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PROFILES

THROUGH  
THE  
PORTAL

*Deana Lawson's  
photographs of diaspora.*

BY ZADIE SMITH

Imagine a goddess. Envision a queen. Her skin is dark, her hair is black. Anointed with Jergens lotion, she possesses a spectacular beauty. Around her lovely wrist winds a simple silver band, like two rivers meeting at a delta. Her curves are ideal, her eyes narrowed and severe; the fingers of her right hand signal an army, prepared to follow wherever she leads. Is this the goddess of fertility? Of wisdom? War? No doubt she's divine—we have only to look at her to see that. Yet what is a goddess doing here, before these thin net curtains? What relation can she possibly have to that cheap metal radiator, the chipped baseboards, the wonky plastic blinds? Where is her kingdom, her palace, her worshippers? Has there been some kind of mistake?

Examining Deana Lawson's "Sharon" (2007), a black viewer may find the confusion of her earliest days reenacted. Before you'd heard of slavery and colonialism, of capitalism and subjection, of islands and mainlands, of cities and ghettos, when all you had to orient yourself was what was visually available to you; that is, what was in front of your eyes. And what a strange sight confronts the black child! The world seems upside down and back to front. For your own eyes tell you that your people, like all people, are marvellous. That they are—like all human beings—beautiful, creative, godlike. Yet, as a child, you couldn't find many of your gods on the television or in books; they were rarely rendered in oil, encountered on the cinema screen or in the pages of your children's



"Sharon" (2007).

Smith, Zadie, "Through The Portal," *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2018, pp. 50-59





"Wanda and Daughters" (2009).

Bible. Sometimes, in old reruns, you might spot people painted up, supposedly to look like your gods—with their skin blackened and their lips huge and red—but the wise black child pushed such toxic, secondary images to the back of her mind. Instead, she placed her trust in reality. But here, too, she found her gods walking the neighborhood unnoticed and unworshipped. Many of them appeared to occupy lowly positions on a ladder whose existence she was only just beginning to discern. There were, for example, many low-wage gods behind the counters at the fast-food joints, and mostly gods seemed to shine shoes and clean floors, and too many menial tasks altogether appeared to fall only to them. Passing the newsstand, she might receive her first discomfiting glimpse of the fact that the jail cells were disproportionately filled with gods, while in the corridors of power they

rarely set a foot. Only every now and then did something make sense: a god was recognized. There's little Michael Jackson and grand Toni Morrison, and, look, that's James Baldwin growing old in France, and beautiful Carl Lewis, faster than Hermes himself. The kinds of gods so great even the blind can see them. But back at street level? Too many gods barely getting by, or crowded into substandard schools and crumbling high-rise towers, or harassed by police intent on clearing Olympus of every deity we have. And, for a long, innocent moment, everything about this arrangement will seem surreal to the black child, distorted, like a message that has somehow been garbled in the delivery. Then language arrives, and with language history, and with history the Fall.

Deana Lawson's work is prelapsarian—it comes before the Fall. Her people seem to occupy a higher plane, a

kingdom of restored glory, in which diaspora gods can be found wherever you look: Brownsville, Kingston, Port-au-Prince, Addis Ababa. Typically, she photographs her subjects semi-nude or naked, and in cramped domestic spaces, yet they rarely look either vulnerable or confined. ("When I'm going out to make work," Lawson has said, "usually I'm choosing people that come from a lower or working-class situation. Like, I'm choosing people around the neighborhood.") Outside a Lawson portrait you might be working three jobs, just keeping your head above water, struggling. But inside her frame you are beautiful, imperious, unbroken, unfallen.

Born in 1979 and raised in prelapsarian Rochester, New York—well before the collapse of Kodak—Lawson arrived in the world with a matchless origin story: her grandmother

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: SIKEMHA, JENKINS & CO. AND RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY, CHICAGO

cleaned the home of George Eastman, the founder of the Kodak empire. (In what she has called the "mythology" of her family, her grandmother overheard Eastman ask his nurse where his heart was situated, the morning before he shot himself through the chest.) Kodak was foundational in practical ways, too. When Lawson's mother applied for a factory job there, the man who interviewed her felt that she was more suited to office work, and so instead she landed an administrative job, which she kept for the next thirty-nine years. The Lawsons thus found themselves in an interesting social position: "middle-class-aspiring," living on the working-class East Side of Rochester but not on blue-collar salaries, and with a father, a manager at Xerox, who, as Lawson has described him, was an avid family photographer, daily documenting Deana and her identical twin, Dana, in times both happy and sad.

On one memorable occasion, he took a picture of the twins on the stoop together, Dana with a recently broken thumb and Deana holding her sister's cast in her own hand: "We're both dressed exactly alike. We both have the same frowns on our head. That picture kind of pierced me. I think that was, like, the beginning of identifying with another person, or trying to understand another human being's pain, in a way, through looking at myself." This self-in-other experience intensified years later, when Lawson's sister, then seriously ill with multiple sclerosis, permanently dropped out of Penn State (the twins had arrived together), leaving Lawson with the weight of her family's expectations on her shoulders. ("When my sister got sick, I had to win for both of us.") It was in college that Lawson wriggled out of her business major and started taking photographs. From the outset, they were "staged"—like a family portrait, only more so—for she always liked to choose the people, the setting, the clothes, and the pose.

As Cindy Sherman has amply demonstrated, the most obvious route for a photographer with these anti-*vérité* instincts might be the self-portrait, but in the bulk of her work Lawson appears only in relation: she is the un-

seen person whom all these striking-looking people are looking at. How she manages to create this relation is a fascinating question. In person, Lawson—a striking woman in her own right—has a soft-spoken, rather shy manner that seems to belie the fearlessness and will it must surely require to travel to far-flung places, talk your way into strangers' homes, and then get them to pose precisely as you want. (My own response upon seeing her work for the first time was: How do you convince Jamaicans to take their clothes off?) To do so, you would need to know how to listen, but also how to ask the right question, and at the right moment. You'd have to be self-effacing and yet forceful enough to pursue significant leads. With her ethnographic skills, and in her choice of destinations, Lawson might remind us of Zora Neale Hurston, whose idiosyncratic 1938 anthropological study of voodoo and folk practices in the diaspora, "Tell My Horse," traverses some of the same territory to which Lawson has been drawn—Jamaica, Haiti—and is a text that Lawson herself has cited as an early inspiration.

Like Lawson, Hurston was constitutionally attracted to the marginalized, the obscure, the ostensibly lowly. And, like Hurston, Lawson's fullest subject is the diaspora itself. Looking at "Otisha" (2013), in which a young, naked Jamaican woman poses like a piece of West African statuary among the many leatherette couches that fill a cramped and overdecorated living room in Kingston, I thought of the Pocomania (or Pukkumina) cult that Hurston encountered in Jamaica, and which she heard a local man define as the compulsion to make "something out of nothing." The diaspora is a broad and various thing, but one rich vein running through it has surely been the historical, economic, and personal necessity of making "something out of nothing." In an illuminating conversation that Lawson had with Arthur Jafa, a Los Angeles-based artist and filmmaker, Jafa sketches this journey from nothing to something in miniature:

Initially, when Africans step off those ships they have the same battery of cultural verification and affirmation that most people have.

But a defining experience for black people during slavery is the separating of folks from their children, from their partners, from their families. So, very quickly, Africans become a new kind of people, black people. We create culture in free fall, but we also create kinship in free fall.

Jafa, too, is a diaspora explorer. (His 2017 video installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art, in L.A., "Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death," was set to Kanye West's sublime gospel-inflected "Ultralight Beam," and used a huge variety of found film footage to create a phantasmagoria of black images through history.) In their conversation, which will be published later this year in "Deana Lawson: An Aperture Monograph," Lawson and Jafa declare themselves profoundly interested in this new kind of people, a concern that never aspires to a sociological neutrality but, instead, pulses with love. Black people are not conceived as victims, social problems, or exotics but, rather, as what Lawson calls "creative, godlike beings" who do not "know how miraculous we are." In her work, she tells Jafa, she wants "to try to locate the magnificent and have it come through in the picture." In response, Jafa notes, "It's like black people are inherently scarred by our circumstances, and you're trying to take photographs of them that look past that, like an X-ray looks past surface scars."

Which is not to say that the surface scars pass unrecorded in Lawson's photographs. Circumstances are in no way hidden or removed from the shot; nothing is tidied up or away, and everything is included. Dirty laundry is aired in public (and appears on the floor). Half-painted walls, faulty wiring, sheetless mattresses, cardboard boxes filled with old-format technology, beat-up couches, frayed rugs, curling tiles, broken blinds. (It's instructive to contrast Lawson's staged portraits of low-income black folk with the young Californian photographer Buck Ellison's staged portraits of wealthy white folk, replete with the discreet symbols of wealth: wood panelling, cashmere sweaters, silk shirts, linen pants, polished chrome kitchen-cabinet handles, crystal tumblers.) That these circumstances should prove so

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*"Baby Sleep" (2009).*



similar—from New York to Jamaica, from Haiti to the Democratic Republic of the Congo—carries its own political message. But the repetition also takes on a mystical cast, as we note visual leitmotifs and symbols that seem to reoccur across time, space, and cultures. Paragraphs could be written on Lawson's curtains alone: cheap curtains, net curtains, curtains taped up—or else hanging from shower rings—curtains torn, faded, thin, permeable. Curtains, like doors, are an attempt to mark off space from the outside world: they create a home for the family, a sanctuary for a people, or they may simply describe the borders of a private realm. In these photographs, though, borders are fragile, penetrable, thin as gauze. And yet everywhere there is impregnable defiance—and aspiration. There is “kinship in free fall.”

In “Living Room” (2015), taken in Brownsville, Brooklyn, all the scars are visible: the taped-up curtain, the boxes and laundry, the piled-up DVDs, that damn metal radiator. At its center pose a queen and her consort. He's on a chair, topless, while she stands unclothed behind him. They are physically beautiful—he in his early twenties, she perhaps a little older—and seem to have about them that potent mix of mutual ownership and dependence, mutual dominance and submission, that has existed between queens and their male kin from time immemorial. But this is only speculation. The couple keep their counsel. Despite being on display, like objects, and partially exposed—like their ancestors on the auction block—they maintain a fierce privacy, bordered on all sides. They are exposed but well defended: salon-fresh hair, with the edges perfect; a flash of gold in her ear; his best bluejeans; her nails on point. Self-mastery in the midst of chaos. And the way they look at you! A gaze so intense that it's the viewer who ends up feeling naked.

When you create kinship in free fall, you may grab at certain items on the fly. The similarity between these items constitutes its own realm of interest. How often we find—especially in the more comfortable homes—luxurious sateen in brown and gold, heavy



"Mama Goma" (2014).

brown wood, silver jewelry, fabrics of dark green and dark red, tiles and wallpaper intricately patterned in geometric form. (I am describing my own mother's living room as surely as any Lawson has photographed.) What deep satisfaction, then, to stand in front of "Kingdom Come" (2014), in which two young Ethiopians in Addis Ababa, a boy and a girl, stand ramrod straight, staring out at us, dressed in the Coptic-like finery of their church. Their gowns are a dark-red velvet, threaded with silver embroidery; the walls behind them are deep red, too, and panelled in dark wood; gold crosses hang behind them. In such an image, you find yourself able to track the aesthetic roots of so much of what Lawson has shown us in diasporic living rooms worldwide: the red and the gold, the geometric patterns, the heavy wood, and that ubiq-

uitous silver bling in which, elsewhere, Lawson photographs a bedazzled New Yorker, "Joanette" (2013), who has stripped to the waist, the better to highlight her silver bangles, her silver hoops, her silver rings. Kinship in free fall, yes, but still connected, however tenuously, to the thick braid of our African heritage, cut off at the root so long ago.

Sometimes, as in a picture like "Mama Goma" (2014), taken in Gemena, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, that heritage feels close at hand. A young, heavily pregnant woman stands in a cheap-looking shiny blue dress, meant to imitate the finest satin, with a large hole cut in the middle from which her bump protrudes. Her palms face upward, like someone about to begin a ritual or ceremony. Behind her, sprays of cheap tinsel are pinned to the wall; before her, a silver

spoon sits on a table like an offering. The remnants of ancient faiths and previous glories touch the edges of the frame; echoes of the Vili people of the Kingdom of Loango, maybe, who traded their copper, finely carved objects d'art, and luxurious fabrics with the people of Holland, a historical memory that is here transmuted—but somehow not reduced—into a tablecloth patterned with flowers and a Dutch windmill that turns no more. In "Hotel Oloffson Storage Room" (2015), a naked woman, perhaps an employee of the hotel in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, perches on the edge of a discarded bed, surrounded by old mattresses, old chair cushions, and old hotel art. These simple paintings have been left half-forgotten in the lowliest corner of a tourist spot—one is of trees, the other of three mystical-looking owls—but in their humble way

they each make reference to Haiti's storied art factions, the Jacmel school (dominated by landscape art) and the Saint-Soleil school (incorporating voodoo symbolism). Meanwhile, on the door hangs an amateurish bust of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Haiti's revolutionary general. And in all this décor—in the cushion covers and the bedspread, the walls and the art itself—that red, green, and gold persist, framing our mysterious nude and, like her, retaining an innate magnificence.

You make something out of nothing. You borrow, steal, adapt. Sometimes, in Lawson, this adaptation involves direct quotation. (Her "Three Women," 2013, which poses naked girls standing in Beyoncé-like formation, recalls Albert Arthur Allen's naked chorus lines of the nineteen-twenties; in "Ashanti," 2011, a nude on a sheetless mattress in a grim, bare room assumes the position of the figure in Ingres's "Grande Odalisque.") More often, the references seem to come from intimate experience. I'll bet there are diaspora folk stretching from London to Kingston to Detroit who will recognize, as Lawson does, how many couches can be squeezed into a space that cannot really accommodate that many couches, and, moreover, how one couch in particular will be a matter of special pride, and therefore covered with plastic for its own protection.

This bold visual recognition of rarely acknowledged commonalities is a great source of pleasure in Lawson's work. One of the things many people in the diaspora have shared—unavoidably—is the experience of poverty, but Lawson's work suggests other, deeper vectors that may also connect us: certain gestures and interpersonal attitudes, strategies of escape, modes of defense or display, pleasures and fears, aesthetics, superstitions, and, perhaps most significant, shared fantasies. First among these is an idealized vision of Africa. Of course, Africa has an independent reality, made up of fifty-four separate states, but Lawson isn't trying to capture that reality any more than she is photographing Detroit when she sets up her camera in that city. Naturalism is never the intention. Everything has an otherworldly aura, each space is both the

particular and the universal, and each person at once an individual and a symbol, an archetype, an avatar. "Africa," in Lawson's photographs, is unabashedly the site where diasporic longing, fantasy, and sentiment—after much journeying and seeking—finally converge and are fulfilled.

When I look at Lawson's women, for example, this sentimental instinct in me grows particularly strong. I see Nicole—"Nicole" (2016)—a young mother lounging provocatively on her own rug, her kid's toys piled up behind her, and up surge the catchphrases of the day: *slay, queen; you go, girl; you get yours*; and so on. But a picture like "Wanda and Daughters" (2009) defies such easy sloganeering. Wanda, in her mid-forties, is resting against a tree, while her two daughters rest on her. They are in the midst of nature but are dressed in their city best: gold hoops and silver rings for Wanda, perfectly braided hair with many-colored bows for her girls. Wanda has a face like thunder: I dare you to mess with her. Easy to think her a queen, or, if you prefer, an African lioness, protecting her cubs. But you can also read this photograph sequentially rather than sentimentally, moving from face to face, and find a more ambivalent story. Wanda's fierce gaze tells us that she has sampled the tree of knowledge, that she knows the ways of the world. She's known for a long time. But her melancholy firstborn is only just discovering how things are, and her younger daughter, with her beaming smile, is still (happily!) in that Eden of innocence in which Lawson has pointedly framed the three of them. Which raises the question: When we call black women queens or lionesses, or when we call Asian mothers tigers—or any of the other colorful terms we conjure up to describe minority women fighting the daily battles of their lives—what are we doing? We come to praise. But, at the same time, don't we bury—and implicitly sanction—the idea that a fierceness like Wanda's is the bare minimum needed to raise a black family? I'm again reminded of the ladies in Buck Ellison's pictures: languid, relaxed, sometimes a little bored, at worst a little impatient for the camera to go

*click*. They have not the slightest touch of fierceness about them. But, then, they have no need of it.

In the history of photography that has concerned itself with Africa and its diaspora, the concept of the portal has been central. In a newspaper, say, a photograph of a black subject is usually conceived as a window onto another world. Even the most well-meaning journalistic images of black life have the intention of enabling a passage, from the First World to the Third, for example, or from one side of the railway tracks to the other. It might be impossible for a black photographer in a largely white art world ever to wholly divest herself of this way of seeing, but in Lawson's "Portal" (2017) we come as close as I can imagine. What are we looking at? A ripped hole in a couch. That's all: no human figures, no other context. Just a hole in the kind of couch with which Lawson has made us, by now, very familiar. After staring at it awhile, you might notice that it is almost Africa-shaped, but what you see initially is its magical properties. Like the voodoo practitioners Zora Neale Hurston met in Haiti, Lawson has the rare capacity of being able to take an everyday domestic object and connect it to the spiritual realm. Her work does not show us "how the other half lives." Rather, it opens up a portal between the everyday and the sacred, between our finite lives and our long cultural and racial histories, between a person and a people. "Portal" presents, in abstract, what Lawson is doing in every other photograph:

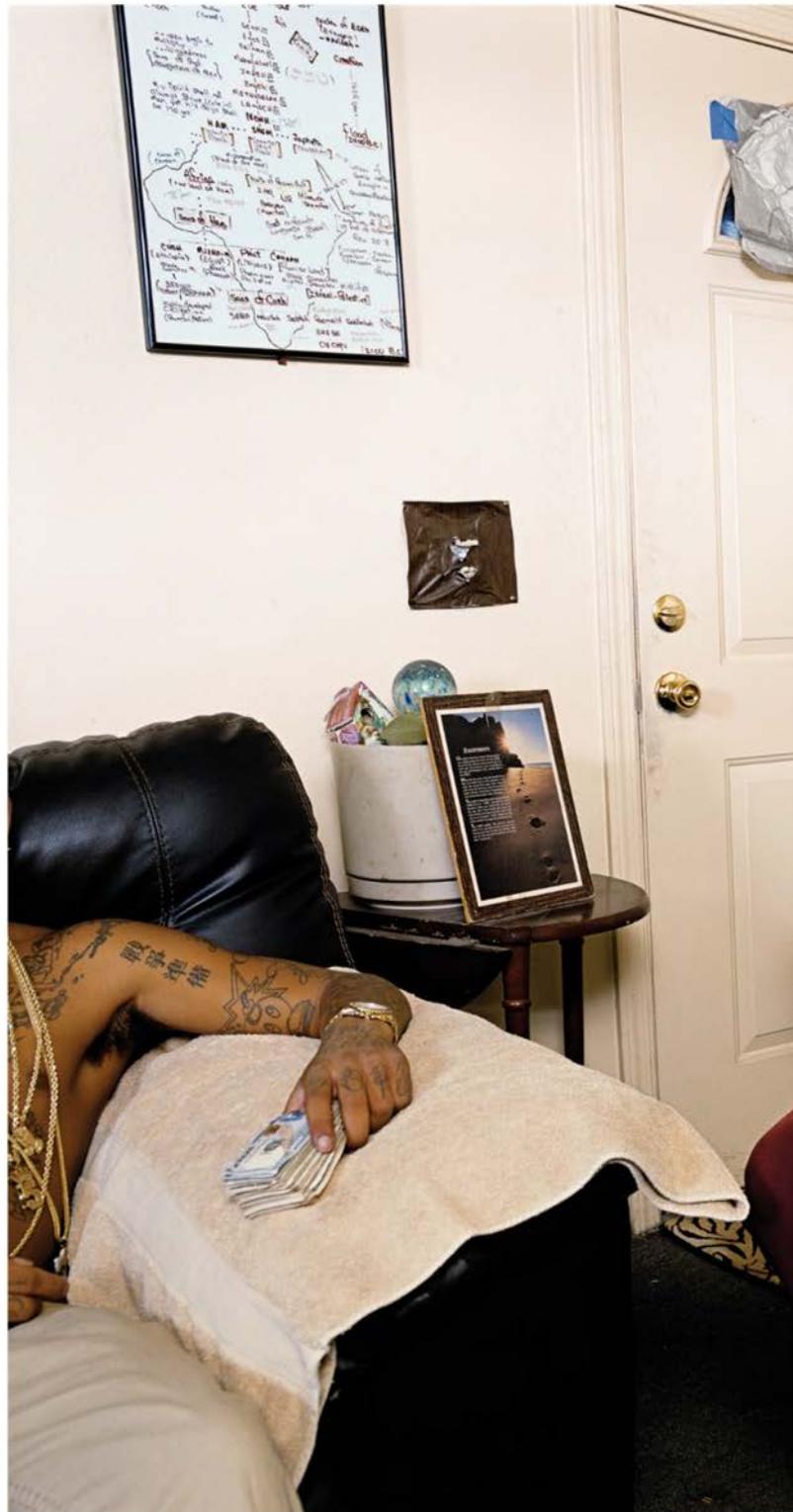
I feel a lot of the figures that I use, I want them to be like a pivotal point, or like a vehicle or a vessel for something else. Diane Arbus was always keen on this idea of what the photograph is and what it does. What you see in the photograph is one thing; the specifics or what it references or what it's symbolic of is greater than that. She said the subject is always more complex than the picture.

What you see is not what you get. We are more than can be seen. We are here and elsewhere. Some of Lawson's portals appear to facilitate a crossing over into the realm of myth and fable, especially in her pictures of young black men, whom she has several times photographed in groups, emerging from pitch-black backgrounds, like

figures painted by Caravaggio. Out of the void they come, riding in on horseback ("Cowboys," 2014) or throwing gang symbols with their hands ("Signs," 2016). Both idealized by Lawson (in their physical beauty) and pathologized by the culture (as symbols of violence or fear), they are largely liberated from the kinds of domestic circumstance and context in which Lawson tends to frame her women. Such images are transhistorical, transpersonal, transcendent, and take at least some of their inspiration from previous portals, as Lawson explains to Jafa:

Jorge Luis Borges and just his writing of "The Aleph," and the center of the world is pinpointed in the basement. Or, in "The Matrix," the oracle was the black woman in the kitchen smoking a cigarette and making cookies. Like, that's where, like, the shit is—the knowledge. That's the site of another dimension, maybe, but we don't know it. That information has been distorted. But if black folks really knew that, we'd just be on a different plane.

To reach this plane, you must pass through a portal—or maybe it's a veil, or a curtain. Where should you seek it? There are some obvious points of entry you might visit—funeral homes, voodoo festivals—but you should also try places more obscure: broken couches, broken blinds, broken windows. Don't give up. The reward will be great, once you arrive. In recent years, Lawson has begun explicitly framing this destination: she has taken a picture of a loving, naked couple in the lush Congolese forests, half hidden in the undergrowth ("The Garden," 2015) and another of beaux fondly clinging, half-dressed, posed together in tropical gardens ("Oath," 2013). These images are infused with a spirit of fantasy, set as they are in a dreamed-of Africa, an imagined and beloved homeland where harmony reigns, reunited souls pledge their troth, and glorious black bodies luxuriate, unashamed, in a natural environment. This isn't a practical or political reality but a state of mind, sacred precisely because it is literally unattainable and geographically fantastic. This Africa of the mind contains Detroit and Kingston and Port-au-Prince and Brownsville. It is eternal and everywhere. It is in all of us. It is the portal that leads us back to ourselves. ♦



"Sons of Cusb" (2016).

Smith, Zadie, "Through The Portal," *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2018, pp. 50-59

