



PROJECT MUSE®

On the Sleeve of the Visual

Alessandra Raengo

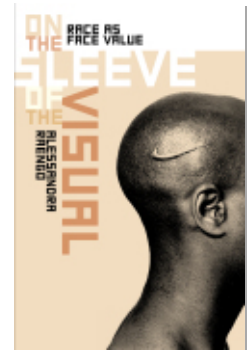
Published by Dartmouth College Press

Raengo, Alessandra.

On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value.

Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2013.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/22955>

CONCLUSION IN THE SHADOW

I began this book by evoking Toni Morrison's image of the fishbowl and W. J. T. Mitchell's recent argument that race is a medium, which seems to finally bring to the mainstream of visual culture studies the mandate that Morrison launched so long ago. Yet, this book has offered a way to reach another question that lies underneath the ability for race to act as a medium; namely, the idea that race has perfected a theory of the ontology of the image with which we still wrestle. It is hard to let go of certain images due to the comfort they bring with their fullness and the trustworthiness they inspire with their seemingly incontrovertible indexicality. The photochemically fixated black body is one such image, both cause and product of a visual fold whereby truth, value, and meaning can be secured by, and be read on, the surface. Because of this fold, the black body has and continues to fuel a photochemical imagination that lingers even in our prevalently digital environment.

Put more bluntly, *seen through race*, the affects surrounding the photochemical imagination, which in recent film and new media theory have coalesced again around the question of indexicality, suggest that under the umbrella of semiotics, broadly conceived, two confluences might have occurred. First, a confluence of phenomenology with ontology; that is, the confusion of an experience of visible blackness with an image ontology that understands it as a perfectly intelligible and trustworthy sign. Second, a confluence of hermeneutics with ontology, that is, a type of reading of the surface as always securing a path toward its inside, its value, its meaning, which then becomes the template for what images are understood to be.

I have addressed this by attending to a series of objects (a series of “pipes”) tucked in the depth of the visual field. These objects have challenged their status by pivoting on themselves, returning the gaze, cutting a figure. They have done so in a variety of ways — through deferral, by excision, magnification, germination; by overlaying; by repeating with a difference; by instituting a wedge between identity and the identical; by scrambling and reconfiguring the relationship between surface and depth; by forcing a gap and inhabiting the space in between the surface and depth; and ultimately by nourishing the gap between visible and visual. As much as the blackness of the black body is the result of a fixation and an outward fold, the objects discussed manage to interrupt the racial fold and reverse its direction and, in the process, turn the visual field inside out.

Thus, the ontological question I posed and I believe race continues to pose but, because of these slippages, has not yet been frankly addressed, is not one about the ontology of blackness, in the way, for instance Fred Moten tackles it in “The Case of Blackness,” or David Marriott discusses it in *Haunted Life*.¹ My discussion has not been about the possibility, in Fanon’s eloquent formulation, for the black man to have an ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.² Rather, the ontological issue focused on in these pages is about blackness in the field of vision and the suturing between the visible and the visual, the seeable and the sayable that the black body is capable of performing, the anxieties the black body is able to assuage about what images are and what they refer to, where they might lead or land, and the intelligible surface that it is seemingly able to secure.

But what, then, is a racial image?

Commonsensibly, we understand racial images to be those that deliver a racial content, ultimately, a body. When the body is secured, “racial images”

perform an ontologizing function: they are understood to be as accurate as mirror reflections and yet as tethered, contiguous, and, therefore, trustworthy as shadows. Thus racial images are those that can be trusted at face value. The complication, though, is that the mirror is the mode through which the white, Western subject encounters the Other, as a mirror image, but one that reflects back something that is skewed, frightening, opaque, and thus needs to be disavowed. As Marriott's reading of Fanon shows, the face-to-face encounter between the black and the white produces blackness as a specter. The native too, Fanon explains, encounters her own other as a mirror, but quickly realizes that what is reflected back is neither here nor there; the black *imago* exists only in-between, like a ghost show, a phantasmagoria. Throughout this book, I pursued the possibility of a way out of the "black representational space," as suggested in the introduction, whereby this moment of phantasmagoric visibility can be productively mobilized to turn these visual relations inside out, and blackness can be unhinged from the body and the image, but still claim its "ontological resistance."

Toni Morrison explains the delicate balance that needs to be reached. Her reading of canonical American literature is not concerned with racial representations but with the "tremors" that pervade the literary utterance in the attempt to sometimes accommodate, and sometimes deny, the Africanist presence. She writes: "In matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate . . . To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a *shadowless* participation in the dominant cultural body."³ Morrison's image is poignant: to ignore the formative role of race in literary whiteness is like robbing the black body of its shadow. The shadow here operates as a figure for the ontological resistance of blackness that needs to be sought, as well as makes available yet another reading of the NAACP photograph which literalizes this move by overlaying a shadow on top of the crowd.

The ontological complexity of the lynching shadow in the NAACP photograph has guided my readings throughout. Its formal properties inspired my attempt to read race formally and to look for ways in which it articulates the visual by both corporealizing and monetizing it. They have illustrated how race has given both a fleshed-out presence and a readable surface to the visual. They have shown how the visual has wrapped itself around a specific

type of body and claimed it as its point of stability and its paradigmatic sign. Yet, whereas in the photochemical imagination, blackness seems to sit on top of an image, just like Antonio Beato's fly, posing as the image's corporeal interface and ontological augmentation, seen instead from the shadow, blackness appears as cast onto a contingent environment, onto a surface it helps to create, but it can just as easily redraw and dissipate.

The very story of this photograph registers several passages of the image. This photograph has never existed for me as an item of material culture. Rather, I casually encountered it in the NAACP files at the Library of Congress in the form of a microfilm, which I printed out and then scanned at home so that I could store it and eventually project it on a classroom screen. The poor quality of all these reproductions encouraged a formal reading of the image and slowly showed that the reverse fold of the shadow is not only the mirror, but also the silhouette where the shadow's existential contingency and ephemerality is undone. Rather than tethered and formally unstable, the silhouette is detachable, portable, yet fixed and reified. Furthermore, this poor quality heightened counterfactual elements of this image, the "what-if" that animates it; that is, the possibility that the shadow might indeed be coming from its diegetic space. In encouraging visual ambiguity, this shadow increased the possibility of working as an unstable and flickering image, one that, like Ligon's *Self-Portrait*, makes its viewer aware that seeing is always seeing *as*. The counterfactual this image potentially raises, furthermore, is one that extends across the digital divide. Even though the process of overlaying this shadow occurs by photochemical means, the very fact that it is a doctored image gestures ahead toward sentiments associated with the artefactuality of the digital image and the anxiety about its truth value that the question of indexicality is supposed to address.

As discussed in chapter 1, its artefactuality has a bearing on the evidentiary value of this image but, as I addressed in relation to Willis Thomas's *Branded Head*, it does not significantly impact its haptic properties. The impulse to flesh out the shadow remains, but, once it is so explicitly racialized, the implications are profound and complicated: When a black body fleshes out an image, the latter acquires an "excess flesh," which the NAACP shadow instead evacuates and excises.⁴ The superimposed shadow phantasmagorizes the body, so that it is neither here nor there.

Once I received the high-resolution file, which was acquired to reproduce in this book, the picture showed other dimensions. Not only the formal fact

that the shadow doesn't even fully overlay across the photograph, a sure giveaway sign of the fact that it is indeed superimposed, but I discovered people in it, rather than a blurry and anonymous crowd, a textural counterpoint to the smoothness of the shadow's blackness. Now I can see through this picture into the diegetic world it makes available. I can see the faces, and in what direction they are looking. The image is haunted even more. The chasm between the visual and the social field that the lynching scene opens so dramatically is accentuated here by the doctored nature of this image. This could be any crowd, not necessarily the crowd of a spectacle lynching, yet the clarity of the image now makes the visibility of at least some of the people a factual possibility. Yet, if the body doesn't come from the diegetic space, where does it come from? How to describe the space of its superimposition? Is this shadow in the space of the crowd or the space of the viewer or, alternatively, on the sleeve of the image?

As a paradigm, the shadow has the ability to bring to the fore the idea that race most prominently inhabits the *state* and not the content of the image. Seen as a mirror, the racial image is epistemologically oriented — it is a tool for knowing — and, therefore, it is understood representationally. Seen as a shadow, it is racially agnostic and representationally weak, but it always implies attachment, proximity, and contingency. The shadow is an indication of the body's extension into its surroundings and, therefore, calls attention to the spaces and modes of interaction between bodies. It is a figuration of the body's skin, understood not as the racially charged epidermis, but rather phenomenologically as a flexible, porous, and constantly redefined boundary between self and other, impression and expression, inside and outside. Thus, it is a reminder that the boundaries of bodies are never securely given, but are instead always negotiated in the interactions they entertain with other bodies. Even though indexical, the shadow is more a shifter than a trace, more a deferral than a referral, more of an affect than a sign function. More broadly, the shadow affords a spectral ontology and can be leveraged to think about states of the image that are precarious, fleeting, tethered, and oblique. The shadow recognizes that in front of images we seek ways to stabilize them, semiotically, rhetorically, ontologically, and ethically. The shadow realizes our fixation with fixation, but, for its part, it refuses to comply.