



SLANT

THE DIFFICULTY OF BLACK WOMEN (A RESPONSE)

December 20, 2022 • Rizvana Bradley



Simone Leigh, *Last Garment*, 2022, bronze, 54 × 58 × 27". Photo: Timothy Schenck. © Simone Leigh.



what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life.

—Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory”

IN AN ESSAY on the uncompromising brilliance of Toni Morrison’s oeuvre, published just months before the passing of this inimitable writer, Namwali Serpell observes: “There are many ways to be ‘difficult’ in this world: stubborn, demanding, inconvenient, complex, troublesome, baffling, illegible. Black womanhood is where they overlap.” Black women have always been difficult for the world, which relentlessly demands their labors, but disdains the exorbitance their labors bring forth.

This singular bearing of black feminine labor also palpitates through Simone Leigh’s practice. One of the most admirable dimensions of Leigh’s work is its commitment to the difficulty of black women. Such commitment manifests not only in Leigh’s artwork, but also in her convening of intramural encounters that refuse to countenance the customary partitioning of intellectual and creative labor. Indeed, Leigh has been applauded by American Artist as “able to materially manifest the concerns of black studies and also build community” in and through this commitment to the eclectic practices of black feminist study. Leigh recognizes that black feminist art *thinks*, and that black feminist thought is necessarily an *art* of survival.

As example: *Last Garment* (2022), one of the eleven works featured in Leigh’s “Sovereignty” exhibition in the U.S. pavilion of this year’s Venice Biennale, references a photograph taken by the white American photographer Carlton Harlow Graves titled *Mammy’s Last Garment, Jamaica* (1879). The ostensible subject is the quotidian labors of a Jamaican woman, her back bent, eyes all but shut, ankles submerged in coursing water, as she scrubs clothes against river rock. For her sculpture, Leigh created a clay model using a live sitter, then cast it in bronze. But *Last Garment* dispossesses the viewer of the representational presuppositions that would ground the putatively transparent image of black women’s labor that the genre of colonialist photography fabricates to meet its own demand. The dark bronze sculpture bends over a broad black marble pool of strikingly still, shallow water, its reflective surface accentuated by its chromatic contrast with the white room. As the viewer’s gaze is held in abeyance by a scene which casts this laboring figure’s face toward her own reflection or refraction, one begins to sense that the work is

not only a reflexive commentary on the labor of its own making, but also on the impossible black feminine labor of bearing one's own debasement before the eyes of the world. *Last Garment* emblemizes the fraught existential registers that black women are forced to reckon with in traversing the difficult conjunction of “care, labor, and creation,” as Leigh has thoughtfully characterized the substance of her exhibition.

It was this recognition that also informed Leigh's efforts to organize, in collaboration with scholars Saidiya Hartman and Tina M. Campt, “Loophole of Retreat,” a gathering that took place at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum on April 27, 2019. Joining writers, artists, poets, filmmakers, and activists from around the world in a daylong congregation “dedicated to the intellectual life of black women” in which I was fortunate enough to participate, “Loophole of Retreat” presented an ensemble of interventions. The title of this convening, which references Harriet Jacobs's characterization of her escape from the depredations of enslavement by hiding in “the last place they thought of” (namely a 9' x 7' x 3' garret at her grandmother's house, where she lived for seven years), signaled precisely the difficulty of black feminine intellectuality—its tenacious inhabitation of impossibility, the utter opacity of its refusals, its recession from any extant articulation of freedom. No problem approached resolution during “Loophole of Retreat.” No narrative was clarified. No paradigm elucidated. To differentially reprise the poetry Dionne Brand shared on that occasion: Our inventiveness is tethered to the reproduction of an unfinished passage, our only “passports to unknowing everything.”

The project “Loophole of Retreat” sought to honor and announce found iterative extension this past October in the convening of “Loophole of Retreat: Venice,” organized by Leigh and curator, artist, and writer Rashida Bumbray, with Hartman and Campt as curatorial advisors. The time and place were occasioned by Leigh's historic participation in the Biennale as the first black woman to exhibit her work in the U.S. pavilion. “Loophole of Retreat: Venice” was fashioned as part of her exhibition, bringing together an even greater array of writers, artists, curators, performers, and more for a three-day symposium, once again explicitly focused on the inextricability and irreducibility of black women's intellectual and creative labors. Given the unequivocally black feminist emphasis of “Loophole,” I was surprised and disturbed to read the critic Seph Rodney's journalistic account of the gathering published in [Hyperallergic](#) on November 13. Not only does

Rodney's piece rhetorically pit the participants against one another, it also reinscribes the very protocols for reading black women's art and thought that "Loophole" refuses. In this response, I will often turn to the language and insights of other black feminist thinkers in order to draw attention to a tradition that, whatever its strains and fissures, comprises a difference-in-common, which Rodney sees fit to arbitrate, but does not seem particularly willing to grapple with.

Rodney's umbrage at the difficulty of black women is in some respects prefigured by his review of Simone Leigh's 2019 solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, "Loophole of Retreat," also published by [Hyperallergic](#) that same year. He begins with the admission: "I wouldn't normally expect an object that's meant to defy the inquisitive gaze to be as large as this." Reflecting on Rodney's comment in her most recent book, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, Camp asks: "But why not expect their monumental stature? Isn't their scale part and parcel of their defiance as an overt response that rises to the challenge of a gaze that routinely seeks to probe, diminish, and overwhelm Black women?" Rodney's incredulity over the putatively excessive proportions of objects that would refuse the rapacious ambitions of the racially gendered gaze would seem to signal an embarrassment or discomfort with black feminine exorbitance—always too much and too little for every space that would seek to hold it.





Simone Leigh, *Façade*, 2022, thatch, steel, and wood, dimensions variable. ***Satellite*, 2022**, bronze, 24 × 10' × 7 x 7". Photo: Timothy Schenck. © Simone Leigh.

In his report on “Loophole of Retreat: Venice,” Rodney recoils from the difficulty of black women with a different figurative emphasis, which turns out to be simply the other side of the same coin. After briefly glossing the ambitions and background of the symposium, Rodney declares that “[w]hat it *felt* like to be there was almost as profound as the premise of the symposium.” Of course, as anyone even vaguely acquainted with the critical insights of black feminist thought and artistry surely knows, *feeling* is hardly innocent. As Hartman has been at great pains to elucidate, the gendered violence of antiblackness is all too often “extended . . . in the garb of sentiment.” So what exactly does Rodney tell us about his felt experience, and how might we, in turn, read the affective contours of his testimony? What seems to have most gratified his appetites were scenes and performances that he felt opened themselves to him, *without difficulty*: “Black women . . . dressed in vivid and flamboyant colors and chatting amiably with each other,” testimonies of “family and personal experience,” presentations that he found “beautifully moving,” “the room audibly sigh[ing].”

“Conversely,” Rodney notes, “some presentations made me recall. . .that offering academic papers at symposia is not generally helpful to the audience . . . Listeners have too little time to parse dense writing, thus oftentimes these presentations feel like job auditions, anxious claims to authority, or appeals to recognize their eligibility to be on the dais, rather than avenues to deep discussion.” In his parsing of the beautiful and the ugly, or at least the disagreeable, Rodney was kind enough to single out my talk “Awaiting Her Verb,” (an essay that will be published in Leigh’s forthcoming monograph) as indicative of this latter, degraded form of black feminist intellectuality:

For example, Rizvana Bradley, an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley, delivered a paper titled “Awaiting Her Verb” in which she rapid-fire referenced Hortense Spillers, Stuart Hall, Tina Campt, Franz Fanon,

and other stalwarts in the Black liberation canon. In one instance she quoted Saidiya Hartman, saying something about bridging “the gulf between the sovereign and the fungible.” Bradley I’m sure is a fine researcher, but I needed a few minutes to wrap my head around what that phrase meant, and by then I had lost the plot to the rest of her paper. (Bradley was helpful after the fact though, by providing the source of that particular phrase when I emailed her.) Other kinds of narratives and research-oriented explorations need to be made regularly at public symposia. The personal is not only political; it’s also where most of humanity lives.

Notwithstanding the diametric opposition rhetorically constructed by Rodney, it must be stressed that “Loophole” emerged from the recognition that black women’s “difficult” intellectuality moves in concert with our sartorial imaginations, minor gestures, tender embraces, and impossible testimonies. Be that as it may, the quotation Rodney mentions actually appeared in the very first sentence of my talk: “In a speculative piece entitled ‘The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance,’ Saidiya Hartman provocatively suggests that extinction could very well be the only thing that could ‘[bridge] the gulf between the sovereign and the fungible.’” It is curious, to say the least, that the formulation Rodney found emblematic of the sort of intellectuality that is “not generally helpful” pivoted upon the distinction between sovereignty and fungibility, given that the former term—*sovereignty*—is quite literally the title of Leigh’s exhibition at the Biennale, while the latter—*fungibility*—references one of the most well-known concepts in Hartman’s repertoire, which Leigh has time and again cited as one of her most important intellectual influences. What is one to make of the fact that Rodney found my formulation worthy of denouncement rather than of understanding? What is clear is that what he found most objectionable about my talk is not that it was “academic,” but rather that it failed to accommodate his expectation of *transparent* discourse, *benign* affect, and the reiteration of a politics always already *known in advance*.

But perhaps I am being difficult.



Simone Leigh, *Anonymous (detail)*, 2022, glazed stoneware, 72 1/2 × 53 1/2 × 43 1/4". Photo: Timothy Schenck © Simone Leigh.

“Loophole” was conceived as a refusal of and refuge from precisely these sorts of discursive prohibitions on and degradations of black women’s intellectuality, not least as they manifest through the “patriarchal control over language,” to use the poet and critic Simone White’s words. But the substance of Rodney’s true complaint is worth attending to further, as it has significant implications for how we understand the function and reception of black women’s creative labors within the art world and more broadly. Rodney is clear that he “believe[s] very much in the public and transparent discussion of the problems of our politics,” yet is blithely unaware that the defense of *opacity* and the refusal to valorize any self-evident articulation of “the public” is central to the work of numerous participants in “Loophole,” including both of its curatorial advisors.

In Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (a work whose twenty-fifth-anniversary edition has been widely publicized in periodicals such as *Artforum*, *Bomb*, and *The New Yorker*), which she has referred to as “a history of the present,” she stresses that the “subterranean and veiled character [of opacity] . . . must be considered in relation to the imposition of transparency and the degrading

hypervisibility of the enslaved . . . such concealment should be considered a form of resistance, a refusal of legible forms of address.” Additionally, as Campt observes in *A Black Gaze*: “Black women’s refusal to use words to render the complexity of our interiority is, more often than not, taken as an affront.” It is, of course, precisely my refusal to provide Rodney with an immediately “legible form of address,” or to sufficiently open up my figure to his sentimentalist projection of interiority, that has prompted his acrimony. A black woman’s illegible speech entered into Rodney’s space, or the space he imagines himself to occupy, as an unsolicited and unwarranted difficulty.

The ironic approaches the farcical when we recall the namesake of “Loophole,” for what Rodney misses entirely is what is at stake in Harriet Jacobs’s opaque retreat. Rodney might have consulted the inexhaustible wisdom gathered in Hortense Spillers’s *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, in which she suggests that Jacobs’s “tale of ‘garreting’” directs us to the “not-quite spaces” which, even in the face of the most brutal enclosure, are still audaciously inhabited by the “captive women’s community.” Our riven collectivity cannot be reduced to any conventional articulation of “the public,” which names a social imaginary that only coheres through our brutal expulsion from it. Nor can we simply withdraw into the supposed protections of its dualistic corollary, “the private,” because our kinship exists in an “enforced state of breach,” as Spillers puts it, “since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment.” Indeed, as the work of black feminist historians such as Jennifer L. Morgan shows, black women were conscripted, down to our wombs, in forging the very distinction between the public and the private.

That my contribution to “Loophole” serves as the negative foil for Rodney’s narrative framing of his piece—his editor even went so far as to integrate his rhetorical coup de grâce as the piece’s tagline (“The personal is not only political; it’s also where most of humanity lives.”)—is telling, especially given his careless invocation of, and appeal to, a universal figure of humanity, seemingly in ignorance of the numerous participants in “Loophole” who have differentially theorized the problem of blackness’s violent “abjection from the realm of the human,” to use Christina Sharpe’s phrasing in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. There are certainly those who can afford to reproduce the axiomatic terms of conventional discourse—who can track their lives within and across the conceptual maps of public and private, who can righteously proclaim the value of

transparency, who can claim their belonging in a universal figure of humanity without a second thought. Black women are not among them. We need a new language to speak the unshakable difficulty of our inhabitations.



Simone Leigh, *Jug*, 2022, glazed stoneware, 62 1/2 × 40 3/4 × 45 3/4". Photo: Timothy Schenck. © Simone Leigh.

Moreover, “Awaiting Her Verb” was *not* an academic paper (at least not one that any academic journal would publish). It was rather a series of experimental provocations, associatively organized through the thematics of sovereignty, the body, black performance, and picturing, and in ekphrastic relation to, unnamed images of the dungeon of Elmina Castle and works by Leigh, Maren Hassinger, and the late Khadija Saye. But this misascription should come as no surprise. Unfortunately, as Leigh’s oeuvre at once discloses and refuses, the innumerable uses to which black women may be put generally supersede any meaningful inquiry into the arts of survival that our existential condition

necessitates. For it is precisely the black woman's *fungibility*, or being forcibly rendered "an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values," which makes her of inestimable use to those who scorn her.

It is also no small irony that this critical reception of "Awaiting Her Verb" confirms the very formulation by Spillers that my talk's title references: "black women are . . . unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb." For, of course, the black woman's (mis)appearance precedes her, or at least precedes the substance and stakes of her theoretical intervention, artistic gambit, and intellectual labor. The black woman, Spillers avers, is a figure "so loaded with mythical prepossession" that the flesh which bears it must shoulder a "terrible weight" before a gaze as disdainful as it is acquisitive. But perhaps my appearance is also that of the "meager," a figuration of the black feminine that, as a reader of M. NourbeSe Philip and Patricia Saunders might suggest, is "so slight" as to fall precipitously from the categories of both woman and girl altogether? If the "Black Woman at the Podium," who dares not only to theorize but also to deviate from the ruthless dictates of transparency, is already marked as an abomination, it would seem that to have such a contravention of permissible speech proceed from the mouth of the meager approaches the register of the unthinkable. Both the meager and excessive figurations of the black feminine are different iterations of the difficulty of black women.

One of the principal expressions of our difficult intellectuality is the refusal of what Sylvia Wynter called our "narratively condemned status," in and through writing that strains against the limits of discourse. When the critic derisively states that he "lost the plot" of the talk, surely he did not have in mind Hartman's "runaway plot," or Wynter's plot as a "cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system." These are plottings that slip beneath the watchful eye and analytical maps of transparent narration. For, far too often, as Hartman reminds us, narrative ends up simply reinscribing "a conceptual prisonhouse." This is why her method of critical fabulation requires "narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure . . . the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law." These are not merely academic matters. They reside at the crux of black women's immeasurable intellectual labors and enduring contributions to theorizing the quotidian conditions we confront every single day.

So yes, Seph Rodney, it is true: my writing is difficult. Not in the facile sense of straying too far from the habitual reflexes of the very discourse that would secure my annihilation, and certainly not as a clamoring to ascend to a “dais” that, in the eyes of civil society, can never be anything more or less than an auction block. Difficult, rather, in the sense that black women have always been difficult, have had to be difficult to survive, have borne the difficulty the world requires and abhors, the difficulty which perpetually haunts the world’s ceaseless churning. Too much and too little, too little too late, an unfinished thought that recedes from the voraciousness of comprehensibility, from the story as lullaby. A black thorn in the side of our common flesh. The salt in the wounding we bear.

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