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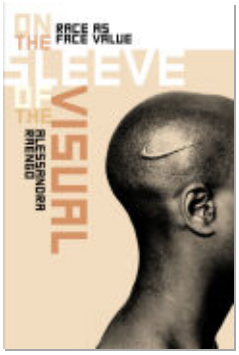
3 | The Money of the Real



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THREE
THE MONEY OF THE REAL

Wouldn't it be a helluva joke if all this was really burnt cork and you people were being tolerant for nuthin'?
—Dick Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus*, 1962[1]

In his essay "The Shadow and the Substance," Nicholas Mirzoeff discusses a *carte-de-visite* titled *Emancipated Slaves* (figure 3.1) featuring a group of slaves — adults and children alike — of various skin tones. Produced and circulated within abolitionist propaganda, the photograph relied on the whiteness of the children's skin to argue for the end of slavery. Their whiteness exposed the evil of the institution because the "wrong" people were being held captive.[2] Mirzoeff notes that one of the slaves behind the children is branded in the forehead, a place that could not be concealed, which means that he was probably an apprehended runaway. Juxtaposing the light-skinned children with the branded dark-skinned slave, the photograph mobilizes multiple and competing forms of racial indexicality: the brand on the man's forehead performs as an indexical trace of the property structure of slavery, which duplicates and compounds the indexicality of his blackness.

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FIGURE 3.1. Myron Kimball (fl. 1860s), *Emancipated Slaves*, 1863. Made in New York City. Albumen silver print from glass negative, 13.2 × 18.3 cm. (5 3⁄16 × 7 3⁄16 in.), oblong oval Mat: 19.9 × 25.2 cm. (7 13⁄16 × 9 15⁄16 in.). Gilman Collection, Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2005. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

The whiteness of the children's skin, however, does not bear the trace of their racial identity. Instead, it indexes that whiteness is an asset, a color capital, and a property, which grounds a claim to something other than captivity.[3] These children, the photograph argues, are entrapped by slavery where their appearance determines that they do not belong. Rather than indexical, their whiteness is an iconic representation, one that signifies by resemblance, and thus attends to a fundamentally social semiotic process.

I am interested in reading this image also from the point of view of the political economy of the sign. From this point of view, *Emancipated Slaves*

shows a scene of exchange in which the bodies of the darker slaves function as the mirror of the value of the lighter ones. Yet, rather than illustrating the formal equality that is presupposed by commodity exchange — the same formal equality that prompts Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to claim that there is "no *philosophical* injustice in capitalism"[4] — the photograph testifies to the intrinsic violence of capitalist exchange. The black slaves cannot exchange, circulate, and move the way the light-skinned slaves can. Overall, this image illustrates how the black body becomes both vehicle and signifier of exchange and thus generalizes the *money form* of the social sphere. It does so by putting in play two ways in which the photochemical imagination is imbricated with race. The first, which was discussed in chapters 1 and 2, is the investment in the indexicality of the trace, the idea that the visual is in continuity with the real as its outward fold. The second, which is introduced in this chapter, is the understanding of photography as the *money of the real*. On the one hand, this *carte-de-visite* enlists the effect of photographic transparency to reinforce the idea of the transparency of race; that is, the coincidence between the photographic and the racial index. On the other hand, it stages a scenario of both desired and failed exchange, while, as a material culture object, it acts as a token of exchange for a projected emancipation.[5] It also holds in tension the indexicality and iconicity of blackness, which manifests itself in the way some slaves' bodies express the value of others. In this, the *carte de visite* presents the semiotics of value Marx outlines in *Capital*; that is, the relationship whereby the body of commodity A acts as the mirror of the value of commodity B.

This chapter offers a reflection on the notion of face value from the point of view of the political economy of the racial sign. In chapter 1, I argued that the image passes through the racial index to acquire a certain measure of (affective, semiotic, symbolic) stability. In chapter 2, I approached photography first as a suturing and carnal catachresis and then as ectopography — a structure that, wielding catachresis against its own grain, is capable of excising ectopic growths. Here I am concerned with the way in which photography passes through capital to gain exchangeability. This is what scholarship in film and visual studies has described as photography's ability to function as the money of the real[6] — the fact that, regardless of their aesthetic stance, all photographic representations partake of the logic of the commodity form — "the exchange abstraction that haunts the culture of capitalism."[7] Whereas the two previous chapters focused on the ability for photography

to produce reality a(e)ffects, in the last two chapters of this book I focus on exploring the money form of photography. The claim I make here is parallel to my earlier claim: race stabilizes both photography's ability to connect to, or produce, the real, as well as photography's ability to exchange for the real. The iconicity of the (photochemically fixated) black body, I contend, generalizes the money form of the visual sphere. My goal in these last two chapters is to show that blackness and photography share the same hermeneutics — the hermeneutics of *face value*.[8]

I have decided to characterize face value through the notion of the Long Photographic Century, which I explore in chapter 4, in order to graft the image state of photography onto the Long Twentieth Century; that is, onto the history of capital regarded as a *longue durée* that unfolds through a series of systemic cycles of accumulation.[9] The concept of the Long Twentieth Century provides the lens through which Ian Baucom rereads the cultural, geographical, and historiographical concept of the Black Atlantic in order to place the financial revolution and the slave trade in the same historical continuum as our present moment.[10] Baucom derives from Walter Benjamin and Frederic Jameson a philosophy of history based on the recurrence of forms and from Giovanni Arrighi an oscillatory history of capital. He also indirectly indicates another parallel *longue durée* in the history of visuality once it becomes bolted to the history of capital, as it occurs with the establishment of the slave trade.[11] It is this *longue durée* that I call the Long Photographic Century, to emphasize how photography (in the broad sense I explored in chapter 1 as a photochemical logic that includes pre-photographic forms such as the silhouette) offers the dominant mode of the visuality of capital — a generalization, in the visual sphere, of capital's hermeneutics of the surface. Photography is an image state that exchanges with a real it helps to visualize.

The theoretical pivot for the intersection between blackness, capital, and photography is the notion of "form." The form I have in mind is the commodity form, as Marx describes it in the opening chapter of *Capital*, volume 1. I read Marx's "form" as outlining a theory of (double) visuality, a theory of *seeing as*. Form is what expresses the *as*. My focus on blackness as a commodity form, therefore, attends to the way blackness continues to give appearance and visibility to commodity status. Importantly, just like the commodity form has become increasingly more speculative in finance capital, so has blackness moved from being the (seemingly natural) mark of the human commodity in New World slavery to being attached to material culture objects, to providing

an aesthetic form within consumer culture, and finally to being the form of speculative entities produced by finance capital, what (with a Marxian and Benjaminian language) I describe as "phantasmagoria."

I begin this investigation on blackness as commodity form with a reflection on the concept, aesthetics, and semiotics of blackface, which I read as one of the most accomplished forms of reification of face value. I do so with an analysis of the Dick Gregory joke I used as an epigraph, then I remark on Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2000), which can be regarded in itself as a palimpsest of various stages and expressions of blackness as commodity form. I conclude by looking at the work of artist Hank Willis Thomas, a perceptive interpreter of the diaphanous but pervasive imbrication of blackness in the aesthetics and desires of consumer culture. In Willis Thomas's work, blackness emerges as a visual language of social and consumer relations — a vehicle for the expression of capitalist desires — and as the "matter of expression" of the speculative logic of the Long Twentieth Century. At this chapter's conclusion, I return to the idea of blackness as phantasmagoria in Keith Obadike's *Blackness for Sale*, a work of cyberart that involves the eBay auction of the artist's blackness.

The objects discussed in this chapter have in common the ability to act as scenes of recognition (but sometimes also misrecognition, prevarication, exploitation, etc.) whereby a reified racial object or objectified racial subject is capable of pivoting around itself and turn the very principle of its reification into a critical vantage point onto the system that reifies it. The subject-made-object suddenly turns around and *sees*. Thus, not all the objects in this chapter are visual. On the contrary, sometimes they inhabit a place of avisuality and yet find a way to cut a figure, pierce the visual field, and fold its racial fold onto the outside; they manage to turn their *surface* into a *face* and claim their role as conditions of possibility of the visible itself.

Before beginning this analysis, I need to attend to the notion of face value as it emerges from the political economy of the racial sign.

SEEING DOUBLE

Lyndon Barrett proposes to look at blackness through the Marxian notion of value as a way of seeing double.[12] Other scholarship, from Shawn Michelle Smith to W. J. T. Mitchell's book *Seeing through Race*, and obviously Toni Morrison, as indicated in the introduction, recuperates the idea of race

as a lens, a medium, something we see through. They do so by leveraging W.E.B. DuBois's notion of double consciousness as a visual theory of race. In DuBois's notion of second sight, the idea that in "seeing oneself being seen," the black subject occupies two places at the same time: she is simultaneously a viewed object and a viewing subject. Because of that doubleness, she also enjoys a unique vantage point onto the seer.[13] This idea of double vision informs my approach as well. Yet, for me it remains important to ground the idea of "seeing double" also in the structure of capital, as described by Marx, because of how foundationally the African slave's body has bolted visuality to the history of capital, turning blackness into a form of appearance of value. First, then, I want to attend to the relationship between form, value, and the double vision they afford.

A double vision characterizes the very opening of *Capital*'s first chapter, which begins with the rhetorical structure of the metaphor, the appearance of something as something else.[14] This Wittgensteinian "aspect seeing" is necessary to behold the specific yoking of the visible and the invisible, the material and the social, embodiment and representation, literal and figural, which come together in the notion of *form*. The first form we encounter in *Capital* is the commodity form, which becomes visible only in exchange: "Commodities . . . *appear as* commodities, or have the *form* of commodities, in so far as they possess a double form, i.e. a natural form and value form."[15] In other words, commodity is not a thing, but rather the *form* a thing assumes, a way of being, a manner of appearance, a principle of visibility, as well as the expression of congealed human labor and of an object's ability to exchange.

Two illustrious commodities mark the contours of Marx's notion of form. The first one is Marx's coat. I am not referring to the coat that constitutes a figure for the simple commodity Marx employs throughout *Capital*'s first chapter, a commodity that, unlike the wooden table enlisted to introduce the concept of commodity fetishism — the second commodity that bookmarks the notion of form — has not yet evolved all kinds of "grotesque ideas" in its head.[16] The coat I am talking about is Karl Marx's own overcoat, whose vicissitudes Peter Stallybrass has so eloquently illustrated.[17] Stallybrass found that Marx struggled to complete the research that would eventually lead to *Capital* because, at several junctures, he was forced to pawn his coat to sustain his impoverished family in London. Without it, he could not brave the London winter to go to the British Museum, nor could he be admitted to the museum's reading room without being suitably dressed. Stallybrass shows how the coat

falls in and out of Marx's possession, how its form changes with each trip to and from the pawnshop, thus showing that possession itself is also only a form: it is a specific type of relationship between use and exchange, and also between the tangible and the intangible. Thrown into the sphere of exchange (at the pawnshop, for example) the contingent materiality of Marx's coat dissipates. Yet, once out of the pawnshop, the coat becomes tangible again and appears unchanged by its temporary transformation into cash. It can supposedly still warm Karl Marx's back. Marx's notion of form can be regarded as the unavoidable response to this process of constant metamorphosis of the "sublime" body of the coat.

The possibility to behold the appearance of something *as* something else comprised in the notion of *form* is necessary for Marx to explain the fact of exchange; that is, the fact that physically, qualitatively, and affectively different commodities become commensurable and relate to each other in some capacity. (Marx shows that within capital, equation — that is, exchange — is intrinsically violent. Commodity exchange entails reductions, abstractions, etherealizations and ultimately the spectralization of the sphere of the human, which, catachrestically, exchanges for nothing in return.)[18] Form is a pivot between dualities and different ontological orders — quality and quantity, use value and exchange value, contingency and system — but also across scale, between the micro and the macro level at which capital can be comprehended.[19] Form addresses also another riddle that *Capital* attempts to resolve: the failure of human labor to leave an indexical trace that would mark its product. Value, Marx states, is not visible in itself, but rather emerges only relationally through the value relation between two commodities in exchange. Value expresses human labor only through its reflection on another commodity.

In order to illustrate the relationship that connects the commodity form to value, Marx adopts the language of the medieval doctrine of the King's Two Bodies. He writes: "An individual A, for instance, cannot be 'your majesty' to another individual B, unless majesty in B's eyes assumes the physical shape of A, and moreover changes facial features, hair and many other things, with every new 'father of his people.'"[20] This passage accomplishes at least two things: it outlines the theory of embodiment Marx adopts in order to address the representational crisis of capital, and it dramatizes the double vision that Lyndon Barrett claims is necessary in order to behold the commodity form. Barrett's double vision is a type of seeing double, whereby one's embodiment

acts as the mirror of another's value. Value cannot be found in the fibers, the substance, and the material of the commodity's natural body, but only in its sublime body as reflected on another (natural) body's surface. With modern-day slavery, whereby the commodity becomes human in the slave, this notion of form is brought to a dramatic point of crisis. Indeed, in the slave, the commodity form needs to perfect its structure of embodiment, in so far as the slave is the commodity with a biography, a composite construct where the human and the commodity coexist in an irresolvable tension.[21] So much so that, in nineteenth-century American legal discourse, as Stephen Best has shown, the slave is figured with two bodies: one biological, hence mortal, and one as "property," hence implicitly immortal. The theory of embodiment supporting the medieval doctrine of the King's Two Bodies underlies both Marx's notion of the commodity as well as the aesthetics of slave law.[22]

THE DANCING TABLE

Marx's account of commodity fetishism dramatizes the relationship between the two bodies of the commodity — its natural, phenomenological body and its body politic, the body that is socially constructed, like the king, like the Leviathan.[23] For Jacques Derrida, the specter of exchange haunts use value from the beginning of Marx's account and eventually forces him to act as a conjurer and call on stage the second notorious commodity — the Dancing Table — a wooden object animated by commodity fetishism in which Marx attempts to show the specters of abstracted human labor.[24] The scene of the Dancing Table offers a dramatization of the commodity's embodiment, which is obscured by the commodity fetish in the animation of the object and its determination to act as the ending point of the textual chain of value.[25] The table comes to life. It recognizes that it has a body and, rather than using it to reflect the value of another commodity, it uses it to dance and pretend its body is the custodian of its own value.[26]

For critical race discourse, this scene is very important because it stages what Fred Moten has called the "resistance of the object," registered in the slave narratives, as will be discussed momentarily.[27] There is another productive reading I want to mobilize. According to Bill Brown, the phenomenological experience of the table's sensuousness and tangibility gives rise to a tradition of misinterpretation of this passage that has become second nature in literary and cultural studies; that is, the investment in "understanding our

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desire for objects as more primary than understanding the structure through which they become commodities."[28] This tradition begins with Benjamin's account of our fascination with objects, our being drawn in by the material object world. In turn, Benjamin is able to expand on Marx's notion of fetishism because he misinterprets the fetish as a scene of seeing, connected to commodity display. If this tradition can be regarded as an attempt to restore to the commodity the traces of the human producers that fetishism has occulted and dissipated, through an attention to its sensorial and aesthetic properties, then it can also, at least in Benjamin, offer a way to think about the form of the commodity as a point of view; not only the manner of an appearance but also the locus of a gaze.[29] Benjamin, in fact, is responsible for identifying an important pivot the commodity can perform when it celebrates its becoming human in the prostitute. There, he claims, it can finally "look itself in the face."[30] This pivot for me is crucial; it is the movement that many of the objects I consider in this chapter perform in order to cut through their invisibility, to resist their being tucked away in the depth of the visual field. However, beyond Benjamin, the most compromised, legally sanctioned, and formalized human commodity is not the prostitute, but the slave. Hence it is to the slave narratives I want to turn in order to find a discussion of this pivot in the recurring scene of the Talking Book.

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. reads the trope of the Talking Book as a representation of the linguistic economy of slavery. In its first appearance in the slave narrative of Gronniosaw, the Talking Book is the book that the master reads, but, once approached by the slave, does not *talk* to him.[31] Of course, the book never talked, but as long as he is illiterate, the slave believes that it does; he mistakes the master's reading for the book's speech, and mistakes the book's silence toward him as the book's failure to see him. Gronniosaw, Gates argues, interprets this silence as a consequence of his blackness, a sign of absence of face and voice.[32] Recording the moment at which the slave's blackness obscures his human form in favor of the commodity form, the trope of the Talking Book registers the slave's inability to read as a failure of being seen. Eventually, the slave's acquisition of literacy — as testified by the very act of writing his own narrative — affords him a reflexive move, which is simultaneously linguistic, economic, and visual. The slave learns that the book had never spoken but was instead being read by the master, and also learns that he (the slave) can also read it and that his inability to read does not imply the book's failure to see him. Once

the slave learns to see and read the commodity fetishism of which he is also part, he is also able to detect the signs of his repressed absence.[33] In short, the Talking Book performs the function of the Dancing Table until the slave can accomplish an act of exorcism and elevate himself to the status of seeing and speaking subject. This moment signals what Charles Mills would describe as the "non-Cartesian Sum" uttered by "property that does not remain silent but insists on speaking and contesting its status."[34] This is the pivotal moment in which the slave leverages the commodity fetish to represent "what is *missing* or absent"; that is, the recognition of his humanity. At this juncture, the commodity-become-human sees itself in the face.

I want to use this pivot as a methodological tool and explore the formalizing and superficializing function of blackness as commodity form. In turn, Marx says, the commodity form is only the "germ" of the money form, where this hermeneutics of the surface is further generalized. Money, in fact, is both the commodity that has become the universal equivalent and the medium for commodity circulation. Yet, as the reification of the very process of social mediation,[35] money becomes so naturalized that, in money, value seems indeed to be branded on the forehead. In money, value is understood and regarded as *face value*, as if a bill's or a coin's value naturally sprung from its (surface) denomination.[36] This hermeneutics of the surface is both the signature trait of modern-day racial slavery and of our hyper-speculative contemporary moment. Far from being incommensurable, the two belong to the same historical and epistemological map, *viz*, the Long Twentieth Century.

THE LONG TWENTIETH CENTURY

In *Specters of the Atlantic*: *Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History,* Ian Baucom claims that the money form of the social sphere was licensed and generalized by the transatlantic slave trade. Baucom argues that we have to regard the moment of finance capital of the British cycle of capital accumulation concomitant with the slave trade (1750–1825) not only as central to Black Atlantic history, but also to the "history of modern capital, ethics, and time consciousness," and continuous with our highly financial present.[37] In order to make this claim, Baucom models his philosophy of history on Benjamin's conception of the Baroque allegory as the literary anticipation of the logic of representation of the commodity form. Unlike Benjamin, however, Baucom is interested not in the common debasement of the thingly

character of things that the allegory shares with the commodity, but rather in the financial phases of the oscillatory history of capital Giovanni Arrighi identifies in *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*; that is, those phases in which value is not accumulated in commodity production but rather in the quarters of high finance; the phases in which money seemingly breeds money, which Marx described with the abridged formula M-M.'

The phase of capital accumulation facilitated by the slave trade is characterized by the universalization of the money form of the social sphere, which Baucom sees "demonstrated, anticipated, and recollected"[38] in the events and discourses surrounding the 1781 *Zong* massacre when the slave ship's captain threw overboard 133 slaves, supposedly to save the ship and the cargo. The *Zong* massacre played a central role in abolitionist efforts and imagination because the ensuing trial was not conducted as a murder case, but rather as a property dispute to determine Captain Collingwood's compliance with the jettison clause in the insurance contract covering the *Zong* and its cargo. Baucom regards the *Zong* as exemplary of a new and larger speculative epistemology of "theoretical realism," whereby products of the imagination or of agreement — such as the value covered by the insurance contract — are considered real. In fact, what was never challenged at the *Zong* trials was not only the commodity status of the slaves, but also the fact that they indeed constituted an insurable commodity whose value was the product of an agreement that preceded the moment of exchange. Thus, the trials sanctioned the death of the less desirable slaves as the necessary condition for bringing into existence the imaginary form of value underwritten by the insurance contract. Ultimately, the death of the slaves hurried their conversion into money. The epistemological revolution underwriting the *Zong* trials is what puts the slave trade at the core of a historical continuum Baucom calls "The Long Twentieth Century."

There are several elements that concur in the formation of this epistemology of theoretical realism, but they all, in various ways and forms, indicate an extension of the logic of paper money to the social and cultural sphere — the "extension of not only commodity capitalism into the domain of the human, but the colonization of human subjectivity by finance capital."[39] This dominance of capital is characterized by and sustained within the system of credibility required by the substitution of paper money with bills of credit (a form of imagination of fictional things, a training in recognizing, read-

ing, and believing character and the others' ability to do the same), and the accreditation of a "real" existence to the value agreed upon by an insurance contract. All of these innovations were also supported and normalized by other profound epistemological changes — for instance, the notion of the type, which appeared both in historicism and in the emerging form of the novel, but it is also a necessary concept for the practice of insurance, which is the business that trades in, invests in, and speculates on the typical and the average. In other words, the birth of values and the possibility to trade them in the growing eighteenth-century European financial markets is ontologically connected to what Bill Brown has called the "historical ontology of slavery"; that is, the collapsing of the distinction between personhood and thingness, and to the paradoxical form of physical and imaginative vision that could disregard the signs of personhood in the African's body and regard him or her, instead, as a form of economic return.[40] Ultimately, the slave occupied the body that mirrored a socially agreed value, thus bolting the history of visuality to the history of capital. In this milieu, the slave's blackness came to function not only, and quite intuitively, as a signifier of difference, but also as a means of exchange.[41]

Value, argued Marx, is an expression of social relations, which, however, is not directly visible in itself. The location of race onto the body achieved at the dawn of the Long Twentieth Century, instead, has given a form, a channel, and a mode of visibility to value. It has constituted a racial contract, as Charles Mills put it, as a form of political domination, which has become incarnated.[42] As a result, value has become embodied, sensorially and aesthetically tangible, and visible on the surface. Because of the way it yokes together the speculative and the carnal in the Long Twentieth Century, race produces a hermeneutics of *face value*. Value is facialized in the black body's epidermis.

A HELLUVA JOKE

I now return to the question posed earlier to guide me in this reflection on race as a form of appearance of capital and eventually on the visuality that this fact entails: the idea of blackness as commodity form, blackness as form of appearance of value. I want to examine the hermeneutics of face value at a site where it is both reified and put *en-abyme*; that is, turned into a tangible sensorial object but also into a regime of representation that reflex-

ively comments on itself. I am thinking about the concept, the practice, and the aesthetics of blackface, which I want to first consider briefly through an analysis of the Dick Gregory joke used as epigraph to this chapter and then with a few remarks about Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2000). Therefore, I begin with a pivoting object that directly calls into question the hermeneutics of face value in one of its most reified expressions. Building on scholars that have emphasized the "counterfeit" nature of minstrel performances, I approach blackface as a formation that is already aware that blackness is a form of appearance of value.[43]

In general terms, blackface can be regarded as the dramatization of the formality of blackness, of blackness *as* form. Simultaneously a channel and a mask, a medium for interracial contact and a message of racial hierarchy, blackface is a highly unstable object. Like the commodity and the slave, it has a dual nature and two bodies. One nature of this body is the product of a process of reification of the thingness of the slave, given a sensorial and aesthetic presence with burnt cork makeup, and the other is an extension of property relations in the cultural sphere. As mask, blackface is also a reflecting mirror where a complex web of social, material, and discursive relations becomes visible — for example, as Eric Lott has influentially argued — the dynamics of love and theft.[44] Furthermore, blackface is a second-degree racial signifier: with blackface makeup, obtained by applying burnt cork on the skin, the epidermal signifier — the phantasmatic index of racial identity — is in turn indexically and iconically signified. The first referent for blackface is not "race," but the epidermality of race. Blackface is an image *of* blackness *as* image of race.[45] In particular, blackface provides a type of social currency, elevating blackness to the function of the money commodity. Finally, blackface flaunts blackness as a signifier of exchange.

The "scene" that first prompted me to begin thinking about blackface as face value is a thought experiment that 1960s standup comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory posed as a joke in his first photo book, *From the Back of the Bus* (1962). I read this joke as a metapicture of blackface as face value — as the reification of the hermeneutics of the surface of the money form — a theoretical work that the joke achieves in the way it negotiates its location within and away from the tradition of minstrelsy and in the way it stages a hypothetical scenario of exchangeability between skin pigmentation and its twice-reified and twice-removed signifier; that is, burnt cork.

Dick Gregory came onto the scene in 1961 when he performed before

an audience of white Southerners at the Playboy Club in Chicago. He took the stage and opened his routine: "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I understand there are a good many Southerners in the room tonight. I know the South very well. *I spent twenty years there one night . . .* "[46] This was the beginning of a brilliant career as an entertainer and later as a civil rights activist, which, among other things, led him to run for president in 1968 as a write-in candidate with the Peace and Freedom Party. His output is extensive — comprising not only live performances as stand-up comedian, lecturer, and activist — but also a number of comedy records, and books of jokes, history, and political analysis.[47] In all these instances, a staple of Gregory's comedy was the way in which he integrated his body into his work, first as part of his comedy routines and later as a tool of protest; for example, in his hunger strikes.[48] This is interesting not only theoretically insofar as it indicates Gregory's strategic employment of his body as a mirror of value, but also historically since Gregory is arguably the first black stand-up comedian who never wore — literally or metaphorically — the minstrel mask. Early on, he expressed his intention to be perceived apart and away from the minstrel tradition as the determination to come across not as a funny *colored man* (that is, a naturally amusing Negro) but rather as a colored *funny man* (that is, an entertainer whose skin happened to be black). He wanted his audience to read him as a provider of an entertainment value — which, in his case, coincided with social criticism — that did not naturally spur from his blackness, but rather from his skills and, in particular, his ability to behold a double vision. This is the pivot I am interested in — a pivot that Gregory employs in a number of jokes and statements but is most succinctly represented in the "burnt-cork" joke: *wouldn't it be a helluva joke if all this was really burnt cork and you people were being tolerant for nuthin'?*

This joke establishes a double "what-if" scenario. On the first part, it claims that it would indeed be ironic to realize that blackness is in fact a man-made signifier, a makeup, a coating that can be removed at will, or a pose, a performance, a game of "pretend," a discursive construction, a floating signifier.[49] Under this discovery, however, Gregory places another, deeper irony, which he communicates through its inverted mirror image: once realized that blackness is socially constructed, we would discover not that white people have been racist for no reason, but rather tolerant for nothing. Gregory's counterfactual is doubly ironic: white privilege, which within the fantasy scenario of the first part of the joke is made irrelevant, is still presented as

a burden — the burden of being tolerant.[50] The joke contains also a double gesture of catachresis: first race's corporeality vanishes under the coating of blackface makeup — the body is disappeared and leaves in its wake a cloud of smoke like in a Méliès film — and then there is the discovery that white people's tolerance too exchanges for nothing in return. Furthermore, these two unequal exchanges exchange unequally among themselves as well: the waste of whites' supposed good feelings is incommensurable against the racist oppression skin pigmentation has historically authorized.

The joke is complicated on a phenomenological level as well. It appears on a two-page spread in Gregory's first photo book.[51] The shifter Gregory employs — "this" — is visualized by a close-up of his face against a black background that comments on the social location of stand-up comedy within the abject space of the nightclub and on blackness as a form of representation of the illicit.[52] Importantly, it also invites a sensorial engagement with Gregory's body — he is literally surrounded and almost dwarfed by blackness — immediately frustrated by the suggestion that blackness might not be a property of the body but only just a makeup. That there is no "there" there. By saying "this," Gregory is pointing to the blackness of his skin and, by extension, to his body as bearer of that blackness and of its supposed ontological truth. At the same time, the joke, just like the background, puts Gregory's body under erasure by summoning the specter of the minstrel mask as a second-degree signifier and a man-made sign. By evoking burnt cork, Gregory puts a mask over his face: a mask that is phenomenologically tangible, intimate, and carnal because it adheres to the skin. Yet, as soon as the first "what-if" has triggered a sensorial involvement in Gregory's corporeality, the second part of the joke lifts the mask onto what Ralph Ellison described as the "hole" behind it: the fear of the other side of the mask that the white minstrel entertainer experiences, the abyss that opens once one stands in the place of the object rather than the subject.[53] Gregory too reverses the chiasm between self and other. First, he channels an embodied response towards the tangibility of his skin color, asking one to see it instead as a disguise, a fabrication, a "what-if?" But then, as the audience is still trying to parse that out, he reroutes the gaze toward them. Now he is discussing an attitude, a type of conduct, and a propensity, *viz.*, tolerance. Thus blackness is both reified in the burnt cork makeup and spectralized in the phantasmatic mask Gregory is able to conjure. Now the minstrel mask hovers over his body, barely lifted, but still there. Gregory has willfully placed his body at the site of the phenomenologi-

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cal chiasm between self and other and then, with a conjuring trick, he has made its tangible corporeality vanish and has replaced it with a specter — at the very least, the possibility of an unmasking. Blackness is thus performatively dislocated from the body as its bearer and placed instead in the space between the visual object and the viewing gaze.

Gregory's joke conjures a scene reminiscent of the Dancing Table because his natural body is made to appear as a sublime body instead. Locating himself in the position of the table, he institutes an abnormal mirror, but twice so as a mirror that is capable of returning an image of the social relations fetishism would otherwise obscure. A conjurer and exorcist at once, Gregory ultimately stages blackness as phantasmagoria, the pre-cinematic device Marx evoked to describe the phantom-like objectivity of commodity fetishism. Instituted in the aftermath of the French Revolution, the phantasmagoria was comprised of a fully darkened room with a magic lantern placed behind a screen so that the screen and the apparatus would be concealed from view; the audience only saw floating images without anchorage in any specific place. This detachment of the visual from the material, this idea of images floating in space with no support and nowhere to land, is what Marx found useful to describe the sublime body of the commodity fetish and what Benjamin relied on to articulate his notion of exhibition value.[54] Otherwise called "ghost show" because it would project images of dead historical figures such as Danton, Robespierre, and others, the phantasmagoria was precariously perched between "science and superstition, Enlightenment and Terror," as Tom Gunning notes, "because it offered an experience in which the senses would contradict what was rationally known to be true."[55] Thus, the phantasmagoria offers a model to think about social materiality. On the one hand, it offers the sedimentation of social constructs onto material (animate and inanimate) bodies and, on the other, the idea that the social can produce effects of materiality. Ultimately, as is the case here, it can be used to characterize an increasingly simulacral ontology of the commodity blackness — the minstrel mask that Gregory manages to conjure with his joke.

In this joke, the question of blackness as commodity form is addressed in a remarkable semiotic complexity. Through this scenario of reversibility between black skin and burnt cork, Gregory substitutes a property of the body with makeup, the expectation of an indexical trace with an iconic effect of resemblance, a bodily script with a performance of identity, a face with a mask, finally suggesting that they might be each other's conditions of pos-

FIGURE 3.2. *Top:* J. S. G. Boggs, *Project: Pittsburgh* (1993). Back of a ten-dollar bill. *Bottom:* Back of an actual U.S. ten-dollar bill. *From Weschler, Lawrence.* Boggs. A Comedy of Values. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. © jsg boggs 2012. All rights strictly reserved. Studio of jsg boggs: jsgboggs@me.com.

sibility. Otherwise put, it is the act of substitution — seeing/handling one as the other — that carries the bite of Gregory's criticism because it calls attention to how these signifiers function as tokens of exchange and, therefore, to blackness as a vehicle of exchange itself. But what exactly is being exchanged?

Eric Lott proposes the term "counterfeit" as the most appropriate to describe the dialectic between avowal and disavowal in early minstrel acts — an idea that is also descriptive of the relationship between race and value understood as a problem of representation.[56] Unlike real money, counterfeit money is mimetic as well as simulacral. At face value, counterfeit money is indistinguishable from its authentic counterpart. What makes counterfeit money real is its ability to circulate, to perform as if it really was money. The work of Boggs — an artist who has been exploring the social materiality of money

for a long time — can offer insights into the question of representation that face value attempts to resolve.[57] He does so by drawing currency of various denominations and from various countries and using his drawings as payment for various services and goods, such as a meal or a cab ride. Boggs never tries to have his money pass for real. On the contrary, when trying to use his drawings to pay for something, Boggs always makes explicit the value of the drawing in terms of the labor expended to produce it, but also the value that he expects will be attributed to it by the transaction, which he arbitrarily determines to be the denomination of the note; that is, its face value (figure 3.2).

Boggs's art is part craft and part performance, and the performative component demands that the Boggs note would be received at face value. When that happens, his drawing has become money. In its mimetic impulse, the Boggs note is a representation of a representation of value but it acquires monetary value when, by an act of will on the part of the recipient, it is exchanged as if it was indeed money. The bills he draws are just catalysts for a transaction he carefully documents that constitutes not only the money but also the actual art object, which is then sold, exhibited, and circulated in the art world. Boggs's art "momentarily slows the mindless frenzy of exchange, forcing us to mind it; and in so doing he forces the age-old monolithic stasis [that is, the money form] to budge and shudder."[58] In fact, the transaction whose traces (receipts, goods, etc.) in turn become a commodity exchanged in the art world is based on an informed agreement of the parties, all aware that they are exchanging a second-order representation of value.[59]

Here is where I find the comparison between Boggs and Gregory helpful: just as Boggs's transactions successfully raise the problem of the referentiality of money, foregrounding that our belief in its intrinsic value is indeed dependent on a social agreement, Gregory's burnt-cork joke challenges the fact that skin pigmentation, understood as the index of race, tends to remain the unchallenged starting point of the signifying chain. And just as Boggs successfully exposes the supplementarity of the sign — that there is no substance, no authenticity, no ontology behind the bill's denomination — Gregory criticizes how blackness continues to be perceived as ontologically grounded rather than the product of a historically specific hermeneutics of face value. The illusion of the transparency of the sign of value is what makes the pigmentation of the skin — just like the pigmentation of the bill — appear to carry value, while in reality it has no referent outside the regime of representation of which it is are a part.

Boggs has been in and out of jail in both Europe and the United States, and repeatedly considered in violation of U.S. law, which prosecutes whomever "makes or executes, in whole or in part, after the *similitude* of any U.S. currency, or makes *likeness* of such currency."[60] However, the more interesting "crime" I want to emphasize is not the production of a likeness of U.S. currency, but rather having made currency of a likeness. Boggs's deeper crime was not his act of mimesis, but rather the exposure of the simulacral and contractual nature of the supposed original and the fact that the work of resemblance can produce ontologizing effects. Gregory's joke achieves the same result, suggesting that it is the fact that blackness functions as currency that makes signifiers of blackness appear "authentically" black. It is the circulation of blackness as a sign of value — as a money form or money commodity — that induces the idea or expectation of its ontological thickness. Blackness, he ultimately suggests, is a vehicle, signifier, and product of exchange.

OPTIC BLACK

A television set occupies the frame. A handwritten note sits on top: "Feed the idiot box." This shot introduces the premiere of *Man Tan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show* in Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2000). Hoping to be fired, television writer Pierre Delacroix, played by Damon Wayans, has scripted an updated minstrel show and is now awaiting the show's premiere. How will it look on TV?

Previously in the film, we have seen the taping of the series pilot — a plantation scene re-created in a TV studio through brightly dressed stereotypical characters — Aunt Jemima, Rastus, Nigger Jim, and more — a cartoonish set, and a cinematography that emphasizes the *mise-en-scene*'s vibrant colors. The TV broadcast begins with a similar visual aesthetic but this time the color palette is rendered through animated characters. As the premiere begins, we see a huge minstrel mouth opening to let out two computer-animated dancing puppets — caricatures of the show's two stars who, along with the production assistant, are watching the broadcast in dismay (figure 3.3).[61]

Then an abrupt aesthetic transition occurs: a cut to two commercials targeted at black audiences: one for an aphrodisiac drink named Da Bomb, and the other for a line of "ghetto" wear designed by Timmi Hillnigger. Both tits- and ass-style hip-hop music videos employ a rhetoric of 125 percent

FIGURE 3.3. The *Millennium Minstrel Show* stars as animated puppets, *Bamboozled* (Directed by Spike Lee, 2000, 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks/New Line Cinema), frame grab.

pure authenticity and of "keeping it real"; so real, Timmi Hillnigger claims in the commercial, "we give you the bullet holes." But now the colors are muted, the images are grainy, and look like low-definition video (figures 3.4 and 3.5). Why this shift?

Bamboozled has enjoyed tremendous critical success. It is a densely theoretical film which has generated a lot of theory in return — most particularly in relation to theories of reification, commodification, exploitation, abjection, racial grotesque, interracial passing, masquerade, questions of authenticity of black representations, stereotyping, and relationships between material culture and race.[62] While this rich scholarship informs my thinking, here the film is discussed only to explore a couple of points. The first is that the film's focus on blackface (which operates in a variety of diegetic, extradiegetic, stylistic, and theoretical ways) demands that we take seriously the film's surfaces. *Bamboozled* deploys blackface as a hermeneutics of the surface and a way to facialize the commodity form. Not only are so many faces and material surfaces black in the film, but, progressively, the film constructs blackness as a face. The second point is that the film's use of blackface offers a way to convey processes of reification of blackness as commodity form. Said otherwise, the function of blackness as that which brings to visibility commodity status — the form — is rendered materially, sensorially, and tangibly

FIGURE 3.4. Da Bomb commercial, *Bamboozled* (Directed by Spike Lee, 2000, 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks/New Line Cinema), frame grab.

FIGURE 3.5. Timmi Hillnigger commercial, *Bamboozled* (Directed by Spike Lee, 2000, 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks/New Line Cinema), frame grab.

FIGURE 3.6. The revenge of the Sambo artifacts, *Bamboozled* (Directed by Spike Lee, 2000, 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks/New Line Cinema), frame grab.

throughout the film. Bill Brown identifies one of the film's great achievements in having recirculated in the same space blackface, stereotypes, and Sambo art, in order to show that their blackness expresses their shared commodity form. Because of the film's success in this expression, blackness appears as a signifier that sits equally on the surface of the body and of commodity culture; blackness is what allows these two realms to swiftly swap their skins.

Bluntly put, through the leverage of blackface, *Bamboozled* argues that the commodity form in contemporary material culture has a face, and that face is black. This is because material culture is still determined by the commodity relations of slavery. *Bamboozled* presents slavery not as a historical phenomenon — a historical event that occurred in the past and has attained its closure — but rather as a historical ontology; that is, an enduring systemic breakdown of the distinction between humans and things.[63] This breakdown is most evident in the racist memorabilia that populate the film because of how they materialize the stereotype, fixating "a demeaning and/or romanticizing racism with the fortitude of solid form."[64] These objects are second-degree stereotypes because their first referent is not the living breathing subject, but the stereotype itself, which they have managed to reify.[65]

To convey this pervasive ontological scandal, Spike Lee stages multiple scenarios of interchangeability between personhood and thingness; for example, by foregrounding the continuity between human movement, mechanical

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FIGURE 3.7. The revenge of the Sambo artifacts, *Bamboozled* (Directed by Spike Lee, 2000, 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks/New Line Cinema), frame grab.

movement, and animation. Manray — the show's talented main star — is an obvious transitional figure in this continuum, as his tap dancing is already capable of evoking proximity between the human and the automaton, especially in his final dance of death, when a barrage of bullets fired by the hip-hop militant group Mau Mau keeps him dancing at a maddening speed. And so is the Jolly Nigger Bank, the cast-iron piggy bank that Delacroix's assistant, Sloan, gives him so that he will remember "a time when black people were considered inferior." In the film's denouement, this object suddenly moves of its own will. Through this revenge of the racist artifacts that populate Pierre Delacroix's office, the film stages "the recollection of the ontological scandal perpetrated by slavery, as the reanimation of the reified black body" (figures 3.6 and 3.7).[66] This reenactment of the breakdown between person and thing, this return of the personhood that had been wiped from the slave in the form of animation of a mechanical object, for Brown, represents the American uncanny.

It is blackface's flickering effect that brings this reapparition to fruition. Not only are many faces metaphorically or literally black in the film, but blackness is also a vehicle of facialization. To gain a "face" — a recognizable site of personhood — even the racist collectibles have to "blacken up."[67] Lee renders this with camera angles and a lighting design that reconstitute, for artifacts already permeated by ontological instability, the personhood that

had been robbed from the subjects after which they are supposedly modeled. Shot at a low angle or slightly to the side with an emphasis on their eyes, these artifacts, sitting silent and still in the depth of the visual field, suddenly become beholders of a gaze — an aesthetic strategy of reanimation that the film shares with David Levinthal's photographs of Sambo art, which also hang on the wall of Delacroix's office.[68]

Most of the film is spent coating everything in blackness, creating highly tactile images, and a progressively suffocating *mise-en-scène* in which the characters, and Delacroix in particular, are increasingly dwarfed by, and gradually indistinguishable from, items of material culture. Watching *Bamboozled*, Kara Keeling says, is like wading through a pool of shit. Everything is highly tactile and everything is pitch-black. More precisely, a performance of what W. T. Lhamon would call "optic black" — a pose, an attitude, a gesture that embraces blackness in order to flaunt a refusal to fit. Building on the image of "optic whiteness" — the metaphor of color capital that Ralph Ellison employs in the "Liberty Paint" episode in *Invisible Man* — the idea of "optic black" folds it inside out. It is less concerned with the denied black contribution to the production of whiteness, than with the shift in the location of blackness from the sphere of production to the sphere of exhibition. In optic black, blackness is not invisible, but rather hypervisible, and deliberately so. While Ellison indicts a cultural optics that spectralizes black labor for the production of a white color capital, the notion of optic black, instead, calls attention to the fact that blackness has become a visual signifier which is more valuable the more it is removed from the sphere of production. Blackness severs its connection to black labor, but once liberated from it, it acts instead as currency in the sphere of exchange. With optic black, blackness is on the surface and well on display. "[O]ptic blackness," Lhamon explains, "acknowledges and works through stereotypic effects, usually turning them *inside out*."[69] Optic black is performative and purposely exhibitionist.

"Optic black" describes the overall stance of the film and its ability to mobilize blackface as its own surface, its own projected outside and "in-your-face" blackness. But there are other forms of blackness that concern the surface of the film's images — besides the surfaces of people and things that populate it — in the way their interaction occurs through or produces blackness as an outcome. We see this in the scene in which Delacroix pitches his idea for the *New Millennium Minstrel Show* to his network producer, Dunwitty. At the opening of the scene, the two are sitting across from each other around

a long conference table in Dunwitty's office, which is heavily decorated with large photographs of African American sports figures and a variety of pieces of African art (sculptures, masks, and so on). As Delacroix is describing his idea for a minstrel show, Dunwitty becomes increasingly excited. The scene is not shot in the customary shot/reverse-shot structure, but rather by alternating increasingly closer and more rapid profile shots of the two men. The long table standing in between them is progressively forgotten and, with each "call and response," the two men's faces are brought closer and closer to each other. Eventually, Dunwitty climaxes and makes explicit the mounting erotic tension the very idea of minstrelsy has triggered: "You know why I know that I like this? I am getting a boner." A minute later, Manray, one of the show's prospective stars, samples his tap dancing for Dunwitty on that same table. The shot composition with the camera positioned at a low angle from behind Dunwitty's head sitting at one end of the table implies that Manray is performing a lap dance over Dunwitty's erected phallus. Here the minstrel dynamics of love and theft are dramatized through postures and an editing and camera placement that brings the characters together, almost speaking in each other's face. We see them touching through the minstrel mask Delacroix's description has conjured up. Blackness is something in-between them, both the vehicle and the outcome of their erotic dance.

But in the sequence of the show's television premiere something else happens. A blackness that, up to this point, the film had primarily located on the surface of people and things, often as an added layer (the burnt cork makeup the performers are forced to wear, the black coating applied on top of the myriad racist household objects that increasingly populate the screen), changes location in the TV commercials. Blackness is no longer a saturation, but a graininess, obviously and deliberately digitally rendered.[70] Here blackness is a mood, a quality, and a *mise-en-scène*. The suggestion is that blackness pervades and, in fact, enables the language of the advertising image. The very transition between these various aesthetic regimes of the image shows how "the relationship between the projected black image and 'prefilmic blackness' [already and always] problematizes cinema's claims to function as an index of a prefilmic reality."[71] By emphasizing blackness as *mise-en-scène* of desire, *Bamboozled* puts the image at a remove from "the black" and, therefore, exposes a crisis of representation, but one that, Kara Keeling argues, was always already there: blacks never matched their media representations. Therefore, because of its digital aesthetics, the film can help

us think through "digitization and film, representation and identity." In dividing these poles so (digitization and representation on one side, and film and identity on the other), Keeling underscores that blackness no longer sutures them together; blackness no longer folds one onto the other. At this point, the film is taking the question of blackface and surfaces directly to bear upon the role of the black body in stabilizing the ontology of the image. In this sense, the film stages a crisis in the photochemical imagination — a crisis it renders through its digital aesthetics and its optic black stance.

In its entirety, the sequence of the show's premiere stages a transition of blackness from the surface of the body to the surface of the commodity object to the grain of the advertising image. This sequence is also a transition between two ontological states of the commodity form of blackness — blackness as an object and blackness as aesthetics, blackness as a thing and blackness as a language (of desire). In the *New Millennium Minstrel Show*, "black" occupies the uncertain border zone between the human and the object: "black" is the animated puppet that, within the system of objects of the film, takes on the same ominous quality of the reanimated black memorabilia. Blackness supposedly abstracted from living bodies and turned into material signifier — burnt cork makeup — equally coats the faces of the entertainers, the puppets made to their likeness, and a host of mass-produced household objects whose function is to perpetuate nostalgically the social relations of slavery. With the TV commercials, instead, the filmic image presses against its surface, thus embracing the conceit of blackface as an aesthetic regime in which blackness functions as signifier of exchange. In the commercials, blackness is both the product and the medium of exchange.[72] It ushers in the aesthetic regime of what Michael Schudson has called "capitalist realism"; that is, the imagination/visualization of a way of experiencing things that supports the material and social relations of capitalism.[73] Advertising, Schudson has argued, is intrinsically self-referential: "it does not represent reality nor does it build a fully fictive world. It exists, instead, on its own plane of reality," one that allows it to fully absorb and thus render completely irrelevant, the question of truth value.[74] Thus, capitalist realism is fully self-contained and self-referential, and, just like the minstrel show, presents itself as mimetic, but it is instead entirely simulacral. Schudson conceptualizes advertising fundamentally as an interface for how (capitalist) social relations romance themselves, whereby the advertising image is the mere vehicle, the temporary embodiment necessary for this romance to take place. But

it is also mere sur-face. It is the face that capitalism must provisionally, but also repeatedly, assume in order to interface itself, in order to lovingly caress its own skin. Thus, whereas in *The New Millennium Minstrel Show* blackness offers the face of reification that solidifies the commodified body into an object, in the case of the commercials blackness acts as the face of the signifying system that enables capitalist realism to say "I love you" to itself.

CAPITALIST ROMANCES

In *Bamboozled*'s commercials, the simulacral logic of passing, the frenzy of circulation, is a primary manner in which desire is expressed and articulated. The logic and the real or phantasmatic experience of commodity exchange is what capitalist realism takes as its amorous object. *Bamboozled* shows that this is the capitalist romance that renews itself in the advertising image and blackness is a crucial interface for this romance to take place.

The work of artist Hank Willis Thomas claims a similar place for blackness, as a signifier of the desire for/of capitalist exchange. Willis Thomas's primary medium is photography and his main aesthetic mode is that of creating works that are, at face value, indistinguishable from advertising images. His photographs are deliberately crafted to reproduce both the aesthetics and the intermediate ontological plane of capitalist realism, slipping in and around our consciousness just as advertising does, so that their commonplace appearance "gives them the kind of legitimacy accorded to things existing in the natural world."[75] This means that his works' ontological claim to the real is dependent both on their ability to camouflage as actual advertising, and on sharing advertising's cumulative effect — the insistence with which it clutters our visual landscape.[76] Yet, by engaging with the surface of the language of advertising — by taking advertising at its face value — Willis Thomas's works transform their self-referentiality into reflexivity: they do not just look like ads, or refer back to them, but they also manage to hold up a mirror to the property structure that underlies capitalism itself. This is a fundamentally Benjaminian move, if we recall Benjamin's characterization of the prostitute as the site in which the commodity celebrates its becoming human, in the attempt "to look itself in the face."[77]

As much as his work has been shown in galleries and museums, Willis Thomas's photographs have often been exhibited in public spaces, such as

bus stops, billboards, and kiosks. When they appear in places that are common, shared, or unmarked, rather than institutionally designated, Willis Thomas's works seem to want to go, to some extent, unnoticed. They want to pass. But as they pass, they also call attention to what they pass *through* and *to*. With their quasi-metaphysical stillness they arrest viewers in their tracks just before being dispatched as most advertising is.[78]

Consider the pseudo MasterCard banner Willis Thomas created from a photograph taken at the funeral of his cousin Songha Willis, who was tragically shot in the back of the head outside Club Evolutions in Philadelphia on February 2, 2000 (figure 3.8). Built and publicly hung as a billboard outside the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, this image's deceptive face, fully compliant with the aesthetics of other "priceless" MasterCard ads, encourages a distracted reception, while the superimposed text quietly, but sternly, demands that the viewer conjures up the horrible loss that lies beneath it and face advertising's cynical computation of value. This computation of value lays at the beginning of the Long Twentieth Century, the cycle of capital accumulation begun with the slave trade which — in augmented, self-reflexive, and increasingly speculative form — continues to this day. By camouflaging the work as a MasterCard ad, Willis Thomas's *Priceless* (2004) seeks to counteract this monetarization of human life by exhibiting, as its blind corner, the historical roots of the "speculative matter" of race.

The MasterCard "priceless" ads proceed as a series of computations that accumulate to finally climax in the mention of an item that is considered beyond the just reiterated logic of exchange and labeled "priceless." They are a mounting love, a vain promise of an orgasmic fullness that the advertising image is supposed to deliver. Ironically, even though purportedly detached from monetary value, it is this final image, and hence the visual itself, that is unintentionally posited as the ultimate token of exchange and surface for romance. Hank Willis Thomas's *Priceless*, instead, refuses to deliver such fulfillment and constructs its visual field in the opposite direction, as an implosion. It counteracts the ads' exhibitionism with a scene that withholds closure, resists romance, and ultimately stages the unexchangeable object as a nonvisualizable and nondisplayable blind corner. Thus, it turns the advertising visual field inside out, and it gestures toward the irrepresentable scene of exchange sitting at the heart of modern visuality, where the exchangeability of the slave gives rise to the money form of the social sphere. Consider this: the paper trail of the *Zong* trial, as well as its logbook, contains nothing that

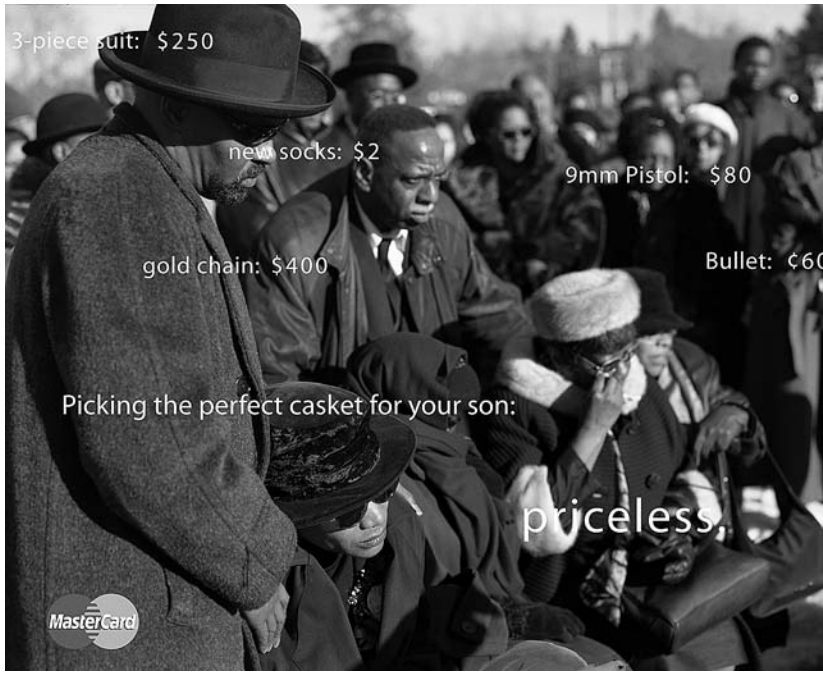

FIGURE 3.8. Hank Willis Thomas, *Priceless,* 2004, Lambda photograph, 48× 60 in. HWT05.006. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

can bring the traded men, women, and children to visibility.[79] Only their movement can be beheld — their coerced transportation, the transactions they made possible, and their conversion into money. Hank Willis Thomas's *Priceless* presents the viewer with a similar impasse: it demands a gaze that is willing to be arrested by the recognition of its own failure to restore what has not left a computable trace. Thus, it functions as a metapicture of the Long Twentieth Century's abstractive logic of exchange.

Like Dick Gregory, Willis Thomas too can be regarded as both a conjurer and an exorcist, performing acts of aesthetic and ontological camouflage, which begin with the name of the series of works that brought him to the attention of the art world. The series is called *B®ANDED* — a name that announces the intended exploration of the intimate relationship between commodity form and race through an effect of *différance*. The name suggests how subtle displacements of the signifier can open up the possibility to explore the work of race as a work of writing, the inscription of a visual order onto

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the body — a branding — as well as a work of resemblance, the institution of a system of visual equivalences whereby presence is always deferred.[80] Itself branded with the recognizable mark of intellectual property, the series title further evokes the commodity logic lodged within artistic expression. Moreover, the title announces the desire to work from within a given regime of representation by manipulating its surface — its face value, in fact — by problematizing the connection it establishes between face and value: here, made to flicker, with the use of the symbol ®.

I read the *B®ANDED* series, built predominantly around the dialectic between advertising logos and the visual and material culture of the archives of slavery, in relation to his later *UNBRANDED* series, in which Willis Thomas digitally removed the captions from print advertisements featuring African American models or directed at black consumers published between 1968 (the year Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated) and 2008. While the first series focuses on effects of corporealization that the black shares with the commodity, the latter engages more directly with the ontology of the advertising image and its desire to circulate. Stripping these images of their advertising text reveals the underlying work and trajectories of desires. The goal is to show how blackness functions as a language through which capitalist realism enables material relations to be rendered and resolved as visual relations. Considered together, the two series are built on the realization that the visuality of the black body is always already flickering between the human form and the commodity form. With works that pass as, mimic, and share the social ontology of the advertising image, Willis Thomas succeeds in unfolding this flickering by slowing down the rapidity with which the advertising image exchanges. Laboring on resemblances, his acts of camouflage foreground the "iconic" properties of the sign; that is, its exchange value or face value, so that resemblances are not posited as effects of ontological affinities, but rather as their cause.

In the *B®ANDED* series, the work of resemblance occurs between advertising images and imagery of slavery, segregation, and lynching, thus suggesting an ontological affinity between the two. The key to understand it is in the relationship between location (how can the historically seen object become a viewing subject?) and matter of expression, and, as I use this formalist notion, my intention is to place emphasis on "matter" — that is, on a materialist understanding of artistic expression — but also on a question that postblack art continuously poses: what is the "matter" of race?[81] By plunging the ar-

chives of slavery in order to recirculate its early mass-culture artifacts, Hank Willis Thomas creates implosive visual fields that take us back to the matter of race, specifically to the financial revolution as the moment when race acquired what Charles Mills describes as a socially material substance.[82] Willis Thomas's art argues that the matter of race is fundamentally speculative.

The artist makes this point by unearthing not only the archives of Black Atlantic history, but also their system of representation. In *Absolut Power* (2003) he reproduces the *Description of A Slave Ship* (1789) in the shape of an Absolut vodka bottle (figure 3.9). With this gesture he reactivates, from the heart of the commodity object, the logic of computation that presided the *Description,* prepared by the London Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which combined the real measurements of the slave ship *Brookes* with the customary utilization of its space for cargo in a typical transatlantic voyage. The result, as Marcus Wood has shown, is a visualization of the logic of finance capital in cartographic form, according to the conventions of naval architecture.[83] Yet, despite featuring schematically drawn bodies that are nothing more than placeholders for a projected profit, the *Description* garnered widespread support for the abolitionist cause, because it was read naturalistically, as a portrayal of the actual stacking of slaves on board. Despite the fact that the aesthetic formality of this picture, as Wood calls it, performs the same work of abstraction that finance capital obtains on the living, breathing humans subjected to its logic, its viewership demanded that the miniscule silhouettes be read under the sign of the human. The *Description*, then, is itself caught in the paradox of racial visibility that Willis explores: it carries the expectation that the signs of blackness would be transparent renderings of black bodies and lives, whereas their visuality is the expression of another logic of signification that I take from Michael Kaplan's idea of iconomics.[84]

"Iconomics" is the rhetoric of financial speculation as it is expressed by the stock market index, which measures the status of the system by providing a "picture" of the investors' feelings about it. The market index, claims Kaplan, is an indexical icon. Thus, as a social imaginary, iconomics is a system of simulation whose only referent is the speculation that market participants make about what every other participant speculates. The *Description,* in other words, is an early example of the semiotic and visual short circuit of iconomics — obviously a Long Twentieth Century phenomenon — that, Willis Thomas's work shows, is coextensive with the way race is still looked at. The compulsive naturalistic readings of (culturally determined) signs

Figure 3.9. Hank Willis Thomas, *Absolut Power,* 2003. Inkjet print on canvas, 60 × 40 in. HWT05.002. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

of race, in a twisted logic, is a way to affectively breathe human life into speculative entities, even though race and blackness themselves are nothing other than "figures" of a specific social contract, forms of appearance of (a socially constructed) value. To prevent this type of representational reading, *Absolut Power* provides a flickering effect between the slave ship and the vodka bottle in order to establish a reversible relationship between inside and outside, container and contained, then and now. The ship is both the vessel and the content of commodity exchange; the liquor bottle is both the commodity exchanged for slaves and the means of transportation to their commercial destination.

To be sure, the icon of the slave ship has been extensively reused and repurposed; just consider, as an example, the cover of Bob Marley's album *Survival* (1979). But the specificity of Willis Thomas's deployment relies on locating this icon within the contemporary logic of the advertising image so that the sociohistorical, but also epistemological, roots of its hyperbolic rhetoric are laid bare. Just like the credit system, disrobed in *Priceless*, was built on the abstraction of black humanity, so too the visualization of the slave ship, as figuration of this perverse ontological failure, is brought back to its rhetorical and socioeconomic conditions: it figures absolute power; in fact, the absolute of power, and ontologically so.

Willis Thomas's work engages with the surface of advertising through a compounding of indexicality: through superimposition and layering — branding; by creating flickering images, which, as it is the case in *Absolut Power*, have the visuality of an X-ray image, simultaneously from the inside and out; and by disrobing existing ads. We also see this indexicality in *Scarred Chest* (figure 3.10).

In the *UNBRANDED* series, instead, advertising images are defaced. The images reach a new stillness while also appearing unprotected and uncovered. They exist in tension with the idea of the brand. Whereas the advertising image is evanescent and unanchored, the brand functions instead as a center of corporeal density, a site of stabilization of the frenzy of circulation, but also a form of embodiment that competes with the embodiment of race. As Rosemary Coombe states, the brand is a "second skin" that products develop in order to interface their consumers. She notes how with the rise of mass consumption, trademarks and logos offered a promise of bodily contact for the unmarked and disembodied bourgeois subject that sought to experience corporeality through consumption.[85] Through its own prosthetic body, the

brand could safely offer a little taste of the Other.[86] More deeply, if the slave is an embodied commodity, a commodity in corporeal form, the brand is the result of anthropomorphization of the commodity. Branding functions in opposite ways in these two cases: while a mark of ownership reduces the slave into thingness, for the commodity branding is a site of personification. Finally, because it is the locus of consumer attachment, the brand is a visual object and an emotion, and as Sara Ahmed explains, emotions are forms through which social interactions shape bodies by producing their surfaces.[87]

Willis Thomas's *Branded Head* literalizes the role of racial embodiment in the commodity romance (figure 3.11). The Nike "swoosh" "branded" (in scare quotes, the meaning of which is discussed in chapter 4) on the model's head conveys also the physical intimacy between blackness and commodity status as it refers back to the practice of branding slaves and popular abolitionist images such as *The Scourged Back* (figure 3.12), as well as the opening image to this chapter.

By repurposing that image, Willis Thomas shows blackness and commodity culture as two orders of inscription onto the body, as *impressions* of a sociomaterial arrangement, not intrinsic properties of the object. Thus the brand is a surface, but also a pivot, the site of a nonreciprocal chiasm between personhood and thingness. As a site of personification, branding performs the outlining of a *face*. The brand, in other words, facializes the commodity and, with a Benjaminian move, it can also be conceived as a vantage point, as a place where capitalist realism can see itself in the face.

I save for the next chapter a more in-depth consideration of how *Branded Head* engages with the ontology of the photographic image because that discussion offers a way to discuss the notion of the Long Photographic Century as the passage of the image through race and capital. Here instead, I am more interested in what Hank Willis Thomas's work can tell us about blackness as commodity form, as principle of visibility of commodity status. As discussed in relation to the branded forehead of the dark-skinned slave in *Emancipated Slaves*, the subject's race appears constructed by the branding of the brand just as strongly as by the blackness of the skin. In *Branded Head* it is the commodity form that takes the semblance of the index: it brands, it acquires its own corporeality, and, acting like a second skin, it becomes face value.

In Willis Thomas's work the "brand" is also a meeting point between the panoptic and disciplinary dimensions of plantation life, and (its updated ver-

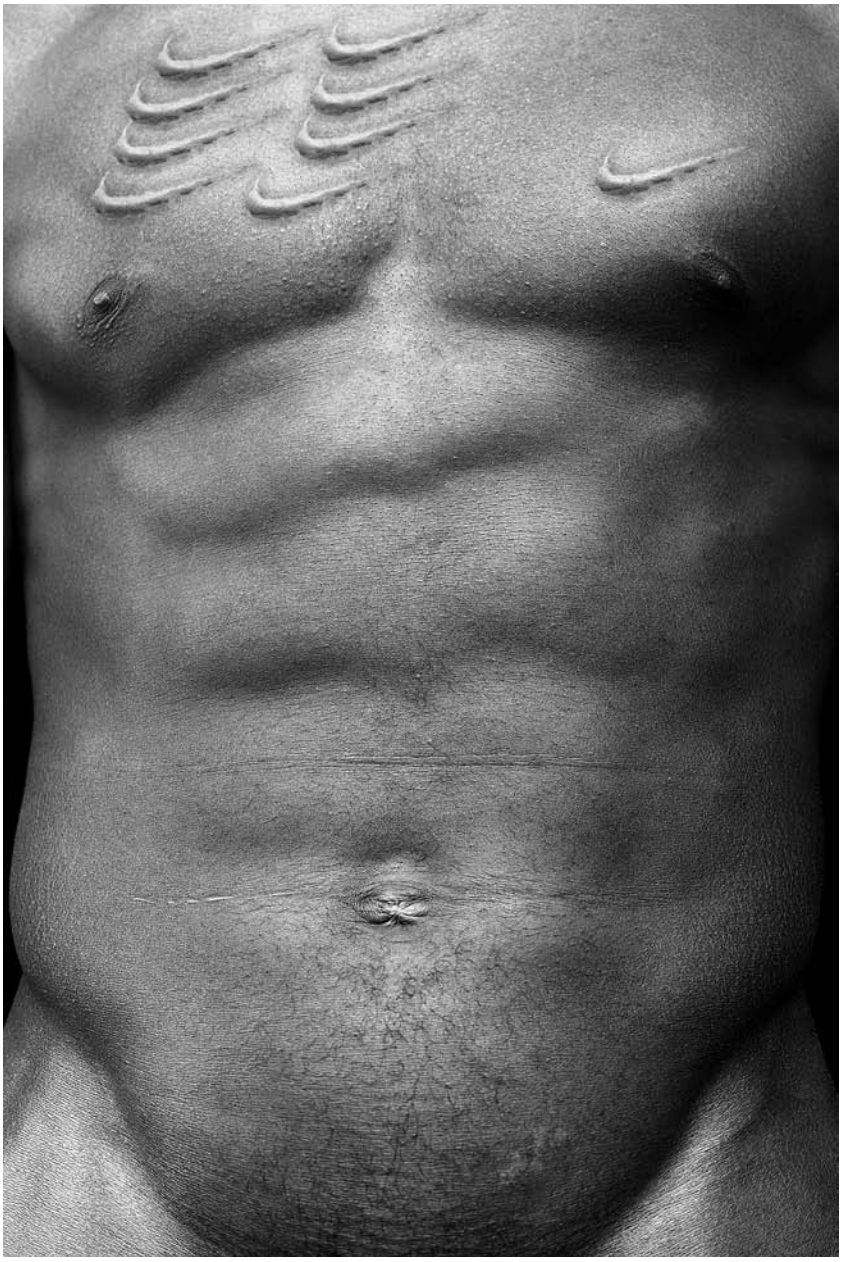

FIGURE 3.10. Hank Willis Thomas, *Scarred Chest, Edition 1 of 3, with 1 AP,* 2003. Lambda photograph, 60 × 40 in., 61 × 40 ¼ in. HWT05.008. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

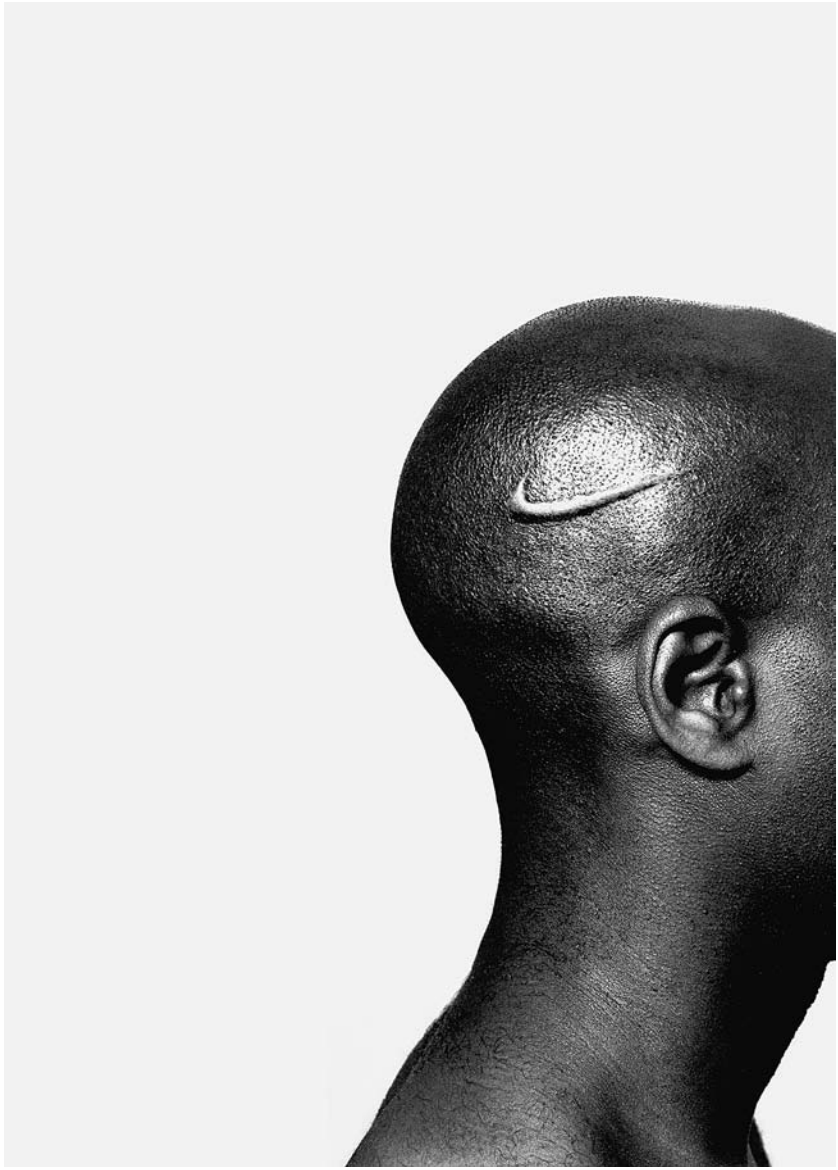

FIGURE 3.11. Hank Willis Thomas, *Branded Head*, 2003. Lambda photograph, 40 × 30 in. HWT05.001. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

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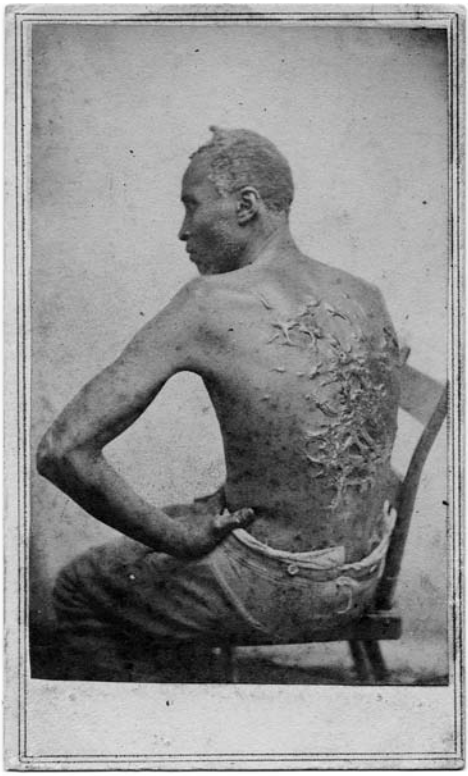

FIGURE 3.12. McPherson & Oliver (attributed). *The Scourged Back, 1863.* International Center of Photography, Purchase, with funds provided by the ICP Acquisitions Committee, 2003.

sion) the contemporary role of blackness in consumer culture. So when Willis Thomas mimics, or signifies on, highly recognizable commercial logos such as Nike, Timberland, or the NBA, he explodes them into scenes of subjection, hybridity, and racial violence. For instance, in *Jordan and Johnnie Walker in Timberland circa 1923* (2004) the NBA silhouette hangs from the Timberland tree while the Johnnie Walker logo, with its back at the lynching, walks away from the scene. Other times, Willis Thomas reanimates the logo, bringing it back to its supposed naturalistic origin as the sign of the corporeality of the Other. In *Shooting Stars*, which addresses the issue of black-on-black crime, one NBA-branded Michael Jordan silhouette holding a gun chases another whose profile has been supplemented by a racially explicit hairdo.

While the *B®ANDED* series focuses on effects of corporealization that the black shares with the commodity, Willis Thomas's *UNBRANDED* series engages more directly with the place of blackness within the ontology of the advertising image and its desire to circulate. For this series, Willis Thomas collected

a number of print advertisements from 1968 to 2008 that featured African American models or were directed at black consumers, and he digitally removed their caption. Thus, the *UNBRANDED* series further superficializes a language that is already entirely focused on its outer appearance and has no referent outside of its own economy of desire. Without captions anchoring them to a specific sales pitch, the images float and freely exchange, speaking only to each other rather than to the consumer product to which they were originally connected. Thus, what comes to the surface is the logic and lure of exchange for which *Priceless* provides the metapicture.

Inoculated within this self-referential and highly mobile field, the black body is aesthetically absorbed within the narcissistic thinness of the advertising tableau, thus bringing to the surface the centrality of blackness in consumer culture's trajectories of desire.[88] Black bodies appear sometimes simply as items within a color palette and other times as part of a wish fulfillment, which always serve as vital ingredients to the reproduction and reaffirmation of a color capital that remains optic white.

For instance, the peacock chair that in the late '60s had become part of the image of black militancy in the famous Huey P. Newton portrait is repurposed by the language of advertising in a way that diffuses the specter of African American takeover and uncovers instead dynamics of desire (figure 3.13). Willis Thomas's excription, in turn, reanimates the titillation that lays hidden within the shock effect of the image of an armed black man. Retitled as *Are You the Right Kind of Woman for It*?, the peacock chair is now the fulcrum of an erotic fantasy staged as a playful and yet daring reversal of a scenario of colonial domination.[89] Clad in colonial attire, shiny black boots, cigar in mouth, an African American model sits in the chair with two white women at his side and a tropical-fruit basket at his feet. The décor echoes the mildly exotic color palette of the fruit in the women's outfits, their sandals, and the flowers they wear in their hair, thus establishing a visual equivalence between the color*ed* man and the color*ful* women. Almost touching each other's hands over the man's crotch, the two women submit to the part of the "(not quite) virgin land" the black colonizer will conquer and possess. As much as unbranding the advertisement foregrounds its disembodied evanescence, the image of the black man with a (literal and metaphorical) gun is not fully etherealized and continues to linger in the erotic associations it has already stirred up.

Willis Thomas's work shows how it has become increasingly difficult to

FIGURE 3.13. Hank Willis Thomas, *Are you the Right Woman for it?*, 1974/2007. LightJet print, 39 × 43 inches. HWT07.003. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

talk about the body, and the black body in particular, in nonfigural terms, in ways that do not make it exchangeable. *Priceless*, for instance, frames the survivors' grief while the mourned body is off-sight, off-frame, and in the coffin. And yet it is still surrounded by the traces of the transactions that that type of body initiates (and is always at the center of), which the work conjures in the viewer equally through the text and through the face of the image, its likeness to other comparable images. But what happens when there is no face to speak of? No face to the body and no face to the object? What happens to the commodity blackness when it can no longer be inter-faced?

Keith Obadike's *Blackness for Sale* is acquiring an important place within contemporary literature on cyberart (figure 3.14).[90] Like *Priceless*, Obadike has created a similar pivot by leveraging the phantasmagoric substance of blackness rather than its carnal phenomenology. He has figured out a way to foreground transactions that blackness can license by camouflaging as a legitimate commercial exchange, an eBay auction of the artist's blackness. In his product description, Obadike draws a very definite distribution of

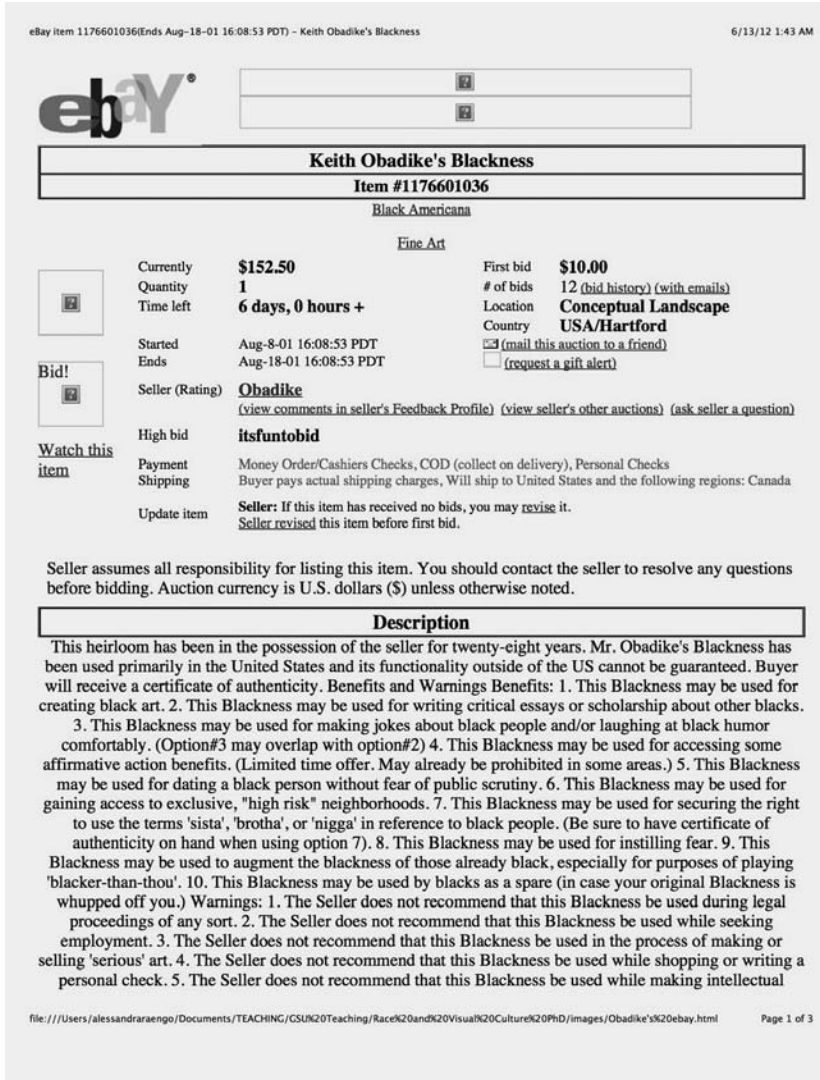

FIGURE 3.14. Obadike's *Blackness for Sale.* Screen grab.

the sensible, among other things, that the "blackness" he is selling can be used to create black art, but not serious art; it can be used to say the N-word without repercussions, but it is not recommended while seeking justice or employment. It offers "cool," but not fairness. Following the marketplace's rules of engagement allows Obadike to describe the commodity blackness in its contemporary form; that is, as a phantasmatic entity — valued for what it enables, both discursively and socially. Just like damali ayo's *rent-a-negro .com*, a website where it is seemingly possible to rent a well-mannered African American woman, Obadike exposes a number of factors that determine the variable value of blackness and offers to sell not what blackness is, but rather what it does. In both these works, blackness does not preexist the act of exchange; rather, it exists as the manufactured product of a transaction that the works themselves initiate. Consequently, the works expose that racial identity is not lodged in a preexisting essence, but it is rather reconfigured as a number of possible subject positions in response to the art itself.[91] By being openly set forth in the form of a commodity, it offers the best vantage point on the capitalist system as a whole. Blackness, then, emerges as a structuring principle and a language of social relations.

For Jennifer González, "Obadike's project reminds us of the purely phantasmatic nature of this commodity relation to race that takes place in the public sphere of the Internet."[92] That is, a sublime blackness triggers the transaction. Obadike withholds the face (there is nothing to see; no image accompanies his auction except for the text of the auction itself), yet he conjures it up. Its success shows the ability for the specter of value to summon its missing or deferred body — just like Toni Morrison's Maggie, just like the NAACP lynching shadow. Beyond that, *Blackness for Sale* brings to the surface another important sense in which the index speaks to the value of blackness — a value that has become independent from its visual presence. "Many people," claims Obadike, "understand blackness as something that lives in the realm of vision and because there was no photo on the auction page it gave room for some to fantasize about how they would occupy this space."[93] Thus, his goal was to test the value of blackness in a commercial context shared with cookie jars and darkies posters, but by withholding any image and just allowing consumers to fantasize as to what blackness would mean to them. That is, *Blackness for Sale* conjures up scenarios of seduction, but also of social injustice, putting the prospective buyer in the position of having to *flesh out* each of the described transactions. Consider, for instance, the following listed

benefits: "5. This Blackness may be used for dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny. 6. This Blackness may be used for gaining access to exclusive, "high risk" neighborhoods." And, among the warnings: "4. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while shopping or writing a personal check." Throughout this product description, blackness functions within the context of what I earlier defined as "iconomics" — as a performance of the market index. Even though it does not unfold through visual means, Obadike's artwork functions pictorially, as an indexical icon, because it provides a picture of a system that, having to face its own desires, is caught in the act of looking at itself in the face.

As Harry Elam argues, the increased visibility of blackness in contemporary visual and material culture paradoxically attests to a new and dematerialized way in which it functions as an agent of abstraction. Blackness seems to circulate on its own quite apart from black bodies and, consequently, from the history of black people as well. Blackness, he argues, has acquired the status of currency: "blackness functions as something that you can apply, put on, wear, that you use to assuage social anxiety and perceived threat: the desire to be included without the necessity of including black folk."[94] The problem, Elam specifies, is that "it remains exceedingly attractive and possible in this post-black, postsoul age of black cultural traffic to love black cool and not love black people."[95] The fact that blackness can be made "detachable" from black bodies — where it was made to adhere by what had been constructed as its natural, ontological, visuality — can be regarded as an indication of a new phase of development of the commodity form, what I described as *blackness as phantasmagoria*; that is, the stage in which an increasingly simulacral status of the visual develops its own, independent, social materiality. From a space of avisuality nested within the heart of commercial exchange, the space that Hank Willis Thomas's work wears on its sleeve, *Blackness for Sale* illustrates this phantasmagoria by showing how blackness has transitioned from being a bodily index to a market index, from being the signifier of a corporeal property to being the signifier of a speculative ontology, the money form that haunts the social sphere.