# Looking with Nona Faustine

## Portraiture, Performance, and Possession

*Ariel Nereson*



It is an unseasonably warm Saturday morning in mid-March in New York City, and I am standing on the land of Seneca Village in Central Park, on the Upper West Side between 82nd and 86th Streets.[1] There are children, dogs, runners, bicyclists, riders on horseback, and tourists everywhere. Seneca Village is the historic home of a free Black American community, many of whom owned property there, between 1825 and 1857, when the city activated eminent domain to begin constructing Central Park and dismantled the settlement. Archaeological excavations began in 2011 and have affirmed the vibrant life of Seneca Village's residents, including their activities of worship, horticulture and farming, animal husbandry, education, and homemaking.[2] I climb to the top of one of Seneca Village's rock

1. My thanks to the University at Buffalo Humanities Institute and Office of the Vice President for Research and Economic Development Publication Support Grant for funds to support the inclusion of color images in this essay.

2. The origins of the name Seneca Village are unclear, and may come from whites' derogation of the area's residents by "refer[ring] to the Native American Seneca people and [...] intended as a slur." Or, freed people chose the name, either/both in reference to the abolitionist activity of Seneca Falls, NY, or to the use of Lucius Annaeus Seneca's antislavery


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outcroppings, formed of Manhattan schist five hundred million years ago. As I look around, spring has barely made itself known, and the land is mostly mud and scrabbly grass, bisected by concrete pathways. Looking down, the surface of the rock has many stories to tell from its suboceanic life millions of years ago, from its life as a physical boundary for the Seneca Village community, and from earlier today, when a child seized some sidewalk chalk to add their name to its mineral record. As I see all of this, I am looking with Nona Faustine (1977–2025).[3]

Brooklyn-based visual artist Nona Faustine's *White Shoes* series (2013–2021) stages and documents her reparative practice of taking self-portraits in sites around New York City where enslaved Africans lived, died, and are buried. Faustine's self-portrait series serves both as photography and performance documentation. In Faustine's speculative work the artist imagines a liberated present and future for Black femme subjects via engagement with the historical past. I proceed from this both/and orientation toward Faustine's work—both portraiture and performance documentation—and think with the differential temporalities of both forms. Crucial differences emerge between framing Faustine's self-portraits as radical re-presentations of Black womanhood and as documents of a practice of freedom. These frames aren't necessarily oppositional, but there is friction, even incommensurability, between them.

I situate Faustine's work (both process and product) within discourses of representations of the Black femme body, Black and Indigenous feminisms, and Black women's portraiture. These analyses are all informed by Dorinne Kondo's pathbreaking assertion that, for minoritized subjects, we can understand "artistic production as *reparative creativity*" (2018:32). Reparative, in Kondo's work and in this article, does not indicate legal reparations but rather extra-legal practices, in this case in the domain of the creative arts, that "navigate through violence, devastation, shattering, to work toward integration" (33). While Kondo's work relocates psychological theories of the reparative into the material dynamics of art-making, I also see her use of "reparative" as aligned with Saidiya Hartman's foundational theory of redress. For Hartman, redress "is a way of making and doing directed toward the release of the captive, the reconstitution of severed natality, and the remembrance of breach" ([1997] 2022:130). Thus, I use "reparative" and "redressive" practice somewhat interchangeably rather than in accordance with a more formal delineation between redress and

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text *Morals* by Black abolitionists ("Searching for Seneca Village" welcome sign, Central Park, New York City, 16 March 2024). For overview and analysis of the historic Seneca Village, see Alexander (2008). For histories of enslaved Africans in New York City and environs beginning in the New Amsterdam era, see Wills Foote (2004); Howlett Hayes (2013); and Lepore (2005).

3. As I was preparing this essay for publication, Nona Faustine passed away. This article is a small gesture honoring her memory and in gratitude for her visionary body of work.

*Figure 1. (facing page) Nona Faustine,* She was a culmination of all things in heaven and earth, how many times had she been here before, Seneca Village, Central Park, NYC*, 2021. (© The Estate of Nona Faustine; courtesy of Higher Pictures)*

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repair that is found in philosophical and legal discourse.[4] In some ways, the use of both reparative and redressive indexes the both/and of Faustine's creativity and artistic practices of freedom. Faustine's photographic practice toggles between what Rinaldo Walcott has described as self-response and response to the intrusion of the white gaze, and her works demand of the viewer the capacity to hold these contrasts simultaneously—both/and (2021:12).[5]

*White Shoes* foregrounds Faustine's own corporeality, intervening in an interdisciplinary discursive space that analyzes what Kimberly Juanita Brown explains as "the tremendous burden of black subjectivity when that subjectivity is tethered to sight" (2015:1). Practices and theories of the visual, particularly of the gaze, are "lodged so profoundly in the logics of the plantation," as Tina Campt writes, that Black visual artists enter a field saturated with racialized ideas about embodiment even when they themselves are not on display (2021:23).[6] These effects are multiplied in the self-portrait work of Faustine and others (such as Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson) who choose to not only practice photography as Black artists but take themselves as the subject of their work. Because of the historical referents to Northern enslavement that Faustine deliberately activates, *White Shoes* contributes to complex discussions about the stakes of Black self-portraiture and also of historical slave portraiture.[7] I am interested in how the contours of these discussions might shift when the photographic practice is simultaneously analyzed as a performance practice.

I look *with* Faustine at the afterlives of slavery and speculate about liberatory futures-lived-now, in a Black feminist analytic tradition with a long history beginning with Ann duCille's call to think *with*, not only *about*, Black women (1994). Faustine's series includes 43 portraits, ranging across all five boroughs of New York City, from dense urban cityscapes to pastoral settings. They feature Faustine always in her pair of self-described "church lady" white pumps but usually otherwise naked, or occasionally draped in a shimmering gold ceremonial robe, or a white cotton petticoat and shirt, with a variety of props including a pistol, shackles, suitcases tied with an ethernet cable, a tea cup and saucer, and books.[8] As the series proceeds, Faustine moves from naked to fully clothed as her searing, thoughtful images stage encounters between herself and potent objects and sites. Certainly, there are important historiographic interventions made by *White Shoes* in terms of remaking the commemorative landscape of New York City by refusing to forget the experiences of enslaved Africans and Lenape people, as in her portraits at Seneca Village. Yet also, as Faustine has stated, "in these images, especially the early ones, I was taking back my freedom. I always said that I am not playing a slave. I am myself—a free woman in the twenty-first century. And I am exercising that freedom. That's what you see in these images" (2021b:107). Conceptualizing Faustine's series as performance documentation centers these exercises (what I am calling *practices*) of freedom. Besides

4. For an overview of both formal and experiential definitions and practices of repair and redress, see Aylwyn Walsh (2023), where she characterizes redress as "a grounded and collaborative approach that unfolds outside of formal [...] reparations, such worldmaking is a means of rehearsing possible futures" (10). See also Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's *Reconsidering Reparations* (2022).

5. For Rinaldo Walcott, "Forms of Black creativity are central to any consideration of Black freedom because [...] those forms emerge at moments when Black people are responding to themselves, unintruded upon by the white gaze" (2021:12).

6. See also Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011). Walcott argues for "glimpsing" rather than looking for Black freedom, writing that "To glimpse Black freedom requires that those of us who look for it reject the modes of looking and assessing freedom that blackness itself often refuses" (2021:2).

7. Angela Rosenthal and Agnes Lugo-Ortiz suggest in their study of slave portraiture that contemporary work speaks back to past practice: "Artists who choose to work precisely at the difficult limit of racial representation suggest ways to conceptualize the analysis of the enslaved body in portraiture" (2013:14). Faustine's work might be usefully included in the group of artists Celeste-Marie Bernier characterizes as "intent upon working imaginatively to expose the extent to which the physical and psychological traumas of an enslaved past retain an enduring stranglehold over a freed present in a contemporary era" (2014:993).

8. Pamela Sneed writes of Faustine's shoes, "paraphrasing the artist's words, they symbolize church-lady pumps and the ever-present white patriarchy, colonialism, and domination" (2024).



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*Figure 2. Display curation with exhibition labels on the right. Brooklyn Museum exhibition, 15 March 2024. (Photo by Ariel Nereson; courtesy of Nona Faustine)*

Faustine's practices of freedom as "what you see in these images," I'm equally concerned with *how* we need to see in order for this particular "what" to be visible.[9]

Faustine was one of a group of contemporary Black visual artists "whose artistic practices mobilize Black precarity as a creative force of affirmation," creating, as Campt has recently theorized, "a Black gaze that shifts the optics of 'looking at' to a politics of *looking with*, *through*, *and alongside another*" (2021:8). Looking *with* Faustine is both my aim and method. In some ways, *looking with* resembles witnessing, as in Imani Perry's formulation: "To witness me is to feel as well as to see me, to allow yourself to be moved by me toward a different self and a different relation to me, and potentially the world" (2018:217). Perry further elucidates how witnessing, or looking with, is a necessary politics for Black women's freedom because of their particular histories as, in Hortense Spillers's paradigmatic term, "flesh" (1987:67). How might Faustine's practices of freedom be registered via *looking with*, rather than simply *at*, her self-portraits? Looking with Faustine across the differential temporalities of portraiture and performance accounts for the artist's innovative treatment of histories of dispossession; intervention into past and present representational politics of Black women and enslaved women; and development of place-based ceremony that honors the intertwined histories of Black and Indigenous communities in present-day New York City. My endeavors to look with Faustine are twofold; first, as an analytic for encountering her photographs in the dominant modality of exhibition attendee, and second as a methodology wherein I visit the sites Faustine has photographed and attempt to look *with* her, to see and search for liberatory futures.

Of course, looking *at* persists as a predominant viewing practice. When I visited the Brooklyn Museum's 2024 exhibition of *White Shoes*, I observed several patron experiences of difficulty in looking *with* Faustine. A curatorial choice to place the image labels on the borders of the grids of photographs

9. We might understand practices of freedom as performative in the Austinian sense of enacting a relation, and in this sense we could add "performing" or "staging" to Campt's list of "practices of freedom—practices of thinking, plotting, envisioning, and realizing alternative forms of possibility" (2021:146).



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rather than next to their referents meant that unless patrons visually recognized Faustine's sites, they might initially miss their identification and thus historical significance. This labor was too much for some visitors; I observed two white-appearing men step back from the images and sigh as one said to the other, "if you can't put the thing [label] by the picture that's asking too much of the viewer."[10]

Looking at complicates looking with, and understanding how Faustine's portraits function as practices of freedom is similarly not straightforward work, particularly given how frequently the language of possession (as a legacy of liberal humanism) is deployed to characterize the series. For example, critics have identified "self-possession" as a dominant theme (Rodney 2021:7) and deemed Faustine's process "agential self-portraiture" (Lanay 2021:11; see also Sneed 2021:101). None of these interpretations are inaccurate, and the stakes of such self-possession and reclamation are deliberate for Faustine, who identified Delia Taylor, one of the enslaved subjects of the Joseph T. Zealy daguerreotypes commissioned by Louis Agassiz, and Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman as intended references for the series.[11] The need for theories and practices that name, untangle, disavow, and abolish dispossession is not in question here; what I am questioning is whether understanding representation and performance via a rubric of self-possession as liberatory can address in full either the complexity of Faustine's practice or the rights of people of the Global Majority to live unharmed by white supremacy. Performance's slippery relationship with possession—its seeming incapacity to be owned because it disappears—bears promise as a tool for looking with Faustine, one that reveals self-attachment, rather than self-possession, as a primary practice of freedom on display in *White Shoes*.[12]

## Portraiture and Performance

According to Faustine, her initial research question for the series was, "What does a Black person look like today in those places where Africans were once sold a century and a half ago?" (2021a:5). One of the inspirations for the series was Faustine's engagement with lower Manhattan's African Burial Ground and its 2007 monument. The earliest known cemetery for African Americans in New York state, the African Burial Ground was rediscovered in 1991 when a federal office building was to be built on its site. An archaeological survey identified eight burials and halted the construction of the building; 419 individuals were later exhumed, studied at Howard University, and reinterred. Faustine lived her whole life in New York City, repeatedly encountering "the site that you could say awakened me. I was there when they found those bodies. I was walking home one night and I passed by the area. I saw them digging and asked the security guard what was going on. He said they had found bodies" (2021b:104). Faustine incorporated archaeological and archival research into her creative process, beginning from this catalyzing moment she experienced as a resident, commuting homeward. Her engagement with archival materials is integrated with her personal experiences of site and of New York City's regimes of enclosure and surveillance, past and present.

In *White Shoes* Faustine's labor of critical fabulation takes up not only the limits of Black women's presence/absence/disappearance in archives of enslavement, but also the limits of portraiture as a representational form. One of the series' most exhibited photographs, *Over My Dead Body* (fig. 4), centers a naked Faustine, back to the camera, wearing her signature white shoes and holding shackles in her left hand as she walks up the steps of the Tweed Courthouse at 52 Chambers Street. Builders broke ground on the now-landmark structure during the Civil War, and the courthouse is sited on

10. These responses affirm Campt's argument about the urgency of a Black gaze: "It is a refusal to depoliticize the space of the gallery or to assume the art world is removed from the politics of Black fungibility. It is a refusal that forces us to do the work of reckoning—both inside the gallery and beyond it—with our own culpability in the infrastructures of anti-Black violence that pervade *every* space, regardless of whether we acknowledge it or not" (2021:190).

11. Of Taylor and Baartman, Faustine has said "they serve as my muses [...] They make me ask questions about how their lives relate to my life, and how I see myself as a black woman in the art and photography world" (in Ford 2015). Baartman is also explicitly referenced in the first photograph of the *White Shoes* series, *Venus of Vlacke Bos* (2012).

12. See Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) for an early and influential articulation of this concept of performance in performance studies, particularly chapter 7, "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction."



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*Figure 3. Nona Faustine,* Protection, African Burial Ground Monument, NYC*, 2021. (© The Estate of Nona Faustine; courtesy of Higher Pictures)*

what was in colonial times a carceral space as well as part of the African burial ground running below what is now Lower Manhattan. Faustine's photographs at the Tweed Courthouse activate associations of enslavement with carcerality and the failures of the US American "justice" system, with *Over My Dead Body* serving as one of the series' most explicit references to chattel slavery via the shackles in Faustine's hand and her naked body on display. *Over My Dead Body* demonstrates how aesthetic production engages what Hartman terms "critical fabulation": "respecting the limits of the archive while remaking it in the process: a creative historiographical praxis of having it all" (in Campt 2021:61).[13]

Thinking of *White Shoes* as performance documentation—the photographic documentation of a performance practice of freedom—holds tension and nuance for understanding the reparative potentiality of Black portraiture and the archival encounters of Black artists.[14] In *Over My Dead Body*, the landmark Tweed Courthouse façade, towering over Faustine, is both confrontational and inhospitable.[15] A detail of the photograph I didn't initially register is the evidence on the steps of rock salt; it is winter. When I visited the site in March 2024, the weather had just turned, and the steps were still covered in rock salt. I remember it crunching under my shoes, and thinking about the uneven terrain it would have provided to Faustine in her white pumps. Then, how cold it must have been. Faustine's white shoes scratch the record of the history replaying in the viewer's mind as they view *Over My Dead Body*: her naked form, the shackles in her left hand, the flesh of her back, and the courthouse's architectural signatures spin a story of enslavement and emancipation sited in the 1860s.[16]

13. Saidiya Hartman explicates the practice of critical fabulation in "Venus in Two Acts" (2008).
14. Other scholars have discussed performance in relation to Faustine's series; Ana Grujić pursues this line of thought as it relates to feminist geographies, writing "Faustine seems to ask: how does a camera turned toward one's own body become a mode of performance that crosses the limit of physical movement and the limit of discourse?" (2019:147).
15. The Tweed Courthouse today houses the New York City Department of Education, though on the day I visited entry was barred for an unstated reason when I attempted to pass through the security turnstile.
16. Architect John Kellum broke ground on the Tweed Courthouse in 1861. The building is part of the City Hall Park complex, and during the Courthouse's construction both Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant laid in state at City Hall and were visited by thousands of New Yorkers.



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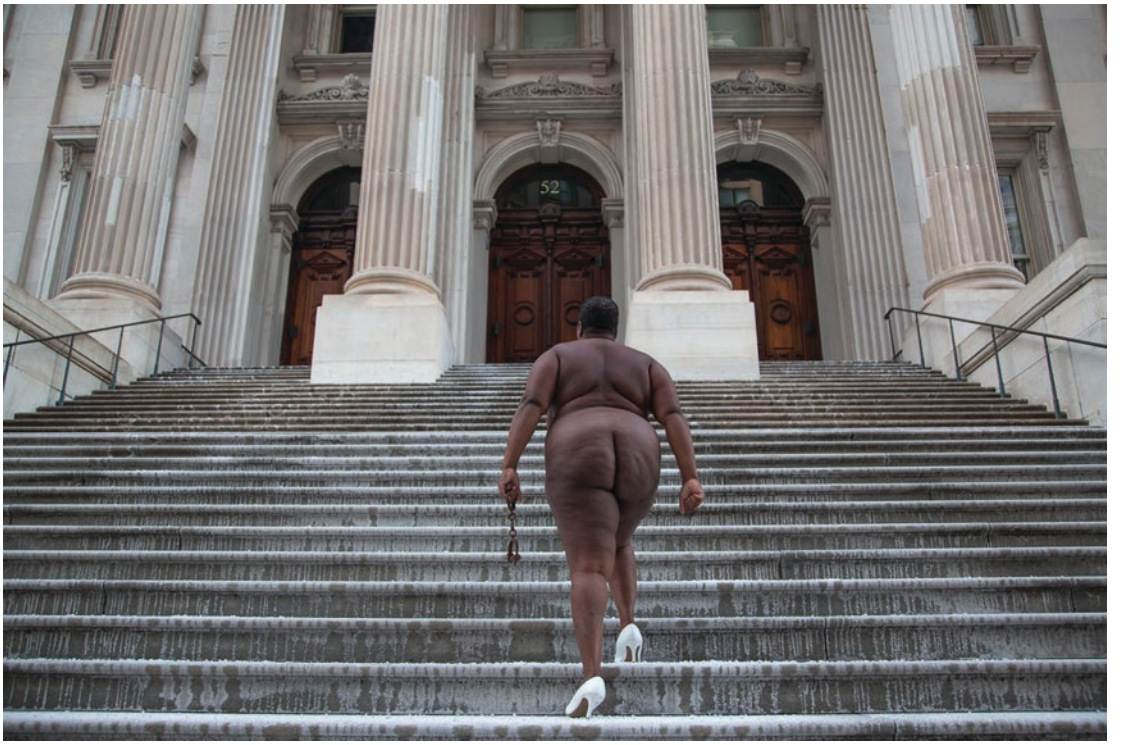


*Figure 4. Nona Faustine,* Over My Dead Body, Tweed Courthouse, NYC*, 2021. (© The Estate of Nona Faustine; courtesy of Higher Pictures)*

In their study of slave portraiture, Angela Rosenthal and Agnes Lugo-Ortiz continually confront the historical reality that "The period marked by an expanding trade in human bodies coincided with the emergence of portraiture as a major field of representation in Western art" (2013:7). While diverse technologies of capture have been utilized in different historical periods from the instantiation of the transatlantic slave trade (from sketches to photographs, for example), the functions of portraiture have largely remained consistent with Nicole Fleetwood's observation that "Portraits were and have been a visualization of privilege and personhood, and also of property" (2020:122). Of course, a rich counter-archive of practice exists such that Black people renegotiate the terms of their appearance in portrait form, from Celeste-Marie Bernier's documentation of Frederick Douglass's manipulation of "the signifying possibilities of his own physiognomy" (2015:323) to Richard Powell's analysis of "cutting a figure," a process available to both aesthetic and vernacular portrait sitters, and consequently "the *displaying* of the body [...] accentuates the sitter's social, aesthetic, or historic worth" (2008:20). While *White Shoes* is emphatically *not* a series of slave portraits, it is a series of portraits set in sites of slavery that activate dense associative networks of place, time, identity, corporeality, and history.[17]

Photography as an apparatus of capture furthers regimes of visuality invested in what Brown has recently described as "the murderous application of a look" (2024:106). Indeed, this was part of my experience at the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition of *White Shoes*. Upon entering, visitors encounter framing signage that reads: "This exhibition discusses the histories of transatlantic enslavement and the ways in which its violence affected and continues to affect Black and Indigenous people and life in New York. Please take care as you move through this space (and beyond)." Part content warning,

17. Cheryl Finley writes about visual media that take up slavery's archival traces, theorizing them as generating mnemonic aesthetics: "a ritualized practice of remembering and recovery, to describe work by contemporary artists whose practices mine the archives to highlight the relationship of the present moment to past histories of slavery and colonialism" (2023:149). For more on Black artists' responses to historic sites of enslavement, see Tillet (2012).



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part conduct advisement, the posted sign did little to discourage the white-appearing young woman in front of me from standing in front of *Over My Dead Body*, giving a thumbs up, and taking a selfie. In Shawn Michelle Smith's analysis of Black photographic practice that takes historical events as its subject, photography "expos[es] the openness of the present to the past," revealing continuities of white supremacy as it offers possible Black liberation (2020:5). Photography's temporality, as Smith notes, is complicated by the photograph's indexicality, its ability to serve as representation and evidence. Reading Black self-portraiture as liberatory practice, Smith nevertheless concedes that "[a]lthough photography challenges the conception of duration, the photograph itself endures," inviting readings of history, identity, and representation that aim at fixity, empiricism, and monumentality (8).[18]

In contrast, the language of performance appears frequently to characterize the liberatory work of Black portrait sitters and artists. Beginning with James Smalls's conceptualization of self-portraiture as an "act" that for Black American artists is "a viable means of psychic negotiation, adjustment, and intervention" (2001:47), descriptions of Black portraiture regularly incorporate theatrical language like self-staging, stage management, and performative stagings.[19] Powell's theory of cutting a figure depends on a definition of "to cut" that includes "to perform" as connected to a sense of individual agency (2008:7, 20). Jessica Lanay's analysis of Faustine's work emphasizes that in each site depicted in the series, "Within Faustine are her ancestors who come forward and participate with her *in an act*" of reclamation (2021:12; emphasis added), while Pamela Sneed characterizes Faustine as both photographer and "performance artist" (2024). Faustine's contemporary, Peter Brathwaite, describes his self-portrait practice as performance: "They capture a breath, or a beat, in the action of stepping into these historic paintings. To me, they are living operatic vignettes" (2023:10). In her analysis of Brathwaite's pandemic series, Cheryl Finley writes that for some artists, "the role of performance as an element of (Black) portraiture cannot be emphasized enough" (2023:151). I assemble this chorus here to establish how easily the language of performance is integrated into both scholarly and artistic explanations of Black portraiture.

This language of performance often connects to liberation via an active agency otherwise inaccessible to minoritarian subjects, perhaps most influentially through the work of José Esteban Muñoz, who saw that performance can offer "the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency" (1999:1). This is in contrast to the operations of dominant modes of photography and their impact on Black people as described in Brown's recent analysis, where the agency an individual might experience in photography is subsumed by "an interlacing of possession and disregard, the permissive inculcation of ocular violence" (2024:xxx). In *White Shoes*, the interlacing of possession and disregard imposed upon Black women in the public sphere is intensified by Faustine's activation of sites of enslavement, doubling the fraught dynamics of the possessive subject/possessed object through the simultaneity of her Black femme body in the present and past. The alleged stability of subject/object position within liberal humanist ideals of individuality depends, as many scholars have asserted, on the violent, continual suppression of Black bodily sovereignty. Reading Black portraiture for glimpses of Black self-possession and resistance to objecthood is meaningful work, and also insufficient to elucidate freedom practices, those complex experiences of what Campt has theorized as "living the future they want to see, now" (2017:59).

What pasts, presents, and futures haunt Faustine's *Over My Dead Body*? To be sure, Faustine's reparative work in the present is an intimate response to histories of objecthood and dispossession enacted through the transatlantic slave trade that we might frame through Fred Moten's claim, extending the work of Hartman and Spillers, that "the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist" (2003:1). Yet Moten revisits this influential claim, rejecting

18. Faustine herself acknowledges this power of the photograph, stating "I believe that part of making self-portraits is to say that you exist, that you are here, that you have something to say. I think that is the part of the series that is for me, the part that says 'I was here,' even after I'm gone. Hopefully these pictures will live on in some form" (in Lanay 2021:107).

19. See for example Bernier (2015:333, 347, and 344). Smalls characterizes the goal of Black self-portraiture as "free agency and recognition by the viewer of that agency" (2001:62).



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*Figure 5. Historic marker outside the Tweed Courthouse, 16 March 2024. (Photo by Ariel Nereson)*

the identity-based enclosure implied by versions of "Blackness is *x*," like the one quoted above that opens his book *In the Break*. More recently, Moten writes "I suffered, and continue to suffer, over the first sentence [...] it was meant to be second [...] the first sentence was supposed to be: 'Performance is the resistance of the object'" (2017:vii).[20] Moten's continuing inquiry into the conditions of living and the affective and relational dimensions of experience that generate and undergird Black freedom touches upon performance's liberatory potential as a site where disappearance, disguise, ephemerality, excess, and doubled subjectivity operate. Often positioned as oppositional to the archive (particularly in work inspired by Diana Taylor's *Archive and Repertoire* [2003]), performance is *also* that which *re*appears, with particular stakes for minoritized subjects.

*Over My Dead Body* is both Faustine's demarcation of the Tweed Courthouse's past as an architecture of confinement and a record of her experience in the present moment of the photo shoot. These past and present collisions produce an abundance, rather than a lack, and trouble both the alleged ephemerality of performance and the absence of Black enslaved women in the archive. Rebecca Schneider, referencing Peggy Phelan, notes that the notion of performance as unarchivable because it disappears is a notion dependent upon an understanding of the identity and function of "the archive" that is based in liberal humanism and its violent exclusions. We could instead, she proposes, approach performance "less as a medium which 'becomes itself through disappearance,' than as a medium in which disappearance repeatedly gains its materiality" (2001:115). When conceived of as performance documentation, *White Shoes*, I suggest, does just that: dispossessed people and their

20. Moten continues to explain that much of his writing after *In the Break* is an attempt to understand why he got the first sentence wrong: "to understand the relationship between the devotional practice that is given in recitation of the sentence 'blackness is *x*' and the analytic practice that moves to place under an eradicable erasure the terms *performance* and *object*" (2017:vii–viii).



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lives repeatedly gain materiality in Faustine's practice. *White Shoes* is also a performance-based example of what Hershini Bhana Young has theorized as "reading the archive performatively": "Instead of the search for an object that leads to a subject, the scholar's search should be for a subject effect: a ghostly afterlife or a space of absence that is not empty but filled" (2017:3). Schneider's and Young's arguments are historiographical while Faustine's is aesthetic, but all three are linked to a refusal of the terms of engagement set by liberal humanism. Faustine intervenes by filling the ghostly afterlives of these sites both materially through her own form and energetically or affectively through the relations of interdependent mutuality that support the photo shoot itself. While Faustine framed and set up the shot, it is her sister Channon Simmons who pressed the shutter for each image in *White Shoes* while simultaneously keeping a watchful eye on other people circulating in the various sites of the series. Considering *White Shoes* as performance documentation brings Simmons's labor (as support, as assistant, as stage manager) into view and enlarges our sense of the audiences that Faustine's work might activate to include people on the street.

Faustine recounts of her posing: "I tried to connect to those spirits, the essence of a time and place that no longer exist except on old maps of New York City, but despite my efforts I could not feel it. What I did feel was the energy of New York, and what it felt like to be a free woman of some degree, naked in the world, on display in my city" (2021a:5). Thus, when I characterize *White Shoes* as performance documentation of a practice of freedom, I do not intend to say that the photographs document Faustine's performance of enslaved women, though part of what the series does is represent Black womanhood (in the resistant mode of Moten's "Blackness is *x*"). Rather, in its function as performance documentation the series documents Faustine's practices of freedom "of some degree" found in being "on display in my city," a practice facilitated by deep connection to self and others rather than defined through alienation from the past.

## Flesh, Agency, and Possession

Faustine's pair of portraits taken in front of the Lefferts Historic House in Prospect Park, Brooklyn (fig. 6), foreground the crisis of agency—particularly of bodily, sexual, and reproductive sovereignty—that enslavement created and recreates for Black women.[21] While beautifully describing and analyzing the images of Black women found in contemporary works, Campt nonetheless admits, "Truth be told, a silent portrait of any Black woman is categorically unbearable [...as] an invitation to impose a narrative we have neither authored nor authorized" (2021:173). The hypervisibility of Black women implemented through routine reproductive terror and surveillance ensures the ubiquitous silencing of Black women's self-authored representation. Or, as Jasmine Johnson puts it, "How might being so regularly beheld actually obscure being seen?" (2020:159). Faustine's portraits at Lefferts House play with this hypervisibility as they participate in an embrace of the "fleshiness" of Black women's experience and existence beyond liberal humanist understandings of agency and possession.

The Lefferts House was built in part by enslaved laborers in 1783 in Flatbush, Brooklyn, on grounds that included a 250-acre farm on lands stolen by European settlers from the Lenape almost a century-and-a-half earlier. From 1783 until New York State's abolition of slavery in 1827, at least 25 enslaved people lived and worked at Lefferts House. Isabel, the woman referenced in the title of Faustine's second portrait, was listed on the census of 1755 as a member of Pieter Lefferts's household along with two other people he enslaved, Ben and Dyne. Isabella, occasionally confused with Isabel, was born into slavery in 1807 at the Lefferts House, and would go on to marry Cornelius Peterson after the abolition of slavery in New York. Both continued to work for the Lefferts family as property-owning neighbors of the Lefferts farm. The pair had seven children.[22] The Lefferts

21. In her keyword entry on "Agency," Hershini Bhana Young writes that Black women's experiences in enslavement "pose a crisis to current vocabularies of agency" (2021:17).

22. Much of this information appears in the pamphlet "Africans Enslaved at Lefferts Historic House, 1783–1827: A Legacy of Resistance and Resilience," distributed through the Reimagine Lefferts Initiative. Director of Museum Operations and Programs Dylan Yeats graciously gave me a copy during my visit to the temporarily closed Lefferts House historic site.



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*Figure 6. Nona Faustine,* Not Gone With The Wind, Lefferts House, Prospect Park, Brooklyn*, 2015 (top). Nona Faustine,* Isabel, Lefferts House, Brooklyn*, 2016 (bottom). Brooklyn Museum exhibition, 15 March 2024. (Photo by Ariel Nereson; courtesy of Nona Faustine)*





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Historic House recently reopened to the public following an extended closure for restoration and the implementation of the "Reimagine Lefferts" initiative, which seeks to "explor[e] the lives, resistance and resilience of the Indigenous peoples of Lenapehoking, whose unceded ancestral lands the park and house rests upon, and the Africans enslaved by the Lefferts family" (PPA n.d.). This effort to articulate the intertwined histories of dispossession on the site directly relates to Faustine's critical work in *White Shoes*.

Faustine's portraits at Lefferts House are from 2015 and 2016, when visitors to Prospect Park could walk through the house, however she herself never entered the building until its 2024 reopening. In *Not Gone With The Wind*, Faustine wears a white petticoat, and this is one of few portraits where her white shoes are not visible in the frame. Instead, the camera captures in a mid-shot the belt of four white baby shoes that encircles her waist. In *Isabel*,[23] the camera zooms out to capture the entirety of the house and Faustine standing in front of it with a cast iron pan in her left hand, the baby shoes still around her waist. Moving from one portrait to the other, the seasons change as Faustine goes from posing on a lawn of new growth to standing on mulch laid down for the winter. When I visited Lefferts House in springtime, I was allowed access to the site despite it being closed to the public and was able to see models of the different sections of the exhibition that will eventually be installed. The "Born into Enslavement" component of the exhibit tells the story of Isabella and features a cradle from the Lefferts household, possibly used for children of all parentage.[24] Faustine's costuming reflects both the specificity of reproductive labor at Lefferts House as well as the ubiquity of domestic terror experienced by enslaved women and the continuity of terror visited upon Black mothers and caregivers after enslavement. Looking with Faustine, the both/and of her practice emerges from these portraits: both radical re-presentation of Black enslaved women and performance of practices of freedom.

Faustine's portraits at Lefferts House reference a body of historic slave portraiture that primarily features men, though Black women reliably appear as caregivers, maids, cooks, and in other domestic roles, secondarily to the "actual" portrait sitter (their enslaver). Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz write that slave portraiture seems a contradiction in terms given that portraiture is "a genre founded in Western modernity on the power to evoke and revoke subjectivity by producing the visual fiction of an individualized and autonomous self" (2013:4). In Black feminist theory, much of the unmasking and critique of the "fiction of an individualized and autonomous self" has happened through Hortense Spillers's concept of "flesh," defined by Samantha Pinto as "what is left after the obliteration of what we think we know to be human and [what] exposes the fictions of rights and their mythic tenets of personhood" (2020:22).[25] In thinking about alternatives to possession as a logic of the person/self in relation to the body, others, and land, Marquis Bey encourages us to question the language of the "Black body," instead embracing Spillers's term as one that might be productively mobilized to generate liberation (2019).[26] While flesh is not a term that Faustine used to describe her work, *White Shoes* does enact otherwise-modes of embodiment dependent on Black femme networks of relation,

23. This image has been labeled both as *Isabel* and *Isabelle*, but Faustine's note indicates that it is a reference to the enslaved Isabel of Pieter Lefferts's 1755 household, who is distinct from the Isabelle born into slavery at the Lefferts House in 1806. The confusion itself is revealing of the problems of record-keeping and reproductive labor in the Lefferts household.
24. As of my return to Lefferts House in November 2024, this component of the exhibition had yet to be installed.
25. Hartman further exposes legal personhood as retrenching "the object status and absolute subjugation of the enslaved as chattel, [and] reinscribes it in the terms of personhood" ([1997] 2022:62).
26. For Bey, the turn to flesh rather than body is essential "to conceptualize an alternative and otherwise mode of living grounded in a non-exclusionary sociality that escapes captive and captivating logics of subjectivity" (2019:56). For additional thinking with Spillers, see Johnson (2020) and C. Riley Snorton (2017), among many others. "Flesh" also appears in Richard Powell's *Cutting a Figure*, in his claim that the Black portrait sitter's figure "transverses the distance between objectification and subjecthood, and becomes flesh" (2008:21). Works by Uri McMillan (*Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, 2015) and Tavia Nyong'o (*Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*, 2018) also take up the distance between objectification and subjecthood for Black embodied practice.



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fugitively produced in the shadow of the Enlightenment logics and regimes of ungendering that prompt Spillers's theory.

The title, *Not Gone With The Wind*, serves several functions here, among them correcting assumptions about where plantation slavery took place in the US; reasserting the materiality and presence of Black enslaved women; and indicating the ongoing violence of stereotypes like "Mammy." The portrait also documents Faustine's experience of self-attachment to her body as flesh, in the generative sense described by Bey. The complexity of Faustine's practice, which triangulates land, self, and others as co-constitutive meaning-makers, extends the relational possibilities of flesh to offer alternatives to possession, or ownership, for Black women's relations to themselves, other people, and the natural world. Recent Black feminist conceptualizations of love as a politics (such as Jennifer Nash [2020] extending the work of bell hooks) are deeply concerned with the kinds of relation that support bodily sovereignty as a component of freedom, as Walcott has recently offered: "The reclaiming of the flesh as a body, a body loved, is a glimpse of freedom in its kinetic form" (2021:5).[27] I bring together this line of thought from Black feminism with Indigenous feminism, extending Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's theory of attachment as an alternative to possession ([2017] 2021). This felt sense of attachment undermines hegemonic cultural views of the Black female body that deny fundamental attachments amongst living beings in order to reproduce racial capitalism. For Faustine, *White Shoes* developed a practice of self-attachment as well as a practice of solidarity with others: "This is my body. It's beautiful. I'm reclaiming that. But I'm also using it in service of my people and in solidarity with those women and men who could not say no" (2021b:105).[28] The circlet of baby shoes in this pair of portraits is a powerful representation of both the histories of non-consent and unfreedom *and* the redressive practices of chosen attachment that have encircled the experiences of Black women.

## Self-Attachment as a Practice of Freedom

Faustine's artistic practice, based in physically moving her body through New York City, resting her body on particular surfaces, or letting the weight of the frying pan in her hand be felt by the viewer, is a practice of freedom with freedom as a chosen relation and attachment to self, others, and the natural world. One of the photographs that helped me learn to look with Faustine to see her practices of freedom as attachment is her portrait at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, *Scarred Earth*.

Faustine's notes in the gallery book for the series inform the reader that "[m]ost of this land was farms tilled by enslaved laborers brought here by the Dutch. The tree is called the Caucasian Wingnut" (2021c:110). When I arrived at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden in search of the Caucasian wingnut featured in Faustine's portrait, the ticket taker gave me a pained expression as they explained that the garden comprised 52 acres of plants, many thousands of them trees. One of the garden's arborists, leaving at the end of their shift, overheard my exchange and generously circled the approximate location of the tree on the visitor map, explaining, "oh yeah, it's a pretty famous tree." This particular *Pterocarya fraxinifolia* (Caucasian wingnut) has thrived at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden since 1922, with multiple supports propping up its massive frame, spanning 60 feet tall, and very wide, with a nine-foot diameter trunk. It is surrounded by a protective barrier low to the ground. It is one of the several trees that border a section of the garden called the Oak Circle.

Sitting on one of the benches in the Oak Circle in mid-March, I hear omnipresent traffic sounds, both automotive and helicopter. The sounds of arborists sawing and pruning to get the garden in shape for spring cut through the chatter of the daycare group visiting the nearby rock garden. The

27. Walcott's formulation here relates clearly to Jasmine Johnson's argument that movement practice allows Black women to navigate the status of "flesh" (2020).

28. Faustine is referring here to "[t]wo enslaved women: Sarah Baartman, who was put on display against her will, and Delia Taylor on a plantation in South Carolina, whose daguerreotype was taken without her consent" (Brooklyn Museum 2022).



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sun is high and full and warm on my face. The Brooklyn Botanic Garden map describes the garden as an "urban sanctuary." Faustine's note to *Scarred Earth* clarifies that the public garden's current cultivated form is hardly its first. Decades as farmland worked by enslaved laborers and centuries as the lands of the Lenape, who grew the Three Sisters (corn, bean, and squash) on this site, precede the city's requisition of the acreage for public use. Faustine's artistic practice directly contributes to a growing body of research (creative and scholarly) that attests to the historic and ongoing continuities and intersections of dispossession experienced by Black and Indigenous peoples as a result of conquest.[29] The Lefferts House photographs, for example, preceded efforts by the Reimagine Lefferts program to describe the coterminous experiences of the enslaved in Brooklyn for their patrons.[30]

*White Shoes* reveals the problem with seeking possession as compensation or even repair for dispossession; namely, that this language and indeed the practices supported by it maintain personhood as possessive individualism, autonomy, and dominance, as well as reinforce racialized hierarchy. As Ashon Crawley writes: "Whiteness is a capacity for possession as the grounds for identity," and thus seeking self-possession carries the potential for reinforcing white supremacist values, particularly within current social formations (2017:6).[31] Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson claims that "the opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep, reciprocal, consensual *attachment*" ([2017] 2021:43). "Attachment," in Simpson's sense, is a useful keyword of sorts for Faustine's practices of freedom, and is aligned with solidarity and love. The resonance between Simpson's thought and the Black feminism of, for example, Campt is clear: "dispossessed people created alternative forms of kinship—bonds of affiliation and affection forged [...] through practices of intimacy, solidarity, and exigency that endure in the present" (2021:97). We could also consider Simpson and Campt together under the rubric of *liberatory feminism* proffered by Perry, wherein "the ends of liberatory feminism [...are] the creation of community that undoes domination and sustains right relation" (2018:223). The restoration of connection and undoing of alienation via practices of kinship, solidarity, and attachment are throughlines for both Black and Indigenous feminist thought and practice, and Faustine's artistic praxis.

Returning to *Scarred Earth*, Faustine lays underneath the Caucasian wingnut tree, partially shaded from the sun, which still catches the right side of her body in its light. She rests her left hand on the tree's massive trunk; one white pump has fallen off. It is very early spring in this image, and likely pretty cold for posing naked and lying on the bare ground. The root system of the Caucasian wingnut is extensive, stretching beyond 30 feet in all directions of the trunk, and far beyond the protective barrier installed by the public garden. The textures of the brown mulch, the tree's roots, its trunk, and Faustine's arm are diverse and layered, as is the relation amongst them: far from suggesting a back-to-nature timelessness of the natural world that might offer freedom or a kind of post-Enlightenment return, Faustine's choice to pose under the Caucasian wingnut instead includes the natural world as a zone of needed redress, as conscripted into the maintenance of white supremacy. The evocative name of the tree speaks to this quality, but even more so does the tree's importation and planting at the garden in 1922. It is an invasive species, kept well in check by the garden's arborists but nonetheless planted in ground that used to support thriving communities of Lenape.

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29. For example: Tiffany Lethabo King (2019); Tiya Miles ([2005] 2015); and Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2022). Bringing these fields together also accounts for a fuller picture of whiteness and its historical violences, wherein, as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon writes, "Both the theft of land enacted by settler colonialism and the strategies of racialization refined by the plantation machine are key components of a system aimed at large-scale disentanglement or uncommoning" (2019:85).

30. As Andrea C. Mosterman has recently demonstrated, "New York's enslaved population consisted of an ethnically diverse mix of men, women, and children of African *and* Native American descent" (2021:7). See Faustine's "Notes" for a repeated acknowledgment of the Lenape as an artistic practice of solidarity (2021c:111).

31. See also Cheryl Harris for her foundational theorization of the imbrication of legal personhood, racialization, and property, as in: "Possession—the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property—was defined to include only the cultural practices of whites. This definition laid the foundation for the idea that whiteness—that which whites alone possess—is valuable and is property" (1993:1721).



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*Figure 7. Nona Faustine,* Scarred Earth, Brooklyn Botanic Garden*, 2015. (© The Estate of Nona Faustine; courtesy* of *Higher Pictures)*

Nonetheless, Faustine is in relation to her body, to the tree and its root system, which supports her resting form (however uncomfortably), and to her sister Channon, behind the camera as always, via a triangulated attachment to self, land, and kin. Indeed, *White Shoes* as a series is not an autonomous set of portraits, but rather deeply interconnected with Faustine's other series, such as *Mitochondria* (2008–2024). *Mitochondria* centers on Black matrilineal kinship formations and includes *What are you prepared to do*, a portrait of Channon on the steps of the Tweed Courthouse taken during the same set of site visits that produced *Over My Dead Body*.[32]

Returning to Faustine's oft-articulated insistence that she is not playing a slave in these images helps us understand how they function as performance documentation. For Faustine, *White Shoes* celebrates "a Black female body who's given birth, who survived, who is a free woman and who is celebrating her freedom, her body, and her people in the way she wants to be celebrated and depicted [...] I am not playing a slave. I'm myself, Nona Faustine, in all of these images" (in Ellis-Gibbs 2024). In order to be fully herself, Faustine is supported by familial and chosen relations that encompass people, places, and objects. This conceptualization of "relation" is one of connection and attachment rather than alienation, embodying a relationality that rejects possessive individualism, as in Keith P. Feldman's claim that "Relationality uncovers those interconnections that liberal capitalism seeks to obscure" (2016:111). These interconnections are also, importantly, with the viewer, who has their own choices to make about their relation to *White Shoes*.

One mode of relation is looking *at*; another is looking *with*. Looking with Faustine, cultivating attachment over alienation, opens up new dimensions of what has been called agency. In further discussion of the crisis of agency inaugurated by the dispossession of enslavement, Young suggests thinking of agency as emergent, even as a "series of embodied performances" rather than something the individual can possess. Agency, for Young, "can be understood as a sensuous embodiment that connects nonnormative bodies to each other" (2021:19). Faustine's *Scarred Earth* depicts the possibility that nonnormative bodies also include nonhuman beings and organisms; that practicing "right

32. This image is available at www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2017/07/11/blogs/in-brooklyn-three-generations-in-family-photos/s/11-lens-nona-slide-PWM2.html.



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relation" through interconnection extends beyond the confines of the human.[33] Thus, when Pamela Sneed characterizes *White Shoes* as a "reclamation of agency for the Black body," we might understand that agency, after Faustine, as aligned with attachment over possession, with a relationality that rejects ownership as the principle for relation (Sneed 2024).

A methodology of looking *with* Faustine reveals the limitations of easy equivalences of performance with the live, the ephemeral, the liberatory, and photography with the document, the durable, and the fixed by allowing Faustine's critical fabulation and reparative creativity, her practice of both/and, to come into view. In larger discourses about how communities might heal and repair in the afterlives of dispossession, such as recent energetic discussion and activism about the removal of monuments, considering Faustine's work brings forward nuance, connection, and attentive listening to artists. In the case of figural representation of the past—such as monuments of military leaders as well as Faustine's own figure throughout *White Shoes*—tactics of ephemerality, embodiment, and mobility may counter some of the most damaging aspects of monumentality in memorialization. This consideration also invites theorizing memorial *practices* (rather than monumental *objects*) and their affordances for liberatory historical projects, particularly regarding disinvestments from possession as a logic of relating to the past and imagining the future.[34] Looking with Faustine, we glimpse her looking, too—looking with the Caucasian wingnut, with the circlet of baby shoes, with the rock salt on the steps of the courthouse, with the hot surface of Manhattan schist. If, as Smith writes after Walter Benjamin, "futures reside in photographs, waiting for the moment in which they can be recognized" (2020:10–11), looking with Faustine helps us recognize these futures as practices of freedom, lived now.

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33. Recognizing the confines of the term human, Walcott has proposed "Black life-forms" as a different language to describe Black experience: "I use the term *Black life-forms* because Euro-American definitions and practices of the human offer Black life no conceptual or actual space within the terrain of the human" (2021:9). Sharon P. Holland's *an other: a black feminist consideration of animal life* (2023) also takes an expansive approach to understanding Black life.

34. See Nereson (2022) for more on the claim that performance practices counter the possible violence of the monumental form.




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