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On the Sleeve of the Visual

Alessandra Raengo

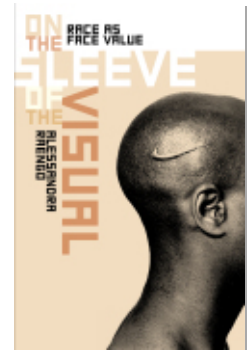
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THE PHOTOCHEMICAL IMAGINATION

In the NAACP files at the Library of Congress I found a highly unusual lynching photograph: an extremely high angle of a seemingly endless crowd crossed diagonally by the elongated shadow of a hanging body (figure 1.1). Descriptively titled “Crowd of people, with shadow of man hanging from tree superimposed over them,” the photograph is undated, although it is estimated to be from between 1920 and 1940, and anonymous.¹ It was probably a published professional photograph since the only inscription it bears is thought to indicate the size of its publication. Arguably, it might have been produced as part of the massive anti-lynching campaign the NAACP mounted in those decades,² a campaign that had been successful in first reducing and then virtually eliminating the spectacle lynchings this photograph re-creates by superimposing the shadow of a hanging man onto the crowd.

Unlike most lynching photographs, made for and representing the point

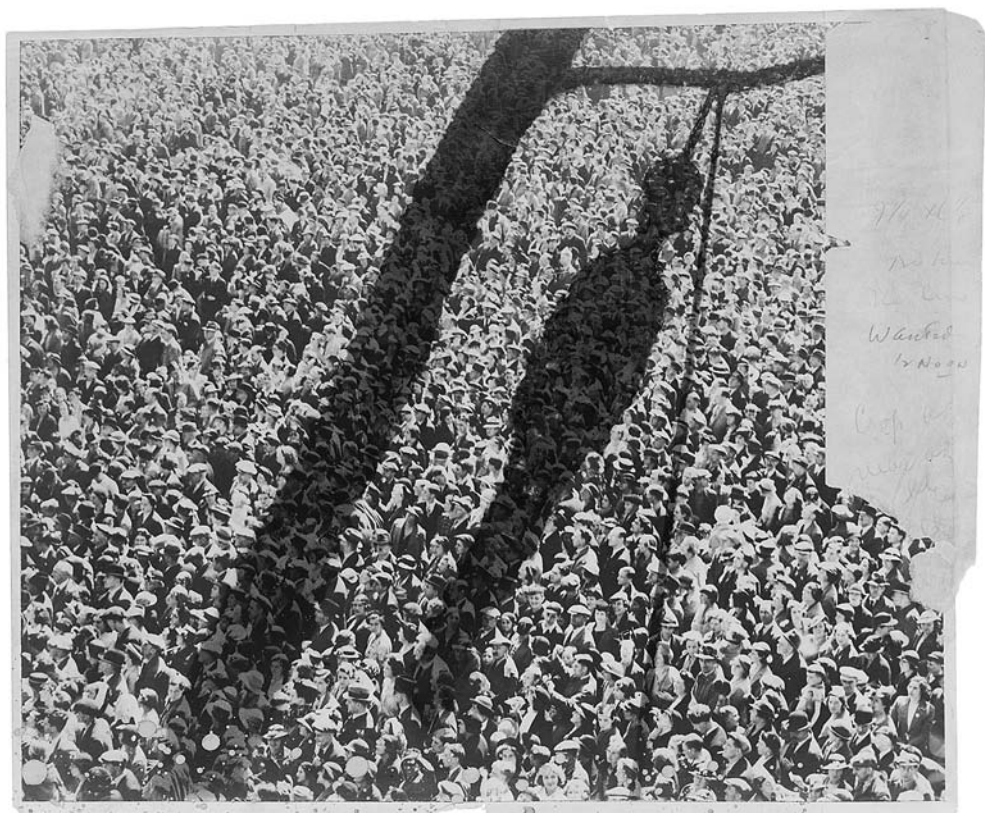


FIGURE 1.1. NAACP Photograph—Photographic Print, Title: [Crowd of people, with shadow of man hanging from tree superimposed over them]. Created/Published: [between 1920 and 1940]. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. The author wishes to thank the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for authorizing the use of this image.

of view of the murderers, this rare image directs the gaze away from the object of the spectacle — the lynching itself — and focuses it instead onto the spectators, thereby framing as spectacle the formation of a white constituency that must contemplate off-frame the necessary condition of its own making. This photograph demands a multiplicity of readings: on a first level, we read it in relation to other photographic lynching tableau, as offering other comparable scenes of the crime.³ In this first reading we analyze its visual field. On a second level, the photograph is also part of a larger visual culture delimited on

the one hand by what Nicholas Mirzoeff has called the “hooded archive” of race; that is, the covert and secretive (in Jacqueline Goldsby’s eloquent phrase) circulation of lynching images and, on the other hand, by the public relation efforts the NAACP mounted to dissipate this secrecy and mobilize support for anti-lynching legislation.⁴ Within this visual culture reading we appreciate the photograph’s different cultural logic and its weakened evidentiary power (from a forensic standpoint).⁵ Yet, the photograph’s effectiveness lies in its formal properties. It is because the scene of the crime is rendered *this way* — through a superimposition that announces on its surface the extent to which it is an *artefact* — that the photograph is capable of showing the transparent structure of Morrison’s fishbowl.⁶ By redrawing so radically the conventional lynching tableau, this photograph shows us Toni Morrison’s fishbowl: “the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.”⁷ I understand race to be such structure: a visually rendered social contract, a meta-image, a world picture, a structure of visibility, and a medium.⁸ Even though we don’t have a direct view of the body; that is, even though we are deprived of the ultimate site/sight and signifier of race, race still inhabits this picture. In figuring out why and how that is the case, we can understand how “race” avisually structures our visual field, visual culture, and how, through the black body, race corporealizes the ontology of the image. Building on this, I am interested in exploring how this shadow challenges and complicates the imbrication of race and photographic ontology — what I describe as the *photochemical imagination*.

The visual field this photograph establishes is unique among lynching photographs because the photographer’s unusual angle institutes a theater of gazes that offsets and reverses conventional relations of looking. Whereas in most lynching photographs the white mob is both spectator to the lynching and consciously addresses the photograph’s anticipated viewers — thus acting as a stand-in for its own audience — here, the crowd we see looking at a lynching does not look back at us. The crowd does not acknowledge our presence on the other side of its anticipated photographic repetition and does not claim a clear position within the social field. This photograph, then, twice bypasses the ethical dilemma facing contemporary viewers: the dilemma of *looking without seeing* the violated corpse, and, for white viewers specifically, the need to disidentify with the all-too-visible perpetrators and to disavow the interpellation to participate in the construction of whiteness fostered by their look into the camera.⁹ By deviating from conventional

looking relations this photograph allows us to enter the lynching tableau from a different angle — one that emphasizes how lynching photographs are also celebrations of a paradoxical type of social visibility, one whereby the perpetrator’s visibility is obscenely detached from their accountability. Lynching itself is sustained by a double denial: it is the social (in)visibility of the perpetrators and the shift of investment from the body *of* evidence to the (black) body *as* evidence. Thus, while the disavowal of what is visually available — that is, the possibility of recognizing the perpetrators — establishes a wedge between the visual and the social field that sustained white unaccountability, this very same wedge is sutured by the central position of the black body as evidence, as metaphysical presence that spectacularly and panoptically organizes the visual field within which the social ritual of lynching takes place.¹⁰ As a constant threat, or in Richard Wright’s words, as a “conditionally commuted death sentence,”¹¹ lynching enacts a regime of surveillance by “inscribing visibility everywhere.”¹²

From a formal point of view, Robyn Wiegman has noted that “operating according to a logic of borders — racial, sexual, national, psychological, and biological, as well as gendered — lynching *figures* its victims as the culturally *abject*,” which is visualized in the identifiable aesthetics of the lynching tableau: “monstrosities of excess whose limp and hanging bodies function as the specular assurance that the racial threat has not simply been averted, but rendered incapable of return.”¹³ The image of a body that has lost “integrity” of form and intentionality signifies the fantasy of a successfully expelled abject object. This aesthetics also functions in the exemplary role of lynching in that it sets an example to reaffirm a white supremacist order, while its synecdochic structure, quite literally, reifies the idea that one black is as good as any other to signify the entire race, and by extension, the entire social order.¹⁴ Yet, none of this is present in the NAACP photograph. We don’t see a dismembered body. In fact, we don’t see a body at all, only its shadow. For this reason, this is one of the few lynching photographs we can actually look at. We are repulsed by it, not because we are looking at a violated body, but rather because it brings into stark relief a picture of whiteness as terror and terrorizing.¹⁵

The photograph offers no direct visual assault: visible here as mere shadow, we comfortably see the crowd through the hanging body. The actual body could be located somewhere outside the frame on the left, the direction in which the entire crowd is looking. Yet, signified by a *trace of its elsewhere*,

the precise spatial location of the body cannot be conclusively identified. Rather, it appears instead to be “hanging.” The shadow marks almost equally the body’s projection and our viewing position: placed just like the victim, at a very high angle, in a sense, we give our eyes to him, so that he can return the gaze and see the crowd’s reaction to the spectacle of his death. On our part, we are both “there,” hanging with the body, and safely outside the scene.

What visual field is being drawn by the paradox of the lynchers’ impunity in the face of their photographic visibility and the blacks’ hyperpresence before the law but impossibility to be represented by it, their skewed anonymity, their matter-of-fact interchangeability?¹⁶ What visual field is created by the fact that, as Jacqueline Goldsby puts it, lynching victims become invisible by virtue of their very appearance in the field of vision? The lynching tableau inhabits this paradox through a specific figure-ground relation that in this photograph is made abstract by the impossibility to identify the victim, as well as made concrete through a sharply drawn formal relationship between the hanging shadow and the crowd. This shadow opens up a space of suspension between projection and conception: the shadow is the projection of the body but it does not “spur” from the diegetic situation of the photograph. Between fixation and duration, the shadow has been photographically captured, but it is in itself a fleeting sign between presence and absence, then and now. Through these effects of suspension, the shadow also destabilizes the notion of blackness, which can no longer be seen as an attribute of the body, but rather only as a visual effect.

By affording a purely formal reading of the visuality of lynching through a consideration of multiple figure-ground relations, this shadow sutures the wedge that lynching creates between the social and the visual sphere. The image then not only literalizes Goldsby’s thesis that the spectacle of black murder has organized early mass-produced and mass-circulated visual culture, that it has “secreted” American modern visual culture, but also that race theorizes more generally the visual field. By literalizing the role of the black body in arranging the scope of the visual field and in outlining its boundaries, through a shadow that, although superimposed, acts as the pivot of the photograph’s *mise-en-scène*, this image affords the possibility of reflecting on the inescapable racialization of the visual. Even though it is overlaid on the surface of the image, the shadow seems to come from within, just like racial blackness is deposited on the epidermal signifier as it is understood as an indexical trace of the body’s genetic and biological “inside.”

Because it foregrounds a blackness that does not coincide with the blackness of the body, this picture allows one to behold, paraphrasing Charles Mills, the *partitioned* social ontology of a racial world as it expresses itself in the visual field.¹⁷ Race, this photograph suggests, is not the exception that needs to be explained, but rather the foundation of the social bond that continually renews itself across the visual terrain. It is not the exceptional character of a handful of pictures, but it is the meta-image that corporealizes (and, therefore, seemingly gives and is given substance by) the way we still understand visual relations.

LYNCHING AND THE CORPOREALIZATION OF THE INDEX

Leigh Raiford has claimed that, as a disciplinary ritual that returns race to the body, lynching re-creates the same type of coincidence between skin and race that marks the auction block. The rush to secure strands of hair, body parts, and scraps of clothes from the victim — that is, fetishes and mementos of the lynching — further sanctioned this metonymical operation. The more or less conspicuous circulation of these memorabilia attests to the existence of a segregated consumer culture. In lieu of mementos, photographic documentation of a lynching served as the next best thing: “[I]f lynching was a return to the slave block, a reinscribing of the black body as commodity, then lynching photographs functioned as the bill of sale and receipt of ownership.”¹⁸ Thus, as Mirzoeff concludes: “The lynching photograph became, as it was intended to be, that which made the index of race adhere to its object. It created another still more shadowy, even *hooded* archive of race, housed in the mantelpieces and in the desk drawers across the United States.”¹⁹ This “hooded archive” indexes race epidermally, as well as socially and politically. Lynching images disclose the color line unambiguously: they display a very specific distribution of the sensible by returning “everyone to his or her corporeal essence, to the ‘racial’ truth that is only skin deep.”²⁰ Furthermore, in lynching photography the materiality of the referent and the materiality of the photograph double each other. The NAACP photograph, however, cannot perform the same social function as the lynching relic because it doesn’t have enough evidentiary value. It cannot circulate as a substitute object for the body itself; rather, it is fully and deliberately an artefact that works on and

over the traditional lynching photograph, understood both as a genre and as an item of material culture. By doing so, this shadow exposes at the heart of the photochemical imagination an investment in the indexicality of the photographic image facilitated by its analogy with the black body.

A number of scholars have already established how photographic indexicality has been enlisted to create the effect that race is equally indexical, therefore turning the epidermis into a writing pad.²¹ As Coco Fusco observed, epidermalization lies at the roots of the social functions of photography, which was “marshaled to document the ‘fact’ of racial difference [and, in the process] produced race as a *visualizable fact*.”²² This is so when photography and race are both primarily conceived as indexes in the sense of traces. Not only do race and photography share a similar semiotic grid, but they have given each other substance: photography has lent materiality to race because it has provided a visual technology that has further sutured race to the body.²³ Providing a transitive surface that points inward to its meaning and its truth, the black body, in turn, has offered a way to conceive and sustain the ontological claim that, in David Rodowick’s repetition of Stanley Cavell’s formulation, unlike painting, photography is not a world, but it is rather *of* the world.²⁴

What I want to emphasize here is that the relationship between the photochemical imagination and race is mutually energizing: just like the epidermal signifier brands the body with the marks of race and indexes the body’s location within a visual archive that trades in surface signs, so the photographic trace brands the real with a regime of image-ness that lays claims to an ontological connection between its surface existence as a visual object and the historical depth — the “reality” — from which it was seized.²⁵ Both photography and the black body are understood as offering a continuous surface of legible information. They share similar processes of exteriorization and, following Frantz Fanon, also of “overdetermination from the outside,” which he described with an image that recalls the chemical processes involved in photography: “the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way *you fix a preparation with a dye*.”²⁶

This moment is as foundational to the photochemical imagination as the other primal scene, “Look! A Negro!” has been to critical race discourse and the understanding of the visuality of race: Fanon explained the alchemy of race after the chemical basis of the photographic process because photography, for him, describes an image state that fixates and fossilizes — a Medusa effect. Fanon’s metaphor effectively describes a photochemical fantasy, one

that suggests indexicality guarantees that the photographic image exists in continuity with the world. The NAACP photograph, instead, challenges these a(e)ffects of continuity: all we see here is a shadow, which dematerializes the index as *trace* and mobilizes instead more prominently the function of the index as *shifter*, as a finger pointing simultaneously in two directions: toward the lynched body and toward the body politic.²⁷

A STRUCTURE OF DEFERRAL

Formally speaking, this photograph overlays various forms of non-coincidence, introducing a structure of deferral that is unique among lynching photographs. First, our view of the body does not coincide with the geographical location it occupies. The function that Shawn Michelle Smith identifies as normally performed by the corpse, usually displayed front and center, as “the negated other that frames, supports, and defines a white supremacist community” is here performed by a shadow.²⁸ Thus, this indirect view of the corpse does not afford the suturing of the Lacanian mirror stage, where, as Smith argues, the pleasure of white misrecognition as wholeness is achieved by *projecting* a split between self and image only for the black subject, allowing the white one to remain blind to the suturing effects of its own fundamental misrecognition. On the contrary, as the *other* than the body and stretching across space beyond the body’s boundaries, the shadow *figures* instead the unbridgeable wedge between self and image. Second, since it has no evidentiary value, the photograph offers no documentary information regarding the specificity of this lynching. It testifies to a (recurring) occurrence, but not to its historical specificity. It functions rather as what W. J. T. Mitchell describes as a metapicture, capturing how lynching photographs “simultaneously make visible and proclaim invisible the lawless privilege of whiteness.”²⁹ In this photograph the only evidentiary value the shadow maintains is as an indexical trace attesting to *a* body to which it belongs. Fixated through the photographic process, filed in the NAACP’s archives, and then again at the Library of Congress, this shadow also takes responsibility for the body it signifies, making it present, recording its death — an unclaimed death, like so many others — and inscribing its trace and instituting an ethical space, a bookmark, within American visual culture. Third, the blackness of the shadow does not coincide with the blackness of the body. In fact, we are not given any visual clues to determine the racial identity of the victim. Instead,

if we think of the victim as black, it is only because we have attributed racial identity based on historical and cultural context, on the archive to which it belongs, and on the racialized social geography that the photographer's chosen angle visualizes. Just like the shadow is superimposed on the crowd, we map "race" onto the picture because it is a lynching photograph and it shows a regime of racial repression carried out through panoptic and spectacular means. Fourth, since the shadow's blackness is not a mark of racial identity, it functions as the visualization of a place of difference. It offers a point of view inside the picture: we see the crowd through the shadow; we are hanging, like the shadow is, and come to occupy the same place of suspension. Ultimately, this shadow acts as a meeting point between seer, seen, and scene.

The blackness of the shadow acts most prominently as a figure of spatial deferral because it cannot, other than ideologically or contextually, be connected to a body's pigmentation: it signifies the presence of a body that is elsewhere and yet joined at the hip, so to speak, to the signifier of its (spatially removed) presence. In general, the shadow indexes temporal presence (the shadow is here as long as the body is here) but spatial removal (but the body is not here, in this shadow. Rather it is *there*, where the shadow comes from). Therefore, on the one hand, the shadow always has a clear point of origin that temporally coexists with it, on the historical-existential plane. On the other hand, the shadow is the trace of a body's extension beyond itself by means of light. The body is not in the shadow, in its projection, and yet the shadow doubles the body, extending its reach, and locating it in two places at the same time.

This doubleness — this being in two places at the same time, this being the "same, but not quite" — is one of the properties of the shadow that Homi Bhabha invokes to characterize the colonized subject. The colonized, Bhabha writes, is the "tethered shadow" of Western man.³⁰ It is the colonizer's irremovable profile and inseparable Otherness. It is not something that the colonizer faces, but rather something that sticks to him. This doubleness also reveals a tension that is intrinsic to the indexicality of the shadow, which signifies both as a trace and as a shifter. The NAACP shadow, in particular, turns the photographic structure of referral into a process of deferral. Even more radically, it wears photography's already existing, but often disavowed, structure of deferral on its own sleeve.

In a special issue of the journal *differences* devoted to the assessment of the contemporary discourse on photographic indexicality, Mary Ann Doane

reminds us that despite the still-enduring mythology of the index as trace, Pierce conceived of the index both as a trace and as a shifter — a sign produced by contiguity and contact, but also a pointed finger gesturing always beyond itself. She writes:

As photographic trace or impression, the index seems to harbor a fullness, an excessiveness of detail that is always supplemental to meaning or intention. Yet, the index as deixis implies an emptiness, a hollowness that can only be filled in specific, contingent, always mutating situations. It is this dialectic of the empty and the full that lends the index an eeriness and uncanniness not associated with the realms of the icon or symbol. At times, the disconcerting closeness of the index to its object raises doubts as to whether it is indeed a sign, suggesting instead that the index is perched precariously on the very edge of semiosis.³¹

As shifter, the index is a “hollowed-out sign”; it has no content; “the index asserts nothing; it only says “There!”³² When understood as trace, the index implies “the reproducibility of a past moment,” it is a “witness to an anteriority,” but when understood as deixis the index is instead linked to presence and signifies a *remaining gap* between sign and object.³³

The index is part of the semiotic structure of photography but it has also been regarded as a “formal logic”³⁴ of “indication and connectivity.” The index’s purpose is “to suggest ‘the mute presence of an uncoded event.’”³⁵ The shifter, Rosalind Krauss argues, is “that category of the linguistic sign which is “filled with signification” only because it is “empty.”³⁶ While the NAACP shadow is obviously the indexical trace of a body that has cast it, it is not the indexical trace of that body’s skin. Beyond the tension between trace and shifter, the mythology of the index, Doane points out, is also fraught with tension between the iconic and the symbolic. On the one hand, the trace (footprint, death mask, photograph) partakes of the iconic because the sign often resembles the object. On the other hand, the shifter partakes of the symbolic in that its content might be conventional and arbitrary. We see this tension clearly in the indexicality of the Turin Shroud, the photogrammatic trace *par excellence*, which shows that “[i]f the index’s powers are spent in the verification of an existence, the icon and the symbol . . . work to extend and prolong the aura of that indexical authenticity.”³⁷

These notions of indexicality suggest that the index implies, at the very

least, a particular social and cultural geography of the sign (contiguity), specific temporal structures (continuity), and an identifiable notion of the relationship between nature and culture.³⁸ It also implies, or at least mobilizes, a way of understanding the relationship between the seeable and the sayable. If the index is the “natural” sign *par excellence* indeed, if it is the “writing of nature,” especially when thought in relation to photography, then how does it also become its picture? In other words, what is the primary mode of the index? Is that mode discursive or visual? It is an assertion of existence (there! As in “there you have it!”), but one that is in itself empty of content.³⁹ The index affirms without knowing what it affirms, but because it claims a physical or existential connection to its source, resemblance or likeness supply the supposed content to a connection that is already intractably there.⁴⁰

The retention of indexicality in discussions of the ontology of the image — both by scholars that claim it is lost in the digital image and those who argue that the digital too can be seen as indexical, those that seek the index in the image and those that seek it in the mind — often expresses apprehension over the loss of truth value of images, fear of a disconnection from the world, anxiety over simulation, manipulation, and so on.⁴¹ Following increasing scholarship that, rather than focusing on what the index is, reflects on why we care so much about it, photographic indexicality emerges more and more as an affect rather than a sign function that can lay claims on the real.⁴² The index emerges as a reality a(e)ffect. Following Massumi’s idea that some indexes can be affectively constructed — for example in the political manipulation of the semiotics of fear following 9/11 and the war on terror, threats are born retroactively so that the smoke precedes the fire — or taking Greg Hainge’s suggestion that photographic fixation is analogous to the process of constitution of normative bodies, we might find particularly insightful Fanon’s indication that it is the moment of photochemical fixation that carries the affective ability to construct the visual truth of what in reality is a discursive moment.⁴³ The moment of fixation is fundamental for the sense of presence and materiality that photography entails. Vivian Sobchack describes it so: “Abstracting visual experience from an ephemeral temporal flow, the photographic both chemically and metaphorically ‘fixes’ its ostensible subject quite literally as an object for vision. It concretely reproduces the visible in a material process . . . Furthermore, this material process results in a material form that can be objectively possessed, circulated, and saved.”⁴⁴ Seen through race, and specifically through this

Fanonian theory of the photographic image, the photographic represents a certain faith on the index and thus offers a map of the visual that, in its claims to materiality, considers successfully resolved the question of reference.⁴⁵ For my purposes, what matters most is the fact that the notion of the index as trace, rather than shifter, has most strongly been mobilized to secure a closure of the visual field — a folding of the real onto visual representation. This privileging of the trace and its folding of the real onto visual representation has paradigmatically occurred at the expense, and on the ground, of the black body because the “truth” it displays on its surface is supposedly connected, like an indexical trace, to the “truth” of its genetic makeup.⁴⁶ In other words, the black body — the photographic object *par excellence* — doubles in a different scale the photographic map of the visual; that is, the sense of a phantasmatic and affective continuity between essence and appearance, inside and outside, identity and image.

Here, I consider three traits of the photochemical imagination that congeal around the moment of photographic fixation before I suggest a non-medium specific and more flexible notion of photography as a state of the image. First, photochemical fixation has the capacity to bestow an excess materiality to its referent; second, by leveraging the idea of the index as a shifter and, therefore, a pointing finger, the photochemical fixation expresses a fantasy of touching the profilmic world; third, as Fanon explains, the moment of fixation can produce an effect of evisceration of the body, which is evacuated of its interiority and is folded onto the outside like shirt cuffs.

ANIMALIA: THE INDEX AND THE INSECT

Peter Geimer’s essay, “Image as Trace,” offers an extraordinary dramatization of the a(e)ffect associated with the moment of photochemical fixation: a fly caught by the photosensitive plate in one of Antonio Beato’s 1870 Cairo photographs. During the long exposure required to photograph Egyptian monuments, a fly entered his camera and remained trapped by the collodion coat. From the point of view of the photograph’s composition, the fly appears monstrous because its scale does not match the landscape behind it. But from the point of view of photographic ontology, the fly is even more monstrous because it is of a different ontological order than the photograph

on which it has been caught. Its presence and “liveness,” even as a corpse, compete with and exceed that of the photograph. The fly is, in some sense, the only “living” thing in an essentially mummifying picture.⁴⁷ The fact that the fly has recorded itself directly, immediately, and photogrammatically on the surface of the photograph offers an intractable testimony of the fly’s existence that competes with any sense of the Intractable the photograph might hope to deliver. The fly is not a shadow, copy, or trace, but (comparatively) the “thing itself,” delivered “without mediation,” as Barthes would say,⁴⁸ without inscription, a natural photogram within a photograph: “The fly collided with the photographic shot. It brought something from the real world into the reproduction and transferred it to the picture in the form of a trace.”⁴⁹ The fly becomes the trace of the photographic process. In a sort of accidental *mise-an-abyme*, the fly reproduces the photographic process in an ontologically augmented form while it seemingly provides material substance — a body of evidence — to the idea of the photographic index as trace.

Even though it does so in a different and totally accidental context, Antonio Beato’s photograph presents the supplemental materiality that is also at work in the consumption and circulation of lynching images, especially the not-uncommon practice of gluing a curl of hair onto a photograph or a postcard. This supplemental material trace would be understood as evidence of someone’s personal witnessing to the lynching. Beato’s fly also performs as this trace. In similar fashion, the fly performs as ontological augmentation and accidental *mise-en-abyme* of the compound indexicality of the lynching photograph itself. Whether it takes the form of Beato’s fly, or a strand of hair, or a scrap of cloth, this supplemental materiality embodies the understanding of photographic connection as trace and photography’s ability to put us in the presence of, in touch with, that which the photograph has seemingly “captured.” The fly or the hair function as loci of desire, but also lenses through which to appreciate, through similar mechanisms of supplemental corporeality, the way the photographic has lent materiality to race.⁵⁰

THE TWO FINGERS

Considered alongside the NAACP shadow, Antonio Beato’s fly and the lynching relic attached to a photograph present various forms of photographic embodiment that differ in degree. All three are products of a deliberate or accidental superimposition; all three “supplements” pose or act as

ontological and affective augmentations of the photographic connection. The lynching shadow brings the corporeality of race and death to bear upon a picture of a white crowd, but it is in itself a disembodied form. In that sense, the shadow performs deictically, as a shifter, a pointed finger — a function that introduces another form of embodiment, that of the body politic.

In lynching photographs the deictic quality of the index is made visible by the white mob's deliberate address to the camera. Sometimes, as in Lawrence Beitler's 1930 photograph of the double lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, the indexical function of the pointed finger is literal (figure 1.2). There, as Shawn Michelle Smith observes, the pointed finger "invites viewers to read the photograph as an object lesson."⁵¹ The lynching tableau, as it has been often noted, is a photographically imagined scene: the onlookers are staged and perform for the benefit of the photograph's audience, establishing — with their direct look at the camera or with their pointed fingers directing the gaze to the corpse — a paradoxically highly studied "*punctum*." In apparent antithesis to the way Barthes distinguished the *studium* from the *punctum*, lynching photographs pierce not with their unexpected qualities (the casual detail, for example), but with their formality. It is the *form* of the lynching photograph that most strongly pricks the viewer, forcing a corporeal alignment on either side of the color line.

Furthermore, in these images the finger that points stages, within the photographic field, the social function performed by the finger that clicks: the photographer's action on the camera shutter that Barthes fetishized as the ground for photography's claim to sharing the same historical space with the event it purportedly records. The formality of the lynching tableau, in other words, indexes in two directions: it points toward its own connection to the lynching scene, and toward its own connection to its photochemical reproduction and secret(ed) circulation. Thus, the finger that clicks performs as the "umbilical cord" that Barthes found at the heart of photography's essence.

In the NAACP photograph, instead, there is no pointed finger but rather a shadow that, uniquely, points toward the crowd, thus reversing the traditional direction of the gaze toward the corpse. Hence, by implication, the crowd, not the lynched body, is framed as the object. As the stand in for the finger that clicks, the shadow doubles the photographic process within the photographic field, just like Antonio Beato's fly, but this time in a disembodied form. Like the fly, the shadow has collided with the photographic process — a photogram within a photograph. Unlike the fly, the shadow does not deliver a



FIGURE 1.2. Lawrence Beitler's photograph of the double lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, 1930. Courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society.

carnal body but only the signifier of one — a signifier that, like photography, is produced by a play of light.

The shadow as pointed finger thus creates a counter *gestalt* not only to the conventional lynching photograph, but also to the relationship between blackness and photography. Whereas the added scrap of clothes or hair in the conventional lynching photograph would reproduce the photographic process in corporeal form, in this photograph the only blackness we see is that of the cast shadow. We do not see a corporeal attribute, but a viewing position, a placeholder for the viewer within the lynching scene. Yet, because the shadow is also the projection of the lynched body, its placeholder amongst the crowd, the blackness of the shadow is also the space where the viewer and

the victim finally touch. The shadow itself provides the membrane through which viewer and victim inter-*skin*.⁵²

In the literature that insists on conceiving indexicality solely as trace, but also, and more strikingly, in the discussion surrounding the loss of indexicality with the digital turn, it appears that, to be thought as truthful, the photograph needs to allow us to touch the profilmic world.⁵³ In other words, it is ultimately the possibility to understand the photographic itself as a form of embodiment (not only of the photographed object but also of the viewing subject and, more importantly for my purposes, of the object-subject connection as well) that grounds the photograph's supposed truth value.

There are two forms of photographic embodiment that are relevant for the present discussion. First, the continuous sensuousness of the world grounds the possibility to leave a trace. Second, photography itself is a bodily membrane because, as Akira Lippit, Jonathan Auerbach, Brian Massumi, and Vivian Sobchack, and others have argued in various ways, the ultimate photographic archive is not the filing cabinet (as Allan Sekula posits in his discussion of Alphonse Bertillon), but rather the human body.⁵⁴ In *Atomic Light*, for instance, Lippit shows that early cinema is but one of the three phenomenologies of the *inside* coming together in 1895, alongside X-ray photography and psychoanalysis. In distinct and yet interconnected ways, all three “figured” new and phantasmatic surfaces, producing images of three-dimensional flatness simultaneously cast and projected onto a screen.⁵⁵ Furthermore, cinema, X-ray photography, and psychoanalysis transformed the structure of visual perception from phenomenal to phantasmatic, from perceived to imagined visuality, from visual to avisual, and in so doing constituted another shadow archive — the avisual archive of a new phantasmatic visuality — to be placed alongside the one identified by Sekula. “What constitutes, defines, determines the *thereness* of the X-ray?” asks Lippit, “[w]hat is *there* in the X-ray, depth or surface, inside or out? What is *there* to be seen? A *thereness*, perhaps, that is avisual: a secret surface between the inside and out.”⁵⁶ Freud described both the ego and the body as surfaces in which we are projected, and he conceived of psychoanalysis as a search for depth on the surface of things. In the meanwhile, both X-ray and the cinema introduced a mode of radical photography marked by a profound superficiality. X-ray photography flattened the inside and outside of the body into one common screen/surface turning the vantage point of the spectator-subject inside out, while the cinematic screen provided an impossible order of deep space dramatized

by a plethora of images of movement across the screen, such as arriving trains or receding subways. Cinema, argues Lippit, is a series of planes that expand and contract in what Deleuze described as a metaphysical surface.⁵⁷ As he further argues, the profound superficiality of these phenomenologies is possible because, in psychoanalysis, X-ray photography, and the cinema, the skin and the screen are conflated onto each other: the skin acts as a surface of projection while the screen functions as a metonymy of skin.

If the human body is the primary archive for the image state of photography, then what happens when the body is raced? If the epidermal signifier is read as a trace that race leaves on the body, then what kind of materiality is supposed by this interpretation? What is the “matter” of race?

Again, I am drawn toward the NAACP photograph because the blackness of the shadow does not coincide with the blackness of the body. Yet, the superimposed shadow offers the means whereby the lynched body “touches” the white crowd. Through its own metaphorical skin the shadow offers a figuration of the reaching of the lynched body beyond itself even as it does not have, in itself — that is, apart from the affects connected to the compound indexicality of lynching photographs — an embodied materiality. Rather, this shadow is racially over-embodied (both in the sense of being burdened with an excessive carnality and in the sense of being embodied *over*; that is, through a superimposition) because of how race presses onto the picture both from the inside and the outside.

STATES OF THE IMAGE

The imaginary associated with “photography” has obviously changed now that images proliferate in other, mostly digital, forms so that it is now possible to distinguish a photochemical logic (invested in the index that touches) and a digital logic, invested in resemblance and computational equivalences. Mary Ann Doane has talked about the “photographic” as a desired “logic” of indexicality, which has intensified with (and has been incorporated by) the digital. While the indexical exudes a fantasy of referentiality, the digital exudes a fantasy of immateriality. The continued discussion of Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, furthermore, indicates a remaining interest in addressing a series of affects and investments linked to the photochemical imagination Barthes expressed so effectively.⁵⁸ These two “logics” are not tied to the technological mode of production of images, but they articulate chang-

ing notions of indexicality, materiality, and embodiment, as well as movement and stillness, life and death, and, I argue, race and blackness as well.⁵⁹

The exploration of the photochemical imagination requires an understanding of photography that is non-medium specific, one that also offers the possibility to resist this fixation on photographic fixation.⁶⁰ I follow Raymond Bellour's attempt to, once again, isolate the specificity of the photographic way of understanding these relations in the context of the other "arts of the image." The double helix is the form Bellour has chosen to express the connection between the arts' ability to convey movement (whether it is a movement primarily of the "soul," as in photography; that is, a movement that belongs to the viewer, or whether the movement belongs to the image, as in the cinema) and the amount of analogy the image can sustain — analogy understood as the power of the image to resemble and represent. It is impossible, or at least undesirable, argues Bellour, to discuss the arts discretely, because the history of images "has become an indication of our own history, a sign of the impressive accumulation of images." As there are increasingly less Image(s), and "we know less and less about the nature of *the* image, *an* image, or *the* images," he argues, it is more appropriate to talk about "passages of the image."⁶¹

In "Concerning the Photographic," Bellour writes: "'The Photographic,' as I imagine it, is not reducible to photography even while borrowing part of its soul and the fact of which we believed photography to be the guardian. The photographic exists somewhere in-between; it is a *state* of 'in-betweenness': in movement, it is that which interrupts, that paralyzes; in immobility, it perhaps bespeaks its relative impossibility."⁶² The notion of the *passage* or the *state* of the image suggests not only the in-betweenness that Bellour is after, but also an affective movement or charge that is intrinsic to the image itself. A "state," as the *Oxford English Dictionary* says, is "a condition, manner of existing; a combination of circumstances or attributes belonging for the time being to a person or thing"; thus images can be understood to be in a particular state, in a chemical, but also in an emotional, sense. "State," therefore, is a way to indicate a picture's mode of existence as precarious, sensitive, volatile, and unstable. The "state" is the temporary form an image assumes as it *passes*, through and to. Within this framework, the index can be regarded as one type of passage of the photographic image that attempts to counteract its volatility: the photographic passes through the index to acquire a measure of quasi-chemical "stability." This is the reason that prompts

Barthes to claim that photography is the child of chemistry. This stability is not at all simply a technological product, but it is also supplied affectively when the indexical connection is experienced, as it happens in Barthes's account of the photographic, as an umbilical cord.

Thus the understanding of the index as trace and the consequential elevation of the photographic as the state of the visual that can most securely deliver reference and truth value, doesn't rest solely on a specific semiotic theory, but it also implies specific notions of materiality, presence, contiguity, connection, and embodiment. In fact, as Sybille Kramer observes, "what makes it possible to leave traces and to read them is the material continuity, physicality and sensuousness of the world."⁶³ Building on Bellour's notion, the photographic/photochemical is thus a "state" that the visual assumes when it posits itself in existential and material continuity with reality, regardless of the specific technology of image production. Because of its underlying theory of embodiment, the photographic is also the state of the image that has most sanctioned and secured the effect of the materiality of race. With each reiteration, the photographic image thus conceived rehearses the racial fold.

THE SHADOW

What happens, though, when we regard a shadow, rather than a fly, as the site of concentration of photochemical affects? The NAACP shadow reproduces the process of racialization, but it withholds closure, reference, and permanence not only because of Talbot's characterization of photography as the art of "fixing the shadow," but also because of the *condition* of the visual they both share. Such a condition (or is it an affliction?) is first of all the idea of the indexical image as trace. But what kind of image is the shadow?

From an ontological standpoint, the shadow is not a picture and yet it pictures.⁶⁴ In its impermanence, it is not a durable sign, but the potentiality of one. Its indexicality aligns it most strongly with photography, its iconicity with the pre-photographic form of the silhouette, and its constitutive becoming with the cinematic. Because of its phenomenological capability to extend beyond the body, the shadow figures both the process of photographic impression and the dislocation and doubleness of the projected image. It thus presents itself as a "state" in-between the two — photographic "fixation" on the one hand, and cinematic becoming on the other. Thus, on the one hand, infinitely more than photography, the shadow's fleeting contingency and in-

betweenness is a passage of the image. On the other hand, as Victor Stoichita has argued in other respects, the shadow is the prototype of the inalienable sign and, therefore, a sign of permanence because it “is undetachable from, that is, coexistent and simultaneous with, the object it duplicates.”⁶⁵

More importantly, the shadow offers one of the two paradigms that in Western art have determined the ontology of the image alongside the paradigm of the mirror. The history of the shadow, Stoichita writes, begins with Pliny the Elder’s account of the origin of the plastic arts in the myth of a young Greek woman who draws the outline of her lover’s shadow as he is about to depart for war.⁶⁶ According to the Plinian tradition, then, the first pictorial image is not the result of direct observation but rather the capturing of a body’s projection.⁶⁷ The first image entertains an individualized indexical connection with its source. It is somebody’s image: it doesn’t simply resemble but also belongs to the person whose image it is.

The paradigm of the image as shadow has been historically concurrent with, but also dialectically opposed to, the Platonic understanding of the image as a mirror. In Plato’s cave, in fact, pictorial representations are not the result of an act of love that finds a way to make a durable re-presentation of the lover’s trace. In Plato’s cave visual activity is understood merely as the equivalent of cognitive activity. For Stoichita, Plato equates artistic images to mirror images in order to underline “the nothingness of mimesis” — the fact that “the painted image, like the specular reflection, is pure appearance (*phainomenon*), devoid of reality (*aletheia*).”⁶⁸ The mirror image has no substance, hence no truth. This equation of reality/substance with *aletheia* (truth) is what turns the mirror into the model for epiphenomenal representations in Western art, which has overwhelmingly used the notion of the mirror, rather than the projection of interposed bodies, as the vehicle for mimesis. In the tradition of Western visual arts, the shadow remains in a dialectical relationship to the mirror image: the Plinian tradition understands images indexically — in contiguity with the real, as its cast shadows — and has remained in a dialectical relationship with the Platonic tradition that conceives of images iconically, as purely apparent beings linked to the real by their mirrorlike resemblance. If “in the Plinian tradition, the image (shadow, painting, statue) is *the other of the same*, then in Plato the image (shadow, reflection, painting, statue) is the same in a copy state, *the same in a state of double*.”⁶⁹

What concerns me the most, as I follow Stoichita in this brief recounting of these two paradigms of the visual in Western art, is first the implied

frontality of the mirror image, and second the relationship between trace and resemblance. The paradigm of the mirror establishes a frontal relationship with its source; hence, the ontological claims it makes are dependent upon the mirror image's resemblance or likeness to that which it mirrors. The paradigm of the shadow, instead, manifests itself in the profile and its ontological claims are based on its existential relationship to the model — a relationship that is contiguous, but oblique. Thus, Stoichita suggests, while the Lacanian mirror stage involves primarily the identification of the *I*, the shadow stage involves the identification of the other.⁷⁰ The shadow is not a likeness of the self, but rather something that has emanated from it. While we face the mirror, we don't face the shadow. The shadow, in fact, is fleeting, semi-autonomous, oblique, and pragmatic; that is, sensitive (and subjected) to the circumstances of its formation.

Race has often been euphemistically described as a shadow, but usually in metaphorical or allegorical ways. "Shadow," for example, indicates the ghost in the machine, the way in which race cuts across the American screen, the return of the (racial) repressed, the doppelgänger, and the Other of the self.⁷¹ "Shadow" was also a term used to indicate photography, one that, when applied to photographs of black bodies, makes evident to contemporary eyes the semiotic transference of the blackness of the shadow to the blackness of the black.⁷² However, rather than lingering on a vaguely allegorical association of the shadow with racial blackness, a reading that remains located within the Manichean visual template I am trying to complicate, I believe it is more important to investigate the alternative paradigm it offers, the structure of deferral it makes available, the different relationship between surface and depth it implies, and the model of photographic embodiment it provides.

PHOTOGRAPHIC EPIDERMALITY

Even though it is superimposed, the NAACP shadow still reads as coming from a contiguous offscreen space. Such are the spatial relations that the photograph establishes at its face value. We read this shadow as somewhat contiguous because, no matter what the circumstances and the location of its formation, *this* is *somebody's* shadow; it is tethered to the lynched body that has cast it. Thus, from a more strictly formal standpoint, the NAACP shadow institutes a variable figure-ground relation between the body offscreen and the crowd, coming forth as "figure," when regarded as the indexical trace of

the body offscreen, and as the “ground” on which the white constituency stands. In this variable relationship, the shadow brings two bodies to this image — the lynched body offscreen and the body politic gathered around this scene of the crime.

In the shadow, a certain state of the visual is caught in suspension — put *en-abyme*. The shadow, in fact, is not fixed, but rather travels through space; it doesn’t have mass, but it is the projection of a mass. The shadow needs a surface to become visible, and when it casts itself over a surface its empty blackness equalizes textures, masses, and rank. Thus, visually, it is ruthlessly democratic and abstractive: everybody’s shadow is black.

Consider the textural contrast in the NAACP photograph. On the one hand, there is a smoothness resulting from the way the difference between materiality of the body, the pole, and the rope are equalized in the shadow’s blackness; on the other hand, there is the coarse texture of the crowd, which registers like an oppositional (resistant?) background. While the overall texture of the image encourages a tactile engagement, what do my fingers know when I look at the NAACP photograph?⁷³ What do I touch when I touch its blackness? This shadow challenges the relationship between figure and ground, inside and outside, and my haptic relationship to it. I am sensorially engaged by the crowd, which I feel I can touch, but sensorially withdrawn from the shadow, which, instead, flaunts its untouchability. Nothing comes back to me as I extend myself toward it. I could move across space forever without ever reaching that shadow. Thus the blackness of the NAACP shadow figures (and yet it simultaneously undermines) the very process of superficialization of epidermality insofar as it is a contingently produced surface turned into a sign. Otherwise put, the shadow wears its blackness on its sleeves.

The shadow’s blackness figures the sociohistorical constitution of a supplemental corporeal border; that is, pigmentation and its effect — what Fanon has called the “epidermal schema” — on photography itself. Because the shadow’s blackness figures, but does not deliver, skin pigmentation, the shadow also figures the epidermis of photography’s ghostly membrane.⁷⁴

For Fanon, photography and the epidermal schema are both phenomenologies of the surface. Indeed, they share the same phenomenological structure of a profound superficiality that Akira Lippit has found in psychoanalysis, early cinema, and X-ray photography. Teresa De Lauretis makes the connection explicit. She argues that Fanon shows how Freud’s body-ego (“the projection of a surface”) is over-inscribed by an epidermal schema, which

the child's gaze has the ability to fix like a dye.⁷⁵ The corporeal schema, which Fanon describes in terms that are very close to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is not indexical; rather, the schema is a "sedimented effect without a stable referent or predictable content."⁷⁶ When the body enters in relation to the world, it does so through its sensate border — having sense and making sense — which then acts as a "skin." Fanon shows how, as a consequence of its interpellation, the child's body schema is overridden by an epidermal schema — an outward body image that does not correspond to that of the subject. While the bodily sense of the self occurs through the folding of proprioception and perception, self and other, seer and seen, sensible and sentient, the child's interpellation interrupts the possibility of this folding by "freezing" and fixating it into a fully exteriorized frontality. Seen from the outside by the other, the body becomes "epidermalized"; that is, fully externalized (to the other looking, but also to the self who now sees himself from the outside) and deprived of interiority — "the body Fanon describes is all surface."⁷⁷ When this happens, explains Charles Johnson, "[a]ll I am, can be to them is as nakedly presented as the genitals of a plant since they cannot see my other profiles." "My subjectivity," he continues, "is turned inside out like a shirtcuff."⁷⁸

If from a phenomenological standpoint the skin is the border that feels, the visibility of skin; that is, its pigmentation, institutes another border, at the same time deeper (lodged in the genetic makeup or in an "interiority") and more superficial (epidermal) in between bodies in the social space. Pigmentation triggers a figure-ground relationship between touch and sight that can work against the folding of self and other. As a chromatic property, pigmentation can elicit a "retinal pop" that foregrounds and isolates vision from the remainder of the sensorium: "*Maman*, look a Negro; I am scared."⁷⁹ As a tactile border, however, it can also project a surface of desire, a desire to touch, possess, or "eat" the Other.⁸⁰

In the NAACP photograph, the black shadow superimposed onto the crowd institutes a place of enfolding that the frontality of the traditional lynching tableau violently denies, thus showing the constitutive interpenetration between the lynched body and body politic. Beyond that, the NAACP shadow is a figure for the "skin" of the visual as the border that feels (from both sides), a surface of impression and expression, a containing but also releasing membrane, a seal and a face.⁸¹ Otherwise said, in this shadow the visual appears as the "mode" in which bodies inter-skin (rather than inter-face), as the terrain in which bodies touch and constantly redraw their boundaries.

TOUCHING BLACKNESS

Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* remains arguably the most influential account of the phenomenology of the photographic surface as a complex and shifting figure-ground relationship between the tactile and the visual. Not epistemologically rigorous but existentially and rhetorically audacious, *Camera Lucida* offers a still-relevant description of the state of the photographic image even beyond the digital turn. In fact, photography emerges from the book as an image state just as nervous, conflicted, and passionate as the book's author.

What draws me to *Camera Lucida* is Barthes's commitment to exploring photography's ability to connect rather than represent. Photography, for Barthes, is a corporeal medium, in the spiritist sense, a body that functions as a vehicle for a necrophilic encounter: it is a corpse through which we touch other corpses. And yet, photography is also a womb, a return to the inside of the mother's body, the only place where we know we have been before. Barthes's notion of photographic connection pivots around his idea of indexicality as a sort of "umbilical cord" and his description of light as *a carnal medium*, "a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed."⁸² But what does "skin" mean in the context of a lynching photograph? What does it mean here for *this* lynching photograph?

The connection Barthes describes as an umbilical cord is an affective one. Barthes privileges photographs that "prick" him. He seeks the essence of photography ultimately in the photograph of his deceased mother because of how it invites him in, in its "space," in its "bosom." Photography is for him a space of habitation — a place where he wants to live, a dirt road that he remembers his body having traveled a long time ago. He is drawn to photographs that are not obvious, not studied, not composed; that is, nonrepresentational. His interest is not so much "to see" but rather to "be there" — hence his elaboration of the affects associated with the realization that the noumenon of photography is its "having been there." These affects, as it is well known, congeal around his notion of the *punctum* — a quasi-tactile realization of the awakening and circulation of one's desire — as the site and the occasion in which we are startled by our sudden experience of photography as a connection. As Kenneth Calhoun observes, for Barthes "the finger, not the eye is the photographer's true organ, and the *punctum* . . . connects the finger that points to the wound it indicates."⁸³ The *punctum* is the place

where the index is experienced as a pointing finger, a shifter, to be sure, but one that also touches that which it indicates. Crucially, Barthes' *punctum* is also experienced through the mediation of the black female body.

Barthes invokes the notion of skin primarily to describe the photographic connection with a tactile language. Yet, if it is clear to any reader of *Camera Lucida* that Barthes understands the photographic connection as a form of inter-embodiment, it is less noted how the pigmentation of the skin we supposedly share with the photographed subject can, in fact, undo such a connection.⁸⁴ That is, while Barthes invests in the continuity that photography affords us with the physical world, he instead divests and retracts when looking at bodies that are black. This is to some extent ironic, especially given that, as Fred Moten observes, blackness marks the spectatorial position in *Camera Lucida*, and particularly Barthes's refusal to show his mother's photograph,⁸⁵ as well as the place of death. He insists that the photograph is the corpse of an event. Barthes protects his "ontological desire" to inquire into the essence of photography, clouding both its addressee (the Mother) and its representation (the Winter Garden photograph) in blackness. Thus blackness is the sign of the maternal, which Barthes considers as the only fundamental and universal metonymical connection we can claim: the umbilical, the carnal. It is the sign of a temporal structure that connects the origin (the womb) with the destination (the mother's death), and thus institutes a complex dynamic between interiority and exteriority — blackness as skin versus blackness as space, blackness as a physical attribute versus blackness as the mode of an interaction.

Most commentators interested in the role of blackness in *Camera Lucida* observe that Barthes introduces the concepts of *studium* and *punctum* when discussing Van Der Zee's photograph *Family Portrait*. Barthes introduces it as an example of a most studied photograph (and most naively studious subjects) which, nevertheless, and against what we can imagine to be the intention of the photographer, pricks Barthes for its vulnerable details — affectation in dress, jewelry, and posture — all elements he can "sympathize" with. Barthes uses *Family Portrait* to explain the distinction between *studium* and *punctum*, but his account confuses the two. The *studium* is patronizingly found in the desire to embody a higher social class that the sitters manifest by supposedly mimicking white people and in the paternalistic and shocking description of the woman in the back as a "solacing Mammy." That to Barthes this description appeared neutral and benign is startling. Barthes is

obviously not interested in the cultural and social valence of African American portraiture and, even though he might have known Van Der Zee's *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, as Olin suggests, he took this photograph and the description of its *studium* from a special issue of *Le nouvel observateur*.⁸⁶ The imagination of the standing woman as a "mammy," even though (or maybe because) she reminds him of an aunt of his, is troubling and propels an interest in his handling of family connections and blackness throughout the book.

Barthes describes the photograph's *punctum* again a little later in the book when explaining how the *punctum* works in supplementarity — it is something we bring to photographs, he claims, but also what is nonetheless already there — and its utter subjectivity, its existence in memory, its ability to "work" on the viewer. So as he recalls the Van Der Zee photograph, Barthes misremembers and misrepresents the woman's necklace, and he describes it as a "ribbon of gold" because he is more interested in conveying that he feels pricked by this detail for how it reminds him of an old, unmarried aunt of his. As Shawn Michelle Smith observes, what is really disturbing about Barthes's faulty memory of the black woman's jewelry "is not the erasure of a pearl necklace for a gold but the effacement of an African American woman) [who happens to be Van Der Zee's own aunt] under the sign of Barthes's aunt. One is left to wonder whether this erasure, effected by the *punctum*, is in part a result of the *studium*, a racist paternalism that disregards an African American woman's self-representation as trite."⁸⁷ Ultimately, as both Fred Moten and Carol Mavor point out, Barthes is "nursed and nourished by the blackness of the Van Der Zee woman — the black twin (at least in his mind) of his Aunt Alice." As Mavor summarizes, "Barthes's novel(esque) *Camera Lucida* is a story of a desire for the maternal that is nurtured by photography, whose very texture tells the story of the nourishment of race."⁸⁸ Overall, in *Camera Lucida*, blackness marks the location of a private, intimate, and familial encounter, except when it "belongs" to the body that Barthes faces in these photographs. As much as Barthes thinks about photography as a space of habitation, he instead describes photography as intractable when discussing encounters with black bodies, which he tellingly reads as exemplary of both the mask and the fact of race.

The first photograph of a black subject is Richard Avedon's *William Casby, Born a Slave*, which Barthes discusses in relation to the capacity of photography to visualize a *mask* — a word, he says, that Italo Calvino uses to indicate the perfect intelligibility of a socially constructed meaning (figure 1.3). Cap-

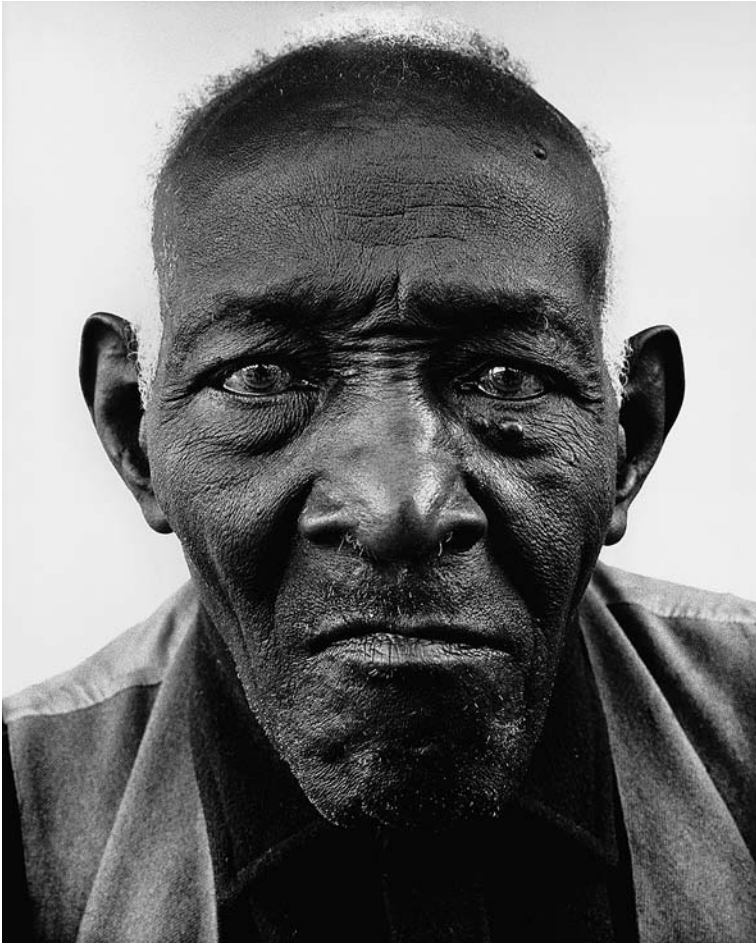


FIGURE 1.3. Richard Avedon, *William Casby, born in slavery, Algiers, Louisiana March 24, 1963*. © The Richard Avedon Foundation.

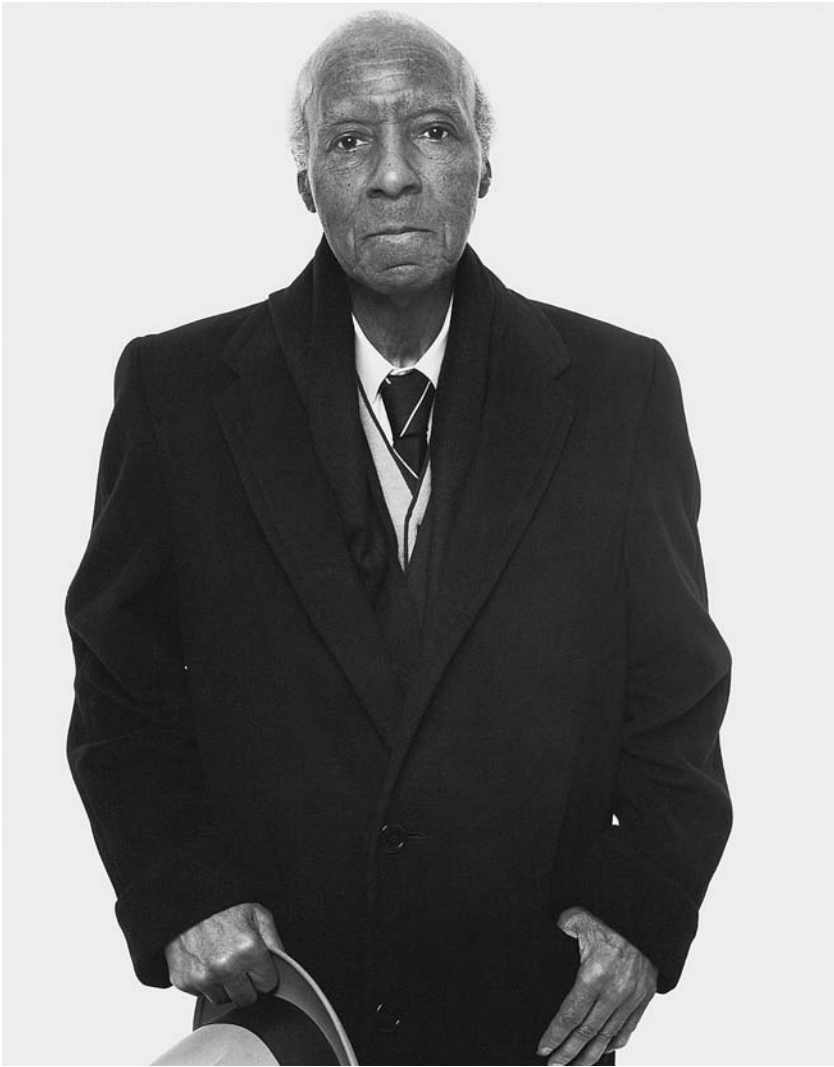


FIGURE 1.4. Richard Avedon, A. *Philip Randolph, founder, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, New York, April 8, 1976.*
© The Richard Avedon Foundation.

tive of the mystique of the Other, Barthes sees in the Avedon's photograph the "essence of slavery" laid bare. But what is it about this photograph that makes Barthes hold it as perfectly intelligible, as a mask (that which "makes a face into the product of a society and its history"); that is, as conforming to socially constructed protocols of legibility?⁸⁹ Barthes reads the "essence of slavery" in William Casby's face: we are left to wonder whether such essence is a feature of Casby's self (a slave by essence?), or whether his face is conceptualized as the writing pad for a specific social and property structure, as bearing the inscription of what Bill Brown calls the "historical ontology of slavery."⁹⁰ But what is it, other than Avedon's complicit title — offered as a testimony of the history of the photographic subject — that prompts this reading? Or is it Casby's sheer blackness and his age-worn face sufficient in itself to conjure it up? Is his blackness the writing pad? What is it about this photograph that makes Barthes feel in the presence of, and in contact with, its history? "The mask is the meaning," he writes, "insofar as it is absolutely pure."⁹¹

Other photographs of blacks appear in *Camera Lucida*, most notably Avedon's 1976 portrait of Philip Randolph, which Barthes uses to illustrate his notion of the air ("a kind of intractable supplement of identity"),⁹² the *animula* — the bright shadow, the spectral image of the soul that good photography is supposed to capture (figure 1.4). Again, this photograph of a black subject offers no space of habitation, but rather the attempt to show an essence as an image. "If the Photograph cannot be penetrated," he writes, "it is because of its evidential power."⁹³ When photography testifies, it is flat and "I can only sweep it with my glance," stay on the surface, on the outside. I cannot touch it, only face it. Importantly, Barthes appears to recognize the superficiality of photography, its exteriority, mostly in relation to the blackness of the photographic subject, as if the skin of the sitter had already performed a labor of superficialization for him. And also a labor of humility, as the two "masks" (now understood in a broad sense) he identifies — that is, William Casby and Philip Randolph — either show the essence of slavery or an "air of goodness (no impulse of power: *that is certain*)."⁹⁴

This tension between the merely visual and the haptic properties of blackness surfaces most strongly when Barthes discusses the photograph of a slave market (a magazine clipping) he used to have as a child. The photograph, he claims, both fascinated and horrified him because "there was a *certainty* that such a thing had existed: not a question of exactitude, but of reality, . . . slavery

was given without mediation, the fact was established *without method*.⁹⁵ In this unexpected return to his earlier positions (that of regarding photography as a “message without a code”⁹⁶), Barthes’s horror is a byproduct of the realization that the photograph places slavery in the same historical continuum as the viewer, that the referent has, so to speak, stuck to it. As Susan Sontag puts it, the Intractable of images of atrocities is what puts our privileges “on the same map” as the suffering we see.⁹⁷ Or, if we are to take seriously Barthes’ carnal theory of photography, photographs of atrocities put him in the same body of the suffering he sees, and that body — the body he touches, the skin he is invited but might not want to inhabit — is, paradigmatically, black. Ultimately, Mavor summarizes, for Barthes “the fact of blackness is as stubborn as the photograph’s link to the referent.”⁹⁸

Barthes’s attitude toward the photographic is both *necrophilic* and *negrophobic*. In my view, Barthes describes his experience of the photographic connection in terms that are very close to Vivian Sobchack’s description of the cinesthetic subject — the subject that, through a sensual catachresis, experiences the nonhierarchical reciprocity and figure-ground reversibility of “having sense” and “making sense.”⁹⁹ The cinesthetic subject is the one that “feels his or her literal body as only one side of *an irreducible and dynamic relational structure of reversibility and reciprocity* that has as its other side the figural objects of bodily provocation on the screen.”¹⁰⁰ But Barthes’s photographic connection has a crucial difference from Sobchack’s cinesthetic subject: Barthes’s imagined or projected chiasmatic relation is not occurring with a film’s living body but rather with a corpse: still photography, a dead mother.¹⁰¹ While Barthes insists that the encounter with a photograph produces movement, that the *punctum* pricks him and awakens him, that he animates and is animated by certain photographs, the reciprocity and fluidity Sobchack finds in the film experience remains in Barthes fundamentally one-sided. Ultimately, Barthes understands the photographic connection as raced, because he embraces what Sobchack describes in relation to cinema, as the “figure-ground reversibility between ‘having sense’ and ‘making sense’” only when in the photographic presence of certain bodies and not others. Barthes avows this connection only when it translates into a heightened and intensified experience of his own sensorium, not when this experience of reversibility heightens and intensifies the experience of his sensorium as another’s. When facing black bodies Barthes rejects and disavows the catachrestic process, because of, paraphrasing Sobchack, his sensual retraction

from race's sensible figuration. The black body "makes the skin crawl" and thus interrupts the chiasmatic structure of reversibility with an obtuse materiality — one that, importantly, is instituted by the process of interruption itself. It triggers an investment to remain on his own side of his body — to avoid, rather than seek, tactile contact.¹⁰² Barthes's example shows how a fixation on photographic fixation troubles the relationship between vision and the other senses.

The complex indexicality of the NAACP shadow has allowed me to reflect on the imbrication between race and the photochemical imagination and the *affects* and *effects* it sustains — a(e)ffects of reality, materiality, tactility, continuity, contiguity, and corporealization. Even though, and maybe because, it is fabricated, the NAACP photograph brings awareness to affective investments: for instance the desire to follow the pointed finger like a yellow brick road and reach the body, whether to mourn or witness. Yet, what happens when on the surface of the image we find a shadow, rather than a fly? The shadow withholds closure and, instead, puts the photochemical process *en-abyme*. Photography emerges as a structure of deferral rather than referral, and we see how the umbilical cord is affectively supplied and how much the black body is instrumental to delivering a referent to its image.