Black Matrilineage, Photography, and Representation

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PART TWO

“TURNING THE FACE OF HISTORY TO YOUR FACE”: SEEING THE REAL SELF THROUGH REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD

5 MOTHERHOOD IN THE WORK OF DEANA LAWSON

A conversation with the Artist

Susan Thompson

In her photographs, Deana Lawson pictures compelling individuals from across the African diaspora often posed within unique domestic interiors. Her subjects are mostly strangers recruited during chance encounters, and the preponderance of these sitters are women. Since many women have children, it is perhaps unsurprising that motherhood has arisen as a recurrent thematic within Lawson’s work. In these photographs, the artist simultaneously highlights the subject’s role as a mother—often through the inclusion of her children or their belongings in the image—while also conveying that this role is but one part of her identity within the greater whole of her being. This conversation focuses in particular on four works that capture women at different stages in early motherhood: the profound experience of pregnancy as seen in Mama Goma, Gemena, DR Congo (2014), the triumph of delivery and joy of new life in The Beginning (2008), the postpartum reclamation of physical autonomy and sexual identity in Baby Sleep (2009), and, finally, mothering young children through difficult circumstances in Mohawk Correctional Facility: Jazmin & Family (2013). Collectively, these works offer a portrait of the spiritual, physical, sexual, and social dimensions of the Black maternal experience.

Susan Thompson: References to mothers and children abound in your work. Perhaps we could start by discussing motherhood more broadly and how you choose to represent it in your photographs. I wonder if any part of your interest in portraying mothers grows out of your own experiences as a mother or of having been mothered.

Deana Lawson: My family community in my hometown of Rochester, NY, almost always involved children. Familial spaces of home, church, and family get-togethers were mostly intergenerational, so it was natural for children to
be a lively presence within adult spaces. It feels normal to me to hear a crying child at church, and if a crying child isn’t heard, somehow there’s an unnatural absence. The women in my mother’s generation and in my generation also had children when they were quite young, often between the ages of 16 and 20 years old. A lot of my cousins had children starting as early as 15, so when I was pregnant at the age of 22 it was like I got pregnant late. Being pregnant at 22 for me felt like a later stage, but in the culture at large it would appear to be at a young stage in life. I had just graduated college when I was carrying Judah Gilbert, who is now 18 years old.

In the making of my pictures there is often a child present, whether the child is in the final picture, or around the periphery of the photograph. In Living Room, Brownsville, Brooklyn (2015), we put a movie on for the young woman’s son while taking the photograph. When photographing Uncle Mack (2016) I will never forget the image of my best friend Dana Brown holding my daughter Grace in one arm, and her niece Layla in the other. It was pure chaos, but I got the job done. Somehow the presence of children blesses the picture in its own way. You would think it would collapse it, but it’s the opposite. I also think having a powerful community of women around who had always had children, especially at younger ages, really had an influence on my “get it done” positionality as a working artist and mother.

Thompson: Mama Goma was taken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where you traveled on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2014. On this same trip, you also created The Garden, Gemena, DR Congo (2015), an iconic image that feels so much like a portrait of Adam and Eve. You’ve spoken previously of an ethnographic impulse in your work and of how you envisioned this trip to Africa as almost a way of going back in time to seek out something original—even Edenic—within that setting.

Lawson: Yes, The Garden is my vision of paradise in the heart of the continent of Africa: D.R. Congo. The story of Eden is envisioned through the Black body, the ultimate ancestors of all humanity. It is a story of primordial love and innocence, before the fall of mankind. The Fall is a stand-in for European invasion and colonialism. The male subject in The Garden has his hand on the woman’s stomach, which many people have interpreted as a coming child.

Thompson: The Biblical figure of Eve is the mother of all humankind, the ur-mother. Even pictured in her nakedness before the Fall—before the birth
of Cain and Abel and everyone who would come after—she is always somehow coded as pre-maternal. As the first mother, her motherhood is inscribed in her body as inevitable. Many have used the term “prelapsarian” to describe your work and the way it captures scenes of paradise before the Fall of humanity, before the advent of sin.

**Lawson:** Yes, it’s prelapsarian. The story of Eden is one of paradise, pleasure, and natural bounty. This paradise was also one of utmost isolation or quarantine. Adam and Eve were the only human beings of their kind to inhabit the earth. They were completely alone. The coming child represents the third member of the formation of a family/community/humanity. And Eve in particular, is the mother who begins the cycle of human evolution. Her body is a vehicle for the future. She has a look of concern on her face, but also of strength, displaying the conflicting notions of care and burden that comes with being a mother, and the tribulations of humanity at large. I wanted that to be embodied in her expression and her pose, which was taken from Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1500).

**Thompson:** And if the woman in *The Garden* is Eve, the woman in *Mama Goma* is Madonna, Mother Mary. The image calls back to Renaissance representations of Mary: the expectant mother dressed in blue vestments as she gestates a holy being within her.

**Lawson:** Her hands are open and upturned to “receive.” The symbol of blue, or light blue in particular, I associate with the celestial. *The Book of Symbols* speaks of blue eloquently: “It is not quite of earth, this blue, which apart from sea and sky is the rarest color in nature. Given the unearthliness of blue and living as we do below the vast blue heavens, we have colored our gods blue—Kneph, Jupiter, Krishna, Vishnu, Odin—and our goddesses too…” So yes, Mary is cloaked in blue, and *Mama Goma* in my photograph is a Goddess in the flesh, draped in blue silk fabric. The same seafoam blue is seen on the dress of the baby girl in *Sons of Cush* (2016).

**Thompson:** For *Sons of Cush*, that particular dress was so important for the work; you brought it with you to the shoot. The dress in *Mama Goma* is very specific in its cut and it has a very handmade quality to it. Was it something the subject owned or did you bring it with you?
**Lawson:** We made that. I bought the fabric in Kinshasa and as soon as I got to the smaller town there was a seamstress waiting for me. On the first day I arrived, we measured out the fabric and the subject and she made the dress within days.

**Thompson:** Did you have a specific vision for the design, with the cut-out for the belly and off-the-shoulder sleeves flowing like wings?

**Lawson:** The dress was inspired by a photograph I’d seen of a young woman who went to prom, and her prom dress had a cutout for her pregnant belly. The young mother-to-be chose to celebrate the prom and her pregnancy by showing her beautiful body. She literally crowned her belly with this dress. Back in the day, mothers who got pregnant in high school had to leave the school because it was a mark of shame. But the way that this young woman wore her dress definitely was not with shame. It was with pride. And that just sat with me. I thought it was an odd dress, but also really beautiful and striking.

**Thompson:** You mentioned that Mama Goma’s palms are turned upwards to “receive,” perhaps to receive a blessing. There is certainly something deeply spiritual in this work. Between the unique dress and the woman’s prayerful, almost supplicant, pose it seems as if she is performing a rite to honor her swelling belly. That her hands are raised in a yogic gesture of openness creates a link between gestation and meditation, and celebrates the profound experience that is pregnancy.

*Mama Goma* is such a captivating ode to pregnancy it makes me wonder if you were pregnant when you were shooting it.

**Lawson:** You know, I think I conjured up my own pregnancy. I wasn’t pregnant then, but a year after I made that photo, I was with child. And I didn’t know it. I was about to go to Ethiopia and the doctor had given me malaria pills. And I was like, “Wait, I shouldn’t take this if I’m pregnant, right?” And I didn’t even know then, but my subconscious knew. I never took the pills and it turned out I was pregnant with my daughter. It’s interesting when the photo begets reality. I think that was the case with Grace.

**Thompson:** *The Beginning* is a powerful image of the immediate aftermath of labor and delivery, capturing the intensity and beauty of that moment when a new life enters the world. The baby, who occupies the foreground, is brand
new: simultaneously glossy from amniotic fluid and waxy from vernix case-
ola. It is a very active scene in contrast to many of your other works that are
more fixed. For other images, the setting is carefully staged and the sitter is
directed into a pose. Obviously that’s not possible with a moments-old baby.
How did this image come about?

**Lawson:** I was really thinking about birth as this space of knowledge that
can only be arrived at through the body. No one can ever describe to you what
it feels like to give birth until you do it. Most importantly, I was curious about
a female child who first enters the world and how she might appear in a pho-
tograph. I imagined birth through the womb as an event horizon that we all
traverse as babies to make our way into the world. What does she look like
when she’s crossed this horizon?

I met a family in New Haven who welcomed me to photograph their birth. I
was at a residency in Syracuse when the mother went into labor and I received
the phone call. She gave birth to baby Ebony twenty minutes after I arrived. It
was incredible. One minute she was pushing and I was waiting with the cam-
era. And the next minute, the baby was out. I just started clicking the shutter
and I thought, “wow, I just missed it.” But of course, when I got my negatives
back, I was like, “wait, no, there is something here.”

Lawson, courtesy of Sikkema
Jenkins & Co., New York
**Thompson:** The image is so perfectly composed for having happened so suddenly in such an intense moment. The baby is positioned in the center with the mother’s face looking on in the background.

**Lawson:** And all the hands: the hands of the midwife, the hand of the husband on the mother’s forehead, the baby’s arm sticking out very straight in an almost-fist. There’s a cacophony of hands.

**Thompson:** And the midwife’s gloved hands are that same celestial blue. There is such an emotional heft in the work. It captures this climactic moment of birth, which is a moment of triumph for the mother and also the beginning of a new life. There are also social and political valences that this work brings to mind as well, specifically in regards to the staggering statistics around Black maternal mortality in the U.S. Due in part to added health risks like heart disease and hypertension connected to the physiological stress of racism and compounded by the biases of medical professionals in addressing Black patients’ pain, Black mothers in the U.S. are three to four times more likely to die in childbirth and its aftermath than white mothers. In New York City, it’s even higher than that. I guess that’s part of why I describe this image as capturing a moment of triumph. Every birth is a triumph because of the work the mother has done to bring her baby into the world, but it feels like this image is also about survival because giving birth as a Black woman in the American medical system is a harrowing experience.

**Lawson:** It is. And this subject was also at an older age having a child so there was added risk. She had eight kids, so it was a more difficult birth because she was past middle age. It is indeed a triumph.

**Thompson:** Let’s turn to *Baby Sleep*, where we see a mother navigating family life with an infant at home. There’s a baby asleep in a mechanized swing and a few toys strewn about on the floor: a soft book, a rattle, pieces from an alphabet play mat. On the left side of the image, a shirtless man sits on a wooden chair. A woman straddles him, completely naked except for a scarf in her hair. She is looking directly at the camera with confidence and self-assurance. She grips the back of the man’s head and pulls his face into her neck for a kiss, a deeply sensual gesture. Referencing Audre Lorde’s *Uses of the Erotic*, you’ve spoken previously of a notion of the erotic in your work that seems especially operative in *Baby Sleep*. 
Lawson: What has always appealed to me about Lorde’s framing of the erotic is that the sexual includes the spiritual, it includes family and community, which is markedly different from notions of “sexiness.” And I wanted to use Baby Sleep as a way to make an image that was really beautifully sensual, but that also includes the presence of a child. What could that look like?

Thompson: I read this work as a mother who is navigating her postpartum identity to include her roles as a mother and as a lover. It asserts that the mother remains a sexual being; she hasn’t been neutered by the transformation into motherhood. These different parts of her identity are not in conflict or mutually exclusive. Maternal love and adult desire can coexist within healthy family life. However, in a society that expects mothers to be fully devoted to their children, such an image reads as almost transgressive. There is a brazenness to the empowered, dominant woman as she rejects the social expectation that she can either be a doting, dedicated mother or a sexually desiring vixen, but not both.

Lawson: Right, I envisioned using Thais as a subject for this because she’s such a queen. She embodies a philosophical and spiritual power. She is on top, in a dominant position of pleasure. This is a woman who is running a household, but who is also confident in her sexual relationship with her husband. There’s another version of this image that I used on the cover of Contact Sheet at Light Work.

Thompson: One where her eyes are kind of rolling back in her head, right?

Lawson: Yes. And when you see the whites of someone’s eyes like that it’s often a sign that they’ve been mounted by spirits.

Thompson: It also strikes me that the man in the image has his back to the child. He doesn’t need to negotiate the same dichotomy within himself in his roles as father and partner. He can really engage fully in that moment because he’s not carrying the weight of societal expectation.

Lawson: And he’s also a big man, but she still conquers him, you know? She’s definitely not a victim in this picture at all. One of my other subjects saw the picture and said, “She looks like a succubus, like a woman who would eff the shit out of men and then leave them.” And I actually wanted a little bit of that
in the image. I was actually thinking about a praying mantis, about a woman who was a bit forceful in a way that maybe complicates ideas of womanhood, sexuality, and motherhood.

**Thompson:** *Mohawk Correctional Facility: Jazmin & Family* is a series of thirty images of your cousin Jazmin with her incarcerated partner, Erik, and their children taken in the visiting room of a penitentiary. These photographs document the family over the course of a few years, serving as commemorative markers of the limited moments of connection they shared during their prolonged separation. This piece is somewhat anomalous within your work as it features appropriated photographs rather than images you composed and shot. Do you see this work as operating differently within your practice? Did the process of making it feel more like a curatorial gesture than a photographic one?

**Lawson:** Not at all. The same instinctive attraction that draws me to photograph strangers was the same instinct that drew me to Jazmin’s pictures, which she was posting on Facebook. As she posted the photos, I slowly learned the context as I started to see the same background. I knew she was pregnant and I knew her then-boyfriend (they’re now married) was incarcerated, and I put two and two together that these were visitation pictures she was taking with her man and her son. In one, she’s pregnant, but then she has the baby during his time in prison.

So much of my work is about picturing love in different dimensions and different manifestations, and this piece shows one way of love, of romance, of mothering. I wanted to show what it might possibly feel like in those shoes. Looking at those pictures and the quantity of them I actually began to understand what it must be
like for a woman to experience having the love of her life locked up. And having a child together. It seemed so lonely, but also there’s something endearing about Jazmin and the discipline—and the longing—to go see her man, her child’s father. To bring the kids, get dressed up, get her hair done, and then make sure a picture is taken every time. Not for anybody, not for an audience, just for her.
**Thompson:** There is something sweetly ritualistic and, ultimately, devotional about it as well. Creating the photographic record of these regular visits feels commemorative in a way that lends a gravity to the occasion, that marks its significance. The visits are clearly very important for her in maintaining a connection to her partner across distance and time, but it also seems to be a dedicated act of motherhood to make sure her children see their father and have a relationship with him. She is doing the work of creating a family.

**Lawson:** Exactly. To create a family and to sustain a family within an architectural institution that is designed to destroy a Black family. In that way, this is really an act of refusal.

**Thompson:** It just speaks to the incredible, enduring strength of Black women as pillars within their communities, a testament to the work they do to hold everything together. And in naming the series after Jazmin in the work’s title, you’re honoring that work that she’s doing as her family’s matriarch and its champion.

**Lawson:** Absolutely. And she didn’t do this because she is an activist. She’s not theorizing this in the way that we’re talking about it. She’s actually just doing this out of love. There is something so pure about those pictures that I felt needed to be seen. It’s a visual testimony that says, “See, this is what we do.” And Jazmin is one of many.

**Thompson:** The fact that you encountered these pictures on Facebook also shows how this was her way of sharing her life with her community.

**Lawson:** Yeah, and with a sense of pride, posting for the world to see.

**Thompson:** There are of course many other works you’ve made featuring mothers that we haven’t addressed here: *Barbara and Mother* (2017), *Wanda and Daughters* (2009), *Greased Scalp* (2008), *Woman with Child* (2017), and *Daughter* (2007), among others.

**Lawson:** I’m glad you mentioned *Barbara and Mother* and *Greased Scalp* because they represent an older version of a mother and child. I think we tend to gravitate towards younger children. Of course, that phase requires the most work as a parent, but how do these relationships change over time? How do
they manifest at a later stage in life? What does that look like? There are so many tumultuous relationships between mother and child in later stages of life. And that’s a part of love, too. Some part of love is heartbreak. The two women in Barbara and Mother did not get along, but in the photograph, they put aside their differences and made a beautiful picture.

Thompson: In contrast to the works we’ve discussed, the piece Sons of Cush centers on fatherhood. When you were making this work, you said you’d felt like you had really focused on representations of women, and you now wanted to confront masculinity, and in particular Black masculinity and Black fatherhood.

Lawson: I grew up with my father in the household. My parents are still together and my father is very much a part of his three daughters’ lives. I’ve known Black men to be very caring, involved fathers, but representations in mass media always present Black men as absentee parents. I wanted to create an image of a beautiful man who is complicated and perhaps even intimidating, and to have this daughter be the epicenter of the photograph. I wanted to play off the contrast of fragility and strength, femininity and masculinity, through the relationship of father and daughter. It was important that the child be close to newborn, in that state where they’re still a bit like little angels, still looking like they’re from another world.