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 ering (their names
 t list at the door).
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 David Hammons
 g from hooks. At
 uting them. Oohs
 oise Noire's gown.
 smiles, she smiles,
 s lost none of the
 . Each of her nine
 s, which she gives
 says, while smiling
 y heavy bouquet?"
 Photographers and
 ay. Mlle Bourgeoise
 oves, white cat-o-
 earl crown, is very
 ges them. But Mlle
 heart between 1955
 sion. As the band
 res. All her flowers
 removes her cape,
 ies. She is wearing
 ic, by prearranged
 elbow gloves, which
 th she paces, like a
 beats herself with
 en waiting for this
 er final conclusion.
 t of the art in this
 greater and greater
 ne, where she was
 ust the others side
 great mulatto poet
 gs before she did.
 Of course, she will
 OUGH!" she shouts
 boot-licking. . . "No
 ng-up . . . "No more
 es . . . "BLACK ART
 ickly exits, leaving
 so: "Mademoiselle



Lorraine O'Grady **Writing in Space**

1973–2019

EDITED AND WITH AN
 INTRODUCTION BY ARUNA D'SOUZA

Writing in Space, 1973–2019

Edited and with an Introduction by **Aruna D'Souza**

Lorraine O'Grady **Writing in Space,**
1973–2019

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Acknowledgments

LORRAINE O'GRADY and I first met via email in late spring 2018, when I was trying to convince her to join me on a panel discussion at the Brooklyn Museum. In the long, delicate negotiations—Lorraine does nothing by half measures, so every invitation requires careful consideration—she sent me photos of members of her Jamaican family who shared my last name. I was struck by the significance of this connection—one that was both banal (my last name is a very common one among South Asians, as Lorraine must have known) and weighted (what were the historical contingencies that led to Lorraine's relatives ending up in Jamaica since the nineteenth century, while my parents ended up in Canada in the 1960s; how could her relatives be black while mine were brown?). She agreed to take part in the panel, and ever since then we have continued our conversations about diaspora, hybridity, and the way that art and writing can reveal, make strange, and heighten the contradictions inherent in whiteness.

I would like to thank Lorraine, first and foremost, for entrusting me with this project. Jarrett Earnest, the person who originally conceived the endeavor and got it off the ground, gave us a great foundation to build on. Members of Lorraine's studio team, especially Laura Lappi, were of great assistance in gathering images and information. Friends and colleagues, including Rebecca Solnit, Nancy Locke, and Christopher Campbell, also offered particular help in securing images and permissions. Catherine Morris,

with whom I am cocurating a retrospective exhibition of Lorraine's work at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (*Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And*), and her colleagues Allie Rickard, Chelsea Adewunmi, and Jenée-Daria Strand have been constant presences as I thought about an artist whose words have always been as important as her images. Robert Ransick, Anjuli Fatima Raza-Kolb, Aaron Gemmill, and Paul Chan have provided useful editorial feedback, and Bryan Siegel and Priya D'Souza have offered sage advice and loving support throughout the process. Finally, Ken Wissoker and his team at Duke University Press, including Nina Foster, Amy Ruth Buchanan, Liz Smith, and Joshua Guterman Tranen, have shared their enthusiasm and expertise from the start.

—Aruna D'Souza

A BOOK AS ECLECTIC AS THIS could not have been conceived, let alone brought to coherency, without a variety of contributions and support. I am grateful, first, to those editors and publishers who thoughtfully and sometimes stubbornly guided so many of the articles here into print earlier. Their success formed the bedrock of the current collection and made it possible to move forward, adding unpublished items that had not yet received focused attention. One such editor to whom I owe a special debt is the superbly talented Jarrett Earnest, who in 2016, after exercising the laser-like prep work needed to convert our conversation into a cover article for the *Brooklyn Rail*, turned still more intensely to my art and writing as a whole. He saw the possibility of a book of collected writings before I did, and his enthusiasm shaped my belief. The proposal Jarrett crafted received a positive expression of interest within days from Duke University Press, the first publisher to whom we'd submitted it.

But I've leaped ahead of myself here. This is a book about becoming an artist and about making art. I will soon be eighty-five, and my career as a visual artist goes back more than forty years, to 1977, when I made *Cutting Out the New York Times* (CONYT). The earliest debts I incurred in the art world were to curators. The first was in 1980 to Linda Goode Bryant, founder-director of Just Above Midtown gallery, who could easily have pulled away from me and *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, given the subject matter, but instead embraced me and her and helped us go further. Linda provided an indelible example of how a commitment to experimentation in art could expand the mind (and the world). In the early 1990s, two important solo exhibits—curated by Judith Wilson at the INTAR Gallery in Manhattan's Theater District, and by

Andrea Miller-Keller and her then assistant curator, James Rondeau, at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford—allowed me, at a time when few opportunities were available, to initiate my turn to the wall by creating a new series (*Photomontages*, later known as *Body Is the Ground of My Experience*, at INTAR) as well as to elaborate my concept of the “Both/And” by connecting seemingly disparate bodies of work (*Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* and *Miscegenated Family Album* in the Matrix Gallery of the Atheneum).

The contemporary phase of my career, which began in roughly 2008, was jump-started in 2006–7 by three unlikely curatorial events. In 2006, the young artist Nick Mauss remembered having seen a diptych from *Miscegenated Family Album* (MFA) and took it and four other pieces from MFA for a show he was curating for Daniel Reich at the Chelsea Hotel. He fell in love with *Cutting Out the New York Times* and took five multipanel poems from CONYT as well. The show was reviewed in the *New York Times*, and my work received special mention. The same year, James Rondeau, now curator of contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago, made the first museum purchase of the full sixteen-diptych MFA installation. He also nominated me for a residency at ArtPace San Antonio. In 2007, Connie Butler made *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* one of the entry-points of her landmark exhibit *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*. It was the first time most people in the contemporary art world could see this vaguely mythic piece in context, the costume together with the photo-document installation. It was a breakout moment for the work. A week after the *WACK!* exhibition opened, I went down to San Antonio to begin the residency James had made possible. There I made my first video piece, an eight-channel wall installation called *Persistent*. Because of perceptive and generous curators like these, I could move confidently into the future.

But it hasn't been just curators. There have been critics, too. In the very opening moments, in a review by Patricia Spears Jones for *Live Performance 5* of “Dialogues”—a two-night live series in October 1980, featuring eight performance artists from alternative downtown spaces at Just Above Midtown, in which I represented JAM with the first performance of *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*—being singled out as having created one of only two successful performances in the series gave me a belief in my future in the art form I had chosen, a belief that never left me. I have been privileged with a slow but steadily increasing quality in the response to my work; the two most recent reviews of my new work *Cutting Out CONYT*, one by Colby Chamberlain in *Artforum* and one by Chase Quinn in *Hyperallergic*, are perhaps best of all. I cannot thank writers like these enough. And throughout, I have had the un-

wavering support of the art critic I respect the most, Holland Cotter of the *New York Times*, to whom I will be eternally grateful.

But art is also an industry, and one must make the work. In 2008 I joined a gallery, Alexander Gray Associates, where I have always been proud to show. In their quiet, steady representation of me, the principals, Alexander Gray and David Cabrera, have made me feel less like part of a business than part of a family. Over the years, three of the gallery's employees, through their intellectual acuity and their emotional connection to my work, have helped me understand more deeply what I am doing and its potential value: Maggie Liu Clinton, Carly Fischer, and Ursula Davila-Villa. In 2008, I also set up a studio. I have been blessed since then with assistants of unparalleled loyalty, talent, work ethic, and patience: Nahna Kim, Stacy Scibelli, and Laura Lappi. They have helped in more ways than I can count.

Before the professionalization and during, though, there were and are two who have helped make my work and life in art possible. Sur Rodney (Sur), my friend of nearly forty years and my studio manager since its first days in 2008: it was Sur who straightened out my taxes and settled my space rental, Sur who assembled and shipped sixty-five boxes of my paper archive to Wellesley College; it is Sur with whom I can discuss every issue before I make a decision in the art world, Sur who knows what I will need before I do. And also Robert Ransick, whom I think of as my second son: Robert was first my student at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in 1989, then my assistant in 1990 when together we produced the INTAR show. Now he is my executor and one of the trustees of my estate. Robert always has my best interests at heart, and his clairvoyant intelligence has always been there to help me see—what should be done and should not be done for my work and career, how to get from square A to square B. He is never afraid to cast a jaundiced eye when I try to fly too high or to correct me firmly when I don't believe enough.

Although it “took a village” to help me do this book, mostly it has taken Aruna D'Souza. I remember a different meeting than she does. I first met her when she came to a lecture performance I did for Simone Leigh's *Waiting Room* residency at the New Museum. Not only had she come with Robert Ransick, whom she knew from Bennington, she'd also arrived with her editor at the *Wall Street Journal*, Adam Thompson, for whom I once occasionally babysat (I'd introduced his father to his mother). Even before Aruna and I exchanged a word, she felt like family. And then there was her last name. How often I'd fantasized what my life would be like if my mother and father had met in Jamaica instead of Boston, if like my father I had grown up with my DeSouza cousins? When she emailed to invite me for her panel, I knew,

but wanted to be sure. The panel would be on politically sensitive topics, and in the end it was the brilliance of her book *Whitewalling* that convinced me to accept her invitation. And it was the generosity and, above all, the light touch of her remarks that evening that determined me, in turn, to invite her to be my editor. I believed that together we could navigate these shoals. We were so different yet had so much in common. She, raised by South Asian parents in Western Canada, and I, raised by Jamaican parents in New England. I had come of intellectual age via *Third Text* with “political blackness” in Britain, and believed in allyship that understood and respected difference. It’s been rocky and it’s been clear. Thank you, Aruna, for this fruitful collaboration! And thanks, too, to Ken Wissoker, senior executive editor at Duke University Press, for his unfailing support and warm encouragement of our book.

Thank you most of all to my family who have, somehow, not given up on me despite the weird life I’ve led: my son Guy and my daughter-in-law Annette, whose thirty-five-year marriage has me in awe; my three incredible and loving granddaughters, Ciara, Kristin, and Devon; and my two astonishing great-grandsons, Kevin Elijah and Royce Marco, who make me want to live another twenty years to see how “my little prodigies” turn out. But you can’t have everything!

—Lorraine O’Grady

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Introduction For Those Who *Will Know*

ARUNA D'SOUZA

"IF PRESSED TO DESCRIBE WHAT I DO," wrote the artist Lorraine O'Grady in a 1983 statement, "I'd say that I am *writing in space*. I guess that comes from being trained as a writer (I went to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, etc.). But I was never able to accommodate to the linearity of writing. Perhaps I'm too conscious of the stages I've lived through and the multiple personalities I contain. . . . The fact is, except for the lyric poem, writing is the art form most closely bound to time; but to layer information the way I perceived it, I needed the simultaneity I could only obtain in space."¹

Over the past forty-plus years, whether she was operating in performance, conceptual photography, the moving image, collage, or the written word, text and image have played mutually supporting and endlessly complicating roles in O'Grady's groundbreaking and prescient work: they reinforce and undermine each other, illuminate and complicate, contradict and explain, resolve and explode. This attention to the interaction between the textual and the visual is signaled in the poetry of her earliest artwork, *Cutting Out the New York Times* (1977), in which she clipped out resonant words and phrases from the paper of record to produce a deeply personal found poetry. It is further developed in the verses that her performance alter ego, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire (Miss Black Middle Class), shouted in her guerrilla interventions in the art world, and it can be seen in the literal layering of words and pictures in her studies for the planned photographic installation *Flowers of Evil and Good*. The relation of image to text is often emphasized in the form of the

work itself, in what she describes as the book-like structure of performances like *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* or the “folktale” that was *Rivers, First Draft* or the “novel in space” format of *Miscegenated Family Album*.² It is also elaborated in the scripts and image descriptions that she has produced in order to document and preserve her visual and performance work, demonstrating the care with which she approaches language and its translation into form. And it is present, too, in her practice as a writer per se—of criticism, of theory, of analysis, of history—describing, mapping out, and making visible, whether explicitly or implicitly, the contexts for her art, which revolves around issues of black female subjectivity, hybridity and diasporic identities, and colonial and racist histories, as well as the inscription of history on the self, the political possibilities of art, and more.³ O’Grady’s approach of “writing in space” has allowed her to build a theoretical foundation for her practice (to work out what she wants her art to do) and to prepare the ground for its reception (to give viewers of her work the tools to see what she saw).

This volume gathers the vast range of this important artist’s written output. It begins, chronologically speaking, in 1973, and continues to the present; the last few years especially have seen a flurry of statements, essays, interviews, and historical recollections as a new generation of curators, critics, and artists discover her work. Also included are a number of interviews and conversations: the artist almost always edits her oral interviews, or conducts interviews via email, and thus considers them part of her writing. While each text has a potency of its own, the accumulation and recurrence of her ideas as one moves through time is equally revealing. In her carefully chosen words, she reprises anecdotes, descriptions, and histories—but always with a subtle change; O’Grady is constantly reframing her own artistic record as the significance of her practice discloses itself to her over the course of time.

The effect is not so much repetitive as iterative and emphatic—illuminating when it comes to both her working method as an artist and her goals as an artist who writes. In the introduction to the script of a lecture-performance she gave in 2013 while standing in front of slides of what she considers one of her most important pieces—an installation of photographs from her one-time-only performance *Rivers, First Draft*—O’Grady drew the audience’s attention to the relationship of the words she was reading to the imagery behind her: “The installation being projected here is silent when on the wall or on pages in a catalogue, titles newly added. Imagine my voice now reading a text which bears on it only tangentially. Of course, you may not be able to follow the installation and the spoken text simultaneously. But whether you wander in and out of the installation and the text in alter-

nation, or attend to them sequentially, it's OK. Cognitive dissonance can be overcome when you slow down and repeat."⁴ She then repeated the slides while speaking the text a second time.

If O'Grady's texts exist in a ceaseless, unresolvable, endlessly complicating (and endlessly stimulating) conversation with her artwork, they also function as such with each other, which makes putting them together in a single volume a difficult and delicate task. The artist launched her archival website in 2007, anticipating the renewed—and, frankly, criminally belated—attention her work would receive thanks to its inclusion in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, a major traveling exhibition curated by Connie Butler.⁵ The website is designed to make apparent the multiple, overlapping relationships in time and space between the various aspects of her practice—images and visual documentation, her own texts, and other writers' analysis of her work—and to make available the materials necessary for a future theorization of her art. (O'Grady, then in her seventies, designed the site's information architecture herself.) The layering she sought via the concept of "writing in space" has been translatable in the digital world; it is harder to achieve in the linear, one-page-after-another form of the book. In addition, many of the texts gathered here were originally conceived to be presented alongside imagery, or to describe imagery—whether in the form of performance scripts, or slide lectures, or wall labels for exhibitions. While the volume includes an insert of images created by O'Grady herself—a carefully composed, allusive distillation of her visual output to a few dozen trenchant images—the emphasis in this book is on the writing as writing: it is an opportunity to see O'Grady's practice from another angle. Gathering these texts in such a volume offers its own insights: most strikingly, the opportunity to slow down and savor her language and ideas; the ability to see the development of her thinking over the years; the recurrence and repetition of themes, concepts, and stories; and the sheer *density* of her textual analysis.

O'GRADY BECAME AN ARTIST late in life, at age forty-five, after years of being steeped in language. On graduating from Wellesley College in 1955 with a degree in economics and a minor in Spanish, she took up positions as an intelligence analyst at the Departments of Labor and State in Washington, DC, scanning international publications and internal reports. "After five years of reading ten newspapers a day in different languages, plus mountains of agents' classified reports and unedited transcripts of Cuban radio, language had melted into a gelatinous pool. It had collapsed for me," she has

said.⁶ In spite of, or perhaps because of, this collapse, O'Grady moved briefly to Europe to attempt to write a novel; when she discovered she didn't have the tools to do so, she returned to graduate school—the Iowa Writers' Workshop, one of the most prestigious creative writing programs in the United States. She worked as a translator and then ran her own translation agency in Chicago.

She eventually moved to New York City, leaving the translation business to become a rock critic for the *Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone* while exploring the edges of the mainstream art world. One of her early reviews for the *Voice* was a 1973 piece on a joint residency at Max's Kansas City by two acts about to make it big: the Wailers, fronted by Bob Marley, and Bruce Springsteen. Of the latter, O'Grady wrote, in her typically lively and confident prose: "He's the real thing. An authentic talent, with a rushing stream-of-conscious imagery that is banked by a solid rock-and-roll-rhythm-and-blues beat. At times the imagery becomes less of a stream and more of a torrent. It's enough to make a Freudian analyst rub his hands in glee."⁷

But O'Grady's editor at the downtown weekly decided not to publish the piece, saying, "It's too soon for these two."

This might have been the first—it certainly was not the last—instance of a phenomenon that has dogged O'Grady throughout her career. As an artist and a writer, she has always been very conscious of the notion that her ideas have come *too soon*, before others could see the theoretical landscape she was traversing. "The problem is that I'm always saying things that haven't been said before, so it takes a while before they can be heard," she lamented (not without a sense of humor) in 1996.⁸ From the beginning of her artistic career, as expressed in her 1983 performance statement, she saw her job as an artist not only to create work but also to create the audience for her work, or, failing that, to find ways to make her work available to an audience that would emerge in the future: "Right now, my goal is to discover and create the true audience, and something tells me that, for a black performance artist of my ilk, this will take a many-sided approach. Because I sense that the true audience may be *coming*, not here now, I try to document my work as carefully as I can." She goes on to explain, via a reading of Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art," something she intuits: "that the work requires an audience who, whether or not they are *like me*, can see what I see."⁹

Back then, she found it "possible to imagine a day when we can stop being unique and simply concentrate on doing our work. A day when, finally, the 'preservers' [a term she borrows from Heidegger to signify "audience"] will no longer be 'coming' but will already be there." Sure enough, more than

forty years later her audience has started to catch up with her, as the wave of interest in her practice over the past decade will attest. Even so, in a recent conversation with the artist Juliana Huxtable, she once again alluded to the ways she is relying on writing to ensure the perpetuation of her ideas and the possibility of a deferred comprehension of her project: “At least the writing gives a ballast, a weight to the visuals so that people do get the sense that maybe they don’t understand, and that sense of not understanding allows the work a bit of room to at least—I’m not going to say grow—but at least persist.”¹⁰

O’Grady’s belief in the futurity of her audience and the imminence of her work is more than confidence in her own genius—it is also a recognition of the structural conditions facing “black performance artists of [her] ilk.”¹¹ Her 1983 performance statement was made, let’s remember, before the mainstream art world finally, later in that decade, turned its attention to David Hammons and Adrian Piper—figures who, like herself, were producing challenging, difficult-to-categorize work that grappled with questions of race in a way that disrupted easy perceptions of what black art could and should do. In 1983, at the beginning of her career in performance, she had few peers, outside the small coterie of performance artists she encountered early on at JAM, including Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger. (She did not even discover that Piper was a black—or, as Piper describes her mixed-race identity, “gray”—artist until years after she first encountered the work.) As a consequence, she had a strong sense that the art world she aspired to was only beginning to come into formation. With great optimism and not a little determination, she saw the situation as a temporary one:

I don’t take this as a permanently limiting condition of the work. The problem as I see it is simply that, so far, the context of black art hasn’t been broad enough for either whites or blacks to become so familiar with it that they can cross barriers of race or sex to seek themselves—the way anyone can in a Jewish novel, for instance, or even in a Merce Cunningham dance concert. At the moment, individual black performance artists are still exotic oddities. But already this is beginning to change.¹²

O’Grady has always remained keenly aware of how the obligation to explain oneself still weighs more heavily on black artists than on white, and may always be so—because, as she recognizes, the demands for explanation and justification from artists of color, especially women, are part of how white supremacy continues to shape the (art) world and its institutions. In 1994, in a postscript reflecting on her groundbreaking essay “Olympia’s

Maid”—presented first on a panel at the College Art Association’s annual conference in 1992—she noted, not without frustration, that “whether I will it or not, as a black female artist my work is at the nexus of aggravated psychic and social forces as yet mostly uncharted,” which required explaining not only her own view and the implications of her work but also “the multiple tensions between contemporary art and critical theory, subjectivity and culture, modernism and postmodernism, and, especially for a black female, the problematic of psychoanalysis as a leitmotif through all of these.”¹³ As recently as the eve of this book’s publication, O’Grady has written about this almost impossibly onerous obligation, quoting Toni Morrison:

It’s not enough to make the work. First, one may have to answer questions of motivation: Why this? Why now? What are you *doing*? More often, one must find or invent language so the work can be understood, be *seen*, by us as well as them. This can frequently take years. I love the quote by Toni Morrison: “the function, the very serious function of racism . . . is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again.”¹⁴

THE ROLES OF ARTIST and critic have always been simultaneous for O’Grady. Her education in the art world—with its possibilities and its blind spots, with its shocking segregation—required critical analysis and visual elaboration, and indeed she claimed at one point to want to make “art as an art critic.”¹⁵ At the same time, she was writing art criticism *as an artist*. Finding the models for her approach to art criticism was no easier than finding those for her art making, as she revealed in a recent email:

When I began reading art magazines seriously in the late 70s . . . I was struck by how badly written *Artforum* was. French theory seemed to have come to the art world a decade after it had conquered literature. The effort to “speak French” by “American talkers” had left them tongue-tied. That plus the fact that words often seemed treated more like physical objects than like signifiers tethered to meaning made the essays unintentionally annoying and funny, as in LOL funny. For a while, I didn’t know what to read (other than *Third Text*).¹⁶

A number of her pieces for *Artforum*, to which she contributed regularly till around 1994, attest to the ways in which she refused to separate her criticism from her art, taking every opportunity to reveal the underlying racial

logic of the art world and to map out the terrain in which a black woman steeped in the most challenging literary and critical race theory could find a provisional footing. An article on the Women's Action Coalition ("Dada Meets Mama") discusses her ambivalent relationship with the almost entirely white feminist activist group, which both provided her with opportunities to engage in direct action and revealed to her the limitations of white bourgeois feminism to deal with racial and class difference. In "The Cave," she uses an opportunity presented by the zeitgeist—Hollywood's embrace of black film directors—to ask, "Where are the women?"¹⁷ In her quest to discover the reasons for the occlusion of black women filmmakers, she allows us at once to understand the ways in which these structural conditions are driven by the particular economies, critical landscapes, and biases of the movie industry and to see how these limitations might function in the art world (and in fact many other spheres). A piece on Sean Landers, a much-celebrated bad boy of the New York art scene in the early 1990s, offers what seems to be the first—and, for a long time, only—serious critique of the then-emerging art historical/critical language of "the object" from a critical, race-focused perspective.¹⁸ Against the scholarly tide, O'Grady saw "the object" functioning not as a race-neutral means of admitting to the clean spaces of modern art the messy, the impure, and the degraded but, rather, as a rhetorical tool for admitting everything formerly associated with blackness into the art world without actually admitting blackness itself.

In the case of the Sean Landers piece especially, one is struck by O'Grady's prescience, her ability to analyze and assess a discourse *at the moment of its formation*. But equally important is her insistence on speaking, in almost all of her art criticism, of how her own art, by proposing a different set of conceptual terms than that of the mainstream, is an equal and necessary part of that art world. Comparing her own iterative artistic practice to Landers's unwillingness to self-censor or self-contain his adolescent white male voice, she writes: "I find a difference between Landers' logorrhea and the way my own work is driven from medium to medium and from style to style by the compulsion to get it all in. This lack and this over-abundance are dialectically related, and I don't want to choose between them. . . . Even the dullest of us should by now be able to sense that the cultural projects of the West and the non-West are each implicated in a larger history. And if we don't all keep getting it said, how will we find out what that is?"¹⁹ This insistence on keeping in play the two sides of this dialectic—Landers's logorrhea (a privilege of his white masculinity) and her own compulsion to get it all in (an imperative born of her position as a black woman)—rather than privileging one

over the other or erasing the difference between them is, as we will see, one of the most foundational, and radical, aspects of O'Grady's project.

IN THE EARLY 1990S, another theme emerged in O'Grady's writings, one that arose from and fed her larger artistic practice and would go on to solidify her influence on other artists: an exploration of black female subjectivity as both the expression of the most intimate and personal aspects of selfhood *and* a function of larger cultural and historical forces. She articulated the idea in early texts such as "Black Dreams" (1983), a first-person dream journal that made clear that even her unconscious desires and fears were framed and determined by the experience of racism, and in performances like *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, in which she sought to come to terms with her relationship with her deceased older sister by recourse to ancient Egyptian history, cross-cultural mythology, and psychoanalysis. But it was with "Olympia's Maid"—published first in 1992, and then again with a postscript in 1994—that she homed in on "the need to establish our subjectivity in preface to theorizing our view of the world."²⁰ Drawing on a breathtaking range of cultural theorists, including Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Spivak, Trinh Minh-ha (many of whom were involved in the important post-colonial studies journal *Third Text*), the art historian Judith Wilson, the literary and cultural theorist Hortense Spillers, and others, O'Grady begins with the question of who, exactly, was the black woman who posed as the attendant in Manet's *Olympia*. While a number of white feminists had addressed the question of the model for Olympia herself—attempting to wrest subjectivity for her from the male artist's flattening and objectifying gaze—no one had proposed the same for Laure, the model for her maid.²¹

O'Grady's question pointed to an important historical lacuna that, in years since, has engaged a number of black women artists but—another instance of her too soon-ness, perhaps—is only now, a quarter century later, being addressed by art historians.²² Whatever its influence on the discipline, however, her goal was not simply an academic one: "Olympia's Maid" marked a turning point for O'Grady, one that acknowledged "the need to establish our subjectivity in preface to theorizing our view of the world." "Critiquing *them*," she wrote, "does not show who *you* are: it cannot turn you from an object into a subject of history."²³

To establish subjectivity for the black woman at the moment of a sort of stiffening of postmodern theory in the American academy—when analysis was purportedly moving toward the *dismantling* of the subject in favor of

pure discursive construct—was no easy feat. But it was necessary nonetheless: how to countenance throwing out the subject before black people had a chance to occupy such a position? While much postmodern thought had addressed itself to identifying—and even dismantling—foundational oppositions such as male/female, white/black, culture/nature, and mind/body, O’Grady was one of a number of feminist thinkers who saw such deconstructive moves as, paradoxically, *retrenching* the unequal power relations on either side of these binaristic divides. “When Western modernist philosophy’s ‘universal subject’ finally became relativized . . . , rather than face life as merely one of multiple local subjects, it took refuge in denying subjectivity altogether,” she observed dryly.²⁴ By imagining that such oppositions had been overcome in discourse, the primacy of the male-white-culture-mind had been stealthily upheld once again. Even with the challenges posed by deconstruction, O’Grady recognized, the basic Western ontology, in which “somebody always has to win,” remains intact.

In the face of this, she cites the theorist Gayatri Spivak as a model for her thinking about the need to retain terms like “nature” and “the body”—terms most often associated with the black subject—in our analysis of subjectivity, despite the charges of “essentialism” that often resulted. Embracing Spivak’s “strategic essentialism”²⁵—her willingness to admit to an irreducible, non-discursive form of being at the point that femininity, and specifically brown femininity, was at risk of slipping away in theoretical analysis—was, for O’Grady, a means of tackling an urgency: the need to map a self that existed beyond culture, not forever trapped by a racist logic in which the black subject would always be lesser.

It is no overstatement to say that the greatest barrier I/we face in winning back the questioning subject position is the West’s continuing tradition of binary, “either: or” logic, a philosophic system that defines the body in opposition to the mind. Binaristic thought persists even in those contemporary disciplines to which black artists and theoreticians must look for allies. Whatever the theory of the moment, before we have had a chance to speak, we have always already been spoken and our bodies placed at the binary extreme, that is to say, on the “other” side of the colon. Whether the theory is Christianity or modernism, each of which scripts the body as all-nature, *our* bodies will be the most natural. If it is poststructuralism/postmodernism, which through a theoretical sleight of hand gives the illusion of having conquered binaries, by joining the once separated body and mind and then taking this “unified” subject, perversely called

“fragmented,” and designating it as all-culture, we can be sure it is *our* subjectivities that will be the most culturally determined.²⁶

This critique of Western thought was articulated, in “Olympia’s Maid” and over the course of her career, as a political manifesto: a call to the barricades for black artists and other artists of color to reveal the moments in which a more hybrid and philosophically sophisticated notion of “both/and” could replace a Manichean structure that was, at root, the sustaining concept that made antiblackness possible and persistent. Rejecting either/or-ism and embracing both/and-ism was and continues to be, for O’Grady, the most urgent task in the fight against white supremacy.

If artists and theorists of color were to develop and sustain our critical flexibility, we could cause a permanent interruption in Western “either/or-ism.” And we might find our project aided by that same problematic imbrication of theory, whose disjunctive layers could signal the persistence of an unsuspected “both: and-ism,” hidden, yet alive at the subterranean levels of the West’s constructs. Since we are forced to argue both that the body is more than nature, and *at the same time* to remonstrate that there is knowledge beyond language/culture, why not seize and elaborate the anomaly? In doing so, we might uncover tools of our own with which to dismantle the house of the master.²⁷

For O’Grady, an embrace of blackness as a condition of being was central to this endeavor—she refers often to W. E. B. Du Bois’s observation of the “double consciousness” required of black people who were compelled by a history of enslavement and forced migration into a diasporic condition that required being able to imagine a self constituted of multiple centers (a here and a there) versus a single locus of subjectivity.²⁸ To resist the subtle but devastating erasure of black subjectivity enacted by postmodern theory would require an acknowledgment and embrace of the idea that Africans in the diaspora were in fact “the first postmoderns.” She elaborated this idea in written form, in pieces like “Olympia’s Maid,” and in artworks such as *The First and Last of the Modernists*, which compared and contrasted the figures Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson, and *Flowers of Evil and Good*, which explored the lives of Baudelaire’s mistress Jeanne Duval and O’Grady’s own mother, Lena. To reclaim black female subjectivity “not as an object of history, but as a questioning subject” would require rejecting the “either/or” oppositions of emotion and intellect, of public and private, of personal and historical/cultural.

PERHAPS PARADOXICALLY, from very early in her career, O'Grady was convinced that it was not simply her blackness but the particular manifestation of her blackness—her multiracial background, typical of black people outside the African continent to greater or lesser degrees thanks to historical exigencies and colonial violence—that was “a crucible for the lessons that blackness teaches.”²⁹ In fact, O'Grady has long embraced terms like “mulatto” and “miscegenation”—terms that recall legalistic notions of race rooted in America's ongoing history of slavery and its effects—to refer to her own complex heritage. Works like *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, a video from 2010, finds a bodily correlate for the long history of displacement and diaspora that has resulted in the uneasy, unstable, wholly ideological but still oppressive concept of blackness in the West. On a large screen in a darkened space, we see the artist's own hair, in extreme close-up, in different lights and at different times of day, ruffled by air currents that seem to change direction. Its texture ranges from silky waves to tightly wound kinks—it is not one thing, but many simultaneously. The accompanying audio suggests this multiplicity is tied to geography, as soundscape of the ocean waves and squawking birds shift from the Caribbean to New England, two of the origins the artist can claim as her own.

For O'Grady, hybridity is not an erasure of difference—the synthesis of black and white into an indistinct “gray,” the white liberal's Kumbaya fantasy that as black and white mix further racism will disappear—but, rather, a means to allow both sides of the racialized coin, along with the myriad complexities and correlates that emerge from the opposition, to be recognized simultaneously, outside the inevitable hierarchies imposed by “either/or” thinking. It is, moreover, a fact of—a product of—history. For her, the idea of miscegenation is one to be thought *through*. “My attitude about hybridity,” she has said,

is that it is essential to understanding what is happening here. People's reluctance to acknowledge it is part of the problem. . . . The argument for embracing the other is more realistic than what is usually argued for, which is an idealistic and almost romantic maintenance of difference. But I don't mean interracial sex literally. I'm really advocating for the kind of miscegenated *thinking* that's needed to deal with what we've already created here.³⁰

The double—or triple, or endlessly multiplying—consciousness of the mulatto subject has served, in O'Grady's work, to reveal the operations of white supremacy and the productively troubling presence of blackness in a variety

of forms in Western culture, from the writing of ancient Egyptian history, to the birth of modern poetry, to the construction of late twentieth-century celebrity. The intellectual vantage point of the diasporic subject's always-riven experience, and the hybridity that marks her very being, is necessary not just for understanding black subjectivity but in fact, as O'Grady made clear in a 1994 lecture, for survival (of our communities? of our species?); this hybridity is a means of psychological *and civic* equilibrium. Her words seem especially resonant now, twenty-five years later, as we face a global crisis of forced migration due to war, economic injustice, racial and sectarian violence, and climate change:

It is diaspora peoples' straddling of origin and destination, their internal negotiation between apparently irreconcilable fields that can offer paradigms for survival and growth in the next century. Well, I should say that the caveat is if, and always if, they choose to remember the process of straddling and negotiation and to analyze the resulting differences. A simplistic merging with the host or captor always beckons. But I do think that in a future of cultural crowding, the lessons of diaspora and hybridity can help us move beyond outdated originary tropes, teach us to extend our sensitivities from the inside to the outside, perhaps even help us to maintain a sense of psychological and civic equilibrium.³¹

This conceptual realization has driven O'Grady's work in all of its manifestations. The formal device that O'Grady landed on to tackle this ontological problem was that of the diptych, an arrangement whose doubling set up an irresolvable, endless, mutually inflecting play of signification. In a text from 2018, O'Grady explained,

For me, the diptych can only be both/and. When you put two things that are related and yet totally dissimilar in a position of equality on the wall, for example, they set up a conversation that is never-ending. It's a totally unresolvable, circular conversation. And I think that that "both/and" lack of resolution—the acceptance and embrace of it, as opposed to the Western "either/or" binary, which is always exclusive and hierarchical—needs to become the cultural goal. The diptych, which is actually anti-dualistic, has served me to make the point against "either one, or the other."³²

Look closely at O'Grady's work and you will find diptychs everywhere. Take one example: *The Clearing*, part of the artist's project *Body Is the Ground of My Experience* (1991), consists of two photomontaged panels mounted side by side, one showing the ecstasy of sexual union between a black woman

and white man, the other showing the simultaneous violence adhering to such unions by transforming the woman into a cadaver and the man into a tattered knight. Though hardly explicit or prurient, O'Grady has spoken extensively of the ways that the deceptively simple "both/and" form of the work, and its literalization of the implications not only of interracial relationships but of "miscegenated thinking," have troubled viewers even to this day.³³ "With no resolution, you just have to stand there and deal," she once explained to a visitor to her studio.³⁴ But the diptych operates in more conceptual—even metaphorical—ways as well: in the both/and of anger and joy that marked the performance of *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*; in the simultaneity of defiance and celebration of her street performance at Harlem's African American Day Parade in 1983, *Art Is . . .*; in the one-to-one pairing of white and black artists in *The Black and White Show*; in the relationship to her earliest bodies of work (*Cutting Out the New York Times*) and one of her most recent (*Cutting Out CONYT*), and so on.

The word "diptych" itself refers to ancient, hinged writing tablets and to early European altarpieces that could fold like a book, confusing the boundary between image making and writing. This is hardly an accident. In addition to functioning within O'Grady's visual output, and between her various art projects, the concept also allows us to situate O'Grady's writings in relation to her artwork. In a lecture she gave in 1994 to coincide with the first installation of *Miscegenated Family Album* at Wellesley College, she spoke of the way in which her speech could operate as a complicating factor, the other side of a diptych to those photographic pairings that hung on the walls:

I have tried to examine my practice in words that hopefully cut a crevice between the magic of the installation and my overdetermined creation of it. I wanted to set up a situation where the movement back and forth between the experience of the piece and the process of hearing me talk about it might be disorienting, might create the feeling of anxiously watching your feet as you do an unfamiliar dance. Because it's what happens when you get past that, when you can listen to the music without thinking, that is most of what I mean by hybridism and diaspora.³⁵

In the following pages, the reader is invited to take part in the unfamiliar dance that O'Grady offers us by attending to the many textual diptychs contained therein. As with most collections of artists' writings, the individual essays and interviews here are grouped together under various rubrics that speak to the dominant themes in O'Grady's work. "Statements and Performance Transcripts" offers up a series of texts that will stand in

for an art historical overview of the artist's career. "Writing in Space" includes essays and interviews in which O'Grady has articulated her relationship to the means and media she explores, including the written word. "Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity" comprises texts that clarify the roots and consequences of O'Grady's concern with Eurocentric theory, including mainstream, or white, feminism, dating from her early involvement with the feminist collectives Heresies and the Women's Action Coalition, and centers on her crucial essay "Olympia's Maid." "Hybridity, Diaspora, and Thinking Both/And" gathers essays in which the productive complications introduced by her insistence on "miscegenated" thinking are explored, in relation to both her own work and the cultural productions of others, including Flannery O'Connor, William Kentridge, and the surrealists. "Other Art Worlds" includes a number of examples of the ways in which O'Grady has, over the years, shone a light on the oversights of the mainstream art world and revealed, to those who would attend to them, the existence and persistence of the black avant-garde; the writings in this section are almost startling in their demonstrations of her prescient thinking—she was saying things about the art worlds of the 1980s and 1990s that are only now being fully recognized and understood by curators, critics, and historians. Finally, "Retrospectives" comprises a pair of wide-ranging and in-depth interviews along with a narrative of her early career and two examples of her forays into rock criticism. The pieces are for the most part organized chronologically within each section. Unless otherwise indicated, ellipses are in the original; they do not indicate omitted text.

But despite these organizing themes, there are countless opportunities for making connections between texts and allowing each to complicate, contradict, and illuminate the other. Some signposts have been provided, in the form of editor's notes (marked by an [Ed.]), brief introductory paragraphs, and "See Also" sections placed at the end of the individual texts that point out ways in which O'Grady's writings relate not only to specific artworks but also to each other. For example, just as *Cutting Out the New York Times* (1977), the artwork itself, needs to be read in tension with *Cutting Out CONYT* (2018), her recent "remix" of that older piece, so too does the text O'Grady wrote about the earlier work need to be read in concert with one that she penned to illuminate the later one ("On Creating a Counter-confessional Poetry"). A 1998 conversation with a studio visitor on her choice of the diptych form ("The Diptych vs. the Triptych") should be seen in light of a recent gathering of email snippets, "Notes on the Diptych, 2018." And "My 1980s," a 2012 article written for the College Art Association's *Art Journal*,

based on a lecture she gave at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art as part of programming for the traveling exhibition “This Will Have Been,” curated by Helen Molesworth, is to be paired with the 2018 “On Creating a Counter-confessional Poetry.” O’Grady and I have offered some of these connections; readers will, in the course of their engagement, find other points of contradiction and affinity. The point is not to explain away that which seems irresolvable, but to see what we can learn by allowing those tensions to coexist—by sitting with the differences. The goal is to allow this volume to introduce—not simply by its contents, but by the experience of reading over time, by the experience of connecting essays and interviews in nonlinear ways—this central idea of O’Grady’s aesthetic and theoretical project: the productive value of thinking many things at once.

ONE OF THE ENDURING “both/and” qualities of O’Grady’s practice is her ability to offer both seriousness and joy, pleasure and critique, beauty and politics in a single experience—dualities that are most often thought of as contradictory or mutually exclusive in contemporary art, as she has noted in the past.³⁶ She describes herself as an “equal-opportunity critic” and considers her critique “a back-and-forth between anger and love”³⁷—a both/and approach that has been apparent from her earliest forays into performance, especially in regard to *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*. The piece was born of her disappointment in going to the *Afro-American Abstraction* show at PS1 in 1979: at first she was struck by the crowd, full of chic, brilliant, interesting artists with whom she could (at last!) aspire to build a creative community; she was brought down to earth when she realized that some of the work they were making was too tame, too polite, too clearly hemmed in by the rules of the white art world. *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* was first performed at another opening at which many of these same PS1 artists were in attendance, at Just Above Midtown gallery, the space run by Linda Goode Bryant that was in many ways the epicenter of the black avant-garde in New York in the late 1970s and 1980s. O’Grady, in her beauty queen persona, dressed in a gown covered in white gloves (symbols of middle-class black culture’s aspirations to white cultural status and achievement) and wielding a cat-o-nine-tails (“the whip that made plantations move”), decried the internalized and externalized racism limiting black artists from creating art that challenged the institutions that were excluding them. The performance climaxed with Mlle Bourgeoise Noire shouting a poem that ended with the line “BLACK ART MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!”

O'Grady did not limit her critique to her black artistic peers, however: when she restaged her "kamikaze performance" at the opening of a show at the New Museum titled *Persona* in 1981, which included not a single black artist, the poem *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* intoned declared, "NOW IS THE TIME FOR AN INVASION." In her retrospective account of the work, she notes that she had been invited by the museum, before the performance, to design some educational programming for schoolchildren visiting the show and that the offer was withdrawn after her action. The detail is telling—a signal, at least in part, for why the embrace of her practice by museums has been so slow in coming, despite her centrality in the art world since the first moments of her career.³⁸

It may be that the curators at the New Museum could only see *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* as a performance of hostility toward the institution. (The enduring misrecognition of artists' protest as unproductive aggression, as opposed to constructive intervention, is a leitmotif of American art institutions.) But when it was included in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* in 2007, O'Grady posted a number of unpublished photos of the performance on the exhibition's website. She wanted to counter, she said, the too-common impression people had that the piece was just about anger: by sharing pictures that showed her engaged in full-throated laughter and conversation with the other artists, critics, and curators associated with JAM who were there the night she performed there, she hoped to convey the joy also embodied in her alter ego. While O'Grady has often referred to the productive value of anger in her thinking, she is no less motivated by pleasure, delight, and laughter.

As will become clear in the following pages, O'Grady's sense of humor and deep belief in the transformative possibilities of art leavens her bracing, surgically precise, and sometimes even brutal approach to analysis. Take this, a parenthetical remark in her analysis of the spectacle around Jean-Michel Basquiat's treatment by the mainstream art world: "It was an uncomfortable reminder that more was at stake than a game. (At some point between the Greeks and the free-agent clause, sport gave up its pretense to a cultural meaning beyond narco-catharsis.)"³⁹ Or this description of her friend George Mingo, a fixture at Just Above Midtown whose aspirations to art stardom couldn't survive the realities of a segregated art world: "George didn't take art seriously until late high school, when he saw a picture of Salvador Dali wearing a top hat and cape and carrying a gold-knobbed cane. With dreams of limousines and good-looking broads, he went off to Cooper Union and discovered he was black a few years before multiculturalism. That was the end of that."⁴⁰ Or this, a devastatingly pithy takedown of a darling of the

bad-boy artist set: “Blissfully tone-deaf, he writes as if unconscious of how a phrase like ‘Surely pity for a whiner of my magnitude must be impossible’ echoes differently in the corridors of power than when it is overheard by someone who really has something to whine about.”⁴¹

Indeed, after I had passed along to O’Grady a first draft of this introduction, I received a very long email. It contained the following paragraphs:

Basically, the text splits in two. There are about twenty-eight paragraphs. The first thirteen or so are about as first draft as you can get. You could drop them and no one would hear a splash. Episodic, and then and then and then, and nothing but description that’s not providing answers because it’s not asking questions.

Suddenly, in paragraph fourteen, the first sign of real thinking. Gradually it gets better and better, until by paragraph twenty or so you are flying. The last paragraphs are as close to first class as the first half is to less than first draft.⁴²

The metaphor of dropping paragraphs and not hearing a splash, the charge that the writing was not asking questions—all this is countered by the enthusiasm for what she sees, despite it all, happening in the text. She even saw that sad first draft as a diptych (“the text splits in two”). I laughed when I read it—especially at the rhyming riff at the end of the second paragraph—then dug into her notes, and ended by completely rewriting the essay. I knew that O’Grady’s critique is a form of love—born of a desire for all of us to do the work that needs to be done. Why would I not attend to that, no matter how difficult the task, with the joy that comes from thinking through the world on these new terms, and letting myself be changed in the process? If they are read with as much care as they were written, O’Grady’s words are a gift, a call to action, and a vision of a world as it could be.

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**1 Statements
and Performance Transcripts**

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Two Biographical Statements (2012 and 2019)

O’Grady wrote these biographical statements seven years apart: the first for her showing of *Miscegenated Family Album* in the 2012 Paris Triennial curated by Okwui Enwezor, the second to accompany her 2019 “Diptych Portfolio” in a volume of the New Museum–MIT “Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture” series and later revised for her website. Unlike most examples of the “artist’s bio” genre, O’Grady’s foreground the conceptual import of her work—the ideas she is grappling with—rather than privileging a résumé of her activities. The artist has long used the form of the biographical statement to refine and revisit her understanding of what she has been doing—they function as retrospective assessments of her oeuvre and its through lines.

2012

Lorraine O’Grady

Born in 1934, Boston, United States

Lives in New York, United States

Conceptual artist Lorraine O’Grady uses performance, photo installation, and video as well as written texts to explore hybridity, diaspora, and black female subjectivity. Born in Boston to Jamaican immigrant parents, O’Grady was strongly marked by a mixed New England–Caribbean upbringing which

left her an insider and outsider to both cultures. She has said, “Wherever I stand, I must build a bridge to some other place.”

O’Grady came to art late following several successful careers—as an intelligence analyst for the Departments of Labor and State, a commercial translator with her own company, and even as a rock critic for *Rolling Stone* and *The Village Voice*. Her first public art work, the well-known performance *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1980–83), which critiqued the segregated art world of the time, was done initially at the age of 45. This broad background accounts, in part, for her distanced, critical view of the art world and for her eclectic attitude as an art maker. Ideas come first, then the medium to best execute them. However, the work’s apparently different surfaces are characterized by their unique amalgam of rigorous political content and formal elegance and beauty. Beneath the surface, there is often a unifying concern with hybrid identity.

The pejorative word “miscegenation,” coined in 1863 and then used for the post–Civil War laws making interracial marriage illegal—laws not struck down by the Supreme Court until 1967—has been recuperated in O’Grady’s photo-installation title *Miscegenated Family Album* (1994). In this strongly feminist “novel in space,” O’Grady attempts to resolve a troubled relationship with her only sister Devonia, who died early and unexpectedly, by inserting their story into that of Nefertiti and her younger sister Mutnedjmet. Building on remarkable physical resemblances, the paired images span the coeval distance between sibling rivalry and hero worship through “chapters” on such topics as motherhood, ceremonial occasions, husbands, and aging. At the same time, the work also reflects O’Grady’s view of Ancient Egypt as a “bridge” country, the cultural and racial amalgamation of Africa and the Middle East which flourished only after its southern half conquered and united with its northern half in 3000 BC. Both families featured in the photographs—one ancient and royal, the other modern and descended from slaves—are products of historic forces of displacement and hybridization.

2019

Lorraine O’Grady is a conceptual artist and cultural critic whose work over four decades has employed the diptych, or at least the diptych idea, as its primary form. While she has consistently addressed issues of diaspora, hybridity, and black female subjectivity and has emphasized the formative roles these have played in the history of modernism, O’Grady also uses the diptych’s “both/and thinking” to frame her themes as symptoms of a larger