Coco Fusco

RACIAL TIME, RACIAL MARKS, RACIAL METAPHORS

Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological "race" ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before.

—Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 1992[1]

Race in the making of the American self

The photographic image plays a central role in American culture. Americans are avid producers and consumers of photographs and as our culture shifts from being predominantly print based to image based, we grow increasingly reliant on photographs for information about histories and realities that we do not experience directly. But we also create and use photography to see ourselves. By looking at pictures we imagine that we can know who we are and who we were. Though the fashioning of one's self-image may be most frequently associated with family snapshots or portraits, the endeavor to see, and thus to know oneself is also a public, communal activity. Photography offers the promise of apprehending who we are, not only as private individuals but also as members of social and cultural groups, as public citizens, as Americans. No other means of representing human likeness has been used more systematically to describe and formulate American identity than photography. Envisioning and exhibiting the American self has been a photographic venture since the inception of the medium. It is an ongoing social, cultural, and political project.

For most of our country's history, one of the most forceful means of circumscribing American identity has been race. From the establishment of the United States until the 1960s, access to American citizenship and to the full exercise of civil rights was restricted on the basis of race. As noted by historian Manning Marable, American national identity "was largely defined by 'whiteness': racial categories of privilege that rationalized and justified the domination and exploitation of 'others' who are nonEuropean, poor, and/or female."[2] He goes

1. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 63.
2. Manning Marable, "The Problematics of Ethnic Studies," *Black Renaissance* 3, no. 19 (Fall 2000): 10.

Gordon Parks, *L.A. Courtroom, Malcolm X displaying picture of Muslim Ronald Stokes, killed by police a year earlier*, 1963. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 3/8 in. (27.9 x 36.4 cm). International Center of Photography, purchased by the ICP Acquisitions Committee, 2003.

on to explain "whiteness was literally codified as part of the Constitution, particularly in Article I, Section 2, which defined enslaved African Americans for the purposes of taxation and representation as the equivalent of three-fifths of a human being."[3] Once slavery was abolished, segregation, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1896, remained in place until 1954; only after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act were blacks guaranteed enfranchisement in all fifty states.

Beginning in the 1830s, Native Americans were forcibly relocated to reservations, thus facilitating the opening of the Western territories to white settlement. They were subsequently enjoined by the 1887 Dawes Severalty Act to adopt an individualistic and capitalist concept of property, and subjected to several decades of assimilationist re-education projects that were designed to sever their connection to their respective languages, religions, and other traditional customs. A byproduct of this process of uprooting and deculturation was the development of a pan-Indian racial consciousness, which led to the formation of the American Indian Movement in the 1960s. Until the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act, the indigenous peoples of the United States could only obtain citizenship through marriage to a white male or military service, and until 1948 several states continued to bar them from voting. To this day, federally recognized tribal affiliation is determined by equating identity with biological lineage.

Marable differentiates between blacks who were racialized through slavery and legally enforced segregation and Asian and Latin American immigrants who were racialized by means of laws and *de facto* segregation. After the U.S.–Mexican War of 1846–48, only Mexicans who were defined as Spanish or white could claim U.S. citizenship. The Chinese were subjected to restricted entry from 1870 until the 1940s, and those who did reside in the United States could not become citizens until 1943. Japanese immigration was restricted by Congress in 1907 and 1924, Asian Indian immigration was halted in 1917, and Filipino immigration was curtailed in 1934.[4] Only after the passage of the McCarran–Walter Act of 1952 were racial barriers to immigration removed, which finally made it possible for all Asians to become naturalized citizens. Still, it was not until 1965, when the quotas favoring Europeans were terminated, that racial distinctions were completely eliminated from U.S. immigration policy.

At one time, the limitations placed upon nonwhites and the concomitant privileging of whites did not represent an untenable contradiction of the idea of America as a democracy or even as a melting pot. Race was not understood as something that American law could reconstruct or abolish through the concept of political

3. Ibid., p. 11.
4. Ibid., p. 12.

equality—it was seen as a fact of nature. As the legendary *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision states regarding the right of states to enforce segregation in public spaces:

> *A statute which implies merely a legal distinction between the white and colored races—a distinction which is founded in the color of the two races and which must always exist so long as white men are distinguished from the other race by color—has no tendency to destroy the legal equality of the two races.... The object of the [Fourteenth Amendment] was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either.*[5]

During the first 150 years of U.S. history, race was considered a theoretically coherent system of human classification; from the

5. Justice Henry Billings Brown, "Majority Opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson*," in *Desegregation and the Supreme Court*, ed. Benjamin Munn Ziegler (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1958), pp. 50–51.

Garry Winogrand, *Central Park Zoo, New York City*, 1967. Gelatin silver print, 8 1/2 x 13 1/2 in. (21.6 x 32.5 cm). Courtesy of The Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tuscon.

mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, racial hierarchies were widely accepted as having a basis in science. Because of its purported technological objectivity as a recording device, photography during this period was marshaled to document the "fact" of racial difference. This was a particularly challenging task, considering that forced and consensual interracial unions in the segregated United States were generating a population with an ever-increasing variety of complexions and features even though the protection of white privileges demanded a clearly defined binary system of identification. The premise of this exhibition, however, is that rather than *recording* the existence of race, photography *produced* race as a visualizable fact.

I am making a point of referencing this history because it is not uncommon in the present to assume that in America, racial awareness is the result of self-segregation impulses among its ethnic minorities. This assumption notwithstanding, the historical record indicates that the organization of this country's population into racial categories has been a constituent element of American identity. The more difficult and controversial question is whether this is still the case, and if so, how are we to explain why. Politicians, media pundits, intellectuals, and activists debate these issues incessantly, and at times it seems as if their discussions are designed to defer rather than to engage in analysis. Over and over again, the same questions are posed. If equality has been achieved, then what does race mean? If race is still meaningful, does that mean that racism has not been eliminated?

The relationship between racism and racialized self perception is never a purely philosophical matter. Racism represents a social and political dilemma for the society that defines itself as democratic, so public acknowledgement and organization of the knowledge of race and racial imagery must be carefully managed. Ascribing racist character to any public cultural expression or image invokes the specter of deleterious economic effects—boycotts, protests, withdrawal of sponsorship, decline in value, and so forth. These effects are not qualitatively or quantitatively comparable to the long-term impact of racism indiscriminately directed at an entire group and sanctioned by law and custom. It is not uncommon for members of groups who are unaccustomed to being racialized in American terms—which includes both white Americans and newly arrived middle-class immigrants of all backgrounds—to equate freedom of expression with freedom from racial consciousness as a tactic of self-defense. The fear of the aforementioned potential economic effects informs the presumption that behind any discussion of race lurks an accusation of racism waiting to spring forth. Therefore one's interests are best protected by asserting

that culture no longer has anything to do with race unless it is obviously and univocally celebratory. And since art, or at least "good" art, should not be monological or instrumental, it should be thought of as being above such considerations. Contemporary public discussion of art abounds in variations on this theme, all of which fabricate an opposition between a concern with race and a concern with beauty. The arguments that develop out of this opposition are: art is about beauty, so art that is beautiful is not about race; photography defined as art is not about race; and artists who make beautiful images of themselves and others are not making pictures about race. Therefore, there is no need to discuss the relationships between race and representation in art photography. I hope to demonstrate in this exhibition why this opposition is spurious.

It is safe and easy to point to a past with a clearly demarcated racial hierarchy and grasp how it is connected with the propagandistic use of racial imagery. Much in the same way, it is no great feat to point to racist hate groups and understand how their rhetoric expresses their beliefs. In an age when racial discrimination against nonwhite legal residents of the United States has been made punishable by law and individual racist acts have been criminalized, it is more difficult to ascribe a single meaning or function to racial imagery, especially if it is not produced or used specifically for didactic purposes. Is the logical deduction that racial history can never drop out of the picture?

Unidentified photographer, *"Fun in black,"* ca. 1900. Albumen print stereograph, 4 1/8 x 7 1/8 in. (10.5 x 18.0 cm). UCR/California Museum of Photography, University of California, Riverside, Keystone-Mast Collection.

More than a few intellectuals in the past decade, recoiling in dismay at the entertainment industry's blatant commodification of ethnicity on the one hand, and the global rise of ethnic fundamentalism on the other, have gone on record as being "against race." But does it really make sense to claim that American culture has moved beyond race?

There is ample evidence that racial perception has not disappeared and racial imagery continues to proliferate, but there is no consensus as to the effect that historical legacy has on racial perception in the present. This is not only because racial obstacles to equality have been removed from our legal system—though that makes it much more difficult to measure the effect of race and the effect of racial imagery. As an individualistically oriented society with a market-driven economy and a thriving entertainment industry that reaches a global audience, the United States maintains a clear line in law and popular consciousness between public acts with measurable effects and the private world of image consumption and fantasy. Financial interests are served by keeping the politics of the consumption of racial imagery produced by the private sector away from public scrutiny, and finding recourse in the discourse of the individual rights of expression and privacy is the most unimpeachable rationale.

The efforts to dismiss racial analysis in the present, however, if viewed as part of a larger historical pattern, can be interpreted as a means of negotiating apprehensions about the decline of Western influence in the course of the twentieth century. According to sociologist Frank Füredi, these anxieties emerged during the transition from a dominant worldview prior to World War II that celebrated white superiority, to a formal acceptance of racial equality in the postwar period. In *The Silent War: Imperialism and the Changing Perception of Race*, Füredi describes how Western powers in the postwar era have been fearful of the potentially destabilizing consequences of racial conflict, and have thus developed defensive philosophies of race relations as preemptive strategies.[6] Those strategies have included: supporting knowledge production that pathologizes individuals and groups who espouse racial consciousness; promoting schools of thought that advance views of racism as universal and indistinguishable from one geopolitical context to another; circulating arguments that characterize racial conflict as irrational; and instituting cultural and educational policies that restrict redress of racial inequality to a celebratory expression of cultural difference. These approaches to race management inform most variants of multiculturalism *and* the conservative movements opposed to it.

America's relationship with its imaginary racial distinctions is not only a juridical and moral matter—in other words, it is not reducible to

6. Frank Füredi, *The Silent War: Imperialism and the Changing Perception of Race* (London: Pluto Press, 1998).

whether we treat people as equals or whether a given ascription is inherently racist. Regardless of whether we believe that race can tell us anything significant or "true" about people, we don't need to be forced to see it nor can we completely avoid it. Racial thinking is not experienced or enforced exclusively through repressive means. Photography has not only been deployed in the pursuit of scientific truths about race; it has played an absolutely fundamental role in the construction of racialized viewing as a positive, pleasurable, and desirable experience. Michel Foucault's notion of "the positive production of power" is crucial to this understanding: "What makes power accepted is that it traverses and produces things, induces pleasure, forms of knowledge."[7]

The knowledge of race operates, to use Foucault's terms, as a "productive network that runs through a social body." I am not alluding here to theories about the need to compensate for negative stereotyping with positive images of ethnic minorities, but to the ways that photography generates a distinct mise en scène and provides material that is visually reminiscent of but phenomenologically distinct from

7. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 119.

Peregrine F. Cooper, *As We Found Them*, 1864. Carte-de-visite, 3 3/8 x 2 1/4 in. (8.6 x 5.8 cm); *As They Are Now*, 1864. Carte-de-visite, 3 3/16 x 2 1/8 in. (8.1 x 5.4 cm). George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.

reality for voyeuristic engagement. The parameters of the pleasurable and the articulation of "beauty" in racial imagery were first established by and for a middle-class audience that was white. As Allan Sekula has said, "Perhaps more than any other single technical invention of the mid-nineteenth century, photography came to focus the confidence and fears of an ascendant industrial bourgeois...the contradictory role played by photography within the culture dominated by that class... combined a coldly rational scientism with a sentimental and often antirational pursuit of the beautiful."[8]

The representations of race in photography have never been restricted to denigration of racialized subjects; racial difference has also been seen as a spectacle and a commodity over the course of a century. Race has often been visualized in "high" and popular culture as a display of difference, as natural beauty and style, and as an eroticized encounter with alterity. Photography renders and delivers interracial encounters that might be dangerous, forbidden, or unattainable as safe and consumable experiences. Mass-marketed photography in the second half of the nineteenth century made racialized viewing into a form of entertainment. It created a domain for the imagination where fantasies did not have to remain within the boundaries of time, space, law, or decorum—but where pleasure was predicated on the awareness of limits and roles. In the scenes that have been staged in studios and exotic exteriors, cabarets and burlesque revues, theme parks and festivals, and now also in video games and cyberspace, racial difference has been dramatized as the interplay of irreconcilable extremes and ritualized as role play, yielding a fantasy world akin to what Jessica Benjamin described in her analysis of sadomasochistic eroticism as "the sensationalism of power and powerlessness."[9]

While social mores do affect what kind of racial imagery is considered marketable to mass audiences for public viewing, the possibilities of private production and consumption that were opened by photography enabled image makers to cater to a much wider range of racialized tastes and desires, and to foment and diversify demand by means of continuous exposure. The most obviously denigrating forms of racist caricature have long been targeted as evidence of visual culture as an agency of oppression, but the repertoire of racial imagery that Americans inherited from the nineteenth century is somewhat broader in style and scope and quite varied in emotional tone. A good deal of it erased the traces of racial or colonial domination altogether with picturesque tableaux that provided a site where the power to look and the pleasure derived from it appear to be detached from what Sarah Suleri calls "questions of colonial culpability."[10]

Fetishistic disavowal of race operates on more than one level in these photographic encounters. The scenes enable a psychic denial of

8. Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal*, no. 41 (Spring, 1981): 21. In this volume, pp. 79–109.
9. Jessica Benjamin, "Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), p. 296.
10. Fatimah Tobing-Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 90.

the violent roots of racial difference, and counter the destabilizing effect of difference-as-unpredictable through the repetition of visual tropes. The apparent beauty of nature and of the "others" who are integral to it masks the cultural and political act of constructing the racial other. The aestheticizing of nature and of preindustrial societies, and the exaltation of the racial other's beauty has the incredible effect of reversing the power dynamic between the viewer and the viewed in the real world: in the fantasy of the photographic encounter, the viewer is "overcome" by the beauty of the other. I have outlined the mechanics of this process because it continues to be relevant in the present as these dynamics are repeated in contemporary art and advertising.

The abstraction of artifacts and human elements from their contexts, the mythologizing of "vanishing natives" as "noble savages," and the romanticizing of the rural South and its "happy Negroes" were the racialized versions of early photography's sentimental and antirational pursuit of the beautiful. Long before simulation entered our theoretical lexicon as a defining characteristic of postmodern imaging, photographers and filmmakers routinely entered already-colonized spaces and rearranged them to concoct images of a "pure" and "primitive" world that did not exist. Edenic pastoral scenes with exquisite others untouched by modernity have been and continue to be staged routinely for vicarious and genuine tourists who symbolically transcend time and space in the act of looking at others. On the global art circuit, contemporary art photography, with its imposing scale, its exuberant colors, and its never-ending parade of exotic bodies, is better understood as an extension of this racialized discourse on beauty than as a negation of race.

The ethnographic trope of staging evolutionary time, however, was not the only means of establishing the distance that frames and structures the scenarios of racial fantasy. The foregrounding of artifice with ironic editorial text and parodic theatricality was also common, if not the norm. Not surprisingly, the photographs produced to entertain white audiences were more openly humorous than those that served as political or scientific propaganda, and photographers often used exaggeration and transgression to entice viewers. Postcards and stereoscopic photographs titillated them with intimations of sexual attraction between white women and black or Native American men; images of costumed microcephalics, masquerading as examples of "backward" races, were grotesque parodies of positivist reasoning. Though the color line was clearly drawn in public life, photography studios were veritable laboratories for the fabrication of multiple selves. Photographed performances of racial transvestism in which whites could express their repressed "inner primitives" and nonwhites were dressed as wild savages, or demonstrated their abilities to "perform

whiteness" were popular. These pictures from the past suggest that many peoples' views of race were not simplistic or literal-minded, in spite of the belief that only recently have Americans become more ironic and risqué in our attitudes toward race. These scenarios still inform photographic representation in art and entertainment in the present.

In American society today, race is *both* a volatile political agenda and a multimillion-dollar-culture industry. I offer just a few examples to highlight its prevalence in the immediate present. Even as the legitimacy of racial profiling has been restored by the threat of terrorism, affirmative action is in jeopardy and likely to be abolished when the University of Michigan case reaches the Supreme court this year. In the brief period that I have been working on this essay, Senate majority leader Trent Lott stepped down after the public outcry at his nostalgia for segregation, and nine hundred Middle Eastern men were arrested and detained when they voluntarily reported visa irregularities to immigration authorities in California. The reversal of the conviction of three black and two Latino youths in the 1989 Central Park rape case, as a result of the introduction of DNA evidence that linked another man to the crime, detonated yet another vituperative public debate about whether the American criminal justice system is prone to racial prejudice.

Meanwhile, Americans consume an astounding amount and variety of racial imagery and fantasy in music, literature, film, television, pornography, tourism, advertising, fashion, and beauty products. Sensationalized racial conflicts that accentuate racial polarities and enforce stereotypes are just as popular grist for the media mill as the prospect of eliminating, accentuating, or transforming racial characteristics through miracle treatments and morphing machines. The recently released Michael Moore documentary *Bowling for Columbine* features an interview with a producer of the television series *Cops*, who confesses that despite his liberal politics, he continuously features police officers chasing black men on his program because shows about white-collar crime are far less attractive to television audiences. Miscegenation as a means of neutralizing racial conflict through sexual domination still yields solid box office returns: Halle Berry won an Oscar in 2002 for playing a southern black woman who falls in love with the white prison guard who executed her black husband. Wayne Wang's new film *Maid in Manhattan* features a love affair between a Puerto Rican chambermaid, played by Jennifer Lopez, and a blueblood politician who discovers that a Bronx-bred Latina can be sexy and "Mediterranean-looking" when seen in a five-star hotel wearing pilfered Dolce & Gabbana. Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven*, set in 1958,

leaves a love-starved white suburban housewife longing for her black gardener, but unable to have him.

The act of visualizing and looking at racial difference continues to seduce and enthrall American viewers, whether or not the racial discourse is objective, and whether or not all Americans even agree on the existence of racism. The sheer volume of racial imagery that has been and continues to be produced for private consumption, public education and entertainment, erotic stimulation, and aesthetic appreciation signals that America's attraction to race exceeds the boundaries of a discussion of institutional racism. In that sense, it is possible and indeed probable that we like to *see* race even if we don't consider ourselves racist. Some would hold that consuming racial imagery proves one's love for the other or is a substitute for engagement with the social and political realities of race relations. Others argue that the inclusion of images of nonwhite people in mainstream media and art indicates that racism is over and race is no longer salient. Serious discussion of the meaning of our desire to *see* race in visual representation is impeded by the difficulties we have in distinguishing between racialization as a visual process, and racism as an ethical and political dilemma.

Unidentified photographer, *Portrait of Young Kru Woman from Village Near Monrovia with Body Paint and in Costume*, 1893. Postcard, 6 x 4 in. (15.2 x 10.2 cm). National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Insititution, Washington D.C.
Walery Studio, *Josephine Baker*, 1926. Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm). Private collection.

The racial exhibition in context

Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self began as a National Endowment for the Arts Millennium project, an initiative launched at the end of the Clinton Administration that was designed to showcase the quality and richness of American art and culture and thus, tacitly endorse the Endowment's role in its production. I was specifically asked to address the issue of race in America. I wanted to avoid several predictable responses to this request, and in particular I did not consider advocating the now-popular position that art and scholarship should move beyond race. If I embraced the argument that contemporary image-makers have moved on to a postracial and post-identitarian mode of representation, I would have been unable to assess the ways that race persists in American visual culture and social life. I did not want to visualize diversity as a taxonomic display of recognizably distinct and attractive ethnic faces, which is the convention that now dominates corporate advertising. Nor did I want to recast it as the geographic dispersal of universal art forms, which is the underlying premise of most global art shows and biennials.

I also did not wish to repeat the compensatory gesture of showcasing the self-imaging of minority groups as authentic, superior, or more self-reflective than what is generally identified as colonialist photography. The flip side of this method would be the modernist tactic of singling out works based on purely aesthetic criteria. The presumption that museums are able to effectively dismantle the history of institutional racism by attributing "master" status to a handful of nonwhite photographers based on the "discovery" of quality in their work implies that the economic and cultural power of art institutions to designate value should replace a critical analysis of Western forms of racial thought and how those forms are manifest in our culture.

Each one of these presentational strategies has yielded interesting and edifying exhibitions, broadened our understanding of photography, and helped many artists' careers. Because of the origin of this project in a government-sponsored initiative that was specifically aimed at conveying ideas about our *national* culture, I felt it necessary to pay close attention to the political implications of each method. I am not trying to suggest that exhibitions that manifest the abovementioned curatorial strategies should never be organized. However, they share an approach to multiculturalism that can be summed up as what Ann duCille calls "additive campaigns" that "augment but do not necessarily alter the Eurocentric status quo."[11] As such, they can all be understood as attempts at race management and containment that circumvent analysis of racial logic as a visual system that is distinguishable from the status of race as a indicator of some "truth" about identity.

11. Ann duCille, "Black Barbie and the Deep Play of Difference," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 336.

Because of the expectation that an exhibition about race is nothing more than a show about racism and how artists have endorsed or debunked it, I have tried to outline how that presumption is informed by our history and to explain why I have sought a different approach in developing this project. I hope this approach can move the discussion of photography's complicated relationship with identity, race, and nation around the critical impasse resulting from a focus on stereotyping of and discrimination against nonwhite people.

In an effort to work against the grain, I have tried to broaden the discussion of racial representation in American photography in many ways. The geographic area identified as America is here extended to include territories and protectorates to suggest that our political influence beyond national boundaries has also contributed to our changing views of race. The exhibition also includes many explorations of how whiteness is configured in photography and how it may even be expressed through nonfigurative means as the exercise of power over others through their very distinction. By this I mean, for example, that the representation of whiteness includes how it functions as a normative standard against which the physical and moral characteristics of nonwhite people are measured and how it operates as a force in the physical world separate from white bodies. To stress that race is a system of representation rather than an indicator of truths about any group of people, I have not divided the work in the exhibition according to the ethnicities of the subjects or their makers. The photographs are not displayed by genre or arranged in chronological order to emphasize how visual strategies resurface and are reformulated at different historical moments and how they cut across a range of photographic styles.

The images in the exhibition are grouped into five thematic categories that are organized in binary terms. "Looking Up/Looking Down" comprises images that endorse or subvert the objectivity of racial hierarchies. "All for One/One for All" examines the distinction between the embodiment of an ideal American, and specific ethnic types. "Humanized/Fetishized" contrasts images that emphasize a subject's individuality with those that objectify and dehumanize. "Assimilate/Impersonate" compares images of nonwhites attempting to "look or act white" with those of whites assuming the characteristics of nonwhites. And finally, "Progress/Regress" explores how racial imagery is tied to ideas about America's future and past.

The categories were devised to stress how photographic techniques communicate ideas about what race means through a recognizable set of visual symbols. In other words, *Only Skin Deep* explores the manifold strategies embedded in photographic discourses that make

race visible, intelligible, and attractive. The exhibition is an inquiry into *racial imagery* rather than racism, and it features works that evoke popularly held ideas about race regardless of the intent of the photographers who took them. The logic and meaning of that imagery is too complicated to be explained by determining whether the photographer, his or her subject, or the viewer is consciously for or against racism. America's relationship with race, I would contend, is fraught with ambivalence; with *Only Skin Deep* I have tried to chart the traces of that irresoluteness.

Only Skin Deep is an investigation of how racial imagery in photography of many kinds has shaped understanding of what Americanness is and who Americans are. It is a historical survey and a multidisciplinary investigation. This exhibition also proposes ways of reading photographs and understanding the complicated relationships between images and the social realities they convey. The technological visualization of any identity involves—and often blurs—two key functions we regularly impute to photography: to record preexisting material realities and to visualize our fantasies of what reality could or should look like. Because race is an imaginary construct that is also a social fact with political ramifications, the act of making it visible entails generating believable fictions and demonstrating the effect of their credibility. This exhibition looks at the interplay of these functions.

Racial imagery as mythical speech

I began my research with the theoretical concept of Roland Barthes's notion of mythical speech, a kind of expression whose meaning relies on a preexistent set of signs, or images, and the concepts they convey. According to Barthes, mythical speech is defined by its intent more than its literal sense. When we recognize myth in a picture, we intuit that it is about more than the sum total of its elements. The intent thus appears naturalized. In "Myth Today," his landmark essay from 1957, Barthes relied on an image of a black male in order to explain how photographs function as mythical speech.[12] His principal example was a cover from the magazine *Paris Match* that featured a youthful black soldier in a French uniform saluting the French flag. Barthes's point was that the image made the political and historical effects of French imperialism seem harmless, even logically necessary.

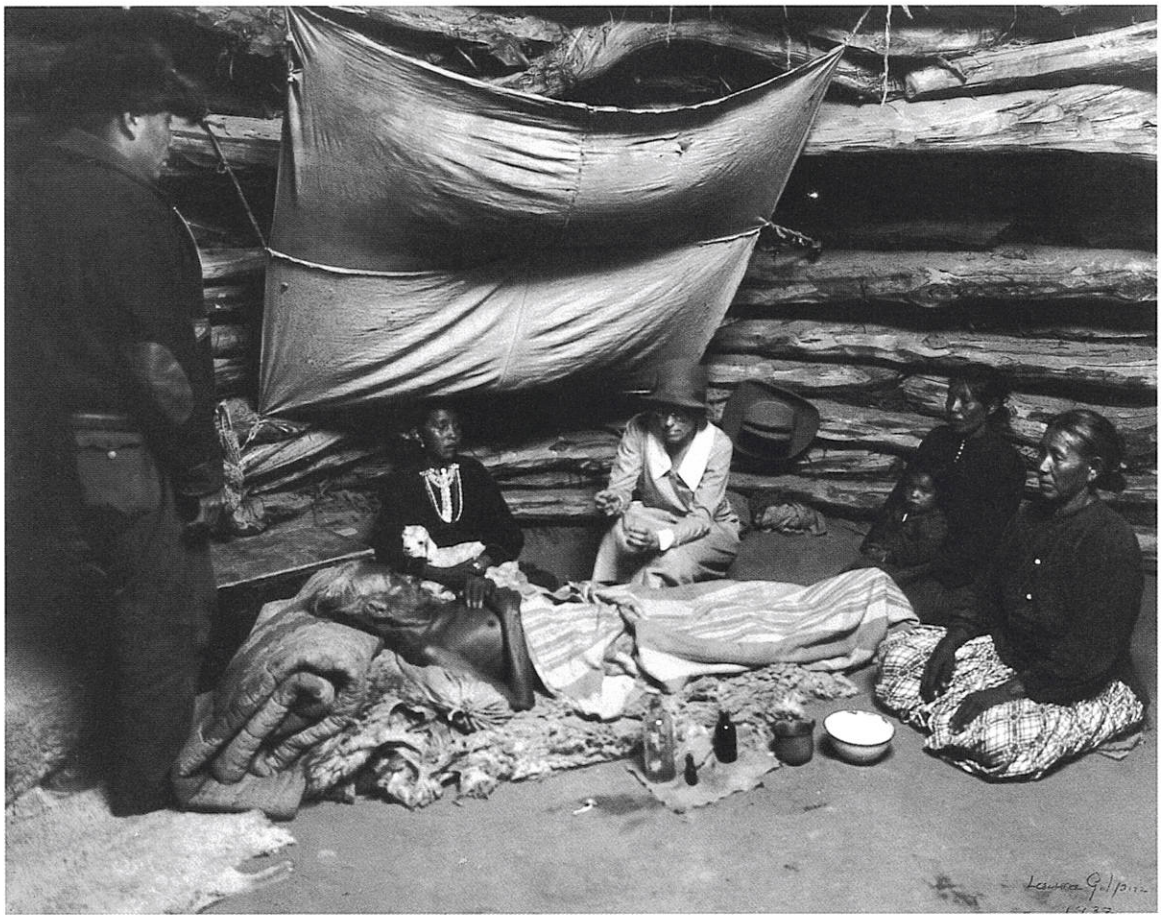
Though he does not state it directly, Barthes relied on a Fanonian understanding of the soldier's blackness as a threat of difference: the image of a black man in a French uniform cast doubt on the general assumption that to be French meant to be white. Colonial subjects who were not white had to demonstrate their assimilation into Frenchness through the enactment of subservience and patriotism.

12. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, trans. and comp. Annette Lavers (New York, Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 109–59.

The anticolonialist struggles of blacks, Arabs, and Asians in the 1950s struck at the legitimacy of French imperialism. But the representation of a black French soldier on the cover of a popular magazine in effect nullified their radical position. The black soldier's salute affirms both the justness of his colonial status and the validity of the French Empire. His blackness is visible, but its threat is neutralized.

We could apply this method of reading images to Laura Gilpin's photograph from 1932, *Hardbelly's Hogan*. In it, an elderly Navajo man lies on the earthen floor of a traditional Navajo abode. He is surrounded by three native women, one with a child in her lap, who sit with hands lowered and gaze somewhat blankly into space. A younger native male stands by the old man's head, looking down at a bespectacled white woman crouched by the side of the supine figure. She holds a small receptacle in her hand as she leans forward as if to offer it to him. Her gesture to the prostrate man before her, together with the three small chemical bottles and two tin bowls in the foreground, suggest that she is a nurse. A ray of light falls on her, accentuating the difference in her dress and further distinguishing her as the active agent in the scene. This intercultural configuration of figures can easily be read as a story about the power and superiority of Western science poised to sustain a race whose own life energy appears on the wane. The white nurse, perhaps at the behest of the presiding young adult male, arrives at the hogan to save the sickly Navajo patriarch with a dose of medicine that she has concocted on site, while the ineffectual family witnesses the act and learns a necessary lesson.

Significantly, illness is shown as the cause of the trouble in the hogan. The white presence in the Navajo home takes the form of a maternal savior, an "angel of mercy" responding to their call. The violent conquest and colonization of native land, culture, and people are not in the foreground, or even in the background here: Hardbelly's problem is biological. The relation between two cultures is epitomized by the benevolent administration of knowledge that the Navajo man must absorb to stave off his own death. The photograph was made during a transitional period in American history after the closing of the American frontier. Treaties between the federal government and native peoples required that the United States provide them with housing, education, and medical services, on the one hand, while prevailing notions of white superiority underlay the official policy of cultural termination via assimilation. The social context of U.S. Indian policy informs this intercultural scenario and proffers a set of assumptions about race and science, the photographed family, and by extension, the Navajo and other indigenous peoples of the Southwest: namely, that after the conquest of the American West traditional knowledge



would no longer be known or considered effective, and the indigenous would have to depend on white civilization and scientific knowledge for survival.

Anthropologist James Faris notes that the photograph, though usually classified and presented as "documentary," was to an extent composed by Gilpin, who was following her companion on a visit to the family, and is known to have removed European objects from hogans in order to reinforce their purely tribal aesthetic. The scene, he explains, either demanded that the subjects hold their poses for an extended period, or is likely to have required artificial light.[13] One way or another, the claims published in a 1986 museum catalogue on Gilpin, that it was lit by "sunlight filtering through the overhead smoke hole," and that the Navajo women accepted the photographer and were "sitting peacefully," are questionable, if not a direct attempt to downplay the violence of colonization and obfuscate any ethical questions about Gilpin's approach to photographing the Navajo.

13. James C. Faris, *Navajo and Photography* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), pp. 241 and 246.

Laura Gilpin, *Hardbelly's Hogan, Arizona*, 1932. Gelatin silver print, 9 1/2 x 13 1/2 in. (24 x 32.4 cm). Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, bequest of the artist.

When it works effectively, then, mythical speech makes a particular view of history seem like nature. If we analyze the intent of the myth, we discredit its content as a simple fact of life. If we argue that an image was created to make something arbitrary seem necessary, we undercut the possibility of seeing it as "just a picture." For example, what is it about the black man and white woman holding baby monkeys in Garry Winogrand's *Central Park Zoo* (1967) that makes them notable? Do they only draw attention because they appear to be an interracial couple or because the primates in their arms evoke common fantasies about the dangers of miscegenation? Or why would George Trager's photograph of Big Foot lying dead in the snow after the 1891 battle at Wounded Knee continue to be reproduced as a postcard decades later (as were images of the dead Pancho Villa) and circulated among people who had no direct relationship to the scene?

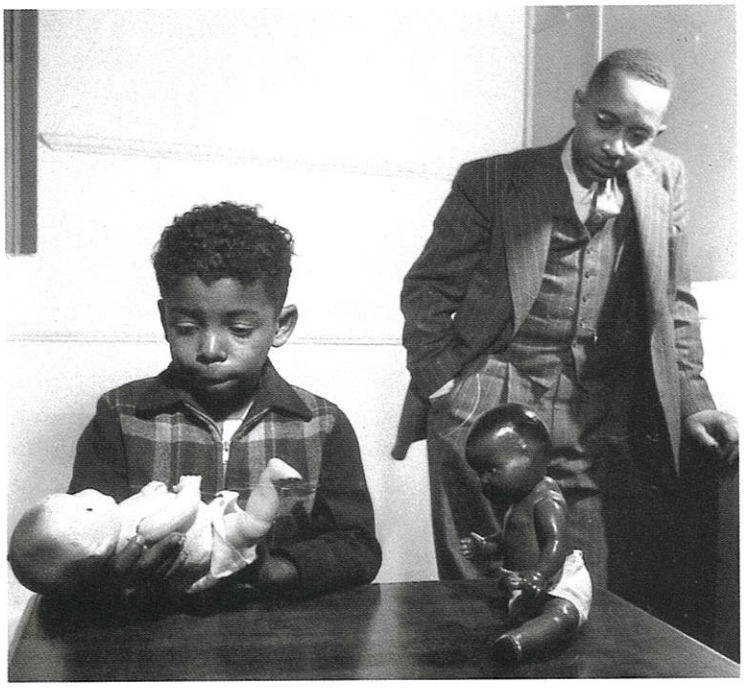
Some would say that this approach imposes a purpose on a photograph, making it an instrument. But even an ambiguous or polysemous photograph exists in a visual field and a collective imagination together with other images and real things. That nexus affected the choices that lead to the making of the image in the first place, and our understanding of it shapes our experience of the image and enables us to interpret it. Why, for example, did Richard Avedon title one of photographs in his American West series *Unidentified Migrant Worker* when his other subjects are named? Why is this man, who seems to be Mexican, bare-shirted and dripping wet when he was standing inside under hot lights? Are we to see him as a degraded version of an ethnic type, a "wetback?" Why has the imprimatur of the auteur foreclosed these questions when a similar image in another context would raise eyebrows? Some artists intentionally play with the potential for mythical resonance, while others may do so more inadvertently. Some approaches are overtly didactic, others more ludic, or oblique. The dialogue with the world outside the frame, what is at times described as a photograph's intertextuality, can be made manifest through the incorporation and quotation of documentary elements, historical allusions, and recycled icons, forms, and compositions. My point is that the dialogue exists, even if certain methods of generic classification, interpretation, and appraisal of photography sidestep or suppress it.

To expand upon this idea, let us look at one of Paul Pfeiffer's digital images from 1998, in which a closeup of a flattened doll's head covered with blonde hair fills the frame. The size of the follicles and the tone and texture of the skin constitute telltale signs of the scalp's artificiality. So does the monochromatic blondness of the hair whose waves appear here to parody painterly brushstrokes. Those synthetic locks caricature the formalist experiments with organic forms of such

early twentieth-century photographers as Edward Weston, denaturing the universalistic pretense of such modernist gestures. In an oddly deadpan manner, Pfeiffer points to clichéd notions of abstraction as the prime example of Americanness in art.

Pfeiffer's blond doll head simultaneously recalls Kenneth Clark's landmark study in the 1950s that demonstrated racism's impact on black children by their preference for white dolls. That study, poignantly documented by Gordon Parks, and referenced with melodramatic flair by Douglas Sirk in *Imitation of Life*, his classic tale of a mulatta's self-hatred, has sparked innumerable debates about how cultural artifacts affect children's self-images. In the decades since then, the toy industry has diversified the complexions of its most popular dolls to mollify its critics, but as Ann duCille points out in her essay "Black Barbie and the Deep Play of Difference," the effort to represent the heterogeneity of the world population stops at skin. "Mattel and other toymakers have got around the problem by making the other at once different and the same. In this sense, Mattel's play with mass-produced difference resembles the nation's uneasy play with a melting pot pluralism that both produces and denies difference."[14]

Artists from different backgrounds who explore the representation of whiteness have repeatedly touched on the ideological power of blond dolls. Todd Haynes used and defaced Barbie dolls to convey



Gordon Parks, *Dr. Kenneth B. Clark conducting the "Doll Test" with male child*, 1947. Modern gelatin silver print from original negative, 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.5 cm). Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

14. duCille, "Black Barbie," p. 337.

"LA YODO," OR JODING, WAS THE NAME I GAVE MY IMAGINARY FRIEND. SHE WAS FAIR AND LIGHT COMPLECTED.

SHE HAD A BROTHER WHO WE WATCHED PLAY IN THE SNOW WHEN WE HAD TO STAY INDOORS. HE WAS OLDER.

"LA YODO" WAS ALWAYS GETTING INTO TROUBLE, SO I WOULD TAKE HER BY THE EAR AS PUNISHMENT FOR HER ACTIONS.

THE OTHER DAY I CALLED MY MOTHER TO ASK IF "LA YODO" WAS EVER REAL.

"YES," SHE ANSWERED, "SHE LIVED A BLOCK AWAY FROM OUR HOUSE. HER NAME WAS HONEY.

AND SHE WAS A VERY SWEET LITTLE GIRL."

Karen Carpenter's status as a cultural icon and her obsession with attaining impossible body shape in his short film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*. The East Los Angeles multimedia art collective ASCO, whose members had participated in the 1968 Chicano student protests against racist public education, set white dolls on fire as performance in the 1970s. In Celia Alvarez Muñoz's "La Honey," the text contrasts her mother's and her own memories of a fair-haired figure from the artist's childhood; the photo series culminates with the image of the back of a white doll's head where the hair has been pulled out. Pfeiffer's rendering may not be figurative, but his selection of the blond doll head is not exclusively formal. Pfeiffer makes other key choices here that invite a reading of the work as racially inflected myth. The artist's use of scale—the work is seven feet by three feet—spatializes the symbolism of the work's title, *Leviathan*. Pfeiffer projects Jonas's biblical encounter with the great white whale onto the viewer by engulfing us with the image of blond hair. The title connects the artist's work to a plethora of other literary and philosophical references, among the most notable being Thomas Hobbes's treatment of the whale as a metaphor for the manmade state that circumscribes the individual.

Celia Alvarez Muñoz, *La Honey Nos. 1–6*, 1983. Mixed media (rock maple, gelatin silver print, letterpress text, seven boxes, each 12 x 17 x 14 in. (30.5 x 43.2 x 35.5 cm), images 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.5 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Whereas Barthes's black soldier saluted the flag while we watched, Pfeiffer places us in front of a mythical reference to the state in order to point to both its capacity to dwarf us, and its visible artifice. He offers us a commentary on whiteness as an all-encompassing construct. That flaxen-haired scalp, rendered abject by its being so obviously plastic, is nonetheless presented to us as the flayed hide of leviathan. And if leviathan is the whale, then we as American viewers are latter-day versions of Herman Melville's Ahab, so immersed in our pursuit of whiteness that we cannot see beyond the detail in front of our eyes. Pfeiffer twists that infamous seafarer into a child whose nemesis is a dismembered towheaded toy.

The evolution of "race"

Thus far, I have asserted that racial imagery is central to American culture and have given examples of how it can operate as mythic speech about the nation and its people. Nonetheless, I have not yet provided a genealogy of the term "race" and how its development affected its use as organizing concept in American society. After many years of teaching about race and visual culture and encountering students who have all experienced some form of racial awareness and fear, but regularly conflate race, ethnicity, and nationality when they write and speak, I have learned not to confuse unconscious racial behavior with the awareness of race as signification. To make sense of how and why race resonates in contemporary America, one must examine how its significance has evolved.

The existence of the term "race" actually precedes the formation of the United States. The word first entered the English language in 1508, and was then used to signify lineage. In the seventeenth century, the word was used by European natural historians to refer to all living species. Throughout the history of its usage, the idea of race has posed a philosophical dilemma for a Judeo-Christian world that posited all human beings as descendants of one source, Adam and Eve. If there was only one human race, several philosophers argued, how could the physical diversity of the world's peoples be explained?

At the very beginning of colonization of the Americas, the legitimacy of hierarchical racial relations was cast in religious terms, as is evidenced by theological debates of that period about whether native peoples had souls. The Bible contains passages about the punishment of Ham that were used to justify enslavement of blacks. Those hierarchies were reinforced visually by representations in which non-Europeans resembled animals and the mythical beings of medieval folklore other than humans. Even though indigenous American peoples would soon be determined to be human, the

vestiges of earlier attempts to represent them as another species of animal altogether would remain in Western visual culture, eventually resurfacing in the nineteenth-century imagery that likened blacks and the Irish, for example, to primates.

The political and economic pressures that propelled European colonialism and American expansionism also called for more arguments that would sustain the notion that people in fact were not all the same. By the early nineteenth century, the meaning of race had changed as scientists turned to zoology as a defining paradigm and began to rely on the concept of biological type. From this came the notion that the human species was actually divisible into a number of subspecies that had developed into distinct groups. Some theorists explained those distinctions as the result of geographic dispersal, while others saw them as the product of miscegenation. Still others adhered to the notion of polygenesis, which stipulated that each race was a distinct species. The latter school of thought became widely accepted in the United States in the decade before the Civil War.

Shortly thereafter, Charles Darwin's theories of evolution were added to the cauldron of pseudoscientific theories about human diversity, and they were construed to serve racist ends. The races were placed on a scale of evolutionary development that ranked whites at the top, blacks and Australian aboriginals at the bottom, and Asians, Arabs, and Amerindians in between. According to this interpretation, Caucasians had evolved more than other races. The allegedly less-developed races needed to be disciplined by the more developed ones in order to survive and be useful, and the most "primitive" groups would die out as a result of natural selection. Those whose job it was to capture the vanishing strains of humanity were racing, in theory, against the clock. The belief system that mapped the historical evolution of the human species onto a static topography of phrenological types, known as Social Darwinism, also equated racial superiority with technological accomplishment. This logic, however, generated a self-fulfilling prophecy, since controlling the nonwhite population's access to technology could be legitimized by using body type to determine intellectual or technological ability.[15]

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, proponents of the new social sciences of anthropology and sociology undertook the task of organizing a vast encyclopedia of humanity. The diversity of visual characteristics of human beings could be used as evidence of the reality of racial differentiation. Photography, with its apparent objectivity, seemed to be the perfect means of documenting the purportedly objective reality of the existence of distinct human types. Scientists, photographers, and the viewers of the photographs operated

15. Michael Adas, *Machines and the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

in a world in which phrenology and physiognomy were considered legitimate, and those disciplines demanded that material evidence could be extracted from the human body to explain invisible traits and human potential.

Scientific racism relied on linking physical traits with invisible group characteristics and remained a widely accepted view until the mid-twentieth century, when its use by the Nazis compelled the international scientific community to formally repudiate it. There were significant prior attempts to contest it, but the empirical evidence of its devastating effects in Europe sealed its demise and catalyzed subsequent political moves by European and American governments to undo legalized systems of racial domination. This epistemological shift did not take place by fiat nor did it lead to the negation of race as an operative category; instead race generates a sphere of public contestation, a terrain in which defensive management strategies are organized for and against every theory of what the term means. Visual culture, and photographic imagery in particular, is the key locus for the articulation of these battles.

The historical legacy of nineteenth-century ideas about race lives on in common language: we still speak of race as synonymous with differences based on pigmentation or human typologies, even though there is no scientific basis to support such usages. In the present there are still many efforts to resurrect this myth through supposed new evidence in social science and genetics. Digital-media artists entertain their audiences with spectacular displays of racial alteration and recombination. The speed of this technological operation reinforces the notion of race as pure visual phenomenon located on the surface of the human body, and appears to dislocate this epidermal logic from its origins in social relations of power. *Only Skin Deep* on the other hand, posits race as a historically rooted myth through which we read physical appearance, a conceptual crutch that we use to organize humanity into culturally meaningful groupings. By referring to race as a myth, however, I do not mean to suggest that the concept does not have ramifications in the real world. On the contrary, racialization of human beings, though not grounded in science, is a historical process with real effects, what leading racial theorist Howard Winant calls a social fact.

Winant notes that because race is now widely understood as socially constructed, many conservatives argue that it is an illusion and therefore without valence.[16] He argues forcefully for the need to challenge "the widely reported death of the category of race."[17] Indeed, it has become commonplace in the so-called postidentity era to suggest that any mention of race necessarily entraps one in an antiquated

16. Howard Winant, "The Theoretical Status of the Concept of Race," in *Theories of Race and Racism*, ed. Lee Back and John Solomos (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 181. In this volume, pp. 51–61.
17. Ibid., p. 182.

logic. The position that race is meaningless because it is illusory overlooks the fact that imaginary constructs can and do wield political and cultural power. As Winant writes, "the salience of a social construct can develop over half a millennium of diffusion... as a fundamental principle of social organization and identity formation."[18] Winant also warns against assuming that race and racial identity have always meant the same thing to everyone. That view does not account for their mutability, which is to say how ideas about race change, how group affinities shift, how roles are performed, and so on. He defines race as a concept that is adapted by its users; at the same time, because it is rooted in a logic that emerges from binary relationships of domination, its meaning is constrained by poles of difference.[19]

Framing whiteness

It is fairly clear that race as a measurement of inferiority could be deployed to legitimize colonization and slavery, and to defend segregation, xenophobia, and imperialist adventurism. Sociologist Michael Banton notes that theories of white superiority were most prevalent between 1890 and 1920, a period when European colonialism was at its zenith;[20] Jim Crow reigned in the American South, the U.S. government's genocidal campaign against Native Americans had been completed, and the Spanish-American War brought Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines under U.S. control. What is less obvious is how whiteness makes itself visible photographically, even when racial difference is

18. Ibid., p. 185.
19. Marable, "Problematics of Ethnic Studies," p. 10.
20. Michael Banton, Racial Theories (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p. 76.

Don Normark, *Lladro Madrid, home from WWII*, from the "Chavez Ravine, 1949" series, 1949/1997. Gelatin silver print, 14 3/8 x 11 in. (36.5 x 27.9 cm). International Center of Photography, purchased by the ICP Acquisitions Committee, 2003.
Jack Iwata, *Queen of Manzanar*, ca. 1943. Gelatin silver print, 9 1/2 x 7 3/4 in. (24.1 x 19.7 cm). Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles, gift of Jack and Peggy Iwata.

clearly delineated and legally enforced, as it was during that period. Many historical exhibitions have limited the issue of whiteness in photography to images of white ethnics—Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants who emigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and who underwent a process of Americanization that broadened the category of whiteness beyond its original Anglo-Saxon Protestant base. However, in his book *White*, British cultural theorist Richard Dyer explains that the centrality of whiteness in Western visual culture depends on Christian ideas about incarnation and embodiment, specifically the notion that white people are *more than* bodies.[21]

21. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), chap. 2, pp. 1–41. See also in this volume, pp. 301–311.

John Baldessari, *California Map Project*, 1969. Type R prints and typewritten sheet mounted on board; eleven prints, each 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm); text 8 1/2 x 11 in. (21.6 x 27.9 cm). Private collection.

Whereas systems of racial classification from the eighteenth century onward reduced people of color to the corporeal, whiteness was understood as a spirit that manifests itself in a dynamic relation to the physical world. Whiteness, then, does not need to be made visible to be present in an image; it can be expressed as the spirit of enterprise, as the power to organize the material world, and as an expansive relation to the environment. We might consider some of the photographs in the exhibition that mythologize the construction of the transcontinental railroad and the opening of the Panama Canal in relation to these concepts of whiteness. Michael Heizer's earthwork *Double Negative* and its aestheticized "opening" of southwestern lands as heroic gesture, and John Baldessari's *California Map Project* could also be reconsidered in light of Dyer's formulations. Similarly, Richard Misrach's photographs of the U.S. Navy bombing exercises in the Nevada Desert—territory considered sacred by the Northern Paiute—provides a chilling coda to the triumphal version of the history of American expansionism.

Dyer underscores the centrality of images of the conquest of the West and of the metaphor of borders to the formation of white American identity. Postcards such as William S. Prettyman's *The Race* (1907) helped to draw whites to areas being opened for settlement. The image shows scores of white men on horseback dashing across a field in Oklahoma, presumably carrying the markers they would use to stake out their own plot of land. Eugene Omar Goldbeck's 1926 panoramic view of a row of armed U.S. Immigration officers at the Texas–Mexico border merges notions of white authority with the right to territorial control of the United States. Don Bartletti's photo of the 1991 "Light Up The Border" campaign in Southern California with its motto "Control Immigration or Lose America," an expression of white backlash against the perceived threat of illegal immigration, shows how the expansive urge to take over land is now recast as a frantic plea to hold onto it.

Dyer also points out how crucial cowboys were to the construction of white masculinity. It bears emphasizing here that the dominant cultural representation of cowboys as white men supported by Indian scouts—the stuff of Hollywood Westerns—obscures the historical evidence of the widespread existence of black, Native American, and Mexican cowboys, and the Mexican origins of cowboy culture. Richard Prince's postmodern reframing of the cowboy icon in his "Marlboro Man" series leaves this aspect of history untouched. On the other hand, Isaac Julien's video *The Long Road to Mazatlan* underscores the intercultural dimensions of what is often conceived of as a quintessentially American cultural identity. Nonetheless, because whiteness is

distinguishable from embodiment, it is a somewhat mercurial category. Whiteness often requires otherness to become visible. In other words, white people look whiter when there are nonwhite people around them. Whiteness can also be articulated as the capacity to masquerade as a racial other without actually being one. Whiteness emerges most clearly when it can mold others into imitations of itself.

By the early twentieth century, it had become more expedient and socially productive for official propaganda to stress the legitimacy of reasoned rule, and to present white Americanness as a civilizing force. The notion of whiteness as an implicit normative code of appearance pervades the before-and-after photographs of black and Native American children "saved" by assimilationist boarding schools education. Photographs taken during the Puerto Rican Reconstruction campaign illustrated the view that the "backward" Puerto Rican peasantry lived in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions that could be remedied by proper instruction in modern American ways, including methods of personal hygiene that would enable them to work as servants in the United States. These performances of civilized, industrious, and patriotic behavior would become the basis for many contemporary artists' ironic commentaries on the psychosocial dynamics of inclusion. Tseng Kwong Chi's well known self-portraits in a Mao suit posing with American icons that range from the Twin Towers to Mickey Mouse, and Pedro Meyer's image of a man clinging to the face of the Statue of Liberty are but two of many examples of the playful and at times sardonic repositioning of national icons characteristic of a great deal of photography about cultural identity from the 1980s and 1990s.

Threats to national security have frequently led to the resurrection of racial profiling techniques. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, *Life* magazine published "How to Tell Japs from the Chinese"

Eugene Omar Goldbeck, *Immigration Border Patrol, Laredo, Texas, February 1926, M. M. Hanson, Inspector in Charge*, 1926. Gelatin silver print, 9 3/4 x 40 3/8 in. (24.7 x 102.5 cm). Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

with a comparative phrenological study to instruct the general public in how to distinguish the new enemy from other Asians. Although that particular magazine spread makes the Japanese man in it look deviant, the photographs of Japanese internees taken for the U.S. government make them look quite docile, industrious, and unencumbered by their detention—indeed, internment camp life was made to seem like a cross between a technical school and a military academy. During the 1950s and early 1960s, when the moral authority of the United States was impugned by the circulation of images of the segregated South and of white supremacist brutality, the United States retaliated in international magazines such as *Life en Español*, with displays of "exceptional" black talent from politicians and athletes to artists and musicians. Lee Friedlander's photographs of that period of jazz luminaries were published in *Art in America*. More recently, "new and improved" biometric imaging technologies that digitally recognize racial "types" are touted as a necessary means of protection from terrorism. At the same time, government-funded publicity campaigns featuring Muslims who enjoy freedom and prosperity in the United States circulate at home and abroad.

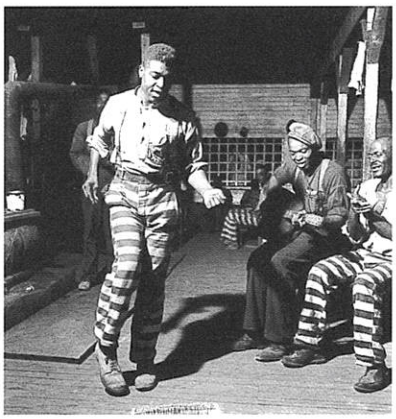
During the period when dominant political forces endorsed racial hierarchies by means of photographic illustration of "objective" principles, and a burgeoning entertainment industry capitalized on the spectacle of racial difference as a panorama of archetypal polarities and human oddities, antiracist efforts, quite logically, sought to visualize the immorality of racism with documentary "evidence" of its deleterious effects. Most of what is identified by American audiences in the post-Civil Rights era as "photography about race" is more precisely defined as documentary photography about racism. Scores of socially engaged documentarians throughout the twentieth century have

Don Bartletti, *Border Opinions, San Ysidro, California. Protestors gather within sight of the US/Mexico border to demonstrate their opinions about immigration*, 1991. Digital chromogenic print, 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and the *Los Angeles Times*.

produced a vast archive of photographs that link inequality with injustice, and that foreground the merits of the racially oppressed with images that elegize their dignity and will to resist in the face of adversity.

The finest examples of this counter-hegemonic humanism are distinguishable from what Allan Sekula describes as the liberal humanism of the Cold War period epitomized by the photographs chosen by Edward Steichen for *The Family of Man*. The works I am interested in suggest an antiuniversalist politics of race and foreground the impact of racism on the raced individual. The most visually striking images render race relations as a poetic drama about political idealism in the subaltern population. I am thinking here of the poignancy of Roy DeCarava's teenaged black girl in a party gown who stands alone in a garbage strewn lot looking at a billboard advertisement for a Chevrolet sedan; the quiet defiance of Horace Poolaw's relative as she stands before a sign in a field that says "Stop State Law"; and the remarkable intimacy of Don Normark's view of a Mexican-American migrant worker who, four years after World War II, still wears his soldier cap as he prepares his breakfast. In works such as these, the visual contrasts are not about ritualized role play—they detail how subaltern people negotiate their subjection, not just in public confrontations but also in orchestrated private moments.

Postmodern critique of documentary realism has focused on the fallacy of the logic that asserts that positive images can refute negative ones. The premise of the critique is that photographs are representations, not unmediated documents of preexisting realities, and therefore positive images are no truer than negative ones—no picture can "tell it like it is." While I do not dispute that assertion, I would suggest that it has at times led to the problematic assumption that documentary realism is inherently nonreflexive. This hypothesis does not give sufficient consideration to how the subjects of a photograph, not just its maker, may self-consciously construct the "real." This is not so much a matter of whether, in the early days of photography, nonwhite people reinvented themselves in commissioned studio portraits, just as whites did. I am more concerned here with pointing out that counterhegemonic humanism entailed a self-conscious politics of realism. In the early twentieth century, Leigh Raiford notes, the NAACP appropriated the postcards taken for whites of lynchings and used them in their antilynching campaigns. They also sponsored "Beautiful Baby" contests and commissioned portraits of the winners for black magazines. Gordon Parks's 1963 photograph of Malcolm X holding up a photograph of a murdered black man suggests an awareness of the power of a carefully chosen iconic image to shape a discourse on reality, rather than an unquestioning faith in photographic indexicality.



Jack Delano, *In the convict camp in Greene County, Georgia*, 1941. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.5 cm). Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Racial politics and racial fantasies

In outlining some of the ways that photography has been used both to endorse and to denounce racism, I would not want to suggest that all racialized images can be understood as falling into this paradigm. The project of classifying humanity into a hierarchy was facilitated by the professionalization of the social sciences, which engendered a network for the production and circulation of knowledge about racial difference, and by the technological development of photography. But these material conditions, even when coupled with the demand for ideological justification of colonialism, enslavement, and segregation, are insufficient as explanations for why racial imagery was popular and desirable for the largely white public that has consumed it voraciously for more than a century. The attraction to racial fantasies should be distinguished from racism as a punitive politics of power, not because fantasy has nothing to do with reality but because it is not a mimetic reflection of it. Photography is a field where the psychic power of fantasy meets the power of the marketplace. The economic incentive to stimulate viewers who enjoyed visualization of racial difference has affected the ways that numerous photographers in America have represented all the peoples of this country, as well as their very choice to do so.

Not every photographer who produced racial imagery has done so exclusively—on the contrary, many well-known nineteenth and early-twentieth-century photographers did so only occasionally. Eadweard Muybridge's stereoscope photograph *Heathen Chinee*, for example, is the sole example of racial stereotyping in his work that I could find, and it is not clear that the title is his. Edward Steichen's photographs of Hawaiian hula dancer Tootsie Steer, taken on assignment for the Matson Cruise Line in 1941, are also quite different from the fashion photography for which he is known. Nonetheless, it appears that Steichen had a clear sense of how to stage his version of an untarnished "native," because Steer recalls that in addition to seeking out dramatic natural sites as backdrop, he instructed her to stop cutting her hair, to cut off her nails, and to stop using nail polish.[22] It seems safe to estimate that in these and many other cases, financial gain was a much stronger motive than fanatical Social Darwinism, or belief in the existence of the primitive. In the first decades of mass-marketed photography, consumers were largely European immigrants in urban areas who were learning to see themselves as white Americans and simultaneously to enjoy how technology brought the rest of the world into view. Photographing racial difference was a lucrative business, whether it involved ethnic types, frontier myths, or exotic paradises. The images blurred official "scientific" discourse with a parallel world

22. Jan C. Desmond, *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 192.

of exaggerated artifice as a sales strategy.

Numerous scholars have pointed out how crucial the photograph was to the nineteenth-century concept of the European and American self. Those studies often focus on how photography transformed portraiture, a painting genre that had originally served to legitimate the bourgeois self, into a mass-cultural venture that enabled the more humble members of Western societies to participate in the performance of individuation. The Euro-American middle classes not only used pictures of themselves to explain who they were, but also to know who they were different from. Mass-produced images of ethnographic types circulated far beyond the domain of science. The world beyond their immediate surroundings was coming into view through the act of looking at representations that objectified and miniaturized their referents; personal collections of these images of racial others as types symbolically linked the acquisition of racial knowledge with the possession of other people as things. Photographs of racial others put white viewers at the center of that world regardless of whether they appeared in the pictures or not.

When I have asked scholars and curators in the course of my research on this project to explain the popularity of early racial imagery, particularly ethnographic photographs, they have often commented on how these images offer a vicarious experience of power. In other words, while some people might have been drawn westward by the prospect of picturesque natives or may have accepted the validity of U.S. military adventures in the Caribbean and the Pacific, it is also likely that more viewers were enjoying the "views" as a conduit for the fantasy of omnipotence. Psychoanalytic theory posits that the voyeur's fantasies of omnipotence arise from the anxiety about being overwhelmed in an encounter with difference, and racial differentiation functions as a master narrative for dramatizing the making of the American self. Malek Alloula, in his study of the artificial construction of the harem in French colonial postcards of Algeria, argues that the political act of colonization was transferred to the visual register and transfigured as an erotic unveiling of the female colonial subject.[23] A similar argument could be made about the plethora of images of awkwardly posed, bare-breasted Southwestern indigenous women and Hawaiian hula dancers taken by studio photographers in America at the turn of the twentieth century. These are usually classified as ethnography by fastidious archivists who are completely cognizant of the irony in the captions. Mass participation in the blatant fetishizing of the Polynesian native was institutionalized by the Kodak Hula Show, which has been providing tourists with dancers to photograph

23. Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich, introduction Barbara Harlow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

since 1937. That today the "natives" are paid serves as evidence of the consent that is supposed to balance the power between tourists and the others.

The legal apparatus of American racism has been dismantled, but the photographic apparatus that produced race has not. In stating this I am not advocating the elimination of photography, but I do endorse its deconstruction, if for no other reason than that images are much too pervasive and powerful in American culture to be taken for granted, *especially* when they are pleasurable. That the management of racial representation is important to contemporary power structures is evident by how carefully the symphony of diversity is orchestrated. Global corporate advertising, regardless of what it is designed to sell, conveys the message that racial difference is attractive, comprehensible, and essentially nonantagonistic through endless displays of "rainbow coalitions" of happy workers, students, patients, athletes, and clients. Technological innovation is made to seem interchangeable with subaltern empowerment when photographs of Cesar Chavez and Gandhi appear in Apple's "Think Different" ad campaign, for example. In her analysis of Internet advertising, cultural theorist Lisa Nakamura notes that the spectacle of race acts as an antidote to the insecurities provoked by the real possibility of a technological world where differences break down. In this "globalizing Coca-Colonization of cyberspace," beautiful racialized others are used to sell a product by seducing viewers and simultaneously reminding them of who they are not.[24] Referring to a 1997 advertisement for MCI, she writes:

> *The ad gestures toward a democracy founded upon disembodiment and uncontaminated by physical difference, but it must also show a dizzying parade of difference in order to make its point. Diversity is displayed as the sign of that which the product will eradicate. Its erasure and elision can only be understood in terms of its presence; like the word race on the chalkboard, it can only be crossed out if it is written or displayed. This ad writes race and poses it as both a beautiful spectacle and a vexing question.*[25]

The visual landscape of today's mainstream media resembles a "multiplication table of living breathing faces," as Carl Sandburg referred to *The Family of Man* exhibition. Whereas that table evoked the idea that all the different peoples of the world were the members of the same kinds of families, the message these days is that all those different peoples serve the global economy. In his brilliant analysis of that exhibition, Allan Sekula explains how its "aestheticized job of

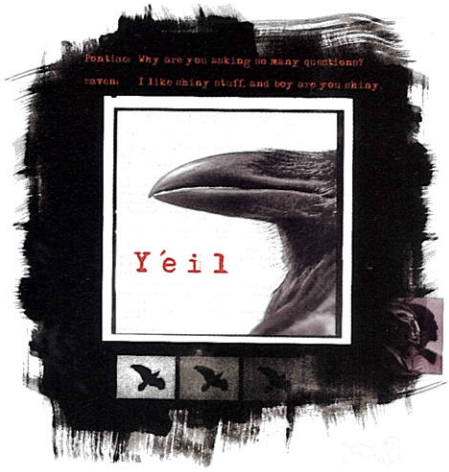
24. Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity and Identity on the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 99.
25. Ibid., p. 22.

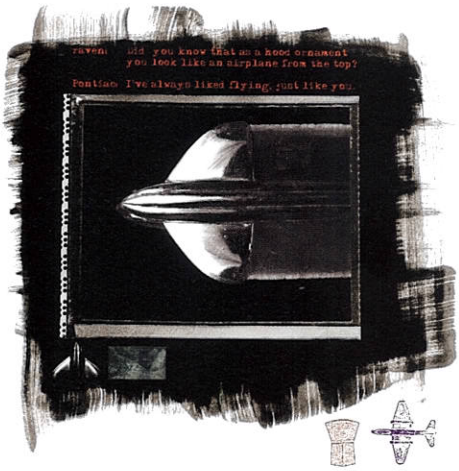
global accounting" was strategically designed to forge an ideological alignment between the United States and the third world at the height of the Cold War.[26] At present, the staggering economic polarization of the world population, the rising tide of xenophobia in wealthier nations, the emergence of ethnic fundamentalism in poor ones, and the pervasiveness of immigration and border "crises" suggest that the visual celebration of racial diversity just might be diverting our attention from other far less attractive racial scenes.

The question that still disrupts the photographic pleasure machine is: what does racial imagery, even when it is perceived as beautiful, communicate to us about the meaning of race in the present? If many visual tropes from earlier periods have retained their allure, is it because our society has not changed? Or is the recycling of racial paradigms a perverse form of nostalgia, the fixation of a few hardcore fetishists, something akin to fascist chic? Similar debates have taken place since the 1970s about sadomasochistic eroticism, or more precisely, about the relationship of staged scenarios of domination between partners to the actuality of sexual violence in real life. Most feminist arguments in favor of the idea that ritualized domination and submission are entirely distinct from real violence have been predicated on the informed consent of the participants and the fluidity of the roles. However, in her legendary essay "Fascinating Fascism," Susan Sontag argues for the need to scrutinize those rituals carefully when they adopt the trappings of a heinous political moment from the past. She exhorts those who defend the photographs and films that endorse fascist ideals on the basis of their "beauty," using the example of the rehabilitation in the 1970s of the work of Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. Instead of neutralizing the politics of fascism by treating it as purely aesthetic, Sontag advocates that we should ponder the motives underlying the renewed attraction to it on the part of those who are too young to have experienced it firsthand during the 1930s and 1940s. At the same time she recognizes that separate from the ideology, many would find some fascist ideals generally acceptable.[27]

In an increasingly individualistic and hyperrational society where religion and politics no longer offer possibilities of enjoying emotional fusion with collectives, rituals of domination offer respite from numbness. For Sontag, certain forms of eroticized fascism are controlled expressions of longing for temporary dissolution of the self. Those forms of sexual theater, she explains, are different from the self-consciously ironic "playing with cultural horror" of certain artists. Sontag's arguments here are apropos not only because fascism was a horrific example of how state-sanctioned racism could lead to mass genocide but also because she offers a cogent example of how one might reflect on the

26. Sekula, "Traffic in Photographs," p. 20. In this volume, pp. 79–109.
27. Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism" in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975).

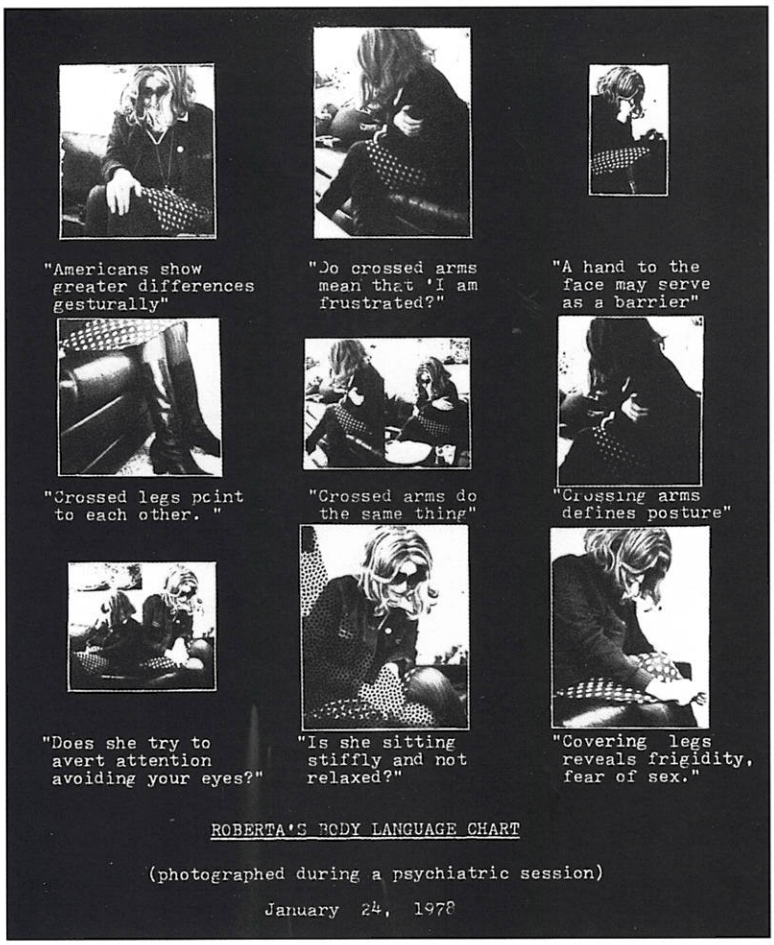




delicate relationships of erotic drives, political violence, theatricalized domination, and beauty to arrive at informed consent. Understanding the representation of race in photography and our sublimated erotic attraction to its various manifestations entails this very same process. Analysis of racial rhetoric in visual culture then does not lead to the complete erasure of the generic distinctions between art and propaganda, between functionalism and beauty; but it does involve critical reflection about the implications of how those lines are drawn.

The postcolonial investigation of the photographic archive by many artists of color that began in the 1970s and then flourished in the 1980s and 1990s ushered in a watershed period for the development of that informed consent and for the changing of roles regarding

Larry McNeil, *The Raven Series*, 1999. Digital chromogenic prints. Courtesy of the artist.



the construction and reception of racial imagery. The artists not only underscored the relevance of historical records and of marginalized nonwhite photographers of earlier generations, but also placed a new emphasis on the ways that bodies had been racialized by photographic discourses; on how ethnic imagery had been classified within cultural institutions; on how cultural institutions and the media perpetuated fictions about ethnic identities; and on how audience desires had been defined in racial terms. The 1970s Chicano experimental collective ASCO, for example, created film stills for a cinema they never produced. Called "No-Movies," these images about the absence of a "real" Chicano cinema were a conceptual statement about two factors that made Chicano cinema impossible to realize: the artists' poverty, and the exclusionary practices of the mainstream media. In *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock*, Pat Ward Williams's furiously scribbled questions around the edges of an enlarged magazine photo of a lynched black man literally

Lynn Hershman, *Roberta's Body Language Chart*, from the "Roberta Breitmore in Therapy Session" series, 1978. Eight gelatin silver prints with text, overall 60 x 40 in. (152.4 x 101.6 cm). Courtesy of Gallery Paule Anglim and Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco.

thrust the ethical dilemma of witnessing and reviewing racial violence into the process of reception. Glenn Ligon's *Notes on the Margins of the Black Book* masterfully foregrounds of the question of consent. This compendium of comments of the models who posed for Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, and of other viewers of those images is a multilayered act of reframing, not just of those portraits but also of the history of modernist photography's objectification of blackness. The conservative backlash against multiculturalism in the 1990s may have resulted in the tempering of more strident forms of questioning, but some resourceful artists have elaborated other less verbally driven means of addressing these issues. Daniel Martinez, for example, has turned his skin, neck, and tongue into unsettling sites of violent inscription that somaticize the social construct of race as an act of wounding. In *Self Portrait #4 (Second attempt to clone mental disorder or How one philosophizes with a hammer)*, he tilts his head toward the camera to draw attention to the stitched wound that runs across his forehead.

Extrapolating from the work of the Annales School historians who have tried to explain historical logic in terms of how material life was produced, sociologist Howard Winant suggests that we can understand Western time as a racial *longue durée*, "in which a slow inscription of phenotypical signification took place upon the human body, in and through conquest and enslavement, to be sure, but also as an enormous act of expression, of narration."[28] *Only Skin Deep* is about how photography acts as a site and agent for the enunciation of racial history. Race has a special relationship with photography, more than with other art forms. As the most pervasive technology of visualization, photography has served as the primary guarantor of race as a visual indicator of invisible differences. All forms of photography have been created and used to prove and disprove the validity of racial theories while shaping an image of the American nation and its citizenry. No one effort ever completely succeeds in fulfilling either task—instead, photography continuously repeats and reformulates this project. This is due in part to the fact that all the factors involved—America, its population, ideas about race and photography—have changed over the past one hundred and fifty years. But it is also indicative of how photography communicates the ambivalence of Americans toward race in its various formulations—our dependence on it as a frame of reference, our attraction to its logic, and our fears of its implications.

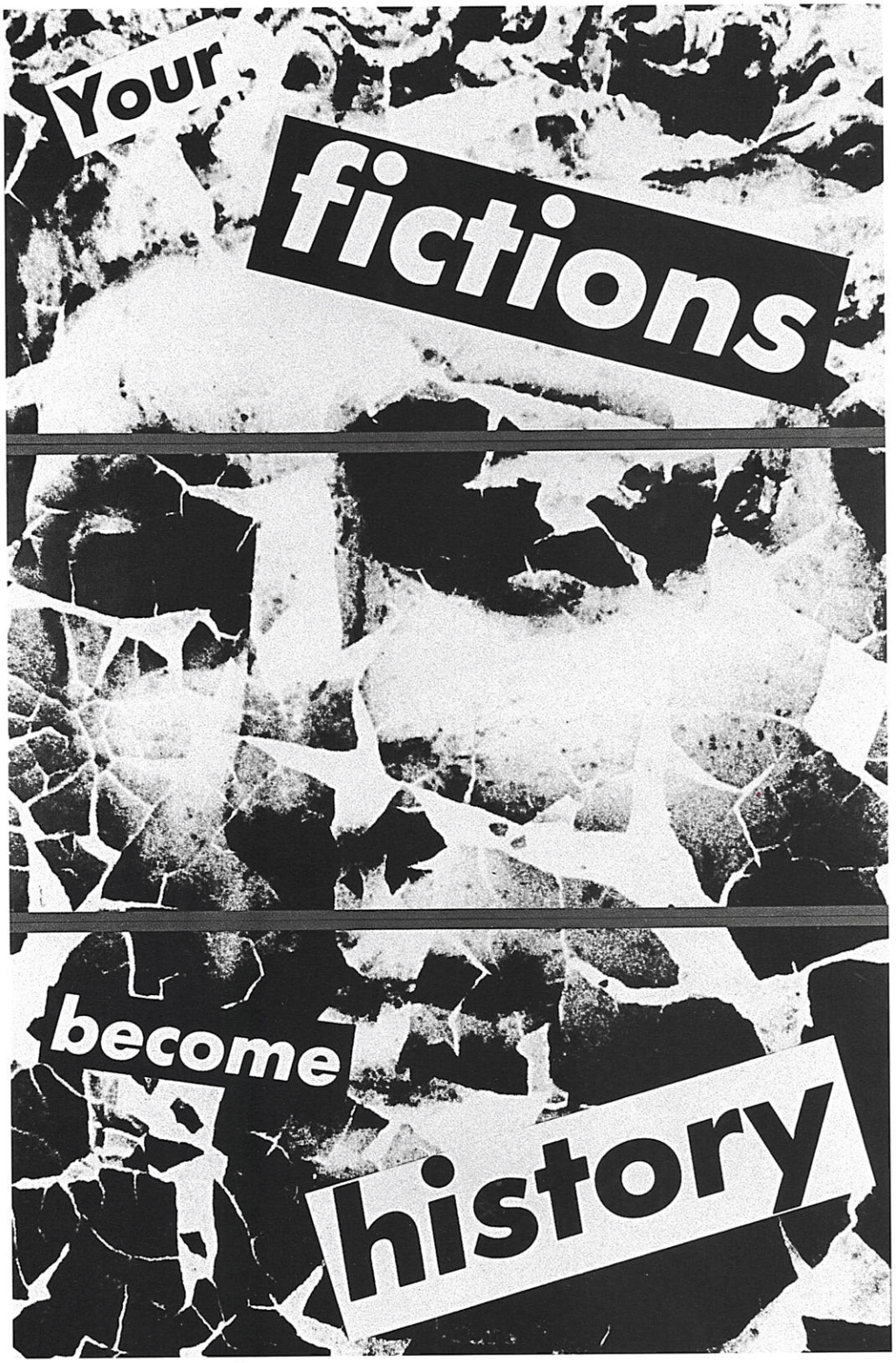
The notion that the current state of affairs signals a transcendence of valence of race becomes difficult to maintain if one takes the history of race relations into account. Where and when Americans have expected or wanted to see race, as well as where and when we don't want to see it, tells us a great deal about how we negotiate our

28. Winant, "Theoretical Status of the Concept of Race," pp. 187–88. In this volume, pp. 51–61.

ambivalent relation to the historical legacy of racialization. That ambivalence has informed the ways that photographs are classified and interpreted. That some photographs are identified as being about race within the larger field of photography—and those are usually limited to images of nonwhite people or demonstratively racist whites—does not simply enable racial imagery to become visible, but permits us to maintain the belief that other photographic images are not about race.

The perceived effect that race has on the status and coherence of America's image as a nation makes any discussion of race and representation appear politically charged, and this supposed threat has motivated most attempts to camouflage or otherwise suppress public analysis of racial discourse. Numerous social theorists have pointed out that since the middle of the twentieth century, American race relations have been the most influential factor in undermining national and international perceptions of America as a democracy, and thus have greatly affected our country's ability to exercise influence in the rest of the world. That American story is not unique; on the contrary, it is part of a global history.

The story of how the construction of race intersects with the emergence of nations is central to the history of the modern world, and has wide ranging implications for the interpretation of culture. Postcolonial theorists consistently argue that modernity, capitalism, and the very idea of Western society cannot be fully understood without taking slavery and colonization into account—race is a signifying system that emerges from that history. Since its inception America has been a territory inhabited by many peoples who saw themselves as different from each other in one way or another—the racialization of its populations is an integral component of the formation of the nation, and the evolution of power relations among those groups is a key element its development as a democracy.



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled* [Your Fictions Become History], 1983. Gelatin silver print, 76 1/4 x 39 1/2 in. (193.7 x 100.3 cm). Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Contemporary Art Society.

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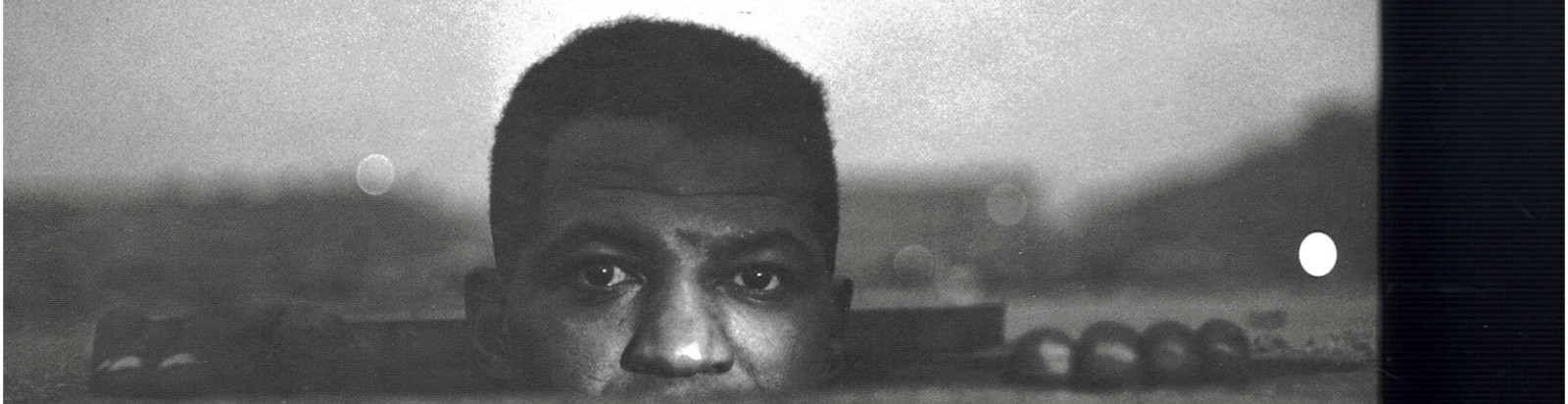

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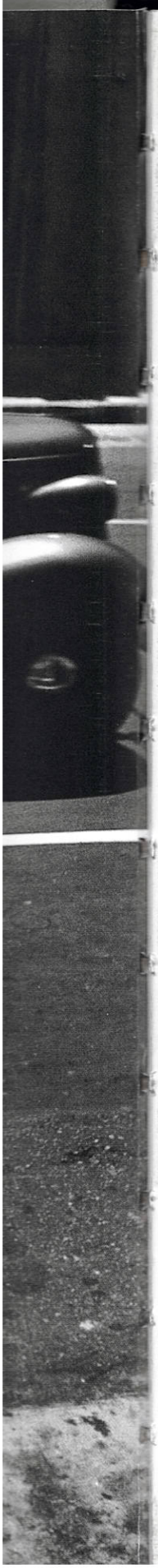

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ONLY SKIN DEEP

CHANGING VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN SELF

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