communal care that strengthens social integrity with the real vulnerabilities black women endure in the face of toxic exposure. The project, disseminated via circulating public media, reanimates critiques of media culture that informed works of still and moving images by artists throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Frazier overturns media representation of a national crisis with photographs that render thriving social relationships, primarily sustained by black women, in the context of incessant environmental racism.

Flint is Family is charged with similar themes that define Frazier's documentary practice. Rendering the effects of deindustrialization and environmental pollution in Frazier's hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania, the fourteen-year project *The Notion of Family*, curates a set of images that nest relationships between self, family, and landscape. Commenting on the creation of photographic counter-narratives, Frazier states:

The conceptual framework around it is questioning, deconstructing, and elevating the notion, history, and argument around social documentary...I'm pushing back very much at how the Pictures Generation resisted and questioned media representation of their particular moment...I'm trying to weave this other narrative around what I see as the dominant narrative, which falls very short of my reality and experience from my hometown (Sawyer).

By focusing on the somatic impacts of steel mill toxicity on her family, Frazier mounts a critique against traditional social documentary paradigms and mainstream depictions of deindustrialization as a closed historical process. The intimate photographs lay bare that industrial pollution has enduring health effects on marginalized populations. Unseen pollutants not only have a spectral quality in the wake of industrial decline, but also have an extended lifespan infiltrating bodily matter. This photographic emphasis on porosity and nonlinear history—potently visualized in portraits depicting the artist, her mother, and grandmother battling illnesses—manifests the body's vulnerability to toxins and intricate material sentience.

Foregrounding embodied memory and collective struggle, Frazier's images incite what Laura Marks terms "haptic visuality," a mode of seeing that integrates tactile registers (2). Her theory of tactile seeing posits a mode of knowing predicated on bodily encoded history and sensory experience. This somatic form of knowledge, as Marks affirms, collapses dichotomies between subjects and objects in the phenomenological world, or spectators and imaged worlds (151). Recognizing body and image surfaces as porous, sticky, and malleable, she highlights the connective relationships that accrue in their worldly engagement. Attuned to such intimacies, Frazier's images bear the trace of mediated gestures and closeness to subject matter; their framing refuses the effacing optics of traditional documentary conventions; and conveys the linkages among people in space and time. The intergenerational narrative arc sustains a dense materiality of haptic connection: images are suffused with that surplus of co-presences between photographed interactions, between photographer and subjects, between viewers and objects. This abundance of contact expresses "the social poesis" that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney argue surges from and in spite of conditions of the hold (97). Depicting and participating in community re-building projects, Frazier's work appeals to an embodied photographic engagement, a feeling with and through, a tactile seeing that unsettles representational repertoires of national crisis and aid.

#### Conclusion

The public art practices of black women photographers and sculptors, still unfolding in the contemporary, participate in a broader praxis of reimagining social conditions. Amid widespread social justice movements carried out in a global climate of anti-blackness, the art-based initiatives of Frazier, Leigh, and Weems actively redefine the meanings of socially engaged aesthetic interventions. In the context of shifting

multidisciplinary art practices, emergent iterations of black public art transform the spatial organization and imagination of social worlds. Moreover, this model of practice not only expands the parameters of art production and distribution, but also mediates the integration and participation of audiences into a fluid creative process. Through these interventions, artists-activists reconfigure categorical systems that link familiar art spaces to broader social contexts, and more fundamentally, employ lived epistemologies and negotiations as black women to reorganize dominant processes of exclusion and negation. Whether physically sited on a public street, museum floor, or magazine page, these critical practices should be understood intertextually with racializing discourses that configure social space.

The tactical creativity of black women artists alters the codes of hierarchically organized space as it recalibrates art economies predicated on the representational fixing of otherness. The composing of space from particular socio-political positions mobilize practices beyond the representational. This form of social practice subverts the kind of viewer engagement that decodes an arrangement of visual signs attributed to blackness; and instead, urges a relational engagement and collaborative labor that contends with everyday violence against black lives. The forms of relational assemblage, materiality, and structural alternatives summoned by these public activations insist upon the expansiveness of black bodily being within reverberating conditions of subjection. The works Operation: Activate, The Waiting Room, and Flint is Family set social values of care in critical motion, which decidedly reclaim the felt intricacies of embodiment. In so doing, these projects not only place pressure on spatialized systems, but also unsettle visual paradigms predicated on the exploitation of black pain and devaluation of social lives. This constellation of public forms thus intervenes within dominant fields of visuality, their spectatorial regimes, and their logics of containment. Animated by social participation, black public art projects keenly punctuate cultural landscapes through the collective formation of materialities that reconstruct the grounds of civic life.

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