“Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited ... a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible,” declared black historian bell hooks (who uses no capitalization with her name). “It is that act of speech, of ‘talking back’ ... that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice.” Drawing on the African American tradition of storytelling, Lorna Simpson juxtaposes cryptic symbolic narratives with spare, large-scale photographs to give blacks and females a voice—to let these culturally, historically, economically silent and passive individuals finally “talk back.”

The Brooklyn-born Simpson developed these distinct and challenging artworks, such as Outline, 1990, [see slide 19], after a period of exploration during the late 1970s, when she took documentary photographs in the United States, Europe, and Africa. She then studied photography at New York’s School of Visual Arts, receiving a B.F.A. in 1982, and at the University of California at San Diego, graduating with an M.F.A. in 1985. While in graduate school, she began to question the photograph’s ostensible objectivity. How “true” were documentary photographs? Didn’t prevailing historical and cultural conditions affect how people interpret them? This led her to examine the hidden meanings of photographs—which she called the “things that the photograph would not speak of and that I felt needed to be revealed, but that couldn’t be absorbed from just looking at an image.”

From these investigations evolved the hallmarks of Simpson’s probing, understated, and elegant style. Her focus is both on the image itself—as well as on the viewer. As she explains:

I started to concentrate more upon how the viewer looks at photographic images. I took elements from my own documentary work and abstracted particular qualities, putting them in very stark environments—meaning, perhaps, the way a person stands or a particular gesture—but leaving the photographic subject blank or not permitting the photographic subject’s face to appear. That way, all information or clues that point to a particular individual are eliminated from the image. From there, I would insert my own text or my own specific reading of the image to give the viewer something they might not interpret or surmise, due to their “educated” way of looking at images, and reading them for their emotional, psychological, and/or sociological values.

The Art Institute’s Outline, 1990, demonstrates Simpson’s conceptual approach. The image on the right features a figure that appears in many of Simpson’s photographs—an anonymous black woman, whose back is turned, resisting the viewer’s gaze. Although Simpson creates variations of this iconic image—some appear faceless, others with heads or eyes cropped.
off—the artist resolutely refuses to give the viewer any of the physical clues that have historically defined black and female bodies. “I made a conscious decision not to show anyone’s face,” she declared. “The viewer wants so much to see a face to read ‘the look in the eyes’ or the expression on the mouth. I want viewers to realize that this is one of the mechanisms ... which they use to read a photograph ... that they are making a cultural reading that has been learned over the years.”

To further eliminate physical clues, the model is minimally adorned, wearing a short natural hair cut and a plain black dress. Although she is presented close enough so that we can see freckles on her skin, even individual pores, these provide no answers, so we refer to the five plaques of printed text, which appear equally impersonal and enigmatic. They read: “lash,” “bone,” “ground,” “ache,” and “pay.”

The image on the left seems just as cryptic: a braid of hair, shaped like a U, and underneath, a single plaque that reads simply “back.” Simpson has evolved a repertoire of symbols or props that serve as stand-ins for the body. They include shoes, gloves, African masks, and the hair we see here. Hair is of particular interest to Simpson. As she explains: “Within racism’s ... codification of human values, black people’s hair has been historically devalued as the most visible sign of blackness, second only to skin.”

As in all of Simpson’s work, the viewer has an active role in deciphering, or decoding, the artwork’s message. But with the absence of a clear narrative, we are challenged to construct meaning by putting together the discrete parts and to go beyond our own preconceived ideas and value systems. With reference to the title Outline, if we look at the two images together, the braid of hair forms an outline, just as the model’s back in the right photograph is outlined. Then, combining the text panels that are appropriately placed down the model’s back, the resulting words—“backlash,” “backbone,” “background,” “backache,” “backpay”—provoke a number of strong associations about race and gender. They include themes Simpson examines throughout her work, such as origins, bodily functions, and job and financial discrimination. In Outline, Simpson has created a symbolic artwork that challenges the viewer to think beyond conventional, culturally conditioned interpretations of the issues and experiences involving the black and female today.

Because she has stripped away most physical details and attributes of her subjects, words have prominence in Simpson’s work. “In remembering the things I’ve read and the experiences that I’ve had,” she explains, “it’s the words, the things that are said, that stick in my mind.” In Flipside, 1991, the text reads: “The neighbors were suspicious of her hairstyle.” [See figure 22] Above, on the left, is again the image of the back-turned, simply
dressed, black female figure. This time, Simpson pairs her with a traditional African mask. Like the model, the mask is turned backwards—ready to be worn, in a sense, by our reflections. With its turned-up ends, the mask seems to wear a flipstyle hairdo, which was popular with both black and white women during the civil rights era of the early 1960s, when Simpson grew up.

In fact, the work has autobiographical roots, as do many of the photographer’s pieces. When Simpson was about ten years old, her mother began wearing an Afro hairdo, a symbol of solidarity, strength, and power among African Americans during the civil rights struggle. As Art Institute curator Sylvia Wolf explains in the children’s book Focus: Five Women Photographers (Albert Whitman & Co., 1994): “At the time, the Simpsons lived in a working-class black community in Queens, New York. To the neighbors, Lorna’s mother’s Afro was a political statement. It looked radical. It made them question who she was.”

Figure 22.
Lorna Simpson.
Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery,
New York.
The fact that the model wears a natural hairdo, and the traditional artifact wears the "artificial" straightened hair underscores the complicated relationship between American blacks and their African roots. As with Outline, this work also addresses racial and gender stereotypes—how women in particular are judged by how they look. And, like all of her pieces, "the work is not answer-oriented," says Simpson. "It's intentionally left open-ended. There's not a resolution that just solves everything."

Well before she was forty, Simpson's compelling photographs and installations received significant notice. In 1990, she became the first black woman to show in the noted Venice Biennale in Italy and at New York's Museum of Modern Art's Project series of exhibitions. Among her one-person exhibitions are those at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in 1993, and at the Whitney Museum of Art, New York, in 1994. Her work is in such major collections as the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota; the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut; and The Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, both in New York.

Although Simpson's conceptual works challenge and critique, they also have a restorative sense. As bell hooks proclaimed: "Within sexist racist iconography, black females are most often represented as mammies, whores or sluts. Caretakers whose bodies and beings are empty vessels to be filled with the needs of others. Against this backdrop of fixed colonizing images, Simpson constructs a world of black female bodies that resist and revolt, that intervene and transform, that rescue and recover."
Slide Nineteen: Lorna Simpson

1. Have students review the words “backlash,” “backbone,” “background,” “backache,” and “backpay” in this work by Simpson. What associations do these terms provoke about race and gender?

2. Refer to the five words in Simpson’s text panels and quoted in exercise #1. Are any of them suggested in the other works of African American art in this manual? How have various artists interpreted these loaded terms and communicated their significance?

3. Discuss the notion of a conceptual approach to art. How is the experience of viewing and understanding Outline different from that of looking at and comprehending work by Tanner, Motley, or Pippin? What must the viewer bring to each experience? Have students debate the artistic merit of Outline versus art that is narrative.

4. Simpson strives to give blacks and females a voice—to let these culturally, historically, economically silent and passive individuals finally “talk back.” Have each student pick one of the five words in Outline as the basis for a written or verbal monologue in which a fictional African American or woman “talks back” about his/her experience with the term.