2020

How Many Licks

Ashley Goodwin
Virginia Commonwealth University

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HOW MANY LICKS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Master of Fine Art
Photography + Film
Virginia Commonwealth University
School of the Arts
2020

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Abstract

HOW MANY LICKS

By Ashley Goodwin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020.

Major Director
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Arts communities are currently reevaluating and restructuring power dynamics within their systems to accommodate a broader range of experience and subjectivity. However, the forces of control are still largely dictated by a broader patriarchal culture. This complicated, tangled dynamic is the focus of my research. Female artists who make work about men or about patriarchy more generally, are consistently subjected to its influence as the dominant cultural experience—the invisible “truth” that everything either is, or acts in reaction to its position. In reality, patriarchy is no longer gender specific. I will be addressing my relationship to it as well as my role within it. I aim to talk about my own female subjectivity; the psychological reality of living within this long-standing societal structure. This project, by examining those things generally left unseen in the creation of artworks, will shed light on the insidious ways we go about disguising domination through language and behaviors.
Introduction

In this paper, I will examine the ways in which landscape shapes identity and how I bargain for power within these structures. I use the term “landscape” broadly, referring to both literal land or geographic location, as well as psychological landscapes that are shaped by experience and perception. How Many Licks reflects on how my photographic process has revealed internal preoccupations with desire and control while contending with the cultural scenery of patriarchy and masculinity. My attempts to unravel and comprehend these complex relationships are realized through my photographs.

Rural Nebraska plays a central role in understanding my place. The prairie, the sandhills and vastness of space, are easily imagined as an idyllic, pastoral fantasy; God's country. How do we, let's just say Nebraskans, benefit from this romanticization? A simple life, “The Good Life,”¹ valuing hard work, a love of God and country — this may sound fairly innocuous. As stewards of the land, we put our hands in the dirt and pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Tending our fields keeps us close to creation.

Landscape codes language. According to art historian W.J.T. Michell in Landscape and Power,

These semiotic features of landscape, and the historical narratives they generate, are tailor-made for the discourse of imperialism, which conceives itself precisely (and simultaneously) as an expansion of landscape understood as an inevitable,

¹ “The Good Life” is Nebraska's state slogan, although the official motto is “Equality before the law.”
progressive development in history, an expansion of "culture" and "civilization" into a "natural" space in a progress that is itself narrated as "natural."²

A lifestyle that has been simplified in contrast to the presumed conflicts of more populous urban areas, conceals racism, homophobia and misogyny. Likewise, simplicity, if read as frugality due to economic distress may not be a choice at all. While I do not wish to create an oversimplification of an entire region, I believe I can attest to some of its ills. I agree with Mitchell that “landscape” is active. It is “a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.”³

Psychologically, my family fit right in, in Nebraska. My dad was born in the same small town he would later die in. My upbringing was steeped in white, Christian, conservative values. We were “traditional” by these measures. My mom stayed home until I was sixteen, and the rules were different for my brother and I. My dad and his cousins owned a piece of property along the North Platte River which housed the “Cottonwoods Lodge,” their hunting cabin, which belonged to their fathers before them. Girls were generally not allowed, but every once and a while a sanctioned “wives and daughters” day would present itself. Littered with vintage porn, cardboard women, and sexist jokes, the hunting cabin represents my earliest understanding of gendered spaces. Despite the blatant parody of toxic masculinity (which I had yet to understand), I begged to go, to be a part of it. Playing dress-up and shopping were never really me, I was much more interested in the secret lives of men. I began constructing myself in their image.

Like the boys, however, I was to go to college. Advanced education is a big part of the value system I grew up with—I could be or do anything if I just worked hard

enough; play my part in American folklore. I directed my supposedly unique midwestern work ethic at art school. It was both financially and pragmatically possible for me. When I entered the unpaid workforce common to studio arts grads (internships, volunteer work and the like), while earning income in kitchens and cleaning houses, I became very cynical over time. I had done the hard work and felt entitled to my just reward. Surely this bore no resemblance to my own criticism of my dad's privilege. I never doubted that he worked hard in law school, but the race is not as long if you have a head start. I had failed to see my own. “Privilege saturates, privilege structures.” My cynicism had become an internal landscape, and a problematic one.

1. Ash Goodwin, *Dad at the Cabin, Bridgeport, Nebraska*, 2017

Photography is the vehicle for this psychological exploration. I demand answers from my work. My anxiety and preoccupations conceal subconscious truths, and through the process of making, these truths move to the forefront and are revealed in images. To conceive of learning in this way is indeed a luxury.

Chapter 1: Landscape As Language As Power

2. Carleton Watkins, Sentinel Rock, View up Yosemite Valley, 1865-1866

The history of landscape photography in North America between 1860 and 1880 had intrinsic ties to the destruction of indigenous land in service to capitalist development. Carlton Watkins, William Henry Jackson, Edweard Muybridge, among others were routinely employed by mining, lumber or railroad industry titans. Art historian Joel Snyder says of Watkins, “... like most American businessmen of his time, [he] was devoted to the idea of progress—understood in terms of ownership and
industrial development of the land and its resources.” Emboldened by Manifest Destiny, these photographers set out to represent an American Eden, encouraging further colonization. For these future immigrants, Snyder suggests a double salvation, “…a return to unspoiled innocence and an opportunity to profit from the violation of that innocence.”


The Wilderness Act of 1964 set out, perhaps a day late and a dollar short, to protect these areas that, by no small miracle, were still “innocent.” The Act states “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” In 2017


7 The text of the Wilderness Act of 1964 can be found at the National Park Service website: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/wilderness/law-and-policy.htm.
The Trump administration scaled down protected national monuments in Utah—a modern day trammeling, proving that the concept of Manifest Destiny and the myth of the American Dream are still alive and well. Photographer David Benjamin Sherry photographed these sites in 2019 in his project American Monuments. Using his signature saturated colors as well as analog techniques akin to the frontier photographers of the past, Sherry offers a, ‘...’queer revision’ of the rugged and macho legacy of western landscape photography.”

It bears mentioning that, of course, all of these photographers of the past were white men. In addition to their contribution to the destruction of land and indigenous lives, they also took ownership of the sublime within photography (a lesser offense, to be sure). In Edmund Burke’s A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, he describes power, vastness and infinity among the sublime's core tenets. These terms could easily be applied to many of those photographs, as well as the imaginations of those shooting them. Burke says, “But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so.”

My aim is to challenge the necessity of the sublime in landscape photography. Scale and grandeur are indeed enticing, but I would like to address the behind-the-scenes reality of creating these types of images. In many cases, a very large, often heavy camera is being used. Sherry shoots an 8-by-10-inch film camera and Watkins shot whopping 20-by-24-inch negatives, for example. In the 1860’s Timothy O'Sullivan


10 Burke, 1958, 1987, p. 73.
travelled with a portable darkroom in a horse-drawn wagon, contemporarily David Emitt Adams has the same in his truck. Creating negatives and images at this scale is a practical and financial hindrance for most. Life is not fair, and I understand that. What I would like to poke fun at is the perceived masculinity inherent to these practices. Scale, referring to large-scale artworks, was historically the purview of men—Richard Serra, Jackson Pollock, Donald Judd, Claes Oldenburg, etc. I realize this is no longer the case, and I know plenty of women who shoot with large-format cameras, but one needs only to Google Chris McCaw to understand what I'm driving at. In a patriarchal culture that aims to keep women both literally and figuratively small, while simultaneously extolling the virtues of expansion and economic imperialism, I don't find the observation without merit. To quote Nine Inch Nails, “I am a big man, yes I am, and I've got a big gun. Got me a big ole dick and I, I like to have fun.”

4. Chris McCaw and his large-format camera

Within my own practice, I make small landscapes, shot digitally, generally printed to 3-by-5 or 4-by-6-inches. There are hundreds of them, all shot with notable urgency,

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which is to say they aren't particularly formally considered. I consider them to be a small protest against all that defines the art historical sublime. I rarely show them and do not yet know what to do with them. Looking at the photo-grids of Penelope Umbrico or Roni Horn, I imagine the multiplicity of images to be a metaphor for the importance of the multiplicity of perspectives; multiple subjectivities. Umbrico appropriates similar-looking found images to represent a literal view of thousands of perspectives. Dennis Oppenheim's piece *Ground Gel* looks like slides under a microscope, but upon closer examination is the artist swinging his daughter in circles. It is in this multiplicity that fundamental understandings can be transformed.

5. Ash Goodwin, *Untitled Landscape*, 2019

6. Penelope Umbrico, *5,377,183 Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* (Partial), 2009
Outside of the art world, perhaps more potently, are countless examples of men taking up physical and intellectual space at the expense of all else. The climate change “debate” has become increasingly feminized by coding language averse to the current model of Manifest Destiny. Researchers at Sweden's Chalmers University of Technology are studying the connection between climate-deniers and the anti-feminist far-right. Researcher Martin Hultman describes “industrial breadwinner masculinity” as a package of values of behaviors: “They see the world as separated between humans and nature. …economic growth is more important than the environment.” Climate science has thus become feminized or viewed “as oppositional to the assumed entitlements of masculine primacy…” Strangely, a formerly nonpartisan issue has become a matter of identity, part of a psychological system of overlapping values. Predictably though, as gender equality becomes increasingly realized, men feel threatened and dig their heels in—a cultural backlash was a foregone conclusion.

As someone who routinely takes photographs in nature, I try to be mindful of the locations where I am shooting and the costs associated with that access. All of the land I use is owned, largely by state and national parks associations. It is public, regulated, fundamentally unnatural in many ways, and potentially up for grabs if a corporate entity were to show interest. I shoot along the James River a lot and, for example, over the last five years Dominion Energy was able to preemptively build a 400 million dollar transmission line without the necessary environmental impact statement. The question


13 Martin Gelin, 2019.

now is whether or not to punish them by making them remove the line and further disrupt the habitat of the James, to leave it unused after having already spent all that money, or to allow them access as the damage has already been done. This is the mindset of a company believing it has an entitlement to natural resources: asking for forgiveness rather than permission.

In addition to the river, I frequently make trips to the ocean. Make no mistake, I still seek to encounter the vast and infinite sublime. Like my photography forefathers before me, I want to experience this transcendence. I can only speak for myself, but it seems that life has become very unnatural, under constant pressure to perform for a culture we may or may not agree with, and often feel hopeless to change. All the anxiety, hand-wringing, head-banging and fear are utterly consuming. Of course I want to feel the sun on my skin or the childlike joy of splashing water in a friends' face, if only briefly because there is another truth right around the corner. Dictators are murdering people for access to trade routes, people are dying swimming for asylum across the Rio Grande, there isn't even clean drinking water across the U.S. The politics of water and ownership are not remotely transcendental. My desire to have a magical little moment with a wave now feels very trivial.

bell hooks uses the phrase “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” "I wanted to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality..."15 The history of territorial photography and the endurance of its motivations relies, in part, on a thinly veiled language of control. Understanding this strategy is essential to parsing out this complicated history.

Sandra Phillips reminds us that in the era of Manifest Destiny,

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Attitudes toward the West were expressed in the language of control: We were to “conquer” nature, or as [William] Gilpin put it, “subdue” its geography. Nature was in need of “taming”; she was “wild,” “virgin,” and often “dark”; she needed to be “penetrated” and “controlled.” John L. O’Sullivan, who first used the term *Manifest Destiny* in 1845 did so in terms of an almost inevitable sexual claim: “... [it] is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent,” he said. Likewise, the eloquent geologist Clarence King wanted to use his scientific learning to “propel and guide the great plowshare of science on through the virgin sod of the unknown.”

In sorting through the features of landscape, frontier photography, industrialization and climate science, coded language is apparent across the board. These propagandizing techniques are deftly used to disguise white supremacy, capitalist destruction and misogyny.

7. Ash Goodwin, *Untitled (Small splash)*, 2019

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Chapter 2: Hidden Subjectivities

In an effort to make more clear the function of landscape within my work, I began inserting straight, white men into my pictures. My goal was to adopt the predatory role as it operates within my medium of photography as well as our historical knowledge of the gaze. I consider the difficulty of achieving a female subjectivity in this role by examining the ways contemporary art and artistic intention are manipulated by a dominant patriarchal culture.

The assumed power of photography dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. Most people at the time accepted the absolute material accuracy of these images. The notion of truth in photography still lingers despite a general understanding of artistic intent and context manipulation. Take an example common in many family homes—a salon-style installation of photographed family memories and achievements. A graduation, a wedding, grandma in her “prime,” the last fun childhood birthday party. It is possible to accept this collective narrative as truth, but it is at best only a partial truth. I think it is useful to reorient what constitutes photographic truth (as well as manipulation or deceit) away from the still image and toward the photographic event. Ariella Azoulay in The Civil Contract of Photography states, “Photography is an apparatus of power that cannot be reduced to any of its components: a camera, a photographer, a photographed environment, object, person, or spectator. ‘Photography’ is a term that designates an ensemble of diverse actions that contain the production, distribution,

exchange, and consumption of the photographic image.”18 Within this definition she has outlined several opportunities for the usurping of power or predatory action both within and without the still image.

The dissection of the photographic event into its various components is similar to the deconstruction of the gaze and the many ways in which it can function. In Margaret Olin's essay, “Gaze” she reflects on the art historical use of the term—it's concern with pleasure and knowledge, often in service to issues of power, manipulation and desire. She says, “A typical strategy of art theory is to unmask gazing as something like staring, the publicly sanctioned actions of a peeping Tom.”19 The negative connotations associated with staring are useful when answering critical questions like, “Why is this author asking this viewer to stare at this person, this place or this object?” In “The Persistence of Vision,” Donna Haraway describes this specific gaze, akin to staring, as that which “mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation.”20 The unmarked categories in this context are white and male. Marked identities are situated around, and thus only understood in relationship to the unmarked.

Most routinely maligned is the ubiquitous male gaze and its expressions of power over or desire for women, generally. The active/passive heterosexual division of labor within narrative is described by Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasures in Narrative Cinema.” She describes the man's role as active, controlling the story's movement and outcome, while the female role is limited to the scopophilic gaze of men. According to these ruling


ideological principles, “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification.” These essays by Haraway and Mulvey were originally published in 1986 and 1975 respectively. The demand for greater representation of marginalized peoples in art and on screen has, to some small degree, been addressed. What is important to emphasize, however, is that this representation has occurred more readily in “softer” areas of culture like the arts. Allan deSouza points out in How Art Can Be Thought, that “Diversity can instead be remade into a holding operation, a technology to keep things as they are by allocating spaces in which difference can visibly operate, using the models of both the reservation and the touristic display.” In this scenario the unmarked gaze has failed to fundamentally evolve, rather it is still just staring.

Operating in contrast to the male gaze, the female gaze and its proponents are working toward the incorporation of a plurality of subjectivities. It is generally not understood to be a simple flipping of the script in order to sexualize or reduce the personhoods of men, nor is it intended to be limited to the purview of women. This is informed by Judith Butler’s gender theoretics where she argues that gender is socially constructed through repeated language and behaviors that are performative. This repetition serves to normalize a male/female gender binary. She says,

If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.

It seems the purpose of describing this gaze as “female” is to place it in direct dialectical

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conversation with the much more culturally understood “male gaze.” While perhaps an oversimplification of the experience of gender, this comparison offers specific characteristics to rebuff. I enjoy director and writer Jill Soloway’s effort to define the female gaze with empathy at its foundation, “It could be thought of as a subjective camera that attempts to get inside the protagonist, especially when the protagonist is not a Chismale [cis male]. It uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling, rather than seeing – the characters.”24 Most frequently, the female gaze directly refers to uniquely female and non-binary representations and experiences, de-centering the male character and perspective altogether. I am interested in how this definition of the female gaze bumps up against varying other concerns when applied to women who are specifically making artwork depicting men. Soloway again,

   The female gaze dares to return the gaze. It’s not the gazed gaze. It’s the gaze on the gazers. It’s about how it feels to stand here in the world having been seen our entire lives. [...] It says we see you, seeing us. It says, I don’t want to be the object any longer, I would like to be the subject, and with that subjectivity I can name you as the object.25

This extension is something I am constantly grappling with. Taken to, what I think is a logical conclusion, it manifests as an expression of anger, frustration and exhaustion...ending in a cathartic revenge fantasy. You are the object now. Empathy can be an effective political tool, can cruelty?

   Artists operating from a place of empathy in their depictions of men often discuss the harmful stereotypes placed on men and boys. There is a concerted effort to create a space of vulnerability during these shoots where new masculine identifies can be


imagined. Amy Elkins has a two-part series, *Wallflower* and *Wallflower II*, where she documents masculine-identifying individuals stripped of personal context. The models in each series of headshots are shirtless, pensive, and set against blurred floral backdrops. In a heavy-handed construction of tenderness, Elkins demands an empathic reaction from the viewer. Similarly, Jodi Bieber is challenging the ways in which men are traditionally represented in her series *Quiet*. She photographs her subjects in their underwear, in their safe spaces, asking each the question, “Who are you in the world?” The answer to this question is then incorporated into the title of each piece. The collaborative nature of these portraits makes possible an intimacy between subject and photographer—how they *feel* being seen by Bieber.

That empathic connection, despite being the more overt characteristic of the work, is operating in tandem with Bieber's sociopolitical concerns, addressing the prevalence of domestic violence and rape in South Africa. A press release for an exhibition of this work at Goodman Gallery reads, "The reality of men as the main perpetrators of violent crime is the unspoken undercurrent that runs through Bieber's Quiet series – the title referring to both mood of the photographs and the unsaid nuances embedded within them. Each image silently calls into question the notion of masculine violence as innate." This seeming contradiction, of empathy and anger co-mingling within the very same picture, is entirely true to my own experience making images.

For my project How Many Licks I solicited men online, on Craigslist, willing to pose nude in natural landscapes. My plan was to place myself in an unquestioned position of authority via the camera and the gaze in combination with the nudity and performative role of these men. I would be the predator. They would feel vulnerable and appear foolish in a role reversal revenge fantasy of sorts. Despite my imagination, none of that happened. The men I shot were completely comfortable being naked outdoors and while they did look to me for instruction, I certainly did not disrupt any existing gendered power dynamics between us. If anything I went out of my way to ensure their comfort. If they had ideas, I shot them. I approached this project with rage and left with collaborative portraits. Upon showing my colleagues these images, two reoccurring comments stood out: "Were you being safe?" and "This looks like queer erotica." My own imagined subjectivity got lost in the process.

In Kristine Potter’s project *Manifest* she examines the lingering question of the mythic American West. She includes landscapes, but they are not landmarks or majestic vistas, rather they illustrate containment, removing the specificity of place. Regarding the male figures in Potter’s work Stanley Wolukau-Wananbwa offers this in the book’s introduction, “Potter’s contemporary pioneers are lithe, muscled young men and old, photographed almost exclusively out in the wild range, and yet they are sequestered there and somehow ungrounded.”27 In a direct comparison to Laura Mulvey’s assertion that men play the controlling, active role in narrative, he goes on to say, “…it is the absences that seem especially significant in the work: there are no variations on the romantic sublime; no bold male figures in vast open spaces; no depictions of craft or skill; no images of authoritative command; no images of social

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interaction; no images of labor; no images of action of any kind.”

I don’t know if empathy was a motivating factor for Potter in the making of these images. It can be said that in American culture now, boys lag behind girls academically, working class job security is up in smoke and adult men feel a social and economic displacement unlike any in (relatively) recent history. These isolated, “ungrounded” men are vulnerable and sympathetic. Without their historically controlling, “active” role, who are they; what do they become? The picture of the baby in Potter's series becomes increasingly poignant. What hope does it have in the absence of this crumbling American myth?

To return to Azoulay's concept of the photographic event, artist Susan Lipper responds to Potter's project in a different way,

[...] this work is interesting because as a woman and photographer, I cannot help but question the imagined personal risk involved in manufacturing these works with all the necessary transaction involved with sitters both pre- and post-portrait session. (In general though the perceived effort behind the making of an image does not sway me.) In reviews of this work I’ve read written by men, this topic is

28 Wolukau-Wananbwa, 2018, section III.
not broached. Perhaps I am reading too much, but the question constantly returns: “What is she doing there?”

Women are concerned for the safety of other women from men. A complete stranger will become your best friend to help you get away from a predatory man at a bar—it takes one knowing glance. Women share their GPS locations with friends when they go on first dates. We gift each other bear mace. This is categorically not the same as men who feel they need to “protect” women.

In her project, *Deep Springs*, Sam Contis travelled to the all-male (at the time) alternative-learning college of the same name in California. She photographed the lives of the young men studying there, the everyday brutality of this harsh environment, and similar to Potter, was invoking myths of the American West. In an interview with Brad Feuerhelm for *American Suburb X*, several key concepts of this work went missing.

Brad asks questions and offers comments such as:

Perhaps it is the use of sinew and sweat and boys teetering on the edge of manhood, cocoons so tightly wrapped that they burst forth from their denim jeans…was there any intention to look into this erosion of male stoicism from your side when making the work? […] Would you care to talk about the pre-conceived notions of masculinity and how your experience of an all-male community gestated to become this body of work? […] This is not a view that is culturally embraced in the current climate. There is a formidable shouting about masculine toxicity, the patriarchy etc. […] It seems that the response mechanism for a body of work like *Deep Springs* suggests that men can be viewed, within communities like this as either overly and terribly masculine or a bit ….“brokeback” […] She has clearly gained trust and access to the drama that has unfolded during the production of her work.30

In this classic case of mansplaining, the interviewer’s constant redirections back toward masculinity and his own life experience are entirely dismissive of Contis' own

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subjectivity or any of her creative motivations. She has been reduced to a passive spectator of “active” men, rather than the project's creative force. I don't mean to suggest that all male writers are as rude or clueless as this one. This is just another example of the ways in which female subjectivity becomes invisible. Contis replies, in what I can only assume is frustration, “I wasn’t looking to be some kind of ghost who leaves no trace and whose presence doesn’t register in the photographs.” Her interest in the photographic event and innate power of the camera appear in another interview for *Document Journal*. She asks of her work, “How much of our own identity is performance? How much does it depend on the visual cultural references we have stored in the back of our minds? How does the presence of a camera affect our understanding of ourselves?” Again, moving past the overt subject matter, wondering how it feels to see and be seen.


For those of us who do point our cameras at men, I would be remiss if I didn't address scopophilia as it is yet another component of female subjectivity often ignored. Despite perhaps more prevalent interests, Potter and Contis both include arguably sexy, objectifying images of men in their projects. In an interview with Collier Schorr, Craig Garrett of *Paper Coffin* asks Schorr about her conflicted feelings regarding the interpretation of her work, in this case the photos of young male athletes. She says “...it may be that some gay male critics have become too comfortable in the idea that male sexuality, or men being caught in the gaze, is the property of male homosexuality. That type of 'ownership' allows that women don't look at men and that when men appear a certain way it is a performance for other men. It's just another way that women's desire
is undermined.”³³ In my own work the gaze is sexualized if (and often only if) the author is imagined to be male. Whether or not I am attracted to any of the men in my photographs is really beside the point when you consider they have already been sexualized a la queer erotica. While I do welcome and appreciate this reading of my work, it is generally the only presumption of desire. My question is, can female desire not even be imagined?

Succinctly put by Gloria Anzaldúa, “Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them.”³⁴ Myself and each of the artists I have mentioned in this chapter are women who photograph men. In reimagining masculinity, shaping it to fit our desires, we are confronted by a culture still preoccupied (intentionally or not) with the changing roles of men. In our supporting role, historically capable of exercising empathy, we offer a safe space for the vulnerability of men and boys, performing the emotional labor expected of us. Our subjectivity is ignored while we provide this service. Like it or not, I believe that in so doing we reinforce the problematic binaries that keep us in our place.


Chapter 3: How am I Not Myself

I discovered that attempting to subvert the male gaze by reversing expected gender roles accomplished very little. If anything it just reinforced a dated and problematic male/female gender binary which is antithetical to my actual beliefs anyhow. According to Maggie Nelson, “...true moral complexity is rarely found in simple reversals. More often it is found by wading into the swamp, getting intimate with discomfort, and developing an appetite for nuance.”35 In this chapter I aim to understand how I arrived at this simple reversal. I will also describe my own account of “wading through the swamp” and the resulting work.

The title of this project, How Many Licks, is intended to describe the repeated defeats I experienced while making this work. Additionally it serves to sexualize the bodies of these men. When I first posted an ad seeking models on Craigslist I received numerous dick pics and insulting questions. Misbehavior and misogyny online is not a surprise, but I do consider it my first “lick” of the project—a reminder that female voices are derided wherever they appear. During the shoots a few of the ten men I shot actively tried to play director. While I was generally able to get the images I wanted, I also wound up with many I did not, at least not then. The man who masturbated in front of me being the most potent example. In Unmarked Peggy Phelan describes the relationship between the self and other as marked, “It is alluring and violent because it

touches the paradoxical nature of psychic desire; the always already unequal encounter nonetheless summons the hope of reciprocity and equality; the failure of this hope then produces violence, aggressivity, dissent.”

Of course there will always be some level of collaboration if one is working with other people. I find the distribution of power and control during my shoots, and the resulting ambiguity in the images to be of particular interest. But my loss of control, as it played out in real time, made me very upset.


I believe this awareness, that as a woman others will move you to the background, to a supporting role, often without even realizing it, engenders the desire to push oneself to the foreground and usurp that leading role. The problem is that for so long, at least in American culture, that role has been very narrowly defined by patriarchal and colonialist thinking. In Chela Sandoval's, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, she talks about the primary ways women's movements have gone about seeking liberation. Unfortunately I found myself relating to the “Equal-Rights Form” as she called

it. “Practitioners of this particular ideological tactic demand that their humanity be legitimated, recognized as the same under the law, and assimilated into the most favored form of the human-in-power. Aesthetically, the equal-rights mode of consciousness seeks duplication; politically, it seeks integration; psychically, it seeks assimilation.” The problem with this mode is the assumption that those in power are correct in how they wield and maintain that power. I think it is easy to understand how I, a college educated white woman arrived at that strategy. I had a part to play in American folklore, and I was set up to execute that. For example when I experienced gender bias as an undergraduate, I was already prepared with a statement like, “No, no, no, I'm not a woman artist, just an artist, thank you.” And that response is an extension of this desire for assimilation. I had not yet been able to even imagine the possibility of other structures. Allan deSouza describes a conversation he once had with a curator who asked why he would want to call himself a “black artist.” He says, “In other words, why would one give up the expansive scope of individuality to function within a social and artistic ghetto? […] What this insinuation fails to grasp is that a group affiliation located around 'difference' may also stem from a rejection or refusal of assimilation, rather than a failure to assimilate.” Individuality as a value, critical to the myth of the American Dream, reinforces capitalist aims and ignores generations of systemic bias. Within art the pinnacle of individuality is represented by the “creative genius,” with little if any attention paid to how one might acquire such a status.

Another lick, as was mentioned in Chapter 2, came as concerns for my safety. This varies from how women look out for other women and instead addresses how


“woman” became a protected class, intrinsically linked to gender but also race. Ruby Hamad in *White Tears Brown Scars* describes the history of the damsel in distress. In an effort to maintain racial purity, white women’s sexuality had to be guarded. Hamad says, “Since their sexual innocence was the most valuable asset they had, white women were treated as though they required constant supervision, ostensibly for their own protection. […] The burden of representing the inherent superiority of white civilisation fell not on the shoulders of white women, but firmly between their legs.” In effect these women were protected only from their own liberation as well as meaningful relationships with people of color. Despite the problems inherent to this kind of infantilization, the damsel in distress trope remains a way for white women to exercise some power. That power often comes at the expense of black and brown bodies. Recently we have seen the likes of “Permit Patty,” “BBQ Becky” and a host of other white women calling the police on black people for doing nothing of note—selling lemonade, grilling dinner. These modern day damsels are capable of toggling between identities of oppressed and oppressor at their convenience. While I do not necessarily want to conflate others’ concerns for my physical safety with concerns for the sexual purity of white women generally, I find is useful to reflect on these historic notions of protection to better understand how my work may be interpreted.

Despite failing to see value in this one-to-one role reversal, I am still angry. I am upset with how a lot of relationships with men have played out in my life. I often feel like I am pushed back into my place—back into specific roles. Maybe this is me not being honest with myself. Certainly those roles have their benefits. Regardless, my project up to this point exemplifies that—I had in effect created a safe space for men to feel

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vulnerable and desirable, and to express those things to me as I performed the emotional labor expected of me. So the next step I took in this project was to reveal some of what went on behind the scenes, or what Azoulay would call the photographic event. This is much more personal and less about completing a “project” proper with a predictable, tidy result. It is also much more performative—illustrating my various experiences with these men, and the vulnerability that I had perhaps equally assumed. I began including snippets of text messages and emails I had received from potential models as well as the men I did wind up working with. These messages serve to contextualize the part of the process often hidden by anyone who works with models they do not know very well—if they know them at all. This peculiar courtship, explaining who you are, having to prove you are a legitimate artist, and building that trust is such a big part of making images this way. They function to describe the motivations these men had for wanting to work with me in the first place. They represent samples of all the roles I played, framed by someone else's expectations: a girl, a woman, a friend, a therapist, a means to an end. This is a return to my gender performance because I fell into those roles so effortlessly. For example if a man were going to say or do something weird in front of me, push some boundaries—I already know my role in that scenario. Even if it makes me uncomfortable, well, I can be uncomfortable for a few minutes, that is barely a challenge.
In an effort to redirect the focus back to my story, my subjectivity, I invited myself over to the homes of these men to take pictures of their personal spaces. Removing the figures from the images functions to bring the interpersonal human messiness into focus—which is of great interest to me. That is evident in the projects of other artists that I enjoy. Examples include Laurel Nakadate’s Oops!, where she went to the homes of men seeking companionship on Craigslist and danced with them to the Britney Spears song of the same name; Michael Northrup, who had beautifully photographed his now ex-wife over the course of their marriage, and despite her request to not publish a book of those images, he did—*Dream Away*; Stacy Kranitz, whose former subjects had become friends and lovers during the creation of *From the Study on Post-Pubescent Manhood*, has addressed the difficulty of exiting that and other projects, leaving those relationships behind.
I expect I enjoy this messiness and disregard for polite society’s boundaries to justify or better explain my own behavior, or simply to relate. To return to my work, the power dynamics I was so preoccupied with before in the men-in-landscape images, become much more nuanced. Rather than aligning vulnerability or lack of vulnerability with *nudity*, I am instead aligning it with trust. In a sense I am exploiting their trust for this creative gain. In order to do that however, I have to make myself more vulnerable too. Obviously in this scenario, I am on their turf, taking perhaps the greater personal risk. It was these “in home” interactions and these mutual expressions of trust that made me both want to exploit them further, but also protect them from the judgement of others. This conflict of love and resentment has come up in my work before in images of my dad and those of my partner. To explain I will refer instead to Maggie Nelson paraphrasing Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy of ethics, “…who proposes that the perceived precariousness of an Other simultaneously provokes in us the urge to protect him and the temptation to kill him. For Levinas, the negotiation of these two opposing
impulses—rather than the abolition of the latter—provides the foundation for ethical behavior. I wonder, have I been ethical?

I have definitely had to negotiate with myself while making these images. I went about rationalizing how I could justify using these men in this way. Firstly, they are adult men who surely have the capacity to consent. They signed model release forms. Regarding the pictures of their homes, they knew I was coming over and I didn’t photograph any “off-limits” areas. If how they keep their homes inspires judgement or pity from a viewer, I could argue that that is out of my hands. Also there were multiple exchanges. For example, if there was a shot they wanted, I would send them that image among others. I have spent hours drafting emails and replying to texts because I do think some of them are lonely. So am I. Whether you think I am exploiting these men or not, and I am not going to argue that they are not the containers for my rage or frustration, I am still left wondering if there is any value to this apparent cruelty.

According to Peggy Phelan, “Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The 'excess' meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible.” A resistant reading of my work would take the photographic event into account. How would I gain access to the bodies and homes of these people if my only intention were exploitation? Is a viewer convinced I am participating in a fair exchange?

Tangling with a litany of problematic male stereotypes and using these specific bodies, these specific men, to create some archetype representing those who have inflicted trauma upon me has left me unsettled. I have my rationalizations and I have


documented some bad behavior. So what? To quote Nelson, “…when faced with the radical vulnerability of another's body or soul, one might feel inclined to laugh at it (the recipe for much cruel humor, in art as in life). The schizoid nature of these responses reminds me of a child who plucks a beetle from the dirt, makes it a home in a dish, gives it a name, then squishes it to death, then cries because it's dead.”42 I go back and forth constantly and have come to see this project really as two, or one imbedded in the other. The black and white portraits intended to construct retribution, albeit misguided, and the total of all the work representing the reality of this entire creative experience. I would like to center my process as that which carries the value of this project. And that process contains experiences with ten unique people who I do not wish to squish equally if at all. In those moments when I saw vulnerability—during a shoot, maybe just after, in a text message—I wanted to care for it. In On Beauty and Being Just, Elaine Scarry says, “We saw that the fact that something is perceived as beautiful is bound up with the urge to protect it.”43 In this context vulnerability is an extension of beauty, linked by beauty's fleetingness. Within my work there was an exchange of vulnerability, arguably beautiful in its rarity.

Nelson asks,

Who would want […] a world in which everything nice were partitioned off from everything horrible, thereby draining the world of its wild, nearly un navigable paradoxes? And who would want a feminism—or any form of social justice—that lessened our apprehension of such difficult coexistences, or diminished our access to this electrical current?44

What I want my work to communicate is the challenge of navigating these paradoxes,

and how it felt for me to enact this performance. I do hope that some of it makes the
viewer uncomfortable, but in a subtle enough way that they have to ask why. Each new
element is intended to increase the overall complexity of the project, where boundaries
are pushed and pulled between myself and these men. Ideally a viewer would have to
do a little bargaining with their own notions of photographic ethics. Ultimately however,
this about me, psychologically looking inward to better understand my own boundaries,
expectations and gender performance.
Conclusion

In the creation of *How Many Licks* I was trying to put a good face—an empowered face—on my experiences of subjugation and rage. I tried to understand bias through language, landscape, gender norms, mimicry and paradoxical ethics. I came to understand some of the ways in which I have constructed my own world—through a series of failures as well as refusals to assimilate into prescribed American culture.

My work represents the story of repeated brushes with power, followed by backtracks to disguise or eliminate it. Boundaries continue to collapse as I carve out my ever-evolving role. I have focused heavily on my relationship with masculinity but that too, is collapsing and evolving. My inclusion of a trans man speaks to that belief most readily—likewise I have had experiences with men revealing unexpected vulnerabilities that are not easily shared. My desire to trespass in the “boy's club” and define myself through those relationships has me wondering who I am, or who I could be without them. Judith Butler explains,

[… ] my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am is the enigmatic traces of others. […] Don't I need to know myself in order to act responsibly in social relations? Surely, to a certain extent, yes. But is there an ethical valence to my unknowingness? I am wounded, and I find that the wound itself testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control.45

For many of us, our understanding of life as a learning experience is rather a life-long process of unlearning. I intend for this project to continue with inclusivity and empathy at its core as I imagine new ways to engage with my community. I expect that my preoccupations with masculinity will remain, but no doubt my performance and approach will differ. How that changes the shape of my work, I do not know, and I accept my lack of control as an integral part of my creative process.
15. Ash Goodwin, *Texas Beach, Richmond, Virginia*, 2019

18. Ash Goodwin, *Pocahontas State Park, Chesterfield, Virginia, 2019*

20. Ash Goodwin, *Texas Beach, Richmond, Virginia*, 2019
21. Ash Goodwin, Texas Beach, Richmond, Virginia, 2020

22. Ash Goodwin, Untitled, 2020
23. Ash Goodwin, *Dirty Pillows*, 2020

25. Ash Goodwin, Texas Beach, Richmond, Virginia, 2019

27. Ash Goodwin, *Stupid is as Stupid Does*, 2020


34. Ash Goodwin, *Wish You Were Here*, 2020

35. Ash Goodwin, *Texas Beach Sunrise, Richmond, Virginia*, 2019
10/04/19, 11:53 PM
OK, you got me intrigued. Thanks for the detailed description.
You sound like a legitimate artist.

11/25/19, 11:23 AM
Can I see what you look like?

10/08/19, 9:10 PM
I’m used to people coming into a class I model for and getting as much of a free peek as they please. I’m bound to hold the pose.
I’ve basically got to the point it doesn’t bother me.
I could tell you all kinds of stories of people standing in open doorways who just happened to be walking down the hall, the office manager who knew we were doing an art class, peeking in, the gallery accountant moving her books to a spot where she could look on while she worked, drinking me in to her fill.
I’m used to it now and don’t even worry about it.
I expect it.
02/11/20, 12:32 PM
Here are a few thoughts I had for some shots.
I’m standing behind a tree peeking around.
Or like I’m hiding but more like
Peeking at something.
If you wanted to try more erotic
I could be touching myself.
I’m laying on the beach.
If you wanted to go erotic
I could be laying with an erection.

02/25/20, 5:46 PM
Would you say they are all either serious or cheesy?
Would you classify any as “sexy” at all?

10/18/19, 8:42 PM
On a funny note:
I took a shower
when I got home
and found a leaf
wedged between my butt cheeks

11/12/19, 8:23 AM
I want to do some slightly erotic pictures
for a few Christmas gifts.
I did want to do them outside,
in and around a car.
I know the perfect place we can go...

39. Ash Goodwin, Received Messages, book spreads, 2020
Bibliography


