In June 2010, the New York Times published a feature provocatively titled, “The War is Fake, the Clothing Real,” about David Tabbert, a fashion-conscious costumer for a company that clothes play-acting Afghan or Iraqi insurgents and civilians in war games staged for the United States armed forces.1 “Though Mr. Tabbert, 28, personally prefers G-star denim and concert tees, he was on the hunt for 150 dishdashas, the ankle-length garments worn by men in Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world. In July, actors will wear them in a simulated Iraqi village, posing as townspeople, clerics and insurgents at a National Guard training ground in the Midwest.” Of his initial hesitation to accept the job, Tabbert notes that while he was not pro-war, “I looked at what we were doing as a positive way to train the soldiers, in light of the fact that they are being deployed anyway.” In educating his eye to create usable profiles, Tabbert studies images on the Internet — “to determine, for example, the exact embroidery on the epaulet of an opposition leader’s military uniform” — and trains others to do the same, thereby teaching soldiers to distinguish between “bad” and “good” Afghans or Iraqis (or et cetera) by their cover.2

Making the criminal or terrorist visible, and educating the eye on how to see and otherwise interpret the signs of his lawlessness — which is also his availability for detaining, and killing — is central to modern state powers of surveillance, reconnaissance, and prediction. In differentiating from the background a possible criminal, or a probable terrorist, the surfaces of the body bear the weight of instruction. Predicting a correspondence between the visible aspects of such surfaces, including tattoos, features, and clothes, and the unseen propensity for criminality in any individual, the profile also divides that which it surveys into actionable categories. Or, as Tabbert says, “It’s teaching the people how to not kill people,” with the unspoken corollary of teaching them also how to kill the right people, whom we might (supposedly, reasonably) suspect from their surfaces.3

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1 Sarah Maslin Nir, “The War is Fake, the Clothing Real,” The New York Times (June 23, 2010).
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
Million Hoodie March in New York after the death of Trayvon Martin (March 21, 2012) / Photograph by Tyco
What cover then do clothes provide? Because clothes are both contiguous and not with what they cover — skin, flesh — clothing is a mutable boundary that asserts itself within a field of matter, forcing us to confront the intimacy between bodies and things, and the interface between their amalgam and the environment. In considering these dense interactions, I suggest these three presuppositions. First, clothes are often understood through an indexical relationship to the body who wears them, functioning as clues to their existence in the world. This is the premise of the sartorial profile in the war game or the criminal study, which depends upon the stability of surfaces for its visual reconnaissance. Second, for this reason clothes might provide an alibi for a racial, colonial optics as a surrogate for flesh, where flesh is the overdetermination of metaphysical substance — as the unseen truth of criminality, alienability, or deviancy. Such enlightened discrimination is based on calculations that hinge on the substitution — such as culture, which is often (as war-game training supposes) captured in clothes. But because clothes often act (or are accused of acting) as camouflage or costume to enable false perceptions, including the merging of surfaces into the background, in order not to be seen, clothes also heighten anxieties about epistemic surety. Lastly, then, do we really know what we know in seeing?

Locating the apprehension of alienability on clothes does not constitute any sort of departure from racial, colonial optics that target the body as a continuous surface of legible information about capacity and pathology. Profiles that include such surfaces as clothes (as well as tattoos or hair, in the profiling of gangs, and their cover, in the banning of niqab) teach us how to see race both with and without skin as an anchor. Consider the criminalization of sagging pants (especially worn by young black men) in the United States, and some forms of hijab (on Muslim women) in Canada or France, as a public contagion. Because these are liberal states that proclaim themselves champions of equality and freedom, clothes rather than the bodies that they cover are named as those suspicious things that trouble lawful persons who “merely” wish to see and secure something with certainty. For example, while a 2010 French law bans “the concealment of the face in public,” rather than directly prohibiting the wearing of the niqab, the law allows leeway for motorcyclists, fencers, skiers, and carnival-goers, among other non-Muslim exceptions. But President Nicolas Sarkozy himself argued that the law is specific to Muslim veiling, with the presumption that veiling is religious coercion and therefore a rights violation. He and supporters therefore claimed the law is necessary to French secularism. So too did clothes become suspect in Arizona’s draconian immigration law, SB1070, which made it a state misdemeanor to lack immigration documents (and more, to fail to carry such paperwork at all times), compelling police officers to have to determine immigration status via the highly suspect route of “reasonable suspicion.” Discussing this 2010 leg-
islation, California State Representative Brian Bilbray appeared on a cable news show to defray the accusations of racism with claims that “trained professionals,” presumably criminal profilers and other experts in scientific methods of observation and evaluation, would be able to identify “illegals” by their clothes: “They will look at the kind of dress you wear, there is different type of attire, there is different type of — right down to the shoes, right down to the clothes.” In the language of right down to the shoes, right down to the clothes, some essence of illegality and alienability is found on these surfaces as depths.

Through the abstraction of contiguous surfaces, blurring the distinction between surplus and ontology, surface and essence, the sartorial profile teaches us to project onto racial, colonial others the so-called truth of criminality, deviancy, or lawlessness. In doing so, clothes not only dramatize the materiality of bodies, but also demonstrate that such materiality is itself animated by racial histories of abstraction. That is to say, the story of skin is not depth but more surface. Constructs of race teach us how to see, as Frantz Fanon observed so well, naming flesh an “epidermal schema” presumed to yield usable knowledge about humanness and its others through a series of abstractions shaping subjectivization from substance. The liberal disavowal of racism as the foundation for the rule of law thus proliferates such abstractions as alibis — the abstractions that script skin as visible or material evidence of ontological truth transfer to other matter, including clothing, as indices for criminality, or terrorism. If constructs of race and racism, as Ann Laura Stoler argues, do “not necessarily rest on immovable parts but [...] a changing constellation of features and changing weighing of them,” then the strength of racial discourses is in their mobility and mutability, their slide from one surface to another.

But the promise to capture a stable presence in the profile is treacherous, not least because some surfaces are changeable, unreliable. There is no telling whether the signs encoded in an epaulet in the war game, or the blue bandana in the gang profile, correspond to the body it covers. The subject of instruction is classification, but its shadow is camouflage. Camouflage names those strategic practices of blending in such that the one’s presence is untraceable, invisible, or indistinguishable. Clothes are essential to such deceptions in which a body willingly effaces itself to an environment. The irony of the French ban is that the niqab does not offer self-concealment at

4 Brian Bilbray on MSNBC (April 21, 2010).
5 For more on race as a modernist surface, see Anne Anlin Cheng, Second Skin: Joséphine Baker and the Modern Surface, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
all; with the number of Muslim women who cover their faces hovering
less than a hundredth of a percent of the population, to be so cov-
ered in public is to stand out and draw attention. Consider instead
that famous scene in Gillo Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers (1966),
in which women guerillas cast off their hijab and conceal themselves
in “European” clothes in order to walk the crowded city streets un-
noticed, to plant their bombs. Artist and theorist Hito Steyerl in her
video HOW NOT TO BE SEEN: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV
(2013) also instructs the viewer in an adaptive logic of surface in an
age of security. In one sequence, second-skin green suits (perhaps
most familiar from behind the scenes of CGI-heavy films) enable
bodies to move past the surveillance cameras found everywhere in
public as no-bodies, no-spaces, registering only the shimmer of their
displaced absence in tree-lined suburban malls and desert photo
calibration targets for drone warfare. Such cover as clothes might
provide confounds because it transforms the available surfaces for
reading, extending and transforming the body’s boundaries into the
world, rendering that body both more dangerous and more vulner-
able, depending on their movements. But even as fabric extends a
fleshy body’s boundaries into the world, that body also emerges and
disappears, materializes as a threat and dissipates into shadow.

Some clothes then, perceived to aid invisibility and anonymity (cov-
ering the face, eluding the eye), become h ypervisible as objects of
suspicion in and of themselves, contingent upon environment and
proximity to other objects, which can include the bodies that such
clothes cover. These contingencies are as Sara Ahmed writes, “an
effect of how objects gather to clear a ground, how objects are ar-
ranged to create a background.” Consider the New York City subway
announcement that “suspicious backpacks and large containers are
subject to search,” as if suspiciousness were a property of the ob-
ject, though these objects only become suspicious when contiguous
with some bodies and not others. The gathering of some objects in
a supposedly chance cluster — the large backpack, the black youth,
which is no chance at all — thus justifies suspicion to then create a
ground for surveillance and policing.

The figuration of the hoodie as a suspicious thing, as another ex-
ample, demonstrates some of the operations of power that deem
some bodies criminally, ontologically other and available for violence.
In the 2012 murder of seventeen year-old Trayvon Martin by vigilante
George Zimmerman, the hoodie Martin wore became a material wit-
ness. Zimmerman claimed that his suspicions were aroused by the
“dark hoodie,” pulled up against the rain but more to the point, ac-
ccording to the armed vigilante, against respectability, and therefore
against rule of law. Racial subjectivization thus emerges through this

8 Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others, Durham: Duke
University Press, 2006, 87.
interaction between flesh and fabric. Imbued with animative power, Martin’s hoodie not only lends to him the resemblance of criminal behavior and deviant being (because it obscures recognition) but also propels his body physically, expressively, into another realm of possible activity. Implicit in this reading is the suspicion the black body is without the self-possession to “just” wear the hoodie. The hoodie instead wears him, wields the power to transform him into another, the thug. Thus did execrable television personality Geraldo Rivera appear on the Fox cable station morning show Fox & Friends to argue that parents should denounce the hoodie as a bad influence: “I am urging the parents of black and Latino youngsters particularly to not let their children go out wearing hoodies. I think the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin’s death as George Zimmerman was.” In this ontological confusion between subject and object, between disclosure and deception, the hoodie scripts some part of the performance of racial optics and its claims to legitimate violence.

Clothes are not merely ornamental; when we subtract them from the surface, we do not otherwise uncover the truth. After Martin’s murder, proliferating commentaries worried at the hoodie’s nature (is it innocent or dangerous, ineffective or utilitarian, soft or hard?), sometimes to dismiss the hoodie as evidence at all. To insist (as many do, understandably) on seeing Martin’s unadorned body, black and murdered, is to insist upon a return to a deeper condition beneath a numbing, noisy distraction that impedes our perception of the stability of the real. But the process of attending to the body — unhooded, unveiled, unclothed — cannot be the solution to racisms, because that body is always already an abstraction, an effect of law and its violence. In profiling surfaces, especially where flesh and fabric are brought together close enough as to be imperceptible, we do not arrive at the truth of an interior. We find instead on such surfaces the optics through which someone is targeted as alienable from others, and the lethal structures that disappear them — unwillingly, devastatingly — from our sight.

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10 Some parts of this essay are elaborated upon in Mimi Thi Nguyen, “The Hoodie as Sign, Screen, Expectation, and Force,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, forthcoming Summer 2015.