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2013

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Recommended Citation
Raengo, A. (2013). In the Shadow. *Camera Obscura, 28*(2 83), 1-43. DOI: 10.1215/02705346-2209907

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In the Shadow

What makes 'black art' black? What functions have to be performed successfully in order to secure that identification?... And, What other kinds of work does the positive racial identification of an artwork permit one to do?

Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*

In the NAACP files at the Library of Congress, I found an unusual lynching photograph: an extremely high angle of a seemingly endless crowd crossed diagonally by the elongated shadow of a hanging body (figure1). Unlike most lynching photographs, made for and representing the point of view of the murderers, through this superimposed shadow, this image diverts the gaze away from the object of the spectacle—the lynching itself—to the spectators, therefore focusing on the formation of a white constituency, contemplating off-screen the necessary condition of its own making.

This photograph offsets and reverses the looking relations of the conventional lynching photograph which presents for the contemporary viewer the ethical dilemma of looking without seeing, and, for white viewers specifically, the need to disavow the interpellation to participate in the construction of whiteness fostered by the perpetrators' look at the camera.[1] Here, on the contrary, we see the crowd through the shadow's mediation of the lynched body. It is, in fact, a 'doctored' photograph—an artifact apparently created in the 1930s when the NAACP mounted massive anti-lynching campaigns[2]—which holds in tension several forms of non-coincidence: the 'blackness' in the image does not identify any specific body; the body that produced the shadow is not present in the same diegetic space as the crowd; and the shadow provides a place

of suspension, a placeholder for the viewer in the image, and therefore a meeting point between seer, seen, and scene. As a *trace of the body's elsewhere*, the shadow equally marks the body's projection into the social sphere and our viewing position: through our eyes, the victim can return the gaze, so to speak, and see the crowd's reaction to the spectacle of his death. On our part, we are both 'there,' hanging with the body, and safely outside the scene**.**

Unlike most lynching photographs, the present one has no evidentiary value regarding the specificity of this lynching. It is rather what WJT Mitchell would describe as a meta-picture,[3] capturing how lynching photographs "simultaneously make visible and proclaim invisible the lawless privilege of whiteness."[4] The function usually performed by the corpse, normally displayed front and center as "the negated other that frames, supports, and defines a white supremacist community," is performed instead by its shadow.[5] The effect is at least twofold: first, the location of the hanging body visualizes blackness as a place of difference. Second, the blackness of the shadow is racially agnostic insofar as it doesn't coincide with the blackness of the body. In fact, we are not given any visual—but only contextual—clues to determine the racial identity of the victim. Thus, the shadow challenges the possibility for blackness to act as a principle of intelligibility of this image because it un-hinges blackness from both the body and the content of the image. The photograph challenges the way we see blackness and race, and it shows that neither are properties of visual objects but rather ways of understanding relations in the visual field**.** Consequently, the very term 'blackness' here appears to take on a new responsibility: to signify a relation, rather than an object. In fact, what does the shadow's blackness *represent*? Otherwise stated, if race, as argues Hamza Walker in his introductory essay to the 2008 exhibition *Black Is Black Ain't*, "remains … unimaginable without the body," then how do we see it when the body is signified by something other than its flesh?[6]

Look, Mama: A Shadow!

To be sure, there are two bodies in this image: one is the body that has produced this superimposed shadow and the other is the body politic: i.e., the constituency that this punitive spectacle brings together. More importantly, blackness and whiteness do not simply belong to either, but they are rather fashioned in their interaction. This idea concretizes Toni Morrison's call for a literary criticism that would detect the labor that American literature has historically performed in order to disavow the way that the "Africanist" presence provides both the spark and the language for the (implicitly white) American literary imagination. In *Playing in the Dark*, she famously challenged the fact that race is considered a legitimate critical framework only in conjunction with literature *about* or *by* black people or in the presence of a recognizable blackness in the literary work. She asked: How does an utterly racialized society ignore the tremors that pervade the literary utterance in the attempt sometimes to accommodate and sometimes to deny a black presence? By way of an answer she offered the following observations:

> In matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate… To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a *shadowless* participation in the dominant cultural body.[7]

Morrison's image is poignant: to ignore the formative role of race in literary whiteness is like robbing the black body of its shadow.

Morrison expresses the way in which whiteness and blackness mutually author each other as an effect of light—not as a materially lodged and recognizable *difference*, but as a circumstantial and impalpable *differential*. Her statement allows us to draw a connection between the two bodies in the lynching photograph, maintaining in tension a racialized reading of the shadow (which leverages its visible blackness to provide an often used trope of race) and the possibility of regarding the shadow's indexicality as a claim to a substantial and undeniable presence. The performances of the index, the formal properties of this picture, as well as the image-states that it puts into play (namely the shadow, the silhouette, and photography itself) frame the questions that I want to raise in this essay.[8] What is the blackness of black cinema?[9] Where do we locate it? How do we identify it? What are its conditions of (critical) visibility?[10] This photograph, in other words, can offer a theoretical leverage to challenge the fact that too often the critical reception of the blackness of black art is based on the deceptively simple, and yet enduring, assumption that black art is made by "people whose skins happen to be black."[11] And yet, why should the blackness of black art coincide with the blackness of the body? Moreover, why should such blackness provide the only principle of intelligibility for black art? (34).

These are some of the questions that Darby English raises in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, where he notices how 'black' works of art are still explained by the way in which they make race visible or understandable. They are still quarantined within what he calls a "black representational space" in which the question of representativity (what has been conceptualized as the burden of representation)[12] is tied to the mandate to be *representational*. Black art, in other words, is faced with an injunction to *portray*, if not the 'black condition,' at least the subject position of its maker. Although originated within art criticism at the beginning

of the twentieth century "when black art became part of a political program of uplift," such a naturalized discourse of belonging, he argues, continues to act as a form of "tactical segregation" because it separates "from works of art elements of their informing contexts that reflect interest in issues other than race" (11). Thus, problematically, this discourse exercises a *descriptive*, as well as a *prescriptive* function. For English, the designation 'black' for black art robs the works of precisely their complexity as 'art.' I argue that this is often true for black cinema as well: however we tentatively define the 'black' of black cinema (as subject matter, ideological alignment, social function, racial identity of the author, etc.), once it appears next to the term cinema, the latter is immediately burdened with the expectation to reveal a racial referent.

Such expectation of transparency is modeled after the seeming self-evidence of black skin as index of race. The body, in other words, continues to perform a central role in the conceptualization of the blackness of a cultural utterance, remaining its anchoring authorial and authorizing force and the primary template for its readings. "Look, a Negro!": like the blackness of the body, the blackness of black cinema or art is "imagined to provide a visual gift to its perceiver and a stable habitus to its inhabitant" (35). But is that so? English turns precisely to Frantz Fanon, for whom the black body constitutes the black representational space *par excellance*, to conceptualize a relationship between racialization and (art) spectatorship that would instead foreground the instability and in-betweenness of blackness.

Let us consider, then, once again, Fanon's primal scene. In seeing the reaction he causes in the child ("Mama, I'm frightened"), the narrator of *Black Skins White Masks* is given back an image of himself that is available to no one: not to the child who has projected it, and not to the narrator who can only see its effect reflected onto the child's reaction to it. "Nowhere does Fanon's text itself confuse or elide this blackness with a body or an object…. Rather, Fanon

describes the space of racialization as a makeshift dwelling 'weaving me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.'"[13] This, for English, is the central gain of Fanon's theorization: the fact that, suspended between reflection and projection, Fanon locates "blackness in the place between the interpellator and the interpellated" (English, 37). Crucially, as much as Fanon describes the discovery of his epidermality as 'being fixated by a dye," he also accounts for blackness as formed *in*, not simply *as*, difference. Blackness, in Fatimah Tobing Rony's words, is an "uncomfortable suspension" between a negated recognition as Self and the impossibility to identify as Other.[14]

Taking Morrison's and English's positions as points of departure, my concern in this essay is to explore blackness as an occurrence rather than a property, an in-betweenness rather than a localizable fact, a visual relation rather than a visual object. Otherwise stated, in pursuing a way to understand the "blackness" of black cinema and art, it is important to recognize and yet resist, or at least problematize, the tendency for "blackness" to attach to something (whether it is a body, an object, or a cultural expression)—the tendency, which this shadow displays but does not fulfill, to seek a place to land, a surface to mark, a body to identify. To do so, we need to look at how blackness is signified within the visual forms that have historically given substance to an optical approach to race: i.e., the forms (such as the shadow, the silhouette, and the photograph) that constitute what, paraphrasing Ian Baucom, can be called the Long Photographic Century.[15]

Shadow Archives

The NAACP photograph literalizes, without submitting to, what Allan Sekula has very productively theorized as a shadow archive.[16] Yet it also offers the opportunity to expand this

notion's theoretical reach to suggest the paradigmatic function that the shadow performs in theories of the visual as the prototype of the inalienable sign. The shadow, Victor Stoichita argues, offers a counter-paradigm to the more influential Platonic model of the mirror (think of the impact of Plato's cave in classical film theory) within which the visual is understood as having the ontological substance of a mere resemblance, as a copy, not a trace, of the real. "If, in the Plinian tradition," writes Stoichita, "the image is *the other of the same,* then in Plato the image is the same in a copy state, *the same* in *a state of double.*"[17] Sekula's terrain is photography and, in particular, the social uses of the medium in the context of bourgeois portraiture, on the one hand, and the employment of photography for purposes of social surveillance, on the other. In his work, the 'shadow' stands for the unacknowledged, sinister, and yet enabling counterpart to the self-image of the bourgeois subject.

The shadow is an index that presupposes the presence of the body that projects it. It is a sign of presence and existence: there is no shadow without a body. Yet in being overlaid at a later time on top of an already existing photograph of a crowd, the shadow in the NAACP photograph signifies at all times both presence and absence. Its indexicality functions primarily deictically, as a pointed finger, gesturing beyond itself to its source, which as Mary Ann Doane reminds us, was always part of Peirce's conception of the index as both a trace and a shifter.[18] It is this second modality of the index that is more powerfully mobilized here: this shadow does not deliver the body that has cast it, but only gestures to its presence in an unspecified elsewhere.

'Shadow' has been frequently used as a euphemism for race in relation to the body politic. 'Shadow' has described the 'ghost in the machine,' the way in which race cuts across the American screen, the return of the (racial) repressed, the doppelgänger, and the Other of the self.[19] Further, 'shadow' is a term that has been used to indicate photography itself, seen as the

"art of fixing" what is essentially ephemeral and fleeting. In its social uses, it can describe the practice of enlisting photographic indexicality to create the effect that race is equally indexical, thus understanding the epidermis as a quasi-photographic plate.[20] From an indexical standpoint, in fact, not only do race and photography share a similar semiotic grid, but they have given each other substance: just like the epidermal signifier seems to brand the body with the marks of race and to index the body's location within a visual archive that trades in surface signs, so the photographic trace seems to brand the real within a regime of image-ness that lays claims to an ontological connection between its surface existence as a visual object and the historical depth—the 'reality'—from which it has apparently sprung. In particular, from a socio-political standpoint, the lynching photograph functioned as a relic, insofar as it was used as a substitute for the material possession of scraps of cloth, skin, or hair. "The lynching photograph," writes Nicholas Mirzoeff, is "that which made the *index of race adhere to its object*. It created another still more shadowy, even *hooded* archive of race, housed in the mantelpieces and in the desk drawers across the United States."[21]

Yet, because of its formal properties—i.e., the fact that this specific shadow, unattached to a visible black body, seems to index not the particularity of race but existence itself —the NAACP photograph unsettles the perverse indexicality of lynching photography: the way in which the materiality of the referent and the materiality of the photograph typically double each other.[22] On the contrary, its highly geometrical composition and the relationship between background and foreground invites a formal and aesthetic reading of the image, one that considers the shadow not only deictically, as an evidentiary index of an off-screen body that has been lynched, but also as its severed and man-made durable reproduction—i.e., as a silhouette.[23]

The Silhouette as Racialized Space

In the silhouette, the body has fully vacated the sign—dissolved in the abstract iconicity of its contour—and has left behind a blackness, which is not necessarily a phenotypical mark, but rather the detachable trace of its past presence and current absence. As Mitchell reminds us, the scene of origin of the plastic arts revolves around a woman's attempt to preserve the likeness of her departing lover by drawing the outline of his projected shadow.[24] As much as this fixation brings the image of the lover to life in a material reproduction of his likeness, it already mourns its model's death. It is this paradox of the durable possession of the sign of an absence—a tension between a fullness and a void—that found expression in the use of the silhouette as cheaper and portable form of bourgeois portraiture. In this context, the blackness of the silhouette was not racially coded but instead connoted a vacated space of subjectivity filled with the accruement of social status, which "promised to fix and franchise one's humanism."[25] That is, the blackness of the silhouette functioned as both a signifier of *emptiness*, insofar as it indexes the absence of the body, and of the *fullness* projected by the lover's desire to transform a *hole* into the possibility of *wholeness*. Within the bourgeois context of portraiture, in other words, the blackness of the silhouette performed *fetishistically*—and, as Homi Bhabha has influentially argued, also *stereotypically*—because the sign of a bodily absence was transfigured into a mark of personhood through the affective work of sentimental memory and nostalgia.[26]

In the context of the social sciences, the blackness of the silhouette was instead heavily racially coded. What Joann Caspar Lavater called the silhouette's "modesty" and its "weakness"—that is, its lack of texture and detail—made it the most suitable form of representation for physiognomic analysis. It provided an abstract map of the body onto which it was seemingly possible to 'read,' but in reality project, an imagined relationship between its

inside and its outside, its outward characteristics and its interior essence.[27] Within the paradigm of the social sciences, the blackness of the silhouette came to indicate the writing of nature in two ways: one that provides the body with a shadow, from which the silhouette is then derived, and the other that provides race with its epidermal signifier, the blackness of the skin. As meeting point between mimesis and contiguity, the blackness of the silhouette became a racially overdetermined index: on the one hand, it operated as a mimicry of the chromatic attributes of certain bodies' skin, and, on the other, it was the signifier of the Other of the body—its indirect presence under the form of the shadow. This double ontology accounts for the silhouette's overdetermination in relation to the *substance* it indexes as well, which is simultaneously *carnal*, because the silhouette is used to map those bodies that do not have access to the disembodied notion of personhood underlying bourgeois subjectivity, and *categorical*, because of its function as a criterion of classification of a subject's position within the Great Chain of Being. The silhouette of the social sciences, in other words, is phenomenologically 'thick': it is burdened with the 'spectral' presence of the white male normative body while being filled with the carnality of the racial Other.

Silhouette artist Kara Walker has extensively explored the meeting point between these two traditions. Walker's installations are made of life-size, black paper cutouts glued onto the gallery walls. The scenes of plantation life that they depict have been described as unspeakable, traumatic, and disturbingly grotesque.[28] Iconographically violent and highly controversial, her silhouettes are worth reflecting on in this context precisely because of their blackness: in most of Walker's installations, everybody is black.[29] This blackness, however, is not a portrayal of the bodies' phenotypes but rather the reified version of their evacuated index. They are a durable (but also confrontational) version of the blackness of the shadow. What shocks about Walker's

work—besides the visualization of a deep complicity, what Sharpe has called a "monstrous intimacy" in the social relations of slavery, or the multiple violations of the body across race, gender, and age—is the fact these figures are all too recognizable: at first iconographically and then because they inhabit several representational modes, spaces, and traditions at once. It is the violent collision of the silhouettes' pristine and abstract forms with the carnality evoked by these bodies' behaviors and their compulsive penetrations that manifests the double legacy of her figures: the use of the silhouette as a form of portraiture and its use by institutions and disciplines for social control.

Tellingly, one of the most pressing questions among interpreters of Walker's work has been how to describe the ontological status of her figures. Simply put, these are highly unstable figures that are obviously cut from black paper, but, because of Walker's craftsmanship, they are so naturalistically rendered that at times they can appear as cast shadows. Their contours are so vivid, their actions so troubling that they do feel (indexically) attached to some-body. Thus, in Walker's work, indexicality becomes linked to spatial relations of identity and difference. How can her figures be so fleshed out and yet so abstract? So carnal and yet so iconic? Her work extends indexicality from a temporal and existential order of signification (in which the index is the present sign of a past state of affairs, the 'having-been-there' of the object that asks: is/was a body there?) to a spatial one, which involves both presence and contiguity (and if so, where?). Hence, more than posing only a semiotic question (is the image a trace?), the index raises a question of *self* and *other*. This is further complicated by tensions existing along other axes as well: the temporal, the existential, the mimetic, and so on. Are her figures copies or originals? Inventions or citations? Reflections or projections?[30]

In this way, Walker's figures literalize Sekula's shadow archive by pressing on the question of indexicality as contiguity. Consider, for example, how this *Untitled* paper cutout (figure 2) mobilizes both paradigms: on the left-hand side, we can see the profile of a European man and, on the right-hand side, a female 'primitive' standing back to back with him.[31] Here Walker shows how the bourgeois portrait is materially inseparable and visually indistinguishable from the shadow archive of race science. It is, in fact, its condition of possibility: the white normative body is always haunted by the remnants of the Other's flesh, precisely because its abstraction is made possible by the Other's overembodiment. This image offers a visual counterpart to Bhabha's claim that, in the colonial framework, the representative figure of the Manichean delirium of black and white is the Enlightenment man *tethered* to the shadow of the colonized man.[32] Importantly, it shows how both traditions of silhouette use meet in the same blackness.

Throughout her work, Walker emphasizes the shadow's inalienable contiguity to the body to which it belongs, raising the question of the presence of the body as the source of the image and of the image as the body's trace. Each of her figures scandalously reveals its own archival position within the history of visuality, hence behaving as a scene of constant reversibility between an indexical and an iconic order of signification as well as a theater of desire suspended between a fullness and a lack: the blackness of Walker's silhouettes relentlessly pursues a condition of both/and, precisely an *in-betweenness*.

Walker's interpretation of the lynching image, in particular, emphasizes these paradoxes by addressing the question of presence (not only the presence *of* the image, or the presence of the world *in* the image, but also our presence *to* the image). The *Untitled* gauche of figure 3, for example, combines multiple states of the image laying on both sides of an implied photographic

surface, which then appears no longer as a protective screen, but rather as a permeable membrane. If we look carefully, we can see that the diegetic source of light is located behind the bodies. The figures on the left side of the image are white because rendered as cutouts, a void, within the thick darkness of the night. On the right side, instead, the moonlight partly blocked and partly filtering through the holes of a charred body makes clear that it is present as a mass and positioned directly before the viewer. In this case, the silhouette effect is produced by overexposure, by how the body blocks the light, thus placing us, at least for this half of the image, in an uncomfortable proximity with it. The lynched body as ultimate bearer of the racial index is made visible through a representational form that mimics the photographic process, while the use of the cut-out on the other side of the image comments on the figures' socio-historical invisibility in the dark night of racial oppression. Produced as effects of different regimes of representation, the bodies' racial 'blackness' forms *in* difference, as a product of the gestalt of the image.

Walker's work suggests that the structural asymmetry between the inside and outside of the body in the last instance reflects the structural asymmetry of race. Background and foreground, inside and outside, fullness and void, presence and absence: the relationship between these poles still depends on the interaction between blackness and whiteness, as conditions of legibility of images as such—but unequal ones. Blackness, in fact, is always susceptible of being a signifier of depth as well as of surface—the surface of some-*body*. By highlighting the phenotype as a screen of projection and reflection, Walker identifies the epidermality of race as a hermeneutic of the surface that predates and supports those developed in the late nineteenth century, namely X-ray photography, psychoanalysis, and the cinema.[33] She locates racial epidermality at the heart of the Long Photographic Century.

Modernism and Racial Gestalt

That the silhouette can afford a way to signify the body while bypassing its epidermality was clear to several visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance, a time of consolidation as well as contestation of the "black representational space," with high expectations placed upon black artists to express their racial identity in their work. During the period of high modernism in African American art, the silhouette became a privileged from of expression of the New Negro. Visual artist Aaron Douglas, for example, employed it to illustrate Alain Locke's eponymous anthology of African American writings, as well as in his murals, representing scenes of Negro life from African civilization, through the Middle Passage and bondage, to the experience of freedom and the entrance into North American modernity.[34] Even though schooled in the tradition of the ethnographic portrait of Winold Reiss, Aaron Douglas's silhouettes are modeled not after ethnographically defined bodies but after art styles: the posture is inspired by Egyptian art, the slit eyes by African masks, and their graphic qualities by art deco. Furthermore Douglas's distinctive use of rays of light to create multiple planes in the image is stylistically reminiscent of cubism but performs a rather different function: that of elevating the image to a metaphysical space where various historical temporalities and geographical and social spaces freely coexist. Douglas's silhouettes thus do not portray African American people, but rather express African American contributions as cultural and historical forces in the making of Western modernity.

More striking, in keeping with the formal emphasis of the present inquiry into the blackness of the silhouette, is Richard Bruce Nugent's use of blackness and whiteness in his *Drawings for Mulattoes*.[35] His lexicon gestures toward the primitivist inclinations of modernism insofar as he models his rendering of physiognomic traits not after the scientific paradigm but rather after African masks (figure 4). More importantly, he effects an ironic reversal of the

chromatic codes of racial identity—the African mask on the left is white, and the Caucasian profile on the right is black—and of their imagined settings with palm trees for the 'Caucasian' side and icons of urban modernity on the 'African' side. This reversed mapping of color onto race creates a perceptually shifting relationship between foreground and background, thus making the viewer aware of how blackness and whiteness alternate as the conditions of visibility of the figures. It is the gestalt of the image that carries the index of race, not any one of the featured bodies. Nugent's *Drawings* are addressed to mulattoes, the paradigmatic problem citizens, as Lauren Berlant has put it, because their racial identity is not satisfactorily evident to the "legal mind."[36] Nugent provides a chromatically polarized rendition of the visually ambiguous racial identity of the mulatto in order to reclaim blackness and whiteness as symbolic constructs and two coexisting but also performative polarities. The racial connotations of the two profiles have been scrambled so that an expected contour does not match its expected color, and a certain surface does not lead to its expected depth.

But even here we are forced to wonder: How do we eventually see race in this image? What makes the blackness of one profile *the* signifier of racial blackness? What processes, assumptions, or interpretive grids do we have to mobilize in order to attribute a definite racial identity to any one of the formal elements of this work? The blackness of Nugent's *Drawings for Mulattoes*, I am inclined to conclude, wants to float away from the body and become a pure signifier of difference. Within Nugent's medium, this is conceptually bold but also easily achieved. But under what circumstances can photography attain the same effect?

The Long Photographic Century

This modernist process of color reduction—i.e., the handling of color as a purely chromatic, rather than racial, signifier—is also at work in the independently produced film *Suture* by filmmakers Scott McGhee and David Siegel (US, 1993).[37] The film's plot revolves around two look-alike, estranged half brothers who reconnect at their father's funeral. One, powerful and wealthy Vincent, is suspected of having killed his father. To escape the criminal investigation, he stages his own death by car accident and engineers a way for his working-class half brother Clay to occupy the car. The accident, however, is only partially successful, and Clay survives even though he is disfigured and suffers from amnesia. A tabula rasa inside and out, he is sutured back together—both physically by plastic surgeon Renée Descartes, who reconstructs his image by studying photographs and footage of Vincent, and psychologically by psychiatrist Dr. Max Shinoda—and made to take on the identity of Vincent. Even though the film describes the brothers as "identical," they are respectively played by a white and by a black actor: Michael Harris and Dennis Haysbert. Shot in black and white, the film presents a relentlessly polarized visual scheme to offer the spectator a visible difference between the two characters that, however, the film's diegesis disavows: nobody in the film appears to realize that the two half brothers look nothing alike. Furthermore, as only the spectators can see, the 'suturing' process undertaken to restore Vincent's image and identity is actually taking place on the body and memory of Clay. In turn, Clay exists only in representations of his brother.

My reading of *Suture* begins with the observation that, if the film can use the epidermal signifier merely as a marker of 'difference,' this is because this coding has been fully naturalized. But why is that so? What kind of visual culture, logics of seeing, regimes of signification are needed for that to be the case? What are the epistemological, but also disciplinary, formations that sustain this mapping of the visual field? *Suture* undertakes a characteristically modernist

agenda: to wreck a crisis in the unity of the subject by attacking identity through the very notion of the identical. Yet, by visualizing difference so—in a way that is not recognized within the diegesis and is instead only evident to the spectator—the film relies on skin color as the most effective (and arbitrary, albeit naturalized) signifier of difference, as well as on the racial gestalt of the Long Photographic Century (i.e., the way in which the photographic reproduction of the black body has historically appeared to give substance to the 'reality' of race).

Suture is an essay film conversant, as the title suggests, with Apparatus and Suture Theory, but also firmly located within a neo-noir cinematic style. In fact, alongside the expressionistic reliance on the graphic properties of the *mise-en-scène* to convey interior states, the erudite citation of psychoanalytic discourse, and some of its visual tropes (the oneiric *décor* and the surrealist dream sequences reminiscent of the Dalì-Hitchcock collaboration in *Spellbound*, for example), the high contrast cinematography entertains a direct dialogue with the racialized aesthetics of film noir. As emphasized by scholars such as Eric Lott, Manthia Diawara, and Dan Flory, film noir deploys a visual style that translates the "racial unconscious" of the genre into elements of the cinematography and the *mise-en-scène* as a chromatic play of darkness and light, blackness and whiteness.[38]

This fact, however, is not clearly acknowledged by the film. On the contrary, the film appears to want to live on its surface. From the beginning, it is visually polarized. The film opens proleptically, anticipating a decisive event that will occur later in the narrative: Vincent breaks into his own house—now occupied by Clay—to kill him. Formally, the sequence establishes a crucial visual and chromatic symmetry sustained for the remainder of the film: a close up of a hand picking up a rifle, for instance, is matched to the close shot of another hand carrying a gun; a white man dressed in black is crosscut to a black man in white pajama pants and undershirt,

shot against an optic white background. This rhyming editing structure finally leads to a perfectly vertical and emphatically polarized two-shot which concludes with an explosion and a quick fade to black (figure 5). Flattened against a mottled background, the actors's bodies are employed as pure chromatic poles to visualize a split identity. Furthermore, the image creates the same instability between foreground and background, inside and outside that characterizes Nugent's *Drawings* as well as Walker's silhouettes, thus challenging what Brian Price summarizes as "the priority of line (or drawing) over color, and the enforced integration of figure and ground in realist production, and in Western optics more generally."[39]

Doctor of the mind Max Shinoda's voice-over superimposed to this opening sequence presents the concept of identity as a stable core, an uninterrupted connection with one's past, a form of permanence guaranteed by the presence of schemata (i.e., structures of knowledge that have the ability to assure continuity between the present, the past, and the future). He says:

> How is it that we know who we are? We might wake up in the night disoriented about where we are; we might have forgotten …who is sleeping beside us….However confused we might be … we always know that it is us….Because the knowledge of who we are is mediated by what we, doctors of the mind, call our self-schemata… These are the structures that connect to our past and allow us to imagine our future. To lose these connections would be a sign of pathology… called amnesia…

As articulated through Dr. Shinoda's words, the film conceptualizes identity as dependent on a historical continuum. As the film unfolds, however, we will realize that what is being discussed and threatened is not merely the unity of the person but also the concept of the *identical* and its complementary pole, the idea of *difference*.

For the film *Suture*, the filmmakers claimed to have been driven by the desire to explore questions of identity (as individuality) and difference and to have chosen for this reason to utilize "color blind casting," a disclaimer that is necessary only when color is so conspicuously at stake.[40] What we are forced to appreciate, though, is that the film utilizes the epidermal signifier as a self-evident insignia of difference. Clay's blackness, above and beyond the audience's knowledge that he is the wrong man, demands that viewers respond to the film's images from a position of color blindness. The film thus un-sutures its spectator, who is constantly forced to imagine a visual identity between the two characters that the film does not provide.

This is particularly evident in the scene in which surgeon Descartes removes stitches from Clay's face while he confesses to her his fear of having indeed killed his father. In trying to assure the person whom she believes to be Vincent of his innocence in his father's death, Descartes voices the language and epistemology of the indexicality of Social Darwinism, thus mapping onto Clay's body the signs of an interior essence. "Vincent … you have far too elegant a nose to have shot someone. You have what they call a Greco-Roman nose: sleek, with a small prominence at the bridging point. Physiognomists were sure that people with Greco-Roman noses were inclined towards music, literature, and the arts. Definitely not deviant behavior like killing people," she tells him while the camera is fixed on their close up, and her careful removal of Clay's stiches commands the viewer's haptic engagement with his flesh (figure 6). In appealing to physiognomy and its underlying assumption of a correspondence between appearance, character traits, and moral values, Descartes argues that the exteriority (contradicted by the image and therefore rendered irrelevant) adequately reflects interiority and that classical beauty equals moral good. Racial signifiers are detached from their reference to a supposed life-world and operate instead as pure signifiers of difference. Furthermore, not only are spectators

expected somehow to imagine a supra-racial visual identity between Vincent and Clay, but, because of the relentless chromatic polarization of the image in a stark black and white cinematography, color blindness is also a position that the image emphatically contradicts.

Suture is both dependent on, and critical of, a racialized map of the visual, which it engages through a visual conceit that simultaneously mobilizes resemblance and dissemblance. "In the domain of film," writes Marcie Frank, "the problem of looking alike is often presented as the problem of being alike, for film techniques can create resemblances where none exists."[41] This is a claim made in relation to David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988), but it is relevant here to appreciate the wedge that *Suture* places in between the body as bearer of race and its color as mere signifier of difference. By casting actors who do not look alike as characters who do, the film embraces dissemblance as a way to expose the simulacral (and hence social) roots of resemblance. The film's blackness is tucked away in between the two: it cannot be equated to a body, but it is rather an unstable relation rendered as an attribute of the surface of the image.

As much as blackness appears almost overlaid on top of the filmic image (just like how, in the previously discussed NAACP photograph, the lynching shadow is overlaid on top of the crowd), it remains unsatisfactory to read this film as a pure stylistic exercise in chromatic polarizations. Underneath the film's surface, in fact, Clay's body is phenomenologically fleshed out. The film strives to fashion for him a coherent living body that experiences things and objects independently from his 'racial' identity. When Dr. Shinoda takes Clay home from the hospital, he tells him: "Try to feel what it is like to be home. Help your body to remember." He mentions staying open and receptive to the "free association of body and memory": "There are triggers here […] Your memory is here. I promise you." The idea is that the body will find its bearing and inner sense of itself by experiencing its relationship to objects and that the skin is not just a

chromatically marked surface but also the border that feels—the site at which the body interacts with the social space and becomes conscious of itself. In this way, *Suture* suggests that racialized identity (or its disavowal) emerges between image and history, interiority and exteriority, the body and the space into which it projects its shadow.

Shadowboxing

The way in which *Suture* seems to long for ways of understanding the phenomenology of racial embodiment prompts me to return to the critical productivity of the visual paradigm of the shadow, but this time, from a phenomenological standpoint. The shadow, in fact, is an indication of the body's extension into its surroundings and therefore calls attention to the spaces and modes of interaction between bodies and to the idea, as I have been arguing, that blackness exists in-between them. The shadow is a figuration of the body's skin, understood phenomenologically as a flexible, porous, and constantly redefined boundary between self and other, impression and expression, inside and outside. Thus it reminds us that the boundaries of our bodies are never securely given but are instead always negotiated in the interactions we entertain with other bodies.[42] More broadly, the shadow can be leveraged to think about states of the image that are precarious, fleeting, tethered, and oblique. In fact, as discussed in relation to the NAACP image, the shadow cannot, other than ideologically or contextually, be connected to a body's pigmentation. In general, the shadow indexes temporal presence (the shadow is here as long as the body is here) but spatial removal (the body is not here, in this shadow; rather it is *elsewhere*, where the shadow comes from). Therefore, on the one hand, the shadow is tethered insofar as it always has a clear point of origin that temporally coexists with the body on the historical-existential plane. On the other hand, the shadow is the trace of a body's oblique extension

beyond itself by means of light. The body is not *in* the shadow, in its projection, and yet the shadow doubles the body, extending its reach and locating it in two places at the same time. Thus, even though indexical, the shadow is more a shifter than a trace, more a deferral than a referral, more of an affect than a sign function. This is why, as signified by the shadow, race appears more prominently to inhabit the *state* and not the content of the image.

This fact offers a productive interpretive angle to make sense of Lee Daniels's film *Shadowboxer* (2005). *Shadowboxer* tells the story of the complex relationship between Mikey (played by Cuba Gooding Jr.) and Rose (Helen Mirren), an unconventional couple of professional killers. Rose is terminally ill but agrees to perform one last job. Unbeknownst to them, the target is a pregnant woman (Vicki), yet Rose decides to spare and care for her, together with her male child. After Rose's death, Mikey will step in as the provider, the boy's father figure, and, eventually, Vicki's partner as well.

From its title, *Shadowboxer* announces its engagement with the image state of the shadow and the fleeting presence of the body in it. Shadowboxing is a training in which one boxes without an opponent or, rather, with an opponent who is merely conjured up by the moves that the boxer makes. Formally, shadowboxing offers a spiraling embrace between the phantom substance of a ghostly opponent and the fullness of the boxer's body in exertion—punching, skipping, dodging, sweating, etc. Thus, it draws a continuum between the phantasmatic and the fleshy, which the film *Shadowboxer* also inhabits at multiple and interlocking levels. The film offers an oscillatory movement between image states, which might be seen as exemplified, on the one hand, by the silhouetted form of Cuba Gooding Jr.'s body and, on the other, by the statuary fullness of his nude shots. Similarly, the film unfolds across visual registers of varying densities: the decadent noir style of its interiors, where baroque sets and oversaturated colors

envelop the characters and the viewer in a suffocatingly lush ambiance; the soft focus Impressionistic aesthetics of its open-air locations; and the sharply defined neo-classical architecture of some of its urban locations.

The film opens with a typical 'primal scene' of initiation to a criminal life: young Mikey's firsthand experience of his father's gun against the backdrop of spousal abuse. As much as this opening follows a somewhat conventional plot line of the 'Noir by Noirs' genre, it also dramatically deviates from it, since young Mikey inherits not just the career of a professional hit man but also his father's romantic companion, Rose. Mikey and Rose stand at the heart of a highly uncomfortable yet entrenched scene of exchange between incest and miscegenation, which have been regarded as part and parcel of the national family romance.[43] The relationship between Rose and Mikey, however, develops in unusual directions: the 'predator' here is not the patriarchal male but a dying and therefore infertile white woman, while the 'victim' is a young black male.[44] Thus the specter of miscegenation is overshadowed by the specter of Rose's pedophilia and Mickey's necrophilia, by their non-normative relationship, and by the plethora of other interracial and unconventional couplings in the film.

Seemingly incompatible roles, just like seemingly incompatible visual styles, are joined paratactically so that the film unfolds along a series of acts of transference and becoming. For example, the film uses reflected images so that distinct elements, which in the *mise-en-scène* stand on opposite sides of the camera, can be seen in the same frame with a soft-edged split screen effect. In the opening, young Mikey first shares the frame with a painting of the Christ hanging on the wall of his parents' dimly lit living room; he then shares the frame with his father through their reflection in the same mirror. When Mickey shoots his father's gun at the mirror, the boy's image is shattered, leaving the father's intact. Once the mother enters the scene from

the left—her shadow preceding her down the stairs—the camera slowly pans to the right to a blurred shadow of the father's head, and then, once the religious image begins to appear on the right of the frame, the boy's close up comes to occupy the father's shadow, therefore sharing the frame with the picture of Christ. In this brief scene, the question of lineage, criminal pedigree, and the Law of the Father are addressed through a series of fluid transitions, moving through first the mirror (as locus of the Ideal Ego but also as site of projection of a fantasized parricide), then the shadow (as the fleeting sign of the Father's presence eventually visually occupied by the son), and finally their suggested parallelism through the split screen effect (figure 7).

Similarly, the opening credits begin over a series of dissolves, proleptically anticipating narrative moments we will see later in the film. Like panels of sheer fabric being layered onto each other, these phantasmatic screens mimic the evanescent substance of the shadow until they slowly begin to stabilize on the right half of the frame, onto the silhouetted figure of the shadowboxer (figure 8). As he throws his punches against continuously changing phantasmatic opponents—the still dissolving images on the left side of the frame, continuing the soft-edged paratactic form of the prologue—his silhouettes linger, multiplying in slow motion, until they slowly coalesce around his body, now fully lit, in a final shot of his torso as he turns frontally and looks toward the camera.

This aesthetic structure, oscillating between various fleeting doubles of the body and the body's fully fleshed-out presence, runs through the entire film. Likewise, it is unclear as to whether Mikey is best understood as the boxer or the shadow, since his identity and motivations are never clearly identified. His life is haunted by multiple ghosts, most prominently that of his father, lingering across a series of acts of transference. There is not only the transference whereby Rose—originally his father's lover and, as we find out later, also his killer—becomes

Mikey's mother figure (replacing the mother that had been killed by Mikey's father) and later his lover, but also the transference that Rose enacts when she decides to spare Vicki's life, deliver her baby, and then provide for her safety and the upbringing of her (male) child. This child, whom, before her death, Rose entrusts to Mikey and who grows up believing Mikey to be his father, will be haunted by his own father who he will eventually kill, thus repeating, but this time literally, the metaphorical parricide of the film's prologue.

Symptomatically, in *Shadowboxer*, evil and violent fathers die mercilessly shot from behind, a fact that connects to a series of figurative and literal anal penetrations in the film; in contrast, Gooding's naked behind, as I will discuss below, is repeatedly offered as beautifully intact (as, in fact, the embodiment of the perfection and integrity of classical forms). The erotic charge that pervades the film—and binds so tightly together Rose and Mikey above and beyond any cultural expectations attached to their racial identities, their familial relationships, or their ages—functions as a propulsive force that, seemingly unbound, continues to circulate in-between and through a multiracial cast of highly affective and affected bodies.[45] Overall, in fact, the film deliberately (and for some, perversely) refuses to address its own multiple transgressions and instead focuses on making compatible subject positions and visual imageries that the cultural expectations ascribed to the blackness of Mikey's body—as well as the blackness of Daniels's cinema—typically pose as incompatible.

More importantly, the erotic and the deadly are never neatly separated, but rather constantly fold onto each other. They are not opposed or dialectical but paratactic. Climactically, Rose dies by Mickey's hand while she is the grip of an orgasm. In a clearing in the woods, as leaves move in the breeze and red petals are blown by the wind (the first shot of the credit sequence), Rose, like a blooming flower in a red outfit, furiously undresses Mikey. Rose's moans

of pleasure trigger Mikey's flashback to his mother's funeral, when a much younger Rose winked at him, and then to his father's death, shot from behind by Rose as he was hitting Mikey for having cried at his mother's funeral. The father's smacks are cued to the sound of Rose's moans and, as the violence climaxes, so does she. The two gunshots coincide: the one with which, in the flashback, Rose kills Mikey's father and the one with which, in the present, Mikey kills Rose. He then lifts her and, still naked, buries her, digging until nightfall, when he finally covers her grave and lays on top of it crying as a light rain begins to fall.

This 'both/and' charge—both erotic and deadly—pervades the entire film. Seemingly incompatible vicissitudes and postures of the body substitute for one another: Vicki's gushing amniotic fluid substitutes for the bullet that Rose does not fire at her ("He wants you dead," Rose tells her, referring to Vicki's husband, "now, push!"); the repeated shots of Mikey sleeping in a fetal position substitute for the sexual positions he assumes with both women; gunshots blend with moans of sexual pleasure, and so on. Within this textual economy of transference, substitution, and becoming, blackness is itself is folded within the film's molecular affect.[46] It travels in-between the characters' bodies just like they, themselves, often transfigure into their opposites. If lover can become mother and then lover back again; if love delivers death and death delivers love; if death sentences give way to births while birthing brings a death sentence, then blackness and whiteness too are no longer localized and self-contained attributes; just like everything else in the film, they are always already enfolded in their opposite. They do not come to the forefront as convincing and definite principles of intelligibility because, overall, the film does not provide a visual, narrative, or generic gestalt for them. Rather, *Shadowboxer* can be seen to enact what Michele Beverly has described as a post-black "politics of bodily liberation"

where white and black bodies circulate, affect, and are affected "beyond the entrenched meanings and boundaries of cultural politics."[47]

In this sense, blackness does not inhabit the content of the image—because of the film's open refusal to redeem, correct, and solve social problems, or even to address them—but rather its unstable and constantly shifting state, which moves almost effortlessly through a variety of guises and poses, just like Mikey's body does. He is bathed by Rose like a baby but is also capable of arousing her desire despite her weakening condition; he is a precise and calculating killer but eventually a protective and affectionate father; he impersonates a hypermasculine hip-hop "superstar" to seduce one of his victims and a transgender escort to seduce another. Throughout all these fluid transitions, however, it is the classically framed images of Cuba Gooding Jr.'s body that offers the switchpoint between multiple trajectories of desire, some of which are directly pursued in the film and others left for the viewer to imagine.

Writing about heterosexual interracial porn, Linda Williams argues that "different interracial permutations of lust … contain a nonpresent third term that haunts the scene. This is the putatively 'proper,' same-race partner whom the spectacle of interracial lust can be said to betray."[48] Gooding's nudes, however, appear as both part of an interracial and heterosexual sex scene or just standalone moments that the narrative barely justifies. Therefore, the absent third term they conjure is not only the same-race but also the same-sex partner of the tradition of interracial erotica they suggest—most prominently, the output of the so-called "glamorous generation" of art photographers (including Van Vetchen's "fetish and fantasy" studio photographs and Nickolas Muray's nudes of Paul Robeson, for instance), its echoes in Robert Mapplethorpe's work, and its repurposing in Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1998).[49] This aesthetic tradition understands the portrait as an erotic genre characterized by the staging of

multiple fantasy scenarios that cut across interracialism, homoeroticism, and primitivism; identification and dis-identification; passive and active; captor and victim. Part of its appeal, therefore, lies in the numerous transgressions centered on the visual attraction offered by the taboo of skin-to-skin interracial contact. Hence the archive of erotica that the film joins is a play of call and response, as Isaac Julian's *Looking for Langston* in particular makes evident—insofar as its interracial and homoerotic imagery by white and black artists (and white and black critics) alike stages multiple and reversible scenarios of desire. If 'erotica' is characterized by the inscription of "the tension of the forbidden into its fantasy,"[50] then Gooding's nudes are charged with a double-inscription: the taboo of miscegenation and the shadow presence of homosexual desire. These 'unspeakable' and unauthorized crossings can be regarded as a narrative unfolding of something that Kara Walker's silhouettes achieve formally and through stillness: the free mingling of bodies, whose wild and complicit interpenetrations can only register on the outside contours of the silhouette.

Overall, the film mobilizes the shadow in multiple ways: as a measure of the 'density' of the image, as a place of transference and becoming, as a scene of exchange and substitution, as an image state meant to evoke an unstable mode of being. *Shadowboxer*'s embracing of the phantasmatic substance of the shadow allows the film to embody blackness as a molecular, diffused, and shared affect, not a localized property or a sign function.

Race Anatomy

Black art, English argues, needs to be divested from the question of representation, since what, in fact, secures its referent, other than a racialized anatomy of the visual? Instead, seen *from*/*in* a shadow, blackness appears as *cast* onto a contingent environment, onto a surface it

helps to create but can just as easily dissipate. Hence, the theoretical reflection I have performed on what the blackness of the shadow *is* and *wants*—which has taken me considerably far from a representational paradigm of 'black' art and cinema—should equip us to ask whether it is critically more productive to see blackness in the *state*, rather than the *content* or the *surface*, of the image. This question possibly shares the impulse that led *Camera Obscura* to interrogate "race and/as technology" (in its special issue of that same name) and WJT Mitchell to discuss race as a medium, something we see *through*, and an intervening substance between people.[51] These perspectives, in fact, recognize that the black body lives a thoroughly mediated existence in the world, to the point of constituting in itself a technology and a phenomenology of mediation.

If the American cultural utterance, as Morrison claims, is inescapably racial, then black cinema or black art should not demand a specialized language but rather one that recognizes the mediating function that race performs. For example, if we were to ask whether *George Washington* (dir. David Gordon Green, US, 2000) is a 'black film,' we would have to focus on the way in which the main character's peculiar embodiment filters the phenomenological, aesthetic, and ultimately ethical experience of the film. A magical realist film about a group of African American children in an unspecified end-of-the-track Southern town, the title character George dreams of becoming President of the United States, or at least playing George Washington in the 4th of July parade.[52] His skull never fully sutured, we learn, and wetness on the head irritates his brain. George is only precariously separated from the outside world, highly vulnerable to its hard and sharp edges. In pursuit of the possible 'blackness' of this film, we could notice how George's body acts as the figure for the film's anatomy: for its cinematography, which is soft, porous, and immersive, and for its narrative, which is distributive and diffuse,

depicting intertwined and entangled destinies of the vernacular class in an unspecified end-of-the-track Southern town. George's aspiration to greatness thus has to be accounted for in relation to the way the film's cinematography and characters alike interrogate the substance and possibilities of the trace: the idea for George to make a mark, to leave a durable sign of himself—one that, importantly, is never equated with a racial index and never fully secured, because of how the body at the center of the film's narrative is at pains to secure its own boundaries. By moving beyond an optical model of race and filtering the entire film through the main character's condition, the porousness of George's skull offers the terrain for the ethical investment that the film expects from its viewers, who become acutely aware of the phenomenological qualities of the film-world and the threats it presents to the main character.

Partly inspired by Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (US, 1973), *George Washington*'s world is seen through the eyes of a young girl named Nasia. We enter the film-world from the inside of an abandoned train car, whose door progressively opens to illuminate the screen from right to left. This is a mechanically produced 'wipe' effect that emphasizes the black screen as a scene of an exchange between the inside and the outside of the film's own body.[53] Nasia's voice over is heard over a series of slow motion tracking shots of children running in deserted streets, jumping obstacles, and playing in empty lots—images that are reminiscent of Roy DeCarava[54]'s street photography—and it thematizes the act of looking in connection with the substance of photography. "My friends...they used to get around, looking for stuff...trying to find the clues of all mysteries and the mistakes God had made," she says, as we see the children walking around debris, inspecting and playing with discarded objects. The sound of an approaching train, the banging of iron, and the close up of abandoned tracks establish the film's blues aesthetics, hence the reflexive work of the film on its own matter of expression.[55] "I look at my friends, I know

there is goodness. I can see the bones inside," says Nasia. Just like the friends about whom she speaks—the title character George, in particular—Nasia is looking for greatness. While her voice over is rarely descriptive of the action we see, it is evocative of the attempt to find the indexes of a different future, a higher design, and a sense of permanence.

Suspended, just like the girl who narrates it, in between remembrance, imagination, and dream, *George Washington* is just as concerned as its characters with the substance and possibilities of the trace. Most prominently, the traces offered by the debris and trash surrounding the characters, objects that resonate with a past history of human use, index a sense of place and belonging that the characters are seeking as well. But there are also the traces of labor: a John Henry character, Uncle Damascus, is seen and heard hammering the junction between two train cars. As Nasia claims: "The grown ups in my town, they were never kids. They had gone to wars and built machines." Damascus is fired for complaining about working conditions: he laments the scars, the cuts, and the burns on the back of his head, a litany revealing the constant threat of a violation of the flesh. However, rather than being the vehicle for an exploration of the relationship between black labor and machinery, the myth of John Henry here becomes the pretext for a focus on the detritus and the discarded object. The endurance it epitomizes does not translate into a triumph of human stamina but rather into the resilience of the marginal object. Mounds of trash, junkyards, rusty train cars, and abandoned buildings reclaimed by encroaching vegetation offer lessons for survival that eventually extend to the characters themselves. George, for example, doesn't have anybody to look after him, so he dreams of someone looking *at* him, as Nasia's voice over puts it. After risking his life to save a child who was drowning in the pool, he walks around wearing a superman outfit and a cape. But he also wears the hat that Uncle Damascus made for him from the skin of his dead dog, a dog

George befriended because he "had nowhere to go, nobody to love him." In this environment, there is no clear distinction between the urban and the wilderness, the human and the animal, childhood and adulthood: everybody bears or wears the scars of labor—the labor of expression as well as the labor of being alive.

As much as the characters and the film itself are focused on looking for clues, the answer is seldom found where one looks. For example, George captures the viewer's concern because of his vulnerability, yet he is not the child who dies as a result of a head concussion. Midway into the film, there is a dramatic shift in focus: George's friend Buddy slips and hits his head on the bathroom floor of an abandoned building. Once we witness the tragic accident, we realize that some form of loss had been there all along. In part, this loss speaks to the difficulty of securing permanence, of leaving a mark. Buddy, whose body his friends eventually lay amidst abandoned furniture against a wall bearing graffiti, is unable to mark his own death other than aurally—by banging a stick against the bathroom stall until his body falls limp on the floor. It is a sonic *punctum*, a way of piercing through and to, which returns at the end of the film when George is seen in a photographer's studio 'puncturing' the official moment of portraiture. Dressed in a two-piece gray suit, George is finally in the condition to secure a permanent image for himself. Sharing the frame with the ominous portrait of another famous George hanging on the wall—George Bush Sr.—he poses to have his portrait taken. He smiles broadly, but as soon as the shutter clicks, he reaches his hand under the frame to pick up a cup of soda and loudly sucks from the straw. This is the last image and sound of the film, leaving us not with the controlled and contained pose of a portrait, but with George's lively and unruly gesture. This is how George, in Richard Powell's terminology, "cuts a figure" for himself, making a claim to his subjectivity.[56] George's negotiation of his own figure, by pressing against the photographic

surface and 'cutting it' with his own sharpness, determines the way the film handles its own skin, phenomenologically understood as the meeting point between the world and the self, perception and expression, texture and thickness. Overall, *George Washington* does inhabit the visual anatomy of the raced body, but only from within—not from a fixated exteriority but rather from the vulnerability and the softness of its tissues.

Finally, if we were to ask whether *From Hell* (dir. Albert and Allen Hughes, US, 2001)—the Hughes Brothers film about Jack the Ripper—is a 'black film,' we could not find an answer in the racial identity of the filmmakers or that of its characters. The film offers no blackness to be seen. And yet it investigates notions of biopolitics, eugenics, and social control for which the raced body offers the paradigmatic instance. Behind the unveiling of the Elephant Man—the only moment in the film in which an abnormal body is recorded as an object of spectacle—lies the shadow of the raced, grotesque, and spectacular body of Saartjie Baartman.[57] Similarly, the intercourse between Prince Albert Victor and a Whitechapel prostitute leads to the Prince's syphilis, a metaphorical cautionary tale against miscegenation. The film's horror, just like the film's blackness, is left off-screen or under the garments of the butchered women that the spectator doesn't get to lift. But it hovers over the medical examiners' refusal to look twice, it inhabits the opium-induced dreams of Inspector Frederick Abberline, and it is felt in the repression of the possible scandal of a compromised royal bloodline. It inspires the project of social eugenics that the Ripper feels invested to carry out. It is finally lodged within what Shawn Michelle Smith called the "properties of blood."[58] Blood, understood as the repository of race, permeates the film as the shadow within.

Conclusion

"How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness?" English asks. This is the methodological issue posed by the works I have discussed, which Morrison has similarly defined as a "Playing in the Dark." What artistic and critical language is available to maintain the in-betweenness of blackness? Or, as Morrison asks,

> What does positing one's writerly self, in the wholly racialized society that is the United States, as unraced and all others as raced entail? What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level always conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be 'universal' or race-free?... [H]ow is 'literary whiteness' and 'literary blackness' made, and what is the consequence of that construction?[59]

The blackness of black cinema can begin to be detached from the blackness of the black body by undoing the mapping of race onto color. Skin needs to be returned to its phenomenological function, as a boundary and a meeting point; it does not have to be a script, and it shouldn't have to index anything other than itself.

"The American black man," wrote Chester Himes, is the most "anthropologically advanced specimen of mankind in the history of the world. The American black is … the only race of man to come into being in modern time."[60] The black body is also the visual object that continues to provide the paradigm for the way that we understand the substance and the truth-value of the image. Blackness structures the archive of the Long Photographic Century: it not only provides 'flesh' to the visual, but it consolidates its grid, offering (through its perceived indexicality) the illusion of successfully resolving the question of reference. As long as the visual epistemology of race is modeled after the epidermalization of the raced body, as long as such epistemology relies on the conceptualization of the visual as trace, as long as the supplementary

impression of analogy of the photographic image (and its attendant technologies, ontologies, and affects) reinforce this paradigm, the blackness of black cinema is bound to be ultimately sought in the body, whether in front of, or behind, the camera. The image state of the shadow offers instead an alternative paradigm whereby blackness is no longer conceived as a content but rather as a state of the image. Most especially, this paradigm allows race to be severed from a compromised epistemology of the visual that repressively maps a visible outside onto an invisible inside and from cultural expectations about what black bodies can *be* and *do*.[61] Black is not a visual object, claims English, but a place of suspension between interpellator and interpellated. Black is not 'of blacks,' argues Morrison, but it belongs to the very fabric of the American cultural body even, and especially, when it is denied and pushed off screen, like the hanging body that the NAACP lynching image instead overlays on top of the crowd.

The argument of this essay appears in much expanded form in my book *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2013). In the present form, it has benefited from the kind readership of Charles ('Chip') Linscott and Michele Prettyman Beverly, whom I would like to thank.

[1] Dora Apel, "On Looking: Lynching Photographs and Legacies of Lynching after 9/11," *American Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2003): 457-78 and *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002); Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life*

and Literature (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[2] See Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Sam Perry, "Competing Image Vernaculars in the Anti-Lynching Movement of the 1930s" (PhD Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2011).

[3] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[4] Shawn Michelle Smith, "The Evidence of Lynching Photographs," in Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Lynching Photographs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 23.

[5] Shawn Michelle Smith *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 127.

[6] Hamza Walker, "Domino Effect: Introduction to the Exhibition *Black Is Black Ain't* at The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago," http://www.renaissancesociety.org/site/Exhibitions/Essay.Black-Is-Black-Ain-t.595.html. Accessed Oct. 12, 2009.

[7] My emphasis. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 10.

[8] My idea of the "image state" or the "passage of the image" is inspired by Raymond Bellour, "The Double Helix," in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996), 173-199, and "Concerning "the Photographic"," in *Still Moving between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 153-276.

[9] This, to some extent, is a repurposing of Stuart Hall's influential question in "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1992), 21-32.

[10] I pose a similar question in my essay "Shadowboxing: Lee Daniels's Non-Representational Cinema," in *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*, ed. Mia Mask (New York: Routledge, 2012), 200-216, where I interrogate the meaning of the term 'black' from a rhetorical and phenomenological standpoint as a *catachresis*.

[11] English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Boston: MIT Press, 2007), 26.

[12] Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "De Margin and De Center," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988), 2-11.

[13] Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 91, quoted in English, *How to See*, 37.

[14] Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 6.

[15] I explore the notion of the Long Photographic Century at length in my book *On the Sleeve of the Visual* where I suggest thinking of photography as a way of mapping the visual that goes beyond the photographic medium per se and includes pre-photographic indexical forms such as the silhouette, just like, in Ian Baucom's theorization, the Long Twentieth Century indicates the cycle of capital that begins with the financial revolution facilitated by the transatlantic slave trade. Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic. Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005). In my essay "Reification, Reanimation, and the Money of the Real," *The World Picture Journal* 7 (2012), available at: http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_7/Raengo.html, I further explore the idea of race as a form of appearance of capital and photography as a form of appearance of race.

[16] Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of*

Photography, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 343-89.

[17] Victor Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 27.

[18] See Mary Ann Doane, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction," and "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," both in *differences* 18, no. 1 (2007), a special issue on indexicality.

[19] See, for instance, Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Elizabeth Abel, "Shadows," *Representations* 84 (2004), 166-99; Alice Maurice, "What the Shadow Knows: Race, Image, and Meaning in *Shadows* (1922)," *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 3 (2007), 66-89.

[20] William Henry Fox Talbot characterized his invention as the "art of fixing a shadow," in "A Brief Historical Sketch of the Invention of the Art," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980). See also essays by Coco Fusco, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and Jennifer González in Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds., *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003).

[21] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography, and the Index," in *Only Skin Deep*, 123.

[22] As Leigh Raiford argues, this is because lynching itself is a process of carnalization, a "return to the slave block, a reinscribing of the black body as commodity," and, secondly, because lynching photographs functioned as the bill of sale and receipt of ownership. Leigh Raiford, "The Consumption of Lynching Images," in *Only Skin Deep*, 267-74.

[23] Since the publication of WJT Mitchell's book *What Do Pictures Want?*, the interdisciplinary

field of Visual Culture Studies has posed questions from the point of view of the desire, volition, and ontology of the visual object. What does this picture want? In this piece, I pose a question that is parallel to Mitchell's but one that also resonates specifically with Critical Race discourse. "What does blackness look like, or sound like, or feel like, or…. What does blackness think like?" asked Mark Anthony Neal during his keynote address at the 2008 *Theorizing Blackness Conference* at the CUNY Graduate Center. Likewise, I ask: what does the shadow or the silhouette want? Or, more precisely, what does the blackness of the shadow and the silhouette want? See W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Im*ages (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Neal's speech is available here: http://blog.insightartsliberation.org/2008/04/14/theorizing-blackness-mark-anthony-neal-video.aspx. He supports his query with references to, among others, Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness. Enactments of African-American Modernism* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000) and Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black. Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007).

[24] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 66. For Stoichita, this scene inaugurates the paradigm of the visual as *trace* against the Platonic model of the image as *double*.

[25] Darby English, "This is Not About the Past: Silhouettes in the Work of Kara Walker," in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negresse*, ed. Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Patterson, Mark Reinhardt (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 159.

[26] Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routlledge, 1994), 94-120.

[27] Lyon, John B. ""The Science of Sciences": Replication and Reproduction in Lavater's Physiognomics." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007), 257-77.

[28] The literature on Walker is extraordinarily rich but see at least the seminal text by Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

[29] Christina Sharpe notices how white critics tend to recognize, identify, and describe in gritty details only the recognizably black characters and how the blackness of the silhouettes is often imagined to refer only to diegetically and stereotypically recognizable black characters, while the white ones—who are never really shown in these types of contexts and compromising situations and who and certainly have no recognizable stereotype belonging to the same socio-historical context—go unnoticed. This is an acute commentary on white disavowal, of course, but also on the ontological audacity of Walker's silhouettes, which, by coating everybody in black, gains the ability to equalize their treatment and therefore prod deep seated and disavowed scenes of monstrous intimacies. Sharpe also notices that Walker has increasingly begun to make silhouettes in different colors, possibly in order to address this profound critical imbalance. Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[30] A number of these questions were prompted by my reading of Ann Wagner, "Kara Walker: 'The Black-White Relation'," in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negresse*, ed. Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Patterson, Mark Reinhardt (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 91-101.

[31] 'Primitive' is one of the terms Walker uses to evoke a female persona, which sometimes she adopts for herself to underscore the expectations of her patronage, modeled after Josephine Baker's exotic *sauvage*.

[32] Homi Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition," in *Rethinking Fanon. The Continuing Dialogue*, ed. Nigel Gibson (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 179-96.

[33] This is the argument developed by Akira Lippit, who argues that new phenomenologies of the 'inside' coming together in 1895 (X-ray photography, psychoanalysis, and the cinema) created what he calls an 'avisual' archive, i.e. principles of categorization based on the visualization of avisual substances. In distinctive and yet interconnected ways, all three phenomenologies 'figured' new and phantasmatic surfaces, producing images of three-dimensional flatness simultaneously cast and projected onto a screen. Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[34] Some of the most notable of Douglas's murals are those painted for the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library and Fisk University. See Amy Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995); Aaron Douglas et al. *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Heaven: Lawrence, in association with Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas: Yale University Press, 2007).

[35] See Ellen McBreen, "Biblical Gender Bending in Harlem: The Queer Performance of Nugent's Salome," *Art Journal* 57, no. 3 (1998) and Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[36] Lauren Berlant, "National Brands/ National Body: Imitation of Life," in *Comparative American Identities. Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 110-40.

[37] Hailed as a clever Hitchcockian thriller, the film was very successful at the 1993 Toronto Film Festival but had a limited theatrical run. See Roy Grundmann, "Identity Politics at Face Value," *Cineaste* 20 (1994), 24-7. See also Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, "Looking Alike: Or, the Ethics of *Suture*," in *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (New York, London: Routledge, 2000), 103-131.

[38] Eric Lott, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," *American Literary History* 9, no. 3 (1997); Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993); Dan Flory, "Black on White: Film Noir and the Epistemology of Race in Recent African American Cinema," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2000) and *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

[39] Brian Price, "Color, the Formless, and Cinematic Eros," in *Color: the Film Reader*, ed. Brian and Angela Dalle Vacche Price (New York: Routledge, 2006), 78.

[40] Annie Howell, Personal Conversation with Scott McGhee and David Siegel, 2005; see also Grundmann, "Identity Politics at Face Value," 3.

[41] Marcie Frank, "The Camera and the Speculum: David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*," *PMLA* 106, no. 3 (1991), 459.

[42] This is a tenet of the rich phenomenological tradition developing from Merleau-Ponty's work. Consider at the very least Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[43] Gillian Harkins, *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). See also the seminal essay by Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe. An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987), 65-81, and Janice Doane and Hodges Devon, *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

[44] This fact reminds me of Michelange Quay's film on Haiti, *Eat, for This Is My Body* (France, Haiti, 2007), in which a dying colonialism is embodied by an old, bedridden, and dried-up white woman who insists in attempting to breastfeed the land's 'children.'

[45] My sensitivity to what Elena del Rio describes as the "powers of affection" in the anti-representational stance of the film is profoundly influenced by Michele Prettyman Beverly's reading of *Shadowboxer* as a post-black film in her PhD dissertation "Phenomenal Bodies: The Metaphysical Possibilities of Post-Black Film and Visual Culture" (Georgia State University, 2012). Beverly draws on Elena del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

[46] I derive this idea from Elena Del Rio's employment of the Deleuzian concept of the 'molecular' to account for the diffused eroticism of Claire Denis' *Beau Travail* (1999). Elena Del Rio, "Body Transformations in the Films of Claire Denis: From Ritual to Play," *Studies in French Cinema* 3, no. 3 (2003): 185-97.

[47] Michele Prettyman Beverly, "Phenomenal Bodies: The Metaphysical Possibilities of Post-Black Film and Visual Culture," (PhD Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2012), 205.

[48] Linda Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2004), 297.

[49] See Mercer, "Busy in the Ruins of a Wretched Phantasia," in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony Alessandrini (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 195-218' Josè Muñoz, "Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van Der Zee, Mapplethorpe, and *Looking for Langston*," in *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, ed. Harry and Uebel Stecopoulos, Michael (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 337-58; James Smalls, "Public Face, Private Thoughts. Fetish, Interracialism, and the Homoerotic in Carl Van Vechten's Photographs," in *The Passionate Camera*, ed. Deborah Bright (London: Routledge, 1998), 78-102; Jeffrey C. Stewart, "The Black Body: Paul Robeson as a Work of Art and Politics," in *Paul Robeson. Artist and Citizen*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New Brunswick and

London: Rutgers University Press, The Paul Robeson Cultural Center, 1998), 135-63; Thomas Waugh, "Posing and Performance: Glamour and Desire in Homoerotic Art Photography, 1920-1945," in *The Passionate Camera*, 58-77.

[50] Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border," 275.

[51] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Lynne Joyrich, ed. "Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies: Race and/as Technology," special issue of *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 70 (2009); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[52] See Cynthia Lucia, "A Touch of the Neorealist," *Cineaste*, 26, no. 4 (2001), 13-18 and Justin Horton's Bazinian and Deleuzian reading of the supernatural and hallucinatory elements of the film in "Mental Landscapes: Bazin, Deleuze, and Neorealism (Then and Now)" in *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 2 (2012), 23-45.

[53] For a phenomenological approach to the film's body see Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000; Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[54] I am referring specifically to the collaboration with Langston Hughes in the book *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1984).

[55] See Houston Baker, Jr.'s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested. The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), who describes the blues as the aesthetic conquering of hostile surroundings.

[56] Richard Powell, *Cutting A Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[57] See at least Deborah Willis, ed. *Black Venus 2010: The Called her "Hottentot"* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

[58] Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[59] Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, xii.

[60] Chester Himes, *The Quality of Hurt* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 285.

[61] What can the black body do, other than being black? This is one of the main questions that Michele Prettyman Beverly pursues in her already mentioned Dissertation, "Phenomenal Bodies."