On the Sleeve of the Visual

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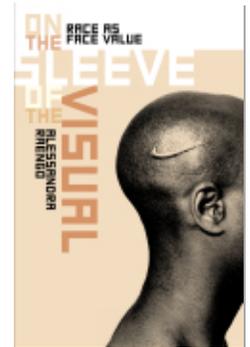Published by Dartmouth College Press

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FOUR
THE LONG
PHOTOGRAPHIC
CENTURY

Two look-alike estranged half brothers reconnect at their father's funeral. One, powerful and wealthy (Vincent), is suspected of having killed his father. To escape the criminal investigation, he stages his own death by car accident and engineers a way for his working-class brother, Clay, to occupy the car. The accident, however, is only partially successful and Clay survives, though he is disfigured and suffers from amnesia. A tabula rasa inside and out, he is sutured back together physically by the appropriately named plastic surgeon Renée Descartes, who reconstructs his image by studying photographs and footage of Vincent, and psychologically by psychiatrist Dr. Max Shinoda. Through this process he is made to take on the identity of Vincent.

This is the premise of Scott McGehee and David Siegel's 1993 film *Suture*, a film about a case of mistaken identity between two characters who are diegetically treated as if visually identical, but are played by a white and by a

black actor: Michael Harris (Vincent) and Dennis Haysbert (Clay). Shot in black and white, the film presents a relentlessly polarized visual scheme to offer the spectator a visual difference between the two characters that, however, the film's diegesis disavows: nobody in the film appears to realize that the two half brothers look nothing alike. Furthermore, as only the spectators can see, the "suturing" process undertaken to restore Vincent's image and identity is actually taking place on the body and in the memory of Clay. In turn, Clay exists only in representations of his brother.

The film, as Kaplana Sheshadri-Crooks observes, stages the *écart* between seeing and saying of Magritte's *La Trahison des images* — "this is not a pipe"— because it demands that the spectator imagines a visual equivalence between the two actors that the image does not provide.[1] It also obviously disrupts the suturing process as understood within Lacanian-inflected film theory as a film's ability to stitch the spectator to its placeholder in the text. The diegesis is color-blind, but the images are not. Thus "race" appears in this film as a series of visual codes polarized as black and white, which, in Saussurian fashion, create a system of equivalences and differences without positive terms. Building also on high-contrast black-and-white cinematography, the film uses racial embodiment to create a visual grid in which bodies do not matter, only their color does. At the same time, the discrepancy between a color-blind diegesis and color-coded images calls attention to the film's own photographic skin as raced.

My reading of *Suture* begins with the observation that if the film can use the epidermal signifier merely as a signifier of "difference" this is because this coding has been fully naturalized. By visualizing difference so, through black skin, the film relies on the surface of the body as its most effective location. But why is that so? What kind of visual culture, scopic regimes, logics of seeing, and archival structures are needed for that to be the case? What are the epistemological, but also disciplinary, formations that sustain this mapping of the visual field? On what ground do these two visually distinct bodies exchange as identical? And, ultimately, what can this film's use of "black" and "white" teach us about what we think images are?

The need to begin to answer these and similar questions is what initially prompted me to seek a framework large enough and specific enough to comprise a history of deployment of "black" and "white" as visual forms — a framework *Suture* relies on and so effectively recapitulates. In chapter 3 I argued that this framework becomes available once we see how blackness

gets bolted to the history of capital, which I have labeled the Long Photographic Century. I have also described the way the photochemical imagination is the product of the passage of the image through race and capital as the ability for both race and photography to function as the "money of the real," not only as systems of equivalences but also systems of surfaces that reify the mediation they are supposed to provide. In this chapter I focus more directly on the visuality of this phenomenon. The objects analyzed here show how the image state of photography offered the dominant mode of the visuality of capital, a generalization, in the visual sphere, of capital's hermeneutics of the surface. They also indicate that this hermeneutics overrides the digital divide. Whereas in chapter 3 I was 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, this chapter focuses more strongly on objects that recapitulate the history of visuality produced by the bolting of race to capital. They do so sometimes by entering in relation with the money form of the visual sphere and other times by concentrating more specifically on the relationship between photographic visuality and the hermeneutics and phenomenology of the black body.

As has already been suggested, the photochemical imagination can be seen to express two main impulses: on the one hand, the experience of photographic connection as a form of racial embodiment and, on the other, the possibility for the photographic image to exchange on its surface. In *Suture* these two poles are formally rendered by the film's attention to Clay's flesh, and by the film's attempt to render Dennis Haysbert's body as if its blackness was wholly detached from it; that is, as a silhouette.

To reflect on the black surface this film attempts to project, I turn to silhouette artist Kara Walker, arguably the most controversial African American artist alive. The target of several attacks by fellow artists, scholars, and the general public for the obscenity of her imagery and the alleged reviving of deep-seated racial stereotypes, Kara Walker's work seems at the same time to be an indispensable talking point in a good amount of scholarship on race and visual culture.[2] For many scholars, Kara Walker has succeeded where no other contemporary artist has in initiating a conversation about the resilience of the historical ontology of slavery and its still-privileged position at the core of the American uncanny.[3] I agree with this assessment and yet also take a slightly different approach. For me, a great part of the radical impetus, but

also the difficulty in the reception of her work, stems from the reflection on the ontology of the image that her use of the archaic pre-photographic form of the silhouette in a post-cinematic moment affords. In turn, her ontological inquiry is only possible if considered against the backdrop of the *longue durée* in the history of visuality described by the Long Photographic Century. Her silhouettes synthetize a history of the photochemical imagination we are still coming to terms with — one that recognizes how the stabilization of a specific relationship between surface and depth has occurred through the mediation of the black body.

Suture and Kara Walker's silhouettes work on the surface in similar ways, primarily by detaching it from the (expected) body behind it. Thus they invite what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus recently called "surface readings," where the surface stands on its own as that which is openly given to the senses and it is no longer what we look *through*, but rather what we look *at*.[4] They do so by deploying the possibility for blackness to perform as the money of the real, to live on its surface. Not only do they traffic in blackness, but their blackness is all surface. This does not imply that bodies are no longer important or have no stakes in the matter. But, in putting the visual signification of race at a remove from the bodies it is supposed to differentiate and administer, they succeed in showing how the language of black and white remains seemingly intact, even when it is supported by nothing behind it. Said otherwise, they employ blackness and whiteness as simultaneously flickering and floating signifiers — flickering like duck-rabbit optical illusions, so that they bring to the fore that seeing is always seeing *as*; and "floating" in the way in which they render the surface intransitive, distant, detached.

Finally, the Long Photographic Century is also what connects the NAACP lynching photograph and the digital scar/brand in Hank Willis Thomas's *Branded Head*. Both display a case of layering — a shadow superimposed in the printing process to an existing photographic picture in the former and a carnal growth digitally overlaid on top of the photograph of a model's head in the latter. I see them as bookmarking in some respects the long passage of the image through race and capital across the digital divide. And as they do that, they also map it both vertically and horizontally: on the horizontal axis, just like *Suture*, they provide a system of equivalences, a map of the logic of commodity exchange whereby they offer substitute and equivalent signs for race (for instance, the blackness of the shadow in the first case and the branding of the brand, in the second). On the vertical axis, the layered

structure of the image replicates, while it also complicates, the racialized structure of the photographic body. Even though the images are fleshed out, the interplay between these layers never yields a clearly identifiable skin.

RACIAL GESTALT

Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks reads *Suture* alongside Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" as texts that achieve similar effects of "symbolic passing." She regards *Suture* as the unwritable text *par excellence* and "Recitatif" as the unfilmable text. I too see these two texts as closely, possibly chiasmatically, related. Both build upon the desire for a visually present black body to deliver unfettered access to a sociological world behind it. Both display the desire for race to represent difference. However, one withholds sight of the body and makes its black/white designation undecidable, while the other withholds "reality" to the black body we see. Leveraging a body that is *Intractably* present (Intractable because of the "reality" of the profilmic, not because it connects to the "historical" world of the diegesis where the character's racial difference is instead unacknowledged), and yet representationally absent, the film explores the possibility for the black body to unhinge seeing from saying. Ultimately, in *Suture* the body's hypervisibility faces its vanishing in the fictional world.

Suture is an essay film conversant with classical film theory, but also firmly located within a neo-noir cinematic style.[5] Alongside the expressionistic reliance on the *mise-en-scène* to convey interior states, the erudite citation of psychoanalytic discourse and some of its visual tropes (oneiric *mise-en-scène*, surrealist dream sequences reminiscent of the Dalì-Hitchcock collaboration in *Spellbound*, for example), the high-contrast cinematography entertains a direct dialogue with the racialized aesthetics of film noir — emphasized by scholars such as Manthia Diawara, Eric Lott, and Dan Flory, among others — a visual style that translates the "racial unconscious" of the genre in elements of the cinematography and the *mise-en-scène* as a chromatic play of darkness and light, blackness and whiteness. Thus, at the generic level, race already inhabits the film.[6] This fact, however, is not clearly acknowledged by the film. On the contrary, the film appears to want to live on its surface. From the beginning, it is visually polarized. The film opens proleptically, anticipating a decisive event that will occur later in the narrative: Vincent breaks into his own mansion now occupied by Clay in order to finally kill

him. Formally, the sequence establishes a crucial visual and chromatic symmetry sustained for the remainder of the film: a close-up of a hand picking up a rifle is matched to the close-up of another hand carrying a gun, with both props commanding the camera movement in proper Hitchcockian fashion; a white man dressed in black is crosscut to a black man clad in white pajama pants and undershirt, shot against an optic white background. This rhyming editing structure finally leads to a perfectly vertical and emphatically polarized two-shot which concludes with an explosion and a quick fade to black (figure 4.1).

Flattened against a mottled background, the actor's bodies are employed as pure chromatic poles to visualize a split identity. The image creates instability between foreground and background, thus challenging what Brian Price summarizes as "the priority of line (or drawing) over color, and the enforced integration of figure and ground in realist production, and in Western optics more generally."[7] Both bodies lose their thickness, their fleshed out presence.

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

> "How is it that we know who we are?" . . . However confused we might be about any other particulars of our existence, we always know that it is us, that we are now who we have always been. We never wake up and wonder, "Who am I?" Because the knowledge of who we are is mediated by what we, doctors of the mind, call our self-schemata: the richest and most stable and most complex structures we have. These are the structures that connect to our past and allow us to imagine our future. To lose these connections would be a sign of pathology, a pathology called amnesia . . .

Gesturing to the film's function as an archive of photographic visuality, the voice-over presents identity in historicist term: a stable core, an uninterrupted connection with one's past. It argues that identity is a form of permanence guaranteed by the presence of schemata; that is, structures of knowledge that have the ability to assure continuity between the present, the past, and the future. Identity is conceptualized as stability and as dependent on a historical continuum. As the film unfolds, however, we realize that what is being
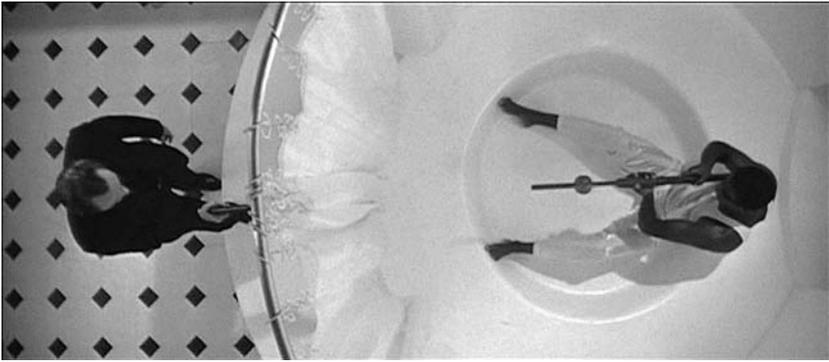
FIGURE 4.1. Racial gestalt, *Suture* (Directed by Scott McGehee,
David Siegel, 1993, Kino Korsakoff), frame grab.

discussed and threatened is not merely the core of the person, but also the
concept of the identical, and its complementary pole, the idea of difference.
Suture undertakes a characteristically modernist agenda — to wreck a crisis
in the unity of the subject by attacking identity through the notion of the
identical.

The opening voice-over also indicates how *Suture* speaks, among other
things, of history and historiography through a unique use of the epidermal
signifier of race. Unintentionally, then, the film embodies the Long Photo-
graphic Century; that is, it sutures together the structure of embodiment and
forms of appearance of value of the Long Twentieth Century on and over its
photographic body and the body of a black actor. It does so by employing a
split model of subjectivity in which exterior appearances are read as surface
signs of an interior essence, which is in turn the result of a suturing process
between the technologies of vision of photography and cinema, and the
nineteenth-century eugenic project of the social sciences responsible for the
characteristic codification of racial difference as a visual fact.[8]

Suture's filmmakers claimed to have been driven by the desire to explore
questions of identity (understood as subjectivity) and difference and to have
chosen for this reason to use "color-blind casting," a disclaimer that is nec-
essary only when color is so conspicuously at stake.[9] What we are forced
to appreciate, though, is that the film utilizes the epidermal signifier as a
self-evident signifier of difference. Clay's blackness, above and beyond the
audience's knowledge that he is the wrong man, demands that they respond to

The Long Photographic Century **135**

FIGURE 4.2. Physiognomic thinking, *Suture* (Directed by Scott McGehee, David Siegel, 1993, Kino Korsakoff), frame grab.

the film's images from a position of color blindness. The film thus unsutures its spectator, who is constantly forced to imagine a visual identity between the two characters that the film does not provide. The effect of this discrepancy between the visual and the diegetic, between the face of the image and what might lie behind it, is particularly evident in the scene where surgeon Descartes removes stitches from Clay's face while he confesses to her his fear of having indeed killed his father. In trying to assure the person whom she believes to be Vincent of his innocence in his father's death, Descartes voices the language and the epistemology of indexicality of physiognomic thinking, thus mapping onto Clay's body the indexes of an interior essence. "Vincent . . . you have far too elegant a nose to have shot someone. You have what they call a Greco-Roman nose: sleek, with a small prominence at the bridging point. Physiognomists were sure that people with Greco-Roman noses were inclined towards music, literature, and the arts. Definitely not deviant behavior like killing people," she tells him as the camera is fixed on their close-up and her action commands the viewer's haptic engagement with Clay's flesh (figure 4.2). She continues, "You have a crisp, angular jaw: a sign of patience and refinement. And your fine straight hair — almost always a sign of good mental temperament, not to mention digestion. And your mouth: thin, smooth lips, slightly open. Lips that are sign of an affectionate, kind-hearted and generous person."

In appealing to physiognomy and its underlying assumption of a correspondence between appearance, character traits, and moral values, she argues that exteriority (contradicted by the image) adequately reflects interiority,

and that classical beauty is a certain index of moral good. Ironically, as she attributes Clay's moral traits to the person whom she thinks is (and the body she describes as) Vincent, she is also folding the physiognomic mapping of the visual field inside out: we see (even though she obviously does not) that the actor embodying Clay does not have the nose or forehead that prompted her reading. The character, however, does possess the moral traits that she has attributed to the nose and the forehead of the actor embodying Vincent. This sequence therefore effectively detaches bodily racial signifiers from their reference to a moral universe behind them, whereby they operate instead as pure signifiers of value. Furthermore, not only are spectators expected to somehow imagine a supra-racial visual identity between Vincent and Clay, but, because of the relentless chromatic polarization of the image in a stark black-and-white cinematography and the sustained dichotomic *mise-en-scène*, color blindness is also a position that the image emphatically contradicts.

It is in this effort to construct a (racially) zero-degree (mental) image that the film resonates with a properly modernist inquiry into signification; that, as Seshadri-Crooks argues, it stages the *écart* of Magritte's painting: this is not a pipe. Just like, in Foucault's reading, *La Trahison des images* refutes resemblance in favor of similitude — that is, it rejects the presupposition of a referent and champions instead a chain of similarities in the simulacrum — this sequence exposes the simulacral nature of the epidermal signifier. *Suture* is both dependent on, and critical of, a racialized map of the visual, which it engages through a visual conceit that simultaneously mobilizes resemblance and dissemblance. "In the domain of film," writes Marcie Frank, "the problem of looking alike is often presented as the problem of being alike, for film techniques can create resemblances where none exists."[10] Her claim refers to David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988), but it is relevant here to appreciate the wedge that *Suture* places in between the body as bearer of race and its color as mere signifier of difference. By casting actors who do not look alike as characters who do, the film embraces dissemblance as a way to expose the simulacral roots of resemblance.

Furthermore, the way in which the film flattens the image into a polarized visual grid is reminiscent of other modernist artistic experimentations with the possibility of opening a wedge between the surface chromatic coding of race and race as a lived in the body and as performative identity. Because of its abstract quality and modernist potential, during the Harlem Renaissance the silhouette became a privileged form of expression of the new Negro. I am thinking specifically about two prominent artists during the Harlem

Renaissance who employed silhouettes in order to experiment with ways to signify the African American body while bypassing its epidermality and its confinement within overdetermined ethnographic representations. For instance, even though he had been schooled in the tradition of the ethnographic portraits of Winold Reiss, Aaron Douglas's silhouettes are not modeled after ethnographically defined bodies but after art styles: the posture is inspired by Egyptian art, the slit eyes by African masks, and their graphic qualities by art deco. In addition, Douglas's distinctive use of rays of light to create multiple planes in the image is stylistically reminiscent of cubism but performs a rather different function — that of elevating the image to a metaphysical space where various historical temporalities and geographical and social spaces freely coexist. Douglas's use of silhouettes allows him to figure African Americans without portraying them, and therefore express African American contributions to the making of Western modernity as cultural and historical forces.[11]

Richard Bruce Nugent's lexicon in *Drawings for Mulattoes* also gestures toward the primitivist inclinations of modernism insofar as he models his rendering of physiognomic traits not after the scientific paradigm but rather after African masks (figure 4.3). But, importantly, he effects an ironic reversal of the chromatic codes of racial identity — the African mask on the left is white and the Caucasian profile on the right is black — and of their imagined settings: palm trees for the Caucasian side, and icons of urban modernity on the African side. This reversed mapping of color onto race creates a perceptually shifting relationship between foreground and background, thus making the viewer aware of how blackness and whiteness alternate as the conditions of visibility of the figures. It is the *gestalt* of the image that indexes race, not any one of the featured bodies. Nugent's *Drawings* are addressed to mulattoes, the paradigmatic problem citizens, the potentially passing subjects that challenge and disrupt the split model of subjectivity presupposed and reproduced in photographic representation.[12] Yet, rather than celebrating lighter skin tones á la Archibald Motley, Nugent provides a chromatically polarized rendition of the visually ambiguous racial identity of the mulatto.[13] He peels apart, so to speak, what is mingled together in the genetic makeup in order to reclaim blackness and whiteness as symbolic constructs and two coexisting but also performative polarities.[14] But even then we are forced to wonder: what makes the blackness of one profile *the* signifier of racial blackness? How do we eventually see it? What processes, assumptions, interpretive grids, do we have to mobilize in order to attribute

DRAWING FOR MULATTOES—Number 2
By Richard Bruce

FIGURE 4.3. Bruce Nugent, *Drawing for Mulattoes #2.*
From *Ebony and Topaz*, 1928.

a definite racial identity to any one of the formal elements of this work? Nugent's drawings too produce — visually, this time — the same situation of racial unknowing Morrison created in "Recitatif." Blackness and whiteness are here both flickering and floating signifiers.

These examples point to the expressive potentials of a modernist process of color reduction that *Suture* employs as well. In *Suture* too the "blackness" of the character's skin appears in its metaphorical iconicity — as a signifier of exchange rather than an index of racial identity. And yet, can we watch this film as a pure chromatic exercise? Or is not this film in fact exhibiting the naturalization of the Long Twentieth Century process of systematization and universalization of the value of appearances — the process that has turned blackness into a form of appearance of value? The discrepancy between the visual equivalence between the two characters demanded by the diegesis and the spectatorial experience of their visual difference continues to rehearse the "perplexity" of value and the hidden violence of commodity exchange.[15] At the visual level, Vincent's and Clay's bodies do not exchange on equal footing. As we are increasingly given access to Clay's past life through a series of dream sequences and scattered flashbacks, we can appreciate that, refusing to address "race" on the surface of the image, the diegesis marks the difference between the two characters in terms of class.[16]

At the end of the film, just when Clay, who has regained his memory and has realized he is not Vincent, resolves to take full possession of his brother's identity (his house, his clothes, artistic tastes, and position in society), Vincent comes back to kill him. This sequence, which is an extended replay of the proleptic opening discussed earlier, concludes with Clay shooting Vincent in the face, making him unrecognizable in order to complete the suturing process that allows him to assume his brother's identity. This narrative closure, which is criticized in voice-over by Dr. Shinoda, cannot counteract the fact that, at the level of cinematic suture, the film has been offering the viewer an "impossible" stand-in or placeholder, thus threatening the entire suturing process.

IMAGINING THE TABLES TURNED

The fundamental inequality of the characters' visual exchange is best appreciated by focusing on another structuring principle of the film: *Suture* is constructed around the form of the counterfactual, those "if-then statements

or contrary-to-fact speculations that constitute both a necessary feature of all literary and legal hermeneutics and a common component of historical and philosophical inquiry."[17] As Stephen Best argues, the counterfactual form seeks causal links by producing a mirrorlike imaginary and inverted equivalent of the actual world. It is a thought experiment that depends on the ability to imagine the tables turned. Because it is so linked to the imagination, the counterfactual is also subjected to the limitations of sympathy, which at times fails to envision an inverted equivalent of the existing world. Importantly, the counterfactual underlies both the doctrine of separate-but-equal and the ideology of color blindness. Specifically, "[c]ounterfactualism provided the doctrine of equal protection with its logical correlate, with that "fuzzy logic" that enabled the courts to imagine a separate-but-equal (alternative and parallel) universe."[18] Counterfactuals, however, represent merely a hypothetical position of equality, because they can only be achieved by ignoring the effect of historical contingencies. I am specifically interested in the fact that the system of sympathy triggered by the counterfactual obeys to (and shares the same limitations of) the principle of exchange characteristic of the commodity form. But so does the visuality of passing.

Plessy vs. Ferguson offers a well-mined case study to understand the shortcomings of counterfactualism and passing. A light-skinned man, Plessy was recruited to challenge the constitutionality of the 1890 Louisiana state Act to Promote the Comfort of Passengers. His attorney, Albion Tourgée, argued that Plessy was being denied the claim to whiteness that his appearance entitled him to enjoy.[19] Amy Robinson has already shown how the logic of passing mirrors of the logic of commodification: "Passing requires a culture in which exchange functions as the primary distributive mechanism." She explains further, "*[o]nly* in the context of a culture of exchange can the commodity rehearse the social logic of passing."[20] In this intricate conjunction between counterfactual imagination and the economy of the visible, produced by both racial passing and commodity exchange, "black" and "white" again function as money of the real.

Tourgée's briefs are located at the initial stages of the discussion of the doctrine of separate-but-equal, but also at the beginning of Jim Crow rule — a legally sanctioned visual and sensorial regime of segregation on the base of color.[21] Tourgée appealed to the court's sympathy but unfortunately, as Amy Robinson shows, his notion of formal equality was tainted by his reliance on visual distributive mechanisms. Consider this argument he makes: "Sup-

pose a member of this court . . . should wake tomorrow with a black skin and curly hair — the two obvious and controlling indications of race — and in traveling through that portion of the country where the "Jim Crow Car" abounds, should be ordered into it by the conductor. It is easy to imagine what would be the result, the indignation, the protests, the assertion of pure Caucasian ancestry."[22] Without challenging the idea of whiteness as precious asset and property, Tourgée argued that separation entails inequality and marks the black race with inferiority.[23] Supreme Court Justice Brown replied that feelings of inferiority are personal and they are not to be regulated by the courts. Thus, "testing the plaintiff's social imaginary, his vision of an alternative present — and finding it wanting — the *Plessy* court confirmed why the current present is the *only* present possible."[24]

I mention this to reiterate the formal equality but intrinsic violence of the logic of commodity exchange especially in the way it extends to the visual sphere and to the bodies that are managed through it. Significantly, in *Suture*, Clay successfully completes Plessy's pass. Only Dr. Shinoda knows that he is not Vincent and describes Clay's pass with the customary language of illegitimate appropriation, claiming, in voice-over, that he is the wrong man, living a wrong life. Furthermore, the film withholds visual equivalence between the characters so that the blackness of Clay's skin is "impressed," so to speak, with the mark of misappropriation. Even though Clay fills Vincent's placeholder and takes possession of his life and resources, actor Dennis Haysbert as Clay does not equally exchange for actor Michael Harris as Vincent. A tension remains between notions of identity understood in relation to the "identical" and identity understood as the sameness that underwrites exchange. The film performs an exchange without mimesis, thus showing how likeness is not a property of the object but rather the necessary vehicle and channel of exchange. Contradicting Tourgée's argument that segregation is an impossible social project because passing subjects demonstrate the difficulty to read racial identity from the body's surface, in *Suture* segregation fails because the characters are color-blind and cannot see difference. Yet, the spectator is put in the position of desiring to see this difference affirmed and hoping that the characters would avow her visual apprehension. Ultimately, by emphasizing its unequal exchange, *Suture* mocks the formal equality of a counterfactual logic and its inability to fully bear upon a racialized distribution of the sensible.

There is no "what-if" that can be imagined or summoned which would

deny the photographic evidence of Dennis Haysbert's body as black. The Intractability of the black body goes beyond the burden of analogy of the photographic image — what led Christian Metz to claim that every film shot is already a statement, an assertion (this is a cat . . . this is a pipe . . .) — or the rule of resemblance, whereby, as Foucault says, likeness leads to (the illusion of) reference. The Intractable for blackness doesn't simply mean "this is . . . " but, after Fanon, it means "look!': "look at this!" Hence *Suture* does not so much test the dynamics of disavowal connected to the fetish nature of the imaginary signifier (I know it, but nevertheless . . .)[25] in the sense that we see a black man but we are supposed to imagine a white one, that we see what nobody else sees, that we are made aware that the diegetic world is of a different ontological order as the filmic utterance. This is the type of disavowal that spectators had already experienced with, let's say, Louis Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) or in its inverted form with David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988). Instead, the disavowal this film requires concerns the willingness to recognize or not a certain presence — the presence of race in the image — by asking the viewer to determine where the truth of the image lies, whether in the seen or in the said, in its depth or its surface. It demands that the viewer ponders whether, and in what circumstances, might the image wear its truth on its sleeve.

LIFE TO THOSE SHADOWS

Kara Walker's silhouettes pose very similar questions. In most of Walker's installations everybody is black.[26] This blackness, however, is not the portrayal of a figure's phenotype, but rather the reified version of their evacuated index. This blackness is the ontological mark of highly unstable images, of an image state that shares photography's indexical and iconic grid but not photography's ability to put us always on the same side of what we see. Furthermore, their blackness functions both as a conjuring tool, because of their capacity to summon a past that is still contemporaneous, and as a receptacle of viewers' affective responses and investments. Walker has created forms that maximize what the viewer brings to them. They seemingly prod their own existence from a state of individual and collective slumber.[27] Thus, Walker has opened a provocative drift in the history of pre- to post-cinematic representations: the question of where her figures come from is just as, if not more, uncomfortable than the question of what they show. The slippage

between their origin and their iconography addresses recurring ontological questions within the history and theory of film and visual culture — namely those regarding the "substance" of cinematic shadows and the dialectic between presence and absence within the imaginary signifier — recasting them as inseparable from the racialization of the visual. As John P. Bowles, for instance, argues: "The debate surrounding her art demonstrates the difficulty we have with work that implicates viewers in the perpetuation of whiteness's claim to privilege."[28] The way in which her silhouettes explosively mingle the indexical and the iconic order of signification intervenes in our understanding of the two most influential paradigms for the image: the shadow and the mirror. Furthermore despite — and possibly because of — its stillness, her work provides an extended and uncompromising version of the cinematic screen as the meeting point of projection and reflection. Finally, it shows how the phenomenology of the photographic surface supports itself on the phenomenology of the black body and, therefore, once again how processes of racialization are integral to the very ontology of the photographic image.

With the title "Life to Those Shadows" — a title borrowed from Noel Burch's work on early cinema[29] — I want to describe the ability for Kara Walker's silhouettes to keep in productive tension several strands that compose the Long Photographic Century — for instance that between image and liveness, mimesis and mimicry, mirror and shadow. The life Walker breathes into these forms — a life partly borrowed from the viewer — allows them to recapitulate the Long Photographic Century, to function as "time machines" through different states of the image — photography, cinema, and digital imaging.

Kara Walker's installations are arranged in continuous scenes that reproduce the 360-degree space of pre-cinematic spectacles such as the panorama and the diorama and confront the spectator unflinchingly, with an absolute presence (figure 4.4). From a distance, they expound a composed elegance. Upon closer scrutiny, they reveal not only decisive racial characterizations, but also a commingling of bodies engaged in "unspeakable acts."[30] Her bodies are "living": they defecate, copulate, suck, ejaculate. They are ecstatic and grotesque, often extending beyond their own boundaries and the boundaries of decency. Part of the controversy her work has triggered is fueled by a representational reading of her silhouettes an approach that their ontological status and their ability to act as archival tools within the Long Photographic

FIGURE 4.4. Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a* GRAND *and* LIFELIKE *Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or "Life at 'Ol' Virginny's Hole' (sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause*, 1997. Cut paper on wall, 11 × 85 feet. Installation view: *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2008. Photo: Joshua White. © Kara Walker/Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Century radically criticize. It is her medium of choice — life-size black cut-paper figures glued onto the gallery walls — rather than her iconography that I believe is responsible for a more profound discomfort her work produces in viewers and critics. To put it differently, her silhouettes are more radical for what they *are* than what they *show*. Against what some of her critics argue, she did not bring those images to life; rather, they were always already there.[31]

I approach Kara Walker as a visual theorist of the Long Photographic Century who makes an important intervention in at least three areas. The first is the ontological question: What are her silhouettes? And how do they relate to other technologies and genres of the Long Photographic Century? Even though the silhouette is a pre-photographic figurative form, I want to

think about what it means to use it in a post-cinematic context, understood after Steven Shaviro as a media regime of digitality in which "intensive affective flows," mirrored by and intertwined with "intensive financial flows," are expressive (that is, both symptomatic and productive) of a certain "surfeit of affect,"[32] but also, from an institutional standpoint, as a time where digitalization has further challenged the institutional role of cinema. Second, the substance of her silhouettes, their materiality, their ontological thickness and their phenomenological properties intervene in the question of embodiment evoked in her work through the relationship between two different traditions of representation — bourgeois portraiture and the physiognomic sciences. Third, Walker's silhouettes pose a question about support, which circles back to the ontological question: Where do these figures come from and where are they now? Against their seemingly clear location, firmly glued onto the gallery wall, Walker's silhouettes are fundamentally phantasmagoric: they refuse to land, secure a support and, in doing so, they draw a geography of race relations whereby Otherness is always kept in front and at a distance. Furthermore, Walker's silhouettes invite the (unwilling) viewer's racial commingling by evoking a permeable and unstable photographic membrane, as well as the scene of exchange instituted by the use of the black screen in early cinema.

One of the most pressing questions among interpreters of Walker's work has been how to describe the ontological status of her figures and, therefore, how to cope with their ambiguous indexicality, which in her work assumes novel and important connotations. Indexicality extends from a temporal and existential order of signification (that is, index as the present sign of a past state of affairs; index as the "having-been-there" of the object, index as trace) to a spatial one, which involves both presence and contiguity. In Walker's work, indexicality entails a spatial theory of relations of identity and difference. Simply put: what are we looking at? Silhouettes or shadows? We know they are cut paper, but why then do they feel tethered to some body? This spatial paradox is further complicated by tensions existing along other axes as well; namely, the temporal, the existential, the mimetic. Are her figures dead or alive? Fixed or mobile? Are they inventions or citations? Copies or originals? Reflections or projections? Hence, in Walker's work, indexicality becomes primarily a question of *self* and *other*.

What about Walker's work shocks viewers — besides the visualization of a deep complicity, what Sharpe has called a "monstrous intimacy," in the

social relations of slavery, or the multiple violations of the body across race, gender, and age — is the fact that we recognize these figures all too well: at first iconographically and then because they inhabit several representational modes, spaces, and traditions at once. It is the violent collision of the silhouettes' pristine and abstract forms with the carnality evoked by these bodies' behaviors and their compulsive penetrations that manifests the double legacy of Walker's figures — the use of the silhouette within the genre of portraiture and its use by institutions and disciplines for social control.

Walker's silhouettes, Ann Wagner argues, speak an economic language of substitution and erasure insofar as each figure enlists the viewer's complicity in investing the black hole of the body's departure with the sense of the metaphysical presence of a portrait.[33] Within the bourgeois context of portraiture, in fact, the blackness of the silhouette was not racially coded, but rather functioned fetishistically — that is, as Homi Bhabha has influentially argued, also stereotypically — because the sign of a bodily absence was transfigured into a mark of personhood through the affective investment of the viewer.[34] Just like the mythical young woman in Pliny's account had imbued the reified trace of her dead lover with a sense of presence, the blackness of the bourgeois silhouette was filled by sentimental memory and nostalgia. The blackness of the silhouette functioned as both a signifier of emptiness, insofar as it indexed the absence of the body, and of fullness, projected by the lover's desire to see that same blackness as a trace of the body that had cast it — a present sign of a past presence. Within bourgeois portraiture the silhouette was animated by the desire to transform a hole into the possibility of wholeness.

The blackness of the silhouette, however, has a very different valence in the context of the social sciences and specifically physiognomy. Joann Caspar Lavater praised the silhouette's "modesty" and its "'weakness"; that is, its lack of texture and detail, because it made it the most suitable form of representation for physiognomic analysis. It provided an abstract map of the body onto which it was possible to seemingly read, but in reality project, an imagined relationship between its inside and its outside, its outward characteristics and its interior essence. The veracity of the silhouette for Lavater relied in its indexicality while its legibility was provided by its iconicity. The silhouette, he wrote, is "the emptiest but simultaneously . . . the truest and most faithful image that one can give of a person . . . because it is an immediate imprint of nature."[35] Thus, within the paradigm of the social sciences, the

blackness of the silhouette can be seen to indicate the writing of nature in two ways: as that which provides the body with a shadow, from which the silhouette is then derived as its reified, durable, and transportable version, and as that which provides race with its epidermal signifier, the blackness of the skin. As a meeting point between mimesis and contiguity, in the context of physiognomic analysis, the blackness of the silhouette becomes a racially overdetermined index through mimicry of the chromatic attributes of certain bodies' skin, and as a signifier of the Other of the body: its indirect presence under the form of the shadow. Another crucial transition between an indexical to an iconic order of signification occurs here: because black is the sign of the silhouette's likeness to the body it indexes, it becomes the "face" of the index as well. Black becomes *the* signifier of likeness, of resemblance as a visual regime: not just an iconic sign, but also a signifier for the iconic. Not just exchangeable, but the signifier of exchange.[36]

This double legacy accounts for the silhouette's overdetermination in relation to the substance it indexes as well: the silhouette is simultaneously carnal and categorical. Carnal because in the social sciences the silhouette is used to map those bodies that do not have access to the disembodied notion of personhood underlying bourgeois subjectivity. Categorical because of its function as a criterion of classification of a subject's position within the Great Chain of Being. The silhouette of the social sciences, in other words, is burdened with the "spectral" presence of the white male normative body, while being filled with the carnality of the racial Other.

This dialectical blackness of the silhouette allows Walker to show not only the imbrication of the paradigm of bourgeois portraiture and that of the social sciences, but also to show them as the recto and verso of the same figure. We see this in the *Untitled* work of figure 4.5. It is a paper cutout where on the left-hand side we can see the profile of a European genteel man, and on the right-hand side a female "primitive" standing back to back with him.[37] With this work, Walker depicts the bourgeois portrait as both materially inseparable and visually indistinguishable from the "shadow archive" of race science. She shows how the silhouette of the social sciences exists in a relationship of contiguity with bourgeois portraiture — indeed as its condition of possibility — as the literal version of what Allan Sekula has metaphorically described as the shadow archive of bourgeois photography; that is, the police records and the eugenist's files. But while Sekula's metaphorical shadow indicates a hidden counterpart, an adversary and yet complementary — enabling —

FIGURE 4.5. Kara Walker, *Untitled*, 1995. Cut paper on paper, 38 × 24 ¼ in., framed. © Kara Walker/Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

position, Walker's archive evokes that and more. In her work the shadow is what sticks to the body as its inalienable Other. Thus, she provides an effective visual counterpart to Homi Bhabha's claim that, in the colonial framework, the representative figure of the Manichean delirium of black and white is the Enlightenment man tethered to the shadow of the colonized man.[38] The self-representation of the colonial man, argues Bhabha, depends upon a staged division between body and soul that underlies the artifice of identity. The native occupies the carnal pole while the Westerner occupies the spiritual one. The tethered shadow of the colonized man offers "the 'Otherness' of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity."[39] At the same time, Walker shows how both traditions of silhouette use meet in the same blackness: the white normative body is always haunted by the remnants of the Other's flesh, precisely because its abstraction is made possible by racial overembodiment.

Walker's work emphasizes the shadow's inalienable contiguity with the body to which it belongs. Each of her figures, in other words, scandalously reveal its own archival position within the history of visuality, hence behaving not only as a visual object but also as scene of constant reversibility between an indexical and an iconic order of signification, as well as a theater of desire suspended between a fullness and a lack. It is in this sense that she recapitulates, by combining them, the two foundational paradigms for the ontology of the image within the visual arts: the shadow and the mirror. We can read in her work the Plinian tradition which understands images indexically — in contiguity with the real, as its cast shadows — and the Platonic tradition conceiving of images iconically, as purely apparent beings, linked to the real by their mirrorlike resemblance. Or, as discussed in chapter 1, we find the understanding of the image as the other of the same or, conversely, as the same in a state of double.[40] What are Walker's figures, then? Are they shadows or reflections? Are they Others or Doubles? And whose other, whose double? Their ambiguous indexical status (was/is a body there? And exactly where?) indicates how Walker's work relentlessly pursues a condition of both/and, which is also an in-betweenness, effectively engaging also the cinema screen, in an expanded and unflinching manner, as the meeting/arresting point between projection and reflection. This condition of both/and, and in-betweenness is present not only because her installations give the impression of a cyclical temporality that has been provisionally suspended, but also because the unclear location of her figures extends the ontological question

regarding their substance and origin to the substance and location of their support. Thus, they offer an *entrée* to thinking about race as an epistemology and a phenomenology that *secures* a support.

It is therefore crucial to appreciate the way in which her work engages with the cinematic screen. First, her scenes extend the cinematic screen by freezing it. In her installations, narrative temporality unfolds horizontally within a fully comprehensive and unbroken space, frozen in a perpetually unfolding and continuous image. This layout, shared not only with pre-cinematic devices such as the panorama and diorama but with landscape and historical painting as well,[41] presents itself as an alternative archive, a different indexing of history as a layered contemporaneity, as repetition and accumulation. "Too active to seem moribund, and too recognizable to be dismissed as safely part of the past," Ann Wagner contends, Walker's silhouettes, "cross-breed past with present."[42] They function metahistorically as haunting incarnations of racial templates. Not only do her figures act in the present — indexing a past that refuses to pass — but they also confront us directly, thus extending the cinematic screen durationally as well: they are uncompromisingly present and unapologetically in our presence.

Walker's metahistorical analysis — the use of archaic forms within a post-cinematic moment — offers provocative insights into the question of presence that have become urgent again after the digital turn: not only the presence *of* the image, or the presence of the world *in* the image, but also our presence *to* the image. Walker's work intervenes in this conversation by emphasizing that part of the affective investment in indexicality is due to how it secures the observer's location *vis-à-vis* the object of the gaze. In David Rodowick's terms, Walker's silhouettes extend the ontological perplexity that photography manifests along the temporal axis to the spatial axis as well: her figures double the paradox of temporal perception of photography with the paradox of spatial recognition of optical illusions such as the duck-rabbit figure.[43] Not only do they ask how things absent in time can be present in space, but also how can such different things both be there in the same space. How can her figure be so fleshed out and yet so abstract? So fleshy, and yet so iconic? And, more radically: how can they be both "us" and "Other"?

In order to expose the affective charge that indexicality bears as a spatial theory of representation, Walker creates images before which the viewer cannot claim to know his or her location. Images such as the *Untitled* gauche of figure 4.6 confound because they are unanchored: they seem to exist on

both sides of an implied photographic surface. The diegetic source of light in this lynching scene is located behind the bodies. The figures on the left side of the image are white because they are rendered as "hollow-cuts"— silhouettes in which the profile is removed from a white paper, which is then glued on top of a black paper. They are rendered as a void, as if they had been cut out from the thick darkness of the night. On the right side, instead, the moonlight partly blocked and partly filtering through the holes of a charred body indicates that it is present and positioned directly before the viewer. In this case, the silhouette effect is produced by overexposure, by how the body blocks the light thus placing us, at least for this half of the image, in an uncomfortable proximity with it. While the bodies on the left-hand side have vacated their place and have left a void in their wake, the body on the right-hand side is still there, in our presence, in a diegetic space we can imagine as continuing uninterrupted into our viewing space. What this shows is that if the photochemical imagination demands a support, a writing pad onto which light leaves its trace, then it also implicitly determines an unambiguous location for the viewer in relation to the image. It produces and relishes on what Metz described in relation to the cinema screen as the "segregation of the spaces," an idea that in his work expresses the unfulfilled desire of the viewer to join the screen image, and the way in which the physical absence of the objects on screen affects a supplementary "turn of the screw" bolting desire to lack.[44] Walker's work, however, shatters the sense of safety that separation might offer — the knowledge, the wish, the hope that there would be a clearly marked line between "us" and "them." Walker reverses the direction of this desire: the segregation of the space is no longer the trigger but rather the hoped-for fulfillment of this desire. Absence is never entirely such and thus the viewer's location, mastery, and knowledge of what is there and what is not is never fully secured.

The ambiguity and reversibility of Walker's figures and her experiments with both sides of the photographic surface establish a dialogue also with scholarship that highlights the permeability of the early cinema screen and its connection with other phenomenological discourses on the body *as* screen, and specifically the three phenomenologies of the inside coming together in 1895 — cinema, X-ray photography, and psychoanalysis — identified by Akira Lippit and already discussed in chapter 1. The black screen of early cinema is one of the sites of thematization of this permeability.[45] The black screen, argues Trond Lundemo, is a technique of suspension of the indexical

FIGURE 4.6. Kara Walker, *Untitled*, 1998. Gouache on paper, 58 × 101 in., 147.3 × 256.5 cm. © Kara Walker/Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

basis of photographic images in order to introduce an alternative to optical models of vision.[46] Its function might be to conceal montage, or to elicit astonishment, or to open onto an abyss of deep space behind the surface of the image, or to punctuate a narrative change. Sometimes, as in *The Big Swallow* (Williamson, 1901), it marks an exchange between the inside and the outside of the body.[47] Most certainly, as Stephen Best has pointed out in his analysis of *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903), it functions as a scene of exchange and a locus of reversibility bearing racial implications because of how the screen blackness is equated to the blackness of the substituted diegetic body.[48] Considered in the context of the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision handed down six years earlier, the film can also be seen as testing the limitations and the repercussions of the counterfactual imagination underling the separate-but-equal doctrine. In all cases, the blackness of the screen is a space of suspension, penetration, and possible reversals.

Similarly to the permeable black screen of early cinema, Walker's figures act as portals towards a phantasmatic indexical source — the body that would supposedly produce them — as well as towards their "insides." We slide in and out through these bodies, aware that while their blackness is a present sign of the body's absence, it is also the sign of an overdetermined carnality. Like X-ray photographs, their blackness provides a view of the body simultaneously from the inside and out, from the space it has vacated and

FIGURE 4.7. Kara Walker, *Darkytown Rebellion*, 2001. Cut paper and projection on wall, 15 × 33 feet, Installation view: *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love.* Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2007. Photo: Dave Sweeny. © Kara Walker/Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

from its phenotype.[49] Hence, the discomfort her installations provoke might not derive solely from the actions that these figures are engaged in, but, at least for certain viewers, from the realization of inhabiting a wholly and inescapably racialized space and the experience of being haptically drawn toward inhabiting a raced body. Even the flatness of Walker's figures is highly unstable, hard to pin to the gallery wall. "Casting their own shadows into a [*sic*] incalculable mise-en-abyme behind them," observes Darby English, "these figures can seem to either threaten further advance into viewers' space or retreat from their very points of appearance."[50] With this movement they expand the cinema screen toward its inside, toward its impossible depth, as well as toward the space of the viewer. This effect is amplified in her installations combining paper cutouts with projected light, where the viewers' bodies are directly implicated by their cast shadow onto the work (figure 4.7). These installations heighten the theater of gazes — viewers looking at the work and looking at each other looking — by engineering a way to project onto the work

On the Sleeve of the Visual

FIGURE 4.8. Kara Walker, *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions,* 2004. Still. 16mm film and video transferred to DVD, black and white, silent; 8:49 min. Edition 1/5. Collection Walker Art Center, Minnea. © Kara Walker/Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

a (however fleeting) trace of those very looks. That trace, the viewer's cast shadow onto the gallery wall, once again calls into question the substance and the liveness of her figures by equalizing them with the viewer's projection.

This sense of double movement is further heightened in Walker's stop-motion puppetry videos (figure 4.8). Here, the question of presence assumes other connotations: not only the foregrounding of the artist's presence by letting her hand appear within the frame while maneuvering her cutouts within a deep space, but also its relationship to cinematic movement and duration; specifically, the fact that the moving image is created by a succession of discrete durational wholes so that, animation offers "a lingering look at an *extended* arrest of movement."[51] Furthermore, the puppets are so flat, so flimsy, and their movements so awkward that they appear as shadows severed from their bodies, running amok, possibly, as Robert Storr suggests, to further underline their status as product of a hysterical white imagination spooked by its own shadow, "by the shadow it conjured out of

the presence in its midst of what it mistook for its God-given antithesis."[52] Lest we forget these shadows' displaced connections to living bodies, in a now-expected twist these ghostlike creatures reclaim their carnality and ejaculate toward the viewer and against the screen. The thickness and life of the flesh that Walker's figures initially appeared to have fully abstracted return as bodily fluid traveling through space, connecting, once again, not only the space of the work with the space of the viewer, but the (wet) skin with the (wet) screen.

The fact that, throughout Walker's work, blackness is the meeting point between the screen and the skin suggests that the structural asymmetry between the inside and outside of the body in the last instance reflects the structural asymmetry of race in the field of vision. Background and foreground, positive and negative, mass and space, inside and outside, fullness and void, presence and absence: Kara Walker's work makes the relationship between these poles depend on the interaction between blackness and whiteness as conditions of legibility of images. Yet, unequal ones. Blackness, in fact, is always susceptible of being a signifier of surface as well as of depth — the surface of some-*body* and yet also the marker of a void. By highlighting the phenotype as a screen of projection and reflection, Walker identifies the epidermality of race as a hermeneutics of the surface that predates and supports those developed in the late nineteenth century. If, as Storr asks, "in the Eurocentric tradition blackness has historically been the shadow that whiteness casts, what is the shadow of blackness? . . . a black hole at the core of Western culture?"[53] Or, as David Marriott phrases it: "what is it that haunts: the phenomenal resemblance to an uncanny unlikeness, or the sudden dissemblance in the reflected image, as if one's own specular image had become ghosted in return?"[54] Ultimately, the Long Photographic Century that Kara Walker's silhouettes unfold pivots around the black body as the visual object *par excellence*, where the shadow meets its substance — the black body as the ontological ground of the visual, as the stand-in for a continuing photochemical imagination.

TOUCHING BLACKNESS. AGAIN.

The question of presence — what are we in the presence of? What counts as present? What do we see when we see blackness and what do we touch when we see it? — is crucial to Hank Willis Thomas's work as well,

and it characterizes one of the ways in which the NAACP photograph and *Branded Head* can be seen to bookmark the Long Photographic Century, the former from a photochemical standpoint and the latter from a digital one. Yet, they also question the tenability of the idea of a digital divide, given that in both images race makes "photography" perform as the money of the real. In both images race both triggers and mediates an economy of exchange that institutes several equivalent signifiers: it is because of the overwhelmingly racist nature of the practice of lynching that we connect the hanging shadow to an African American body; it is because of slavery's practice of branding the slaves that we can see the Nike "swoosh" in competition with the epidermal signifier of race as another inscription of a visual order onto the body. Thus, these two images prompt larger questions as well: if one of the forms the digital divide has taken is the idea of the severing of the photochemical ties with the profilmic object, then how does blackness fare when it moves across it? What happens to the racial index in digital environments? Or, to bring these questions to bear upon the specific object I want to discuss, what is the ontological thickness of *Branded Head*'s digital scar? The hypothesis I want to pursue is that this digital scar shares some of the social ontology that characterizes race as well, and a materiality that is socially produced and culturally read.[55]

Branded Head (figure 3.11) stands in relation to the NAACP photograph like *Scarred Chest* (figure 3.10) stands in relation to the *Scourged Back* (figure 3.12).

All four images offer a map of the Long Photographic Century by raising a "what-if" question — that is, by introducing the possibility, even though not the actuality, of a counterfactual. In all four it is the visual and ontological instability of what is overlaid on top of the image that raises this question. What if the lynching shadow was projected by a body that is in fact just off-frame, in the same diegetic space as the crowd? What if the Nike "swoosh" was actually tattooed/marked/branded onto the model's flesh? What if the whipping marks were on the surface of the image rather than the surface of the body? All these scenarios share a heightened sense of tactility of the image but also confound the expectation or the confidence in our ability to unequivocally locate race. Through layers that have an uncertain and undecided ontological status, they manage to figure the in-betweenness of race.[56]

The haptic properties of these images are crucial for the argument they make. Because black skin already renders the visible by providing a paradigmatic relationship between visuality and embodiment, the sight of blackness

is both pretext and guarantee for a certain effect and affect of corporeality.[57] If, as suggested in my discussion of *Camera Lucida*, blackness works as a hinge between seeing and touching, there is a chance that, at least in these works, blackness might function also as a hinge between a photochemical and a digital imagination. When the image passes through the digital, it "exudes a fantasy of immateriality," whereas the photochemical state is nurtured by the fantasy of the trace. In turn, as mentioned in chapter 1, "what makes it possible to leave traces and to read them is the material continuity, physicality and sensuousness of the world."[58] That is, our feelings about this materiality determine whether the visual, as Laura Marks suggests, acts or not as a connecting tissue.[59] My sense is that Hank Willis Thomas's work builds a site for an encounter between the photochemical and the digital over the body of the black.[60]

Because of the way we ultimately tether it to the body, race proves Brian Massumi's claim that the analog retains experiential priority over the digital, that the analog is always "*a fold ahead*."[61] Race is in the inter-face, and the in-betweenness we recognize *as* a *face* is always analog. The line we draw between the photochemical and the digital is in part the effect of the different haptic engagements triggered by these images. *Branded Head* and even more *Scarred Chest* exist in dialogue with the *Scourged Back*. Yet, compared to that image they raise troubling questions about their materiality. Where is, and what counts as, flesh? And how is it "branded"? The very concept of branding presupposes an embodied support for the brand. Thus, these digital inscriptions lend materiality to the body on which they are applied, which comparatively function as their photochemical support — the more *fleshed out* of the two image states. At the same time, we have to admit this is true only on the plane of face value, a plane that Hank Willis Thomas's work embraces as its critically strategic location. As already discussed, Willis Thomas's works are deliberately constructed to pass as advertisements: they inhabit advertisements' locations — they have been exhibited on billboards, at bus stops, and so on — and they look like it. At the same time, they pass through advertising in the sense that they seemingly occupy, at least momentarily, its same ontological plane. As they do so, regardless of their mode of production, they exist in a state of resemblance, which, as Foucault's reading of Magritte reminds us, is the product of socioculturally constructed grids of discourses and practices.

Alternatively, if we focus on the skin of the image, we can read Willis

Thomas's digital layering as an incision, a material and poetic cut that divides the visual field, disrupting the surface integrity of the black body as black.[62] These works could then be regarded as a critique of a certain photochemical imagination — the way in which photography has supposedly recorded, but also provided substance and currency, to the seeming self-evidence of race. So, on the one hand, the visual integrity of the black body is squarely located within — in fact, it has historically facilitated — a photochemical imagination: the fantasy of the continuous sensuousness of the world just like skin pigmentation is supposedly in continuity with a person's genetic makeup. Yet, on the other hand, Willis Thomas's digital layering calls attention to how the body's surface is constantly formed and redrawn in social interactions. It does not preexist them; rather, it is haptically constituted with each encounter. The digital does not allow any secure surface, at least not in the way in which the black body presents it.

Put bluntly, the black body authorizes the photographic image to act as the surrogate of touch. Here, then, the black body does not so much act as an object of photographic representation, but rather as a stand-in for a lingering photochemical imagination across the digital divide, as a resilient repository of a definite, Intractable, system of signification and a quasi-carnal affective link with the reality that it photographically connects. It thus acts as the phantasmatic locus where the photographic becomes flesh, where it breathes and bleeds. Ultimately, *Branded Head*'s digital scar is fleshed out because it sits on top of a black body, the body that has ultimately fleshed out and stabilized the image state of photography itself.

It would be tempting to claim that the digitality of Willis Thomas's layering expresses race as a social construct — or, even more radically, if we follow Baucom's argument, as the visual epistemology and the visual culture of the current hyperfinancial phase of capitalism — as a speculation. Within this perspective, the photochemical would most strongly express the carnality of race, insofar as the affects associated with it — at least those discussed in Barthes's *Camera Lucida* — depend on the idea of a material continuum connecting the photograph to its object and its viewer. The digital, on the other hand, would be the image state that represents capital's logic of computation. As attractive as this reading might be, I suggest instead that it is the interaction between the digital and the photochemical imaginations that carries the value of the ontological/epistemological argument Willis Thomas undertakes. Consider how Willis Thomas's *Absolut* (figure 4.9)
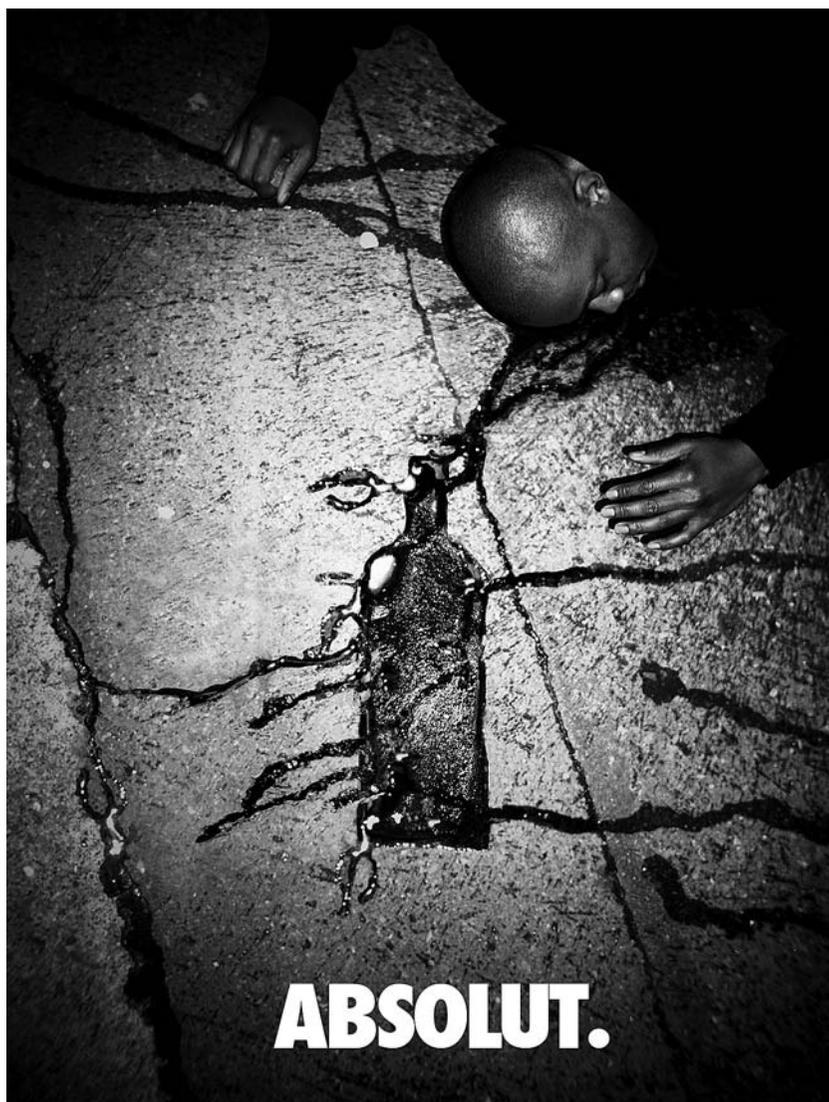
FIGURE 4.9. Hank Willis Thomas, *Absolut Reality*, 2007. LightJet Print, 66 ¾ × 51 in., framed. HWT07.044.001. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

mobilizes the digital in order to insert an icon of consumer culture in the body of the image.

Rendered as an organic entity — the man's blood having temporarily and accidentally outlined a consumer icon — the vodka bottle detaches the photographic surface from the visual field behind it. Wet and bloody, the texture of the photograph inoculates the bottle within the Intractable grain of the forensic image, thus offering a counter-scene to Willis Thomas's UNBRANDED series where, instead, the black body was inoculated within the color palette of capitalist realism. Here, the sign of capitalist realism is made to bleed and is therefore weighted down to a much thicker ontological plane — that of the corporeality of race and death. What oozes out of this body is what in *Branded Head* was conspicuously sitting on top. In this image Willis Thomas folds the photographic field onto the outside like a shirt cuff, effectively relocating the black body within: now the photograph possesses a permeable and traversable surface that, like an X-ray image, turns the object and the vantage point of the viewer inside out. The photograph no longer has a clear surface, an obvious skin. Our gaze has no clear stopping point. We are forced to see the inside, the outside, the skin, the blood, and the consumer icon together at all times.

Like Barthes, Willis Thomas too treats photography as an embodied space of habitation: it is a space of confinement for the black body, to be sure, when photography flattens its surface against the body's epidermis redoubling its branding function. But, by rendering the photographic as a field instead of a surface, an affect instead of a sign function, he allows that same body to cut through and reverse the racialized mapping of the visual field. The black body in Willis Thomas's work, enfolded and unfolded so, no longer delivers under the pretense of an umbilical cord the carnal connection that grounds the truth value of images; instead, it provides a socially material connecting tissue for the social bond that we establish and renew with each and every image. The digital brand, scar, and growth, is the reflexive site where we discover that what we are haptically drawn toward is not a natural but rather a socially material object. An object — the black body as black — which both renders and fleshes out the expectations, fears and desires of a continuing photochemical imagination.