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On the Sleeve of the Visual

Alessandra Raengo

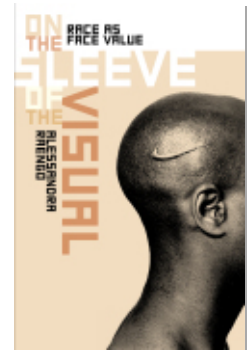
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INTRODUCTION

It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl—the glide and lick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills . . . and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.

—Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 1992¹

There is a work by Glenn Ligon in which he arranges next to each other two panels featuring a life-size, black-and-white silkscreen reproduction of his full figure, wearing a white button-down shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes, and facing the camera. Underneath the image, the panel on the left bears the caption “Self-portrait exaggerating my black features,” while the panel on the right bears the caption “Self-portrait exaggerating my white features.” The two photographs are identical (figure 0.1). We see the same body in both panels but the captions demand that we read the same features alternatively *as* black and *as* white, thus positing the black body as a sort of duck-rabbit figure—an optical illusion. In repeating, but with a difference,² these two panels open a chasm in the visual field that makes apparent that seeing is always seeing *as*. It is also a chasm between, among other things, identity and identical, same and double, different and equal. With this slip-

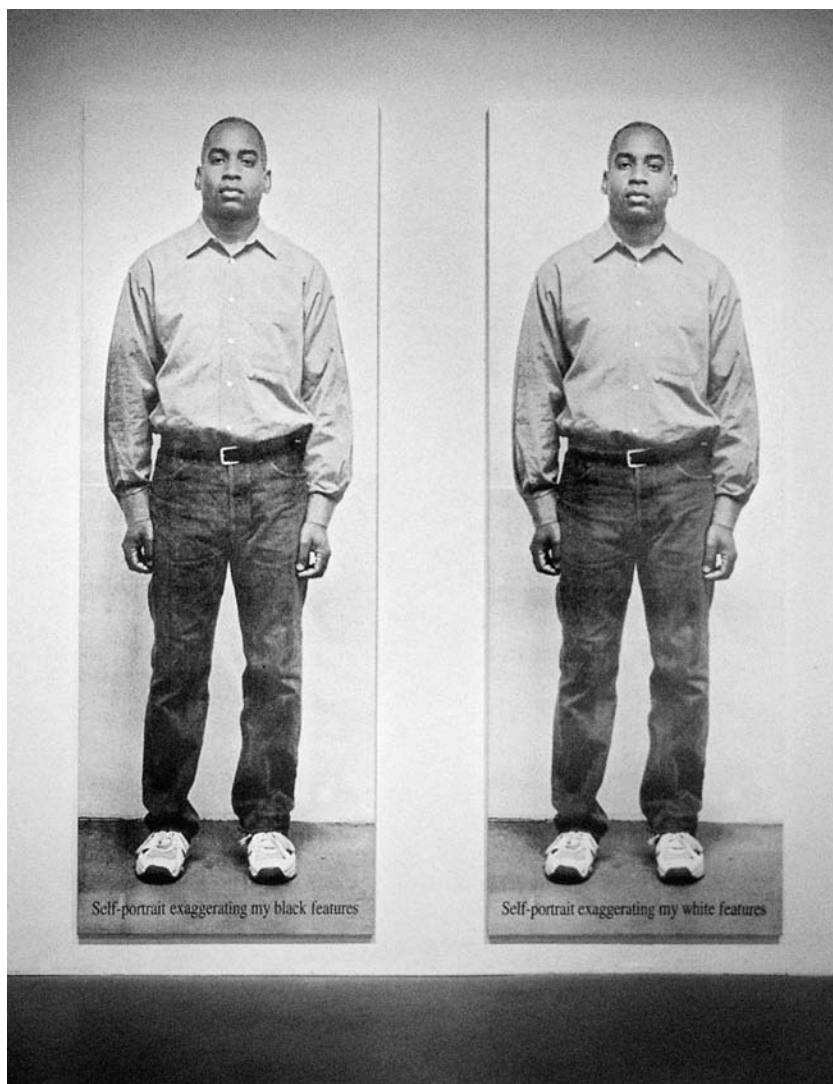


FIGURE 0.1. Glenn Ligon, *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features/Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features*, 1998. Silkscreen ink on canvas, two panels: 120 × 40 in. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles © Glenn Ligon.

page, Ligon makes blackness and whiteness appear as if they are coming from and leading elsewhere, to a place beyond the visible, and thus exposes the expectation that the black body would work as one sign, one perfect image.

Is this a racial image? And if so, what would make it so? When is an image “racial”? These questions posed by Ligon’s *Self-Portrait* and a host of other objects discussed in this book indicate my desire to resist programmatically the conflation of the visual with visibility. Unlike the image of race, the racial image, I propose, is not one in which race is present as an intelligibly visible object. Instead, the racial image is where race acts as a form of the articulation of the visual — a template, an epistemology, a map, an affect, a gestalt, a medium — as W. J. T. Mitchell has most recently argued, or as Toni Morrison’s image suggests, as a fishbowl.³ In this understanding of race I join an increasing interest on issues of vision and visibility in critical race discourse and a growing commitment to race in visual culture studies.⁴ Yet my focus goes beyond, or maybe underneath, their approach: I am interested in exploring the way in which the “medium-being” of race provides an ontology of the image that our supposed post-medium and post-ontology moment might have put under erasure, but is still unable to undermine.⁵ The fact that visual codes of race, for which “black” and “white” constitute the paradigm, continue to secure their referent — or more problematically, but also more frequently, that they continue to be read as portrayals — prompted the guiding question for the present study: What image ontology is needed for race to (still) be read off the surface of some body? Adopting the hermeneutic straining that Morrison describes in the epigraph, I am interested in works and situations in which we can see the fishbowl as such. Not so much when and how race is visible, but what it brings to visibility and what ontology of the visual is implied by the persistence of race.

Consider the asymmetry between the two panels in Ligon’s *Self-Portrait*. While Ligon’s photographed body does not deliver any recognizable “whiteness,” it does deliver a commonsensically recognizable “blackness,” thus underscoring the constitutive imbalance between the two in the field of vision: of the two captions, only one appears truthful, plausible, and sensible. Seen through the blackness the caption both describes and conjures up, the body on the left panel appears as a perfectly intelligible, trustworthy, and transparent visual sign. “Perfect” because it is a sign where the surface bears the self-evident trace of what supposedly lies behind it. This is the visual ontology I describe as *face value*, which I think of as the possibility, the belief and, more

profoundly, the desire to read value (but also reference, truth, meaning) on the image's face; that is, on its visage and its surface. This image ontology is both constitutive of and constituted by the blackness of Ligon's body within a perverse circularity that keeps the black body trapped within the visual field, both proof and product of the visibility of race.⁶ Consequently, the black body features in the present analyses not as the incontrovertible foundation for race, but rather as the ground for an enduring ontology of the visual — one that is modeled after that particular body.⁷ This focus is not an attempt to subsume all racial experiences under the dynamic between blackness and whiteness, understood as sociological or anthropological categories, at the exclusion of many heterogeneous and complicated lived experiences of race. It is rather a means to address a fundamentally Manichean visual paradigm and to press the ontological question: what image ontology do we evoke when we say "black" and "white"?⁸

Race acts both as an agent of corporealization of the visual and an agent of abstraction. On the one hand, race is what has *fleshed out* images for us, but also what has made us like them, trust them, and want to touch them. On the other hand, race is what has enabled us to read these images. It has established and deployed a system of visual equivalences among images, and between images and the world, which we routinely rehearse in our employment of the language of "black" and "white." Race corporealizes the visual at the same time as it secures its legible surface. Thus, under the medium-being of race there is a crucial sliding of an hermeneutic practice of surface reading into an ontology of the image whereby the image's meaning and value is supposedly secured by/on its surface.⁹ But what connects the "face" to value? What makes the surface perform as the repository and the expression of value?

The title of Ligon's work, *Self-Portrait*, identifies a source for the black body's troubled and troubling presence within the field of vision in the expectation that racial signs would always be read representationally as portrayals.¹⁰ It is this demand that the black body be always both representative¹¹ and representational — what in relation to artistic and curatorial practices Darby English has called the "black representational space" — that charges the body's surface with the expectation that it expresses its value.¹² Thus, one of the goals of this book is to offer an alternative to a representational theory of race, which I see as the expression of an imposed system of fixed correspondences, sometimes a conflation, between face and value. In order to resist this conflation, I leverage the flickering effect and the surface

tension between “face” and “value,” the fact that they may seem to belong to two different ontological orders. At minimum, the notion of face value yokes together two important lines of thinking: one trajectory that pursues the phenomenology of racial embodiment, and another that understands value as an expression of the social (understood as labor, meaning, the social contract, and so on).¹³

Face value also begs the question of how the surface needs to be understood; that is, do we need to understand it phenomenologically, as “skin”? Semiotically, as a signifier? Chromatically, as a physical property? As a façade? An interface? A locus of desire?¹⁴ And what is the surface from the point of view of the political economy of the sign? In turn, the notion of the “face” bears an inner tension because it conjures up both a body for which it provides the visage and the idea of a sheer surface. We see this at work in Ligon’s *Self-Portrait*. The request that the viewer read the two photographs as evidence of different racial identities emphasizes the tension between an understanding of “face” as visage and the understanding of “face” under the condition of blackness, as nothing but a surface — the effect of exteriorization Frantz Fanon described in his account of the interpellation to which he was subjected by a French child: *Tiens, un nègre!* (Look! A Negro!) Deprived of interiority, his whole body is evacuated, divided, eviscerated.¹⁵ As Charles Johnson puts it, his body and subjectivity are turned inside out, folded outwardly like shirt-cuffs.¹⁶ It is this very image that inspired the title for this book, the idea that the black body is both cause and product of a visual fold whereby the body’s “inside” is evacuated, turned into mere surface, and placed in full view, *worn on the sleeve of the visual*. The fold thusly understood is also what supposedly connects the face to value, by conflating them, suturing them, or fantasizing about their continuity.¹⁷

At the heart of this conflation there is a profound desire for race to represent difference. In *Playing in the Dark* Morrison shows this desire at work by exposing the fishbowl from within, from a place of avisibility, from the chasm Ligon makes available in his repeated photograph. She claims that the turning point that allowed her to suddenly see the fishbowl occurred when she began to read American literature as a writer; that is, with the knowledge of how an author’s imagination determines her ability to fashion characters and situations. At that point, she realized that “for black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language.”¹⁸ Importantly, she did not read American literature searching for

racial representations, but rather for the “tremors” that pervade the “white” literary utterance when it chokes what she provocatively called “the Africanist presence.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Morrison notes that white American and African American writers do not have equal access to a purportedly race-free language. “The kind of work I have always wanted to do,” she writes, “requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains.” And then, she parenthetically adds, “(The only short story I have ever written, ‘Recitatif,’ was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial.)”²⁰

This is a brilliantly misleading statement and one that holds the key to her anti-representational approach to race. In fact, Morrison did not remove all racial codes — which, according to her previous statement is an impossibility anyway — but rather left them unattributed, handing over to the reader the task to determine who they belong to, and, even more provocatively, which codes are racial and which are not. Significantly, “Recitatif”’s critical reception has emphasized how readers search for signs of race, do not find them, and are left pondering on protocols of racial legibility. This critical reception thus accurately points out not the critical work the story performs but rather the desire it mobilizes; more profoundly, the desire to continue to think of race as a form of representation of difference.

“Recitatif” follows Roberta and Twyla, from childhood to adulthood. It is narrated by Twyla and it begins with her arrival at the New York orphanage St. Bonaventure, where she immediately “feels sick to her stomach” upon discovering that she has been put in a room with a girl of a “whole different race.” The story, however, never tells us what this “other race” is but, because it expresses the characters’ reactions to each other, it employs a racially charged language. Statements such as “my mother said . . . that they never washed their hair and they smelled funny,” or “everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world” are easily read as racially motivated. But are they?

Despite their difference, Roberta and Twyla hit it off because they have some important things in common: for example, they are not actual orphans. Their mothers are alive, although unable to care for them — Roberta’s is “sick” and Twyla’s “dances all night.” After this initial bonding experience over their mother’s absence, Roberta and Twyla will meet again several times over the span of thirty years. At each encounter the reader is also given a

new set of contradictory descriptors. For example, in the '60s Roberta has "huge hair" and she is on her way to a Jimi Hendrix concert. Twyla, instead, waits tables at a Howard Johnson's. Twyla eventually marries a fireman with a big, loud family and has two kids, while Roberta marries an IBM executive, acquires stepchildren and a wealthy lifestyle, Chinese chauffeur included. Each encounter reveals how racial strife has created a wedge between them that overrides the initial bond they had established. Their preferred mode of retaliation in these occasions where they discover they have grown apart is either a reference to the unavailability of their respective mothers ("is your mother well?" "did your mother stop dancing?"), or a reference to Maggie.

Maggie is the mute and possibly deaf woman who worked in the kitchen at the orphanage. She is as short as a child and dresses like one, with a funny hat that the older girls despise as much as they despise her. Her legs are shaped like semicircles — parentheses, as Twyla describes them — and too short and unstable for her to rely on as she awkwardly hurries through the orchard to catch her bus home. The "accident" that is mentioned at each encounter between Twyla and Roberta concerns a time when the older girls made Maggie trip and fall and they all laughed while Twyla and Roberta did not do anything to help. As the racial divide between the characters deepens against the backdrop of the '60s and '70s social unrest, Roberta begins to insinuate that Maggie was black and Twyla had kicked Maggie when she had fallen on the ground. Described as simply "sandy-colored," readers and characters are not given enough information to determine her racial identity. Maggie is not visually scripted in racial terms, but only outlined as a typographic sign that both joins and disjoins — a parenthesis.

It is around the figure of Maggie that the text builds its own dispute of the representational framework of race, and yet it is Maggie as the figure of the story's readership and textuality that has commanded most representational readings. Elizabeth Abel, for example, focuses on Maggie because she offers a *mise-en-abyme* of the text: the girls' inconclusive reading of Maggie's blackness, she claims, mirrors the readers' attempt to determine the racial identity of the characters. Thus the short story offers a useful starting point to explore how "feminist readings of black women's texts disclose white critical fantasies," or, as she otherwise states, how "white women's readings of black women's biological bodies inform our readings of black women's textual bodies."²¹ This conflation between a biological and a textual body is precisely what Morrison is attempting to avoid. Abel recognizes that "Recitatif" renders race

a “contested terrain variously mapped from diverse positions in the social landscape” by replacing “conventional signifiers of racial difference (such as skin color) with radically relativistic ones (such as who smells funny to whom) and by substituting for the racialized body a series of disaggregated cultural parts.”²² Yet, as she reads the story, she tirelessly seeks to stitch back together in a unified pre- or meta-textual figure the fragments that Morrison cunningly maintains separated. What unifying systems, she asks, need to be mobilized to finally match the right race with the right person? Is it class? Is it wealth? Education? Psychology? Politics? But how can any of these be conclusively and definitively raced?

Abel appears to be chasing the prospect of finding underneath the multiplication of (surface) readings that “Recitatif” demands a body we can understand and racially identify. In other words, we might not know who is who and what is what, but the “who” and the “what” of race, in Abel’s reading, maintain an ontological thickness she is unable to challenge. Abel describes Maggie as a “*figure* of racial undecidability,”²³ but I believe that, more profoundly, Maggie turns racial undecidability into a figure — a figure with linguistic and visual integrity, with a substantial presence, with a carnality that is clearly defined, except for her racial identity — a stranger. Her semicircle legs suggest the self-containment of her body, which cannot/does not compare to any other body around her. While Twyla and Roberta are constantly paradigmatically connected within what we can describe as a Saussurean system of differences without positive terms, Maggie is preserved from this linguistic economy and remains unattached to any paradigmatic chain. She is not only a mute woman, but a mute term as well, unyielding and inassimilable. Unlike the main characters, whom are never really described, she is given an image, but this image does not contain the key to her identity. Within the linguistic economy of the text she is more properly understood as an element of syntax, as suggested by the shape of her legs.

Trudier Harris’s reading of “Recitatif” pursues a similar line of inquiry: as readers, she claims, we watch and wait in the hope that “Twyla, the narrator, will provide some clue to her racial identity.”²⁴ We want her to slip and fall (like the characters wanted Maggie to do) and say more than the author has engineered she should say for her experiment in “the removal of all racial codes” to succeed. Ultimately, we want Morrison to fall in order to relieve us from our not knowing and attach the racial codes she so liberally employs, to the body, the mind, and the social circumstances to which they belong. In

Harris's approach, Maggie is constructed as the racially unknowable subject so that the characters themselves, whom we do not see, but who clearly see each other, can experience the temporary blindness to which the reader is also perversely subjected. In this reading, the characters become the deserving victims of the same joke Morrison is playing on us.

By seeking an answer to the riddle of Maggie's blackness, both Abel and Harris unwillingly fall into what Henry Louis Gates Jr. has called a *sociological fallacy*.²⁵ They appear to read racial codes as racial representations and understand these representations as implicitly corporeal: any series of signifiers, however simulacral, needs to finally land onto a body as their referent, even when this body remains unseen. Against Morrison's stated goal, both Abel and Harris struggle with the difficulty of racial attribution; yet, it is the notion of race as a corporeal attribute that they never challenge. The text, in their view, sets up a complex interplay of mirrors, so that we never have an unobstructed view of its characters. Yet, this also means that all we have to do is unravel this interplay of reflections and we will find the answer to our quest.

On the contrary, I argue that Morrison's narrative disputes this representational approach by setting up a mock specular structure only to lead the reader to discover a non-reciprocal phantasmatic chiasm that connects the two characters and the readers to the text in order to explore how both readers and characters invest with a carnal presence the space in-between. The chiasm I have in mind is the one synecdochically inflected that, building on Homi Bhabha, Lee Edelman has described as the part for the (W)hole.²⁶ A typographic sign, a syntactic mark, Maggie is the chiasmic X that marks the spot, the parenthesis itself that connects the whole to the hole. Maggie's textual blackness is posited to signify otherness but this otherness does not belong to her. Rather, as Homi Bhabha has repeatedly argued, it is an inscription of the "artifice" of white identity on the black's body. "The figure of colonial otherness," he writes, "is produced not by the colonialist Self or the Colonized Other but by the *distance in between*."²⁷ By acting as a parenthesis connecting the fiction of wholeness to its synecdochical reliance on a projected holeness, Maggie is the in-betweenness turned into a body.

She is what Sarah Ahmed would describe as a "strange body"; that is, a body with linguistic and figurative integrity that is produced by the social body in the attempt to expel what threatens its boundaries. In *Strange Encounters*, Ahmed reads a passage from Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* in which Lorde recalls an episode that occurred in the New York subway when

she was a child. A white woman sitting next to her kept pulling her fur coat away from Lorde's snow pants. Lorde writes, "She jerks her coat close to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible things she is seeing on the seat between us — probably a roach."²⁸ The child's inability to understand the woman's retreat leads her to imagine a strange body (a roach) as the cause of such horror. The white woman, instead, is seeing the young Lorde *as* a roach. Ahmed writes, "It is through a complex sliding of signifiers and bodies, that the roach becomes the black body, and the black body becomes the border which is hence transformed into an object of abjection" — a roach.²⁹ Similarly, "Recitatif" posits race not in any single individual, but rather in the area of contact, the connecting tissue between them, the "strangeness" that connects the hole to the whole. Race is projected onto the body of Maggie, who acts as the embodiment of the social bond that brings the characters together as well as divides them along unattributed racial lines. This is the work of race that Toni Morrison detects in American literature and whose form she reproduces in "Recitatif": the mechanism that fixates this "sliding of signifiers" into visual objects is fundamentally representational. Through the figure of Maggie, Morrison, like Audre Lorde, embodies the relationality of race in the form of a "roach," a scene of exchange between imaging and seeing *as* — the site of the chiasm that a representational framework of race forecloses from view.

In Ligon's *Self-Portrait*, instead, this chiasm is in full view. Ligon installs his own body in the chiasmic X so that his self-portrait unfolds an implied mirror stage towards the viewer who then contemplates her own mobilization of racialized protocols of legibility. Thus, Ligon shapes himself *as* a roach (within the figurative terms just described) to corporealize not simply what lies between the two photographs, but what lies between the work in its totality and the viewers' stubborn desire to see race represent difference.

The figure of Maggie stages the work of race from a position of avisibility.³⁰ Maggie is a textual figure generative of the visual ontology of race, but she is not in herself visible in Morrison's text. Ligon's *Self-Portrait* instead leverages the fact that, perpetually caught in between hyper- and in-visibility, the black body offers, by default, both the terrain and the vantage point from which to outline the very boundaries of the visible. The photograph leverages this in-betweenness through mechanical repetition and by having photography, as the medium and the epistemological deliverer of transparency, become, instead, a locus of instability and opacity. In this, Ligon confirms what Frantz

Fanon had already noted: the process of racialization is analogous to the photographic process of photochemical fixation, whereby the body is fixated in the field of vision, like a photochemical imprint is fixated by a dye.³¹ By folding the visual onto its outside and then triggering the fixation of this fold, the black body offers both nourishment and pretext for a photochemical imagination that, I argue, lingers across the digital divide. In keeping with Fanon, here *photochemical* does not strictly refer to a specific medium or technology of image production, but rather to the referential affects and a cultural logic of investment in the continuity between the world and photographic images. A lot of these affects have congealed around the continuing reflection on the indexicality of the photographic image that has re-proposed the ontological question in a changed, now predominantly digital, visual culture: whether the index as a sign function remains relevant with digital images and can still ground their truth claims, or whether maybe digital images (as well as the practices of which they are part and our response to them) have finally uncovered for us that the index is more fundamentally and more foundationally an *affect* — an investment in a certain idea of referentiality that the black body has historically delivered. Said otherwise, as the paradigmatic visual sign, as the sign that wears its value on its surface and its ontological status on its sleeve, the black body is both product and trigger of an *effect* and *affect* of reality, a reality a(e)ffect.³²

LOOK MAMA, A PIPE!

Ligon's *Self-Portrait* withholds the suturing between seeing and saying, seeing and touching, seeing and believing that the black body is supposed to deliver. "Somewhere between these two photographs," writes Nicholas Mirzoeff, "there should be a color line, but it is elsewhere."³³ This "color line" that lies "elsewhere" marks this missed suturing even though the terms "black" and "white" used in the captions still make us search the surface of the body for their possible reference, even though the repeated photograph lets us know that the referent will not be found inward where we would want to locate it. Ligon's *Self-Portrait* too, therefore, opens up a place of avisuality — the space in between the repeated photographs; and just like "Recitatif," it does so by leveraging the conjuring power of "black" and "white."

The tension between seeing and saying, suturing and severing that Ligon's work puts in place is foundational to the image ontology of face value. One

of its primal scenes is the oft-quoted passage from *Black Skins, White Masks*: “Look! A Negro!” There Fanon outlines a dialectical movement between the attempted closure of racialization and its irreducible openness and unstoppable slippage as it unfolds around the sight of a black body.³⁴ By resisting this attempted closure, Fanon also resists a representational concept of the visual in order to dislodge the black body from its central position as the paradigmatic visual sign. Fanon conceptualizes blackness not as a visual property, but rather as a visual relation, which becomes a thing only as a consequence of the moment of fixation. When Fanon’s narrator is singled out by a frightened child he is given back an image of himself that is available to no one — not to the child who has projected it, nor to the narrator who can only see its reflection onto the child’s reaction to it. This black *imago*, this haunting presence of a phantasmatic blackness, is a visual relation that never coincides with a visual object. Suspended between reflection and projection, Fanon locates “blackness in the place between the interpellator and the interpellated.”³⁵ He accounts for blackness as formed *in*, not simply *as*, difference, an “uncomfortable suspension” between a negated recognition as Self and the impossibility to identify as Other.³⁶

However, it is only Fanon’s critical response to this interpellation that makes available the indeterminacy of blackness. From the child’s perspective, instead, the Martinican constitutes a perfectly contained, fully intelligible visual object, a perfect sign that benefits from the synergy of iconic and indexical functions. The slippage between the terms *nègre* Fanon uses in this passage and the term *Noir* he employs more often has the ability to suture language and vision, seeing and saying, to suspend the awareness that, as Michel Foucault puts it, what we see is never contained in what we say.³⁷ While critical theory revels in this gap, this chasm that Ligon’s *Self-Portrait* makes so whimsically available, it too acknowledges the desire for referentiality that undergirds the idea of representation. In critical theory a primal scene of recognition of this desire is found in Foucault’s reflection on the infinite relation between seeing and saying in his famous analysis of Velasquez’s *Las Meninas* and even more in his reading of René Magritte’s *La Trahison des images* (*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, 1929), (figure 0.2).

What happens when we read these two scenes together: Look mama, a pipe! This expression, a graft that puts *en-abyme*, while mocking, two separate and preexisting grafts (the *nègre/Noir* and Magritte’s painted pipe) describes the “retinal pop” triggered by the sight of the black body (Look!).



FIGURE 0.2. René Magritte, *La Trahison des images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), 1929. Oil on canvas, unframed canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 37 in. © ARS, NY. Purchased with funds provided by the Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection (78.7). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles. Digital Image © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA/ Art Resource, NY.

But it also triggers a series of referential affects prompted by the way the black body fulfills the need for a referential closure: the sight of corporeal blackness appears to always deliver “the black.” Reading together Fanon with Foucault and Magritte can help us appreciate that what both Magritte and Fanon manage to estrange — the way of seeing and saying that confuses the object with its representation, visual with discursive knowledge — is precisely what black bodies make difficult to do. Indeed, the transparency of the visual object is what Magritte satirizes by staging it as its face value. At first sight, claims Foucault, Magritte provides us with an image that “is as simple as a page borrowed from a botanical manual: a figure and the text that names it.”³⁸ Similarly, the statement “Look! A Negro!” describes Fanon’s body as the appearance of a figure and its name, a Negro. The black body, Fanon shows, is a visual object that appears to prevent reflection on the way of seeing and saying that constitutes it as immediately transparent and directly accessible. It

commends precisely the statement that Magritte attempts to estrange — “This is a pipe!” Yet, while the latter can satirize the desire for the suture between seeing and saying, the former speaks from a position in which that suture has already occurred.

Foucault’s analysis is well known, and it has been deployed also by W. J. T. Mitchell to conceptualize his notion of “metapictures.”³⁹ These two analyses read Magritte’s painting as a meta-argument about vision, naming, and representation, and the desires undergirding them; as an instantiation of what Mitchell expresses with a Wittgensteinian argument — specifically that naming is always naming *as*, and seeing is always seeing *as*. Whatever the interpretation of the referent for Magritte’s *ceci* (the drawn pipe, the statement “this is not a pipe,” the painting itself, etc.), its deictic properties — the pointing finger that it supposedly directs outside the painting to the pipe itself — do not allow for the definition of a “meta” perspective “that would let us say that the assertion is true, false, or contradictory.”⁴⁰ On the contrary, in Magritte’s second painting, *Les Deux Mystères*, the desire for that perspective has become a floating pipe, impossible to anchor either to its original image (now satirically framed within a didactic context of the blackboard), nor to any statement we might want to make about it (figure 0.3). This floating makes visible the desire that representational codes (whether racial or not) would land somewhere where they supposedly belong — on the blackboard, on the canvas, onto a surface that might secure that this image is indeed a fold from the real. Instead, not only does Magritte succeed in creating a wedge between resemblance and affirmation, but he ignites a crisis into the distinction between figurative and literal uses of language. Magritte’s caption, as Mitchell points out, short-circuits common sense because it is literally true (that indeed is not a pipe, but the picture of a pipe), but figuratively false (when asked what that picture is, we would say, “it’s a pipe”).⁴¹ It also succeeds in yanking both linguistic and visual levels of representation from the servitude of reference and locates them instead in what Foucault defines as the ontological plane of similitude, “the indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar.”⁴² In his *Self-Portrait*, Ligon further complicates this relationship between resemblance and similitude: “Resemblance has a “model,” an original element,” writes Foucault, while the “similar develops in series that have neither beginning nor end. . . . Resemblance serves representation, which rules over it; similitude serves repetition, which ranges across it.”⁴³ In withholding delivery of any conclusive referent, *Self-Portrait*

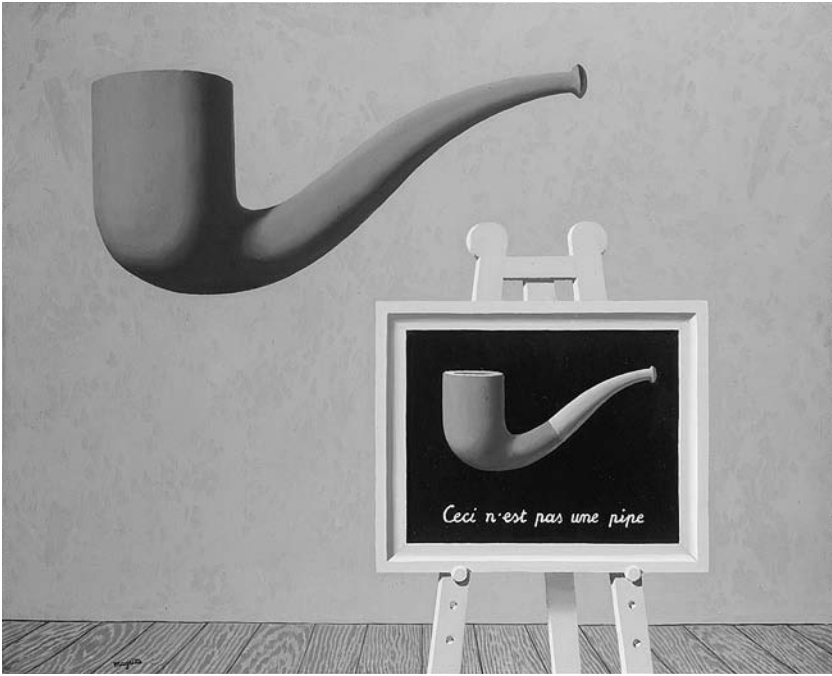


FIGURE 0.3. René Magritte, *Les Deux Mystères* (*The Two Mysteries*), 1966. Oil on canvas, 65 × 80 cm. © ARS, NY. Private Collection. Photo Credit: Banque d'Images, ADACP/Art Resource, NY.

stages the dilemma of Magritte's painting as a form of seeing *as*, where the mockingly accessible pictured body occupies the place and performs the role of the *as*. Here it is Ligon's photographed body, not the pipe, that performs the function of the unraveled calligram, posing as the shape, so to speak, not the referent, of the terms "black" and "white" used in the caption.⁴⁴

Known primarily for his text paintings, Ligon's work often occupies both visual and verbal registers at once and capitalizes on its location "inside a conflict between looking and reading."⁴⁵ In the case of *Untitled (I Am an Invisible Man, 1994)*, Ligon committed to the canvas the text of the opening prologue of *Invisible Man*, a novel that theorizes a perverse fold in the visual field whereby the black subject is invisible because of its body's hypervisibility. Ralph Ellison's text becomes progressively illegible as Ligon's stencil marks become thicker and thicker and the painting slowly transforms back into an object to be looked at, while our ability to see is frustrated by the inability to

make out the words it is supposed to represent. Ligon shows the desire that propels the representational impulse by rubbing together looking and reading. As Darby English notices, this is a way in which Ligon's work wrestles with the problem of the surface, refusing its function as locus of identity and instead repurposing it as a site for "a crisis of apprehension."⁴⁶

Unlike his text paintings, here Ligon embraces photographic presence and the "closed form" of his body to mock the demand for its perfect legibility. As much as we want to read it, his caption underscores the irrelevance of this operation. The surface, which is central in his work, is here again charged with the expectation to represent while it is also withheld as an ending point to our hermeneutic effort. It slides back, into an infinite recess, into the place of blackness that Barthes postulates for the viewer of photography.⁴⁷ English says that Ligon "paints *in spite of the surface*, treating its hallowed ground as a beginning rather than an end."⁴⁸ A beginning that, despite its full photographic delivery, is short-circuited by the caption and does not lead anywhere. Here, the blackness of the body does not deliver the black. Rather, the black body has become intransitive: a pipe is a pipe is a pipe is a pipe.⁴⁹

IN THE FISHBOWL

Chapter 1 introduces the imbrication between race and the photochemical imagination by reading together Fanon with Barthes. I turn to Fanon because his realization that the process of racialization in the visual sphere takes the form of photochemical fixation makes him a particularly astute reader of the relationship between blackness and the affects and desires of a photochemical imagination. I turn to Barthes because of his investment in the photographic connection as an embodied experience and his troubled and troubling relationship with the iconicity of blackness.⁵⁰ This chapter focuses on the affects associated with indexicality by discussing the "photographic" as a state of the image that, sharing the same semiotic structure as the black body, has reinforced the sense of the materiality and referentiality of race.⁵¹ It does so through a close reading of a lynching shadow, an oxymoron, from the standpoint of photographic ontology. Because the blackness of the shadow does not coincide with the blackness of the body while still being tethered to it, this image challenges the photochemical imagination that supports a racial reading of it. As a result, rather than a structure of referral, this shadow suggests that photography can be instead understood

as a structure of deferral. This racially agnostic but visually black shadow offers also an alternative to the representational paradigm still dependent on a Platonic/mimetic conception of the image as *mirror*. Whereas the paradigm of the mirror focuses on the authenticity and truth-value of racial representations — that is, on the extent to which they adequately (or not) portray black people — the paradigm of the shadow locates blackness not *in* bodies but *in between* them. The shadow is an image state that emphasizes connection rather than representation. In this tension between images that can be trusted because of how they “look like,” and images that can be believed because they are tethered, we discover that the representational framework that sustains the photochemical imagination would like to have it both ways: images that are as tethered as shadows and as faithful and recognizable as mirror reflections.

As a following of chapter 1’s focus on fantasies of suturing signifiers with referents, the shadow with the black body, chapter 2 focuses on the attempted suturing of seeing with saying implied by the term “black.” I read it through the trope of catachresis — the attribution of a name for something that supposedly does not have one — and I attend to its phenomenological and aesthetic implications, which show how the process of racialization functions as a “distribution of the sensible.”⁵² The language of black and white, obviously, carries the visual with it, and with the visual, it also carries a series of promises, assumptions, and fantasies about what “black” should deliver. Black describes a visual attribute, a quality, a pole in the color spectrum, but the place of blackness, as Ellison expresses in *Invisible Man*, and Morrison does too with Maggie, is a place of avisuality.⁵³ To suture the visual and the avisual, catachresis grows a body that fills the gap. The case study here is *PRECIOUS*, which is the way I signify the catachrestic conflation between the body of the actress Gabourey Sidibe, the character Clareece Precious Jones, and the title of Lee Daniels’s film, *Precious: Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire* (2009). My analysis shows that the filmmaker anticipated this conflation in the film’s reception and reflexively addressed it through a series of effects of *mise-en-abyme*. Yet, there is a desire of the main character that the film cannot fully address. It is the desire to *cut a figure*, to claim a face from the depth of the visual field. I, therefore, turn to artist Wangechi Mutu’s collages to show how this is possible and how catachresis can be brandished as a surgical instrument to cut through a flattened and overgrown visual surface. Through her cuts, Mutu turns the muted, pathologized, overembodied

native woman, the eroticized vessel for colonial nostalgia, into a posthuman, Afrofuturist, biocybernetic female warrior.⁵⁴ Her aesthetic choices suggest another possibility for photographic practices to challenge the photochemical affects, that is, photography's ability to perform as excision of what processes of racialization have produced as an ectopic growth.

Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned with the way in which both photography and race pass through capital to gain exchangeability. They do so because they share the same hermeneutics of the surface — the hermeneutics of face value. Mostly preoccupied with avisual objects, chapter 3 offers a detour onto the relationship between face and value through an analysis of the political economy of the racial sign. Under this analysis, which leverages Marx's semiotics of value as one in which the body of commodity A acts as the mirror of the value of commodity B, value acts as a counter-concept to the notion of indexicality. Value, Marx says, does "not have its description branded on its forehead."⁵⁵ Yet, it is the ability for blackness to act as an exchangeable surface that is crucial in this case, its performance as the signifier of exchange. My guide in this investigation is the concept and the aesthetics of blackface, which I regard primarily as the dramatization and reification of blackness as face value. I begin with a joke that stand-up comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory published in 1962: "wouldn't it be a helluva joke if all this was really burnt cork and you people were being tolerant for nuthin'?" Through this scenario of reversibility between black skin and burnt cork, Gregory calls attention to how these signifiers function as tokens of exchange and, therefore, to blackness as currency. The rest of the chapter examines blackness as a commodity "form"; that is, as the principle of visibility, the *face*, of commodity status. Building on a reading of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* and of photographer Hank Willis Thomas's work, the chapter asks, "what type of commodity is the one for which blackness acts as principle of visibility?" The analysis of a contemporary work of cyber art — Keith Obadike's *Blackness for Sale* — in which blackness is conjured as the manufactured product of a transaction that the work itself initiates shows a continuing process of de-corporealization of blackness. These works testify to blackness transitioning from being the signifier of a corporeal property to being the signifier of speculative value, from being a bodily index to a market index. They suggest that blackness has become a phantasmagoria; that is, it has come to signify a moment in which an increasingly simulacral status of the visual has developed its own, independent, social materiality. They finally

allow us to understand the current moment as another phase in the journey of blackness from the surface of the body to the surface of material culture to where it is now — *on the sleeve of the visual*.

Chapter 4 maps photography onto race and capital through the concept of the Long Photographic Century. In pursuit of an analysis of the hermeneutics capital, photography, and blackness share — the hermeneutics of face value — chapters 3 and 4, respectively, look at race and photography as the *money of the real*. This view of photography has a long history, one that I build on in order to claim that it is the photochemically fixated black body that has generalized the money form of the visual sphere. I show this at work in Scott McGhee and David Siegel's 1993 film *Suture* about a case of mistaken identity between two characters played by a white and a black actor. The film handles blackness and whiteness only iconically, as sheer surfaces, in order to outline an economy of exchange that, the film makes us realize, has been fully naturalized. But why is that so? Whereas chapter 3 mostly concerned with the way in which capital generalizes a hermeneutics of the surface rehearsed (applied, extended, perfected) in the understanding of the black body during the Long Twentieth Century, chapter 4 focuses more strongly on objects that recapitulate the history of visibility produced by the bolting of race to capital, which I call the Long Photographic Century. I then explore the implications of the lingering photochemical imagination across the digital divide. The objects examined here — Hank Willis Thomas again and Kara Walker's post-cinematic silhouettes — show how the ontological and sensible partition introduced by race is not challenged by the digital image but in fact reinforces and perpetuates the photochemical imagination.

Finally, the book's conclusion returns to my initial question: what is a racial image? Throughout the book, I pursue an understanding of race that resists the conflation between the visible and the visual and the expectation that racial images would perform as mirrors of a supposed racial subject. Thus, at the end of the book I return to the NAACP shadow as offering a possible way to unhinge blackness from the body. Seen from the perspective of this shadow, race appears to more prominently inhabit the state and not the content of the image.

The methodology employed throughout is interdisciplinary and eclectic, but each chapter privileges a set of disciplinary frames over others. Chapter 1 mobilizes mostly film studies, and theories of the photochemical and digital image. Chapter 2 dialogues predominantly with rhetorical theory, aesthetic

theory, art history, and scholarship on black cinema. Chapter 3 relies heavily on Marxist theory and on what I consider to be the intimate connection between visual and material culture. In this chapter I read one through the lens of the other. Chapter 4 and the conclusion return to visual forms and, therefore, bring the theoretical work of the book back to bear on the ontology of the visual.

Each chapter deals with a different aspect of the photochemical imagination and explores the possibility for photography, understood as a state or passage of the image, to act in ways that resist the ontology of face value, which is grounded in two movements, one toward the inside and the other across the surface. Each chapter examines various kinds of bodies — photographically rendered bodies and rhetorically rendered bodies (like Maggie and Audre Lorde's roach), visible bodies and avisual bodies, bodies that are phenomenologically fleshed out and bodies that instead matter only as pure surfaces, bodies that suture and bodies that sever. Furthermore, in each of the chapters these bodies perform different actions: they cut; they vanish; they appear when conjured up; they overflow their boundaries; they grow in unexpected places; they are iconized and made exchangeable; they are abstracted and eviscerated. Virtually all of the objects described perform an act of pivoting in the visual field by turning its racially sanctioned relationship between surface and depth inside out.⁵⁶