Fade to White:
Constructions of Racial Subjectivity in (Digital) Photography

by

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A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2025

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This dissertation draws on scholarship from Critical Discourse Studies, Digital Media Studies, Critical Race/Black/Postcolonial Studies, Science and Technology Studies, and Visual Culture and Photography Studies to demonstrate how photography is a primary medium for producing racial discourse. The aims of my research are twofold. I analyze how photographs operate as discourse by identifying the specific frames of racial subjectivity that were formed during Western modernity. I also examine how the particular camera technologies and dominant visualization practices of select historical moments have affected the production of racial knowledge using analogue and digital photography.

In Chapter One, I trace the early establishment of vision and epistemology, and more formally ocularcentrism, in Western culture. I outline this history to locate photography's authority in producing visual racial discourse in Europe and America. I argue that photography, while an ostensible tool of objective representation, worked closely with the White European and American imagination to construct a racially coded image of ideal modern subjectivity. Building on Allan Sekula's theory of bourgeois portrait photography and criminal mugshot photography as two poles of representation, I locate these dichotomous frames in three key photographic moments in Western history from the mid-19th to 20th centuries: colonial photography, eugenics photography, and lynching photography.

In Chapter Two, I focus on productions of countervisual photographs from the same period as Chapter One. I specifically analyze exemplary photographs that depict unconventional images of Blackness, such as those linked to Black abolitionists Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, as well as representations of Blackness from American World War II propaganda posters and the Civil Rights movement. Building on Evelyn Higginbotham's theory of respectability politics, I consider the interplay of these images with prevailing visual frames of White respectability and racialized deviancy. I argue that because these photographs replicate established codes and conventions of modern subjectivity, they struggle to introduce representations of racial heterogeneity into mainstream discourse. I propose that a shift is needed in photography's accessibility and viewership to unlock its counter-discursive potential.

The third chapter in this dissertation explores a genealogy of digital photography to situate shifts in photographic practice from analogue to digital photography. I assess how the development of increasingly mobile and networked photographic tools—that is, the integration of digital cameras with smartphones—led to the rise of social media photography as a new vernacular that allows personal photos, including previously unseen marginalized representations, to be seen by mainstream publics. Expanding on the works of Black Studies scholar Saidiya V. Hartman and postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, I identify photographs from the Black hashtag movements #IfTheyGunnedMeDown on Twitter and #BlackoutDay on Tumblr as examples of countervisual racial discourse using digital photography.

In contrast, Chapter Four considers how White visuality has become coded into the algorithmic logic of social media, especially with the rise of augmented reality beauty (ARB) filters from 2015 to 2025. ARB filters are pre-set photographic templates that use a combination of camera and computer vision technologies to edit and ostensibly beautify a user's digital image in real-time. Using feminist media theorist Anne Balsamo's methodology of hermeneutic reverse engineering and Amanda K. Greene's notion of glitchy

vision, I identify how race is intertwined with and positioned within ARB filtering technologies and practices. I analyze 15 ARB filters from across Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok to identify their specific areas of "augmentation." I argue that ARB filters disguise their reproductions of Whiteness as a neoliberal tool of self-optimization, and thus produce forms of visual racial discourse that extend modernity's racial ideologies into the algorithmic age.

I end this dissertation with a reflection on work that remains to be done in examining photographs as racial discourse, especially as we navigate social media environments that are increasingly algorithmic in nature. I invite future discussions that will engage culturally informed uses of digital photography and its role in constructing racial subjectivity and ideology online.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee members—Aimée Morrison, Lai-Tze Fan, Heather Love, and Jennifer Whitson—for believing in this research, especially during the years prior to my ADHD diagnosis. Thank you for tirelessly advocating for my work and for employing me in various capacities throughout my degree.

Aimée, thank you for seeing my vision throughout this project despite the unruliness that inevitably accompanies interdisciplinary research, and for your constructive feedback (as well as the BOOMs) along the way. *Lai-Tze,* you have modelled what it looks like when leadership and care co-exist within an academic space. I would not be the scholar I am without you and the U&AI Lab; I am grateful for your never-ending support. *Heather,* thank you for taking a leap of faith in me during the pandemic years and for initiating my foray into tech ethics. Thank you, *Jen,* for opening my eyes to the wonderfully maddening world of STS. Though he didn't end up being a major part of this dissertation, Winner will stay with me forever.

I would be remiss not to mention Susan Cadell here, who informally adopted me into the field of Social Work with research on grief, death, dying, and tattoos. Thank you for helping me stay curious in other ways and for being a mentor and friend to me over all these years.

Bock Ki and Sook Kyoung—*appa, umma*—having reflected on it for a whole degree, I can say that part of my passion for the topic of race and identity comes from you. Because of you, I have had the uncommon privilege of having a childhood in the '90s where being Korean in North America felt rather ordinary. Thank you for demonstrating courage and grace in normalizing our differences to those around us, and for instilling the values of justice and community within me from a young age. Daniel, thanks for being the better roommate during the early years, and for dealing with Oscar's sass so Chris and I could have a life outside the PhD.

Vanya Sorensen, Jenn Rickert, Theresa Shim, Matthew Perks, Truzaar Dordi, and the weekly P3 crew—grad school would have been a wildly different experience without your friendship. Thanks for being the source of many invigorating chats, distractions, and fond memories.

Finally, thank you, Christopher Cameron, for being my sounding board for all things silly and serious and for holding space for my chaos. I am grateful for your love and your relentless support of everything I do. We can go start our Survivor business now.

Dedication

To those who have had to look from the margins of Western culture.

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Preface: Uncanny Whiteness

I grew up in North America as what sociologist Rubén Rumbaut calls a "1.5 generation" immigrant: not the first generation to migrate to a foreign land but also not the first generation to be born there. Children who grow up as 1.5 generation immigrants often experience an intensified version of cultural liminality compared to those of first or second generations. While adult migrants and native-born children identify most strongly with the values, ideals, and beliefs of the cultural group in which they were born and raised, 1.5 generation immigrants often feel caught between the tension of two cultures (Rothe et al.). It is my experiences from this liminal positionality that first brought me to the topic of this dissertation.

There are three distinct but related observations that form the beginnings of this research. The first observation was in relation to a popular South Korean reality-TV program in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Apart from watching the occasional K-drama with my family, I didn't spend much of my teenage years consuming mainstream Korean media. But in 2009, thanks to my family's increased involvement with the local Korean community, I found myself introduced to a popular Korean show called *Ulzzang Shidae*. This show, which roughly translates to the "Best Face Generation" in English, featured a cast of young microbloggers who were internet-famous for their "best face" photos.[1]

The primary appeal of *Ulzzang Shidae* was its setup as an exposé. Several episodes of each season were dedicated to the cast members removing their makeup and discussing which cosmetic surgery procedures they'd undergone. However, as the show revealed, what

[1] Using present-day terms, these microbloggers would more appropriately be classified as "influencers."

left a more drastic effect on their viral photos and allowed these individuals to achieve the desired "best face" aesthetic was their use of Photoshop for digital photo-editing (see figure 1).



Figure 1. *Ulzzang Shidae* cast member Han Areum Song Yi, before makeup (right), after makeup (center), and after Photoshop (left)[2]

As a Korean-Canadian teen who hadn't grown up surrounded by South Korean beauty discourse, I watched this show with morbid fascination.[3] The exaggerated, v-shaped faces in the photos, with their round eyes, pointed noses, and small lips, were unrecognizable compared to the everyday Korean faces I was accustomed to seeing.[4] Indeed, these retouched images depicted individuals who looked drastically different from the photographs' actual subjects. Watching the show, I wondered: What does it mean to "look Korean?" Where does this standard for the "best face" come from? And who gets to determine what is beautiful?

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[2] Source: Ulzzang Shidae TV, "Han Areum Song Yi," n.d., *Koreaboo.com,* koreaboo.com/news/ulzzang-shidae-return-reunite-show/.

[3] While the show's primary appeal for South Korean youth was its shock factor, its focus on digital embodiment (and parasocial relationships) as an emerging social practice situates *Ulzzang Shidae* as an interesting site of early discussion around digital photography, authenticity and embodiment, identity construction, and social value that deserves further research. However, this dissertation does not focus on this show.

[4] It is generally observed that specific groupings of phenotypical features commonly occur within an ethnic or racial group based on differences in their geographical environment and climate (Beatty and Hristova 29). I note that attributing a restricted set of phenotypes to a certain ethnicity or race can be a slippery slope only when value judgments are concurrently made—that is, when these phenotypes become conflated with value attributions that support a colonial agenda. I explain this in more detail in Chapter One.

I never seriously pursued an answer to these questions, and they inevitably resurfaced in the summer of 2012 when I spent some time in Korea on my own. By this point, I was generally aware that plastic surgery had become popular and was relatively normalized in South Korean culture; what startled me was the degree of visual standardization present within this relatively permanent practice. Riding the subway to the Gangnam District (one of Seoul's most modern, upscale neighbourhoods), I was met with a barrage of plastic surgery ads. Each ad spliced together photographs of different women who were uncanny in their resemblance to one another (see figure 2). All of these figures shared physical attributes which I can only describe as producing an image of uncanny Whiteness: they were pale and slim, and flaunted features like a small face, high nose bridge, folded "double" eyelids, and a pointed jawline. However, this observation was also short-lived; upon returning home to Canada later that summer, my curiosity about this particular form of embodiment once again fell by the wayside.



Figure 2. Subway ad for a plastic surgery clinic in Gangnam, South Korea[5]

[5] Source: Jackie Graham, "plastic surgery ad in Gangnam, South Korea," 24 June 2014, *The Seattle Globalist,* https://seattleglobalist.com/2014/06/24/korean-american-cosmetic-eyelid-surgery/26208.

It wasn't until 2016 that I finally resolved to investigate this visual pattern. Chatting back and forth on Snapchat with a cousin who had completed an exchange term in Canada, I noticed that all of his selfies were uploaded to Snapchat from a Korean photo-editing app called B612. Unlike the animal-themed augmented reality (AR) filters that were popular on Snapchat during this time, these photos had been retouched using beauty filters that lightened my cousin's skin tone, removed blemishes, and sharpened certain facial features such as his nose and jawline. Though not as exaggerated in effect as the photos from *Ulzzang Shidae* and the plastic surgery ads in Gangnam, these edited images had the same visual effect.

Thinking back to my three experiences, I ultimately note that the reconfiguration of subject bodies in each of these representations led me to an uncomfortable realization: it suggested a higher cultural valuation of phenotypes that were distinctively *not Korean* but produced instead an image of uncanny Whiteness. Perhaps a result of my liminal identity, which caused me to view these "modernized" images of Koreanness from the outside in, this practice felt like an affront to my understanding of what it means to be Korean.

I want to clarify that my naming of such modification practices is not a condemnation of present-day South Korean culture per se, nor is it a judgment of the people who ascribe to its values. South Korean beauty discourse has a complex and fluid history that undoubtedly holds nuances I cannot glean from my infrequent glimpses of it over the last 15 years. Instead, I offer the observations made in this preface as the catalyst for my research—as having driven my need to examine how subjectivity becomes understood and even *formed* within culture through vision, embodiment, and photography.[6] For my dissertation, I move

[6] Most of this dissertation focuses on photographs of Black subjects instead of Korean subjects. I elaborate on this research focus and my positionality in relation to it in the Introduction.

this investigation to a locale closer and more familiar to myself: to the West, where photography first began.

Introduction

I. Cultural Embodiments: How Ideologies and Discourses Shape Race

Race is a concept fraught with ambiguity. It is undeniable that race exists conceptually within the world and has lasting impacts on the lives of racialized individuals, yet it is difficult to clearly define. Sociologist and racial theorist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva asserts that "although race is not an essential category … and in fact is highly malleable and historically-bounded … it is nonetheless a central principle of social organization" (899). Critical race theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant elaborate that the malleability of race is apparent over time, as "supposed boundaries shift, slippages occur, realignments become evident, and new collectivities emerge" (105). In other words, though the construction of race is centuries-old, having first formally emerged in the 15th and 16th centuries, it is difficult to pin down because it continues to be made and remade into the present day (Bonilla-Silva; Omi and Winant).

Omi and Winant refer to this "sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed" as "racial formation" (109). Racial formation extends across the overlapping areas of social, political, and ideological practices and is co-constituted with other social categories like class, gender, and sexual orientation. For example, during periods of colonial conquest and slavery, social practices including forced and unpaid labour as well as physical brutalization led to the construction of racialized (especially Black) women as "lower-status humans," or worse, as "not human at all" (Omi and Winant 107).

Apart from social and political practices (also shaped by a culture's ideologies), direct expressions of ideology largely impact racial construction.[7] Critical discourse theorist Teun A. van Dijk defines ideologies as a social group's "shared beliefs about [their] fundamental conditions and ways of existence and reproduction" (116). These core ideas or belief systems are gradually acquired over time and are relatively stable, though they are not impervious to change; in turn, they help inform a group's cultural values and ways of being.

Ideologies are simultaneously acquired, expressed, and reproduced through discourses (van Dijk 115), which are traditionally characterized as speech in Western culture. In his 1971 lecture "Orders of Discourse," Michel Foucault explicitly describes discourse as "manifested materially, as a written or spoken object" (8), suggesting that language can convey a culture's innermost beliefs. While acknowledging that there are limitations, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) as a field of scholarship thus argues that an examination of discourse is crucial to understanding a culture's dominant ideologies (van Dijk 124).

Historically, Western cultures have prioritized studies of religious, juridical, literary, and scientific texts as discourse (Foucault, "Orders of Discourse" 12). Scholarship on racial discourse (e.g., in Postcolonial Studies) has specifically centered around analyzing administrative, literary, religious, linguistic, philosophical, and social texts to understand how the West's socioeconomic history and ideologies have shaped and continue to shape racial subjectivity and social relations (Hight and Sampson 6). For instance, in *Black Skins, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon draws on examples from the novels *I am a Martinican Woman* by Mayotte Capécia (24-35) and *Un homme pareil aux autres* by René Maran to identify

[7] I switch throughout this dissertation from Omi and Winant's term "racial formation" to racial *construction* to suggest a level of systemic intentionality behind Western practices concerning racial ideology.

stereotypical race and gender dynamics between Black women and White men and White women and Black men, respectively (45-63). Similarly, bell hooks treats Nella Larson's novel *Passing* as discourse to argue that the ideology of White supremacy creates oppressive social conditions for Black people that discourage them from appreciating Blackness (*Black Looks* 9).

While such analyses of literary discourse have produced critical insights into race, examining written texts alone is insufficient for a holistic understanding of racial construction. This is because conceptions of race are based in semiotics—systems of signification that encompass language, but also extend to other, visual modes (Barthes 9). Indeed, in a passage that is commonly referenced in racial scholarship, Fanon encapsulates the entanglement of visual signs with race by invoking a (White) child's repeated exclamation of the phrase "Look! A Negro!" in his writings (91). In following the visual directive "Look!" with a racial classification, Fanon illustrates that race is characterized and recognized based on visual features—that is, through the process of epidermalization, which "impos[es] race on the body" (Browne 7).

As Fanon demonstrates, this visual characterization does more than highlight an individual's physical differences; it produces a socially legible body (Bourdieu) that inscribes within it specific ideological values (Greene; Higginbotham; Lawrence and Hylton). In the remainder of Fanon's vignette, the child's final utterance, "*Maman,* look, a Negro; I'm scared!" (91), confirms what the reader already knows: that visual markers of Blackness have a history of signifying negative social value.

But how does one learn to perceive race in this way? What is the process by which this signification occurs? In other words, how does ideology become manifested in the visual to imbue certain physical features with negative social value and others with positive ones?

Visual representations of race from across various historical moments replicate and stabilize racial signification by doubling the signification process. Compared to its embodied and ephemeral experience, images externalize and solidify a semiotics of race that establishes a visual code for how viewers should read racialized bodies within their specific cultural context. As art historian and visual culture scholar Martin A. Berger states, images' "shared ideologies rooted in race provide a consistent and detectable structure that guides their interpretation of the visual world" (*Sight Unseen* 1). More pointedly, ideology informs the structures of visuality, which are the social organizations and processes of looking established by a culture's dominant groups to produce "a training of minds, [that] sustain[s] both physical segregation between rulers and ruled, and mental compliance with those arrangements" (Mirzoeff 5). In other words, as "acts of looking are encouraged and circumscribed culturally" (Smith, *Color Line* 22), *we learn about race through the images we see and the ideologies those images imply*. To glean new insights into how Western ideologies have shaped and continue to shape race and racial subjectivity, race-based scholarship must therefore move beyond the written and spoken word to analyze images as racial discourse.

My dissertation offers a theorization of racial construction based on one medium of visual discourse: photography. Using a Foucauldian lens to start, I argue that photographs operate as discourse to generate and establish racial "knowledge" in Western culture.

However, media scholar Simon Ganahl points out that "knowledge [production] requires a transmitting mold" (6). The aims of my research are therefore twofold: in addition to analyzing how photographs operate as discourse, I examine how photography's privileged position in modernity affects the production of racial knowledge. This media-based approach allows me to consider how photography's construction of race is "less about the *visual* … [than] about *visibility,* [or] the actions and materialities through which attention can be shared and focused onto something visible" (Traue et al. 331).

In the remainder of this introduction, I outline scholarship that exists at various intersections of visuality, communication, ideology, and subjectivity, with a particular focus on photography and race. This overview draws from the different but related fields of Art History, Visual Culture Studies (also called Visual and Critical Studies), New/Digital Media Studies (broadly referred to as Media Studies), and Science and Technology Studies (STS). I differentiate Art History and Visual Culture Studies which emphasize a study of aesthetics and visual signification from the latter two fields, which study various technologies' social functions. Though scholarship on photography extends beyond these fields, I focus on these particular areas to reinforce the dual aims of my dissertation on 1) the discursive text and 2) discursive production.[8]

I then discuss the limitations of existing scholarship for theorizing racial construction. I subsequently propose that a study of photographs as discourse is therefore imperative to understanding how race and racial subjectivity are produced and reproduced using

[8] For one, photography and race are also central areas of discussion in the field of psychoanalysis, specifically in relation to the Lacanian notion of desire. These discussions are commonly advanced in Film Studies as well as in Postcolonial Studies. Though I do not focus on psychoanalysis in this dissertation, I briefly return to the notion of desire in relation to affect theory in the Conclusion.

photographic technologies. In the third section of this introduction, I reflect on my positionality and shortcomings in relation to this topic and describe the methodologies for my research. I end the introduction with an overview of my four chapters and some concluding thoughts about this work.

II. Learning to See Race the "Right" Way: Understanding Photographs as Discourse

The idea that we must study the relationship between ideology, (racial) subjectivity, and its visual expressions is not new, though most works created prior to the 2000s neglect to place equal emphasis on all three of these areas. This project has most notably found a home amongst art historians and visual culture scholars, who have long been interested in questions of visual representation and subjectivity, specifically in relation to photography. For many of these scholars, semiotics is a key area of concern: how does photographic representation offer "one particularly important system of signification through which meaning, and 'reality,' is signified" (Lawrence and Hylton 259), and how important is the viewers' ability to interpret the photograph's intended meaning? For instance, Roland Barthes has widely advanced an analysis of cultural semiotics, in which signs are read for their hidden ideological formations (e.g., see *Elements of Semiology*). However, Barthes' examination of semiotics and ideology in photography excludes reflections on subjectivity and is therefore inadequate for assessing photography's role in systemic racial construction.[9]

On the other hand, semiotic analysis in art history has long been criticized for lacking discussions of ideology altogether (Hight and Sampson; Parsons 274). Art historians Eleanor

[9] For this very reason, photography scholar Shawn Michelle Smith returns to Barthes's foundational text *Camera Lucida* to provide a racial reading of it in "Race and Reproduction in *Camera Lucida*."

M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson argue that "the tendency among art historians assessing European and American representations of people under colonial authority was to minimize art's connections to historical moments and to associated colonialist ideologies," and to assess it in relation to pre-existing art movements or stylistic classifications instead (8; see also Emerling 98). Similarly, digital media theorist Lisa Nakamura asserts that there is a "tendency [in] visual culture to omit considerations of the realm of communication, focusing instead on representations and signification that occur between a visual medium and a viewer" (*Digitizing Race* 9). However, as "the image is part of an interdiscursive world of meaning," Traue et al. warn that "the idea of isolating the image from other modalities of meaning … is a deeply flawed notion" (331).

Indeed, art history's disinterest in ideology was challenged in the 1970s with the growing theoretical influence of Marxism and Neo-Marxism, which favoured the everyday and marginalized over the dominant and elite (Nickel 47). With key theorists like Louis Althusser, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Jacques Lacan establishing frameworks for examining identity, subjectivity, and power and their connections to discourse, art history in the late '70s began to treat photographs as cultural objects that were historically constituted (Miles 61).[10] Following this shift, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a larger cultural turn in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Hight and Sampson 8; Miles 60; Nickel 56).[11]

[10] A foundational text that emerged during this period is Hubert Damisch's 1978 English translation of "Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image" (Miles 61).
[11] Traue et al. note some exceptions: they highlight that works by Bourdieu, Denzin, Goffman, Kracauer, Morin, and scholars belonging to the International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA) were ahead of their time (333).

One of the key texts from this period is the 1988 book *The Burden of Representation*, in which John Tagg advances the theory that photography, ideology, and power are necessarily linked.[12] It is only within the last three decades that scholarship within art history and visual culture studies began to dedicate attention to the relationship among photography, racial subjectivity, and ideology, drawing from the contributions of postmodern feminists in photography studies (Parsons 279). I outline here the works of some scholars that have more recently contributed to this research.

Writing in the mid- to late 2000s, Shawn Michelle Smith and art historian Erina Duganne argue that it is essential to read racial photographs in relation to their initial contexts of production and reception. Smith asserts: "archives are ideological; they are conceived with political intent, to make specific claims on cultural meaning" (*Color Line* 7). In her book *Photography on the Color Line,* Smith specifically works to recover the intended meaning behind W.E.B. Du Bois's photographic exhibit from the 1900 Paris Exposition. By contrasting the photographs in his collection alongside other contemporary images of Blackness, she illustrates how Du Bois used photography to challenge racist constructions of Black subjectivity. Smith further illuminates how "photographs … did much more than simply reflect in substance and shadow the wider social, political, and material calculus of the Atlantic world" (3). In her edited collection *Pictures and Progress,* Smith and her co-editor Maurice O. Wallace establish that photography "conditioned a modern way of seeing" and provided a "dialectical bearing … on the wider logic of nineteenth-century racial

[12] While Tagg's theory influenced art history overall to become more political in its analyses of representation (Hight and Sampson 8; Nickel 50), Tagg himself is cited as taking an ahistorical approach to photography's production of discourse.

thought" (3). Duganne echoes this general sentiment; though her analysis examines documentary photographs from 1970s and 1980s New York, she also demonstrates a recognition that photographs are intertwined with their sociohistorical contexts of production.

The works of Mark Sealy (cultural historian), Tanya Sheehan (art historian), and Martin A. Berger (art historian and visual culture theorist) also speak to the relationship among photography, race, and ideology. Sealy argues that photography is a "system of image production that maintained and disseminated [colonialism's] dehumanising ideologies" (1-2), specifically in constructing Black British subjectivity. Sheehan explores how ideas about race have been formed and have persisted through photographic humour, with a specific focus on photographs produced in the northeastern, mid-Atlantic, and midwestern areas of the United States. And in his book, *Seeing Through Race,* Berger studies the Civil Rights movement's most iconic photographs to argue that public perceptions of Blackness during this period of social change were shaped by underlying ideologies of Whiteness.

Existing research on the intersection of photography, race, and ideology also extends beyond constructions of Black subjectivity in Europe and America. Building on Edward Said's postcolonial influence, cultural critic Rosalind C. Morris analyzes how photography allowed colonial photographers to maneuver between the captured past and unseen future of Asian nations to "disseminate, dislodge, and transmute the category of the foreign" for Western audiences, ultimately producing "[visual] practices of political domination and suppression" (2). Her edited collection, *Photographies East,* traces the influence of Scottish photographer John Thomson in forming Western perceptions of East Asia in the 19th century.

Likewise, Hight and Sampson look to the "East" during the period of Western colonialism and imperialism. Their work on colonialist photography offers an insightful examination of "photographs … as complex discursive objects of colonial power and culture," which "produced a dynamic rhetoric of racial and ethnographic difference between white Europeans and Americans and non-European 'races' and 'places'" (1). Their book, *Colonialist Photography,* positions photography within modernity's economic structure to argue that the production and consumption of picturesque colonial images helped reconfigure unfamiliar lands as a desirable space of conquest for Western audiences.

Scholars have also examined the relationship between photography and race in contexts beyond colonialism. For instance, colonial photography scholar Anne Maxwell maps photography's role in the rise and fall of the eugenics movement in her book *Picture Imperfect*. Building on Michel Frizot's work on photography, she advances that the application of photography to eugenicist agendas "enabled the normative codifying of differences, which in turn led to the physical evaluation of whole populations without any other type of examination" (13). Though historian Amos Morris-Reich focuses on the study of German and Jewish subjects, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation, his work shares the central claim that photography "created complex forms of knowledge … that … served as conduits of forms of visual perception with immediate and socially effective consequences" (4). This collective body of work demonstrates growing scholarly interest in investigations of photography and race within the last 30 years. Despite their varied disciplinary backgrounds and subject matter across geographic locales, racial groups, and

areas of application, these works are clearly bound by their shared focus on photography's discursive function in producing racial knowledge.

For all its careful analyses, however, this scholarship does not appear to offer a broader, more cohesive discussion of photographs as an enduring form of colonial discourse. While each of these scholars excels at illuminating photography's significance within their respective areas of interest, an analysis that maps its trajectory across various historical periods and social contexts has been difficult to find. As ideologies are simultaneously manifested in and reinforced by the *accumulation* of discourses (van Dijk 116), a broader, more expansive study of photographs as discourse is therefore needed to understand the production of dominant ideologies and social perceptions of race.

While my dissertation endeavours to draw together these disparate studies of photography and race, it is important to clarify that this research is not a comprehensive study of photography and racial discourse as such a task is surely impossible. Not only are new investigations of photographic history constantly emerging, the worldwide distribution of camera technologies and photography's pervasiveness in the 20th and 21st centuries means that new photographic forms and practices are continuing to be developed. I therefore frame this research as a trans-historical project that aims to bridge the gap between analogue and digital photography, to foreground photography's continued role in constructing racial subjectivity in the Western context.

Indeed, the research I outlined above only covers the relationship between race, ideology, and *analogue* photography. In the first decade of the 21st century, photography faced accelerated development, specifically with the popularization of mobile devices with

digital imaging capabilities. Research from the Pew Research Centre in November 2024 shows that 98% of Americans own a cellphone; of that group, 91% own smartphones with high resolution cameras and reliable broadband connectivity on 5G or LTE networks (Sidoti et al.). With a reported population of 340.1 million in the United States in 2024, we can estimate that almost 310 million Americans had daily access to creating and viewing digital photography last year.

As various digital media scholars have noted, photography's digitalization led to radical changes that have had a lasting impact on the way we look in the 21st century (Hand; Larsen and Sandbye; Shanks and Svabo; Traue et al.). Most importantly, integrating camera technologies into mobile communication technologies amplified photography's communicative potential and shifted its status from a ceremonial to quotidian practice. Writer Margaret Visser remarks that "[t]he extent to which we take everyday objects for granted is the precise extent to which they govern and inform our lives" (qtd. in Roth 132). Recognizing quotidian images' discursive power, sociologists Boris Traue, Mathias Blanc, and Carolina Cambre argued in 2019 that "the spread of imaging technologies and competences make [sic] it necessary to turn [scholarship] toward the everyday practices of imaging, imagining and communicating through cameras, camera-phones, digital video, public screens, image archives, [and] image platforms" (330).

Academic research has responded to these emerging practices and technologies in the last 20 years, albeit within selective disciplines and to varying degrees of focus (Traue et al. 328). Given its intensified role in facilitating everyday communication online, scholarship on digital photography has primarily been undertaken by scholars in New/Digital Media Studies

and Communication Studies. Many of these works have emphasized photography's digitality (i.e., its departure from previous practices) and have taken a postmodern approach to the study: they primarily center around the concept of individual agency to explore how this medium "offer[s] a [unique] wealth of subject positions which in turn help structure individual identity" (Kellner in Quayson 101) rather than examining racial subjectivity. I assert that such studies of digital photography indicate a "collective amnesia" about the use of photographs as racial discourse throughout Western history (Morris-Reich 1), similar to that seen 50 years ago in art history.

Thankfully, new/digital media scholars' adoption of theories and approaches from Science and Technology Studies (STS) has helped bring critical considerations of ideology into discussions of digital photography. Instead of viewing technologies as isolated or apolitical objects that afford all individuals the same usability and experience, STS theorists like Bruno Latour and Langdon Winner argue that technologies and systems operate within an intricate social matrix that connects actors and objects with other aspects of society including politics, economics, and culture. From an STS perspective, the design of technologies "embody specific forms of power and authority" (Winner 121), which in turn, shapes their social uses and surrounding culture.

New/digital media scholars now increasingly argue that rather than serving as neutral conduits for identity expression, digital photographic technologies extend Western culture's dominant ideologies by reproducing traditional forms of subjectivity. Though their research is separated by nearly two decades of technological development, Lisa Nakamura and Amanda K. Greene in particular assert that digital photographic tools and online imaging

practices center around stereotypical and limiting forms of racial embodiment. I add to the existing and still emerging scholarship on digital photography and race by offering a throughline of racial subjectivity from analogue to digital photography. As this dissertation argues, looking at both forms together will provide new critical insights into how photography has always been, and continues to be, entangled with constructions of racial subjectivity.

III. The Future is Analogue: Using Media Genealogy to Trace Photography's Legacy of Racial Discourse

This dissertation is a scholarly investigation of analogue and digital photography that aims to "defin[e] … the system of [visual] limits and exclusion which we practice without knowing it … to make the cultural unconscious apparent" (Foucault qtd. in Simon). My research specifically argues that despite its revolutionary changes to photographic practice, digital photography extends the racist structures and legacies of analogue photography into the digital age. I examine photographs as a form of visual discourse that has sustained Western racial ideologies over centuries by systematically shaping and reshaping dominant conceptions of racial subjectivity.

Postcolonial theorist Benita Parry asserts that signifying systems can be deprived of their power through acts of critical deconstruction (42-3). To deconstruct digital photography, its proliferation of colonialist representations "must [first] be understood in their social content and historic projects" (Quayson 101). In her critique of existing research on photography, race, and ideology, Nakamura articulates that we must "trac[e] the genealogies of media use in [examinations of] new media, identifying specificities of genres

or kinds of production and imaging practices, [to] produc[e] readings of images that gesture toward identity formation in the matrix of power" (*Digitizing Race* 11). My dissertation therefore endeavours to decolonize digital photography by tracing its genealogy. In doing so, it re-embodies the faceless producers of this discourse and examines the sociocultural factors affecting photographic production to ask: how did this earlier period of photography "impac[t] imaginations and perceptions of the [racialized] body before digital technologies arrived?" (Greene vii).

As ideologies form over time through accumulated discourses, this genealogical excavation is, however, incomplete without also examining photographs that have contested dominant racial ideologies throughout their stabilization. I therefore also analyze photographs of racialized subjects that challenge their conventional representations in visual racial discourse. In analyzing photographs as discourse across analogue and digital photography, I aim to shift our current understanding of digital photography to consider how mundane, everyday images can serve as powerful tools that help shape racial ideologies.

Admittedly, the scholarship this dissertation provides has proven immensely difficult to situate. While I am inclined to align this research with the field of Digital/Media Studies, it places an equal amount of emphasis on visuality and racial discourse. Therefore, this work is most accurately characterized as interdisciplinary research that converges from the following fields of study: Critical Discourse Studies, Digital/ Media Studies, Critical Race/Black/Postcolonial Studies, Science and Technology Studies, and Visual Culture and Photography Studies. I assert that the diverse fields of scholarship to which this research

belongs speaks to visuality's prevalent role in Western culture, and further demonstrates the urgency of studying this topic.

Unsurprisingly, the interdisciplinary nature of this research is reflected in the theories and methodologies employed within it. On a broader level, this dissertation blends the methodology of visual discourse analysis (VDA) from Visual Sociology, where "images *are* the argument" (Traue et al. 327), and colonial discourse analysis (CDA) from Postcolonial Studies and more specifically from Colonial Discourse Studies (CDS).[13] VDA and CDA both build on Foucauldian discourse analysis, but as a sociologically oriented methodology, VDA identifies semiotic patterns to determine visuality's effects on social formations. Its study specifically "pursues the image … as product of, and productive of, conflicting visualities" and argues that "social reality thickens through various materialities, practices, and visibilities" (Traue et al. 330). Adopting VDA as a methodology allows me to analyze how existing visual frames reflect the axes of power and knowledge in Western culture (327). My analysis focuses primarily on modern frames of subjectivity that were produced using photography in the 19th century that have since been adapted into the 21st century's digital modality.

CDA, on the other hand, studies colonialism's discursive constructions (Young 151). In his foundational work, *Orientalisms*, Edward Said extends Foucauldian discourse analysis to postcolonial theory to argue that discursive texts "can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality that they appear to describe" (qtd. in Young 152). Employing CDA allows

[13] The abbreviation "CDA" is more commonly associated with Critical Discourse Analysis but is also used within Colonial Discourse Studies (CDS). I employ it here to refer to Colonial Discourse Analysis rather than Critical Discourse Analysis. An alternate acknowledged abbreviation is "PCDA" for "Postcolonial Critical Discourse Analysis."

me to specifically examine "the *mechanics* of the constitution of the Other … [to our] analytic and interventionist advantage" (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak* 90). As CDA traditionally focuses on an analysis of language, however, I apply both VDA and CDA in my dissertation to analyze photographs as racial discourse. My analysis positions early modern photography as a "neglected dimensio[n] of imperial domination and subaltern subject formation" (Yaeger 636) that produced and maintained dominant visual frames of racial subjectivity throughout Western history.

It is worth noting here that this work also has the goal of hegemonic disruption that is shared amongst areas of study focused on historically marginalized, oppressed, or dispossessed groups (i.e., Feminist Studies, Critical Race Studies, Black Studies, and Postcolonial Studies). These areas of scholarship share two interconnected approaches that are pertinent to my dissertation: 1) naming and identifying knowledge positions, and 2) refocusing scholarly attention on underrepresented subject perspectives.

Feminist theorists Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding critique that Western cultures have historically offered a partial perspective of the world under the guise of knowledge and objectivity. Haraway specifically asserts that "there is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds" (678). Thus, situating visual technologies and their resulting knowledges within society and history—a methodology Harding calls "standpoint epistemology"—allows us to analyze "How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? … Whom to see with? …

[and] Who interprets the visual field?" (Haraway 681-2), to illuminate their reproduction of dominant perspectives and ideologies.[14]

This line of thinking shares similarities with an offshoot of Critical Race Studies called Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS, Lawrence and Hylton 256). CWS argues that the invisibility of Whiteness in Western culture "offers immunity" to White people and allows them "to reap the benefits but escape responsibility for [their] role in an unjust system" (Benjamin 4). This field of study thus challenges the continued ability for "white subjectivity to assume the position of the universal subject—with its unmarked territory" (Nakayama 298) by unveiling its particular positionality (see also Montag's "The Universalization of Whiteness").

Importantly, in his interview with Ganahl about media genealogy, Erkki Huhtamo criticizes previous forms of media archaeology such as those conducted by Michel Foucault, Friedrich Kittler, and Jonathan Crary as "superimposing [dominant] models from the present on the past" (1). In contrast, borrowing critical practices from feminist studies and critical race/Black/postcolonial studies allows me to identify "the classical problem of ideology without … totalizing it as a virtually inescapable condition" (Traue et al. 332) by accounting for its historical complexity. Incorporating multiple subject perspectives and "proliferating points of view" into my analysis proves "a useful strategy for examining the ideological, epistemological, and representational implications of dominating modes of vision, including

[14] More specifically, postmodern feminist Roslyn Deutsche questions about representation: "Whose subjectivities are the casualties of epistemologies that produce total beings? What violence is enacted by authors who speak and pretend that reality speaks for itself? Who signifies the threat of inadequacy so others can be complete? Whose expulsion and absence does completion demand? What positions are determined by relations of total knowledge, and who has historically occupied these positions?" (qtd. in Parsons 280)

their illusory monopoly" (Bal 379). In dedicating two of my four chapters and several concluding sections to highlighting racialized perspectives, I consider how countervisual representations of racial subjectivity can help destabilize dominant forms of visuality in both analogue and digital photography.

These chapters and sections specifically consider antihegemonic models and strategies from Black Studies and postcolonial studies including practices of Black refusal (Campt; Wilderson) and the approach of "writing" or "speaking back" to the colonial center (Ashcroft et al.; Bhabha; Spivak; Young). Making room for these understudied perspectives and alternative representations offers a way of "interven[ing] in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged histories of … races, communities, peoples" (Bhabha in Quayson 94). In doing so, this dissertation therefore also demonstrates how further scholarship on digital photographs produced by racialized people is essential to understanding the state of our collective racial futures.

IV. Title and Chapter Summaries

I offer here a brief explanation for the title of this dissertation. "Fade to White" is most evidently a play on the expression "fade to black," which refers to the baseline cinematic practice of switching from one scene to another by splicing a black frame between the two scenes. Mirzoeff argues that throughout history, "one modality of visuality [is] not simply succeeded by another, but rather … linger[s], and can be revived at unexpected moments" (6). It is my attempt in invoking this metaphor to encapsulate this central theme in my dissertation: that is, the idea that perceptions of race are not disparate acts of intuition but

are the result of repeated visual practices and cultural learnings, many of which are shaped through our interactions with photographs.

The replacement of "black" with "white" is central to this metaphor. In inverting these two contrasting elements of visibility, I produce a pun on the Manichean Black/White divide from critical race/postcolonial studies to suggest that even in unexpected areas of technology and society, we see the underlying paradigm of White visuality slip through. Within this figuration, then, Whiteness becomes the default frame against which our lives play out—the mode of visuality to which we continuously return, both in analogue and digital photography.

Additionally, in analogue photography, unexposed film has the appearance of a dark, light-sensitive strip. Due to its chemical makeup, exposure to light gives certain areas of the film the appearance of fading, producing an index or imprint of the photographic object on the film. In cases of overexposure, excess light strips the visual impression of its defining characteristics on the film, distorting or ruining the overall image when it is printed (see figure 3 for an example).

In this metaphor, the ideology of White supremacy can be seen as the light and lightening source that affixes objects of focus onto the "film" (i.e., our perception of reality). Though the exposure process is inevitable in analogue photography, the key here is that varying degrees of light exposure at this stage affect the resulting image. An understanding of this exposure process—of how the photographic subject fades to White as a result of this ideology—can allow us to appreciate how conceptions of race in Western culture are produced within the framework of White visuality. In this way, it is my hope that "Fade to

White" will serve as a guide to better understanding the complex and shifting relationships between photography, White supremacist ideology, and racial subjectivity in the 21st century.



Figure 3. Photographic print from an overexposed frame[15]

Because this dissertation is based on a media genealogical approach, its organization will appear chronological. More accurately though, its organizational structure reflects the broader trajectory of photographic development across analogue and digital forms and its relationship to a given moment's dominant and countercultural ideologies. Coincidentally, my chapters' organization also resembles Fanon's methodology of decolonization: a sign of our shared efforts towards decolonization through discourse analysis.

Fanon proposes five steps to decolonization: 1) reading signs of power, 2) deconstructing them, 3) remaking these signs in a renegotiation of power, 4) committing to

[15] Source: @TheRealShaheer, "Overexposed film," *Reddit*, 2023, reddit.com/r/AnalogCommunity/comments/15m9zgu/help_photos_came_out_too_overexposed_i_am_new_to/.

an ethical position to bring about egalitarian power relations, and 5) mobilizing the previous four steps through mind, body, social body, sign, and meaning (Sandoval 101). Chapters One and Two of my dissertation focus on reading signs of power in analogue photography and deconstructing them. Though Chapter Two also examines attempts to remake racial signs using photography, this action is more fully addressed with digital photography in Chapter Three. However, the process of decolonization (like other forms of progress) is non-linear. Chapter Four therefore reads and deconstructs residual signs of racial power that have recently emerged in digital photography, specifically within the relatively newer forms of social media and algorithmic photography. My conclusion reflects on this work and the work that remains to be done if we are to continue advancing efforts to decolonize photography.

Chapter One is the most historically dense chapter in this dissertation. In it, I establish the foundations of my research, beginning with the relationship between vision and epistemology and ocularcentrism's establishment in Western culture (Levin). I outline this history to locate photography's authority for producing visual racial discourse in Europe and America. I argue that photography, an ostensible tool of objective representation, worked closely with the White European and American imagination to construct a racially coded image of ideal modern subjectivity. I build my argument here around Allan Sekula's two-part theory of bourgeois portrait ("honorific") photography and criminal mugshot ("repressive") photography. I locate these dichotomous frames in three key photographic moments in Western history, which I refer to as *photo-histories*.

Borrowing from the nuanced works of multiple scholars, I analyze the photographic construction of racialized subjects across colonial and "slave" photography (Hight and

Sampson; Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect*), eugenics photography (Black; Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect*; Morris-Reich), and lynching photography (Cooks; R. Miller; Wood). Given the prevailing belief during modernity that photography could make the unknowable knowable, I assert that images of racialized subjects that were produced using criminal photography's codes and conventions operated as discourse to reify existing racial ideologies during this period. This section integrates a literature review with colonial visual discourse analysis and a discussion of Foucauldian theory (discipline and governmentality) to answer the question: "How did photography become equated with truth and objectivity to ascribe negative social value to racial subjectivity?"

Yet as historian Richard Terdiman writes, "no discourse is ever a monologue" (36). In Chapter Two, I explore this idea by examining productions of countervisual photographs, some of which have clear counter-discursive aims and others that do not. Though the photographs I examine do not necessarily contest images of racial subjectivity from Chapter One directly, I analyze photographs of Black subjects from the same time period (the mid-19th to 20th centuries) that broadly challenge dominant racial visuality. Drawing from the works of Ginger Hill, Shawn Michelle Smith, Mark Sealy, and Martin A. Berger, I look at exemplary photographs that depict unconventional representations of Blackness, linked specifically to Black abolitionists Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, as well as to American World War II propaganda posters and the Civil Rights movement. I consider the interplay of these images with the prevailing visual frames of White respectability and racialized deviancy discussed in Chapter One.

My argument builds on Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's "politics of respectability" (a concept that Du Bois himself formulates in the figure of the "Talented Tenth"), Gayatri Spivak's subaltern theory, Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson's "position of the unthought," Wilderson and Tina Campt's writings on Black refusal, and Jenny Davis and James Chouinard's theory of affordance conditions. Though Chapter Two explores the potential for photographs to serve as racial counter-discourse, the photographs I examine in it lead me to conclude that analogue photography struggled to meaningfully break free from modernity's dominant frames of White subjectivity. Ending this chapter with the question "How might the unthought or the subaltern see themselves using photography?" I look to Black family photography as offering a potential answer. Ultimately, I propose that a shift in photographic access is needed to unlock the medium's counter-discursive potential.

The third chapter in this dissertation explores changes in photographic technologies from analogue to digital by producing a media genealogy of digital photography. Applying Haraway and Harding's teachings about situated knowledges and standpoints, I assess how the development of increasingly mobile and networked photographic tools led to the rise of a new photographic vernacular called "social media photography" (Hand) that allows previously underrepresented perspectives to be seen by multiple publics online (M. Ito). Building on literature at the intersection of internet media and race (Brock; Nakamura) as well as works on quotidian challenges to ideology (Campt; Hartman) and hybrid identities (Bhabha), I analyze two complementary case studies from the mid-2010s: photographs from the Black hashtag movements #IfTheyGunnedMeDown on Twitter (now X) and #BlackoutDay on Tumblr. I argue that these photographs extend the earlier imaging practices

seen in Black family photography and demonstrate strategic countervisual practices that undermine dominant discourse on an everyday basis.

Despite such shifts online, Chapter Four relocates White visuality within digital environments, looking specifically at the last decade from 2015 to 2025. This chapter has a more empirical focus to reflect the recent intensification of "algorithmic photography," which undermines user agency through the automation of digital imaging processes (Rubinstein and Sluis, "Digital Image;" Taffel). Building on the research established in previous chapters, I argue here that this ideologically determined way of looking is manifested within social media photography through augmented reality beauty (ARB) filters.

ARB filters are pre-set photographic templates that use a combination of camera and computer vision technologies to edit and ostensibly beautify a user's digital image in real-time. Using feminist media theorist Anne Balsamo's methodology of "hermeneutic reverse engineering," which allows me to work "backwards from the construction of a functioning technology" to determine "the elements that contribute to [its] meaning" (*Designing Culture* 14), I analyze 15 ARB filters from across Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok to identify their specific areas of "augmentation." Blending this technical methodology (Riccio et al.) with a semiotic approach (Bonner et al.), I read these filters' resulting photos against a beauty rating app called FaceScore, which I use as a cultural proxy for eugenics-based beauty standards. Ultimately, this chapter argues that ARB filters disguise their reproductions of White phenotypes in racialized bodies (or more accurately, faces) as a neoliberal tool of self-optimization (Elias and Gill; Seet; van Doorn). Using Amanda K. Greene's theory of "glitchy vision," which treats computational glitches as sociotechnical ruptures that "allow the

workings of the machine…to become visible" (4), I posit that filtered photos operate as a form of visual racial discourse that extends modernity's racial ideologies into the digital age.

Nevertheless, I end the dissertation by turning back to racialized perspectives in the Conclusion. I specifically highlight the importance of looking beyond empirical approaches to also consider the affective and libidinal aspects of photography. As Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu argue, affective studies of photography allow us to more "[humanly] account for marginalized subjects such as women, queer subjects, and racialized groups, who are conspicuously excluded in approaches that focus on thinking" alone (qtd. in Emerling 109). I therefore end my dissertation by highlighting this as an area of future work, especially as we navigate social media environments that are increasingly algorithmic and oppressive in nature.

While this dissertation braids together research and approaches from multiple disciplines, it contributes most to the fields of Media Studies and Critical Race Studies. By looking across uses of both analogue and digital photography throughout history and in the present moment, I argue that photographs offer a form of racial discourse that shapes racial subjectivity. I specifically highlight how photography's digitalization, in allowing racialized people to share everyday photos of themselves with mainstream White publics, has produced the conditions for them to participate in producing counter-discourse in Western culture, to momentarily shed White visuality's limited frames of subjectivity.

V. Final Notes and Concluding Thoughts

As this dissertation is concerned with the study of discourse, the terms and forms of inscription I've employed are intentionally chosen. There are four points of note regarding

my choices in terminology: 1) the capitalization of "White" and "Black;" 2) the use of "Black American" instead of "African American;" 3) the use of "racialized," "subaltern," and "unthought" as opposed to "non-white," "BIPOC," "Other," or "marginalized;" and 4) the emphasis on White *visuality* rather than White vision or the "White gaze" (T. Morrison).

First, I capitalize the words "White" and "Black" when used to describe a human subject to signal their use in making a racial classification, similar to other racial adjectives like "Asian" or "Indigenous." In the racial scholarship I've examined, the word "Black" in relation to a person or group of people is commonly capitalized, but "White" is not. This difference in lettercase may be a way of signalling Whiteness's privileged position in Western culture—that is, of acknowledging it as the norm. In other words, as the universal subject is conventionally perceived as White, this lowercase inscription reflects how Whiteness is not differentially marked as a racial category in mainstream culture but is treated as the default race.

However, I find this choice counterproductive. Instead of signifying a critique, the lowercase "w" when describing Whiteness as a racial category can have the effect of embedding it within the surrounding text. That is, in setting it apart from other racial descriptors that *are* capitalized, its lowercase inscription ultimately normalizes the claim that Whiteness is unique from other races. Thus, I capitalize both terms ("Black" and "White") in my work to mark at the indexical level that "White" is also a constructed racial category.

Second, Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation focus primarily on photographs of Black individuals in the United States. With the exception of cases where the history of Black enslavement is immediately relevant to the construction of subjectivity, I use the term

"Black American" instead of "African American." While "Black American" may seem less precise than the alternative, I use this term here for two reasons. One, "Black American" foregrounds the racial identity of these groups beyond the limits of "African American," which describes "an *ethnic* group of peoples that share a common ancestry, distinguished by the forced uprooting of native Africans to American soil via the Atlantic Slave Trade from the 16th to 19th centuries" (Renolis). As such, this term is also more transparent about how racial classification is determined: visually, by the colour of one's skin.

Despite the basis of race in epidermalization, however, I reject the use of the term "non-white" to describe racialized people more broadly. CWS scholar Richard Dyer points out that this term reflects a negative position that naturalizes a racial hierarchy: it suggests that "people who are not white only have identity by virtue of what they are not" (11). In comparison, while "BIPOC" (the acronym for Black, Indigenous, and people of colour), "Other," and "marginalized" may have appropriate contexts for use, I refrain from using them in this project because these terms are not exclusive to describing racial oppression (e.g., they are also used within feminist studies to refer to the marginalized position of White women in patriarchal societies). Additionally, while applications of "Other" in postcolonialism are cognizant of the term's hegemonically constructed nature, they nevertheless face the same issue as "non-white" of naturalizing Whiteness as the default.

On the other hand, while "BIPOC" is a clear racial descriptor, the acronym is too broad for the purposes of my work. "People of colour" also makes the same symbolic slippage as "non-white:" it "none the less reiterates the notion that some people have colour and others, whites, do not" (Dyer 11). I therefore apply the specific racial term "Black" or

"White" where possible. These terms also reinforce the dissertation's focus on visuality, as they highlight the skin colours that are conventionally used to identify members of these racialized groups.

When distinguishing between groups of White people and groups of people from multiple races, I use the term "racialized" or, in specific contexts, "subaltern" or "unthought." The suffix "-ed" in "racialized" draws attention to the social construction of race; in basing the adjective in an action, it acknowledges that the individuals to whom it refers are socially (and intentionally) distinguished in this way by hegemonic structures and dominant groups. The term "racialized" begs the question "who does the racializing?" and opens up this classification on a lexical level for further investigation.

"Subaltern," on the other hand, marks this dissertation's partial roots in postcolonial studies. In Subaltern Studies (an offshoot of postcolonial studies), the subaltern was traditionally associated with colonial locales as it was used to describe people and groups that are dispossessed by colonial knowledge systems.[16] Since her early writings on the topic, Spivak has argued that with globalization's changes to socioeconomic structures, "the subaltern … is not [sic] longer entirely cut off from lines of access to the centre" (Bracke 850). Given this shifting definition, I adopt this term here to signal racialized subjects' historical and present-day constraints in producing racial discourse. My use of the term "subaltern" intentionally invokes Spivak's critical question of whether the subaltern can speak within Western culture to advance this investigation within the context of visuality.

[16] For instance, Spivak's discussion of the subaltern in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* identifies them as the lowest group within the caste system in India, who are beyond recognition within Western discourse.

Though symbolically similar to the subaltern, I use the Black Studies' term "unthought" in certain discussions (namely, in Chapter Two) that refer to Black photographic subjects. **Black Studies and postcolonial studies share** several perspectives and goals, **including a critique of neocolonial power structures and the central aim of dismantling White supremacy. However, Black Studies** scholars like Hartman and Wilderson specifically argue from an Afro-Pessimist lens that the violence experienced by Black people in the United States is distinct from that of racialized *colonial* subjects; instead of being an extension of the "usurpation of cartography, of space," Wilderson argues that "violence against Black people is a mechanism for the usurpation of subjectivity, of life, of being" (25). **In other words, Black Studies differs from postcolonial studies in its particular focus on African American struggles with race. Afro-Pessimism specifically** underscores that perceptions of modern Black subjectivity are antithetical to existing conceptions of subjectivity in the United States, as such concepts were formed within a society built on Black enslavement and thus with the very rejection of Black humanity or the treatment of Black people as the "unthought" at its foundation. I therefore use the term "unthought" to describe African Americans who are systematically excluded from notions of modern subjectivity, and thus from using photographic technologies and productions of visual racial discourse. **I put these different but related subject positions (i.e., the subaltern and unthought) in conversation with one another in Chapters One and Two of this dissertation.**

Finally, I make a distinction here between "White visuality," "White vision," and what Toni Morrison calls the "White gaze." In the groundwork for this dissertation laid out in

Chapter One, I use the term "vision" to describe the link between vision and knowledge in Western culture. I refer to the particular ways of looking that reinforce White ideologies as "White visuality" instead of "White vision" because, as I argue, the word "vision" works to naturalize and obscure its signification process.

In contrast, White *visuality* points to this way of seeing as specifically constructed by those with the "exclusive claim to look" (Mirzoeff); it references a particular state of looking that is guided by its sociocultural context and ideologies. Though the "White gaze" refers to the same default state of looking through the lens of Whiteness in Western culture, the gaze is commonly used in discussions relating to psychoanalytic (and specifically, Lacanian) desire and power—an angle I do not explore here.[17] I therefore employ the term "White visuality" in this dissertation to emphasize my core goal of teasing apart the mechanisms and processes of a racially oriented way of looking.

Though I have already provided a walkthrough of my personal motivation and investment in this project, I briefly revisit my positionality in relation to this work to explain the motivations behind selecting the photographic texts and to acknowledge the limitations of this research. As I mentioned in the preface, I am a 1.5 generation Korean-Canadian woman who came to this research in my personal reflections on what it means to "look Korean." So, why do certain chapters of this dissertation engage with reading photographs of Black subjects?

I will reveal here that earlier versions of this dissertation did not, for fear of taking up space that I do not have a claim to. But after two years of trying to pigeonhole my work into

[17] Two texts that offer a psychoanalytic reading of race and racialization are Farhad Dala's *Race, Colour and the Processes of Racialization* and Kalpana Seshandri-Crooks's *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*.

analyzing photographs of Asian subjects with only a passing reference to Black subjects, I accepted that a historical analysis of photography and race is impossible without looking at Black subjects. This is because the Manichean dichotomy between Blackness and Whiteness is a keystone of photographic history, but also because much of photographic history (i.e., its technologies and practices) is linked to the United States and is therefore entangled with its racial ideologies. Though this research draws heavily on discussions of Black photographic subjects and Black racial subjectivity, I emphasize that it does not speak for or claim to offer fundamental truths about Black people. Instead, it aims to reflect on the pivotal role of Black subjects in photographic constructions of race, as a foundation for understanding other forms of racial construction in and through photography, which I discuss in Chapter Four.

Nevertheless, as Harding's standpoint theory suggests, lived experiences provide unique perspectives and knowledges that cannot otherwise be accounted for. I therefore identify my position outside of Black communities as a non-Black person as a potential area of limitation, especially in reading photographs of Black subjects that are created by Black people. To address this limitation and to amplify Black voices on this subject, much of my dissertation builds on and is indebted to the work of Black scholars who research at the intersection of photography, discourse and ideology, and race.

I wish to comment on two additional limitations to this research that center around intersectional identities and positionality. This dissertation offers a preliminary genealogical model for understanding photographs, both analogue and digital, as racial discourse. Because my primary concern here is to excavate and establish how photography has advanced a racially oriented way of looking in Western culture, my research first and foremost prioritizes

tracing racial construction in relation to dominant photographic technologies and frames. However, it is important to remember that "race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience … [but] come into existence *in and through* relation to each other" (McClintock in Kendall 144). While I discuss gender at various points of this dissertation, specifically in discussing the hermeneutics of photographs that are produced within the military context (Chapters Two and Three) and in discussing augmented reality beauty filters (Chapter Four), this research would therefore benefit from a more sustained intersectional analysis of photographs as discourse.

The last point I want to make in this introduction is to once again acknowledge that this project's scope of research reflects my position as a North American scholar. Though undoubtedly, the neocolonial effects of globalization and real-time dissemination of digital photographs in the 21st century have widespread implications on present-day racial construction, this dissertation does not aim to make universal claims about the way photographs are produced beyond the Western context. I therefore call for related scholarly investigations of photographs as racial discourse that map its nuanced interplay within different cultural environments and national and geopolitical borders. Some early contributors to scholarship in this field that I previously mentioned include Rosalind C. Morris and Deborah Poole, who have examined analogue photographs from Siam (Thailand) and the Andes for their counter-discursive potential.

To conclude, this dissertation argues that our understanding of race and subjectivity are shaped by photographs and their conditions of production—that is, by photographic technologies and their social practices. As a visual mode historically entangled with Western

notions of objectivity, truth, and knowledge, photographs have taught and continue to teach us normative ways of being through the lens of White visuality. Photographs serve as more than just a visual supplement to written modes of communication—in using a seemingly innocuous technology to naturalize racial ideologies, they operate as everyday forms of racial discourse that independently impact power relations.

Yet as discursive formation is an ongoing process, this dissertation also advances photography as a means of producing countervisuality and racial counter-discourse, including within the digital age. Scholars like Bhabha establish that such projects of resistance must move beyond the binary identification of "positive" or "negative" images and illuminate processes of subjectification to challenge Western hegemony's claimed visual authority (95). "Being in th[is] 'beyond'," according to Bhabha, "is to inhabit an intervening space …. But to dwell 'in the beyond' is … to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future on its hither side"* (10). It is my hope that this dissertation will offer one way for us to dwell in the beyond of White visuality.

Chapter 1. Vision, Photography, and Knowledge: Ocularcentrism and Photography's Role in the Construction of White Supremacy

"As we can only read the past, as it were, in our present, and as the present is never still, then it makes sense to read the past as always being in transition, constantly redefining us in the present as we learn more about the historical conditions of our existence back then."
—Mark Sealy, *Decolonising the Camera*, p.106

"The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history… [that] has placed one where one is and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror because, therefore, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating; one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history."
—James Baldwin, "White Man's Guilt," August 1965, pp. 47-8

1.1 Introduction

Chapter One, "Vision, Photography, and Knowledge" and Chapter Two, "Racialized Respectability" emphasize how our present conditions frame our understanding of history at the same time that history also shapes these present conditions. Research on 21st century digital photography increasingly considers how analogue photography's particular form of racism has informed its relationship to contemporary photography. I therefore begin this dissertation and first chapter with an examination of analogue photography, with the aim to

answer the question: "How did analogue photography become equated with truth and objectivity to ascribe social value to racial subjectivity?"

Critical discourse theorist Teun van Dijk argues that ideologies are simultaneously acquired, expressed, and reproduced through discourses (115). In this chapter, I consider the relationship between analogue photography and Western epistemology to assert that photographs serve as a form of racial discourse that contributes to the construction of racial ideology. More specifically, this chapter considers photography's discursive role in 19th and early 20th century Europe and America and the construction of racial subjectivity and ideology within this cultural context.

Photography theorist Allan Sekula has established that Victorian society's conceptions of subjectivity were largely influenced by the dichotomy of bourgeois portrait photography and criminal mugshot photography. These two photographic poles worked in tandem as one way of instilling modernity's values into the viewing public. Though the mapping of interiority within these two frames is not explicitly characterized in relation to race, I argue that the social values that were associated with bourgeois and criminal subjects nevertheless align with the construction of racial subjectivity during this period. I therefore identify these frames as establishing the cultural foundation for reading photographic representations of racial subjectivity, which were developed across three key areas of 19th and 20th century photography, which I refer to as *photo-histories*: colonial photography, eugenics photography, and lynching photography.

In this chapter, I expand scholarship on these various studies of photography (Hight and Sampson; Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect*; Black; Morris-Reich; Cooks; R. Miller; Wood)

by braiding them together into a single archive and reading them in relation to Sekula's photographic poles. I examine how these photo-histories follow bourgeois portrait and criminal mugshot photography's early discursive function, which claims subjectivity as legible and thus comprehensible through external, bodily signs (Bourdieu). I also argue that in addition to producing race as a fixed and knowable trait, the photographic practices tied to each of these photo-histories further reify photography's authority as a truth-telling technology.

I refer to these distinct uses of photography as "photo-histories" in this chapter to center photography's role in these historical moments of racial construction. The term stresses that the development of particular photographic genres and the uses of photography as discourse are always already dependent on their historical moment. Yet as historical moments do not exist in isolation, framing these seemingly disparate photographic genres in relation to their respective social histories reinforces the interconnected nature of these photographic practices in the reification of a dominant racial ideology in Western culture.

I begin this chapter by providing an overview of ocularcentrism—that is, "the epistemological privileging of vision" (Warnke in Levin 287)—and its establishment in Western culture. Though this condensed review only scratches the surface of scholarship on this topic, it is nevertheless necessary here to understand the blind-faith attitude that underlies photographic use, even to this day. I also cover in this first section photography's invention and its relationship to ocularcentrism, and crucially, its uses in constructing a visual definition of ideal and deviant subjectivity in Victorian society.

The next three sections of this chapter follow the photo-histories outlined above. I examine colonial photography, eugenics photography, and lynching photography as key examples throughout Western history that used photography to naturalize and obscure the social construction of race. In examining these three photo-histories as part of one archive, I point to photography's continued discursive authority from one photo-history to another. Yet as discourses are never stable, but always involve a struggle over the control of symbolic power (Bourdieu; Terdiman), I end this chapter by introducing the idea that photographic technologies also offer the potential for producing countervisual discourse on racial subjectivity and ideology. I explore this idea in Chapter Two.

My methodology in this chapter combines a literature review on ocularcentrism and the persistence of vision (Doane) with a visual discourse analysis (Traue et al.) and colonial discourse analysis (Said; Spivak) of photography. With visual discourse analysis, images are perceived as more than just illustrative in function; rather, they are seen as the argument itself (Traue et al. 327). I trace here the uses of photography across three photo-histories to determine its central role in constructing colonial (i.e., White supremacist) knowledges about racial subjectivity.

Furthermore, my analysis in this chapter builds on the Foucauldian concepts of discipline (*Discipline and Punish*) and governmentality ("Politics of Health"), which remark upon the influence of visual systems on individual behaviour and group control, as well as on Nicholas Mirzoeff's work on visuality. Foucault describes discipline as produced by "a multiplicity of often minor processes, of different origin and scattered location, which overlap, repeat, or imitate one another … converge and gradually produce the blueprint of a

general method" (*Discipline and Punish* 138). Advancing a theory of visual discipline, Mirzoeff identifies visuality as "both a medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority, and a means for the mediation of those subject to that authority" (xv). Drawing from these theories, I argue that photography's repeated demonstrations of symbolic power throughout Western history produce a White visuality—that is, a form of visual racial discourse that disciplines perceptions of racial subjectivity according to a White supremacist ideology.

1.1.1 A Note on Positionality and the Ethics of Reproducing Violent Photographs

In the Introduction, I discussed the importance of acknowledging positionality in producing critically reflexive research. I provide a brief note here regarding my positionality and the reproduction of violent photographs in this chapter.

As artefacts of White supremacy, colonial photography, eugenics photography, and lynching photography document some of the most brutal and inhumane moments of our collective human history. As a "digital media and race" and a "photography and race" scholar, my job is to look at these images to analyze the particular ways of looking that were established by these photographs. In doing so, I have grappled with the following questions: "How can we look in a responsible way?" and "What are the ethics of reproduction for reprinting violent images?"

Most notably, while the photographs in this chapter all embody White supremacist beliefs, colonial and eugenics photographs typically depict symbolic as opposed to literal physical harm; they do not carry the same visual and emotional weight as photographs of Black lynching victims' murdered bodies. As a non-Black viewer and researcher, I recognize

that the hermeneutics of lynching photographs and their social and emotional effects are inevitably influenced by my position external to the affected community. Keeping in mind my distanced position in relation to these photographs, I have wondered: "Is it enough to describe the atrocities captured by lynching photography and to examine its contribution to racial ideology without reproducing the actual photographs?" "Is it better to refrain from reproducing them altogether to minimize their visual violence and harm?" Ironically, "is there an ethical way to reproduce such harmful images that avoids replicating their original practices of violent consumption?"

I ultimately decided to include three lynching photographs in this chapter using a modified format. My decision to include these photographs was informed by Black art historian and African American Studies scholar Bridget R. Cooks, who emphasizes that the context in which lynching photographs are presented and viewed affects their reception and informs viewers' responses to lynching practices (144). Following Cooks's example, I reproduce these photographs here within a specific scholarly and pedagogical context, as "evidence of the impact of racism and the horrors that result from the delusion of white supremacy" (137).

My method of reproduction for these photographs resembles strategies employed by artist Ken Gonzales-Day in his series "Erased Lynchings" and Shawn Michelle Smith in her chapter on lynching photography as spectacles of Whiteness (*Color Line*). Whereas Gonzales-Day digitally erases the Black victims in his reproductions of lynching photographs and Smith removes them by cropping the reproduced images, I redact the victims in the lynching photographs reproduced in this chapter using a white block. I have chosen to redact

the victims' faces and bodies instead of removing them altogether to signal the sensitive nature of the content without erasing the racial hierarchy depicted in the photographs, or the "objects" of the White mob's gaze and contemporary viewership. This strategic framing also underscores the status of lynching photographs as discursive texts that simultaneously work to construct White subjectivity. While redacted content is typically hidden using black lines, I use a white block in these images to underscore the notion of fading to White (i.e., to White visuality), which I addressed in the Introduction. This symbol also doubles as a sort of commentary on the performative black squares posted on Instagram in 2020, which I refer to in Chapter Three in the section on #BlackoutDay.

Though the move to erase parts of a photograph or obfuscate identity can be problematic in certain contexts, I argue that obfuscation within this context of dehumanization is an appropriate strategy that refuses to perpetuate photography as a form of racial violence. To ensure that these redacted images are not mistaken as an erasure of the Black victims' identities, I provide the victims' names in the accompanying captions. Though I cannot speak to the experiences of these photographs' Black viewers, it is my hope that in revisiting lynching photographs from a critical standpoint—in identifying their past uses as a discursive text for governing Black subjects and bodies—this chapter can help assess the history that has placed us in our current moment, and thus, in the words of James Baldwin, allow us to "enter into battle with that historical creation" to restructure our world "according to a principle more humane and more liberating" (47).

1.2 Putting the "Voir" in "Savoir": The Link Between Vision and Knowledge in Western Epistemology

1.2.1 Vision, Knowledge, and Ocularcentrism in Western Epistemology

The link between vision and knowledge stems back to the Classical period of Western philosophy (Flynn; Jay).[18] One of the earliest cited texts (and a common reference point for film and visual media scholars in particular) is Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," which characterizes visual representation and perception as offering an understanding of reality. In Plato's text, however, visual representations offer a distorted version of reality that ultimately impede one's knowledge of a greater Reality.

Despite being Plato's student, Aristotle's teachings on sense perceptions and Reality diverged from the earlier Platonic tradition. For Aristotle, "the senses [are] a gateway to reality" (Gregorić and Fink 15); they provide a reliable foundation through which individuals can understand the world around them. The Aristotelian tradition specifically argues that when combined with additional exercises in intellect, sensory perceptions (e.g., vision) can provide individuals with access to certain universal truths.

During the Enlightenment era, epistemological empiricism—the idea that knowledge is reducible to experience—was formally defended and strengthened by Western philosophers including Sir Francis Bacon and John Locke (Duignan et al.; Warnke 287). Bacon's scientific method especially challenged the 16th century's deference to religious authority, by arguing that Truth could be discovered through individual means. Introducing

[18] The terms used to describe these concepts vary slightly from the Classical period to Modernity, but ultimately refer to the same central idea. For instance, knowledge is commonly referred to as "reality" in Classical texts.

this concept in 1620 in *'Novum Organum'* ("New Instrument"), Bacon advanced that a methodological observation of external evidence would allow individuals to understand various truths about the (physical) state of the world.[19]

Empiricism's growing popularity during the Enlightenment was accompanied by the resurgence of an old, visual invention from around 6th CE. Named after the Latin words for "dark chamber" (Sarvas and Frohlich 9), the *camera obscura* became an established visual technology with which a subject could either observe "an exterior world through a small peephole, or through the inverted reflection of that world cast by a lens on the *camera obscura*'s interior wall" (Poole 81). Influenced by the attitude surrounding vision and knowledge, the prevailing belief during this period suggested that images seen through a *camera obscura* were thus a direct, objective depiction of an external reality (Doane 79; Shanks and Svabo 241).

However, the idea that vision produces absolute knowledge did not go uncontested for long. In 1637, René Descartes published his foundational work, *La Dioptrique* ("Optics"), to replace the idea of ocular vision (i.e., "objective" sight) "in favour of a concept … [that] affirms the arbitrary relation between the object of vision and the impression that object generates" (Judovitz 64).[20] Scholars including Thomas R. Flynn (283) and Martin Jay (153) point out that this distinction suggests an early recognition within Western epistemology of the eye's entanglement with the subjective "I." Yet even with the emerging critique of vision

[19] Bacon's observational method diverged from the aims of previous claims about vision and knowledge, as it was created to explain the occurrence of natural phenomena rather than for establishing philosophical or social "truths" about the world.

[20] Descartes' very use of the word "optics" instead of "vision" (*la vision*) or "sight" (*la vue*) in the title of this work is revealing of his critical stance.

as knowledge, mainstream culture leading into and during the 18th century continued to see a high demand for an "artist-observer [that is] an objective or neutral conduit for the perception of immediate physical reality" (Poole 163).

This position changed in the early 19th century with a shift in scholarship on vision and objectivity. Mary Ann Doane describes this period as characterized by a scientific interest in physiological optics, or "the increasing embodiment and subjectivization of vision" (79). Optical theories of vision specifically delineated the eye's role in processing external visual stimuli to demonstrate vision's "open[ness] to specific social manipulations" (79). For instance, Eadweard Muybridge's image series "The Horse in Motion," which breaks down a horse's movement into six still shots to demonstrate how vision is processed, was commonly used as an example to illustrate vision's subjectivity. This scientific rupture to Western culture's dominant theories of vision produced the ideal conditions for traditional ocularcentrists to embrace photography's invention.

The technology to affix an image from a *camera obscura* into a permanent photograph was produced during The Industrial Revolution. Using a process he called heliography, French inventor Joseph Niépce produced the first permanent photograph, "View from the Window at Le Gras," in his country home in 1826. Heliography, like subsequent forms of analogue photography, was based on a chemical process: the photographer would place a pewter plate coated in bitumen (a derivative of petroleum) inside a *camera obscura* and would expose the treated plate to light through the mechanism's lens. Over several hours, the bitumen would be hardened by the light; the remaining bitumen was then dissolved using

a mixture of lavender oil and white petroleum to render the latent image visible (B. Brown). Niépce's first plate is recorded as taking a total of eight hours to expose.

In the following years, the photographic process was further refined. In 1837, Louis Daguerre invented the daguerreotype, which rendered detailed image positives from a camera onto a silver-coated copper plate that was sensitized with iodine. After light exposure, the plate was developed using mercury, and the resulting image was fixed using a salt solution, then toned with gold chloride. The earliest daguerreotypes are recorded as taking three to fifteen minutes to expose, though it was later shortened to under a minute with developments in photographic lenses and changes to the chemical process. Daguerreotypes could also be reproduced, opening up the possibility for photography's commercialization ("Daguerreotype Medium").[21]

Then, c.1840, the calotype was invented by William Talbot. The calotype exposed a piece of sensitized paper—first treated with a silver nitrate and potassium iodide solution, then coated with silver nitrate—to light within a *camera obscura*. The resulting negative was then developed using more silver nitrate, rinsed with water, and fixed in a potassium bromide bath ("Calotype Process"). In 1851, the collodion wet plate process, which used a camera to expose a glass plate coated in silver iodide and developed the image using a pyrogallic acid solution, was invented by Frederick Archer. Finally, in 1871, Richard Maddox developed the gelatin dry plate process, which was based on a glass plate coated with a silver bromide gelatin emulsion. The dry plate was the first photographic surface that could be prepared well in advance of image exposure, and therefore also capable of being factory-produced. It was

[21] Despite being invented by Niépce in 1826, photography's invention is commonly also dated to 1839 to reflect when the medium became practical to use (Emerling 97).

also the last advancement of photographic plates, as it was superseded by Eastman Kodak's development of celluloid film in the early 1900s (Sarvas and Frohlich 71, 81).

Photography's invention and refinement during the 19th century was crucial to the continued dominance of vision in Western culture. Just as physiological optics began to challenge vision's claims of objectivity, photography offered a material form of vision that appeared to be externalized from the viewer's body (Poole 81). While photography did not assuage concerns about vision's subjectivity altogether, especially amongst intellectual circles in in the Arts (e.g., psychology, philosophy, etc.), its disembodiment abstracted vision in a way that underplayed and erased the "experiential, all-too-human character" of the photographer's sensory experience (Judovitz 70). Modernity's valorization of science, technology, and objectivity during this time especially propelled photography's popularity within scientific fields, leading the late 19th and early 20th centuries to be characterized by the principle of ocularcentrism (Jenks; Levin; Morris-Reich).

1.2.2 Governing Subject Bodies: Visual Discipline in Bourgeois Portrait and Criminal Mugshot Photography

In addition to its reputation as a tool of truth and objectivity, it is well-established in various fields of scholarship in the Humanities and Social Sciences that photography's "formulat[ion] in a historical context of scientific discovery, the development of a capitalist economy and the rise of European nations as colonial powers" (Doy 35) sedimented its uses in knowledge production and Western cultural expansion (Crary; Doane; Doy; Hayes; Houlgate; Poole). I specify that photography played an essential role in establishing and advancing Western socioeconomic dominance during this period by constructing a visual

representation of subjectivity. The formation of modernity's ideal subject, in particular, allowed colonial nations to discipline subject bodies by producing a system of visual difference that imbued its colonial subjects with negative social value.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that disciplinary systems or technologies provide the acting subject with power by offering visual knowledge about the other. Though Foucault does not advance a discussion of photography specifically, his classic example of the Panopticon demonstrates how vision, knowledge, and power come together to form a disciplinary apparatus. Such systems of discipline provide those in power with control over "docile bodies," which "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" to support a society's collective goals (136).

Expanding on this theorization of power, Foucault argues that 18th century Europe is characterized by the concept of biopower, which treats "health and disease as problems requiring … collective control measures" by society ("Politics of Health" 275). He asserts that in making people's health, which vaguely includes "instability," an issue of socioeconomic concern, biopower normalized the intervention of state, medical, and religious organizations on individuals' bodies. Governmentality was thus established as the primary social and organizational force driving the 19th century. With modernity's belief that science and technology would lead to social improvement, "medico-administrative knowledge"—and specifically, the attribution of specific visual characteristics to "health" and "disease"—became increasingly important. Foucault asserts that medical designations allowed the "biological traits of a population [to] become relevant factors for economic

management" to "ensure not only [the individuals'] subjection but the constant increase of their utility" for society ("Politics of Health" 279).

Similarly, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu highlights the significance of bodies in determining social value. Though he does not use the term "discipline," Bourdieu determines that the measurement of material forms *including bodies* forms part of the methodology for classifying symbolic capital, or an individual's power and authority, which in turn informs a society's social positions and social order (297).[22] Indeed, writing on visual recognition, power, and discipline, Mirzoeff underscores that visuality, or social organizations and processes of looking that are established by a culture's dominant groups, specifically produce "a training of minds, organized so as to sustain both physical segregation between rulers and ruled, and mental compliance with those arrangements" (5).[23]

Viewing photography as a disciplinary tool, Sekula argues that bourgeois portrait photography and criminal photography—two photographic frames from the 19th century—operated as a double system of representation that "function[ed] both *honorifically* and *repressively*" to help shape the Victorian public's understanding of modern subjectivity (6). On the honorific side of this system, bourgeois portrait photographs depicted economically and therefore socially successful individuals, producing an image of respectable subjectivity (Batchen 82; Langford 531). The *carte-de-visite* or "calling card" (see figure 4), a popular form of bourgeois portrait photography, particularly celebrated its subjects' modern qualities. Reproducing and extending existing visual codes from across art history (i.e., aristocratic paintings), it "embodie[d] the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie and its systems of social and

[22] Norbert Elias's book, *The Civilizing Process*, also focuses on visual signifiers of class difference.
[23] Bhabha also writes that "the work of hegemony is itself the process of iteration and differentiation" (42).

economic life" within its (White) middle-class subjects (Batchen 86). Art historian Geoffrey Batchen identifies, for instance, "the tumbling curtain, the classical column, [and] the receding landscape" as examples of shared visual codes between aristocratic paintings and the *carte-de-visite* (86).



Figure 4. A *carte-de-visite* of Mrs. C. Howland, c. 1860, André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri[24]

I identify that the crux of this social signalling is rooted in the middle-class subject's familiarity with Western culture—that is, in their recognition of cultural codes and conventions as a form of symbolic capital. Bourdieu states that:

> Symbolic capital, together with the forms of profit and power it warrants, exists only in the relationship between distinct and distinctive properties, such as the body

[24] Source: André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, *Mrs. C. Howland*, c. 1860, *National Gallery of Canada*, gallery.ca/photo-blog/collecting-cards-cartes-de-visite.

> proper, language, clothing, interior furnishings … and the individuals or groups *endowed with schemata of perception or appreciation that predispose them to recognize … these properties*, that is, to constitute them into expressive styles, transformed and unrecognizable forms of positions in relations of force" (297, emphasis added).

Thus, the *carte-de-visite* came to signify respectable subjectivity in Western culture by symbolically distinguishing its subjects from others using recognizable visual signs. For viewers who were able to recognize its cultural signs, this photographic form not only signalled the photographic subject's material comfort and wealth—it also suggested their intellectual superiority by showcasing the subject's own familiarity with and appreciation for the visual language of art history (see also Pollen 293).

I establish that the *carte-de-visite* advanced a form of visual discipline in two ways. First, because it was produced using the wet collodion process, which used a multi-lens camera and a moving plate holder to make eight images at a time, it introduced photographs to Victorian society as a relatively inexpensive and reproducible commodity item (Batchen 81). The portrait's accelerated reproducibility, along with the novelty of being able to own the representation of well-known social figures, guaranteed its success within the 19th century's economy of exchange (Sekula 8). The mass reproduction of this photographic form therefore reified the notion of bourgeois subjectivity by widely disseminating an established and recognizable image of embodied modernity.

Indeed, bourgeois portrait photographs were associated with a specific set of poses: while subjects could act out different poses during its production, photographic poses were

ultimately "limited to a system of established conventions and constraints—some technical, some cultural, and some social—which were formally conveyed to the client by the actions and advice of the photographer" (Batchen 82). These photographs also adhered to a standard print quality and format and conventionally depicted the full length of the subject's body. Batchen points out that the *carte-de-visite*'s conventions were so rigid that this photographic form is often disparaged by art historians, who describe it as "repetitive and predictable," "mechanical and routine," as well as "formulaic" (80-1; also Langford 534); it is even described in one case as producing a practice of "conformist tyranny" (Sagne in Batchen 80).

Second, in purporting to capture the essence of bourgeois subjectivity, the *carte-de-visite* normalized physiognomic practice in Western culture. André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, who patented the *carte-de-visite* process in 1854, states: "one must be able to deduce who the subject is, to deduce spontaneously his character, his intimate life, his habits; the photographer must do more than photograph, he must '*biographe*'" (qtd. in Batchen 82, emphasis added). In conflating the bourgeoisie aesthetic with honour and respectability and treating these photographs as an indicator of the subjects' inner character, bourgeois portrait photography disciplined its viewers by producing a form of subjectivity to which they should aspire; it inspired "an imaginary [social] mobility on this vertical scale" through the use of photography (Sekula 10).

At the other end of the visual system, photography was used to "repress" or discourage a different kind of subjectivity. Sekula informs us that photography was initially rejected within the 19th century judicial space due to "a crisis of faith in optical empiricism" (16) and the idea that using it as a method of criminal identification was considered

degrading to what was originally a bourgeois medium (Jones).[25] But continued beliefs in physiognomy and phrenology during this period and the looming threat of criminality's "disease" to modernity's socioeconomic structure (Foucault, "Politics of Health") ultimately rationalized photography's use within the criminal justice system.[26]

Rejecting early attempts to police criminality using "Rogues' Galleries," which were public-facing, informal collections of criminal portraits (Long 30; Schwartz), two formal systems of criminal "detection" were developed in the 1880s with the aim of "ground[ing] photographic evidence in more abstract *statistical* methods" (Sekula 18). First, a system of "criminal types" was devised by English statistician and father of eugenics Francis Galton.[27] Second, a system of criminal identification was created by French police official Alphonse Bertillon (Sekula 19). Though these photographic applications addressed criminality in different ways, they collectively established visual characterizations of deviancy for the purpose of governance.

Motivated by an interest in genetics and heredity, Galton devised a statistical application of photography to suggest that inherited criminality could be identified through visual processes. His methodology of composite photography (see figure 12) aimed "to construct a *purely optical* apparition of the criminal type" or an average image of the socially "unfit" (Sekula 19), which he would later use to advance eugenicist arguments about the

[25] For instance, part of a poem by Cuthbert Bede published in *Punch* magazine in 1853 reads: "Grave as the fact is, one might laugh/ Almost to see the photograph/ So ignominiously applied/ To serve as the Policeman's guide" (Jones).
[26] Within the judicial context, beliefs in physiognomy and phrenology suggested that criminal traits could be recognized within a person's physical characteristics, particularly by examining their face and head.
[27] Galton's system of criminal types later influenced the father of criminology, Cesare Lombroso, who argued in the late 1800s that phrenology and body types could effectively predict criminality (Holland).

need for selective reproduction in society. Though Galton went on to be much more influential in the field of eugenics as I discuss below, his development of composite photography in the 19th century also popularized the idea that criminality was genetically inevitable for certain groups of people and that these criminal types could be recognized by their physical characteristics.

In contrast, Bertillon invented the modern-day criminal "mugshot" photograph in an attempt to validate portraiture as a scientific method of criminal identification (see figure 5). Named after the colloquial term for "face," mugshots "required convicts to pose for two photos: a portrait photograph and a profile photograph, both against a plain backdrop with controlled lighting" for documentation within a criminal database (Jones). Mugshot photography also required the stringent documentation of accompanying anthropometric measurements, such as the length of the convict's middle finger and detailed verbal descriptions of the subject (Schwartz). Such standardized codes and conventions were designed to help identify repeat offenders who were deemed a socioeconomic burden on society. Like bourgeois portrait photography, criminal photography therefore worked to discipline the Victorian public in two ways: it identified and categorized supposed characteristics of criminality by drawing on beliefs in physiognomy and used its visual "logic" to discourage viewers from displaying such characteristics.

Despite their depiction of dichotomous subjects, bourgeois and criminal photography thus form a unified system of discipline and governance that marks certain subject bodies as ones to strive toward and others as ones to avoid. These genres therefore demonstrate that photography was used in the 19th century to construct a social order based on the legibility of

subject bodies. As the health of Western society (i.e., colonial capitalism) depends on the preservation of a social hierarchy, I argue in the following sections of this chapter that bourgeois and criminal photography played an understated but essential role in European and American (i.e., White) cultural expansion.



Figure 5. A mugshot (profile and portrait) of inmate no. 965, 1905, Alphonse Bertillon[28]

1.2.3 From Discipline to Discourse: Photography's Afterimage and the Establishment of Racial Ideology

Similar to bourgeois and criminal photography's disciplinary function, I argue that colonial photography, eugenics photography, and lynching photography established recognizable images of respectable and deviant subjectivity. However, where discussions of

[28] Source: Alphonse Bertillon, "mugshot of inmate no. 965, Trotter Mitchell," 1905, *Britannica,* britannica.com/topic/mug-shot.

the honorific and repressive genres do not typically address race, these three photo-histories worked closely with racialized bodies to produce inferior subjects within modernity's social order. Expanding on the idea that photography disciplines both its photographic subjects and viewers, I assert that these photo-histories collectively construct a form of racial discourse that draws on photography's authority and its bourgeois-criminal forms to strengthen the ideology of White supremacy.

In a telling comparison that points to photography's potential for producing discourse, critical theorist Susan Sontag compares photography's function to that of language. She states, "In teaching us a new visual code, photographs *alter and enlarge* our notions of what is *worth looking at* and what we have a right to observe. They are a *grammar* and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing" (3, emphasis added). Understood as grammar, I argue that a photograph (or a photographic genre) and its codes and conventions provide its audiences with a particular worldview; that is, they point the viewers beyond the constraints of a photograph's frame to a specific, culturally informed version of reality (Batchen 94). For example, as the *carte-de-visite* borrows its visual codes from aristocratic paintings, these photographs subsume the worldview and function of painted portraits; in doing so, they frame the subjects in question as respectable individuals.

As the dependency of the *carte-de-visite's* interpretation on a knowledge of Western art history shows, however, photographic codes are indexical. They connect "the individual object, on the one hand … with the senses … of the person for whom it serves as a sign" (Peirce qtd. in Batchen 92). Contrary to Disdéri's implication that photographs produce an objective representation of their subjects, a key part of a photograph's legibility therefore

hinges on its viewers' existing cultural knowledge and their subsequent potential for imagination. The *carte-de-visite* does not require an *actual* bourgeois subject to produce this recognition; rather, the viewer's familiarity with the photographic genre and its established codes and conventions produces an *imagined truth* that leads them to perceive the depicted individual as a bourgeois subject (T. Morrison 4). Reproduced and repeated on a mass scale, this imagined truth becomes a form of discourse, and reinforces and strengthens a culture's existing ideologies.

In this way, photography's discursive process is similar to the "afterimage," which Doane describes as a "persistence of vision" that exceeds beyond a photograph's material limits. In its original context in the 19th century's study of physiological optics (and later, in studies of cinema), the term indicates the optical retention of an image over time, or more specifically, the lingering impression on one's retina once an image has disappeared (Doane 82). Doane explains that this impression forms because our memory "prolongs a plurality of moments into each other, contracting them into a single intuition" (77).

I employ the afterimage here as a metaphor to argue that the perception of multiple similar photographs over time coalesces into a persistent impression that forms a greater "truth" for the photographs' primary audiences. Like the use of multiple consecutive images in cinema to produce a legible field of motion (Doane 70) and the *carte-de-visite's* repetition of a set of visual codes to form a recognizable image of bourgeois subjectivity, I assert that the racial impressions produced by colonial photography, eugenics photography, and lynching photography build on the representations of preceding image forms, including one another, to construct an ideological "reality" pertaining to racial subjectivity. What remains

to be seen is exactly how each of these genres subsume the codes and conventions of bourgeois respectability and criminal deviancy to produce new but recognizable forms of visual racial discourse.

1.3 Photographic Economies and Equivalencies: Colonial Photographs, "Slave" Photographs, and *Cartes Postales* as Colonial Discourse

In *Photographies East,* Rosalind C. Morris asserts that photography was more than an afterthought in the colonial arsenal—it served as one of its foundational tools for the dissemination of colonial thinking in the 19th century. This section analyzes colonial photography as a tool of ideological discipline during European and American colonialism. I illustrate how colonial photography's deployment, photographs of enslaved African people, and *cartes postales* (photographs that were commodified as colonial postcards) are directly aligned with Europe and America's preoccupation with science, capitalism, and subjectivity in modernity. I identify this photo-history's specific codes and conventions, including its choice of photographic subject, framing, perspective, etc., to argue that colonial photography was actively constructed to shape its White audiences' perceptions of racial inferiority.

1.3.1 Standardizing Racial Difference in Colonial Photography

The invention of photography in the 1800s coincided with colonial Europe's need for an effective tool of ideological dissemination. As I previously discussed, the invention of the daguerreotype in 1837 shortened the length of photographic processing from hours to minutes; two years later, in 1839, the calotype's invention allowed early photographers to easily reproduce a single image (Sarvas and Frohlich). Though it took several decades for their conventions to become fully established, "racial-type" photographs were taken as early

as the 1840s (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 21), just a few years after the daguerreotype and calotype's invention. Named after its primary function in classifying race, early racial-type photography was produced using a mix of visual techniques borrowed from painters and sculptors across art history and from anatomists and phrenologists in the field of biological science.[29]

By the 1870s, colonial photography became more fully established as a genre with distinguished codes and conventions. Anne Maxwell argues that the solidification of this genre was due in part to Europe's successes in colonial expansion: with rapid advancements in colonization, members of European nations expressed growing concerns that these "primitive" cultures were disappearing too quickly without a trace. A record of primitivity was essential to establishing the European nations' socioeconomic prowess; it was thought that a visual "documentation" of foreign lands and people prior to their colonization would both map Europe's colonial "achievements" and demonstrate colonialism's moral necessity by providing "evidence" of a clear racial hierarchy for audiences back home. Photography thus joined other scientific and archival technologies of the 19th century that allowed these nations to continue their colonial pursuits while simultaneously preserving a record of the diminishing native cultures (Doane 82; Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 36).

Standardized visual conventions in colonial photography, which collectively produced an anthropometric style, were specifically developed for two purposes: they offered an empirical element that helped legitimize colonial photography's "scientific nature" to

[29] Though phrenology is included in the field of biology, it is now commonly accepted as a pseudoscience.

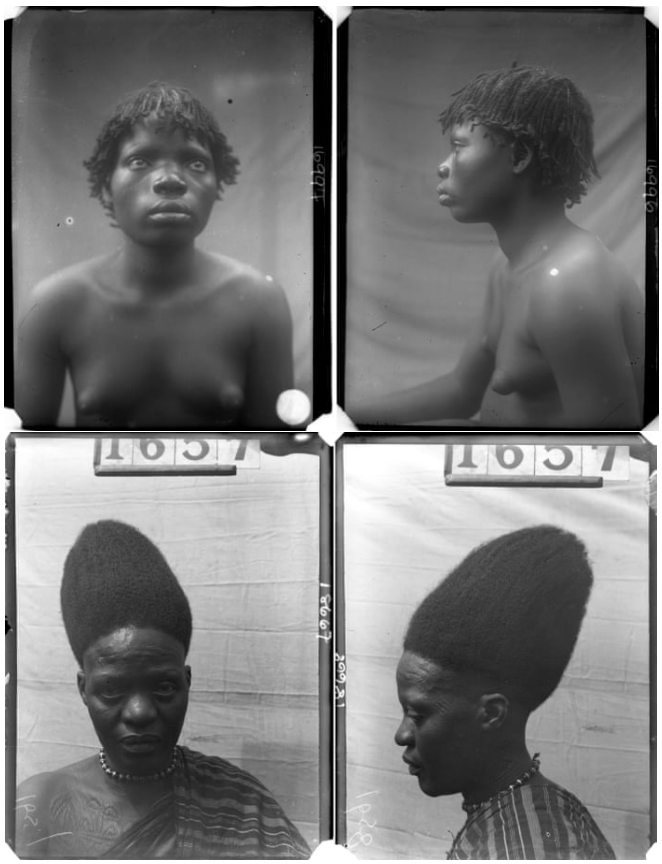
audiences, and also helped streamline the documentary process.[30] Colonial photography required its subjects to be photographed in relative isolation from the environment to emphasize their "visible markers of racial distinction" from the photographs' White audiences (Hight and Sampson 3). I add that in decontextualizing their physical characteristics from the surrounding environment, colonial photography had the added effect of naturalizing native subjects' physiological differences as inherent to their racial group. Such emphasis on physical difference presented race as a "law" of reality that offered viewers access to a greater social truth instead of as a social concept (Bourdieu 293).

Colonial photographs also depicted racialized individuals who were photographed from a fixed distance using an "anthropometer" or measuring stick, which was used to ensure uniformity in photographic scale (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 30). As these photographs served as a proxy for the colonial photographers' visual experiences of colonization by extending their vision across time and space to European audiences (Doane), I assert that this enforcement of physical distance during photographic production did more than produce an air of scientific empiricism: it doubled as a symbolic reminder of the supposed evolutionary distance between the photographer and colonial subjects' respective racial groups.

By 1873, standardization in anthropological photography included the depiction of colonial subjects from a profile, frontal, or posterior view, resembling the codes and conventions of criminal mugshot photography. These subjects were posed partially or completely unclothed against a plain backdrop (Hight and Sampson 3; Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 42). Collectively, these conventions invited the photographs' White audiences to

[30] Maxwell identifies that anthropologists Thomas Henry Huxley and John Lamprey were central to the development of anthropometric conventions for photographing native subjects (*Picture Imperfect* 29).

fully survey the subjects' visible racial difference by providing them with multiple perspectives of the subjects' bare bodies (see figure 6, top). Less frequently, colonial subjects were photographed wearing clothes that would denote their profession, class, or culture (see figure 6, bottom), to further illustrate their "primitive" nature (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 42-3).[31] Despite their differences in degree of dress, both practices represented colonial subjects as scientific specimens to be studied, categorized, and catalogued rather than as human beings, ensuring their establishment as a racial "Other" in the eyes of the European public (DeRoo 162).



[31] The photographic curation of cultural clothing to denote a specific imagined truth continues into present-day. On September 22, 2023, photographer Peter McKinnon published a photo of a Navajo man in a headdress to his Instagram account (@petermckinnon). This representation is misleading as headdresses are not a part of Navajo culture, and sparked controversy amongst his followers (listed as 3.2 million at the time of publication).

Figure 6. Anthropological photographs of unclothed (top) vs. clothed (bottom) colonial subjects[32]

1.3.2 Colonial Photography in the United States: American "Slave" Photography

While colonial photography's conventions were formally established as a scientific method in the latter part of the 19th century, they are also present in early photographs of enslaved people in the United States. In 1850, Harvard natural historian Louis Agassiz commissioned 15 daguerreotypes of enslaved African American individuals that were based on practices of physical anthropology (the use of anatomy to differentiate between racial types; Hight and Sampson 3; Smith, *Color Line* 46). With the assistance of photographer Joseph Thomas Zealy, Agassiz specifically produced daguerreotype images of African "slaves" in Colombia, South Carolina as a form of scientific "evidence" for polygenesis—the idea that "different races constituted distinct species, created uniquely, separately, and unequally" (Smith, *Color Line* 46).[33] Such photographs were popular with the pro-slavery movement in the United States prior to the Civil War (1861-1865), since they allowed White Americans to "justify" the systematic enslavement of African Americans while simultaneously proclaiming the nation's virtues (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 22-3).

According to Maxwell and Smith, Zealy's daguerreotypes of enslaved subjects used conventions that were distilled from scientific fields. These photographs depicted the enslaved subjects in three ways: 1) standing naked, with their full bodies photographed from

[32] Source: Northcote Thomas, "A woman in Ogori, Kogi State, Nigeria," 1910; Elexnaii of Otua, Otuo, Edo State, Nigeria," 1909, *The Guardian,* theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2019/nov/19/the-anthropologists-africa-in-pictures-faces-voices.

[33] The legal battle over this collection of photos—specifically, over photos of subjects known as Renty and Delia—was only just resolved in May 2025. These photographs are to be transferred from Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology to the International African American Museum in South Carolina, where the subjects had been enslaved in 1850 (Willingham).

frontal, profile, and rear angles, 2) sitting naked from the waist up, with only the top half of their bodies photographed from frontal and profile angles (see figure 7 for an example of a front-facing photo), and 3) with a phrenological emphasis, photographing their heads and naked torsos under harsh lighting (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 24; Smith, *Color Line* 46-7).

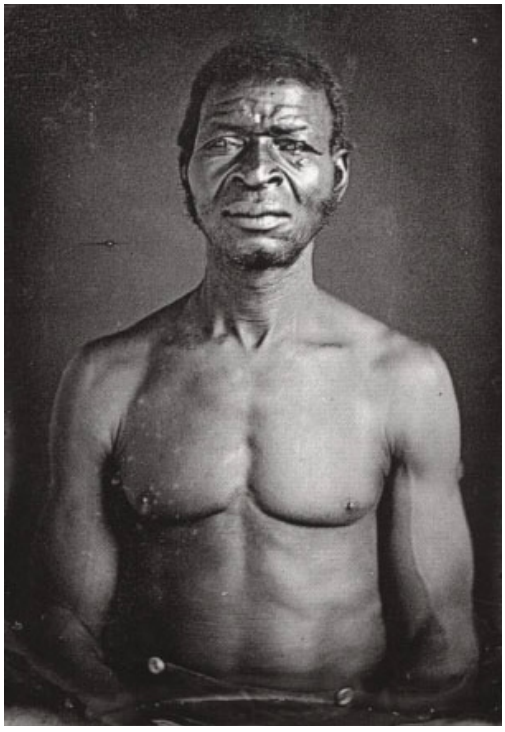


Figure 7. A daguerreotype of Jack, an enslaved African American man, 1850, J.T. Zealy[34]

In addition to proffering "evidence" of "African Americans' anatomical uniqueness" (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 24), Smith argues that these daguerreotypes contrasted daguerreotype portraits of White bourgeois subjects by offering an exaggerated scientific gaze. Whereas bourgeois photographs were commissioned by the photographic subjects themselves and relied on signs of material wealth to signify their supposed superiority, these "slave" photographs were taken with permission from their subjects' purported masters

[34] Source: Joseph T. Zealy, *Jack (driver),* 1850, International African American Museum, *Wikimedia Commons,* commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jack1850FrontZealy.jpg.

rather than the subjects themselves, reinforcing the violent objectification and ownership of enslaved people's bodies. Indeed, each daguerreotype was accompanied by a written description of the subject's first name and ethnicity, as well as the name of their "owner" and respective plantation (Smith, *Color Line* 47). Furthermore, the lack of clothing in these "slave" portraits stripped these images of material markers, placing these subjects outside any considerations of culture and removing potential notions of socioeconomic success from the audience's imagination.

1.3.3 Colonial Imaginings: Constructing Alterity with Cartes Postales

Apart from photography's uses for "scientific" aims in Europe and America, a subgenre of colonial photography was also developed that was directly situated within modernity's economic system. Compared to anthropometric photography, which taught its viewers to see colonial subjects' racial difference and "inferiority" as an innate quality, *cartes postales* (colonial postcards) worked by extending the photographs' equivalency and interchangeability to the colonial subjects to further "justify" colonization. According to Hayes, these photographs "enable[d] and prepare[d] terrain for colonization" by transforming colonial places and subjects into stereotyped and readily commodifiable images of alterity for consumption by Euro-American audiences (176).

Historian Amos Morris-Reich argues that photography's establishment of race demonstrates something "more essential than physiognomic differences, sensory perception, or the connection between perception and cognition"—it demonstrates the role of imagination (21). Similarly, in her explication of photography's meaning-making process, Poole writes:

> We do not simply 'see' what is there before us. Rather, the specific ways in which we see (and represent) the world determine how we act upon that world and, in so doing, *create what that world is*. It is here, as well, that the social nature of vision comes into play, since both the seemingly individual act of seeing and the more obviously social act of *representing occur in historically specific networks of social relations* (7, emphasis added).

Indeed, photography's employment for colonial world-building is apparent, as photographers were considered an integral part of colonial expeditions. Colonial photographers were White men who were trained in Europe and were then deployed from the home nations to the colonies (DeRoo 160). As such, their representation of these "new" worlds was heavily shaped by an imagination that was constructed in relation to Western European ideologies and culture. *Cartes postales* were specifically produced by subsuming and reproducing the racist imaginings and styles of "picturesque illustrations and … paintings, which were already coded with the ideology of cultural alterity" (Erdogdu 122). Colonial subjects thus functioned in these photographs as one "exotic" part of the image among other stage-setting elements such as landscape and architecture, which collectively constructed the colony as an imaginary "Other."

For example, the *carte postale* of Algeria from 1905 shown in figure 8 below represents the Algerian Casbah—the citadel of Algiers—as mysterious and unknowable (DeRoo). Depicted as both figuratively and literally crumbling, I argue that this photograph of Algeria conforms to and reinforces existing visualizations of Algerian alterity for its French audiences. The depiction of the boy and his donkey, for instance, presents a stark

contrast against the image of European modernity by representing Algeria as set in its primitive ways. This representation does more than confirm pre-existing perceptions: it builds on previous cultural images of colonial alterity to produce an afterimage that binds Algeria and its people to the past within the European public's imagination.



Figure 8. Algerian *carte postale,* 1905[35]

More specifically, by freezing an image of Algeria as crumbling and yielding to overgrown nature, this *carte postale* captures "an essence doomed to vanish; not a fixed moment, but stasis" (Morris 13). Morris argues that such historical freezing is characteristic

[35] Source: Neurdein Frères—ND Photographic Studio, "Alger—Une Rue de la Casbah," 1905.

of photography; it creates a fissure that separates the past and cuts it off from its own future, thereby limiting potential realizations of the future to this "ideal" colonialist image of the past (9). The photograph in figure 8 freezes its specific depiction of old-world Algeria in its viewers' imagination, framing the Algerian people as a group for whom modernization is beyond reach.[36] This image persists within the European public imagination to resist all other impressions (Doane 81), including any proof of Algeria's growth beyond the reaches of colonization.[37]

Despite constructing an imaginary image, photography's association with scientific objectivity uniquely granted this technology an authority uncommon to earlier forms of visual representation. In addition to reproducing outdated (and racist) stereotypes as truth, photography obscured the fact that its representation of alterity may be manipulated to conform to a particular worldview (Erdogdu 122). Yet it was not uncommon for colonial photographers to practice multiple forms of photographic manipulation from staging to framing (Morris 131). For example, Erdogdu reveals that in the photograph shown in figure 9, which depicts two individuals in a natural setting wearing elaborate Kurdish "costumes," certain details like the rocks in the photograph's foreground were fabricated using papier-mâché props to reinforce the image of primitivity (111).

[36] Similar photographs and writings exist on Indigenous populations in the Americas. For example, in her piece about the American photographer Edward S. Curtis and the blurring of subjectivity and truth in his photographs, Ellie Gascoigne points out that Curtis removed a clock from his 1910 photograph *In a Piegan Lodge* to erase markers of American modernity from the otherwise Indigenous-looking environment.

[37] Indeed, postcolonialists such as Said and Spivak establish that stereotypical representations of the colonies are "not defined by actual topographical or political boundaries but exis[t] as a construction of the Western imagination" (Hight and Sampson 6).

Photographic manipulation was also common within American colonial photography, especially with the photographing of "Indians," holy spaces, and dances, where Indigenous people were sometimes paid "to pose and … revise their ceremonies to provide more photogenic material" (Sontag 64). Indeed, the practice of photographic manipulation was not exclusive to colonial photography; it was practiced in all forms of analogue photography including bourgeois portrait photography, where subjects performed a specific recognizable representation of bourgeois respectability (Batchen 87).[38]



Figure 9. Staging manipulation in a photograph of two Kurds, c.1880s, Basile Kargopoulo[39]

[38] Batchen notes, for instance, that some subjects were photographed in studio settings "pretending to row a boat on a painted pond … or sitting atop a mast on board a faked tall ship" (87).
[39] Source: Basile Kargopoulo, "Costumes kurdes," c.1880s.

Apart from representing the colonial imagination, *cartes postales* also illustrated photography's suitability to the imperial agenda in another way. Sontag points out that compared to other forms of representation like painting, photography allows its creators to easily capture large numbers of subjects at once, and to rapidly circulate and increase consumption of its subject matter (7). Indeed, despite its relative lack of standardization compared to colonial photography's scientific form, *cartes postales* also had their own distinct conventions in photographic sizing, subject poses, backdrops, and props (Poole 16), suggesting the importance of replicability.[40]

Following the *carte-de-visite's* economic success, *cartes postales* rose in popularity within European colonial nations, where they were consumed for their novelty and as a symbol of pride in the imperial project (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 21). However, where the *carte-de-visite* was exchanged as a way of expressing a social connection or significance, the primary value of colonial *cartes postales* came from their aforementioned representation of colonial places and people as an "exotic" commodity object (Poole 132).

The fact that photographic details were manipulated to fit with an existing imaginary ideal then treated as "evidence" of a racial and cultural hierarchy reveals photography's central role in advancing colonialist discourse.[41] By establishing the colonies and colonial subjects as the antithesis of White modernity and progress, *cartes postales* helped forge a

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[40] *Cartes postales* are said to lack standardization compared to documentary photos because their photographers often found themselves in contexts where they held varying positions of power in relation to their photographic subjects. Interestingly, as they could not enforce the standardized conventions previously established by anthropometric photography, Maxwell notes that colonial postcards therefore incorporated some of the "aesthetic techniques associated with the honorific tradition of portrait photography" out of necessity (*Picture Imperfect* 34).

[41] Another example of this is examined in Thomas R. Metcalf's 1986 study on Britain's use of photography in colonizing India (Hight and Sampson 9).

hierarchical relationship between colonial subjects and colonial powers. In other words, while the subject matter of these postcards typically depicted colonial people and places, I argue that these photographs also presented a claim about members of the colonial powers by stressing their subjects' deviation from a European norm, ultimately solidifying an image of White modern subjectivity within European public imagination.[42]

1.4 From Colonization to Genocide: The Role of Eugenics Photography in American "Racial Science"

For members of colonial nations, photography's installment as a visual system of anthropological "documentation" and collection further validated its effectiveness as an empirical tool. However, while colonial photography offered its viewers a visual reference for colonial racial difference, it did not offer an explanation for the origins of this "inherent" difference. This project was later assumed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by a new but related genre developed within Europe and America: eugenics photography.

From between 1880 to 1920, the growing field of eugenics pseudoscience borrowed frameworks of standardization from bourgeois and criminal photography—and by extension, also colonial photography—to provide an empirical explanation for class and racial difference (Morris-Reich 35). I argue that eugenics photography played a medico-administrative role (Foucault, "Politics of Health") during this period in the United States to strengthen the social position of those in power. By claiming to offer scientific proof of racial difference and establishing it as the cause of America's socioeconomic degeneration,

[42] Writer Toni Morrison argues that literature often offers "an extraordinary meditation on the self" (17)—an idea that I extend here.

photography helped frame eugenicist imaginings as "truth," thus shaping White American views on race and ideal American subjectivity.[43]

1.4.1 What Constitutes "Good Birth?" The Formation of Eugenics in 19th Century England and America

American historian Edwin Black argues that "racism, group hatred, xenophobia, and enmity toward one's neighbors have existed in almost every culture throughout history," but the creation of eugenics allowed these hostilities to "migrate into the safe harbor of scientific thought, thus rationalizing destructive actions against the despised or unwanted" (9). Eugenics combined social Darwinism—a theory best encapsulated by the phrase "the survival of the fittest"—and the biological study of heredity to argue that the solution to class economics in England (and elsewhere) lay within determining its people's inherited traits (Black 15).[44] Underlying the theory of heredity was its methodology of scientific observation—that is, the premise that knowledge is accessible through vision—and thus, a revived and strengthened belief in physiognomy as a scientific form.

The term "eugenics" was coined by Galton in 1883 using the Greek words for "good birth" or "good creation" (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 2). Galton firmly believed that by implementing a system of "positive eugenics" within society (i.e., by selectively breeding

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[43] While Adolf Hitler was also a big proponent of photography (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 172), a study of its role in the ideological advancement of anti-Semitism is beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, such research is complementary to this section on eugenics photography. I offer Nina Siegal's "Photos That Helped to Document the Holocaust Were Taken by a Nazi" from 2022, and Morris-Reich's 2016 book *Race and Photography* as a good starting place for additional reading on the topic.

[44] Social Darwinism specifically distilled the ideas of three individuals in the 1860s who addressed issues of survival in an overburdened economy: economist Thomas Malthus, philosopher Herbert Spencer, and naturalist Charles Darwin. In addition to Spencer's (1863) and Darwin's (1868) studies on the topic, Gregor Mendel's work (1866) found that evolution was dependent on identifiable hereditary 'units' within an organism's cells (Black 13).

those of "good birth"), "the undesirables [could] be got rid of and the desirables multiplied" (qtd. in Black 16). But in 1904, about 35 years after he first advanced the concept in his book *Hereditary Genius*, Galton admitted that his research had a lack of supporting data and revised his stance on eugenics (Black 28).

However, eugenics theory had already made its way into the United States by the late 1800s, where there was growing fear about the demographic changes resulting from the "onslaught" of immigrants and refugees (Black 22; Maxwell, "Eugenics and Photography" 76).[45] For members of the American elite, eugenics offered a welcome explanation for the nation's socioeconomic instability at the start of the 20th century. According to Black, these White nationalists believed that "future generations of the genetically unfit—from the medically infirm to the racially unwanted to the economically impoverished—would have to be wiped away … [for] genetic destiny [to] be achieved for the human race—or rather, the white race, and more specifically, the Nordic race" (19).[46]

While Galton's branch of "positive eugenics" encouraged the selective breeding of those of "good birth," American nationalists thus invented "negative eugenics" as a tyrannical system of biopower and governance that restricted the reproductive activities of select groups of people. The bodies of those deemed non-White, destitute, defective, feeble-minded, epileptic, blind, deaf, insane, and those identified as beggars, paupers, alcoholics,

[45] According to Black's research, there were over 18 million refugees and immigrants in the United States from 1890 to 1920 (22).
[46] Eugenicist Hans Günther identifies members of the Nordic race as those of Scandinavian origin (e.g., northern Germans) who belong to the "tall, slim, fine-featured race [characterized by] the protruding chin, the blond hair and the blue eyes" (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 154).

and vagrants were identified as requiring state intervention, using draconian methods such as segregation and forced sterilization (Black 39; Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 7-8).

In the meantime, the belief in eugenics and physiognomy also shaped modern American law enforcement. In 1877, an executive of the New York Prison Association, Richard Dugdale, published a book called *The Jukes, a Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity,* which traced the lineage of 42 "criminal" families along with their photographs (Black 23; Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 124). While Dugdale's goal was to illustrate the need for social reform in America, the American public treated this book as proof that criminality and poverty were hereditary. "Combined with the widespread racism, class prejudice and ethnic hatred that already existed among the turn-of-the-century intelligentsia," Black explains, Dugdale's publication "created a fertile reception for the infant field of eugenics" (25), and I advance, for photography's uses in categorizing racial types in the United States.

In addition to gaining popularity through its association with intellectual elites like Francis Galton and anthropologist Rudolf Martin, physiognomy and phrenology were granted further institutional legitimacy through research funding from private and government organizations such as The Carnegie Foundation.[47] Though classifications of defect or deviancy were arbitrarily made by the period's leading eugenicists based on an individual's physical characteristics, it was therefore commonly accepted that "racial characteristics left their imprint on both the mind and the body" (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect*

[47] In September 2020, the Carnegie Institution for Science released a statement from the institute's then-president, Eric D. Isaacs, acknowledging the organization's direct contributions to the expansion of "this morally reprehensible endeavor." However, this statement was deleted from the website in less than two years, on August 16, 2022.

3).[48] Individuals with darker features, for example, were seen as possessing an underlying trait of feeble-mindedness (Morris-Reich 51; Poole 164). In many cases, possession of such undesirable traits would prompt eugenicists to further investigate an individual's genealogical history; subsequently, any "discoveries" of non-Nordic lineage would seemingly "confirm" their initial assumptions about the subject's degeneracy. Thus, at the crux of eugenics pseudoscience—and specifically, America's institutionalization of racial eugenics—was the belief that visibility and visuality could unlock hidden truths about race and degeneracy.

1.4.2 Imag(in)ing Degeneracy: Constructing a Recognition of "Racial-Types" Through Eugenics Photography

Given its basis in physiognomy, it is unsurprising that the American Eugenics Record Office (ERO), which was founded in Cold Spring Harbor, New York in 1910 and remained active until 1939, made an extensive effort to document the physical characteristics of so-called "degenerate" subjects. The ERO specifically developed family trait booklets that would help them amass data in support of its racial theories; eugenics "researchers" recorded their subjects' physical measurements in these booklets, making note of observable characteristics like height, hair colour, and skin colour. Height was commonly documented using inches or one of four notations: "very short, short, medium tall, very tall" (qtd. in Black 106). Hair colour was logged using descriptors like "albino, flaxen yellow-brown, light

[48] The categorization of racial groups based on physical characteristics was not new to modernity. Maxwell notes that in the 18th century, naturalist Baron Georges Cuvier used Carl Linnaeus's anatomical model of plant comparisons to determine three "human races:" Caucasian, Mongolian, and Negro. However, Cuvier believed that "interbreeding" between the races was socially acceptable, as—unlike the proponents of American eugenics—his classification of races did not include the attribution of social values to physical features (*Picture Imperfect* 3).

brown, medium brown, dark hair, black;" skin colour was described in terms like "blond, intermediate, brunette, dark brown, black Negro, yellow, yellow-brown, [and] reddish-brown" (qtd. in Black 106).

ERO fieldworkers who travelled around the US to investigate criminal insanity and degeneracy often produced hundreds of pages of subject descriptions. For instance, ERO "researcher" A. H. Estabrook developed 35 pages of pedigrees and 168 pages of personal descriptions during his time in Massachusetts and Connecticut.[49] Fieldworker Mary Drange-Graebe developed 77 pages of family pedigrees and 873 pages of individual descriptions on the "Ishmaelite" family, who were known as a "tribe of racially mixed white gypsies, Islamic blacks and American Indians" from the Indianapolis region (Black 53). These examples demonstrate the ERO's degree of reliance on visible traits (i.e., physiognomy) for determining the socially "unfit," and visuality's importance in teaching the broader public the difference between "good" subjects and those allegedly devastating the health of American society.

In addition to written documentation of physical descriptors, the eugenics movement drew on conventions of criminal mugshots and colonial photography, including the use of portrait and profile shots and harsh lighting, to mobilize eugenics discourse amongst the White American public. These photographic genres shared key similarities with the eugenics movement; apart from being rooted in physiognomy, criminal and colonial photography also aimed to produce a visual record of deviancy to improve the social economy. Their

[49] Estabrook also served as the president of the Eugenics Research Association (ERA) from 1925 to 1926 (Black).

respective photographs thus established certain demographic groups as the cause of larger socioeconomic problems to validate the state's systematic management of subject bodies.

Such similarities were not lost on the eugenicists themselves. As the use of photography in law enforcement was already a well-established practice by the time the ERO was founded in 1910, proponents of eugenics theory quickly embraced this technology to produce their own photographs (Maxwell, "Eugenics and Photography" 77). I identify two key classifications of eugenics photography: those centered around empirical measurements, which I refer to as "empirical eugenics photography," and those depicting subjects in their natural environments, which I call "anthropological eugenics photography."[50]

Empirical eugenics photographs were developed as a "scientific" form of documentation that would supposedly help illuminate phenotypical differences between racial groups. This subgenre of eugenics photography emphasized objective and quantifiable practices (see figure 10 for examples). Similar to the conventions of anthropometric colonial photography, these photographs were typically accompanied by the subject's bodily measurements, often displayed by portraying the measurement tools directly within the image.

Additionally, these photographs were shot primarily in portrait and profile angles from the chest up. and relied on plain backgrounds to isolate the subject's physical characteristics, implying the "degenerate" subjects' inherent criminality. For viewers who were familiar with mugshot photography's codes and conventions, such photos extended

[50] While Maxwell distinguishes between these classifications as photographs modelled after anthropometric-style portraits, mugshots, and social-documentary images (*Picture Imperfect* 108), I reframe them here to locate their practices within my previously discussed groupings of colonial photography and criminal photography.

criminal photography's visual argument to characterize a particular group of subjects as socially deviant. To reinforce its scientific objectivity, the ERO further removed all subject names from their fieldwork photographs, replacing them with visual descriptions and measurements of the subjects' physical characteristics (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 114; Morris-Reich 35).[51] This practice echoes conventions in both colonial and mugshot photography that were used to frame the subject as a racial or criminal "type."[52]

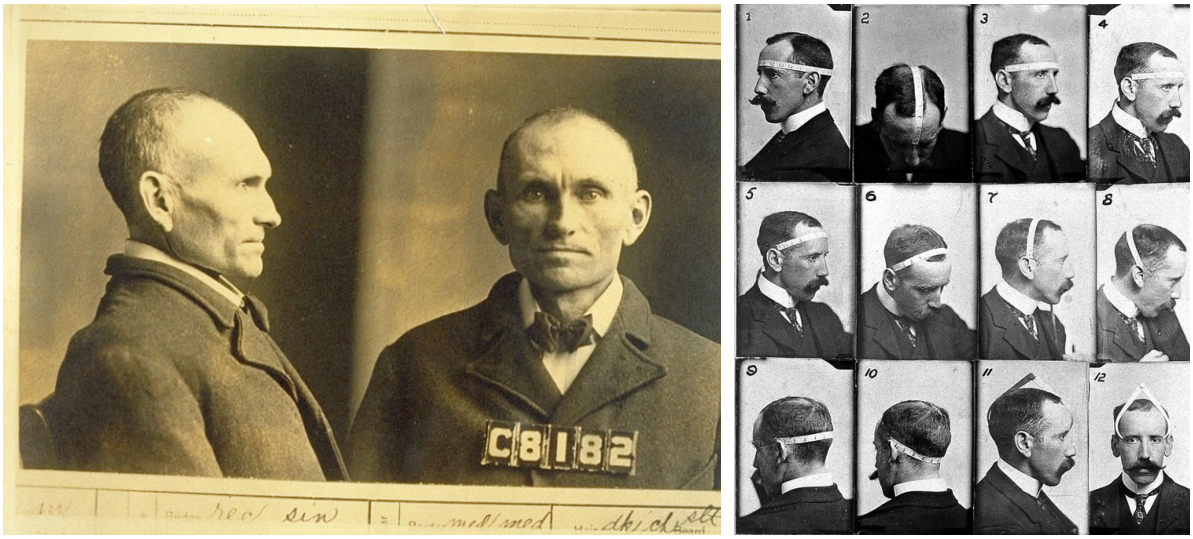


Figure 10. Criminal mugshot photo (left) and empirical eugenics photos (right)[53]

However, as mugshot photography was designed by Bertillon to help identify and deter individual criminals from reoffending rather than identifying criminality as an inherited trait, these photographs were paired with additional conventions that would meticulously

[51] Remnants of this practice are still visible today within medical fields, which disassociate names and abstract body parts from patients to dull their perception as human beings.
[52] Though their use of eugenics photography was supplementary to their writings, Dugdale's and Goddard's renaming of subject groups to the "Jukes" and "Kallikaks" shares a similar function: it represents these family members as degenerate *types* rather than as individuals.
[53] Source: Bernard Hollander, "Hollander measuring his own skull," 1902, Wellcome Collection, *Scientific American,* scientificamerican.com/article/darwin-expression-and-the-lasting-legacy-of-eugenics/; A.H. Estabrook, "Prison mug shot of Edgar (V428)," 1915, University of Albany, *Eugenics Archive,* eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=1366&detailed=0.

isolate a subject's unique physical characteristics (e.g., see figure 11 for one of Bertillon's many pages on ear shapes). Though phenotypical isolation to this degree is incompatible with eugenics photography's aims of racial stereotyping, Bertillon's rigid methodology and obsessive quantification of physical features had the effect of further legitimizing photography's empirical authority and reputation as a scientific technology, ultimately minimizing the role of imagination present in Galton's criminal type photography.



Figure 11. Bertillon's chart of ear shapes[54]

Named after its methodology, Galton's "composite photography" mobilized the logic of the statistical average to produce a visualization of imagined subject types. According to Galton's description, a composite photograph could be produced by fixing eight different

[54] Source: Alphonse Bertillon, *Tableau synoptic des traits physionomiques*, c.1909, The Metropolitan Museum, *Public Domain Image Archive,* pdimagearchive.org/images/a665403a-4a6a-4937-ba21-7e50ddab9424/.

photographs of similar scale onto the same sensitized plate to form one photographic print. Using a camera, each of these eight component portraits were imprinted onto a single plate with 10 seconds of exposure, for a total exposure of 80 seconds. Galton remarks that in the print taken from this plate, the subjects' "individual peculiarities leave little or no visible trace" (97). In comparison, the photograph's sharpest and darkest outlines illuminate its subjects' shared features to produce an average (albeit imaginary) subject that embodies the group's representative characteristics (see figure 12).

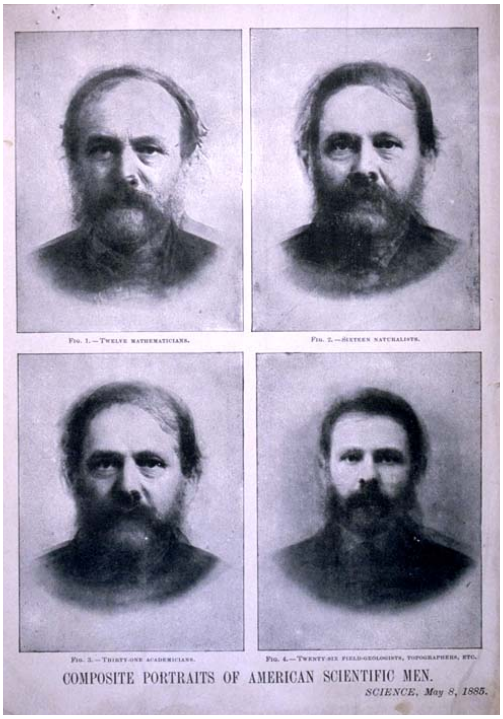


Figure 12. Composite portraits of American scientists, Francis Galton[55]

Interestingly, Galton acknowledges that imagination plays a factor in his composite process. He states in his essay, "Composite Portraits," that his photographs "portra[y] *an*

[55] Source: Francis Galton, *Composite Portraits of American Scientific Men,* 1885, University College London, *Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory,* dnalc.cshl.edu/view/12120--Composite-Portraits-of-Scientific-Men-by-Francis-Galton-Science-5-8.

imaginary figure, possessing the average features of any given group of men" (97, emphasis added). At the same time, however, he claims that composite photography "enables us to obtain with *mechanical precision* a generalised picture" (97, emphasis added). This technological emphasis appeals to the subgenre's standardized and empirical nature to underplay the role of imagination in composite photography. Though the resulting "average" subject does not actually exist, Galton suggests that photography's precision can nevertheless help reveal a subject type's underlying genetic condition or greater physiognomic truth, which are otherwise invisible to the naked eye.

As I addressed in the section on colonial photography, however, photographic imagination is heavily influenced by a culture's dominant ideologies. Morris-Reich asserts that imagination can even cause one to determine an existing social difference or "deficiency" where there is none, and thus establish forms of subjectivity that are based solely on perceived differences (24). As American racial ideology at the turn-of-the-century centered around the belief that immigration was responsible for society's degeneration, empirical eugenics photography did not illuminate an invisible social truth but produced a representation of racialized subjects that reflected its culture's underlying White nationalist and White supremacist imagination.

1.4.3 Creating the Ideal Type: Imagination and Manipulation in Anthropological Eugenics Photography

Within American eugenics, this "empirical" form of photography helped establish certain predetermined races as liable to degeneracy and others as likely to be "fit for society" based on their outward characteristics. Eugenicists like Henry Bowditch, for instance,

adopted Galton's composite technique "to underscore the correlation between good genes, physical beauty and wealth on the one hand, and the importance of curbing foreign immigration and race mixing on the other" (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 111).[56] Yet as concerns about immigration and subsequent miscegenation continued to rise in the United States, empirical eugenics photography was eventually replaced by anthropological eugenics photography (108). This subgenre of eugenics photography produced photographs using an anthropological or social-documentary style to make claims about racial deviancy based on existing markers of difference rather than on imagined ones (125).

Importantly, anthropological eugenics photography simplified eugenics theory's "scientific" language for a broader American audience. For example, in 1913, psychologist and eugenic crusader Henry Goddard published *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeblemindedness,* in which he traced the ancestry, immorality, and social threat of a family he renamed the "Kallikaks."[57] Goddard's argument about the "Kallikak" family's inferior genetic disposition draws on two kinds of racial "evidence:" in addition to a breakdown of their family tree, it relies on "a series of photographs of nefarious-looking and supposedly defective Kallikak family members" (Black 77). By supplementing his "scientific" data with additional visual "evidence," Goddard successfully instilled in his audience a recognition of certain visual characteristics as markers of racial degeneracy.

Though this subgenre of eugenics photography is characterized by a social-documentary style that depicts subjects within their everyday environments, it was able to

[56] Maxwell identifies that Bowditch's composite photographs of racial types were used from 1911 into the 1930s, decades after his death (*Picture Imperfect* 111).
[57] This name derives from a combination of the Greek words for "beauty" and "bad."

maintain its scientific authority by establishing standardized (albeit less stringent) photographic conventions. For instance, Maxwell identifies that photographs of non-Nordic, racialized subjects typically represented their subjects under harsh lighting using a framing method that isolated their faces to exaggerate certain facial features.[58] Such visual techniques amplified physical characteristics that were pseudo-scientifically associated with low intelligence and degeneracy, like wide, gaping mouths. In some cases, these subjects were photographed next to "normal" people (e.g., Nordic subjects with closed mouths) to produce a striking visual comparison of their embodied degeneracy (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 130). Black highlights that many of these photographs, including those of the "Kallikak" family, were also manipulated post-production to produce desired representations of degeneracy (see figure 13).[59] Common editing techniques included "darken[ing] and distort[ing] the eyes, mouths, eyebrows, [and] nose … to make the adults and children appear stupid" (Black 77), ultimately distancing the subjects' visual representations from the fairer features of Nordic subjects.

To represent degeneracy, eugenicists also photographed subjects wearing tattered clothes and surrounded by their sparse personal belongings at home. Like colonial photography's use of environmental markers to denote colonial primitivity, such settings and props suggested the presence of innate, generational degeneracy within specific family lines. For example, Goddard's photographs of the "Kallikaks" depicted them living in rural shacks

[58] Similar conventions are visible in subsequent decades in the Farm Security Administration's Depression-era photographs, such as in Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" (1936), which uses framing and lighting techniques that help isolate the title subject's face ("Dorothea Lange").
[59] As I mentioned in footnote 35, American photographer Edward Curtis also employed such techniques to craft his desired image of Indigenous North Americans (Gascoigne).

to suggest their lack of self-sufficiency (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 132). In turn, these photographs had the added effect of discouraging "racial mixing" with the photographic subjects; combined with the portrayal of embodied degeneracy, environmental signs of poverty implied that prolonging these families' bloodlines would only lead to further strain on the nation's economy.



GREAT-GRANDSON OF "DADDY" KALLIKAK.
This boy is an imbecile of the Mongolian type.

Figure 13. A manipulated image of two members of the "Kallikak" family[60]

In fact, in the 1920s, the ERO made a major push towards the public presentation of anthropological eugenics photographs with funding from private and government organizations (Morris-Reich 31). Maxwell cites that in 1920, for example, the ERO and the

[60] Source: Henry Herbert Goddard, *Great-grandson of "Daddy" Kallikak,* 1912, University of Albany, *Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory,* dnalc.cshl.edu/view/11445-The-Kallikak-Family-A-Study-in-the-Heredity-of-Feeble-Mindedness-by-Henry-Herbert-Goddard-selected-pages-31-.html.

American Museum of Natural History displayed an exhibit on the dangers of immigration to America's national health (*Picture Imperfect* 135). In 1921, an exhibit titled "The Future of America" was extended by a month due to popular public reception (136). This latter exhibit addressed concerns by White nationalists such as Lothrop Stoddard about the rising anxiety that America would be "overrun" by Asian immigrants.[61] Included in the exhibit was a chart mapping the increase of "mixed-race persons" in the United States from the 1890s to the 1920s, and a set of photographs depicting "the progeny of a mixed-race couple, where the father was Japanese and the mother Danish" (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 139).[62]

I argue that for White audiences, anthropological photographs of "miscegenation" were discursively effective because they provided a visual contrast to the clearer racial types established by empirical eugenics photography. In fact, the social style of photography offered here what the "scientific" style could not; as eugenicists struggled to provide an empirical skin colour classification of mixed-race individuals to establish them as a newly emerging type of racial degeneracy, photographs of these subjects instilled fear within their White viewers by depicting them instead as indistinguishable subjects whose ambiguous racial markers would infiltrate and "muddy" the supposed purity of the White American gene pool.[63]

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[61]Stoddard was also a leader of the Eugenics Research Association (Black). On the topic of immigration, he argued that "[w]hite men, cannot under peril of their very own race existence, allow wholesale Asiatic immigration into white race-areas" (qtd. in Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 139).

[62] This example is also interesting from an intersectional perspective, as the trope of an Asian man with a White woman is culturally recognizable within White supremacist societies as a threat to White masculinity (Dyer; hooks, *Black Looks*).

[63] Attempts to classify skin colours of "mixed-race" people were made using a crude tool called the Bradley colour-top, which "involved matching the color of [subjects'] skin to the colors created when spinning a set of black, red, yellow, and white disks" under various lighting conditions (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 118).

Indeed, while much of eugenics photography aimed to make racial degeneracy recognizable, eugenics photography was also used to photograph Nordic-type individuals using a different set of conventions. These White European subjects were conventionally photographed fully clothed in studio environments, using controlled, artificial lighting and flattering camera angles (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 43) modelled after bourgeois portrait photography. Maxwell remarks that even photographs that were taken at Fitter Families Contests, which were competitions hosted across outdoor state fairs and health exhibits to crown genetically superior families, reveal the use of standardized studio settings (143). The use of controlled, studio lighting was considered especially essential to representing the winning subjects, as it helped create "an effect of luminous skin, eyes and hair" (152), thus emphasizing these racially "superior" individuals' Nordic characteristics, which eugenicist Madison Grant describes as marked by "long-headed skulls, blue eyes and blond hair" (in Black 30).

In rarer occasions where White subjects were photographed unclothed, this choice was made to illustrate the subjects' superior physique and to mark them as an ideal "specimen" or racial "type." Magazines such as *Volk und Rasse* (trans.: "People and Race"), a German academic publication meant to extol the virtues of the Aryan race, often depicted these subjects unclothed and mid-action to demonstrate their athleticism. Such depictions of physical power were reinforced by accompanying images of classical Greek statues; alternatively, they employed photographic compositions and techniques (e.g., the use of low camera angles to broaden the subjects' shoulders and chests), which were meant to evoke them. Photographers also depicted subjects using profile shots to minimize or hide physical

asymmetries, ultimately producing the illusion of physical perfection (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 191-2).[64] Despite their scientific affiliation, I argue, this anthropological use of eugenics photography also resembled bourgeois portrait photography in function, drawing on their viewers' familiarity with classical Greek sculptures to establish the superiority of their subjects' physiological, and thus racial, traits. Like its preceding photo-history, the use of photography during the eugenics movement thus demonstrates that photographic representations of racialized subjects played a key role in racial construction overall, especially in upholding and extending existing cultural imaginations about White superiority.

1.5 Lynching Photography: The Visual Production of Fear in American Jim Crow

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, at the same time that American eugenics photography was being used to advance anti-immigration discourse, another photographic genre was used to reinforce the idea that Black Americans were inferior to Whites. Similar to eugenics photography, which was deployed alongside genetics theory to establish eugenics as a social solution, lynching photography used photography to document and establish White America's gruesome "solution" to the abolition of slavery. However, lynching photography has a significant difference from the previously examined photo-histories: where colonial and eugenics photography both centered around producing a visual "science," lynching photographs relied on stirring up the White audience's emotions to "justify" their extra-judicial system for governing Black bodies. This section examines how photography was used as a form of visual discourse during American Jim Crow to represent Black people as

[64] Such techniques continued to be used in the mid-1900s by photographers who shot for physique magazines like *Adonis* and *Body Beautiful*, both of which were adult magazines intended for gay men (Aletti). Notably, the majority of these photographs depict sculpted White men as their subjects.

inherently criminal and non-human, and therefore as deserving of lynching. Such demonstrations of anti-Blackness also generated fear amongst Black communities to limit the mobility of Black Americans during this period of social change.

1.5.1 Imag(in)ing Criminality

Organized lynching in the United States is documented as first taking place in 1865, the same year slavery was abolished with the passing of the 13th Amendment (Cooks 135; Stauffer et al. 187). Historian Randall M. Miller states that "at least 3,500 lynchings occurred between 1865-1920 during the period of Black disenfranchisement and the … implementation of Jim Crow laws" with the height of lynching practices taking place between the 1890s and 1920s (275).[65] In comparison, photographic collections such as *Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen and John Littlefield* date lynching photographs from 1878 to about 1960 (Cooks 135; Stauffer et al. 187).[66]

The 13-year gap between the first case of organized Black lynching and the first known lynching photograph can be explained in part by improvements in photographic processing. The most recent advancements in photographic technology in 1865 was the collodion wet plate process (invented in 1851). As I previously outlined, this process was time-sensitive; because collodion film became waterproof and therefore impenetrable by chemical solutions upon drying, photographs made with this process had to be developed and fixed immediately after exposure or risk losing the image altogether (Kuiper). The collodion

[65] Other records, such as those kept by The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), provide a more extensive history, documenting 4,743 lynchings from between 1882 and 1968.
[66] This collection was exhibited at Roth Horowitz Gallery in New York in 2000. It was later renamed to *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*.

process thus constrained photography to limited settings and subjects until gelatin dry plates were invented in 1871.[67]

It is also possible that lynching photographs existed prior to 1878, especially in the years since the dry plate's invention, and to varying degrees were lost, destroyed, or remained in private collections. Additionally, I posit that the start of (known) lynching photography in the late 1870s may reflect the increased publication of lynching narratives during this time (R. Miller 280). Though anti-Black sentiments existed long before this period, Randall Miller points out that newspaper publications at the end of the 19th century helped establish a unified lynching narrative that worked to justify this violent practice in the eyes of its White readers.

R. Miller explains that these papers produced a specific narrative frame for their White readers: they introduced "a horrible crime, the local community's almost mad insistence on immediate justice (read vengeance), the inability of the local courts to administer the swift punishment the community demanded, and the coming together of … the white community to do by lynching what the law could not do through normal legal processes" (280-1). I assert that this narrative reified America's racial ideology of anti-Blackness and White superiority and emboldened its perpetrators to enact lynching in two parts: first as a physical lynching, then again as a symbolic lynching via photography. Photographing lynchings helped construct Black deviancy as a familiar image for White American viewers to "legitimize" and even valorize such White crimes against Black individuals. Further, lynching photographs doubled in function during the Jim Crow era to

[67] The gelatin dry plate was the first photographic film with a stable shelf-life, which made it more practical to use ("Dry plate process").

operate as a visual system of oppression that signified the continued reality of White domination, violence, and terror for Black viewers.

1.5.2 A Visual Analysis of Lynching as Vigilante "Justice"

Cultural historian Amy Louise Wood identifies that lynching was used by White communities in the United States during a time of "social change and modernization … [where] traditional racial relations governed by slavery were no longer in place" ("Lynching Photography" 376). In areas of social flux like the American South, lynching was implemented as an informal but recognized practice of extralegal violence that allowed White Americans to uphold their community norms (R. Miller 280). In the Southern states in particular, perpetrators of lynching were perceived as enacting a vigilante "rough justice" (or even a form of pre-emptive "law") against various racialized groups (R. Miller 278). While lynching was not exclusive to Black individuals, White lynching practices primarily targeted Black men, falsely accusing and penalizing them for the assault and murder of White women (R. Miller 278).[68] Like eugenics pseudoscience, lynching therefore worked as a system of bodily governance; it simultaneously managed perceptions of White power and racial supremacy and constructed Black subjectivity as inherently deviant to restrict Black people's social mobility. However, while eugenics photography was employed during this period to further distinguish between Nordic and non-Nordic types of Whiteness, often conflating markers of racial and class difference, lynching photography allowed for a flattening of these in-group differences to produce a momentarily unified image of White racial superiority.

[68] While the racist stereotype of the hypersexual and dangerous Black man precedes the 1800s, it is likely that this particular fear was amplified by the eugenics movement's parallel rhetoric of miscegenation during this time.

R. Miller identifies two types of lynching: "spectacle lynching," which took place in the late 1800s into the 1930s, and "private lynching," which took place after the 1930s. Spectacle lynchings were public events that were advertised in newspapers and drew thousands of people from within the local community and beyond. On execution days, train schedules were coordinated around the lynching to accommodate visiting spectators (Cooks 139; R. Miller 279). Cooks elaborates that these executions were treated as family events; as "participation in a lynching was [seen as] a rite of passage for young children, who were given special responsibilities to throw the first stone and gather wood to burn the body," schools also cancelled classes on execution days to allow children to attend the lynchings (139).

Yet it was photography's addition to these lynchings that transformed this act of terror from a personal experience and memory (i.e., one limited to the lynch mob) to a lingering afterimage that would help shape White America's racial views into the 20th century. Cooks identifies four categories of lynching photographs based on differences in photographic conventions and form: 1) photographs of just the White crowd, 2) photographs of the White crowd and lynching victim(s), 3) photographs of just the lynching victim(s), and 4) "souvenir" photographs from the lynching event (138).[69] I specifically examine the second and fourth categories, which I respectively refer to as photographs of *lynching-in-action* and *lynching postcards*, to illustrate how photography framed lynching as an honourable act and incorporated it into America's visual economy. I focus on these two classifications because they share aspects of bourgeois portrait and criminal mugshot photography's codes and

[69] As the fourth category is more of a photographic subgenre than a convention, I treat lynching photographs that operate as "souvenirs" as overlapping with the other categories.

conventions. However, I point out that unlike most colonial and eugenics photographs, these images commonly construct an image of White honour or respectability and Black deviancy or criminality within a single photographic frame (Wood, "Lynching Photography" 384).

1.5.3 Representing White Honour and Black Deviancy with Lynching Photography

Lynching photographers' documentation of "spectacle lynching" demonstrates that perpetrators were "certain of their own righteousness and convinced that their violence was socially acceptable" (Wood, "*Without Sanctuary"* 89). Often, these photographs were published in newspapers along with the Black victim's name, their alleged crime, and the date and place of the lynching (Cooks 142-3). I highlight that the intentional inclusion of Black subjects' names in lynching photographs resembles its inclusion in photographs of enslaved African subjects. That is, in addition to revealing the lynch mob's belief that the lynching was justified, this practice also underscored White Americans' power in deciding what and whom to photograph, where to circulate these images, and what supplementary information to include to further anchor the photographic meaning.

Yet even without these incriminating details, photographs of lynching-in-action demonstrate the White mob's self-righteousness, as the very act of documenting their identities and crimes *in media res* marks the lynching as a commemorative event for its participants (Cooks 140). Cooks observes of these photographs:

> What is perhaps most striking is the absolute fearlessness expressed in [the White perpetrators'] postures. Not only do most of them look directly at the camera, many stand on tip toe, lean on others' shoulders, and tilt their bodies toward the camera to ensure that their participation in the lynching is documented. They stand blameless

and free of guilt. There is no higher authority to fear. Their consciences are clear. (140)

Put differently, for their White viewers, such photographs depict moments to participate in and commemorate because they "confirm" and reify their community's dominant ideology: in representing an image of "justice served," these photographs suggest a reversion to America's "rightful" racial equilibrium. Indeed, even when public lynchings became less common in the aftermath of World War II and were replaced by smaller scale, private lynchings, photographs of these events were retroactively publicized for White public consumption (R. Miller 279), to remind viewers of the continued power of White supremacy.

I argue that photographs of lynching-in-action use codes and conventions borrowed from bourgeois portrait photography's "honourific" form (Sekula) to further reinforce White America's worldview. For example, White lynching participants are typically shown in portrait mode in these photographs, with their full bodies (or most of their bodies) depicted. This positioning of bodies towards the photographer signifies the White lynch mob's willingness to participate in the photograph's production. Additionally, these individuals are portrayed wearing their Sunday best and as standing in formal poses, such as with their shoulders squared in a neutral stance. They are often photographed smiling, though they occasionally also display expressions that are more akin to smugness or pride (see figure 14). In other words, the photographers at these lynchings drew on bourgeois photography's familiar visual conventions to depict lynch mob members as upholders of justice, contributing to the greater narrative of "controlled white citizenry" (Wood, "Lynching Photographs" 373).



Figure 14. The lynching of Charlie Hale, Lawrenceville, Georgia, 1911 (redacted)[70]

In contrast, Black lynching victims were depicted as "captive and defiled, visual embodiments of their ideal position in the white supremacist imagination" (Wood, "Lynching Photographs" 375). These individuals were commonly photographed in profile, using an indirect camera angle. In contrast to the photographs' White subjects, this positioning of Black bodies away from the camera underscored the lynching victims' comparative lack of agency, transforming these subjects into symbolic objects that are unable to return the viewers' gaze. While a limited number of photographs represent Black victims from a direct, frontal perspective and as gazing back at the camera prior to their execution, such depictions

[70] Source: "The lynching of Charlie Hale in Lawrenceville, Georgia," 1911, Georgia Archives, vault.georgiaarchives.org/digital/collection/vg2/id/8659/.

of defiance are inevitably undercut by the victim's surrounding circumstances (e.g., their impending death, the act of being photographed against their will, and the visible self-assurance of the White lynch mob), which worked together to emphasize the dominance of Whiteness in American society.

1.5.4 Commodified Violence: Solidifying Anti-Black Visuality in 20th Century America with Lynching Postcards

A key part of lynching photography's afterimage, or its production of discourse, was the serial depiction of lynching in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries. Produced within America's burgeoning capitalist economy, lynching photographs were quickly converted into postcards to be mass produced and sold to the White American public (Cooks 142).[71] Lynching postcards performed various social functions: they were kept as commemorative items for those present at a lynching, used for unrelated written correspondence, or—similar to colonial *cartes postales*—were treated as commodity items for White Americans to distribute, collect, and display as evidence of their racial superiority (Cooks 142; Wood, "Lynching Photography" 389).[72]

In its commercial form, the lynching photograph was beautified using bright colours and hues (see figure 15 for a visual comparison of a commercial tourist postcard and a lynching postcard). Cooks asserts that post-production manipulations like these softened the photographs' harsh realism to "define lynching photography as something pleasurable to

[71] Cooks specifies that some lynching photographs were also made into stereocards to offer their viewers a more "lifelike" 3-D viewing experience, though these were not as common as lynching postcards (142).
[72] For instance, there is a lynching postcard from James Allen's *Without Sanctuary* collection that exemplifies all three of these functions. Apart from representing a commodity item, there are two additions made to the postcard by the sender that turn the image into a form of correspondence and a form of memorabilia: 1) there is a penciled-in arrow, which draws the viewer's attention to the hanging corpse, and 2) there is a message scrawled along the postcard's border that reads "All OK and would like to get a post from you" (Allen).

collect and recollect," offering a "dreamy" representation of the White consumers' "desire for a nostalgic southern past" (143). Thus, these photographic postcards continued to be rapidly produced and consumed for decades following the addition of Section 3893 to the Comstock Act in 1908, which banned the distribution of lynching photographs through the United States Postal Service.[73]



Figure 15. A comparison of a tourist postcard (left) and a colonial postcard (redacted, right) from 1870[74]

[73] The Comstock Act of 1873 is a federal law in the United States that criminalizes the involvement of the United States Postal Service in conveying obscene content. In 1908, it was revised to add Section 3893, which specified that "the term 'indecent' within the intendment of this section shall include matter of a character tending to incite arson, murder, or assassination" (qtd. in Jordan 23).

[74] Source: "The lynching of J. L. Compton and Joseph Wilson in Helena, Montana," 1870, *PICRYL,* picryl.com/media/lynching-of-compton-and-wilson-ef47af; "Powell Street cable car & turntable, San Francisco postcard," 1870, *Ebay,* ebay.com/itm/186694161117.

In lynching cases that were based on high profile "crimes," such as alleged rape and murder, portraits of the White "victim(s)" were also sold alongside photographs of the accused individual to personalize the lynching narrative for White audiences. These photographs were paired together as commodity objects to stress the racial difference between White and Black people by specifically drawing on the public's familiarity with bourgeois portraits (specifically, the *carte-de-visite*) and images of Black criminality. The examples of commodified photographs provided by Wood suggest that photographs of White "victims" sold at lynchings were commonly of White children; this particular juxtaposition of photographic subjects helped attribute a moral quality to the White "victims" while ascribing an inherent deviancy to Black individuals by representing them as a racial "type" ("Lynching Photography" 386).

By commodifying Black suffering in this manner, lynching postcards therefore also suggested that Black individuals were themselves objects of White consumption. Furthermore, in economizing an endless stream of violent images, lynching postcards normalized views of Black people as non-human and deviant for decades following slavery's abolition, "justifying" lynchings for their White audiences (Wood, "Lynching Photography" 386). I argue that similar to colonial *cartes postales'* construction of racial subjectivity, lynching photography's serialization and commodification thus played a key discursive role in upholding and reinforcing White America's dominant racial ideology during this period of social change.

1.5.5 Locating Lynching Photography's Indexicality within (Amateur) White Photographers

Though cultural context is always crucial to a photograph's interpretation, lynching photography's brazen display of violence is especially reflective of America's social reality and White supremacist ideology during the late 19th and mid-20th centuries. These photographs' particular constructions of White respectability and Black criminality relied on the White photographers' and audience members' shared racial position to successfully represent racial violence as a form of vigilante justice.

In comparison to colonial and eugenics photography, which relied on professionally trained photographers to produce its racial images, lynching photography was produced using a mix of amateur and professional photography. Amateur photography was popularized around the turn-of-the-century with the rapid development and commercialization of photographic technologies.[75] New camera technologies became increasingly affordable for the average White household during this time: the Kodak Brownie camera, released by the Eastman Kodak Company in February 1900, cost one dollar at the time of its launch—a fraction of the cost compared to the original Kodak camera from 1888, which cost twenty-five dollars (Culley).[76]

The photographic process was also drastically simplified to accommodate amateur photographers (Pollen 294). For instance, true to its slogan—"You press the button, we do the rest"— Eastman Kodak offered a service where photographers could mail the entire

[75] According to Pollen, *The Times* newspaper in 1892 claimed that "the present is the age of the 'amateur,' notably in photography but in everything else" (qtd. in 292).
[76] The cost of the 1888 Kodak camera included the cost of processing the first film roll and included a leather case and strap (Culley). Adjusted for inflation, this camera would cost about $845.96 in 2025, whereas the Brownie would cost about $38.27.

camera into the company once a roll was fully exposed, to have it developed and printed by their technicians (Culley). Indeed, Catherine Zuromskis describes snapshot photography as "requiring little or no photographic skill on the part of the photographer" (53). In addition, cameras became equipped with faster shutter speeds from 1/25 of a second in 1888 to 1/50 in 1900 (Culley; Kukulski), reducing the wait-time during image-capture and leading amateur photography to become synonymously known as snapshot photography.[77] With these technological changes, photography suddenly became available as a visual medium for the masses, for everyday users to "document" memorable moments.

Amateur photography's role in lynching photography is significant because it allowed lynching participants to carefully construct these photographs according to a White supremacist ideology. For instance, despite photography's presumed objectivity, lynch mobs resisted documentation by outsiders such as journalists and commentators. In cases where outsiders were caught photographing a lynching in action, mob members confiscated and even destroyed their film rolls at the scene of the crime (Wood, "Lynching Photograph" 378; "*Without Sanctuary*" 88). Enforcing these limits allowed mob participants to control their own photographic representation, to depict their violent actions as orderly, purposeful, and respectable (R. Miller 279) using codes and conventions that were recognizable by their White audiences. Indeed, Wood points out that lynching photographs rarely depicted the crowd "in the process of hanging, shooting, or burning the victim. … Even in later

[77] The term "snapshot" originates from 19th century hunting practices and is defined as "a quick or hurried shot taken without deliberate aim, esp. one at a … quickly moving animal" (qtd. in Cooks 139). Cooks argues that snapshot photography is particularly appropriate for taking lynching photographs because of its symbolic resemblance to hunting. In addition to being suitable for photographing large, excited crowds, lynching victims were clearly viewed by these White supremacists as animals to be hunted—first by the lynch mob, then again by the photographer.

photographs, when faster shutter speeds enabled cameras to depict action, crowds still tended to stop and gather together for the camera" ("Lynching Photography" 382). Put differently, the use of bourgeois photographic codes and conventions in lynching photographs was a deliberate move by lynch mob members to frame themselves as honourable, to distinguish their criminal actions from the "criminality" of their Black photographic subjects.

1.6 Concluding Thoughts: The Persistence of White Visuality

Scholars of photography and race have studied colonial photography, eugenics photography, and lynching photography as separate photographic archives because of their individual breadth and complexity. In addition to their shared basis in Western empiricism and ocularcentrism, however, this chapter has demonstrated that the power of these photo-histories comes from their sociocultural and symbolic entanglement with one another. I have advanced here a genealogical breakdown of these three photo-histories, braiding together Foucauldian theories of discipline and governance with discourse, ideology, and Doane's theory of the afterimage. I have specifically argued that analogue photography produced forms of visual racial discourse in Europe and America by constructing images of racial subjectivity that are rooted in two primary frames from the 19th century: bourgeois portrait photography and criminal (mugshot) photography.

Van Dijk argues that ideologies are a social group's shared beliefs about conditions and ways of existence that are simultaneously acquired, expressed, and reproduced through discourses (115-6). The previous section demonstrated, for instance, that lynching photographs as discourse reflect and reproduce the White photographers' and audience's shared White supremacist ideology by visually constructing Black Americans as

simultaneously criminal and non-human, and thus beyond rational applications of the law. But what happens to a photograph's meaning when it is removed from such a context—that is, when its viewers do not share its underlying ideology?

In discussing this hermeneutic gap, Cooks argues that most present-day viewers of lynching photographs "look in opposition to the function of the photographic act. We alter the meaning of the photographs by adding a purpose other than that originally intended" (137). In lynching photography, this oppositional look reflects a shift in the photographs' viewership and social changes in American society in the latter half of the 20th century. To demonstrate how the meaning of photographic codes and conventions change depending on the surrounding culture's discourses and ideologies, I offer two examples of lynching photographs that were seen by those beyond its immediate audience. In doing so, I introduce the idea that photography can be used to produce counter-visual discourse, an idea I further explore in Chapter Two.

1.6.1 Revising Photographic Meanings: Reading Lynching Photographs Using an Anti-Racist Ideology

In 1937, a Jewish schoolteacher in New York named Abel Meeropol wrote a poem based on his experience of seeing a lynching photograph. Meeropol was not familiar with lynching photography's images of Black brutality for two reasons: the photographs' reduced visibility and his own racial positionality. More specifically, lynching photographs had waned in popularity by the late 1930s with the decline of spectacle lynchings and were overall less common within the Union States. At the height of 1930s eugenics and anti-Semitic discourse, Meeropol would have also been deemed racially inferior to the Nordic-

type White Americans that often formed lynch mobs. Because he did not share the racial imagination of lynching photography's immediate White audiences, the photograph's image left a lasting impression on Meeropol. This visual experience would go on to help shape social change in the United States in the following decades.

Titled "Bitter Fruit," Meeropol's poem describes the visual horror of seeing the 1930 lynching photograph of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith from Marion, Indiana, which depicts the Black victims' bodies hanging amidst a crowd of grinning White faces (see figure 16 for both the poem and photograph; Pietsch). As was the convention for lynching photographs, this image shows a smartly dressed White mob foregrounding the Black bodies. The White subjects in this photograph are also represented as part of a memorable event: while those in the background appear to be looking up at Shipp's and Smith's lynched bodies, the individuals in the foreground have turned to face the camera. One man, who is just off-center at the bottom of the photograph, looks at the photographer and points up at one of the Black victims. However, this image is likely a snapshot that was taken by a White lynching participant. The mob is not formally posed or photographed in portrait like the ones depicted in figures 14 and 15; indeed, the blurry face of one individual at the front of the photo suggests that the photographer took this image for commemorative purposes as the action was still happening.

In 1939, Meeropol's poem was popularized as a song by American jazz singer Billie Holiday and was renamed as *Strange Fruit*. In the decades that followed, *Strange Fruit* was adopted as a powerful protest song. It is now hailed as spurring the start of the civil rights movement in 1954 (Pietsch), which co-opted the very photographs used to argue Black

people's lack of humanity to fight for racial equality. Indeed, organizations such as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) continue to use lynching photographs today as a way of educating Americans on the nation's history of anti-Black racism ("History of Lynching").



Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Figure 16. Lynching photograph of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith (redacted, top) and Abel Meeropol's poem "Bitter Fruit" (bottom)[78]

Barely two decades after the end of the civil rights movement, in 1985, a White antique dealer in Atlanta, Georgia named James Allen found a lynching postcard in an oak desk he had just purchased. The postcard showed an image of Leo Frank, who was lynched in Marietta, Georgia on August 17, 1915 (Stauffer et al. 185). By this time, racism was formally denounced in the United States and lynching had been disappeared from the nation's memory.[79] Historian Jason Ward argues that "the best way to forget [history's horrors] is to have nothing to remember" (qtd. in McGuire 6). It is no surprise, then, that with the exception of limited photographs available through various state archives (e.g., the NAACP section of the Library of Congress), lynching photographs were rarely visible throughout the 1980s and 1990s (McGuire 6; Wood, "*Without Sanctuary"* 88).

Faced with this image of undeniable racial oppression, Allen went on to collect 130 lynching photographs from across the United States (Wood, "*Without Sanctuary*" 88). These photographs, taken by both professional and amateur photographers, were found "in family albums, attic trunks, and flea markets … proving that objects considered to be lynching memorabilia were frequently hidden amongst family possessions or discarded as a means of avoiding the law" (Jordan 27). In January 2000, Allen launched an exhibition at Roth Horowitz Gallery in New York titled *Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection*

[78] Source: "Lynching photograph of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith," 1930, "Without Sanctuary," *New York Times,* archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2004/05/30/arts/30RICHCA01.html.
[79] Though there is no concrete record or consensus regarding the main cause behind lynching photography's white-washing from history, art historian Linda Kim suggests that it was the establishment of anti-distribution laws such as Section 3893 of the Comstock Act (see footnote 72) that ultimately forced these photographs to circulate underground (Jordan 22-3).

of James Allen and John Littlefield, which he later renamed to *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Cooks 135; Wood, "*Without Sanctuary*" 88). Once again, lynching photography was adopted to educate the public about anti-Black racism in the United States, countering their previous uses in shaping public views of Black criminality.[80] These examples demonstrate how lynching photographs, and other racial photographs, when viewed within cultural conditions that reject racism and value anti-racist ideologies instead, can serve as a form of counter-discourse that condemns the idea of White supremacy. The next chapter pursues this argument further by examining 19th and 20th century uses of photography that aimed to advance representations of Black respectability in the United States.

[80] Allen's collection was also the first to illuminate the scope of lynching photography and its practices.

Chapter 2. Racialized Respectability: The Persistence of (White) Visuality in Countervisual Photography

"For every level at which the discourse of power determines dominant forms of speech and thinking, counter-dominant strains challenge and subvert the appearance of inevitability which is ideology's primary mechanism for sustaining its own self-reproduction."
—Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth Century France,* pp. 39-40

"The history of black liberation movements in the United States could be characterized as a struggle over images as much as it has also been a struggle for rights, for equal access."
– bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," p. 57

2.1 Introduction

In their writings about discourse, scholars such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Richard Terdiman have widely acknowledged that "no discourse is ever a monologue" (Terdiman 36); rather, discourses fight against the constant tide of counter-discourses. Nicholas Mirzoeff asserts that the practice of visuality is similarly met with "countervisuality," which has historically "sought to match and overcome [visuality's] complex operations" (4). Indeed, history shows that in the 1930s, when eugenics and lynching photography were being used to establish White supremacy as a social truth, anti-ocularcentrism found momentum as a philosophical movement in Western epistemology, with prominent philosophers and cultural theorists like John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty challenging the absolutism of vision in establishing reality (Levin).[81]

[81] I refrain from reviewing theories of anti-ocularcentrism in this chapter and focus instead on specific counter-discourses that challenge dominant constructions of Blackness, as I am less concerned with epistemological theories than with understanding how social conceptions or "knowledges" of race are formed. For a more philosophical take on Western anti-ocularcentrism, see David Michael Levin's *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*.

To understand how photography produces racial discourse, it is thus imperative to also consider the impact of alternate perspectives or discourses in photographic representations of race. I explore in this chapter representations of respectable Blackness from the 19th and 20th centuries that were unfamiliar within White visuality and therefore challenged dominant constructions of modern subjectivity. I focus here on countervisual representations of Black subjectivity in America because Western culture, as I examined in Chapter One, has positioned Blackness for centuries in direct opposition to Whiteness as the nadir of humanity (Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 41). This focus also lays the groundwork for Chapters Three and Four, which examine aspects of digital photography on social media—an area that is largely shaped by American culture.[82] Though analogue photography has also been used in attempts to reconstruct other racial identities, I do not discuss these in this dissertation. For this, I direct readers to the excellent scholarship of Rosalind C. Morris and Deborah Poole, which traces the production of countervisuality in portrait photographs produced in old Siam and the Andes.

This chapter interweaves Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's theory of the "politics of respectability" with countervisuality and counter-discourse. Higginbotham identifies respectability politics as a strategy in which Black individuals adhere to established norms of White middle-class or bourgeois respectability to negotiate their social mobility within American society. She specifies that this strategy allows Black subjects to counter racist perceptions of Blackness by employing the assimilationist "reform of individual behavior

[82] Chapter Three analyzes photos from Twitter and Tumblr, and Chapter Four examines augmented reality beauty filters on Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. All of these social media are headquartered and, with the exception of TikTok, developed in the United States.

and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations" (187). Her primary example analyzes how the Black Baptist women of the Women's Convention organized annual meetings and formal discussions of "proper" conduct in public spaces to contest popular representations of Black people as lazy, immoral, and inept (191).[83]

Scholars including E. Francis White and Victoria Wolcott have located respectability politics as reaching its peak during American post-Reconstruction from the late 1890s to the 1920s (Wolcott 48). While critical race theorists and African American Studies scholars have since remarked on the significance of immediate embodied representation (e.g., clothing and behaviour) to reimagining Black respectability (G. Hill; Pitcan et al.; Smith, *Color Line*; White; Wolcott), I point out that *photography's* role in reifying this revisualization remains an understudied area of respectability politics.[84] I therefore apply this theory here to argue that photographic representations of Black respectability served as alternate discourses with aims to reconstruct Black subjectivity in the American racial imagination.

I provide a colonial visual discourse analysis of four exemplary cases from the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries that used photography to redefine Black subjectivity. I have chosen these cases because of their sociohistorical remarkability and discursive potential. I have also chosen them because they respond in varying ways to the dominant frames of White bourgeois respectability and racial deviancy discussed in Chapter One (see

[83] For instance, Higginbotham offers that in the 1910 annual meeting, a section on "Conduct in Public Places" reminded its readers that "the quiet, dignified individual who is respectful to others is after all the superior individual, be he black or white" (qtd. on 193).
[84] Existing scholarship includes the aforementioned works of G. Hill and Smith.

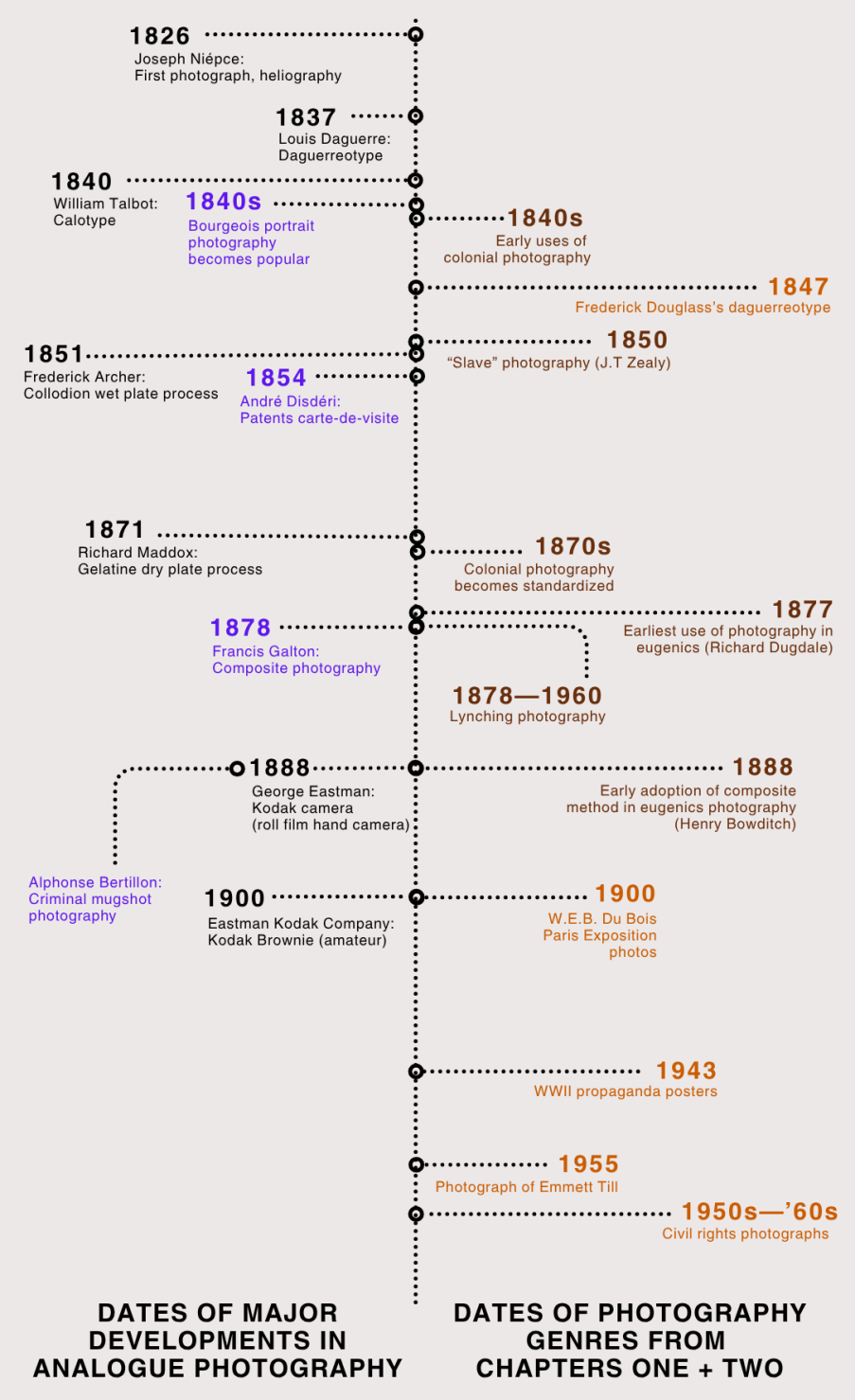


Figure 17. A timeline of key dates in analogue photography, Chapter One's photo-histories, and Chapter Two's example photos

figure 17 for a full timeline of important dates from Chapters One and Two). Mapping these four examples onto established constructions of subjectivity illuminates how photography can simultaneously be used as discourse and, to an extent, as counter-discourse.[85]

Drawing from race scholar Ginger Hill's work, I begin by reviewing abolitionist Frederick Douglass's early daguerreotype portraits, which he expressly commissioned to introduce the concept of Black respectability to the American public. I then build on the works of photography scholar Shawn Michelle Smith and cultural historian Mark Sealy, respectably, to analyze how photographs from W.E.B. Du Bois's Paris Exposition Albums and from World War II American propaganda posters reimagined African American subjectivity for international and national audiences. Finally, I expand on Martin A. Berger's research on photography during the American Civil Rights movement to examine how photographs were used to simultaneously disrupt the dominant racial scripts of Black deviancy and White respectability.

However, Critical Discourse Studies and Black Studies scholars point out that "[t]he site of counterdiscourse is itself contested terrain" (White 132). Butler specifies that "to thwart the injunction to produce a docile body is not the same as dismantling the injunction or changing the terms of subject constitution" (88). Indeed, Saidiya Hartman warns that while strategies of contestation practiced by African Americans following emancipation may have challenged traditional relations of power, they did so by requiring compliance with the demands of existing systems (68). To understand how photography can help create a

[85] In the timeline in figure 17, technical developments in photography are marked in black font; social constructions of subjectivity are marked in purple; the photo-histories discussed in Chapter One are marked in brown; and the four cases examined in Chapter Two (plus Emmett Till's photograph) are marked in orange.

countervisual way of looking that changes the terms of subjectivity, and to see whether or not the photographs examined here succeed as counter-discourse, I supplement my analysis in this chapter with two key concepts from Black Studies and postcolonial studies, which work together to lend a critical perspective into photographs of respectable Black subjectivity (and racial subjectivity, more broadly) as forms of counter-discourse.

Borrowing from Orlando Patterson's 1982 book *Slavery and Social Death,* Black Studies scholars including Hartman and Wilderson have theorized the unique positioning of African Americans in the United States as the "unthought." This Afro-Pessimist framing suggests that because American society was built on the premise that Black "slaves" were non-human objects, the concept of modern subjectivity, which is characterized by White economic values, inherently excludes and is thus ill-suited for the representation of Black people (Wilderson 8). Attuning to Black people's position in American society using the theory of the "unthought" (Hartman and Wilderson 185) therefore helps reveal that rather than celebrating the agency that accompanies this supposed visual shift from deviancy to respectable subjectivity, we must consider "the ways in which performance and other modes of [representational] practice are determined by, exploit, and exceed the constraints of domination" (Hartman 54).

Similarly, in her foundational work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Spivak defines the "subaltern" as subjects or a group of subjects that are dispossessed by colonial knowledge systems. The subaltern differs from the unthought in its relationship to the dominant group: while the former is inconceivable to those in power because there is no frame of reference for the colonized cultures within the colonizers' knowledge systems, the latter exists

conceptually beyond the realm of the human altogether. Both positions nevertheless illuminate the limitations of existing photographic frames for racial counter-discourse and lead me to question the possibility for Black American subjects in the 19th and 20th centuries to see themselves justly represented using photography. To explore this question, I therefore also consider how (counter)discourses are inevitably shaped by a technology or their "transmitting mold" (Ganahl 6). My methodology here advances an analysis of photography's conditions of affordance.

In their article "Theorizing Affordances," sociologists Jenny L. Davis and James B. Chouinard identify that the usability of a technology's affordances—what design theorist Donald Norman defines as "fundamental properties that determine just how [a] thing could possibly be used" (9)—are shaped by its social circumstances. My analysis of these photographs reads each example's countervisual potential against its particular sociocultural conditions of production. I argue that because these photographs respond directly to dominant visual racial discourses, they draw on existing photographic practices and forms of legible subjectivity in American culture and ultimately reproduce these mainstream discourses' established codes and conventions.

Additionally, while these examples all demonstrate alternate representations of Black subjectivity, I flag here that they each operate with different underlying ideologies and rhetorical aims that ultimately affect their discursive impact. In particular, the photographs linked to Douglass and Du Bois, which were commissioned by African American individuals, reveal the commissioner's belief in racial equality and their desire to advance a representation of Black agency, however limited, within American culture. On the other

hand, the photographs used in American World War II propaganda posters and the Civil Rights movement, which were created by White Americans, reveal a more complex repositioning of Black subjectivity that continues to contribute to a White supremacist narrative. I discuss these differences in relation to the reproduction of existing codes and conventions to argue that photography's potential to produce counter-discourse is always already entangled with a culture's dominant ideology.

While the photographs examined in this chapter illuminate the socially constructed nature of racial subjectivity, I therefore assert that the ways in which they contest the dominant image of Black "deviancy" in mainstream American culture does so at the cost of revitalizing and further validating photography's White visual frames. I end this chapter and the first half of this dissertation with the question "How might the unthought or the subaltern see themselves using photography?" I briefly turn to the growing vernacular practice of Black domestic photography in the mid- to late 20th century as offering one answer to this question.

2.2 Symbolic Shifts in Subjectivity: Early Attempts at Counter-Discourse using Analogue Photography

In "Subjection, Resistance, Resignification," Butler builds on Althusser, Lacan, and Foucault's theories of discourse and identity to establish that "the 'position' of the subject within the symbolic … installs the subject within language *and hence within available schemes of cultural intelligibility*" (86, emphasis added). As I argued in Chapter One, for instance, colonial photography, eugenics photography, and lynching photography framed their respective constructions of subjectivity in light of bourgeois portrait and criminal

mugshot photography's established codes and conventions. Yet in claiming that discourse on subjectivity is based on "schemes of cultural intelligibility," Butler also suggests that alternate discourses exist beyond what is culturally intelligible.

Indeed, resistance is an inevitable part of a discourse's regularization or normalization, which undergoes a lengthy and iterative process of construction. According to Terdiman, such resistance or counter-discourses typically develop "during periods of rapid change … as an effect of the relatively *early* stage of [the] consolidation of (discursive) power" (59). Put differently, counter-discourses form during historical phases of social and political change, during periods where dominant discourses must be reaffirmed. Terdiman further specifies that disruptions to cultural discourses inevitably occur with "mutations in systemic elements *over time* … [through] interventions of determinants which have the power to disrupt the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified relation" (28, emphasis added). I demonstrate here that as analogue photography was being used to construct dominant representations of racial subjectivity in the 19th and 20th centuries, parallel uses were also taking place that challenged these images by producing alternate representations.

I specifically argue that photography was used to disrupt and reconstruct existing representations of Black "criminality" as this discourse was being advanced by colonial, eugenics, and lynching photography. These photographs introduced the possibility for unconventional imaginings of Black subjectivity by employing what Higginbotham terms a "politics of respectability" as a strategy for counter-discourse. That is, they produced a representation of Black respectability in mainstream American culture by adopting bourgeois

portrait photography's established codes and conventions (i.e., their symbolic expressions of Whiteness) in depictions of Black subjects.

Literature from the 19th century reveals that bourgeois portrait photography's association with White respectability and photography's potential for representing unconventional forms of racial subjectivity were recognized since portrait photography's early uses. For example, in her 1851 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, writer Harriet Beecher Stowe invokes the use of daguerreotype photography to illustrate the heroism of "Uncle Tom," a Black American "slave" and the novel's titular character. Stowe writes that "as an individual hero rather than as a slave… [Uncle Tom's] picture might occupy the parlor table along with [the family's] other friends and relatives" (qtd. in Williams 163), illustrating a situation in which a White social practice is extended to an enslaved Black subject.

Uncle Tom's photograph, which is placed on the parlour table alongside the White family members' portraits, does more than move this subject symbolically closer to the family—it also denotes the subject's ascent up the proverbial social ladder by involving him in the *carte-de-visite's* economy of exchange. Though "Uncle Tom" himself does not participate in photographic exchanges, his inclusion in this bourgeois domestic collection signals that he is worthy of individual recognition, counter to the more conventional Black "slave" photographs of this period.[86] This depiction also departs from the representation of racialized subjects within the colonial *cartes postales* or lynching postcard's exchange economy. Stowe's excerpt thus demonstrates that although bourgeois portrait photography was a conventionally White practice during this period, audiences were nevertheless aware of

[86] Zealy's photographs of enslaved Black subjects were produced in 1850, a year before the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

its discursive potential for (re)constructing representations of racialized subjects who were beyond the traditional scope of respectable White subjectivity.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that not all challenges to discourse count as counter-discourse (Butler 88; White 132). Butler argues that counter-discourses are consciously produced; their symbolic interpellations must intentionally work to reoccupy or resignify an original "injurious interpellation" (104). Spivak elaborates that discourses that "disavow … the role of ideology in reproducing the social relations of production" may intrinsically uphold the hegemonic values of its culture of production (*Can the Subaltern Speak* 69). Like the photograph of "Uncle Tom" described above, "counter-discourses" that are uncritical of ideology's role in their construction process can therefore reproduce hegemonic values in other ways and ultimately preserve the existing social order.

As the photographs of Black respectability that I examine in this chapter reproduce signs of White respectability to make their claims (Bracke; F. Harris; Pitcan et al. 165; see also Bourdieu 295), I posit that these photographs contribute to the recognition of humanity primarily through assimilation (Hartman and Wilderson 189; Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak* 89). Instead of striving for a total abolition of the racial hierarchy—what Wilderson calls an "epistemological catastrophe" (30)—or challenging White visuality's narrow construction of subjectivity, I contend that these photographs shift perceptions of Black subjectivity from one dominant visual script (deviancy) to another (respectability). I discuss in this section the use of respectability politics in Douglass and Du Bois's photographs to illuminate how depictions of Black respectability, while offering a viable strategy for social change in the 19th century, discursively upheld White-coded frames of subjectivity.

2.2.1 Pictures for Progress: Frederick Douglass's Daguerreotype Portraits and Constructions of Black Respectability

As I established in Chapter One, photography was accepted in the mid-1800s as a tool of scientific objectivity. Anthropometric photography collections, such as Louis Agassiz's photographs of Black "slaves" (see figure 7), were produced to "scientifically" establish Blackness as inferior to Whiteness and therefore "justify" America's foundation within slavery. Ginger Hill describes that in the latter half of the 19th century "the visibly white body became a sign for … self-possession within … the United States [and] the black and … enslaved body, in contrast, existed as that which was not-citizen-subject, property of another" (47). Elsewhere in the colonial nations, photographs were used to make similar visual claims that racialized native subjects were inferior to White Europeans to "justify" colonization.

However, a concurrent early attempt was made in the United States to advance a counterargument against dominant constructions of Black subjectivity. As a social reformer, abolitionist, writer, orator, and visual theorist, Frederick Douglass argued—both by example and through his public lectures from 1859 to 1865—that photography could be employed to achieve social reform in the United States by reconstructing Black subjectivity within the White public imagination (G. Hill 41).[87] Douglass spent much of his later life commissioning self-portraits to establish African American self-possession, using these images to revise his social status from an enslaved to freed individual.[88] Douglass's daguerreotype portraits thus

[87] According to Stauffer et al., Douglass renamed one of his better-known lectures from "Lecture on Pictures" to "Pictures and Progress" (126), demonstrating his awareness of photography's discursive power.
[88] All uses of "African American" here are intentional, to situate Douglass's racial position in relation to the contemporary reality of chattel slavery in the United States.

offer a critical example of early countervisuality that challenges dominant representations of Black deviancy within the first few decades of photography's invention.

I establish that Douglass's attempts to uplift Blackness in American society demonstrate a politics of respectability that relies on photography to reproduce culturally legible forms of respectable subjectivity decades before Higginbotham theorizes it based on the Black Baptist women of the Women's Convention. Higginbotham identifies that respectability politics have differing but related goals depending on the audience's race (187). Indeed, despite recognizing that a subject's photographic representation has no actual correlation to their inner value, Douglass acknowledged that photography mediated this social expression by reinforcing "favorable or unfavorable *prevailing public opinion*" ("Lecture on Pictures" 130, emphasis added) through elements of "socially habituated visual perception" (G. Hill 42). Put differently, he advanced that photography could challenge unfavorable beliefs about Black subjectivity by allowing him to adopt more favourable codes and conventions. Thus, while Douglass's photographs of Black middle-class respectability also modelled the possibility of self-possession for African American viewers, these images primarily aimed to reconstruct Blackness in the White American imagination by countering the dominant discourse of Black inferiority present in mainstream American culture.

Douglass's early portraits, which were commissioned before the abolition of slavery, reveal that bourgeois portrait photography's codes and conventions were specifically employed in his depiction to push White people's perceptions of African American subjectivity beyond an association with slavery. For instance, Samuel J. Miller, the daguerreotypist who photographed Douglass's portraits, describes Douglass in the image in

figure 18 as wearing a "luxurious tie, paired with a vest intricately embroidered with floral designs" and styled with a "prominent side part of the hair [that] was the accepted gentlemanly fashion."[89] Miller also observes that Douglass's "coat and shirt collars [are] … raised high on the neck, a style common during the mid-nineteenth century and a sign of moral rectitude" (qtd. in G. Hill 48).

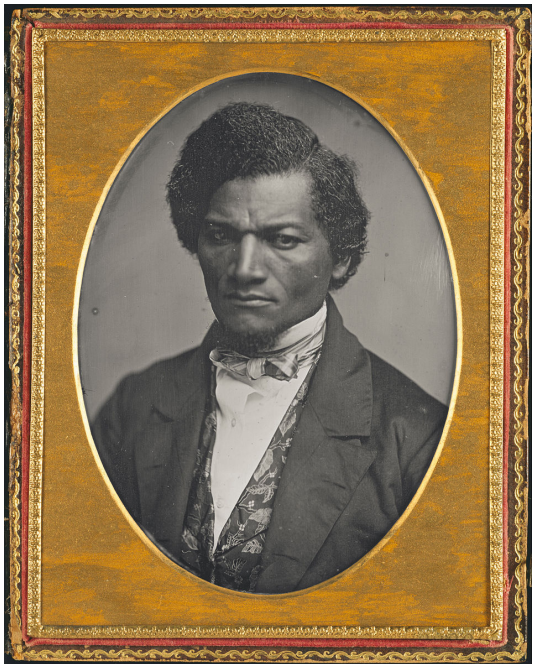


Figure 18. A daguerreotype portrait of Frederick Douglass, 1847/1852, Samuel J. Miller[90]

Depicted on a Black body, these legible signs of White middle-class respectability demanded a recognition of Black personhood from the portrait's White American viewers (G. Hill 42; Pitcan et al. 165; White 122; Womack 191). For this audience, the luxurious tie and intricate vest signified the subject's affluence to symbolically mark Douglass's self-

[89] There is a slight discrepancy in the photographer's name between two sources: G. Hill records the daguerreotypist's name as Samuel L. Miller, whereas the Art Institute of Chicago lists the photographer as Samuel J. Miller. There are also two dates commonly attributed to this daguerreotype: 1847 and 1852.
[90] Source: Samuel J. Miller, *Frederick Douglass,* 1847/1852, Art Institute of Chicago, artic.edu/artworks/145681/frederick-douglass.

possession and capacity to participate in America's growing capitalist economy. The gentlemanly hairstyle, style of shirt, and dark coat further reinforced this signification. In turn, Douglass's familiarity with 19th century sartorial trends suggested his regular participation in this material economy.

I use Bourdieu's theorization of symbolic capital to explain the visual claims that Douglass makes in and with his portraits. These photographs allow Douglass to strategically display commodity items to make "differences in capital (understood as the capacity to appropriate scarce goods and the corresponding profits) visible" (Bourdieu 299). In doing so, these images "transfigure[d] relations of force into relations of meaning" (300): the details in Douglass's clothing acquired a symbolic value in these images that signify the subject's social position and power.

Given his reproduction of bourgeois respectability through dress and style, it may be argued that Douglass's representation of respectability is independent of his daguerreotype portraits and is located instead in his physical self-presentation. However, I assert that the "documentation" of this unusual image through photography imbues the photographic subject's (self)construction with another layer of signification. In addition to preserving this particular image of the subject for posterity, Douglass's portraits further marked his participation in the production and exchange of *cartes-de-visites*, which were seen as a symbol of their subjects' modernity. The portraits themselves therefore underscore his social mobility and self-possession—characteristics that were conventionally attributed to White respectability during the 19th century—and offer a stark visual contrast to the colonial and "slave" photographs that were forcibly taken around this time.

Apart from establishing Douglass as a distinguished member of American society, photography's reputation for producing objective visualization and its reproducibility and reach also legitimated this construction of Black respectability by allowing for its regularization over time. Douglass's counter-discursive intent becomes especially apparent when considering his daguerreotype portraits' large volume and adherence to a strict photographic formula. Unlike the photographs of contemporary celebrities like Walt Whitman, which depict their White subjects in various poses and styles of dress (G. Hill 51), Hill points out that all 160 photographs of Douglass commissioned over the course of four decades closely reproduce bourgeois photography's codes and conventions (Cullen 194; G. Hill 46). I propose that the reiteration of this particular visual construction over time using a "truth-telling" technology constructed an afterimage (Doane) of Black respectability that was irrefutable, disrupting mainstream views of Black deviancy in the United States.

Despite their potential, however, these photographs had limited counter-discursive impact. Hartman posits that "the interpellation of the slave as [respectable] subject enables forms of agency that … reinscribe the terms of subjugation" (54), in particular by binding Black subjects to "proprietorial notions of the self" that are grounded in White economic systems (6). In effect, performances of respectable Black subjectivity through bourgeois portrait photography reproduced existing "culturally intelligible frames" (Butler) to reaffirm modern subjectivity as a dichotomy of White-coded respectability and Black deviancy.[91] For White audiences, this revisualization of Black subjectivity established White respectability's

[91] To clarify, this racially coded dichotomy of subjectivity is one that I propose based on Sekula's bourgeois portrait and criminal mugshot photographic frames. From the perspective of Black Studies and Afro-Pessimism, this dichotomous representation of subjectivity is a farce, as the conditions of modern subjectivity necessarily preclude African Americans from occupying a subject position in society.

codes and conventions as necessary conditions for recognizing respectability in African American subjects. Though Douglass's daguerreotypes illustrated the possibility for Black self-possession in a society that viewed African Americans as property and demonstrate photography's overall potential for producing racial counter-discourse, these photographs' visual practices ultimately limit the representation of a "subject [who] is irretrievably heterogeneous" to the "epistemic violence" of "a binary vision" (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak* 77-9). In doing so, such photographs put the recognition of respectable subjectivity out of reach for most African Americans, who—despite their newfound freedom—faced the consequences of a belated entry into America's material economy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Wilderson 37).

2.2.2 Respectable Mugshots: Challenging Essentialized Blackness with W.E.B. Du Bois's Paris Albums

Portrait photography was used by another prominent African American figure at the turn of the 20th century to reconstruct dominant perceptions of Black subjectivity. A sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, and visual race theorist, W.E.B. Du Bois curated a photography exhibit of African American subjects for public viewing at the 1900 Paris Exposition. As a sociologist, Du Bois publicly rejected the period's popular eugenicist claims about biological essentialism. Building on the work of contemporary Austrian anthropologist Felix von Luschan who advanced a similar claim in 1882, Du Bois argued that phenotypical differences (e.g., in skin and hair colour) were biodata corresponding to differences in geographical climate rather than an indicator of a group's moral and social worth (Beatty and Hristova 29). As an extension of this argument, Du Bois thus rejected polygenesis, or "the

dominant point of view of many anthropologists at the time that there were separate 'kinds' or 'subspecies' of human beings" (25).

At the same time, Du Bois was cognizant of a condition he called Black "double-consciousness," which he theorizes in *The Souls of Black Folks* as a sort of veil or "second-sight" that only lets "the Negro … loo[k] at one's self through the eyes of others … measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (14). Because the eugenics and lynching photographs produced at the turn-of-the-century revitalized discourse on Black deviancy from the 18th and 19th centuries post-Reconstruction, Du Bois's revisualization of African Americans aimed to counter these persistent images of Blackness proliferating American society. Smith argues that the photographs Du Bois curated specifically challenged racist caricatures that claimed African Americans' predisposition to traits like infantility and laziness (*Color Line* 276). These caricatures (see figure 19) included figures like Sambo, a docile house servant and "submissive, childlike buffoon;" Zip Coon, who is characterized as "a lazy, easily frightened, chronically idle, inarticulate buffoon;" and Jim Crow, who broadly represented an "exaggerated, [and] highly stereotypical black character" within contemporary American culture (Jim Crow Museum).



Figure 19. Black caricatures Sambo (left), Zip Coon (center) and Jim Crow (right)[92]

[92] Source: "Sambo, Zip Coon, and Jim Crow," n.d., *Jim Crow Museum*, jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/coon/coon-character-galleries.htm.

Aware of how these caricatures "legitimized" the Reconstruction period's anti-Black sentiments and racial violence for many White Americans (and in turn, shaped African American self-perception), Du Bois used the exhibition photos to represent African Americans as self-determined and autonomous individuals by highlighting their economic successes since Emancipation. The goal of these photographs was to uplift the perception of African Americans on the global stage, to ultimately prove that race and racial difference were social constructions rather than biologically pre-determined indicators of moral and social worth. Titled "The American Negro at Paris," Du Bois's exhibit included a total of 363 photographs of African Americans, which were organized into four albums: *Types of American Negroes, Georgia, U.S.A.* (Volumes I-III) and *Negro Life in Georgia, U.S.A.* (Volume I). The exhibit's albums were collectively (and more broadly) known as the "Paris Albums" (Smith, *Color Line* 275).

More specifically, the photographs in the Paris Albums worked to distance contemporary African American subjectivity from images of Black enslavement by providing a visual representation of a group of African American figures he names the "Talented Tenth." In his 1903 essay by the same name, Du Bois describes this group of Black subjects as "living examples of the possibilities of the Negro race" whose demonstration of "hard experiences and well wrought culture … made American slavery impossible" (*Talented Tenth* 40-1). Referencing figures such as Sojourner Truth, Alexander Crummel, and "above all, Frederick Douglass" (40), Du Bois's writing argues that the key to producing members of the Talented Tenth, who use their newfound rights to autonomy to represent freed African Americans in a different light (34), is education and industriousness.

He identifies that, as 2,000 men were trained by colleges in "Greek and Latin and mathematics …; and these men trained full 50,000 others in morals and manners, and they in turn taught thrift and the alphabet to nine millions of men, who to-day hold $300,000,000 of property" (47), bourgeois respectability and property are entangled with dominant culture, and are therefore accessible to those exceptional members of the Talented Tenth.

Indeed, the Paris Albums' photographs illustrate the very formation of respectable African American subjectivity and thus offers a photographic demonstration of respectability politics. Smith describes that the early photographs in these Albums subvert the turn-of-the-century's cultural discourse by reproducing characteristics of middle-class portraits and criminal mugshots within the same image (*Color Line* 275). I refer to these hybrid images, which Smith identifies but does not name, using the oxymoron "respectable mugshots." As she points out, the Albums' respectable mugshots specifically show "expressionless subjects photographed from the shoulders up, both head on and in right-angle profile … posed against a plain gray background, devoid of props and frills" (280). To early 20th century viewers, these photographic codes and conventions were culturally intelligible as mugshots, and therefore suggested the photographic subject's supposed criminality or deviancy. However, these portraits also depicted carefully groomed subjects in middle-class attire—key elements of bourgeois portrait photography—to simultaneously signify the subject's respectability.

For instance, in the photographs in figure 20, the subject is shown wearing a white collared shirt, a light tie, and a semi-formal jacket with a buttoned vest underneath. Apart from some creases in the fabric along the subject's bent arm, the jacket appears to be neatly pressed. Notably, only the top button of his jacket is fastened—a detail, I argue, that allows

the photographer to also display the subject's vest, which marks the jacket as part of a formal, three-piece suit. In both images, the subject's hair is neatly cropped, and he sits tall within the photograph's frame. These visual codes of bourgeois respectability contrast the photograph's mugshot elements: his seated depiction from the waist up in uneven lighting conditions, and depiction from both the front and side profile in front of a neutral canvas.

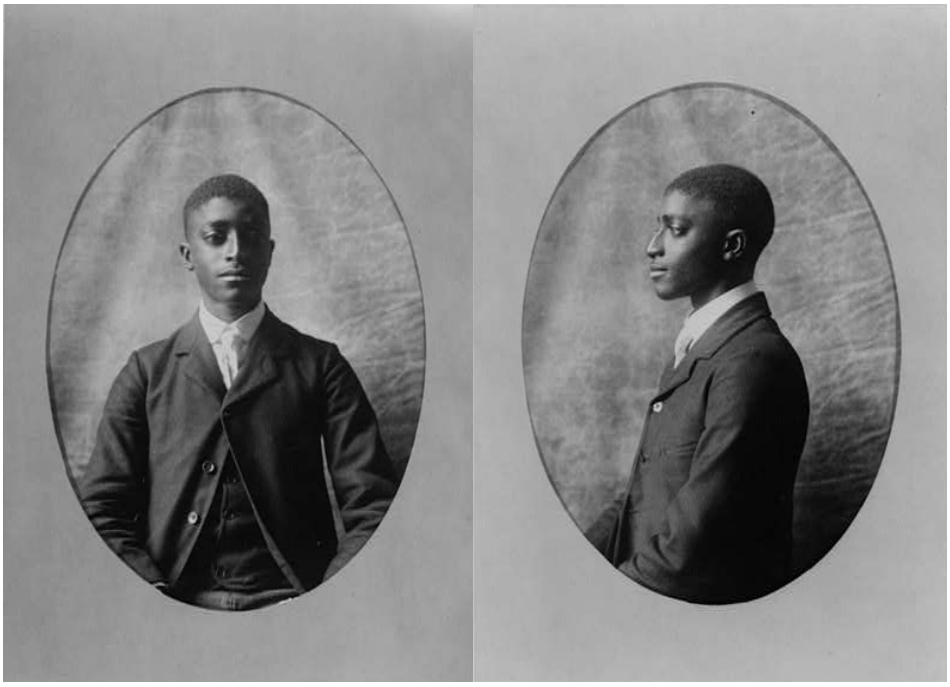


Figure 20. A photograph with both bourgeois portrait and mugshot codes and conventions, 1900 Paris Albums, W.E.B. Du Bois[93]

Smith remarks that for the photographs' Black audiences, the concurrent presence of bourgeois and criminal photographic codes visually mirrored their experience of double-consciousness. In other words, these photographs' blending of photographic codes and conventions reflected the shared understanding amongst Black viewers that their perception within American culture was always filtered through White representations of Blackness

[93] Source: W.E.B. Du Bois, "African American man, half-length portrait, facing front," 1899 or 1900, Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/99472238.

(Smith, *Color Line* 282). I expand on this to argue that respectable mugshots such as the ones shown in figure 20 demonstrate photography's potential to destabilize dominant views of respectability and criminality as racially determined. In blurring legible signs of respectability and criminality, which are racially coded in Western culture, these photographs expose how particular subjectivities (e.g., dominant perceptions of Blackness) are socially and visually constructed rather than linked to biological traits. By defying a clear visual classification of the photographic subjects, the Albums' early photographs introduce for White audiences the possibility of subject positions that straddle the line between respectability and criminality's totalizing subjectivities, to challenge mainstream notions of Black subjectivity as inherently deviant.

However, Du Bois restricts his use of respectable mugshots to the Albums' introductory photographs. Instead of producing an archive that collapses the bourgeois and criminal dichotomy altogether, Du Bois only appears to employ this visual formula as an early framing device that guides the interpretation of the Albums' later photographs. That is, the more familiar image of Black "criminality" "prepare[s] the white man for the freedom of the black man" (*Talented Tenth* 41) and eases his White audiences into the newer configuration of Black respectability.

The remaining photographs in the Albums fully adhere to bourgeois portrait photography's codes and conventions. These images show African American subjects that are "posed in three-quarter turn, rather than in profile. Gradually more and more of the body is represented, and subjects are supported by the stuffed chairs, patterned carpets, books, lamps, and lace draperies that signify middle-class parlors" (Smith, *Color Line* 283).

Additionally, these later photographs portray biracial subjects instead of the darker skinned subjects of their earlier images (see figure 21). These subjects, according to Smith, "contest a racial taxonomy of identifiable (because visible) otherness" (*Color Line* 286). Photographed in the bourgeois style, they "signifie[d] a potential confusion of racial categories and [therefore] the epistemological impotency of vision" (Doane qtd. in Smith, *Color Line* 287). Such depictions of White-passing subjects aimed to advance an alternate view of Blackness by presenting African American subjects whose respectability (and therefore humanity) was readily intelligible to the exhibit's White audiences; in doing so, they challenged the eugenics movement's claims that miscegenation would lead to society's degeneration (289).



Figure 21. A photograph of a biracial African American woman, 1900 Paris Albums, W.E.B. Du Bois[94]

[94] Source: W.E.B. Du Bois, "African American woman, three-quarter length portrait, seated with left arm over back of chair, facing front," 1899 or 1900, Library of Congress, loc.gov/pictures/item/99472220/.

Yet in reverting to bourgeois photographic traditions, the Albums' later photographs flattened the discursive complexity of the earlier images that helped challenge existing representations of subjectivity by presenting African American subjects who were neither fully respectable nor fully criminal. Du Bois's revisualization overall reveals that "counterpossibility for … narrative sanctions [are] granted … [by] the dominant groups" (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak* 82) who hold the power to "gover[n] the appearance of statements [that] generat[e] social meaning" (Hartman 11). When speaking to mainstream discourses and White audiences, such visual frames are necessary for their cultural intelligibility, but remain limited in their counter-discursive effects. For example, Du Bois believed that members of the Talented Tenth who were "natural sons of unnatural fathers" were often given "a liberal training" that could then help them "plead for black men's rights" (*Talented Tenth* 38). Though these mixed-race individuals, depicted in the Albums' later photographs, were African American, the reliance of Du Bois's visual arguments on members of the Talented Tenth with lighter skin had the effect of reaffirming a false relationship between respectable subjectivity, property (i.e., practices of bourgeois consumption), and racially coded phenotypes.

Such representations, once again, establish Black respectability as conditional and exclusive. As Fanon puts it, they determine respectability as a quality granted to an elite group of individuals based on the existence of other Black subjects that are "less intelligent than I, blacker than I, or less good than I…" (186). Thus, despite challenging the previous centuries' stereotypes of Black ineptitude through uncommon representations of Black respectability and demonstrating photography's potential to reconstruct racial subjectivity, I

assert that the Albums' photographs as a whole limit Black representation to existing frames of subjectivity and functionally model an assimilationist strategy that reaffirms respectability as determined by the colour line (Bourdieu 295; Du Bois; Hartman and Wilderson 189; Wilderson 11).

2.3 Who Does Respectable Blackness Serve? Negotiating Black American Subjectivity in WWII Propaganda Posters

Following this, it is unsurprising that Black disenfranchisement and views of Black people as subhuman extended well into the 1930s, especially with eugenics and lynching photography's combined power with Jim Crow laws in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, when the United States entered World War II in December 1941, the American government faced a dilemma: it needed to revise the nation's racial position overnight to garner the support of African American citizens and to persuade White soldiers to work and fight alongside their equals (Sealy 136). This agenda was made more urgent by the American government's desire to distance their racial ideology from Nazi racial ideology, which was explicitly modelled on American Jim Crow and immigration laws (Ross). Along with other modes of nationalist discourse, photography was therefore mobilized during this period to reconstruct American national identity and White Americans' racial imagination (Sealy).

First popularized in 1936 by *LIFE Magazine* (Greene 40), the 1930s to 1960s became known as the "golden age of photojournalism" in the United States (Dimock 253).[95] Photojournalism is a photographic genre that combines a social documentary style of

[95] Interestingly, Elliott S. Parker identifies the Scottish photographer John Thomson as one of the pioneers of photojournalism, and as producing an early form of this genre in the late 19th century (see *John Thomson, Photojournalist in Asia, 1862-1872* for more).

photography with additional framing or post-production elements (e.g., news copy) to report on current events (Dimock 253). Though its documentary style gives the impression that these photographs offer glimpses of "accurate, truthful, unmanipulated slices of life," historical uses of photojournalism, including its deployment by the United States' Farm Security Administration from 1935 to 1943 reveal its potential for and historical uses in producing propaganda (Carlebach 6).

I argue that war propaganda posters in the 1940s drew on photojournalism's popularity to construct a false reality of racial harmony and equality within the United States. More specifically, this genre's adoption allowed the American government to tailor its messaging to multiple audiences by manipulating various levels of the image. My analysis of these images explores the racial tension and conflicting realities presented by the American government to its Black and White citizens by examining different compositional layers of WWII propaganda posters.

I examine these posters by first focusing on their post-production elements, then analyze their photographic components separately from their framing devices. This multi-leveled analysis is appropriate to the posters' immediate conditions of production and ideological context, which differ from Douglass's and Du Bois's photographs. For one, though these propaganda photos are "countervisual" in their purported revisualization of Black subjectivity, they were produced by official government bodies to strengthen the United States' manpower during the war. Unlike the previously examined photographs, these images did not actually aim to dismantle the "injurious interpellations" (Butler 104) of dominant racial discourse to reconstruct Black Americans as respectable subjects and

citizens. Rather, they served as discursive texts that reaffirmed an undercurrent of White supremacist ideology in 1940s America.

2.3.1 "United We Win"

The original black-and-white photograph in figure 22 was taken by Ukrainian-American magazine editor Alexander Liberman as part of a campaign launched by the American War Manpower Commission (AWMC)—a federal agency that managed labour needs during WWII. It was subsequently printed and circulated by the AWMC in 1943 as a propaganda poster titled "United We Win" ("Powers of Persuasion"). The original photograph, if it exists, has proven difficult to find (more on this below).



Figure 22. "United We Win" World War II enlistment poster[96]

[96] Source: Howard Liberman (Untied States War Manpower Commission), *United We Win*, 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, loc.gov/resource/ds.13150/.

The poster depicts two American men whose nationality is signalled by the American flag superimposed onto an otherwise blank background. The bottom left quadrant of the poster depicts a Black American subject; the bottom right quadrant shows a White American one. In his description of the image, Sealy observes that the men appear to be working together in harmony to build an airplane (137).

As I established in Chapter One of this dissertation, it was common convention to photograph Black and White subjects separately in colonial and eugenics photography. When photographed together, this depiction was intentionally chosen to juxtapose the subjects' supposed respectability and deviancy. This visual contrast is also observable in lynching photography, where the bodies of Black and White subjects are juxtaposed to represent a clear racial hierarchy.

In contrast to the preceding decades' photographic genres, the two figures' simultaneous depiction in figure 22 appears to present an image of racial harmony, suggesting the image's countervisual function. Both Black and White subjects are represented as "good, respectable, traditionally masculine, patriotic… citizen[s]" working together to support their nation's war efforts (Strolovitch and Crowder 342). Indeed, the colourized American flag "hanging" above the subjects' heads and the explicit caption "UNITED WE WIN" work to anchor the photograph's message of racial unification.

In *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen describe a vector as a perceptual line that relates two elements of an image together for visual emphasis (16). This poster further reinforces the message of unification using vectors: the Black subject's arm is cleverly positioned to form a perceptual line that directs

the viewer's gaze to the word "UNITED;" the White subject's arm forms a vector that points to the word "WE." These post-production elements claim a new narrative of Black subjectivity by representing Black people as hardworking and honourable American citizens.

However, a closer look at the image reveals that this "photograph" of unity is likely a composite image made from two or three different photographs, as there are inconsistencies in lighting and camera angle across different parts of the "photograph." For example, while the White American subject is clearly portrayed from a bottom-up angle, the Black American subject is photographed more at eye-level or from a slight top-down angle. Whereas the lighting is more evenly distributed in the photograph of the White man, evoking the eugenics movement's controlled illumination techniques for photographing White subjects, the shadows on the side of the Black man's face and body suggest that he was photographed under different (i.e., less calculated) lighting conditions.

Additionally, the lines that join the machine's edge with the White man's hand and leg, and the lines outlining the Black man's right hand appear to be more clearly defined than elsewhere in the photograph, suggesting that these figures were cut and pasted together from separate photographs to form the desired image of racial harmony. Despite suggesting that it was taken under the same manufacturing conditions, there is also a notable inconsistency in the subjects' styles of dress. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that the original photograph by Liberman—one depicting both men in the same image without the post-production elements—is nowhere to be found, despite the poster's documentation in government archives.

The photograph's composite nature aligns with America's social reality during this period. In the years preceding the United States' entry into the war, discriminatory practices prevented Black men from employment within the aircraft and aerospace industry. For example, the Glenn L. Martin Company exclusively hired White men until the autumn of 1941; although President Roosevelt had issued Executive Order 8802 in June of that year, banning discriminatory employment practices within war-related fields of work, Martin was exempted from this order until "external pressure, labor shortages, and the persuasion of the U.S. Employment Service" eventually led the company to comply (Maryland Historical Society 408).

Even following these changes in the aircraft manufacturing industry, Black employees only made up 5% of this workforce, and of these, only 33% were Black men. Black employees also faced continued segregation in the workplace and were often relegated to warehouse settings and factories to produce aircraft subcomponents (Maryland Historical Society 409). Though this photograph appears to present racial harmony during the wartime era, an analysis of its post-production elements therefore reveals a false representation of reality.

The poster's inconsistent message is also evident within other compositional elements that would have been legible to the White middle-class public based on past visual traditions. While the Black and White subjects are presented together, they remain separated by different planes of composition, with the Black American subject positioned below the White American subject to signify his inferior position within the racial hierarchy (Sealy 138). The White American subject is also photographed with one leg up on the airplane. I assert that

this particular pose symbolically reassures White viewers of the status quo: it promises that despite the poster's formal message of unity, White Americans continue to "have a leg up" over Black subjects in the United States.

The subjects' gazes further reinforce a discourse of Black inferiority. Though both subjects look downwards toward their tools, the Black man's eyes are downcast and are obscured from the poster's viewers. Reproduced a few decades after Reconstruction and at the peak of spectacle lynching, the averted gaze in this particular configuration—embodied by a Black labourer in the presence of a White "superior"—invokes the familiar racial dynamic of Black subservience and White domination established over centuries of Black enslavement, and more specifically evokes enslaved Black people's denied rights to look (hooks, *Black Looks* 115). In contrast, the White man's gaze and elevated placement suggest that he occupies a position of power and surveillance over the other.

This photograph also uses clothing to differentiate between the subjects' social value, following photography's long tradition of using the sartorial to denote symbolic capital. The Black subject is dressed in a casually fitted and rumpled utility shirt. His sleeves are rolled up and the brim of his cap is flipped upwards, giving him a silly, almost boyish look. Combined with a contented smile and downward gaze, the semiotics of his clothing evoke the racist stereotype of African Americans as childish and docile figures. As Hartman states, such "figure[s] reconcil[e] infantilized willfulness with the abject status of the [enslaved as] will-less object" (52): that is, they reveal how Black Americans, despite Black liberation in 1865, continue to occupy a position of subjugation in American society in their adherence to its existing structures.

In comparison, the White subject's clothing is less industrial and informal. His hair is coiffed and capless, and he appears to be wearing a fitted polo shirt with the sleeves unrolled. This subject represents a striking image of the all-American man. Given the photograph's depiction of these figures in shared working conditions, this semiotic detail suggests that he holds a more esteemed (i.e., less labourious) position than the Black man within the manufacturing plant.

Indeed, Sealy argues that "when bringing the black subject into view" in wartime photography, the norm was to reproduce them as "objects signifying the [White] Allied army officers' superiority" (125). While this photograph, in placing the subjects together, suggests that the subjects share equal status in their workplace, these differences in photographic code—the subjects' placement on the vertical plane, pose, gaze, and clothing—nevertheless suggest a persistent White visuality that marks White American subjects' elevated social status within American society. This photograph is just one of many posters that reveal the semiotic inconsistencies in American wartime propaganda's messaging, resulting from the nation's sudden and superficial shift in racial representation.

2.3.2 "Twice a Patriot!"

Figure 23 shows another example of propaganda sanctioned by the United States government to portray egalitarian race relations without advancing meaningful changes for racial equality (Sealy 139). This image is produced in sepia tone and has a single Black subject in the foreground of a shipyard. The top of the poster celebrates the subject as "TWICE A PATRIOT!" before explaining: "EX-PRIVATE OBIE BARTLETT LOST LEFT ARM—PEARL HARBOR—RELEASED: DEC., 1941—NOW AT WORK WELDING IN

A WEST COAST SHIPYARD…". The bottom of the poster includes a quotation from Bartlett that echoes this narrative of continued service (read: servitude): "Sometimes I feel my job here is as important as the one I had to leave."

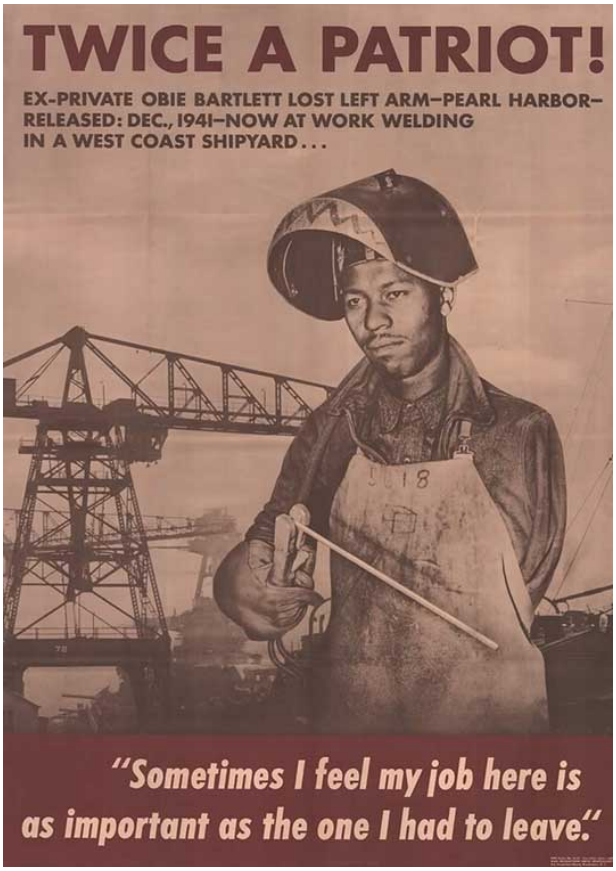


Figure 23. "Twice a Patriot" World War II enlistment poster[97]

Similar to "United We Win," this poster's representation of Black honour or respectability is located primarily in its post-production elements. The poster's three text-based sections—the identification of Bartlett as a patriot, his description, and quotation—visually frame the photograph from the top and bottom margins to produce an inspiring

[97] Source: U.S. Government Printing Office, *Twice a Patriot!,* 1943, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, *National Archives,* fdr.artifacts.archives.gov/objects/16733/twice-a-patriot?ctx=715b5c1f8f10719e0cadda5bde7e80d3aca264be&idx=9.

narrative of patriotism. In addition to explicitly affirming his Americanness with the statement "twice the patriot," the poster's individual recognition of Bartlett and amplification of his voice (i.e., through a quotation) implies that military service will provide Black subjects with unprecedented recognition as first-rate citizens. This association of individual recognition with heroism counters lynching photography's convention of naming Black subjects to "identify" (i.e., mark) them as criminals. This comparison is especially striking when we remember that lynching photography, though less popular than in previous decades, was still practiced throughout the 1940s.

Separated from its supplementary texts, however, the photograph's representation of Black subjectivity is one that is familiar to the White American audience. The photograph itself shows no visual indications of the subject's prior military service. Rather, it reinscribes and normalizes the familiar stereotype of Black American servility. Bartlett's jacket, apron, industrial glove, welding helmet, and tool all work as cultural signifiers that permanently affix the subject within the public memory as a shipyard labourer. Similar to the "United We Win" poster, the stark outline of Bartlett's body here suggests that this "photograph" is likely a composite image; here, the visual composition transfers the subject's image onto the background of a shipyard to reinforce his labour value.

Furthermore, while Bartlett's figure is the largest visual element and is thus the focal point of the photograph, his body is only slightly larger than the construction crane shown behind his right shoulder. In conjunction with his clothing and tools, I argue that this visual comparison between Bartlett and the crane essentializes the Black subject's identity and value to his labour potential. This conventional representation echoes the legacy of American

slavery to suggest that Black American patriotism is conditional—recognized based on the subject's industriousness.

In his research on Black labour during WWII, Cuahutémoc Arroyo states that while representing over 20 percent of shipyard labourers in the 1940s, Black Americans were underrepresented in managerial positions because "the typical white worker preferred death … to working under a Negro" (Archibald qtd. in Arroyo). Black shipyard workers were also segregated at work and paid approximately $635/year less than White workers doing the same work (Rubin et al. in Arroyo).[98] Bartlett's lower-class and racial status is signified here by his gaze, which drifts off towards the left-hand side of the poster, underscoring his comparative lack of power to the photographer/viewer.

This photograph also draws on other cultural codes of deviancy—namely, disability—to mark the Black American as an inferior subject. By positioning Bartlett's shoulder in the center of the image, the photographer uses the subject's arm and welding tool as a vector to specifically guide the viewer's gaze towards his limbless sleeve. Placed within the military context, which Strolovitch and Crowder identify as a discursive site of traditional heteronormative masculinity, this foregrounding of disability works to neutralize the Black man's perceived threat as a stereotypically hypermasculine figure (Eglash and Bleecker 369).[99]

Overall, these war propaganda posters illustrate how seemingly countervisual images, such as outward depictions of Black honour and respectability, can nevertheless serve as

[98] $635 in 1940 is approximately $14,700 in 2025.
[99] Eglash and Bleecker specifically note that science fiction similarly employs disability as a way of keeping self-determined Black men "in check" to address the concern that they are "too threatening for an American audience" (369).

forms of dominant racial discourse. The semiotic tension between these images' post-production and photographic elements reveals the American government's underlying racial ideology and ideology's importance in constructing racial representations. It reveals a discursive tension that Hartman, in her interview with Wilderman, more broadly describes as White America's "[obscene] attempt to make the narrative of [Black] defeat into an opportunity for celebration" (Hartman and Wilderson 185). Despite motivating an immediate shift in employment practices to boost the nation's wartime efforts, these images therefore operated as visual reinforcements of Black inferiority that maintained, rather than challenged, America's racial hegemony.

2.4 Changing Times, Changing Views? Expressions of Respectability in Civil Rights Photography

In his research on race relations during World War II, historian Matthew Delmont states that Black Americans ultimately fought for the right to serve their country ("'Half American'"). Although anti-discrimination policies were formally built into the United States' Selective Service draft, Black draftees and volunteers were often denied the ability to hold meaningful positions in the military under the guise that military quotas had already been met. For instance, Black Americans were excluded from the marine corps at the start of WWII, and those who were allowed into the army and navy were segregated from fighting alongside White draftees (Delmont).

Nevertheless, these Black men played a pivotal role within the American military, moving battle supplies, providing logistical support, and—in more remarkable cases, as with the Tuskegee Airforce—fighting on the frontlines. Yet when World War II ended and these

servicemen returned home in 1945, they found themselves facing the same racial discriminations as before. Delmont argues that despite risking their lives to serve their country, Black war veterans were not treated with the same reverence as White veterans; they were "almost treated as though they were convicts." Some were even murdered or attacked by White men for wearing their military uniforms in public, as the same uniforms that glorified White veterans symbolized a threat to White America's existing racial order when shown on Black bodies (Delmont). Thus, the United States saw mounting social tensions for the recognition of Black American self-determination during the post-war period. In 1954, the Civil Rights movement began to formally establish equal rights for Black American citizens (White 38).

One of the Civil Rights movement's primary challenges was reconstructing public conceptions of Black subjectivity. According to historian E. Frances White, Civil Rights activists recognized that "the image of black men as savage beasts with an uncontrollable urge to rape white women resonated so deeply in the white psyche that even whites sympathetic to black people's struggle for equality accepted this myth as essentially true" (31-2). In response, the movement produced an archive of countervisual photographs to help reframe America's views on race and race relations heading into the second half of the 20th century.

These photographs were published by liberal White news outlets for a sympathetic White audience, and commonly depicted Black respectability as the central argument for equal rights. In addition to employing the politics of respectability, however, these images also challenged traditional perceptions of White respectability by producing a public archive

of White violence (Fackler 273). Photographs that juxtapose Black respectability with White aggression have been widely credited with spurring sympathy in White allies, and with leading President John F. Kennedy to ultimately push America toward racial reforms (Berger, *Seeing Through Race* 8).

However, many of these images adopt traditional respectability frames, which limit a recognition of Black agency. Instead, representations of Black agency were constrained to Black publications on civil rights issues, which had limited circulation and reach, and were therefore unseen by the mainstream White American public. I therefore identify America's Civil Rights era photographs as an arena of multileveled discursive struggle (Terdiman 34) that helped achieve the movement's primary goals while upholding the nation's broader racist ideologies.

2.4.1 Mamie Till and Photographic Expressions of Black Agency

In the summer of 1955, Emmett Till, a Black 14-year-old from Chicago, Illinois, was visiting his great-uncle Moses Wright in Money, Mississippi, when on August 28, 1955, he was tortured and murdered by two White men for allegedly flirting with a White grocery store clerk named Carolyn Bryant. Till's body was so mutilated from the attack that when it was discovered three days after his death, his great-uncle was unable to recognize him (#TeamEBONY). His body was sent back to Chicago and was picked up by his mother, Mamie Elizabeth Till.

Outraged by the torture done to her boy, Mamie Till requested an open casket service at her son's funeral and instructed the mortician not to touch up his face. On September 15, 1955, through the efforts of Black journalist Simeon Booker and Black photographer David

Jackson, a photograph of Till's open casket and body (figure 24) was published in *JET Magazine* as a form of Civil Rights activism: for people across America to see what the two White men had done to her son (Langer; #TeamEBONY).

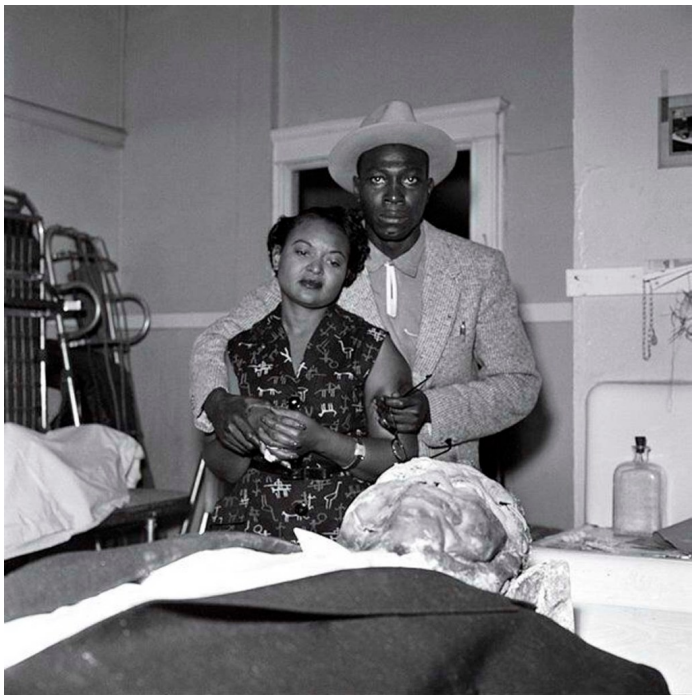


Figure 24. Mamie Till with her future husband, Gene Mobley, looking at her son's brutalized body[100]

To this day, the photograph of Emmett Till's body challenges mainstream American views of White respectability by demanding its viewers to confront racism's violent reality. I argue that this photograph specifically advances a form of racial counter-discourse by inserting Black agency into the creation of a photograph depicting a lynched Black body. In contrast to conventional lynching photographs, which were produced by White mobs to portray Black victims as deviant and subhuman, Booker, Jackson, and Mamie Till's choice to

[100] Source: David Jackson, "Mamie Till looking at her son's brutalized body," 1955, *Meridian Star,* meridianstar.com/2020/08/31/see-the-photo-emmett-tills-mother-wanted-you-to-see-the-one-that-inspired-a-generation-to-join-the-civil-rights-movement/.

document and disseminate an image of Till's brutalized body during a period of political turbulence flipped the dominant script of White respectability to illuminate a view of White criminality and injustice.

More specifically, I highlight that this photograph contrasts the codes and conventions of lynching photographs, which were still produced in the 1950s (albeit less frequently and at private lynchings). For one, this photograph foregrounds the victim's body to represent White brutality; unlike lynching photographs, which relegate the lynched Black body to the background to downplay the consequences of White violence (see figure 15, right), this unflinching representation demands the viewer to directly face its impact. Additionally, Mamie Till and her future husband Gene Mobley are dressed smartly and appear stoic despite mourning Emmett Till's death. The clothing choice and tempered expression of emotion here create an image of civility that contradicts lynching photographs' representations of White respectability and Black criminality. Notably, Mobley looks directly at the photographer/viewer in this photograph; as a Black man who is tall in stature and has dark skin, he is a stereotypical threat to White masculinity. Thus, his gaze here disrupts the traditional balance of power in who gets to see and who determines what to see in White American society.

Unfortunately, this photograph wasn't run by mainstream White publications and remained unseen by most White Americans until several decades later. Nevertheless, its depiction of Black agency to *JET* and other Black magazines' readers, along with the disheartening results of the Emmett Till murder trial, is seen as forming the peak of the Civil Rights movement (Langer; Mitchell). Photographs of the Civil Rights movement printed in

White American publications suggested a similar yet sanitized version of this countervisual image, producing different counter-discursive implications for racial ideology in the US.

2.4.2 Negative Positives in Civil Rights Photography: The Problem with Equating Black Passivity to Respectability

Berger argues that familiar and "reassuring" cultural symbols of White bourgeois respectability were essential to the Civil Rights movement's success because "photographs that made the agency of blacks all too obvious diminished the odds of reaching otherwise sympathetic whites" for fear they would overthrow the White majority (*Seeing Through Race* 34). Social photography scholar Katharina Fackler advances that Civil Rights photographers therefore developed a "nuanced and ambivalent visual grammar of respectability … [using] subtler features of visual composition, including framing and lighting, as well as accompanying verbal narratives" to ensure their Black subjects were legible as respectable subjects by White audiences (273). For instance, she explains how Rosa Parks was deliberately chosen to be the figurehead of the Montgomery Bus Boycott because she fit within the established norms of respectable (White) womanhood (273).[101]

In other words, despite continued views of photography (and especially photojournalism) as documentary proof, photographs depicting Civil Rights protests and subjects were meticulously crafted with the White public's cultural knowledge in mind. I expand Berger and Fackler's arguments by mapping the representation of agency (or lack thereof) onto the photographs' racial subjects, specifically through characterizations of

[101] According to Fackler, two Black teenagers had refused to give up their seats to White passengers several months prior to the Montgomery boycott, but these events were not publicized because the subjects were pregnant out of wedlock (273).

dominance and passivity. Though these images helped introduce notions of White aggression and Black respectability into mainstream discourse and ultimately helped establish civil rights laws in the United States, I argue that these photographs' representation of Black respectability is synonymous with Black passivity and is thus culturally legible within America's existing racial discourse. Put differently, I assert that these photographs challenged dominant constructions of Black deviancy or criminality by adopting a version of respectability politics compatible with White supremacist ideology.

2.4.2a Elizabeth Eckford and The Little Rock Nine "Scream Image"

The photograph in figure 25 was taken on September 4, 1957 at Little Rock Central High School, the first all-White school in Arkansas to implement racial integration. It depicts 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, one of nine Black students sent to Little Rock to test the public's response to integrated schools. Eckford is shown in the photograph with a solemn but determined expression; though she is surrounded by an angry White mob, she looks straight ahead while marching towards the school's entrance, holding a book in her arm. Eckford wears a white, short-sleeved blouse and a long white-and-gingham pleated skirt. The immediate background reveals three White girls—presumably fellow Little Rock students—who feature prominently in the image. Behind them is a crowd of White segregationists, some of whom are likely the parents of Little Rock students. To the top left-hand side of the photograph are two members of the Arkansas National Guard, deployed by Governor Orval Faubus to support the segregationists ("Arkansas Democrat-Gazette").

This photograph was taken by White American photojournalist Will Counts and was first published on the front page of the *Arkansas Democrat* (Blakemore), a democratic

newspaper with "an editorial position … for law and order, which at the time amounted to endorsing integration" ("Arkansas Democrat-Gazette").[102] The image confirmed the need for civil rights laws for the newspaper's democratic White readership by offering a powerful countervisual image: an undeniable representation of Black respectability and White aggression.



Figure 25. Elizabeth Eckford and a White mob at Little Rock, September 4, 1957[103]

To signify Eckford as a respectable Black subject, this photograph keeps very much in line with existing codes of White middle-class respectability. Eckford's collared shirt is pressed and is buttoned up to the top, and while her style of dress mirrors that of the girls

[102] This newspaper is more accurately called the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, as the morning and afternoon papers ran by different names. Will Counts was a photojournalist for both papers ("Arkansas Democrat-Gazette").
[103] Source: Will Counts, "Elizabeth Eckford at Little Rock," *Medium*, medium.com/afrosapiophile/the-little-rock-nine-64-ef23dfc66a06.

around her, her mostly white outfit stands in contrast to the others to symbolize her innocence. Additionally, the photograph's situational context (racial integration at schools) and Eckford's book align her with the same liberal notions of enlightened subjectivity upon which Du Bois identified members of the Talented Tenth (*Talented Tenth* 54). Eckford's respectability is further impressed upon the photograph's viewers by both her pose and expression, which are relatively composed. Against the backdrop of the angry mob, the 15-year-old appears steadfast and stoic.

In contrast, the White mob around Eckford is visibly agitated. While their clothing denotes middle-class respectability as well, here, this visual code is undercut by the subjects' aggressive expressions. The White students' expressions clearly depict their outrage at Eckford's presence and what it symbolizes: racial integration at their formerly all-White school and the discomfort of a changing sociopolitical landscape. Hazel Bryan, the 15-year-old girl shown just above Eckford's shoulder, is photographed mid-shout, with her brows furrowed and mouth wide open. Also popularized as the "Scream Image," this image of Bryan would go on to become "an infamous symbol of the bigotry of Jim Crow and the intolerance faced by the students who tried to go to [Little Rock] that day" (Blakemore). Such expressions also contrast representations of White subjects in lynching photography, which rely on traditional bourgeois poses, dress, and expressions to depict White civility and orderliness.

While this photograph of White aggression in the face of Black respectability counters the dominant racial ideology leading up to the 1950s, I argue that it was able to garner the sympathy of the *Arkansas Democrat*'s White readers because of its synonymous

treatment of Black respectability with passivity. For instance, though Eckford's furrowed brow suggests she is moving with determination towards the school's entrance, her body is composed and appears surprisingly still in this photograph; the only trace of movement is a small lift in the corner of her skirt, seen near the photograph's bottom left-hand side. This contained movement is juxtaposed against the restlessness of the White crowd. For example, the girls on the right-hand side of the photograph are captured in action: their forward-swinging arms and legs suggest they are moving towards Eckford, as if ready to attack. On the other hand, the third girl on the left-hand side of the photograph appears to be shrinking back from Eckford in fear or disgust: despite having one foot forward, this girl's shoulders and body are drawn in. Though characterized differently, all three of these White girls are represented as able to move through this public space without regulation.

This agency is clearly denied Eckford, as is shown through the subjects' gaze and photographic composition. While Eckford does not appear to be looking at anyone, most members of the White mob are depicted as looking at her. The overwhelming presence of the White gaze on Eckford's Black body conveys her limited agency to the *Democrat's* White readership to produce a palatable image of Black respectability. Additionally, though she is one of nine Black students starting school at Little Rock on this day, Counts' isolation of Eckford from the other Black students further highlights her helplessness and limited agency in this moment. Indeed, despite the clear power imbalance between the photograph's racial subjects, Counts's photograph includes the depiction of two government soldiers (in the top left-hand corner), thus reinforcing the White allies' shared understanding that "whites [remain] in charge … allow[ing] white viewers to feel secure, and therefore more amenable

to change" (Berger, *Seeing Through Race* 8). The printing of this particular image for a liberal White readership suggests that Black passivity was a requisite to changing perceptions of Black respectability during the Civil Rights movement.

2.4.2b Walter Gadsden and Birmingham's Police Dogs

Similarly, the construction of Black respectability in the photograph in figure 26 depends on a representation of Black subjects in powerless positions. This image was taken on May 3, 1963 by White American photojournalist Bill Hudson during the 1963 Birmingham riots. It appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* the next day (Davis).



Figure 26. Police dogs attack at civil rights protest, Birmingham, Alabama[104]

[104] Source: Bill Hudson, "civil rights demonstrator attacked by police dogs," *New York Times,* nytimes.com/2016/11/21/opinion/the-art-of-the-protest.html.

In this photograph, a White police officer named Dick Middleton is seen grabbing 15-year-old Walter Gadsden by the shirt in an intersection in broad daylight (Davis). Gadsden is lifted off his feet by his attacker; his body is hunched forward in a defensive position with one arm on Middleton's wrist as he looks down at the police dog lunging towards him. Framed against visual signifiers of assault—the police officer's grab and the lunging dog—the photograph clearly pictures the teenager as a helpless victim.

Notably, while the photograph's background consists of Black American onlookers, none of them appear to be moving towards Gadsden to help him. Apart from an individual on the left side of the photograph who is directly facing the action, the bodies of all remaining spectators are turned away from the centermost subjects, suggesting their movement away from the attack. It is likely that this lack of intervention is motivated by the presence of police dogs and firearms, which symbolically reinforce their wielders' power and potential threat to bystanders.

Additionally, the photograph's Black subjects are shown wearing their Sunday best. Several men wear brimmed hats, collared shirts, and slacks, and Gadsden himself wears dress shoes, a button-up shirt, and a cardigan. For the liberal White readers of the *New York Times, Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*, these symbols of respectability and passivity work together to frame Black Americans as "unthreatening and normatively acceptable" to argue that they are "deserving of rights, equality, and fair treatment" (Strolovitch and Crowder 341).

This passivity is altogether juxtaposed by the photograph's representation of White dominance and power. For instance, the largest figure in the photograph is a White police

officer and his gun, which are foregrounded in the image's right-hand side. The officer's size, positioning, and placement imply that he is moving towards the action from beyond the camera's visual frame, suggesting mobility and agency. In addition to the power that his size and positioning denotes, the officer's orientation—facing the photograph's central action with his back towards the camera—produces a proximal position to the photographer/viewer that frames the incident from a shared White vantage point. Though the photograph's liberal White viewers may not condone the officers' actions, this shared point-of-view nonetheless works symbolically to reassure them of their superior status in American society.

Ultimately, photographs of the Civil Rights movement like those in figures 25 and 26 helped garner the support of White allies to advance legislative action against racism in the United States (Berger, *Seeing Through Race* 8; P. Harris 219). They did so, however, by adopting culturally legible—and therefore limited—representations of Black subjectivity: as subjects whose respectability was contingent on passivity in the face of violence. Martin Luther King Jr. describes in his letter from a Birmingham jail:

> … The Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action …"

While these photographs' adherence to dominant scripts of orderliness and proper conduct (Higginbotham 193)—that is, to respectability politics—was necessary for achieving Black

rights, this visual formula reveals the shortcomings of such images that prioritize White definitions of "order" over "justice" as countervisual discourse.

2.5 The Challenge of Countervisuality in Analogue Photography

In this chapter, I traced the tension between photography's persistent White visuality and its countervisual uses in the United States from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries. Douglass's daguerreotype portraits, photographs from Du Bois's Paris Albums, WWII recruitment poster photos, and Civil Rights images all demonstrate that photographs are a "sit[e] of intense and multileveled struggle" (Terdiman 34), where racial subjectivity and ideologies are continuously shaped and negotiated. Though these examples offer representations of Black subjectivity that veer from modernity's constructions of White respectability and Black deviancy, I have argued here that their representations of Black respectability ultimately reinforce dichotomous conceptions of subjectivity. Put differently, though these photographs reimagine Black subjectivity, they also reveal that their "meta narrative thrust is always towards an integration into the [White] national project" (Hartman and Wilderson 185). Their limitations in advancing racial counter-discourse are best understood through existing critiques of respectability politics (Dazey; Fackler; F. Harris; P. Harris; Higginbotham; Kerrison; Pitcan et al.; Strolovitch and Crowder; White), Hartman and Wilderson's "position of the unthought," and through an examination of what Davis and Chouinard call the "conditions of affordances."

2.5.1 Analogue Photography's Conditions (of Whiteness)

Critics of respectability politics have argued that this seemingly counter-discursive strategy is "concerned above all with social acceptance, [as] it entails efforts of some

members of a marginalized group both to disprove dominant stereotypes about the group and to regulate and 'improve' the behavior of its members in line with socially approved norms" (Gould qtd. in Strolovitch and Crowder 341). While respectability politics as a strategy for social uplift can achieve limited mobility for some groups, it therefore also "participate[s] in, perpetuate[s], and exacerbate[s] forms of what Cathy Cohen has called the 'secondary marginalization' of group members whose oppression is structured by … intersectional marginalization" (Strolovitch and Crowder 340). Indeed, photographs of Black respectability demonstrate this secondary marginalization: in adhering to a narrow representation of "acceptable" Black subjectivity, they leave those who exist beyond these limits of legible respectability behind.

As I have argued, Douglass and Du Bois's photographs of Black respectability hinge on the replication of bourgeois codes and conventions, which are entangled with the White middle-class subject's participation in economic capitalism. Symbols of respectability that signal the subject's social position include formal clothing and furniture typically associated with middle-class parlour settings. In these examples, the photograph doubles as a sign of symbolic capital as well: it signals the subjects' ability to participate in photographic production (including commissions) and subsequent practices of photographic exchange.

Representations of respectable subjectivity based on "proprietorial notions of the self" such as these are therefore inherently limiting and produce "new forms of bondage" for Black Americans (Hartman 6). They promote a type of subjectivity unattainable to most African Americans in the 19th and early 20th centuries, whose "belated entry … into the realm of freedom, equality, and property" (Wilderson 37) introduced "the onerous responsibilities

of freedom with the enjoyment of few of its entitlements" (43). Broadly speaking, these photographs reveal that Black people continue to occupy the "position of the unthought" (Hartman and Wilderson) in mainstream American society, as their recognition of respectability and humanity requires an adherence to White subjectivity norms, therefore invalidating all other forms of representation.

Similarly, Davis and Chouinard point out in their critical reflection on affordance theory that an artifact's affordances do not apply universally to its users but function in relation to various contextual factors and subject positions: they "take shape and meaning only through the interrelation of artifacts, subjects, and *sociostructural environments*" (244, emphasis added). These theorists argue that an artifact's usability is shaped through its conditions of affordances, which are material and social circumstances that shape the subject's relationship to the object in question (245). As Miles explains in relation to photography:

> … photography is not separate from the rest of social life, but is embedded in it and an exclusive category underpinned by power. Class, race, gender, sexuality, and geographical location play an important role in promoting or delimiting a photographer's access to training, professional development, and means of exhibiting and publishing their work. (62-3)

I discuss here the impact of cultural and institutional legitimacy—one of Davis and Chouinard's three categories of affordance conditions—on analogue photography.

In characterizing how cultural and institutional legitimacy shapes an object's affordances, Davis and Chouinard posit that an object's potential for action "rests partially on

the structural position of the subject with whom it relates" (246). In their book *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, photographer Deborah Willis and Carla Williams also argue that photography's "conditions of production [are] central to the discussion" of "the act of confronting identity and taking control of the image" (qtd. in Parsons 277). As I established in Chapter One, photography's invention in the 19th century was readily received by the ascendant bourgeoisie and White middle-class communities, who used this accelerated and relatively affordable portrait form to solidify their socioeconomic power and secure their racial positioning in society (see also Douglass, "Pictures and Progress" 127). To elaborate, photography's usability during this period was influenced by three material and social factors: the subject's access to 1) photographic equipment (e.g., a camera, photography studio, darkroom, and the required chemicals for developing photography), 2) sociocultural knowledge (i.e., the social practices behind photographic composition), and 3) technical knowledge (i.e., the skills required to produce the material photograph, including the ability to navigate technical constraints).

An examination of these various factors illustrates that photography's early adoption was restricted to White subjects who had the financial means to purchase photographic equipment and pursue its technical training. Given its material and operational demands, photographic production remained a relatively specialized practice even within White communities in the 19th century; it was initially taken up as a profession by a select group of people (shopkeepers and clerks) rather than adopted as an amateur hobby (Pollen 293). For most Victorian subjects, the conditions for producing photography were therefore "met" by

proxy: by commissioning a professional daguerreotypist to produce their images within a commercial studio.

Even with the proliferation of daguerreotype portrait studios in the 19th century, however, photography remained limited to White middle-class communities for two "sociostructural" reasons. As a reflection of the daguerreotypist's specialist knowledge, early daguerreotype services were expensive to acquire, costing around $5 or approximately $164 today ("Daguerreotypes"). Even when prices declined after the 1850s, these studio services were inaccessible to racialized people, as they were predominantly located in White neighbourhoods where the primary clientele resided (Williams 167). It wasn't until the late 19th century, with changes to the nation's social structure post-abolition, that photography gradually shifted to include Black subjects.

Members of the Black intellectual elite or "Talented Tenth" were clear exceptions; for this reason, Douglass and Du Bois's photographs exemplify remarkable early uses of photography by and of Black subjects. In contrast to enslaved Black individuals in the early 19th century or even those who were newly emancipated post-1865, Douglass and Du Bois's unique social positions allowed them to access photography within the first few decades of its invention and commercialization to employ it for producing countervisual images. Even so, these individuals did not produce the photographs themselves; like most White middle-class subjects in the 19th century, they commissioned portrait photographers to produce their desired images.

As a result of this gap in racial position between commissioner and photographer, the White daguerreotypists of this period sometimes produced representations of Black

subjectivity that did not share the client's racial vision (Dimock). Dimock argues, for instance, that the 19 photographs of Black subjects created by Anglo-Irish photojournalist Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore for Du Bois's 1901 article "The Negro As He Really Is" illustrates a "conflicted matrix of liberal reform and status quo" (249). While Du Bois's article describes African American dignity, Dugmore's photographs and accompanying captions "confirmed the prevailing white stereotypes that Du Bois was contesting" (Dimock 258).

In rare cases, photographs of Black subjects were commissioned using a Black photographer. For instance, Gordon Parks produced many of the photographs that subsequently composed Du Bois's Paris Albums (Smith, *Color Line*). Even so, these photographers' representations of photographic subjects were shaped by existing photographic codes and conventions, as well as by their aims to reconstruct Black subjectivity within the White American imagination.

Indeed, despite photography's mass commercialization in the 1900s (see Chapter One section 1.5.3), the dominant control of public-facing media by White institutions and owners meant that mainstream practices of photographic production—and thus, subjectivity's legibility—continued to be determined by White visuality. My examination of photographs from World War II propaganda posters and the Civil Rights movement demonstrates this; in both cases, White American photographers drew from existing photographic conventions and produced mainstream images of Black respectability with a White audience in mind.

Apart from the conditions surrounding analogue photography and its use, examining photography's affordances (i.e., the design of camera technologies and photographic

conventions) reveals how photography has historically "embod[ied] specific forms of power and authority" (Winner 121)—that is, White hegemony. For example, lighting techniques in Western photography drew from "nineteenth-century traditions of using and representing light [in] North European painting[s]" and were tailored to illuminating White subjects (Dyer 117; see also Ramirez). Dyer points out that photography manuals further entrenched White-coded ways of representation and seeing in photography. For example, in Lucien Lorelle's 1955 *The Colour Book of Photography,* a photograph of a Black woman is used to demonstrate "an example of an unusual use of colour" (Dyer 95). Instead of describing a lighting technique that follows conventional practices of light calibration based on the subject's skin, Lorelle's book instructs its readers to measure the exposure meter reading using the subject's light dress instead. In doing so, this proposed solution marks the subject's Black skin as an "aggravation," upholding White people as the ideal photographic subjects (Roth 117).

These visual norms were further reproduced within camera technologies, especially with the advent of colour photography. Communication and media studies scholar Lorna Roth points out that for decades, skin tone representation was calibrated based on "Shirley cards," which were images of White women with lighter skin (Roth 112). Due to cultural perceptions of technology's objectivity, skin tone bias in film stocks, cameras, and lighting techniques "came to be seen as fixed and inevitable, existing independently of the fact that it was humanly constructed" (Dyer 90). According to Roth, the technical constraint to photographing darker skin tones was only addressed when White-owned chocolate and wood furniture companies complained that existing film stocks did not accurately capture tonal

differences between their products (118-20). Further, when Kodak's first multiracial Shirley card came out in 1995, this tool was expensive to acquire and had limited availability in the global market (Roth 122; see also McFadden, "Teaching the Camera").

Overall, the photographs I examined in this chapter had ambivalent effects on White America's racial imagination. Viewed collectively as a form of respectability politics, they suggest that while small advances in countervisuality can be achieved over time, countervisual discourses that reoccupy the original "injurious interpellation" of race and racial typing cannot come from its dominant groups, who reproduce and extend mainstream photographic codes and conventions. This discursive work would be done by Black Americans in the later decades of the 20th and early 21st centuries, following photographic technologies' growing sophistication and accessibility.

2.5.2 Can the Unthought or Subaltern See Themselves? Domestic Spaces, Home Galleries, and Black Self-Imagination

With accelerated developments in camera technologies, analogue photography gradually became available for the average Black consumer in the 20th century. The Eastman Kodak Company's release of the Kodak Brownie camera in 1900 marked a pivotal moment in amateur or snapshot photography (see section 1.5.3): in addition to lowering costs to one dollar and making cameras increasingly affordable for middle-class families, the Brownie offered readily available film development and printing services, outsourcing the technical knowledge required to produce photography (Chalfen 13; Culley; Pollen 294). With changes to Black subjects' social position in the United States post-abolition, such shifts in

photography presented the cultural and institutional conditions for Black people to represent and visualize themselves in unconventional ways using photography.[105]

Hartman asserts there is "a certain impossibility" to "the limits of most available narratives to explain the position of the enslaved" (Hartman and Wilderson 184)—that is, to representing Black people using White subjectivity frames. Similarly, Spivak has famously argued that the subaltern cannot speak in Western epistemology because of "the palimpsestic narrative of imperialism… [in which] a whole set of knowledges … [has] been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated" (*Can the Subaltern Speak* 76). Borrowing these ideas about the unthought and the subaltern, I identify the heterogenous experiences and identities existing beyond photography's established visual frames as "subjugated knowledges" in photography. For these figures to see themselves in photographs, I assert that photography must "traffic in a radical textual practice of differences" that rejects White visuality and establishes a "*deviation* from [this] *ideal*" (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak* 80). As Parsons critiques, "questions of gender and race cannot be added to the history of photography [while] leaving its structures—a canon of artists, major works, distinct genres—intact" (283).

Indeed, in his discussion about double-consciousness, Du Bois concludes that the Black man begins "to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another" (*Souls* 18). Other Black scholars concerned with the politics of the

[105] Gil Pasternak specifically points to the 1963 release of the Kodak Instamatic camera and the appeal of its instant photographic process in the 1970s as furthering everyday uses of photography (452). As I will discuss in Chapter Three, this "naturalization of photography in the everyday realities of post-industrial societies" (452) and its increased accessibility to marginalized communities was intensified with digital cameras' commercialization in the 1990s and their incorporation into smart technologies in the mid- to late 2000s.

gaze, including Frantz Fanon, bell hooks, and Tina Campt, have also written about the Black subject's need for a "subversive reterritorialization" in visual discourse (Butler 100). For instance, in *Black Skins, White Masks,* Fanon identifies that Black racial trauma begins in childhood with exposure to mainstream White media; to counter this, he proposes an investment in media forms specifically designed for Black children (127). I posit that photography's increased accessibility in the mid-20th century allowed Black individuals to produce images representing alternate forms of subjectivity, including those deemed unintelligible and illegitimate by White visuality's dichotomous frames. These representations of Blackness were produced primarily within the domestic sphere, within Black family photography.

As various scholars of photography have observed, amateur, vernacular, or snapshot photography is most often associated with domestic photography, which is also commonly referred to as "family photography" or "home mode photography" (Chalfen; Langford; Pollen; Rose; Zuromskis).[106] Pollen describes domestic photography as a form of snapshot photography that is "taken of and for personal and domestic contexts with simple camera equipment" (295). Emphasizing the home as a common locale of this photographic genre, Chalfen has also attributed a sense of ordinariness and intimacy to this practice (8, 12).

Family photography is typically characterized by simple, straightforward, or even banal visual conventions. They are conventionally taken by family members and have an informal aesthetic (Chalfen 32). Common codes and conventions include the subject's

[106] "Home mode" photography is primarily used by Richard Chalfen, who coined the term. Pollen attributes the popular use of "vernacular photography" as a term to the 1990s, in connection to the relative stabilization of everyday snapshot practices during this period (296).

"frontal posing, central framing, demonstrative gestures of affection, and the all-important smile" (Zuromskis 53). Rose adds that these photos are "often out of focus, [with subjects] missing heads or feet" (67-8). In other words, though they do not have strict visual requirements like bourgeois portrait and criminal mugshot photography, family photography nevertheless has its own "patterned consistency" amidst the "apparent 'hodgepodge'" of visual codes (Chalfen 34).

Though it has been criticized at its worst as operating within "an oppressive capitalist system of manufactured leisure and inauthentic consumer culture" (Slater in Pollen 298), family photography has also been recognized and praised at its best for affording agency in photographic production.[107] Family photography is specifically attributed with decentring the "binary of photographer/self *versus* subject/other, restating the photographic act as a connective or dialogic gesture that manifests agency on both sides of the lens" (Zuromskis 60). In operating based on existing relationships between the photographer and photographed, family photography is recognized as allowing a more nuanced representation of the photographic subject. Despite functioning in many ways within mainstream (i.e., Kodak) culture and its imaging conventions, this photographic genre thus affords individuals the "opportunit[y] for non-conformity, for subtly challenging the dominant ideology of snapshot practice through private photographic acts" (Zuromskis 60).

For this reason, family photography has been a popular form of self-imaging for historically marginalized groups. Langford and Rose argue, for example, that in the 1950s and '60s in Britain, middle-class women without a space of their own developed the family

[107] See also Chalfen p. 47 on "Kodak culture's" cultural and social prescriptions and Zuromskis p. 57 on normative cultural citizenship.

album to create a space where they could project visions of themselves and their meaningful relationships (Langford 532; Rose 75). This genre allowed individuals with access to leverage the medium's "pseudo-scientific authority to carefully craft stronger public personae" and therefore produce a "limited space of critical intervention" in mainstream identity discourse (Parsons 273).

Similar to women's uses of photography for negotiating dominant ideologies of (domestic) femininity (Rose 75), racialized photographers have historically used photography to represent their private lives and communities (Miles 64). Though these images were sometimes "lost along the way" or were hidden within "the far recesses of [cultural or family] archives" (Parsons 277), in recent decades, artists and art historians have identified the domestic space as a focal point of Black representation and agency. For example, photographer Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* centers this private space in her photographs to illustrate the complexity, strength, and beauty of Black womanhood ("Kitchen Table Series"). Black family photographs have begun to resurface in large numbers within the last few decades thanks to the work of Black women scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, including Deborah Willis, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, and Valencia Hollins Coar (Miles 62).

Indeed, the power of family photography as a discursive site of Black revisualization has become widely recognized since this period. For one, hooks attributes her appreciation of Black diversity to her childhood experience of seeing a photograph of her father "in his glory" ("In Our Glory" 54). She argues that for this reason, "walls of photographs in black homes [serve] as a [locale of] critical intervention, a disruption of white control over black

images" (59). Though the practice of displaying photographs on home walls is common in family photography overall (Chalfen 28-9; Rose 76), I propose that for Black families, this practice particularly demonstrates Black domestic photography's counter-discursive nature. Compared to photo albums, which deter viewers from regular engagement with their photographs, the communal arrangement of wall photos encourages everyday interactions with expressions of Black heterogeneity and produces "ruptures in experience[s] of the visual" (hooks, ("In Our Glory" 61)—in seeing Blackness through White visuality—for its viewers.[108]

However, family photography comes with a limitation. Unlike mass modes of communication that are distributed to large, heterogeneous audiences, these photographs primarily circulate within more private spheres of consumption (Chalfen 8). Family photographs are typically viewed by family members, such as mothers with their children, who interpret personal meanings and narratives from the photographs' representations (Rose 76). As a result of its limited visibility to broader audiences, family photographs are described by some as having historically "produced … work of little public consequence" (Pollen 295). While demonstrating how "members of marginalized groups forg[ed] valued self-identities in the margins of autonomy available to them in hierarchically structured societies" (Dazey 590), I add that Black family photos, at least in their analogue forms, therefore fall short of their counter-discursive potential.

[108] In the 2023 movie *American Fiction,* there is a scene that strikes me as exemplary of this very practice. While the movie itself has no explicit connections to photography (it follows the protagonist's struggle with respectability politics in representing Blackness in literature), the quick shot of a photo wall in the protagonist's home underscores the character's struggle with and ultimate acceptance of the complexity of Blackness.

In response to these photographs' lack of reach and visibility, archival projects have been created in the 21st century to illustrate Black family photography's counter-discursive power to more mainstream audiences. In 2023, for instance, visual artist Renata Cherlise published *Black Archives*, a collection of Black family photos from the early 1940s to 1990s created to "hono[r] the craft and contribution of the amateur family photographer, an unsung figure who has for generations captured and preserved the most delicate moments of Black life" (McFadden, "Ordinary Family Photos"). Writer Syreeta McFadden remarks that although the collection includes several portraits of Black excellence from institutional archives, it is more importantly comprised of photographs from private collections found in the attics and bookshelves of Black homes, which Cherlise crowdsourced from Black Tumblr in 2011, as well as photos from Cherlise's own family albums.[109]

Circulating within public spaces, I argue that these images finally portray the "middle ground" between representations of Black degradation and exceptionalism to mainstream White audiences. Photographs such as the one in figure 27 show ordinary images of Black representation: in this example, the photograph depicts Cherlise's mom and aunt Teyonya as little girls, sitting on the trunk of their family car in 1978. I point out that many of these photographs, specifically from the 1950s and '60s, contrast the iconic representations of Black respectability produced in photographs from the Civil Rights movement. Instead, these photos depict "tenderness and pride in the subjects' quotidian life: parents posing with their children on their porch, Christmas mornings, grand evenings out, birthdays, weddings" (McFadden, "Ordinary Family Photos").

[109] I return to discuss Black counterpublics or communities on social media, including Tumblr, in Chapter Three.

Though critics may argue that these photographs adhere to and therefore reinsert Black lives into the framework of mainstream culture, Cherlise counters that "images of African American leisure and play can take on radical meaning given photography's historical focus on Black labour" (qtd. in Halpern). These intimate, familial photographs therefore help "wide[n] the idea of Blackness in the United States" by materializing an image of Black personhood and—to their Black audiences—a representation of "familiar joys and listless days" (McFadden, "Ordinary Family Photos"). They allow Black Americans to "talk back" to the power of White visuality and to "talk around and in between [the] silences and absences" (Campt, *Black Gaze* 4) of its false dichotomies.



Figure 27. A Black family photograph of Cherlise's mom and aunt Teyonya, 1978[110]

[110] Source: "Cherlise's mom and aunt Teyonya," 1978, *Imaginations*, imaginationsjournal.ca/index.php/imaginations/article/view/29678/21633#:~:text=%E2%80%9CFamilial%20archiving%20practices%2C%E2%80%9D%20Cherlise,grandparents%2C%20siblings%2C%20and%20relatives.

Chapter 3. Views from the In-Between: Digital Photography and New (Media) Subjectivities

"What is… politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."
—Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

"Visibilities also work on the level of the structural, historical, societal, and technological. … This is certainly not a new claim, but it must be renewed and expanded in a situation where media technologies, techniques of power, and the image have both melted into new dispositifs of domination, and have also opened new avenues for contention, reflexivity, and critique."
—Boris Traue, Mathias Blanc, and Carolina Cambre, "Visibilities and Visual Discourse"

3.1 Introduction

This chapter marks a technological and temporal shift away from the first half of this dissertation on analogue photography in the 19th and 20th centuries to the second half of this dissertation on digital photography in the 21st century. There are three questions that come to mind as I navigate this transition from analogue to digital photography: How have analogue photography's practices of visuality informed our relationship with digital visual technologies? How do efforts in analogue photography to advance countervisual discourse translate to digital visuality? And most importantly, how does the entanglement of smartphone cameras with social network sites (SNSs) change our representations and understandings of racial subjectivity in the 21st century? Put simply, Chapters Three and Four of this dissertation examine how digitalization has changed photography's discursive potential in shaping how we think about and represent race in Western culture.

At its core, this chapter's methodology is informed by feminist theorist Sandra Harding's standpoint epistemology and Donna Haraway's twin doctrine of situated knowledge. In "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," Harding argues that despite Western epistemology's claims to providing objective knowledge, "all knowledge attempts are socially situated" (444). In "The Persistence of Vision," Haraway asserts that Western hegemony's totalizing vision gains its power from the systematic narrowing and obscuring of its White patriarchal position (679). Both scholars' proposed solutions are rooted in embodied difference as a form of counteraction: to challenge the tyranny of Western hegemony, they call for us to "insist on the embodied nature of all vision" and knowledge to "reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere" (Haraway 677). Feminist research such as theirs is what led Photography Studies scholars to examine differing and neglected perspectives in analogue photography in the 1980s and 1990s (Emerling 106; Miles 62), including the personal archives of Black domestic photography, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Building on their critical stance, I consider how Black people's self-representations of Blackness using photography help reconstruct racial discourse in the digital age.

To do so, this chapter begins by tracing the shift in digital photography's conditions of use and its specific technological affordances. Drawing on the work of photography scholars including Jonas Larsen and Mette Sandbye, Michael Shanks and Connie Svabo, and Martin Hand, I begin by providing a genealogy of digital photography to highlight the key sociotechnical developments of Web 2.0. I then illuminate how the convergence of social network sites (software) and emerging smartphone technology (hardware) in the early to

mid-2000s led to the formation of what Hand calls "social media photography," which intensified existing photographic practices by embedding them into networks of constant connectivity and social communication (311). I argue that by increasing the accessibility of photographic tools and processes to ordinary people and providing instant connectivity between images and their potential viewers, social media photography brought photographs previously belonging to the personal or private domain (e.g., domestic photography) into public view. I therefore establish that this photographic genre operates as a social communicative practice that allows racialized individuals to produce racial counter-discourse in the 21st century.

In the second half of this chapter, I use an interdisciplinary framework that braids together approaches from science and technology studies (STS), postcolonial studies, and Black studies to perform a case-study analysis of two social media movements that were catalyzed by social media photographs. I analyze two complementary case studies from the mid-2010s: photographs from the Black hashtag movements #IfTheyGunnedMeDown on Twitter and #BlackoutDay on Tumblr.[111] I have chosen #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and #BlackoutDay for two reasons: because they demonstrate a radical subversion of Western culture's dominant respectability frames, and because of their temporal and sociotechnical significance as artifacts of social media photography *in media res*.

My work in this section is informed by Lisa Nakamura's theory of digital racial formation and digital media theorist André Brock Jr.'s methodology of critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA). Digital racial formation theory, unsurprisingly, builds on Omi

[111] Though Twitter was renamed to "X" in 2023, I use its name from the 2010s to mark the movement's temporality.

and Winant's racial formation theory—the notion that that race is constructed through social structures and cultural representations—to assert that race is now technologically mediated through digital images (Nakamura, *Digitizing Race* 11). On the other hand, CTDA explains how "digital practitioners filter their technology use through their cultural identity rather than through some preconceived 'neutral' perspective" (Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 2). Using these theories together to consider how social media photography both shapes and is shaped by racialized users, I argue that social media photographs can function as a nuanced body of counter-discourse that is produced within various pockets of internet culture.

Additionally, my analysis in this chapter is indebted to postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and Black Studies theorist Tina Campt, who—in addition to Hartman and Wilderson—writes about Black refusal. In his foundational work, *The Location of Culture,* Bhabha stresses that hybrid moments are politically significant because they offer articulations of heterogenous identities that contest established definitions of identity (41). He establishes that the enunciation of cultural difference is, in particular, a "necessary negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands" that "introduces a split … [from] the traditional culturalist demand for a model, a tradition … a stable system of reference" (51). In essence, Bhabha's stance on culture asserts that attempts to contest hegemony urgently require an articulation of alternate, previously unseen subjectivity forms (105), which I argue is more possible with digital photography.

To offer a more nuanced understanding about such articulations, I identify #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and #BlackoutDay's photos as examples of Black refusal, which Campt defines in *Listening to Images* as "nimble and strategic practices that undermine the

categories of the dominant" on an everyday basis (32).[112] According to Campt, such quotidian practices refuse "the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy" (*Listening to Images* 32). This theory is essential because it allows us to recognize both the agency behind these photographic representations of Black subjectivity *and* what Hartman elsewhere theorizes as "the limited and transient nature of that agency" against the tide of mainstream culture (61).

Using these theories and examples, I argue that social media photography affords Black people the ability to adopt photo-taking and sharing as everyday practices of refusal; as a quotidian practice of visual communication, photography helps "articulate diverse 'subjects' of differentiation" (Bhabha 105) that are traditionally unrecognized within Western racial discourse. I assert that the "possibility of difference and circulation" seen within this photo genre "liberate[s] the signifier of *skin/culture* from the fixations of racial typology … [and] ideologies of racial and cultural dominance" (108). In doing so, this chapter focuses on how the sociotechnical shifts from analogue to digital photography allow Black individuals to occupy "'in-between' spaces" of subjectivity (105) and, more broadly, allow racialized users to create and disseminate racial counter-discourse in the 21st century.

3.2 Social Shifts in the Early 2000s: Digital Photography and Networked Publics

It is well-established within internet scholarship that despite grand declarations that the World Wide Web would offer corporeal liberation (Kendall 142; Munster 86) and

[112] Similar concepts include James Scott's "infrapolitics of the dominated" and Paul Gilroy's "politics of a lower frequency" (Hartman 62).

subsequently eradicate identity politics tied to categories like race and gender (Barlow; Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 29), such claims proved to be nothing more than techno-optimistic ideals heralded by the internet's eager proponents (Jurgenson and Ritzer; Sinclair).[113] Posthumanist N. Katherine Hayles asserts that changes from technology are "never complete transformations or sharp breaks; without exception, they reinscrib[e] traditional ideas and assumptions even as they articulat[e] something new" (6). Indeed, scholars have since argued that internet culture echoes existing narratives of colonization and the American frontier (Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 43; Dinerstein 577), as well as Western culture's universalist rhetoric, which treats Whiteness as normative despite its outward erasure (A. Morrison, "Impossible Future;" Benjamin; Nakamura "Cyberrace").

For example, Nakamura has located the early internet's "post-racial" attitude as a reflection of '90s neoliberalism, and more specifically, the Clinton-Gore administration's rhetoric of colourblindness in the United States, which dismissed the gravity of racial problems by denying its continued relevance ("Cyberrace" 44).[114] Nakamura and others critique that such political tactics effectively allow "white people the luxury of not thinking about the effects of race" (Kendall 145) in both online and offline spaces without working towards substantive social improvement (A. Morrison, "Impossible Future" 54-5; Benjamin 4; Dinerstein 572). As a result, the treatment of race online in the 1990s mirrored mainstream racial discourse (Kendall): internet users were considered racially White by default based on Western conflations of Whiteness with overall normativity and with technology (Benjamin 4;

[113] See N. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* for a detailed investigation into cybernetics history, Enlightenment philosophy's mind/body split, and posthumanism.
[114] Also discussed in Brock's *Distributed Blackness,* pp. 48-9 and p. 76.

Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 20, 34; Dinerstein 572; Kendall; Robinson 94). On the other hand, Black Americans were perceived as technologically inept, due in part to their lower socio-economic status (Eglash and Bleecker; Nakamura, *Digitizing Race* 86).[115] In the late 1990s and early 2000s, racialized avatars were constructed based on Western stereotypes, including Asian samurais and geishas (Nakamura, "Cyberrace") and Black Rastafarian men (McDonough in Taylor 32).

However, two concurrent changes in the 2000s opened the door for racialized users to challenge such representations of racial subjectivity in Western culture: the introduction of digital (and especially, smartphone) photography and social network sites. These two areas of sociotechnical development formed the building blocks for social media photography (Hand) and shifted existing conditions of photography (i.e., for production and circulation), ultimately allowing individuals to share personal photographs with larger, public audiences in previously unprecedented ways. I posit that this new mode of photography allowed forms of racial representation produced by racialized subjects, such as those found in Black domestic photography, to become visible to mainstream publics in Western culture.

Yet as digital image scholar Daniel Rubinstein and photography scholar Katrina Sluis argue, the "arrival of digital imaging did not revolutionize popular photography [at its outset] but caused gradual shifts in the habits of … middle-class amateurs" ("Life More Photographic" 11). Thus, this first section navigates the early commercialization of digital photographic technologies prior to the smartphone. I examine here the sociotechnical

[115] Eglash and Bleecker disprove this myth by naming several early uses of internet technologies by Black folks, including The Drum in 1988, which they describe as "a pioneer of Afrocentric on-line services" (371), as well as Net Noir in 1995, the largest commercially successful Black website (372).

changes produced in the 21st century by digital photography and networked technologies, including shifting boundaries of public/private with the formation of "networked publics."[116] A visual timeline mapping the development of digital camera technologies and major SNSs is available in figure 28, in advance of my discussion.[117]

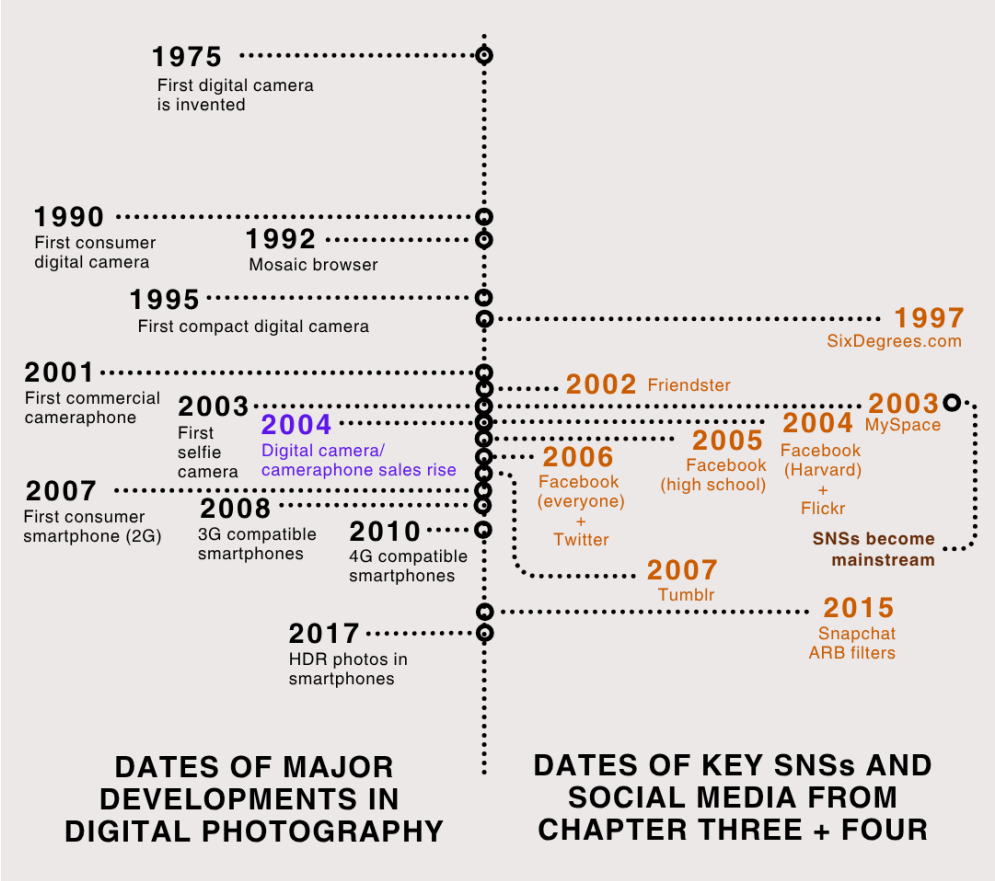


Figure 28. A timeline of digital camera technologies and major SNS development

[116] For convenience, I refer to amateur digital photography as "digital photography" in the remainder of this dissertation, as my research on this practice strictly focuses on how photography's digitalization affects everyday people.

[117] In the timeline in figure 28, technical developments in digital photography are marked by black font and SNS and social media releases are marked in orange. The rise of digital camera and cameraphone sales is marked in purple; SNSs' popularization is marked in brown.

3.2.1 A Brief History of Digital Cameras and Cameraphones

The first ever digital camera was developed in 1975 by Eastman Kodak engineer Steven Sasson in New York. Using a movie camera lens, Motorola parts, 16 AA batteries, and a light sensor called a charged-couple device (CCD) that helps capture the image, Sasson devised a prototype that could take black-and-white images on a digital cassette tape (Marsh; Trenholm). This camera weighed nearly 4 kilograms and was the size of a printer, and while it only took 50 milliseconds to capture the image, it took 23 seconds for the image to run through an analogue-to-digital converter and be transferred to a cassette tape. Sasson's digital camera had a 0.01-megapixel resolution or had 10,000 pixels in an image (Marsh; Trenholm), compared to the 48-megapixel resolution of the 2024 iPhone 16's main cameras ("iPhone 16"). Though the digital camera was a ground-breaking invention, it therefore wasn't suitable for practical use for another two decades.[118]

The first consumer digital camera, the Dycam Model 1 was released in the United States in 1990 (Trenholm).[119] This camera used a CCD image sensor, stored pictures digitally, and connected to a PC for users to download images, providing a basic model for digital cameras in the years to come. Yet with its limited storage capacity and low resolution, the digital camera still offered few advantages over the more established film camera.

Following the invention of JPEG image compression, the first compact digital camera, the Casio QC-10, was introduced in 1995. This camera stored up to 96 460x280-

[118] While there were developments in digital camera technologies in the 1980s such as Sony's Mavica in 1981 (electronic SLR), University of Calgary Canada ASI Science Team's Fairchild All-Sky Camera in 1981, and Canon's RC-701 in 1986 (electronic SLR), the Mavica and RC-701 still recorded images in an analogue format before converting them into digital data and were not yet "truly digital" (Trenholm).
[119] Also known as the Logitech Fotoman (Trenholm).

pixel colour images using a semiconductor memory and offered a myriad of new imaging features including close-up macro shooting, auto-exposure, a self-timer, and a 1.8-inch LCD screen on the back. But with the average household income in 1995 at $35,766 for White households and $22,393 for Black households (DeNavas-Walt et al., "1995") the Casio QC-10's exorbitant price point of $1,000 per unit (Trenholm) kept this technology out of reach for the average consumer.[120]

According to *Digital Photography Review,* a digital camera website established in 1998, compact digital cameras continued to have a retail price within a range of $700 to over $1,000 in 1999.[121] Despite growing excitement about the technology, digital cameras therefore remained unaffordable to all but the "richest dilettantes" of the time and barely affected the consumer market until the late 1990s (Rubinstein and Sluis, "Life More Photographic" 352). In addition to its limited adoption by the upper-middle class, reviewing the United States census from 1999, which records the average annual income at $44,366 for White households and $27,910 for Black households, suggests that digital camera owners during this time were also predominantly White (DeNavas-Walt et al., "1999").

However, interest in digital photography began growing as early as 1992 with the launch of image-compatible web browser Mosaic (Marsh), and middle-class consumers who wanted to participate in emerging digital imaging practices looked to alternative technologies for an intermediary solution (Rubinstein and Sluis, "Life More Photographic" 351).[122]

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[120] Adjusted for inflation, the camera cost equates to $1,867.43 in 2025.
[121] For instance, the 2.1-megapixel Epson PhotoPC 800 cost $699 ("Two Announcements") and the 2.3-megapixel Kodak DC290 cost $1,099 ("Kodak").
[122] While webcams were "so simple and cheap that they [we]re spreading rapidly among ordinary, technically unsophisticated home computer users" by 2001, they were more popularly used for their live video capabilities

Rubinstein and Sluis highlight that flatbed scanners were commonly adopted during this period for their multifunctionality and relative affordability; though they were still somewhat expensive at full-price, scanners were available for as little as $40 at discount stores (Carney).[123] Thus, the average American consumer participated in early digital photography by scanning physical photographs into a digital file (Fordahl), reproducing within this new format and practice analogue photography's old paradigms (Rubinstein and Sluis, "Life More Photographic" 351).

The conditions for producing digital photos finally changed in 2000. With continued improvements in the technology, prices for compact digital cameras dipped below $500 in the latter half of 2000 ("Polaroid").[124] At the same time, the average annual income rose in the United States to $45,904 for White American households and $30,439 for Black American households in 2000 (DeNavas-Walt et al., "2000"). With these socioeconomic changes, it was estimated that 12.7 million US households would have a digital camera by the end of 2000 ("12.7m US households"). Indeed, as digital cameras became increasingly affordable, they began to sell in high volumes from 2001 to 2004 (Cobley and Haeffner 142; Larsen and Sandbye xvi; Lien 136). In 2004 alone, 68 million digital cameras were sold worldwide (Larsen and Sandbye xvi).

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than for taking digital photos (ABC News). This social practice can be seen as a result of a technical constraint: as webcams were tethered to a personal computer (PC), they could only photograph the user in their immediate home environment.

[123] Compared to the single-function slide scanner, flatbed scanners allowed users to scan slides, negatives, and other documents. Models in the early 2000s also came with quick-launch buttons that had built-in emailing capabilities and could support high-speed USB 2 connections to a computer (Fordahl).

[124] For example, the 2.3-megapixel Polaroid Digital 2300Z cost $399.95.

As the compact digital camera began to achieve market success, cameraphones were also introduced and popularized within the consumer market.[125] More specifically, the cameraphone was commercially launched in 2001, though similar to digital cameras, they began to sell in high volumes in 2004. Larsen and Sandbye mark 2004 as a pivotal year for digital photography: 246 million cameraphones sold worldwide and, reflecting the market success of compact digital cameras and cameraphones, the photo-sharing website Flickr was invented that year (xvi). Symbolically, the very company that created the foundation for amateur photography also stopped selling traditional cameras in North America and Western Europe in 2004, and in January 2012, Kodak officially filed for bankruptcy (Larsen and Sandbye xv).

By the time mobile phones were adopted in 2004, they were supported by 2G cellular networks that afforded users basic data transfers via SMS (Short Message Service) and MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service; Galazzo). Thus, with the cameraphone, individuals could send photos to their family and friends on the very device used to take the photo.[126] Though the resolution on compact digital cameras was better than that of cameraphones at this time, Larsen and Sandbye argue that "the problem with the digital camera is that it is just a camera, whereas the camera phone is a *networked* multimedia device that is always at hand as part of one's everyday life" (xxiv, emphasis added). According to them, it is this lack of connectivity to an audience that ultimately killed the digital camera's success.

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[125] Shanks and Svabo define a mobile phone as "an internet-capable portable minicomputer that has the ability to transform and disseminate various media formats and modes of communication easily" (229). A well-established concept today, a cameraphone is a mobile phone with a camera in its hardware that allows users to take photos directly on their phone.

[126] According to Larsen and Sandbye, the digital equivalent of 19 million traditional rolls of film (24 exposures each) were sent as picture messages in 2007 in the United Kingdom alone (xvi).

3.2.2 The Affordances of (Amateur) Digital Photography

In her research on changing practices with digital photography, Gillian Rose argues that photography's digitalization did not alter amateur snapshot or domestic photography. Instead, it intensified it, allowing "people to do what they want to do with family snaps more easily, more often and more extensively" (70). I examine the digital camera and cameraphone's technological affordances here to explain what Sarvas and Frohlich refer to as the "digital path" of 21st century photography—that is, how domestic photography's practices (its uses, audiences, and variety of images) have expanded with digitalization, with important implications for racialized people.

To start, compact digital cameras helped domestic photography become a more affordable and inclusive practice overall. Though Eastman Kodak's efforts in the late 1800s ensured that amateur film cameras were affordable to the masses, analogue photography is shot through rolls of film that are commercially available in sets of 12, 24, or 36 exposures, which must be newly purchased after each set is fully exposed. In addition to the cost of film, most amateur photographers did not have access to a darkroom or the technical knowledge to develop their own film. Thus, following Eastman Kodak's business model, most individuals paid a professional lab technician to develop and print their exposed rolls. These recurring costs made photography an expensive hobby over time, limiting access for some people altogether and making it a specialized practice for others.

Apart from posing a socioeconomic barrier to lower income and (often) racialized groups, these financial constraints meant that amateur analogue photographers were more economical with their photo-taking practices and were therefore more selective about what

they photographed. Common family events that were deemed worthy of commemoration included family vacations and outings, children's first days of school, birthdays, weddings, and Christmases (Hand 319; Langford 537; Rose 80). Though Rose remarks that ordinary home life was sometimes also photographed on film, she explains that such an occurrence was uncommon and was primarily motivated by a photographer's desire to finish a roll of film to accelerate the photo development (538).

In addition, the photograph's materiality posed a technical constraint that shaped analogue domestic photography's viewing practices. As I addressed in Chapter Two, printed family photographs were traditionally kept in photo albums, which were tucked away within the home and taken out for occasional viewing by family members such as mothers and children (Chalfen 32; Rose 76). Even photographs that were framed and displayed in more public areas of the home, or were presented as slide shows for group viewing in later decades, remained limited to a semi-private audience of extended family, friends, and acquaintances, making analogue domestic photography a relatively private practice (Langford 536).

While domestic photography's overall social function remained the same, the popularization of digital cameras, and cameraphones thereafter, removed many of these constraints. For one, digital photography's only expense was the cost of buying a digital camera.[127] Though compact digital cameras could not store a large number of images internally, by the time they became more affordable in the early 2000s, they stored their images on a memory card. These image files could then be downloaded to a computer and

[127] This assumes that the individual or household already owns a home PC.

deleted from the memory card, freeing up space for more photos to be taken without added cost (Rose 73). In subsequent years, with the development of photo-sharing websites like Flickr and online storage services like iCloud, these images could also be exported to external storage platforms to save space on the computer's hard drive (Rose 81-2). With the one-time purchase of a digital camera, consumers could thus eliminate analogue photography's recurring costs, making the practice accessible to a wider demographic, including those belonging to lower-income racial groups. Compact digital cameras and cameraphones also came with a screen that provided a preview of the finished image, allowing users to "see intuitively as the lens/camera sees without years of training" (Rubinstein and Sluis, "Life More Photographic" 352). Combined with the higher threshold for mistakes afforded its increased shot capacity, this affordance made it easier for everyday users to participate in producing snapshots.

The proliferation of digital camera technologies led to two key shifts in amateur, domestic photography: the overall explosion of photographs (Larsen and Sandbye xvi; Van House in Shanks and Svabo 229) and the increasing representation of mundane, everyday things compared to socially sanctioned, significant moments (Rose 82; Shanks and Svabo 229, 233, 243).[128] In other words, compact digital cameras and cameraphones's popularization in the early 2000s allowed non-specialist users to photograph more frequently than they had ever before, and to picture the minutiae of private life that had previously been

[128] Regarding the increasing number of photographs, Cobley and Haeffner argue that digital photography's affordances now allow users the ability to also consider "low-level aesthetic judgements … made at the point of production" such as minute differences in pose and lighting, therefore producing multiple versions of the same image (130).

too costly to photograph.[129] I argue that as digital photography became accessible to more racialized individuals and families, the intensification of vernacular photographic subjects thus also led to an increased and diversified representation of racialized lives.

Nevertheless, digital photography's full counter-discursive potential was hindered by digital cameras' image-sharing practices. Sharing digital photos with family and friends in the early to mid-2000s required a working knowledge of computer software, which was still uncommon during this time (Rubinstein and Sluis, "Life More Photographic" 352). Infrastructural challenges like slow internet speeds further complicated the process of publishing images online, posing another obstacle to image sharing (352). Individuals with the capability to share digital photos did so by downloading them to their personal computers, then putting them into labelled folders to be displayed on the computer screen or emailed to one's family and friends at a later time. To a lesser extent, digital photos were also printed and put into physical albums as an extension of the analogue tradition (Rose 73). For the most part, digital snapshots therefore remained within the personal or private domain. Turning to Black domestic photography as an example once more, such practices meant that despite their increase in number and diversity, the visibility of these digital photos remained limited to primarily Black audiences, similar to those seen in analogue Black domestic photography.

[129] As an aside, I recall obsessively photographing citrus fruits when my family bought our first digital camera in 2003.

3.2.3 Communicating Digitally: How Networked Publics Blur Public/Private Boundaries

As digital photographic practices were emerging in the early 2000s, the internet experienced an organizational shift from Web 1.0's interest-based systems of information exchange (e.g., listservs, discussion forums, personal webpages, etc.) to Web 2.0's identity-based and interactive communication model (M. Ito 1; Lindgren). Anthropologist Mizuko Ito argues that this shift towards interactive communication is facilitated by "networked publics," which are "a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media" (2). Ito highlights several concurrent changes in digital technologies as responsible for this formation: the improvement of graphical browsers, the establishment of consumer broadband internet providers, "lowered costs of processing power and digital storage, [the] accessibility of various digital production tools, … more pervasive network infrastructures—particularly through mobile and wireless technologies" (5)—and the internet's overall popularization (1). Ultimately, these digital advancements produced networked publics by providing individuals with increased and reliable access to tools of cultural and information production, and a pre-established infrastructure for their dissemination (Ito 6).

Russell et al. argue that "these new ways of making and sharing culture have broad ramifications for the fundamental relations between production and consumption and the traditional sources of authority for culture and knowledge" (49)—they produce complex networks of communication that are top-down, bottom-up as well as side-to-side (M. Ito 3; Russell et al. 43). Various scholars have established that networked publics specifically allow for the growing visibility of amateur, local, niche, and often private content (Baym and boyd

321; M. Ito 7, 10; Russell et al. 43-4), including those produced by historically marginalized individuals for large audiences. For example, Russell et al. point out that "artifacts once associated with personal culture (like home movies, snapshots, diaries, and scrapbooks) have now entered the arena of public culture" (43).

Nancy Baym and danah boyd assert that this unprecedented state of publicness does not mean everything is always already public, but that "there are more layers of publicness available to those using networked media than ever before" (321). In fact, while the internet's networked structure heightens the potential for visibility and public engagement by strangers (M. Ito 8), these scholars argue that "most content online is obscure and consumed by few;" they are more commonly shared amongst quasi-publics that are walled off from the larger internet, such as the smaller, more intimate publics available on one's social network sites (Baym and boyd 322). Conversely, users can also choose to participate in "personal cocoons of private connectivity and conversation [to] stay connected with the people they feel most comfortable with" instead (M. Ito 10).

3.2.4 Social Network Sites: Using Multimedia Texts to Communicate Identity Across Different Publics

In 2008, digital media scholars danah boyd and Nicole Ellison mapped the rise of "social network sites" (SNSs), which are online spaces geared towards public displays of social connection as a form of identity presentation (219). According to boyd, SNSs are networked publics that offer a form of digital interaction that helps foster or maintain one's pre-existing offline relationships, which are primarily organized around familial and

institutional ties (boyd and Ellison 210, 221; see also Robards 387). boyd and Ellison establish that social network sites specifically:

> … allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within their system. (211)

Shared profile features across SNSs typically include a profile picture and a written self-description as well as a list of one's social network, made up of individual "Friends" or "Followers." Users are encouraged by a site's technical affordances to share multimedia texts with one another and to converse with others via public comments or private messages (boyd and Ellison 213). When consumed by online publics, these personal texts can "crystallize self understanding as people negotiate their [identity] positions relative to publics both intimate (e.g., family, friends, and co-workers) and unknown" (Vivienne and Burgess in Baym and boyd 324).[130]

Beyond these key features, however, SNSs vary in their technical and social affordances, including in user profiles' default visibility status (boyd and Ellison 213). Such differences offer the potential for varying degrees of visibility across networked publics and suggest that the sites and modes of engagement a user chooses are important to the type of impression management they produce and the publics they interact with (boyd; Robards 394;

[130] Sociologist Zeynep Tufecki argues that online displays of relationships allow individuals to "perform and realize social interactions … public performance, social capital management, social monitoring, and the production, maintenance, and furthering of social ties" as part of one's self-presentation (548; see also Jurgenson and Ritzer 634).

Shanks and Svabo 236). According to boyd, Friends can offer users an imagined audience that helps guide a user's behavioural norms on a given SNS (in boyd and Ellison 220).

I provide here a summary of two sites that boyd and Ellison highlight—Myspace and Facebook—against the backdrop of an SNS development timeline, to demonstrate how different SNSs mediate existing boundaries between public/private viewership and encourage particular forms of identity presentation and social engagement online.[131] I do so to establish a foundation for my discussion of Twitter and Tumblr below.

Though boyd and Ellison note the launch of SixDegrees.com in 1997 as the precursor to SNSs on Web 2.0, they identify Friendster as one of the most significant early North American services in SNS history (215).[132] Created in 2002 to compete with the online dating service Match.com, Friendster was designed to connect friends-of-friends to form romantic connections. However, its early adopters primarily belonged to three specific groups: internet bloggers, attendees of the Burning Man arts festival, and gay men (boyd in boyd and Ellison 215).

Apart from technical challenges in supporting the site's rapid growth, Friendster failed, in part, due to its inability to adapt to users' needs. To reflect its matchmaking goals, Friendster's web interface prevented users from viewing profiles that were more than four degrees of friends away. In response, users who wanted to view profiles beyond their

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[131] Though this timeline of major SNSs does not include BlackPlanet, which is a website for Black American users that was launched in 1999, I note its importance here as an early site for Black communities online (Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 17-8). Brock identifies this social website as a precursor to other online hubs for racialized users such as Myspace and Twitter, with notable similarities including BlackPlanet's HTML-based design and social affordances, which "prefigured Web 2.0's digital sociality and personalization" (*Distributed Blackness* 134).

[132] SixDegrees.com had two primary features of a social network site: a user profile and a "Friends" list but failed within three years due to limited internet adoption, and subsequent constraints for producing extended online networks (boyd and Ellison 215).

available networks created fake profiles called “Fakesters” to circumvent this constraint (boyd and Ellison 216). Friendster’s decision to delete Fakester accounts and ban their creators ultimately led to user distrust and this SNS’s downfall. I point out, however, that its adoption by these groups and Friendster’s evolving social uses reveals an early demand for digital social spaces that challenges existing public/private boundaries.

SNSs became mainstream in 2003 and in the same year, Myspace was created with the intent to attract the very Friendster users who had been banned from the earlier site (boyd and Ellison 216). Of this group, Myspace became especially popular with indie rock bands, who used the SNS to establish a mutually beneficial social dynamic with their fans. Whereas bands could contact their fans on Myspace, fans used their affiliation with certain bands through their public “Friends” list to signal aspects of their identity (217). In other words, Myspace eliminated the social limits set by Friendster’s design interface: in addition to allowing users to recreate their existing social networks online, it opened up its users’ profile visibility to a wider public to encourage interactions between strangers.

I argue that Myspace’s affordance of customizability was central to its social use and popularity. As Myspace profiles were visible to unknown audiences, users relied on customizing their profile’s aesthetic through HTML code to represent their identity more authentically (boyd and Ellison 217). In addition to having a designated section where users could select their favourite song, Myspace’s web interface supported various multimedia forms, including images, text comments, and a “Top Friends” section that would display who the user had shared the most interactions with (Robards 391). All-in-all, users’ Myspace profiles were both performative and reflexive and provided individuals with agency over

their identity presentation, explaining the site's appeal to a counter-culture crowd and to teenagers following the website's policy change in 2004 (boyd and Ellison 217).

In contrast, Facebook was founded with an emphasis on reproducing individuals' existing, offline relationships. Early iterations of Facebook therefore began as an intimate, private community that limited users' profile visibility to those within specific institutional groups (boyd and Ellison 218). When it was first released in February 2004, for instance, access to Facebook user profiles were limited to Harvard students who were registered with a harvard.edu email address. When Facebook expanded in 2005 to include high school students, user profiles were only visible through administrator approval (boyd and Ellison 212, 218). Though Facebook was finally released to the broader public in 2006 and accommodates varying degrees of profile visibility (set by the administrator) in 2025, many Facebook profiles remain limited in visibility, reflecting the SNS's initial design around an intimate or personal public.

By extension, customization or personalization is not as central to Facebook as it was to Myspace (Robards). While Facebook's profile structure requests the user to upload a profile picture and answer specific demographic questions about themselves (e.g., occupation and sexual orientation) and accommodates third-party applications (boyd and Ellison 212, 218; Tufecki 546), autobiographical details such as a user's favourite bands, books, and tv shows are often forgotten on Facebook (Robards 391). This is because this SNS is geared towards facilitating existing relationships (i.e., an intimate public), and presumes that such autobiographical details are already known by a user's Friends. Instead, Facebook's affordances tend to facilitate synchronous user interaction and communication (Robards

390). For example, in addition to featuring a dynamic social "News Feed," the top of one's profile page asks the user "What's on your mind?" prompting them to "articulate the more mundane, inconsequential goings-on of everyday life" (Robards 391). While identity presentation is a central part of Facebook's interface design, its profile affordances are primarily used to produce a familiar and affirmative representation of the Facebook user to their existing social networks rather than to highlight an unknown aspect of one's identity to a wider public of strangers.

3.3 How Social Media Photography Affords the Production of Countervisual Discourse

The rise of SNSs in the early to mid-2000s meant that individuals finally had a space in which to share their photos (as multimodal identity texts) to larger audiences at once. But this potential for increased visibility was challenged by digital photo-sharing practices, which remained a tedious process during this period. To share photos from a digital camera to an SNS, users had to remove the memory card from the digital camera, insert the card into a memory card reader, transfer their photo files from the card to a PC, organize and rename the files (optional), log in to their SNS account, and upload the photos to the website.[133] On the other hand, 2G-supported cellphones had slow download speeds at around 50 kbps (kilobits per second) and even slower download speeds (Nunno 10), lacking the functionality to upload photos directly from a cameraphone to a social network site.

[133] I recall that in early versions of Facebook, photos could only be uploaded one file at a time; it wasn't until later iterations that users could batch-upload multiple photos at once. Alternatively, by the mid-2000s, certain digital camera models could be directly hooked up to a computer using a USB-B cable, allowing users to skip the first two steps.

Then on June 29, 2007, Apple launched the first consumer-friendly smartphone, the iPhone 2G, which introduced major hardware and software improvements to existing cellphone technology. Characterized by a multi-touchscreen display—the first of its kind—a 2-megapixel rear camera with geotagging functionality, and 4GB ($499) and 8GB ($599) storage options, the iPhone further distinguished itself from the 2G-supported mobile phones of its time by partnering with the wireless carrier Cingular Wireless (now AT&T) to offer EDGE or 2.75G network support (Vogelstein). Crucially, the iPhone's EDGE capabilities meant that users could access web-based features on their mobile phones, from surfing the internet at wi-fi speeds (up to 384 kbps) to downloading music and video using Apple's Web browser, Safari (Nunno 4; Vogelstein). Though posting photos online from one's phone was still impractical with this network's lower upload speed, Apple's partnership model and iPhone's EDGE network capability began the shift towards the centralization of internet connectivity—and thus, social media photography—in everyday life.

On July 11, 2008, Apple released the iPhone 3G, which ran on a 3G network with a minimum download speed of 384 kbps (Nunno 1) and maximum speed of up to 2 Mbps (megabits per second) on average (Galazzo; Varnelis and Friedberg 23). On June 19, 2009, the iPhone 3GS was released with a maximum download speed of 7.2 Mbps, marking the beginning of the "real-time web" and mainstream uses of social media via smartphone apps (MacManus). Even so, the 3GS's upload speed remained limited to a maximum of 384 kbps (Diaz); it wasn't until smartphones were 4G-compatible in the early 2010s (Galazzo) and had upload rates of 2 Mbps to 10 Mbps (1NCE Connect) that photo-sharing became common among smartphone users.

With highspeed wireless networks at the core of their design from c.2010 onward, smartphones became "central entryways to the internet" (Shanks and Svabo 234). Shanks and Svabo remark that in the spring of 2012, it was more common for Facebook users in the US and Europe to access their accounts using the SNS's mobile app than through its web interface (235). The growing adoption of smartphones for internet-use during this time led to smartphone photography's seamless integration with SNSs and social media. It is this convergence of mobile camera technology and SNS accessibility that established social media and selfie photography as everyday visual practices with positive implications for producing racial counter-discourse.

3.3.1 The Massification of Digital Photography with Social Media Photography

Hand argues that social media, or SNSs that center around information broadcast to unknown audiences (e.g., Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram), have transformed into primarily image-based platforms since the early 2010s (311).[134] In doing so, social media have played an essential role in shaping contemporary photographic practices from image-making to circulation and viewing (311). Social media photography thus refers to "how making, distributing, and viewing images has become an almost unavoidable part of everyday life" with the proliferation of smartphone technology and social media (310). It is distinct from the broader categorization of digital photography, which includes various forms of digital imaging (such as digital scans of analogue media), and networked photography, which

[134] The solidification of social media photography as a quotidian practice during this time is clearly illustrated by image-based social media app Instagram's public launch in October 2010.

includes digital photos that are shared on the internet to various social and non-social sites using a desktop computer (Hand 311).

As I previously discussed, photography's digitalization increased the frequency and volume of image production and shifted imaging practices towards the quotidian and banal (Hand 313; Rose). Social media photography further intensified these tendencies, making picture-taking in the smartphone era a ubiquitous practice (Hand 312, 318). Matic Broz cites, for instance, that 660 billion photos were taken worldwide in 2013. This number has grown exponentially almost every year; in 2024, a record of 1.94 trillion photos were produced.[135] It is also estimated that 94% of all photos are taken with smartphone cameras, which younger generations now view as the default imaging tool (Hand 312), and that 14 billion images are shared daily through social media (Broz). As these statistics show, smartphones did more than eliminate the need for a separate photographic device (Rose 81)—by housing camera technology and networked communication capabilities on the same hardware (Jerslev and Mortenson 155; Knight 164; Larsen and Sandbye xvi; Rubinstein and Sluis, "Life More Photographic" 11), they allowed users to publish images directly to social media (and other websites) from anywhere at any time (Shanks and Svabo 233). Put simply, smartphones allowed users to finally have control over the "whole process of photography," including the frequency and ways in which they are shared to multiple audiences (Hand 312).

José Van Dijck argues that with photography's intensification over the last decade, and especially with its distribution through social media, digital photography has become massified so that "the value of individual pictures decreases while the general significance of

[135] The growth excludes 2020 and 2021, which saw a slight decrease in numbers corresponding to the COVID-19 lockdowns.

visual communication increases" (in Larsen and Sandbye xx). It has changed photography's social role and function, emphasizing the "continuous process of documentation" (Serres in Shanks and Svabo 239) as well as its speed and reach of distribution over previously privileged factors like storage and classification (Hand 312).

Scholars such as Lister, Mitchell, Ritchin, and Rose point out that this "era of 'post' and yet 'more' photography" (Hand 310) has also reoriented personal photography away from the private to public sphere (Baym and boyd 320; Larsen and Sandbye xxv; Van House in Hand 317). In showing the vernacular to varying degrees of publics, social media photography highlights the potential for the "ground-up agency" of ordinary people (Shanks and Svabo 243), which has "particularly important implications for minorities and marginalized groups who … enjo[y] new opportunities for enhancing their public visibility as agents who picture their own lives" (Miles 71). The significance of social media photography (i.e., its affordances of visualization and visibility) for racialized people and the production of racial discourse becomes especially apparent when examining its subgenre of selfie photography.

3.3.2 The Unconventional Self(ie): Reconstructing Identities Through Selfie Photography

In 2013, Oxford Dictionaries chose the word "selfie" as their "word of the year," defining it as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website." Since its popularization, the discursive implications of selfie photos on embodiment and subjectivity have been widely debated. While mainstream discourse has critiqued selfies as producing narcissistic practices of self-looking among women that reproduce and discipline women's bodies according to the

male gaze (Burns; Warfield et al. 2)., still others argue that these visual texts offer the potential to produce counter-discourses about identity in two ways: 1) by encouraging frequent practices of self-looking for marginalized individuals that reject mainstream conventions and 2) by immediately distributing these unconventional photos to an audience (Boon and Pentney; Bruś; Knight; Tembeck; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz). Put differently, I highlight that selfie photography's embeddedness in online social networks allows individual identity texts to contribute to broader discourses of subjectivity. Thus, like other forms of social media photography, this photo genre does more than serve as a digitized version of its analogue predecessor—it illuminates an important shift in self-portrait photography's visual conventions.

The intensification of selfie-taking as an everyday visual practice specifically follows the trajectory of cellular network development. The first "selfie camera," which is a front-facing camera typically placed next to or above the smartphone's preview screen, is attributed to the Sony Ericsson Z1010 in 2003. It was originally intended for use in mobile video conferencing and had a resolution of 0.3 MP (Triggs). Because of 2G networks' slower speeds, however, the front-facing camera did not reach mainstream popularity until 2010 with the release of mobile devices like the iPhone 4 and HTC Evo 4G. Indeed, while the front-facing camera on HTC's Evo 4G offered a higher image resolution than earlier smartphone models at 1.3 MP, iPhone 4's front camera remained at the same resolution as Sony Ericsson's first one in 2003 (Triggs), demonstrating that the fundamental factor of selfie-taking practices is its sharability.

Media and communication scholar Hannah Westley argues that the combination of front-facing cameras with preview screens function as a type of "digital mirror" (378) for its users: they allow users to see their image during its construction process and thus offers individuals a way to reflect on their self-presentation (Hand 321; Tembeck 3). Unlike seeing one's reflection in a mirror, however, the act of selfie-taking on a networked device situates it within a social infrastructure. Thus, individuals who take selfies often find themselves negotiating the smartphone camera's affordances of reflexivity and sociality. While selfies and selfie-taking conventions are often informed by dominant discourses on identity and are shaped with an imagined audience in mind (Hand 321), in offering tools for participation in practices of self-visualization and representation, they also produce the possibility for the production of countervisuality.

Indeed, digital photography scholars have argued since their very inception that selfies—like other peer-to-peer or user-generated aspects of Web 2.0's architecture—hold a liberatory potential for marginalized groups because they allow formerly disempowered subjects to construct and present their own identities to mainstream publics (A. Morrison, "Laughing at Injustice;" Boon and Pentney; Bruś; Carroll et al.; Knight; Senft and Baym; Tembeck; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz). For example, Tamar Tembeck asserts that selfies of ill health offer their subjects "the capacity to confirm, deny, or negotiate group membership within social media environments and beyond" to determine their own definitions of illness and disability (4). In their respective articles, Sonja Boon and Beth Pentney and Katrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gómez Cruz argue that selfies can help women challenge traditional male constructions of the female body, or their sexualization of women's bodies, by allowing

women to take and share images of themselves during breast-feeding as well as those they deem "sexy selfies." These examples demonstrate how selfie photography encourages forms of self-construction that can destabilize normative assumptions about embodiment in mainstream visual culture.

Feminist readings of selfie photography such as these have established the groundwork for understanding selfies as countervisual discourse. However, I note that selfies as racial discourse (i.e., the implications of selfies in digital racial formation) have only recently begun to emerge as an area of study (for example, see A. Morrison's "Laughing at Injustice"). Discussions of selfies in relation to race have typically been raised as a passing reference, often supplementing discussions of gender, or have identified selfies as secondary texts within existing political movements, such as Black Lives Matter (e.g., Calhoun; Senft on "networked reflective solidarity" in Senft and Baym 1596). In the remainder of this chapter, I therefore examine how social media photos—and especially selfies—allow racialized individuals to construct countervisual images of racial identity by producing "a discursive situation making for recurrent instances of transgression performed by the [marginalized] from within and against colonial discourse" (Parry 41).

3.3.3 Beyond the Dichotomy: How Selfies Challenge Existing Racial Discourse

In her research on identity's fragmentation in postmodernism, Liesbet van Zoonen determines that identity has been historically characterized as singular or stable because it is easier to discipline bodies based on "a discourse of normalized dichotomous identities"—identities that are classified as "female *or* male, able *or* disabled and nothing in between" (46). As I argued in Chapters One and Two, for instance, photographs of racialized subjects

that were produced during modernity reduced these subjects' heterogeneity to the frames of White respectability and racial deviancy to stabilize colonialism's oppressive conceptions of race. Bhabha identifies such binary divisions in culture as a "strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic," or a systematic yet constructed way for hegemony's self-reproduction (52).

Sociologist Erving Goffman critiques the notion that identity is stable, saying that this view fails to consider self-presentation's dramaturgical aspect—that is, individuals' ability to adapt their self-presentation across different social situations. Sharing this criticism, Stuart Hall adds that identities are more accurately a process of *identification* that are "constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (4). Indeed, Bhabha advances that image production is an essential part of this process, as identification often takes place as subjects assume the role of culturally established images (64).[136]

I propose that social media and selfie photography offer racialized users the ability to produce heterogenous representations of identity online, commonly seen in the small, everyday moments of individuals' personal lives. Given photography's authority in Western culture, I assert that these unfamiliar representations of racial heterogeneity gain discursive

[136] In response, mainstream discourse on identity has contested such notions of identity's fluidity by claiming the importance of authenticity (Ferrara in van Zoonen 49), which once again draws from Enlightenment theories about truth to establish the existence of a "true" self. When applied to racial identity, I argue that the concept of authenticity attempts to restabilize and "legitimate" the (socially constructed and indeterminate) category of race by holding individuals to arbitrary measures of racial qualification. The notion of racial authenticity is what leads many White Americans, for example, to classify former President Barack Obama as a White man; their inability to disentangle specific qualities like eloquence and intelligence from Whiteness demonstrates the racial system's dependency on essentialist definitions.

weight over time.[137] Ultimately then, the production of digital, social media photos allows users to challenge hegemonic characterizations of racial subjectivity by broadening the discursive field of racial representation across networked publics.

3.3.4 Selfie Photography's Sociality: The Importance of Social Media Selection and Different Publics in Establishing Countervisual Discourse

As I demonstrated with my earlier discussion on Myspace and Facebook, "the technical structures of different levels of networked technologies … mediat[e] and stee[r] the social practices of visual communication" (van Dijck in Hand 317). While the technical affordances that shape image sharing practices on social media (e.g., image tagging and hashtags) are rarely reflected on by everyday users, these mechanisms impact how and to whom image circulation occurs, as well as the kinds of cultures and uses that subsequently emerge from them (boyd and Ellison 210; Hand 317; Nakamura, *Digitizing Race* 83). As "social media platforms shape possible and preferred meanings of images" (Hand 314) and users present themselves differently across various social media audiences (320), it is therefore important to examine the particular platforms chosen to distribute images of racial heterogeneity.[138] I offer here an analysis of Twitter and Tumblr's affordances to identify how these social media provided Black users with the necessary conditions and audiences to

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[137] Hand explains that the truth-value of a digital snap is generally accepted by everyday social media users because "it would be exhausting to deconstruct *every* claim to authenticity in relation to ordinary visual communication" (315). Similarly, Rose suggests that with digital photography, personal photos, which are prone to depicting subjects in more "natural" poses and settings, are increasingly associated with a knowledge claim about the subject (78).

[138] Baym and boyd argue that even the ownership of a site factors into how comfortable or capable a user feels with sharing their personal information publicly (326). With this in mind, I offer that although the social media movement #IfTheyGunnedMeDown took place on Twitter, it is difficult to fathom that this same selection would be made (or that a similar result could be achieved) since the platform's rebranding to X with Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter in 2022.

advance unfamiliar images of Blackness as counter-discourse in 2014 and 2015. Overall, I argue that both social media's affordances support the distribution and circulation of digital images depicting racialized users in everyday contexts to multiple online publics.

3.3.5 Signifyin' Black Counterculture on Twitter

My discussion of Twitter, and specifically Black Twitter, is greatly indebted to the work of digital media scholar André Brock Jr., who has analyzed the integration of Twitter into Black users' everyday communication since 2012. Though Brock is most commonly associated with scholarship on Black Twitter, he attributes this concept to earlier internet sources written by Black people ("Blackhand Side"): namely, Anil Dash's 2008 blog post "Yo' Mama's So Fat," Chris Wilson's 2009 post "uknowurblack," and Choire Sicha's 2009 article "What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night?" Because my discussion of Twitter is particular to its uses for the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown movement, my analysis here otherwise examines its affordances from 2014.

Twitter was initially launched in 2006 as an SMS-compatible service but rose to the rank of fourth most influential website in the world soon after the establishment of 3G-networked smartphones and smartphone apps' popularization in 2009 (MacManus). Twitter, with its short, text-centric interface was especially appealing to Black users, who were more likely to access the internet via mobile phone in 2009 than White American users due to socioeconomic differences and the higher cost of broadband and PCs during this time (Wortham).[139] In addition to its simplified interface, Twitter's technical affordances

[139] A study by Pew Research Centre in April 2009 revealed that 28% of White Americans used the internet on their mobile phones whereas nearly 50% of Black Americans (and English-speaking Hispanics) used their phones to surf the Web and send emails (Wortham).

collectively emphasize brevity. Brock argues that these affordances specifically encourage the establishment of "weak-tie relationships" or easy connections, which paradoxically allow users to form stronger connections with each other by generating brief but frequent interactions (*Distributed Blackness* 85). This brevity supports the formation of a Black counterpublic, as it is well-suited for users that can connect based on simplified bits of information, such as shared interests, experiences, and values, rather than a fuller representation of one another.

Compared to SNSs like Facebook that reinforce existing relationships by centring user activity around a profile page, Twitter's central focus is on quick and frequent information broadcasting, commonly between strangers. This motivation is characterized by Twitter's early functionality and now-iconic character-count (see figure 29): because tweets were initially designed to be sent and received via SMS, which had a 160-character count, Twitter had a maximum limit of 140 characters for its posts. In 2017, this limit was doubled to allow up to 280 characters (Kastrenakes). This technical constraint has the effect of encouraging users to distill their thoughts into a short, text-based form, which is more conducive to being read on smartphones by mobile users.

Additionally, Twitter's "follow" feature allows users to curate their personalized feed with information that supports their interests and values (Brock, "Blackhand Side" 530, 536). I argue that feed personalization persuades users to engage in brief but frequent interactions with one another—reinforced by the app's pre-set "comment," "retweet," or "like" buttons (see figure 30)—by providing them with a stream of easily agreeable content.



Figure 29. Twitter's iconic 140-character count[140]

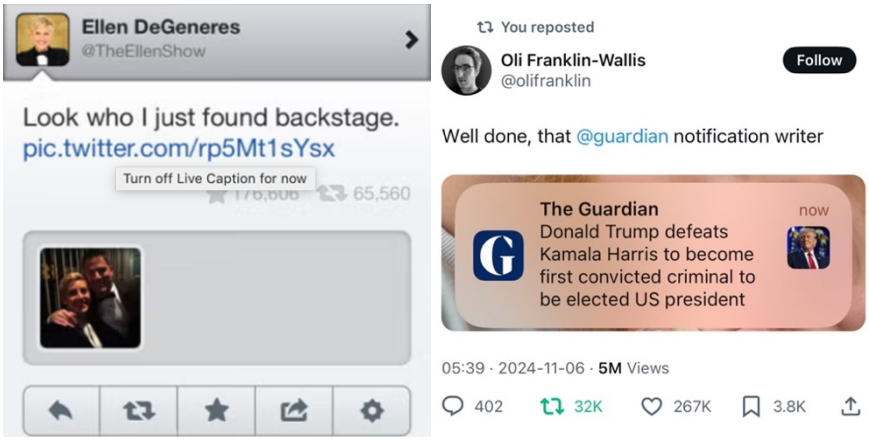


Figure 30. A screenshot of Twitter's interface from 2014 (left) and 2024 (right)[141]

Of Twitter's button features, the "reply" function (represented by the curved arrow icon in 2014 and the speech bubble in later versions) allows users to comment on a tweet, with the option to continue a conversation regarding the post on the original tweeter's profile. Twitter also offers users the ability to "retweet," which allows individuals to share another user's tweet to their own profile without adding extra commentary. In 2014, users could also

[140] Source: Simon van Woerden, "Twitter's 140-character count," n.d., *Tumblr*, littlebigdetails.com/post/46846938719/twitter-characters-exceeding-the-140-limit-are.
[141] Source: Ellen DeGeneres, "Bradley Cooper Oscars tweet," 2 Mar. 2014, *Slate Magazine*, slate.com/technology/2014/03/ellen-degeneres-samsung-selfie-breaks-tweet-record-but-she-uses-iphone-backstage.html; Oli Franklin-Wallis, "Guardian notification writer praised," 6 Nov. 2024, *Twitter*, twitter.com/olifranklin/status/1854111354015068595?s=46&t=wyDbWxiWChMDCjRPDQnW9w.

"favourite" a tweet (represented by the star icon) to bookmark a post, signal their agreement with a user's point, or to simply let the poster know their tweet was being read (Bowman).[142] In comparison to the "comment" and "like" functions on Facebook, which help reinforce an existing bond, these affordances on Twitter allow users to signal similarities such as shared interests and to form weak-tie relationships based on short but frequent interactions. While these features and affordances support Black people's uses of Twitter on mobile phones by facilitating the production of shorter-form content, they also fit well with forms of Black cultural expression and communication, which often draw on shared cultural knowledge for hermeneutic shortcuts.

Indeed, according to Brock, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s idea of "Signifyin'" is central to Black Twitter's conceptualization. Signifyin' is a Black vernacular practice where "black … speakers empt[y] the [White] signifier 'signification' of its received concepts and fil[l] this empty signifier with their own concepts" (Gates 1553). In her essay, "Signifying and Marking: Two Afro-American Speech Acts," anthropologist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan describes it as an alternative message form that is selected for its artistic merit. Signifyin' specifically enables Black people to encode relational messages using an element of indirection, so "the apparent significance of the message differs from its real significance" (Mitchell-Kernan 173). The ambiguity resulting from this indirection allows the speaker or encoder to "reserv[e] the right to subsequently insist on the [message's] harmless

[142] In 2015, Twitter changed "favourites" to "likes," replacing the star with a heart icon. This decision was controversial, with some users claiming that it falsely relayed a positive emotion they might not actually feel (Bowman).

interpretation rather than the provocative one" to protect the speaker from the true meaning's negative repercussions (Mitchell-Kernan 170).

Scholars including Brock and A. Morrison commonly highlight Twitter's hashtag as a crucial part of this cultural identification. Conventionally, hashtags afford users with a way to organize and navigate collaborative knowledge production and exchange by producing search terms that hyperlink related tweets to one another. A. Morrison explains that hashtags "lin[k] disparate information thematically in searchable and followable ways" by emphasizing the shared topics of posts ("Laughing at Injustice" 24-5). Clicking on a hashtag allows users to access that particular tag's archive of tweets; they also offer users a way to participate in the conversation by using the same hashtag in their tweets.

In addition to its general function, however, Brock identifies a "perceptual condition" (Davis and Chouinard) to the ways in which Black Twitter users employ hashtags. For these users, hashtags also operate as a "folksonomic metadiscourse convention," which resembles the Black cultural practice of Signifyin' ("Blackhand Side" 538). Just as Signifyin' allows members of Black communities to "inventively redefine an object or phenomenon using Black cultural commonplaces and philosophy" (*Distributed Blackness* 106-7), the addition of hashtags to a tweet afford Black Twitter users with a coded articulation of a cultural worldview that allows them to nuance their messages to other Black users and thus establish brief but strong connections with one another. Put differently, when used as folksonomic metadiscourse, hashtags also serve as a form of cultural interpellation, which in turn produces a form of call-and-response for its Black users: they encourage a quick surge of timely interactions and the collective production of cultural discourse that reinforce the

community's bonds. In comparison, such hashtags are inaccessible to mainstream White (and non-Black) audiences, who do not share their cultural worldview. In addition to being excluded from the interpellation (and thus the collective production of discourse), the indirection posed by these hashtags suggests that these Twitter users often misunderstand the true discursive meaning behind such tweets.

Nevertheless, A. Morrison argues that hashtags are "a very effective way to … hop existing networks boundaries … to rapidly trend emerging topics outside of interpersonal connections" ("Laughing at Injustice" 24-5). Indeed, while boyd and Marwick observe that "people's mediated acts are both visible and invisible in networked publics" (in Baym and boyd 322)—for instance, countercultural tweets are typically invisible to mainstream publics—viral tweets can nevertheless achieve increased visibility through Twitter's "trending topics" feature, which highlights hashtags that have high levels of engagement on its designated feed (Brock, "Blackhand Side" 534). In privileging previously excluded voices and perspectives in this way, Twitter's affordances allow for the cumulative emergence of a Black counterpublic, and by extension, the increased visibility of racial counter-discourse by mainstream publics. My analysis of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown below therefore builds on Brock's idea to argue that social media photography on Black Twitter produces the grounds for counter-discourse: it allows Black people to use conventional forms of subjectivity in unconventional ways to challenge existing notions of Black subjectivity.

3.3.6 Exploring Black Counterculture on Tumblr

Tumblr's affordances create a countercultural social space that is also conducive to the production and dissemination of Black counter-discourse. Ross et al. describe Tumblr, an

SNS and microblog released in 2007, as a "blog variant … that provides a range of features allowing users to share, exchange, [and] interact with short posts and messages" (in Attu and Terras 529).[143] In contrast to social media like Twitter that encourage brief interactions between strangers or SNSs like Facebook that help foster pre-existing relationships, Tumblr allows users to form deep connections with strangers by encouraging them to share their thoughts and interests in detail and to interact with others in one-on-one or small group settings (Calhoun). This motivation is apparent, for instance, in Tumblr's longer-form posts and multimedia features (Attu and Terras 529), which collectively provide audiences with a more comprehensive image of the user. Tumblr's posts are also "unlocked" by default, suggesting its visibility to anyone with an account (Attu and Terras 529).

Tumblr's most recent User Guidelines version (from February 2024) identifies it as a site that "celebrates creativity" as well as one that wants users to "express [themselves] freely … us[ing] Tumblr to reflect who [they] are, and what [they] love, think, and stand for." In addition to this official statement of values, which positions Tumblr as an inclusive space, I point out that this SNS shares a sociotechnical motivation with Myspace: both sites offer users a countercultural environment that emphasizes personalization and the expression of individuality.

Indeed, Tumblr has become recognized and celebrated over the years for its alternative culture, including the growth of counterpublics such as "Black Tumblr" (Calhoun). Calhoun argues that Tumblr's dedication to free expression "affords all users equal opportunities to use their voice and to respond to others in ways that people from

[143] This description of Tumblr's posts as "short" is relative to traditional blogs, to which the authors draw a comparison.

marginalized communities—and people marginalized within their communities—are often barred from in their day-to-day lives" (49). I analyze how the site's technical affordances (i.e., its open profile structure, reblogging feature, and hashtag system) foster the development of personal relationships and counterpublics to therefore facilitate the production of countervisual discourse by racialized individuals.

At a fundamental level of design, Tumblr's open profile structure encourages its users to develop personal connections with one another. Unlike other SNSs that center their design around user profiles, Tumblr bases its structure around its users' longer-form posts, only designating a small section of a user's page for profile creation. These profile sections do not require users to provide demographic information such as those traditionally prompted by profile-driven sites. For instance, whereas Facebook asks for a user's name, gender, occupation, education, city, relationship status, hometown, birthday, etc. (Chang et al. in Attu and Terras 542), Tumblr offers an open-ended description box, in which users can describe their identities and/or Tumblr blogs using their preferred terms (see figure 31). Though some Tumblr "themes" (page layouts) include a clearly designated "About Me" section that encourage users to describe themselves, this text box is also devoid of pre-determined prompts that have the potential to limit one's expression of identity. Additionally, aspects of a user's account such as usernames and blog URLs that may reveal more conventional markers of identity (e.g., one's name) are easily modified on Tumblr (Attu and Terras). Overall, this affordance of individual expression privileges the user's self-perception over the reproduction of mainstream identity categories. In decentring user profiles altogether, Tumblr

destabilizes the authority of traditional identity categories and encourages users to connect with one another based on their shared interests.



Figure 31. A comparison of user profile interfaces from Facebook (left) and Tumblr (right)[144]

On Tumblr, a user's interests and individuality are also expressed multimodally. Tumblr allows users to create long-form text posts of varying character lengths and to upload different media forms including photos, videos, website links, chat transcripts, quotes, and audio files (Attu and Terras 529). Attu and Terras report that Tumblr's photo posts, which support single images, curated photosets, and moving "gifs" appear to be particularly meaningful sites of identity construction for users (541).

Given Tumblr's open visibility and public-facing content stream (Attu and Terras 530), users typically scan different accounts and "follow" ones that resonate with their own interests and values. Users often establish deeper connections with one another over time through producing multiple reblogs of a user's posts (Attu and Terras 529). Sharing others' posts to their own Tumblr blogs is seen as a way of "express[ing] their ideas and engag[ing]

[144] Source: Aaron Sittig, "Facebook profile interface from 2009," *CNET*, cnet.com/pictures/facebook-then-and-now-pictures/; Jin Sol Kim, "Tumblr blog description box," 2017, *Tumblr*, tumblr.com.

in dialogue with each other" (Calhoun 49).[145] Unlike the retweeting function on Twitter, however, Tumblr's reblog feature explicitly prompts users to "Add something, if you'd like" to the shared post. As this text prompt is placed immediately below a copy of the original post, the semiotics of its placement suggests that all subsequent content are responses to the initial post (i.e., this design suggests a chronological "before-and-after" order to the contents' publication). As secondary content is not typically distinguished from the original post by a time stamp, this feature also reinforces user connection by giving "an illusion of the conversation [between users] being on-going and current, even though comments may have been added over weeks or months" (Petersen qtd. in Attu and Terras 542). Apart from affording user affinity and socialization, this reblog function—paired with the high visibility of content to various publics—also allows users to boost the reach of traditionally marginalized content by allowing them to share these posts across different (counter)publics.

Similar to Twitter, Tumblr's hashtags also serve a metadiscursive function that allows users to signal a shared worldview within their in-group cultures and networks. Whereas the use of hashtags for Signifyin' on Twitter is specifically informed by Black culture, however, Tumblr's metadiscursive affordance is intrinsic to its interface design, as Tumblr restricts hashtag visibility to the original post, preventing its reproduction in subsequent reblogs. For instance, Calhoun observes that members of the Black Tumblr community often tag their posts with hashtags like #melanin, #blackgirlmagic, and #blackexcellence to highlight race as an important aspect of their identity.[146] This affordance simultaneously encourages Black

[145] For example, during the years I was active on Tumblr, I was more inclined to chat with followers one-on-one if I recognized them as someone who actively reblogged my content over a sustained period of time.
[146] Because of its inherent ephemerality, this function is unfortunately impossible to depict as a screenshot.

users to tag their posts as belonging to Black culture while allowing non-Black users to share these posts without claiming the vocabulary of Black membership.

I propose that Tumblr's hashtags offer yet another affordance that allows them to function as sedimented identity texts for individual users. More specifically, Tumblr's organization of hashtags uniquely allows users to search for a hashtag directly within an individual blog. Clicking (or tapping) on a post's hashtag allows a user to search for other posts on that blog that are archived using the same tag.[147] This allows users to see the frequency of a hashtag's use. As I point out in the case study discussion below, hashtags that are paired with selfies can thus illuminate key aspects of a Tumblr user's identity that the user has chosen to highlight. For example, selfies that are consistently tagged #melanin can help underscore the importance of Blackness to an individual's self-presentation and online embodiment. Such information allows likeminded Tumblr users—that is, members of a particular counterpublic—to form connections with one another. When used with selfie photography, Tumblr's hashtags can therefore help destabilize dominant perceptions of subjectivity by allowing users to pair their self-proclaimed racial identities with a wide array of visual representations.

3.4 #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and #BlackoutDay's Countervisual Photos: Challenging White Visuality with Social Media Photography

In the remaining section of this chapter, I analyze two case studies of social media photography from 2014 and 2015: #IfTheyGunnedMeDown on Twitter and #BlackoutDay

[147] Some "theme" formats also provide an internal search bar that allows users to search for a hashtag directly on a user's blog.

on Tumblr. I have chosen to analyze these movements because of their exemplary nature in demonstrating how the creation and circulation of unconventional images can serve as sites of digital racial formation over time. I argue that the proliferation of such photographs on social media and SNSs materialize, stabilize, and legitimize their subjects (Stone) to collectively challenge dominant representations of Blackness in Western culture.

Following the throughline from Chapters One and Two, I discuss these case studies with reference to respectability politics, which argues that respectability can be earned by adhering to bourgeois visual social conventions (Higginbotham). In my discussion of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, I pair this theory with Campt, Hartman, and Wilderson's assertion (Hartman 62; Wilderson 10-11) that the quotidian often offers "acts of refusal," or practices "honed by the dispossessed in the struggle to create possibility within the constraints of everyday life" (Campt, *Listening to Images* 4). In my discussion of #BlackoutDay, I bridge the concept of refusal with Bhabha's theory of hybridity, which argues the need for articulations of heterogeneity or cultural difference in challenging hegemonic systems. I propose that social media photography allows Black individuals to use everyday representations of lived experience as discourse to challenge White visuality's dichotomous frames. I assert that such quotidian photographs can shake up "the [very] notion of race … in the act of creating it" (Nakamura, *Digitizing Race* 186), to revisualize Blackness as heterogenous and varied.

I specifically discuss #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's unsettling of recognizable Blackness with reference to bourgeois portrait and criminal mugshot photography, as these dichotomous frames are simultaneously invoked in #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's photos using a single

photographic subject. These diptych images demonstrate a nuanced reproduction of these photographic frames by Black Twitter users, who mobilize Twitter's affordances to produce a countercultural critique of White respectability. On the other hand, #BlackoutDay demonstrates how social media photography allows Black individuals "to define themselves, in their own voices as members of a multitudinous culture" (Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 12). These everyday photos refuse Western culture's respectability frames by opting for "ways of looking and experiencing bodies in a new … [non-hegemonic] way" (Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz 83).

Although these image-based movements were created independently and utilize contrasting strategies, I point out that they are complementary in their advancement of racial counter-discourse. In contesting existing, racially coded frames of respectability, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown opens up the discursive field for unfamiliar representations of Blackness, such as those shared in #BlackoutDay, to be subsequently developed. Therefore, these examples collectively demonstrate how social media photography allows for the sharing of "points of view that [could] never be known [before], which promise something quite extraordinary"—the construction of a world "less organized by axes of domination" (Haraway 680).

3.4.1 What is #IfTheyGunnedMeDown? How Black Twitter Used Michael Brown's Legacy to Criticize Black Criminality

On August 9, 2014, an unarmed Black 18-year-old named Michael Brown was shot and killed by White police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri (Gross 417; Korn 42). In the initial media coverage of his death, news outlets used an image of Brown wearing

a red Nike Air basketball jersey and light pants that was pulled from his Facebook profile (figure 32). Within the first few hours of release, the image ignited criticism. Combined with the ambiguous hand gesture and a "low camera angle [that] made Brown look particularly large and, to some, menacing" (Gross 417), Black communities argued that the photo represented the victim in a way that suggested he deserved his fate. Though various news outlets quickly changed the initial photo of Brown to one of two other photos (figure 33), their original choice had already revealed mainstream America's default framework of White visuality.[148]

On August 10, 2014, criminal defense lawyer C.J. Lawrence created the social media hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown to challenge racist depictions of Black individuals, and especially of Black victims, in news media (@CJLawrenceEsq; Korn 42; Pitcan et al. 165). Lawrence first posted the hashtag on Twitter along with two pictures of himself and the caption "Which photo does the media use if the police shot me down?" (figure 34). In the first image, Lawrence is shown giving a valedictorian speech at his college graduation; former president Bill Clinton is shown laughing behind him in the background. In the other, Lawrence is dressed as Kanye West for Halloween: he is shown holding a bottle of Hennessy in one hand.[149] While Lawrence's tweet did not provide explicit instructions for reproduction, its use of a hashtag as a form of folksonomic metadiscourse ultimately invited Black Twitter users to post "two different pictures of themselves, one hegemonically 'positive' and the other 'negative'" (Korn 42). Black Twitter users responded to this tweet's perceived call-

[148] There is similar research on social media protests that respond to a photograph of Trayvon Martin in his hoodie, which portrays him as legibly "gangsta" to mainstream American publics (Pitcan et al. 165).
[149] Lawrence's choice to include Hennessy over another brand of liquor in this second photograph is likely intentional, as this brand is culturally coded with Blackness given its popular depictions in hip hop culture.

and-response, with #IfTheyGunnedMeDown used on Twitter 168,000 times within the first 48 hours of its launch (Gross 417).



Figure 32. Controversial photo of Michael Brown used in initial news coverage[150]



Figure 33. Photos of Michael Brown that replaced his controversial photo on new outlets[151]

[150] Source: "Michael Brown's Facebook photo," n.d., *The St. Louis American,* stlamerican.com/remembering-michael-brown/stl-county-police-chief-claims-struggle-with-gun-lead-to-fatal-shooting-of-michael-brown/.
[151] Source: "News media's updated photo of Michael Brown," n.d., *BBC,* bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53603923*;* "Michael Brown's graduation photo," n.d., *St. Louis Post Dispatch,* stltoday.com/opinion/column/article_5117983f-86a6-5a29-8a4f-bdca701c62c8.html.



Figure 34. The first #IfTheyGunnedMeDown photoset of its creator C.J. Lawrence[152]

3.4.1a #IfTheyGunnedMeDown Literature Review

#IfTheyGunnedMeDown has been studied by other digital media scholars including Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa in 2015 and by Tracy Everbach et al. (2017), Nora Gross (2018), and Jenny Ungbha Korn (2019) in more recent years. Except for Gross's research, which examines how the photos are used to construct Black respectability, most of these works focus on the importance of social media networks and hashtags for political mobilization. I contribute to this existing body of work by analyzing how #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's images reconstruct Blackness online: by inviting Black Twitter

[152] Source: C.J. Lawrence, "#IfTheyGunnedMeDown," *Twitter,* 10 Aug. 2014, twitter.com/CJLawrenceEsq/status/498537843170353152.

users to critically examine the discourse of anti-Blackness in America using dominant frames of respectability and criminality.

Though my reading of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown differs from Gross's in several ways, I am nonetheless grateful for her research, which provides me with a preliminary understanding of the paired photos' codes and conventions. Gross's study provides a content analysis of 100 image pairs from the first 24 hours of the hashtag's development to "understand the ways that Black youth and young adults negotiate oppressive media representations and produce their own self-images" (416-7). Her coding considers each photograph's composition, situational context, clothing, facial expression, gesture, interaction with objects, and pose, as well as the photographs' qualitative interpretations and latent meanings (424). As Gross asserts reaching saturation for her analysis at 100 image pairs, I forego performing the same kind of image analysis here. Instead, I build on her findings to demonstrate how social media photography can collectively produce a form of countervisual racial discourse.

To my knowledge, no other scholar has taken a transhistorical approach to analyzing #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's diptych photos by linking these self-constructed images to the early modern development of bourgeois portrait and criminal mugshot photography.[153] As I argued in Chapter One, these photographic frames helped discipline mainstream views of subjectivity by visually "establish[ing] and delimit[ing] the terrain of the other" (Sekula 7). However, rather than claiming that #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's photos adhere to White

[153] While Gross's analysis also utilizes the concept of respectability politics, she works primarily with Higginbotham's notion of its physical embodiment and performance rather than focusing on the photographic frames of White visuality.

respectability frames as a strategy for social uplift, I argue that these photos collectively underscore racial classification as socially constructed. By reproducing the two frames simultaneously and using the folksonomic hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown to signal the movement's critical position, these photos offer a hybrid representation of Black subjectivity that acknowledges that aspects of respectability and disrespectability can co-exist.

Indeed, although Lawrence's post arranges the photos from top to bottom, most other #IfTheyGunnedMeDown photos are placed side-by-side. I argue that this common arrangement removes the potential misreading of social value implied in a top-to-bottom (i.e., hierarchical) arrangement, and emphasizes instead the possible co-existence of visual codes that White media have claimed as contradictory. Ultimately, this movement draws on and highlights Black Twitter users' familiarity with White respectability frames, their cultural knowledge and lived experiences of Black disenfranchisement, and their existing archive of personal photos to indirectly criticize White visuality and notions of respectable subjectivity. I therefore highlight #IfTheyGunnedMeDown as an example of social media photography's potential in destabilizing or unsettling racial subjectivity from its essentialized, recognizable forms.

3.4.1b Unsettling Black Essentialism with #IfTheyGunnedMeDown

In her research on #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, Gross argues that the movement's photos demonstrate Black Twitter users' double-consciousness regarding hegemonic views of Blackness: that is, their understanding that "there are many ways [for Black people] to be problematic but not as many ways to be seen as socially acceptable" (428). From this, she concludes that "[b]y presenting one aspect of themselves as a priori devalued, these young

people are proclaiming the value of their other self" (429). In other words, Gross suggests that #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's participants adopt (and inevitably perpetuate) the oppressive "logic" of respectability politics, favouring images that are legible as "respectable" over those that are "disrespectable" or "criminal."

I argue that this misreading of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's photos results from the failed consideration of the hashtag's folksonomic metadiscursive convention, which aligns with Gross's position as a non-Black scholar. While these images reproduce established subjectivity frames, I counter Gross's reading to argue that they do not signify the participants' willful acceptance of double-consciousness and respectability politics. Rather, the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown anchors these photos within the Black cultural practice of Signifyin' and allows its participants to co-opt these visual frames to indirectly challenge dominant representations of racial subjectivity.

I will begin by explaining the cultural worldview underlying the hashtag. In posing a hypothetical scenario where the individual may be "gunned down" by those who are meant to serve and protect equally, the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown first draws on the Black cultural knowledge of anti-Blackness in the United States, especially within the context of police brutality and racial profiling, to hail members of Twitter's Black counterpublic. This shared knowledge therefore also draws upon an understanding of double-consciousness—that is, the view that Black people are seen as always already criminal in mainstream American society—to interpellate those who visually identify with the diptych's photographic subjects. This interpellation acts as a call-and-response for Black Twitter users:

it invites them to participate in the production of cultural discourse by uploading and sharing their own images of legible respectability and disrespectability.

Such constructions of discourse require Black participants of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown to demonstrate both a strong level of reflexivity and familiarity with White respectability frames. For example, the diptych in figure 35, created by @_bennythejet, shows the Black Twitter user's keen understanding of both "respectable" and "criminal" photographic traditions.[154] For the first part of the diptych (figure 35, left), the photo @_bennythejet has selected depicts him in a formal pose (standing at-ease) wearing clothing that is culturally associated with respect and honour (a military uniform). This photo also shows the subject in portrait mode (i.e., head-on) and captures three-quarter lengths of his body. Together, these photographic codes and conventions mirror bourgeois portrait photography's traditions, suggesting the user's intentionality in choosing this particular image to signal his respectability.

These codes and conventions are further reinforced by the photograph's situational context: the mix of civilians and military officials in the background and the photograph's social documentary-style suggests that this image was taken at a military base or event, thus legitimizing the subject's clothing choice as an authentic uniform. Respectability is therefore signified in this photo using multiple visual codes that represent the subject as a member of the American military—a formal institution commonly associated with honour and prestige. Such compositional details in #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's "respectable" photographs indicate

[154] In this screenshot, which was taken in 2024, his Twitter "name" is "Before You Ask Us, Ask Google"—a message directed at (mostly) White people regarding questions about Black culture. Older screenshots online from 2014, however, such as the one in the *Daily Mail*, show that his Twitter name used to read "Not A Walking Target" as a more explicit comment on anti-Black police violence (Rush).

Black Twitter users' acute awareness of cultural codes and their intentionality behind choosing images that resemble bourgeois photographic conventions.



Figure 35. Exemplary image of an #IfTheyGunnedMeDown diptych[155]

The second image in figure 35's diptych (right) starkly contrasts the first. While it is also a portrait photo (i.e., taken from a front angle), this image only shows the subject from the chest-up, and shows him wearing casual, "street" clothes (a purple hoodie and a toque). Furthermore, the subject's face is partially obscured by two objects in this photo: a mask, which covers the lower half of his face, and a "gun," which he holds in front of his face. The combination of this photo's relatively blank background, tight cropping around the face and

[155] Source: @_bennythejet, "#IfTheyGunnedMeDown would they use my pic on the left or the right?", 10 Aug. 2014, *Twitter*, twitter.com/_bennythejet/status/498551458363883520.

upper body, and clear depiction of a weapon-like prop intentionally invokes criminal photography's codes and conventions to reference mainstream America's longstanding views of Black criminality.[156]

Taken at face value, the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown photos appear exclusively to be a response by the Black community to Michael Brown's media images. Indeed, as their outcry against the initial image led media outlets to change their images of Brown from one legible as "criminal" or misfit to others denoting "respectability," these Twitter photos can be misread as Black Twitter's appeal to respectability politics. Juxtaposed against one another, the diptychs of respectable and criminal subjectivity appear to argue that if a Black subject was gunned down, the media *should* use an image that represents them as a respectable (and therefore, sympathetic) subject.

However, I argue that the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown marks the diptych images as examples of Signifyin' by drawing on the Black Twitter users' shared *discontent* of the status quo. Mitchell-Kernan asserts that Signifyin' as an indirect form of communication "force[s] the hearer to take additional steps" to understand the message (169). Indeed, the hashtag's marking of shared cultural knowledge informs the true meaning behind the movement's posts. The answer to the question "which photo would they use?" does not imply that representations of respectable subjectivity *are* inherently better than those that are legible as "criminal;" instead, in providing two faces of the same subject, it invites the Black viewer who is familiar with double-consciousness to reflect on the injustice of this reality for Black Americans.

[156] Gross's study confirms similar findings; 100% of the "problematic" or "disrespectable" photos in her sample were taken in informal or ambiguous settings.

This critical standpoint is observable in the construction of some #IfTheyGunnedMeDown diptychs, which demonstrate a second layer of Signification within the chosen photographs to flag the notion of "inherent" Black criminality as absurd. For example, a closer look at the second photo in figure 35 reveals that the individual is parodying mainstream depictions of criminality: by foregrounding what appears to be a gun in his photo, he intentionally performs a stereotype of Black criminality. However, the prop included in the image is not a real firearm: according to the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission's rules document (and initially, good military friend and weapons expert Evan Azzopardi), the orange plug on the "gun's" muzzle marks this object as a toy.[157]

@_bennythejet's manipulation of this culturally familiar symbol becomes even more apparent when juxtaposing the first photograph's situational context and particular construction of respectability with the symbol of criminality that is reproduced in the second. As a member of the military, the subject would have institutionally sanctioned access and the clearance to use *real* firearms. Thus, the absence of a gun in the "respectable" photograph and prominent placement of a toy gun in the "criminal" one reveals that this diptych was produced as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on double-consciousness. Using Gates's language of Signification, the presence of the prop in the second photo allows the subject to "empt[y] the [White] … 'signification' of its received concepts" of Black criminality, and to "fil[l] this empty signifier" (1553) with his own criticism of White visuality.

[157] The United States Consumer Product Safety Commission's rules document from May 11, 2023, Section 1272.3a "Approved markings" states that "A blaze orange (AMS STD 595A-17 color 12199) or orange color brighter than that specified by the AMS standard color number, solid plug permanently affixed to the muzzle end of the barrel as an integral part of the entire device and recessed no more than 6 millimeters from the muzzle end of the barrel."

Additionally, the depiction of a single Black subject using both bourgeois portrait/respectability and criminal mugshot/disrespectability frames resembles the early photographs in Du Bois's Paris Albums (see Chapter Two). Semiotically, it allows Black individuals to occupy a "new hybrid offshoot of identity" (Belamghari 10) that embraces aspects of their identity that are conventionally coded as respectable, as well as those that are coded as disrespectable. Lawrence highlights with his photos, for instance, that he is a role model and charismatic public speaker (see figure 31, top) as well as someone well-versed in hip-hop culture (see figure 31, bottom). As the images coded as "disrespectable" in #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's archive are ones that photograph Black people in their everyday lives, often while engaging with elements of Black culture, I assert that the claim over these representations of subjectivity in particular, paired with the hashtag's virality on Twitter, helps trouble existing views of Black subjectivity albeit to a limited, Black audience.

Indeed, according to Mitchell-Kernan, Signifyin' "allow[s] parties to avoid real confrontation or provoke confrontations without exposing unequivocally the speaker's intent" (169). More specifically, "the purposeful ambiguity of [the] … remark" in acts of Signifyin' allows the speaker or encoder to "reserv[e] the right to subsequently insist on the harmless interpretation rather than the provocative one" (170). Within #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, the hashtag as a Signifyin' practice allows Black Twitter users to tailor their degree of criticism across multiple publics. On the one hand, it allows Black Twitter users to challenge mainstream American culture's White visuality to a Black counterpublic, using traditional representations of subjectivity. On the other, it supports a misreading of this discontent with American culture by mainstream White and non-Black

publics, who may take this criticism personally. In response to users who may feel discomfort in (or even complicit with) America's racist system, Black users may insist that their criticism is expressly directed at the media outlets responsible for Brown's stereotypical representation. To these out-group audiences, the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown diptychs further suggest an assimilationist response, namely, through the adoption of respectability politics. Such uses of Signifyin' produce a level of plausible deniability that may help participants disengage from those who view the counter-discourse as a threat to the status quo.

In sum, while the movement's diptych images borrow White subjectivity's photographic conventions, the use of the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and paired representations of respectability/disrespectability demonstrate that these social media images intentionally produce "a double articulation [as] a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (Bhabha 122). These images as counter-discourse offer a multilayered argument about representation and subjectivity. For mainstream publics, they are legible as a simple acceptance of respectability politics that frames one culturally coded image as preferable to the other. For members of Black Twitter, they reveal the use of Signifyin' in the hermeneutic process to more broadly critique double-consciousness and traditional readings of dis/respectability in American culture. In doing so, they also demonstrate how social media photography can serve as critical discursive texts that pull back the proverbial curtain on racial subjectivity, to illustrate Black people as existing between White visuality's dichotomous subjectivity frames.

3.4.2 What is #BlackoutDay?

Though Blackout Day has no official connection to #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, I consider how its varied representations of Blackness complement the earlier movement's images, which helped destabilize dominant views of Blackness using White respectability frames. Blackout Day (tagged as #BlackoutDay, #BlackOutDay, or #TheBlackout) is a quarterly call-to-action that was started on Tumblr on March 6, 2015 by users T'von Green and Nukirk.[158] Following Green's departure from the movement in 2016, it was run by Nukirk and Mars Sebastian until 2020, though it ceased its quarterly operation during its final years. The last two Blackout Days took place on March 6, 2019 and March 6, 2020.

According to its creators, Blackout Day was created as a response to "the lack of representation and celebration of everyday black people in mainstream spaces such as movies and television, and the need to create a positive space in which black people could feel welcomed and beautiful" (theblackout.org). Sebastian also situates this movement's conception "in the midst of heavy conversations around police brutality and Black American identity post the murders of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Mike Brown and countless others," for producing a space where "Black folks from all over the world can connect with each other and celebrate themselves" (Dahir).

This hashtag movement is different from the infamous #BlackoutTuesday, which took place on June 2, 2020, as well as from #BlackoutDay2020, which took place on July 7, 2020 (Dahir). These movements, which co-opted the #BlackoutDay hashtag, had different

[158] Not much information is available online about Green or Nukirk, including in Green's original post introducing #BlackoutDay. This relative anonymity demonstrates the ground-up nature of this online movement, as collective action created by the people for the people.

goals from the original call-to-action presented on Tumblr. More specifically, #BlackoutTuesday took place over the course of one day, on which social media (primarily, Instagram) users posted black squares to signal their solidarity with Black communities.[159] However, many have since explained this event's harmful effects: unlike the hashtag I examine here, which helped flood users' screens with positive representations of Blackness, #BlackoutTuesday mostly filled social media feeds with empty black squares, thus hindering Black people's access to important activist information during this time.[160] Unrelated to #BlackoutDay and #BlackoutTuesday, #BlackoutDay2020 was used to organize a one-day economic boycott online.

3.4.2a #BlackoutDay Research

To the best of my knowledge, there are no scholarly works specifically on Blackout Day other than a passing mention by Kendra Calhoun in her study of Tumblr as a site of everyday online activism. In comparison to Calhoun's work, which emphasizes Tumblr's culture of political activism, my analysis here focuses on quotidian selfie photography as a form of counter-discourse. Selfie photography can be seen as a practice that is "pervasive and ever-present yet occluded by [its] seeming absence or erasure in repetition, routine, or internalization" (Campt, *LI* 4). As #BlackoutDay uses selfies of Black heterogeneity to teach Black Tumblr users to appreciate and celebrate their race, I argue that it exemplifies how everyday practices of refusal can construct a Black gaze, which Campt defines as "a structure

[159] #BlackoutTuesday also piggybacked on the hashtag #TheShowMustBePaused, which was created by Black music executives Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang as a way of encouraging reflection on the role of Black art within the music industry.

[160] In response to #BlackoutTuesday clogging the information pipeline, Instagram user @velvetcloouds posted "you know what we all about to receive though!!! EVERYONES BLACKOUT SQUARES while information gets burried [sic]." This sentiment was echoed by many others following the hashtag's viral spread.

of visual engagement that implicitly and explicitly understands blackness as neither singular nor a singularity … [but a] multiplicity" (*Black Gaze* 21).

Because research on this topic is limited, I present here the results of my own content analysis of #BlackoutDay photographs. My image sample draws from the 144 posts (i.e., photosets) on blackout-day.tumblr.com, which are archived from the first #BlackoutDay event on March 6, 2015. The criterion for my #BlackoutDay sample was that the photos were of everyday Black Tumblr users; I therefore excluded 22 posts depicting artwork, screencaps of political messaging, or photos of celebrities (i.e., Beyoncé and Zendaya). Of the remaining 122 posts, I analyzed the first 30 photosets before reaching saturation at a total of 104 photos.

To maintain consistency in my analysis of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and #BlackoutDay, I adapted Gross's codes for content analysis. I analyzed the photos' composition and situational context (i.e., photographic environment) and their subjects' clothing, expression, gesture/pose, and interaction with other objects or people. However, because #BlackoutDay photos display more open-ended photographic conventions than #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's dichotomous structure, and because the representation of variation is key to the Blackout Day movement, I also considered semiotic variations in two other categories. First, I added an examination of the subject's "facial features" to the same category as "clothing" based on their shared physical nature, and collapsed "expression" and "gesture/pose" together to add a sixth category for documenting accompanying captions and "notes."[161] Continuing my discussion from #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's photos, I argue here that #BlackoutDay's selfies create a radical spectrum of Blackness that allows Black Tumblr

[161] "Notes" are what Tumblr calls its "likes" count. This information provides a sense of user-interactivity with one another and helps determine the popularity of a particular image.

users to see themselves in ways that exceed, and thus refuse, the dichotomous frames of White visuality.

3.4.2b #BlackoutDay Selfies: Revisualizing Blackness Through Heterogeneity

hooks argues that because they have internalized negative perceptions of Blackness constructed by White systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, and racism (*Black Looks* 166), for Black people, the act of looking at oneself from outside White visuality produces an "oppositional gaze" to such structures (*Black Looks* 115-6). Similarly, Campt stresses that it is necessary to establish a Black gaze, which "shifts the optics of 'looking at' to a politics of *looking with, through, and alongside another*" (*Black Gaze* 8). I argue that Blackout Day's selfies demonstrate social media photography's potential for producing such a Black gaze, and thus its potential for challenging dominant racial discourse. In using photos of Black subjects that refuse to adhere to White respectability frames, I assert that Blackout Day's selfies advance a powerful revisualization of Blackness for Black Tumblr users and other publics that challenges viewers to "engage blackness from a different and discomforting vantage point" (Campt, *Black Gaze* 8).

My analysis illustrates selfie photography's critical role within the #BlackoutDay movement. Of the 104 photos I examined, 94% (98 photos) were selfies.[162] I further break down these selfies into the following categories: partial-body selfies, where subjects use a phone's rear camera from near eye-level to take a top-down photo of their bodies; self-timer

[162] Of the six images that are not selfies, one appears to be taken during a date night or special event, two of them appear to be taken from a gay couple's engagement photoshoot, and three are pictures that the participant took of her brother, who has cerebral palsy. The difference in these images' photographic style can be explained by their exceptional subject matter. In contrast to Blackout Day's selfies, which focus on representations of everyday, unremarkable Blackness, these photos intentionally foreground remarkability: they highlight a celebratory moment, the formal recognition of "queer" love, and intersectionality through disability.

selfies, where subjects use a smartphone camera's self-timer mode to take a full-body selfie; mirror selfies, where a rear camera is used to take a self-portrait in the mirror; webcam selfies (self-explanatory); and conventional selfies, where subjects use a smartphone's front-facing camera to take a photo of their face, typically from the shoulders up (see samples of each in figure 36).[163] The image count for each of these categories is provided in a table in figure 37. Despite their stylistic differences, these selfies share the same core function: they allow Black individuals to take a snapshot of a moment in time, to represent a small part of their everyday lives.

In her research on #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, Gross remarks that Black respectability has been conventionally understood along the division of public and private spaces: that is, its recognition is conditionally tied to Black subjects' participation in institutions, which constrain expressions of subjectivity using White respectability frames. I argue that #BlackoutDay selfies challenge this determination of respectability based on public/private boundaries; a result of social media photography's affordances of increased production and networked connectivity, they allow Black individuals to show representations of themselves in private environments, which are inevitably more varied, to public audiences.

These unfamiliar representations of everyday Blackness work to normalize diverse forms of Black visuality, to ultimately contest embodiments of Black respectability that are limited to public spaces. Indeed, out of the 104 photos I examined, 87% (90 photos) were taken in a domestic or private setting, with common background environments depicting

[163] Conventionally, the headless, partial-body selfie is taken to document one's outfits.

bedrooms, bathrooms, and other living spaces.[164] Such digital photos resemble the personal/private function of photographs found in analogue Black family photography (Chapter Two) but have viewing practices that are shaped by social media photography's increased visibility and reach.



Partial-body selfie



Self-timer selfie



Mirror selfie



Conventional selfie



Webcam selfie

Figure 36. A sample of different selfie categories from #BlackoutDay[165]

Selfie Category	Image Count
Partial-body	1
Self-timer	8
Mirror	10
Webcam	25
Conventional	52

Figure 37. The number of #BlackoutDay selfies in each selfie category

[164] Selfies with nondescriptive backgrounds such as blank walls were also considered within this category, as most public spaces have distinctive descriptors that signal the function of the space.
[165] Source: @frahnkocean; @brownchai; @loleeah; @yeuo; @nickispinaj, "Sample of photos for each selfie category," 6 Mar. 2015, *Tumblr*, blackout-day.tumblr.com/archive.

Unsurprisingly, the public/private divide in #BlackoutDay photos overlaps with other dominant codes and conventions that signal respectability. For instance, seven of the 14 photos that were taken in public settings depict a recognizable form of respectability using clothing (see figure 38 for a sample).[166] These photos—one of which appears to be taken during a special event in a non-descript outdoor location, two of which are engagement photos taken outdoors, and four of which are taken in an institutional building or office—represent the subjects dressed in formal attire.[167] I classify formal (Euro-American) attire here based on collared tops (e.g., suit jackets, blazers, and dress shirts), which have historically carried this connotation in their association with bourgeois subjects (Bourdieu).[168] Though these photos continue a longstanding tradition of representing respectability through formal clothing, I assert that they are nevertheless important to the Blackout Day movement because they contribute to the overall spectrum of Black representation, including those depicting the more formal and public aspects of these users' lives.

That said, it is no coincidence that these formal depictions make up a minority of Blackout Day's digital archive. Looking at the flip side, 93% of the photos in this sample (97 of 104 photos) show their subjects in casual attire. These individuals are shown wearing a variety of clothing styles that range from tank tops to t-shirts and hoodies to knit sweaters.

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[166] There are only seven photos out of 104 photos that use clothing to depict subjects as conventionally respectable.

[167] Three of these images also demonstrate a further overlap in respectability codes between public space, formal attire, and *non-selfie* photos.

[168] I do not include polo shirts in this category as they are semi-formal in comparison and are primarily worn within the home in this photo sample.

There is also a wide representation of head coverings (hats and hijabs), jewelry (rings, nose rings, and necklaces), and glasses (see figure 39 for a sample).



Figure 38. A sample of #BlackoutDay subjects wearing formal attire[169]

In contrast to #IfTheyGunnedMeDown's photos, which commonly use the semiotics of casual attire (e.g., hoodies and jerseys) to critique mainstream associations of Black leisure with criminality, the wide spectrum of casual styles in #BlackoutDay photos ultimately demonstrates what Blackness looks like when it is not constrained by the dominant framework of White respectability. As the wide array of clothing choices reminds us, these are photos of ordinary Black people in their everyday lives, dressed in their preferred styles. Instead of limiting their representation to a racially coded dichotomy of formal clothing/respectability and casual clothing/disrespectability, these everyday selfies show that Black subjects occupy a range of social identities that fit elsewhere on the spectrum of subjectivity (e.g., as geeks, hipsters, professionals, etc.). Simply put, the variety of clothing

[169] Source: @labias; @modernbeautyaddict; @thecelestialchild, 6 Mar. 2015, *Tumblr,* blackout-day.tumblr.com/archive.

choices in #BlackoutDay photos more accurately reflects the variety of Blackness that exists in society.

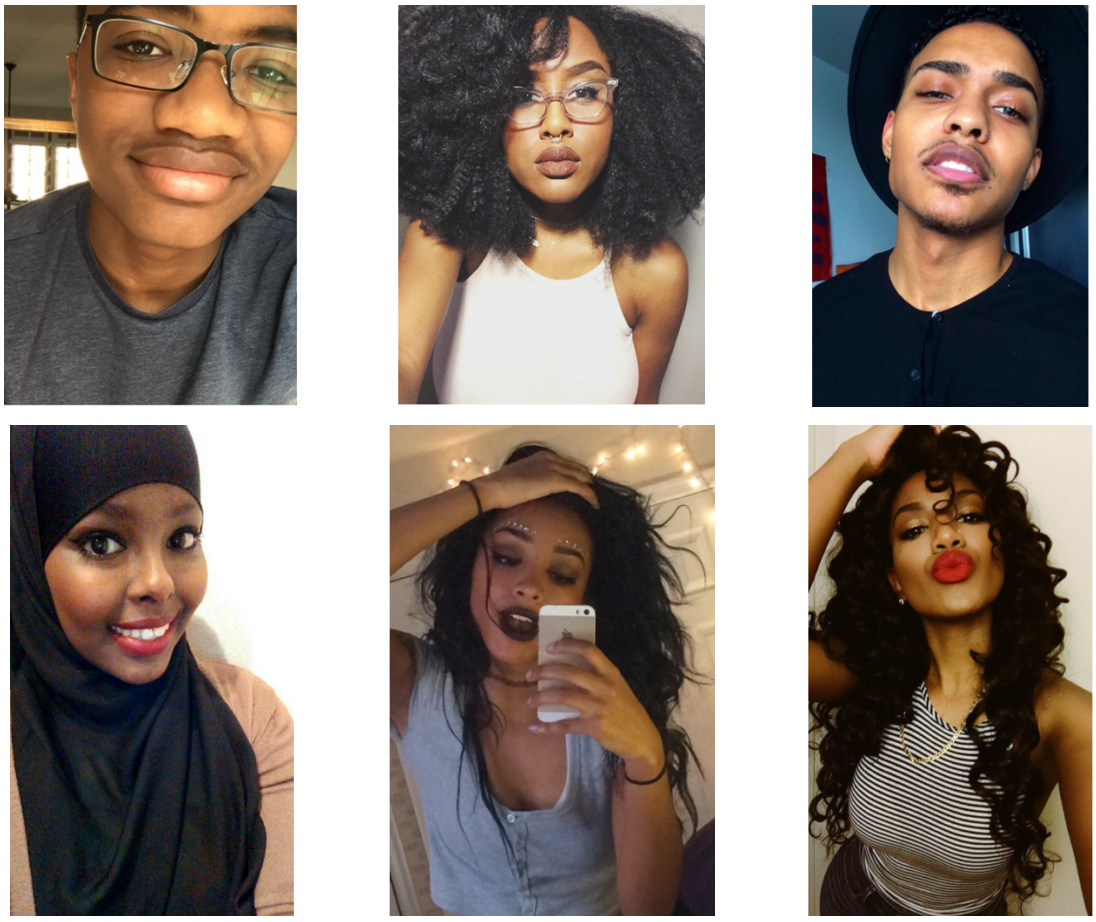


Figure 39. A sample of #BlackoutDay subjects wearing casual attire[170]

This fullness of representation is reinforced across #BlackoutDay in other ways. For instance, the collective archive of #BlackoutDay photos offers a representation of varying hairstyles: there are photos of subjects with tight curls, thick waves, straight hair, braided hair, afros, fades, and more, suggesting that there is no one way to embody Blackness. Though I refrain from producing a more detailed classification of the subjects' other physical

[170] Source: @strain; @mothernaeture; @19z; @angelic; @loleeah; @chalcon, 6 Mar. 2015, *Tumblr,* blackout-day.tumblr.com/archive.

traits, my sample of #BlackoutDay photos clearly demonstrates that these hairstyles appear in different combinations across a wide range of skin tones and facial features.

This diversity of identities also reflects the pictures' varying situational contexts. Though most photosets show the subject in one setting with the same outfit and photographic composition, suggesting that these selfies were produced in a single moment as a real-time response to Blackout Day's call-to-action, three photosets show a mix of selfie and non-selfie photos taken across different environments and social contexts. For example, the couple in figure 40 use their photos to represent themselves as loving partners in an intimate setting (in bed); as stereotypically masculine men at a sporting event; as youthful partygoers (standing in front of empty beer bottles); and as monogamous and committed gays (reproducing domestic conventions traditionally depicted using heteronormative couples, such as engagement and Christmas photos). I argue that the differences concentrated within these photosets complicate and challenge existing forms of respectability and normative Blackness, and demonstrate how social media and selfie photography allow Black people to depict "mundanity, banality, and the celebration of making it through another day" (Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 10) as a strategy for refusing White visuality's limited frames.

In the remaining 27 photosets, where the situational context is not as clear in shaping subject identities, the destabilization of Blackness from recognizable forms of subjectivity is nevertheless demonstrated using variations in facial expression. According to Gross, the perceived threat of Blackness (and especially, Black masculinity) in American culture is commonly managed through smiling; she observes that in #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, subjects

commonly use photos of themselves smiling to signal Black respectability (426).[171] Comparatively, only 26% (27 of 104 photos) of the subjects in my #BlackoutDay sample are seen smiling. In the remaining 74% (77 of 104 photos), users show themselves in multiple states of emotion, including boredom, surprise, confusion, etc. I posit that these images destabilize dominant racial discourse by representing Black individuals experiencing a full range of (often private) emotions to mainstream publics, thus broadening a recognition of Black humanity.

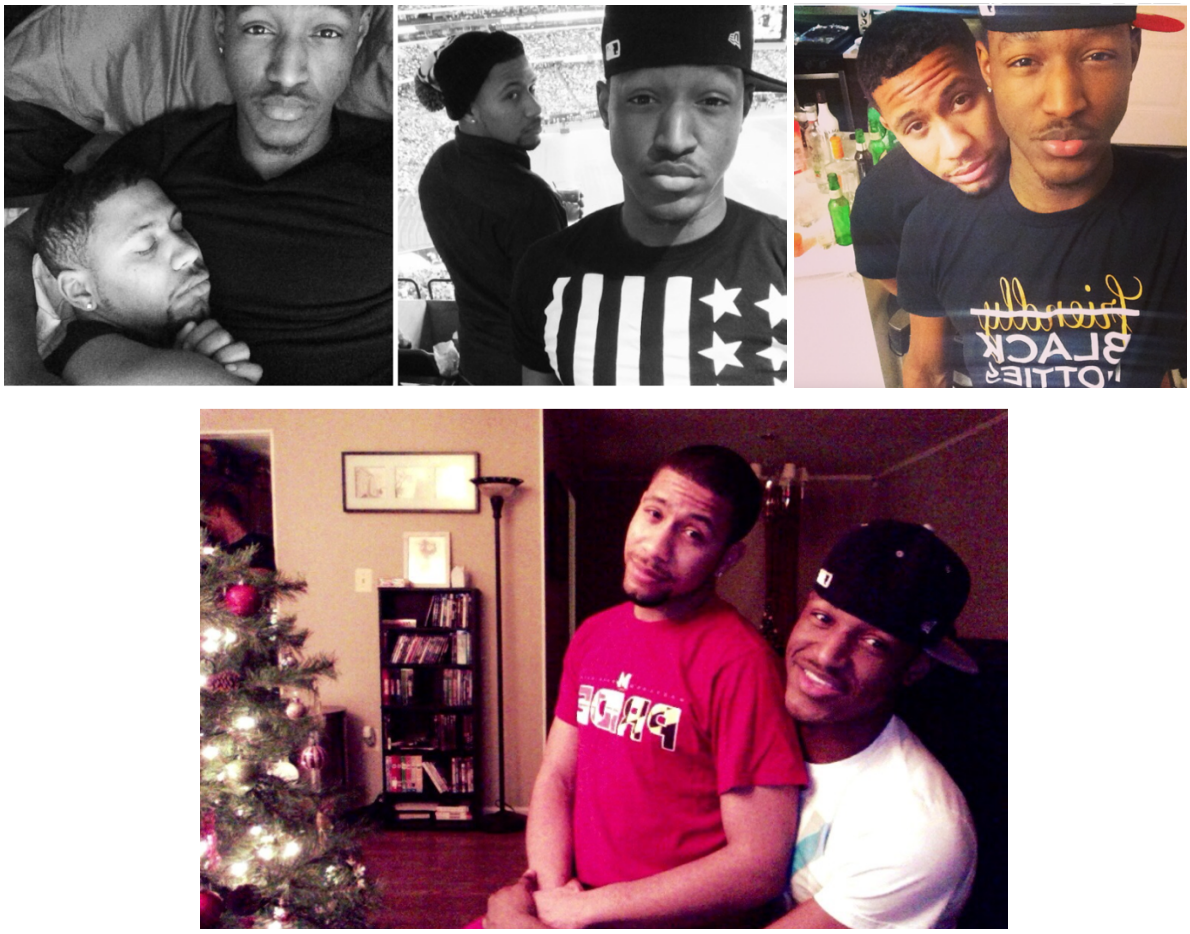


Figure 40. A couple's diverse photoset from #BlackoutDay (4 of 8 photos)[172]

[171] Gross argues that "for some men, a smile is essentially all that makes the difference between a picture they feel the media could weaponize against them in death and another that would paint them more positively" (426).
[172] Source: @thecelestialchild, "couple photos," 6 Mar. 2015, *Tumblr,* blackout-day.tumblr.com/archive.

Bhabha argues that to destabilize hegemonic discourse, there must be a "rearticulation … of elements that are *neither the One … nor the Other … but something else besides*" (41). Notably, the three posts in this sample that have over 150,000 notes (see figure 41) each depict Black subjects that occupy an intersection of minority identities that have traditionally been excluded from mainstream media, including from Black media. I argue that Black Tumblr's high engagement with posts representing Blackness at multiple axes of marginality suggests the discursive importance of representing this "something else besides" that exists between the dominant visual frames of respectability and criminality. It also illustrates how social media photography's networked design offers those at society's margins access to expressing their underrepresented identities to larger audiences.

Of these three posts, the photoset with the most engagements shows an individual with a light skin tone, small facial features, and big hair who self-identifies with nerd culture by stating in the caption "i feel like an anime character" (figure 41, top). Though Calhoun argues that Tumblr's disposition towards counterpublics generally establishes it as a space that contests colourism (52), this photoset moves the subject beyond this racial hierarchy to highlight the unconventional intersection of subjectivities (i.e., as someone embodying both "unsexy" nerd culture and "sexy" conventional femininity). In addition, by depicting the subject in an intimate space (the bathroom, as is indicated by the distinctive tiling and the toothbrush seen in the picture's bottom right corner), these photos further distinguish themselves from the photographs of lighter-skinned individuals in Du Bois's Paris Albums (Chapter Two), which visually conflates its subjects' skin tones with respectability. Instead, these mirror selfies operate from outside the photographic conventions of respectability to

disentangle conventionally valued features like lighter skin tone from other forms of hegemony (i.e., femininity). Like the photos of subjects in formalwear, this photoset therefore demonstrates #BlackoutDay's refusal to abide by the rules of White visuality: by including subjects with a wide range of skin tones, including those with lighter skin, and representing them in unconventional ways, #BlackoutDay refuses to legitimize the racial arithmetic that reduces individual value down to one's phenotypical features.

In the second set of popular selfies, the subject is photographed wearing a hijab (see figure 41, middle). All eight selfies in this photoset are taken in the subject's room using a self-timer. These photos do not vary much except in pose and expression and are otherwise unremarkable in their composition and setting. The lack of variation in external elements, when paired with the relatively high number of images, underscores the subject's identity as a young Black Muslim woman as the focal point of this photoset; specifically, the "blackout" that results from the reproduction of her more conservative cardigan and hijab, combined with her makeup and cheetah print shirt, works to revise stereotypical representations of Muslim women in American culture. I assert that these serial images of intersectionality (in this case, the subject's race and her membership within contemporary youth culture as well as a more conservative, religious culture) "giv[e] us profound insights into the everyday experiences of Black folks as radicalized subjects" (Campt, *Black Gaze* 7) who are able to see themselves—thanks to selfie photography—through a Black gaze.

In the third most popular photoset, the Tumblr user shifts the photos' focus from herself to her disabled brother (figure 41, bottom). This photoset includes four photos: one of the Tumblr user with her brother and three of her brother alone. In all four photos, the

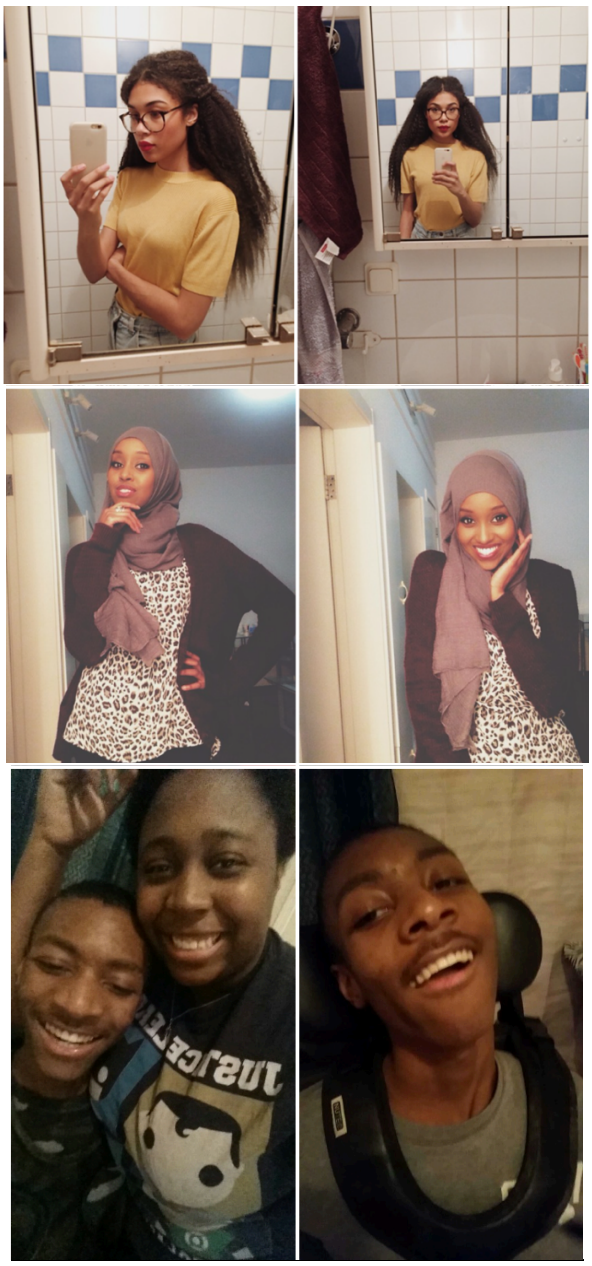


Figure 41. A sample of selfies from the three most popular #BlackoutDay posts[173]

subject's brother is shown smiling. This post is captioned: "My brother has cerebral palsy and I wanna take this moment to celebrate the the [sic] mentally disabled brothers and sisters

[173] Source: @sleep-junnkie; @brownchai; @be-blackstar, "sample of most popular #BlackoutDay selfies," 6 Mar. 2015, *Tumblr,* blackout-day.tumblr.com/archive.

we have too. They are so amazing. I know this little boy is my life. BLACKOUT! BLACK IT THE FUCK OUT." In drawing attention to an underrepresented and even neglected image of Black identity—that is, a positive representation of Black disability—these photos demonstrate that social media photography provides Black individuals with small but frequent moments of autonomy and refusal in the face of White racial discourse (Campt, *Listening to Images*). Rather than producing "grand gestures of respectability or political solidarity" (Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 130), such as those seen in Chapter Two, the images from #BlackoutDay provide Black individuals with agency in their everyday lives to subtly "shif[t] the optics of 'looking at' to a politics of *looking with, through, and alongside*" Black perspectives (Campt, *Black Gaze* 8).

In comparison to the revisualization of Blackness that #IfTheyGunnedMeDown advances, #BlackoutDay therefore demonstrates how selfie photography allows its users to command a Black gaze. This reclamation of the gaze is directly evident in #BlackoutDay photos' visual codes, with 87% of the photos (90 out of 104) showing the photographic subjects looking at the camera.[174] Compared to analogue and professional photographs, where the subject's gaze is typically directed at an external entity (the photographer), these photos, produced using smartphones' front-facing cameras and preview screens, allow the subjects as simultaneously the photographer and the photographed to shift this gaze back onto themselves. This pattern of self-looking symbolizes the subjects' agency with social

[174] Of the 14 photos of subjects looking elsewhere, two depict the individual with cerebral palsy, four depict the subject blinking or closing their eyes, and three show the subject looking at and engaging with another Black individual.

media and selfie photography, and specifically their ability to construct a new visualization of Black subjectivity.

These Black individuals' control over photographic representation is further reinforced by the camera angles in #BlackoutDay photos. In the sample studied here, 88% or 91 of the photos are taken from eye-level or a bottom-up angle, which are conventionally used to denote degrees of power.[175] The prevalence of these angles in #BlackoutDay suggests that Black users feel empowered by the affordances of selfie photography, which allow them to control practices of photographic production and dissemination in constructing representations of Blackness.

A result of smartphones' technical and social affordances, #BlackoutDay's quotidian photos demonstrate how social media and selfie photography can help destabilize dominant racial discourse. In addition to allowing Black individuals to reclaim their right to self-visualization, the dissemination of these everyday selfies on SNSs like Tumblr allows these users to produce a "social articulation of difference" to multiple publics "from the minority perspective" (Bhabha 3). In providing a glimpse into ordinary moments of Blackness beyond the restrictive frames of White visuality, the proliferation of these images helps normalize new, unfamiliar representations of Blackness for its audiences. Collectively, and over time with #BlackoutDay's recurring call-to-action, these everyday pictures coalesce into a form of racial discourse to advance new ways of thinking about Black subjectivity.

[175] Of the 13 photos that are taken from a top-down angle, one is taken in bed, four are of the subject with cerebral palsy, and the remaining eight are women, whose self-presentations may also be negotiating performances of femininity.

3.5 Concluding Thoughts: Social Media Photography as Countervisual Discourse

I began this chapter by identifying the early web as a product of Western hegemony that simultaneously denied and reproduced mainstream racial ideology online. I traced the history of digital photographic technologies—digital cameras, flatbed scanners, cameraphones, and smartphones—as well as social networking and social media sites in the 1990s and 2000s to examine emerging access to imaging practices and networked connectivity in Web 2.0. Though technological progress was staggered, especially by the lack of a fast cellular network, and kept digital photo-sharing practices largely within the personal realm in the early to mid-2000s, I demonstrated how changes from 2009 to 2011 intensified photography, bringing personal photographic practices into the public domain.

As I've argued, this shift, which Martin Hand has named "social media photography" allows racialized individuals to construct "fantastic imaginings that change history" (Haraway 681) from "within the confines of the hegemonic discourse" (Parry 39-40) by removing the financial and material limitations of analogue photography and providing them with a direct channel to share their countervisual images with multiple publics. Within social media photography, growing practices of selfie photography further encourage racialized users to turn towards reflexive self-presentation and identity-making, to contest and rematerialize the meanings ascribed to their bodies in ways previously unimaginable (Bonilla and Rosa 9).

My analysis of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown on Twitter and #BlackoutDay on Tumblr offers two examples of social media photography that contest the limiting frames of bourgeois portrait photography/respectability and criminal photography/disrespectability in

different but complementary ways. In my discussion of #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, I explained how Black Twitter users "tur[n] the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention" (STW qtd. in Parry 43): by co-opting this visual dichotomy to claim contrasting representations of themselves and to point to the social construction of respectability and disrespectability. I argued that in #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, Black Twitter users drew from existing archives of personal images and leveraged Twitter's hashtagging feature to simultaneously produce a call-and-response to other Black users, ultimately demanding its White audiences to confront the false dichotomy presented by White respectability frames.

On the other hand, my discussion of #BlackoutDay photos illustrates the use of social media photography for more expansive articulations of Black racial identity. More specifically, #BlackoutDay demonstrates how selfies can be used as a form of everyday racial discourse that refuses and therefore moves beyond the reproduction of recognizable visual frames. I asserted that by using social media photography's affordances, these individuals "catalogue [their] everyday lives, the beauty of [their] bodies, [their] naive and bold aspirations, and [their] hopes and dreams for changing … current reality" (Campt, *Black Gaze* 4) to collectively construct a Black gaze. Such revisualizations of Blackness create room for ways of being variously Black and suggest the possibility of acknowledging racial difference "without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 5). Altogether, this chapter has examined how social media photography allows Black users to unsettle dominant racial discourse by producing and sharing everyday images to demonstrate the full spectrum of Black identity, foregrounding their marginalized perspectives, which were historically relegated to intimate or personal spaces.

Chapter 4. Disciplinary Filters and the Production of White Neoliberal Subjectivity

"… new digital technologies can be shown to be the heirs of old epistemologies and ontologies. These knowledge systems and conceptions of the disembodied self remain embedded in machines; concomitantly, machines act as conduits for the perpetuation of these systems and ideas of the self in culture."
—Anna Munster, *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*, p.15

"Certain images underscore an unbridgeable gap and a never-to-be-toppled hierarchy. … Without confronting this inequality, this misconstrual of history, photography will continue to describe itself as one thing (a force for liberation) while obdurately remaining another (an obedient appendage of state power). It will continue to be like the organs of the state that "spread democracy" and change regimes. Even when it appears to go against the state, it will only do so selectively, quaintly, beautifully, piteously, in terms that do not question the right of the state to assert power."
—Teju Cole, "When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism (And When It Still Is)," February 2019

4.1 Introduction

Digital media scholars have acknowledged the increased distribution and spread of digital imaging practices within the last two decades with the proliferation of smartphones and social media. Yet even with its seeming democratization, many others have insisted that photography continues to produce hegemonic operations. Art historian and photographer Teju Cole argues, for example, that to view digital photography as a "force for liberation" full stop is to ignore the ways in which visual culture on the internet continues to privilege White bodies and subjectivities. Indeed, though examples of countervisuality like #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and #BlackoutDay illustrate how the internet has produced the conditions for racialized people to practice agency in self-representation, it appears that the problem of leading a "protest within a system that one is nonetheless employing to frame the protest" (Nakamura, *Digitizing Race* 205) has become harder to ignore in recent years, with the internet's increasingly algorithmic structure (Greene 166; Rubinstein and Sluis, "Digital Image;" Taffel). It is becoming increasingly clear that without a continuous, critical

examination of its discursive operations, digital photography will never stray far from its colonial agenda, as—in the words of Audre Lorde—"the master's house will never be dismantled by the master's tools."

In this chapter, I examine a shift within social media photography's design and practices from c.2016 to 2025 that demonstrates its ongoing hegemonic leanings. This change centers around "computational" or "algorithmic photography," which Rubinstein and Sluis define as the process of producing photographic images "*as, with, in* or *through* software" ("Digital Image" 29). Media studies scholar Sy Taffel explains in more concrete terms that computational photography is "the in-camera-application processing of digital images, typically before the user even sees 'an image', rather than the manipulation of already-taken images using a separate computer or an after-the-fact editing application installed on the smartphone" (238).

Broadly speaking, this hyper-mediated form of photography is made possible through the incorporation of smartphone cameras with computer vision—a form of machine learning that teaches algorithms to recognize visual patterns through an automated analysis of large datasets (Taffel 249). In algorithmic photography, machine learning enables the program to detect human faces to make automated modifications that improve the final image quality. While Rubinstein and Sluis and Taffel address the features of algorithmic photography that are embedded directly within a smartphone's default camera app, I focus here on the normalization of what I call augmented reality beauty (ARB) filters within the last decade.

An ARB filter is a technical affordance offered on many social media apps that combine the smartphone camera's photographic function with computer vision to allow users

to digitally alter their selfies in real-time. Unlike the form of algorithmic photography that applies such changes by default, ARB filters are consciously and explicitly applied to one's digital image by social media users who select a desired modification template from an array of available filters. Such filters then produce a "beautified" representation of the user by modifying the subject's image according to a predetermined set of photographic edits (e.g., changes in lighting) and distortions of digital embodiment. This pre-programmed imaging is why I classify ARB filters as a part of algorithmic photography; though there is some element of choice—users can choose not to apply an ARB filter during their photo-taking process—filters that *are* applied pre-determine what the resulting image will look like based on an opaque set of decisions and computational processes that are external to the social media user (Taffel 250).

Though Taffel does not write about ARB filters specifically, his explication of algorithmic images as the new photographic norm offers insights into why users adopt ARB filtering practices. He explains:

> … selfies and smartphone photography are designed to circulate on corporate social media platforms, where they are markers of branded, entrepreneurial selves engaged in competition for the attention of peers. … Self-representational images have moved from markers of the private self through time, towards establishing social capital within a highly commodified attention economy (250).

In other words, with the growing pervasiveness of social media and neoliberalism's continued expansion, the optimization of social capital is increasingly applied to all areas of life—not just in symbols pertaining to lifestyle, such as clothing, but in markers of legibility

within the body (Bourdieu). While the equivalence of bodies as symbolic capital was first systematically established during modernity, it has therefore become a focal point as an arena of modification with social media photography's ubiquity.

Because algorithmic photography is a result of its surrounding socioeconomic conditions, my work in this chapter begins with a review of post-industrial neoliberalism, which is described as producing the conditions for constant self-optimization (Elias and Gill; Seet; van Doorn; Zuboff). Drawing specifically on the work of Ana Sofia Elias and Rosalind Gill, who identify beauty discourse as a reflection of neoliberal entrepreneurialism and self-optimization, I argue that ARB filters offer a form of digital beautification that allows this strategy to become accessible to everyday individuals.[176] I posit that this particular form of "self-investment" offers individuals easy access to symbolic capital by allowing them to manage expressions of embodied difference or "inferiority" within digital environments through ready-to-use templates.

While in some ways, ARB filters can therefore be seen as "democratising the production of technically sophisticated images" (Taffel 244), it is essential to recognize that they simultaneously constrain user agency by recentring the determination of media forms by an elite group of people. An abundance of scholars including Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, N. Katherine Hayles, A.R. Stone, and Jill Rettberg have criticized that despite purporting to offer a neutral or universal user experience, technologies are highly influenced by their developers' worldviews as well as a culture's dominant ideologies. The particular design of

[176] Though this concept is best understood within the framework of (hyper)capitalism, a detailed, economic examination of self-optimization is beyond the scope of this dissertation. I therefore leave a more nuanced discussion of this topic to the texts from which I borrow this notion.

these technologies therefore affects the 21st century's "embodied virtualities" (Hayles 48), or possible forms of embodiment and subjectivity online, according to cultural norms.

Indeed, feminist media scholar Amanda K. Greene argues that digital photo filtering has its roots in 1920s and 1930s glamour photography, which was created to assuage anxieties about bodily vulnerabilities (especially in female bodies) during the interwar period by allowing photographers to "sor[t] out unwanted or threatening aspects of human bodies" (79). Greene advances that this standardization of filtering practices subsequently produced an "aesthetics of human disqualification [that] shape[d] the imagination of [normative] bodies and embodiment" (164). I expand on Greene's research in this chapter to argue that glamour photography's filtering practices—and ARB filters as the legacy of these practices—are inevitably raced. I argue that (digital) filtering practices and their resulting aesthetics share a technical and discursive function with eugenics photography: they reproduce photographic codes and techniques, such as bodily symmetry and manipulations of lighting, that ultimately privilege an embodiment of Whiteness.

To support this claim, I spend the second section of this chapter demonstrating how ARB filters' "beautification" effects mold racialized users' digital embodiments according to an image of Whiteness, albeit one that is glocalized or "diversified" (Seet). As a way of reflecting this technology's simultaneous disavowal of race and eugenic roots, and to illustrate the pervasiveness of ARB filters' neoliberal logic, I expand the focus on Black subjects from my previous chapters to more broadly analyze racial subjectivity in Chapter Four. Using feminist media scholar Anne Balsamo's methodology of "hermeneutic reverse engineering," I analyze a sample of 15 ARB filters applied across subjects from five different

groups—Black, Latinx, East Asian, South Asian, and White—to illuminate how these filters' editing techniques and aesthetics reflect the racial undertones of beauty discourse. I argue that these digital templates of embodiment mirror the eugenics movement's simultaneous idealization and standardization of Whiteness, therefore extending White visuality into the current historical moment.

Adam Z. Seet suggests that within neoliberalism, the symbolic "accumulation of Whiteness"—which I identify as a form of respectability politics—is often employed by racialized individuals as a self-optimization strategy. As ARB filters "beautify" their users by bringing these individuals' selfies closer to an embodiment of Whiteness, I propose that this technology exemplifies a form of digital respectability politics, where the privileging of White-coded phenotypical traits over others becomes treated as a strategy of self-optimization. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I consider the implications of ARB filters on racial discourse. I question: how does using ARB filters for neoliberal self-optimization shape the production of racial discourse in ways that resemble African American uses of bourgeois photographic techniques to produce images of respectable subjectivity? And what does equating White Eurocentric beauty with neoliberal subjectivity imply about racialized individuals in the algorithmic age?

I conclude the argument that ARB filters' whitening practices reveal an underlying rhetoric of eugenics pseudoscience by pointing to these filters' technical glitches as another site of ideological examination. Borrowing Greene's feminist theory of glitches as a technological gap that "allow[s] the workings of the machine … to become visible" (4), I argue that the technology's operational failures—that is, the varying degrees of malfunction

that racialized people experience when using ARB filters—demonstrate these filters' "algorithmic bias" towards White users (Buolamwini). By failing to produce consistent results across users with different racialized facial features, such biases confirm that the privileging of White-coded phenotypes over others is embedded within the algorithms' code. For some racialized subjects, these glitches preclude their participation in digital self-beautification practices, adding another layer to understanding how ARB filters as a form of algorithmic photography affect the production of racial subjectivity.

For the most part, this chapter advances an understanding of ARB filters as a type of algorithmic photography that "compels [the] particular sorts of identifications, investments, [and] ideological seductions" (Nakamura, *Digitizing Race* 17) proposed a century ago by eugenics pseudoscience. I conclude this chapter, however, by underscoring racialized users' demonstrations of agency and refusal from within the margins of ARB filter use. Using the lens of "libidinal economy," which Brock defines as a concept that "highlights the difference between discourse and praxis" by accounting for desire, affect, and other "excess" elements in life (*Distributed Blackness* 11), I examine how glitches in ARB filters' functionality serve as potential sites of communal interaction and shared emotion for some racialized groups. I proffer an example of Asian TikTok users who have appropriated the ill-fitting results of the Bold Glamour filter on their selfies for the production of "affective and intimate in-group bonds that are responsive to racist ideology but [are] not solely constituted by racism" (Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 158). I advance that filtering practices such as these exemplify alternative responses to algorithmic imaging technologies that challenge the increasing normalization of White visuality. Such examples remind us that even as algorithmic

photography appears to restrict the possibility for varied forms of visuality, new opportunities continue to arise for racialized users to reclaim and express agency in self-presentation.

4.2 Gain without Pain? Algorithmic Photography and Augmented Reality Beauty Filters as Neoliberal Self-Optimization

Drawing on the work of Eivind Røssaak, Rubinstein and Sluis wrote in 2013 that networked imaging practices were becoming increasingly entangled with software algorithms, "reconfigur[ing]… the notion of [photographic] authorship as happening in several parallel instances and potentially simultaneous contexts (by both human and non-human actors)" ("Digital Image" 32). Taffel demonstrates how software shapes everyday image production by explaining that since the release of the Sony Xperia XZ Premium in 2017, smartphones have utilized a composite method to improve the final photo's image quality, producing what are called High Dynamic Range (HDR) photos. For example, when a user hits the button to take a picture on a Google Pixel-3, the camera records a 15-frame image stream that is invisible to the user, which is then sent for computational processing to produce a final composite image (Taffel 240). In algorithmic photography, software therefore automates various aspects of the imaging process for an improved final image, "often in ways that are functionally invisible to end-users" (Taffel 249). I focus here on digital photo filters, and more specifically on augmented reality beauty filters, which make up one area of algorithmic photography.

Greene defines digital photo filters like Instagram's traditional photo filter (see figure 42) as "user-friendly modes of retouching photographs based on coded formulas" that are

"preprogrammed with preconceptions about what kinds of alteration are likely to improve the look of an image" (68).[177] These static filters alter various characteristics of a photograph, such as its "granularity, texture, sharpness or softness, … tonality, contrast, and color balance" (Mitchell qtd. in Greene 68). They are applied to an existing image by users post-production and are selected based on how they impact the photo's final aesthetic.

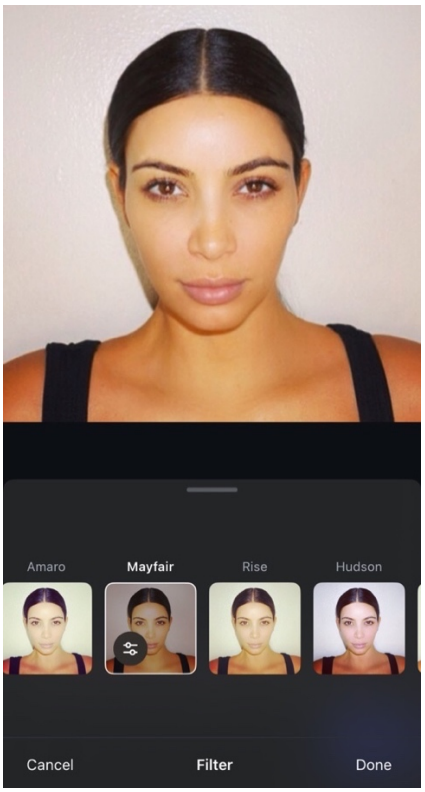


Figure 42. Traditional Instagram photo filters[178]

In 2015, however, the social media app Snapchat introduced a new kind of filter, popularizing the practice of adding pre-set filters to an image *during* rather than after image

[177] Though the manipulation of subject representation is often thought of as a digital process, Deborah Poole has examined how this practice began during analogue photography. In *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*, she examines how post-production editing was used on Andean family portraits during the printing process to manipulate the appearance of race for class ascension (207).
[178] Source: Jin Sol Kim, "screenshot of Instagram's filtering interface using a Kim Kardashian selfie," 2024, *Instagram,* instagram.com.

production, allowing digital modifications to take place in real-time (Doh et al. 350; Hunter; Schreiber 152). While Snapchat calls these frames "Lenses" to distinguish them from static photo filters, they ultimately became adopted and known across other social media as "augmented reality" or "AR" filters. AR filters typically overlay visual effects or objects onto a digital image (almost like stickers) and encompass a wide variety of augmentations. For example, Snapchat's most recognized Lenses filter, the "dog filter," adds an animation of a dog's nose, ears, and tongue to a user's selfie (figure 43, left).

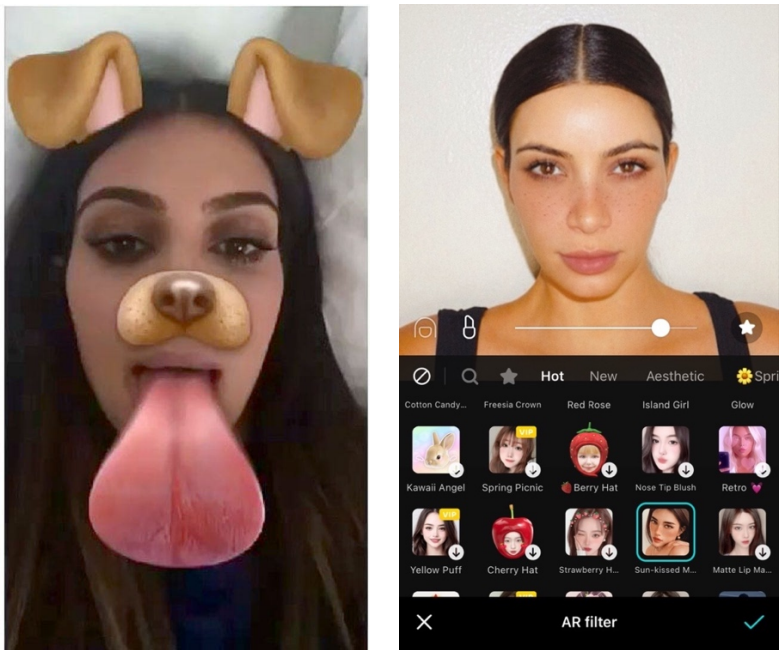


Figure 43. Snapchat's Augmented Reality (AR) "dog filter" (left) and B612's static beauty filters (right)[179]

I focus here on a growing subset of AR filters called "beauty filters," which alter a photo without imposing other objects onto the image. Ostensibly, these filters beautify the user's face image through a set of automated "augmentations." However, a subset of static

[179] Source: Kim Kardashian, "dog filter selfie," May 2016, *Business Insider*, businessinsider.com/how-to-find-snapchats-dalmatian-filter-2016-5#the-dog-filter-is-popular-it-looks-like-this-2; Jin Sol Kim, "screenshot of filtering interface on beauty filter app using a Kim Kardashian selfie," 2024, *B612*.

beauty filters, which are applied retroactively to an existing photo, also exists (figure 43, right). To distinguish between beauty filters that are applied in real-time and its static counterparts, I amalgamate their two primary features to call them "augmented reality beauty filters" or "ARB filters" for short.

Unlike post-production beauty filters that are found on designated beautification apps like FaceTune, B612, and SNOW, ARB filters are a technical affordance typically found within mainstream social media apps.[180] For example, in addition to allowing users to upload and share pre-existing photos with their social networks, Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok—the three apps I examine in this chapter—also allow users to take photos directly within the app with the option to apply ARB filters during production. The addition of these filters to mainstream social media apps has especially advanced their quick uptake in everyday photo-taking and image-sharing practices. In 2020, for instance, an average of 600 million people a month used ARB filters on Instagram and Facebook (Doh et al. 349). In 2023, Snapchat boasted over 250 million ARB filter users a day with a total of 6 billion filtered Snaps produced daily (Hunter). On TikTok, a single filter called the "Bold Glamour filter" (more below) reached over 400 million views within one month of its launch in 2023 (Marr).[181]

In addition to their use in mainstream social media apps, ARB filters were further normalized as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023. During this period, these filters were incorporated into professional video conferencing technologies like Zoom

[180] While some designated beauty apps also include a real-time filtering functionality, at the time of writing, ARB filtering features on social media do not allow filters to be applied to imported photos.
[181] Though "views" do not necessarily translate to filter use, this statistic demonstrates everyday users' interest in such technologies. It is, however, possible that the popularity of this number is inflated due to the filter's novel use of a new AI technology called Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) in its coding.

and Microsoft Teams to supposedly relieve individuals of the social pressure to look "presentable" while working from home (Hunter; Riccio et al. 2; Shein 18). More specifically, this technology purported to save women time and effort in having to wear makeup at home by automating the beautification process. Instead, it reinforced conventional ideals of femininity within public spaces (e.g., workplace culture) by conflating the idea of women and professionalism with makeup.

Following this line of thinking about automated technologies and normative embodiment, this section examines how the proliferation of ARB filters within the last decade interfaces with notions of embodiment and social value within neoliberalism. I argue that longstanding beliefs in beauty's measurability has established it as a viable area of self-optimization for neoliberal subjects and identify ARB filters as a neoliberal technology of self-beautification. Drawing from Foucault's theory of mirror spaces ("Of Other Spaces") and Greene's theorization of real-time media, I offer an explanation of how ARB filters allow users to reimagine and "optimize" themselves through instant beautification.

4.2.1 Self-Optimization and Beauty

In their article "Beauty Surveillance," Elias and Gill characterize neoliberalism as marked by the state's withdrawal from its previous areas of social provision, and society's subsequent turn towards the privatization of human well-being (63; see also Zuboff 37-41). This shift towards individualization amplified existing economic disparities between social groups; in response, the conditions of neoliberalism produced a spirit of individual entrepreneurialism, which treated personal qualities as traits that could be "transmuted into prosperity and opportunity" (Baker qtd. in Wiener).

Reified during the latter half of the 20th century, the rise of an entrepreneurial work ethic specifically established self-optimization or self-investment practices as strategies to help neoliberal subjects maximize their current and future capital value (Elias and Gill 63; Foucault, *Biopolitics*; Tu 22; Seet 163; van Doorn 357; Wiener).[182] According to writer Anna Wiener, such strategies "sugges[t] the possibility of liberation or relief—an exit, or a workaround"—from neoliberalism's economic concerns by offering subjects a systematic way to respond to and seemingly manage their environmental variables. Thus, as the recognition of social value shifted from modernity's emphasis on morality to that of entrepreneurialism from the 1930s onwards, constructions of ideal subjectivity followed suit, celebrating images of the entrepreneurial or self-sufficient subject (Seet 163; van Doorn; Wiener).

While all areas of life "across vast differences of sentiment, person, kind, culture, and nation" have become rendered as potential capital within neoliberalism, (van Doorn 359), beauty stands out as a recurring domain for both the discourse and practices of self-optimization. I posit the reason for this is self-optimization's dependence on systems of commensurability—that is, systems of comparative measurement that can "transfor[m] [these] different qualities and values into a common metric" for determining symbolic value (van Doorn 359).[183] Put differently, self-optimization practices are well-aligned with beauty because standardization offers individuals a clear baseline for self-improvement and self-

[182] This practice is also variably referred to as: self-improvement, self-monitoring, self-surveillance, self-managing, self-tracking, or "responsibilization." I primarily use the terms "self-optimization" and "self-investment" to discuss digital beautification as an economic strategy.
[183] Van Doorn's work draws heavily from Lawrence Grossberg's theory of "commensurating machines," which offer forms of standardization across various avenues of life through which neoliberal subjects determine value.

evaluation (Grossberg in van Doorn 361), and beauty has a long history of standardization in Euro-American culture.

For example, Anne Maxwell argues that the image of classical beauty in the West was established in the 15th century by Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of the Vitruvian man (c.1490), which explored proportions of the human body in relation to the golden mean—a ratio originally associated with determining proportionate beauty in mathematics and architecture ("Classical Ideal"). In 1880, Galton invented the "pocket registrator," a tool designed to measure and classify the beauty of women in the British Isles as either "attractive, indifferent, or repellent" (Bulmer qtd. in Morozov 229). While itself a repellent practice, Galton's classifications nonetheless produced an identifiable standard for beauty. Both da Vinci and Galton upheld classical Greco-Roman sculptures, which were crafted based on mathematical proportions, as one of the highest forms of beauty (Maxwell, "Classical Ideal"), suggesting that beauty has traditionally been treated as quantifiable in Western culture.

Unsurprisingly, these classical standards are explicitly referenced and upheld in beautification practices such as cosmetic surgery, explicating why beauty is a popular area of entrepreneurialism. Balsamo writes that:

> All cosmetic surgery implicitly involves aesthetic judgments of facial proportion, harmony, and symmetry. In fact, one medical textbook strongly encourages plastic surgeons to acquire some familiarity with classical art theory so that they are better prepared to 'judge human form in three dimensions, evaluate all aspects of the

deformity, visualize the finished product, and plan the approach that will produce an optimal result.' ("Cutting Edge" 210).

In addition to providing a clear metric for comparison and evaluation, the notion of beauty is compatible with the idea that symbolic capital, at least in Western culture, has historically been treated as legible within the body (Bourdieu 297). Embodying normative beauty standards through beautification practices has therefore often led to positive socioeconomic results. Balsamo points out that individuals who undergo cosmetic surgery often experience an improved social status and, in some cases, improvements in professional standing ("Cutting Edge" 210), therefore suggesting beauty as a proven arena of self-optimization.

The connection between beauty and symbolic capital has become further reified in the algorithmic age of the internet, where everything is perceived as data and as quantifiable.[184] For example, data points like click-through rate and the duration of user-content engagement are increasingly analyzed by social media algorithms to measure an individual's potential to captivate audience attention—the ultimate marker of social capital within a highly commodified attention economy (Srivastava; Taffel 250). Algorithmic processes then retrieve and arrange data streams in particular configurations based on these metrics, thereby shaping social media users' viewing experiences and online behaviours (Greene 160; Rubinstein and Sluis, "Digital Image" 29, Taffel 250, Zuboff).[185] As user engagement data

[184] Wiener points out that entrepreneurialism is often heightened in moments of cultural transformation and economic instability, as society's precarious position produces the conditions for increased competition.
[185] In 2018, sociologist David Beer coined the term "data gaze," to mark the recent shift in society towards an algorithmic logic (Greene 156). The data gaze specifically suggests that "lives are viewed differently through data" (Beer qtd. in Greene 156), as bits of personal information pertaining to users' internet behaviour inform future behaviours.

suggest a high correlation between conventional representations of beauty and audience attention (Srivastava), this beauty standard therefore becomes algorithmically reinforced through its heightened visibility and popularity, and upheld as an aesthetic to which users should aspire.[186]

Image-based social media apps like Instagram that are centered around influencer culture and topics like appearance, fashion, and lifestyle, especially drive traditional Western beauty standards as a marker of economic potential (Elias and Gill 67; Srivastava). Individuals have observed that algorithms for such social media disproportionately increase the visibility and reach of users who have a small nose, big eyes, and full lips—features that have been collectively dubbed as forming the "Instagram Face" (Doh et al. 351; Lijadu; Ryan-Mosley, "Colorism"). The heightened visibility of this narrow aesthetic reinforces beauty as a potential area for self-optimization; it establishes the Instagram Face as the contemporary standard and goal with which individuals can measure their own beauty and by extension, their social capital.

There is a rich body of work that documents how self-beautification practices have been commodified on a mass scale to produce the "beauty-industrial complex," which sells the promise of achieving self-beautification as a form of social and symbolic capital, especially for women (the two works that are central to this chapter are Balsamo's "Cutting Edge" and Elias and Gill's research). Elias and Gill highlight disparate areas of mainstream

[186] In 2021, Instagram users noticed that plus-sized content creators were being banned from the app for no apparent reason other than their non-normative body size (Amin), substantiating that users who fit within traditional beauty norms are provided higher visibility by social media algorithms based on their perceived capital value.

culture such as "cosmetics companies, women's magazines, celebrity culture, the aesthetic surgery industry, fashion industry … and the burgeoning aesthetic service sector" as part of this complex (66). In a similar vein, Greene asserts that while photo-editing has been a standard practice of fashion and Hollywood photography since the 1930s, the commercialization of digital photo-editing tools like Adobe Photoshop in the 1990s made beautification more accessible to ordinary people by allowing them to participate in forms of physical "improvement" without having to undergo plastic surgery (78).

Like cosmetic surgery and Photoshop, I argue that ARB filters are a technology of self-beautification and neoliberal entrepreneurialism. In producing photos of subjects that are digitally altered to show smoother skin, a more angular face, a smaller nose, higher cheekbones, larger eyes, and thicker lips (Brighton; Haines; Li; Marr; Riccio et al.; Ryan-Mosley, "Colorism;" Wang), ARB filters provide users with a way to gain social capital without the pain of surgery, to participate in their self-production as neoliberal subjects of value. Indeed, Bakhshi et al. cite that "filtered photos are 21% more likely to be viewed and 45% more likely to be commented on by consumers" (qtd. in Greene 68), suggesting that ARB filters are effective tools for self-optimization. Unlike technologies like Photoshop, however, which require "*human editors* [to] [m]ake numerous decisions over whether to soften skin, to what extent, which 'blemishes' (if any) to remove or reduce in prominence" (Taffel 250, emphasis added), ARB filters are coded to optimize photos based on a pre-established set of aesthetic values. While this automated process allows users to produce aesthetic results without any expertise (Taffel 244), it is important to note that this automated

process significantly decreases the amount of user agency in the way individuals "shape" their self-representations.

The framework of neoliberalism explains ARB filters' popularity within the last decade but does not explicate how these filters operate symbolically to "optimize" their users within the internet's digital visual environments. Before examining ARB filters and their resulting images as discourse and examining their sociocultural implications, I therefore explore how the idea of self-optimization works through this everyday imaging practice. I do so by framing social media preview screens, where ARB filtered images are displayed during production, as digital mirror spaces—spaces of real-time digital embodiment that help users visualize and construct themselves as entrepreneurial subjects.

4.2.2 Social Media Mirrors: Becoming the Entrepreneurial Subject through Self-Visualization and Digital Embodiment

In his essay "Of Other Spaces," Foucault theorizes mirror spaces as spaces that reside in between utopia and "heterotopia," or counter-sites of existence (24). He writes:

> The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent…. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. ("Of Other Spaces" 24)

Borrowing this concept, I propose that we can understand how ARB filters operate as a technology of self-optimization by examining the social media preview screen as a sort of digital mirror space.

As seen in Foucault's theorization of the mirror space, I argue that the social media preview screen offers users a self-image that is simultaneously unreal and real. More specifically, though the self-image represented in filtered selfies is unreal in that users' faces are not materially changed as a result of using ARB filters, this self-representation is nevertheless also real within the visual and symbolic space of social media. Because the image exists within a social context—that is, the user takes a filtered selfie and shares it on social media, where various publics can see and interact with it—this beautified self-representation functions as if it "exist[s] in reality" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, 24). Indeed, Linda Joyce Brown argues that though photos have always offered "questionable relationships to 'reality,' they tend to function, for many of us, without questioning that relationship" (606). ARB filters therefore allow users to gain a form of symbolic capital through self-beautification, despite the limitation of its entrepreneurial practice and effects to social media.

Additionally, ARB filters further intensify the association of photography with realism because they operate based on a real-time link between a given moment and its photographic representation. In other words, the symbolic power of ARB filters is due, in part, to the smartphone camera and social media preview screen's joint affordance of instantaneity, which allows users to alter their selfie image as it is being produced. This temporal collapse produces a "schema of projected proprioceptive movement" (Stone qtd. in

Munster 89-90) that subsequently blurs the boundaries of digital representation with the subject's real embodiment. Because the self that is reflected on the preview screen mirrors the subject's movement in real-time, users of ARB filters "bounc[e] back and forth between the surfaces of [these] new technologies and those of [their] own skin" (Munster 138) and perceive their mirror selves' embodied changes as an extension of their actual, flesh-and-bone bodies (Isakowitsch).

This blurring of corporeality with digitality is further intensified with continued developments in algorithmic photography. In February 2023, TikTok revealed that its newer filters have begun to operate based on a computer vision technique known as "Generative Adversarial Networks" (GANs), which help enhance the realism of filtered photos (Doh et al. 349; Marr; Riccio et al. 2).[187] ARB filters that are programmed using GANs "regenerat[e] every pixel on a face based on a dataset of images" (Lal), outputting a new image that closely resembles the original reference images (Brighton; Hunter; Marr; Ryan-Mosley, "Hyper-realistic Filters"). Despite producing a Baudrillardian simulacrum of the photographic subject, the more seamless integration of GAN-based ARB filters with users' face images therefore gives social media users the perception that the gap between digital representation and physical embodiment is narrowed.[188] Overall, the real-time affordances of ARB filters

[187] While GAN-based filters are described as more "realistic," I note here that this realism indicates the instantaneous interactivity and responsiveness of the filter to a user's face, rather than a more realistic final image. Though there may be an overlap between the two, the technical effectiveness of GAN-based filters does not necessarily translate into a more "natural" looking filtered image, especially for racialized users, as I discuss below.

[188] This is especially significant for social media apps like TikTok that privilege the video format over static images, which therefore risks the possibility of filters "slipping" or detaching themselves from a user's face.

and their more recent development using GANs offers one explanation for the popular use of ARB filters in selfie-taking as a digital self-beautification and "optimization" practice.

As various scholars have argued, however, technologies are shaped by cultural filters and in turn, produce particular kinds of users and subjects (Balsamo, "Cutting Edge;" Chun; Elias and Gill; Manovich in Greene; Stone; Taffel). Stone specifically identifies that computer software often produces an effect of "tokenization" online, where forms of digital embodiment reflect mainstream culture's ideal or legible body types (451). I posit that ARB filters therefore go beyond framing social media users as entrepreneurial subjects; they "shape the kinds of bodies that are recognized as livable and valued, and those that are aesthetically disqualified" (Greene 114). The question that remains is: what kind of bodies do ARB filters value and which do they delegitimize?

4.3 Fade to White: Identifying ARB Filters' Eugenic Roots

Since their introduction in 2015, racialized social media users have flagged ARB filters as perpetuating a Eurocentric beauty standard (Brighton; Haines; Hunter; Jagota; Lal; Li; Lijadu; Nguyen; Ryan-Mosley, "Colorism;" Tu; Wang). Academics have more recently turned to this matter, though much existing scholarship is situated in STEM disciplines such as computer science and engineering and are largely reactive in nature. Rather than viewing the reproduction of White normative subjectivity in algorithms as symptomatic of larger ideological issues, these works treat these social conundrums as glitches in the technology's functionality that are solvable with more data.[189] Though the general shift in attention

[189] This view is common within STEM disciplines, including in the related field of facial recognition technology (FRT).

towards the topic of race and algorithmic technologies yields a net positive, a discussion of ARB filters' sociohistorical and cultural factors, and their effect on racial discourse and ideology, therefore remains an understudied area of academic research.

The closest existing work is Greene's research on 1920s and 1930s glamour photography, which she identifies as the sociotechnical precursor to algorithmic photo filters. While I have delineated ARB filters as a new filtering affordance within social media that centers around the real-time beautification of users' digital face images, these filters share similarities in their functionality and their visual codes and conventions with the (static) digital photo filters that Greene primarily explores. Indeed, Greene offers that while general photo filters "alter the photograph as a whole, [filtering] options are all at least partially driven by the human body's aesthetic ideals" (68). I therefore draw from her work on the aesthetic of glamour to argue ARB filters' discursive effects and their implications for shaping racial subjectivity, which is always already constructed in relation to subject bodies.

According to Greene, retouching practices in photography had already begun to be standardized in the mid-19th century, and were widely disseminated in the Western world through instruction manuals by the turn-of-the-century (81). Based on the idea that classical Greek forms represented ideal forms of embodiment, manuals such as Robert Johnson's *Complete Treatise on the Art of Retouching Photographic Negatives* (1886) and James Boniface Schriever's *Complete Self-Instructing Library of Practical Photography* (1909) were centered around practices of smoothing skin, removing freckles, and otherwise "manipulating dark blemishes and textures that marred clear, pale skin" (81). Indeed,

Schriever's instructions explicitly state that the aim of retouching is to "make a marble statue from a living subject, with all the likeness retained" (qtd. in Greene 81).

In the late 1920s and 1930s, these practices became further standardized and mechanized under the aesthetic of glamour, which produced "a new, easily identifiable and reproducible formula" to help quell interwar concerns about pain and bodily vulnerability (Greene 80). Cultivated by fashion and advertising photographer, Edward Steichen, Greene argues that glamour photography specifically utilized the employment of artificial lighting, dark backgrounds, and sharp focus to "sor[t] out unwanted or threatening aspects of human bodies" and "sculp[t] human subjects into solid statues" (79). These photographic conventions produced high-contrast images that had the effect of hardening and smoothening subject bodies, "obfuscat[ing] the recalcitrantly sticky textures of the living flesh" (Greene 72).[190]

Greene draws a connection between the excising of unwanted bodily details in glamour photography and the growing prevalence of digital filtering apps that propose to "fix" their users' visible bodies (110-2). She further highlights that these image manipulation practices and cosmetic surgery have a common ground in the medicalization of women's bodies. Similarly, Carol Spitzack points out that cosmetic surgery's medical gaze is a disciplinary one that "constructs the female figure as pathological, excessive, unruly, and potentially threatening" (qtd. in Balsamo, "Cutting Edge 208). I expand on this notion of bodily pathology to argue that ARB filters are also entangled with medicalization, or more

[190] According to photography scholar Liz Willis-Tropea, this "semiotics of glamour" became conflated with Hollywood publicity in the 1930s, which used glamour photography to visually distinguish and sensationalize celebrities in mass media (Greene 80).

specifically, the eugenic movement's medicalization of racialized bodies. As eugenics photography and Western beauty discourse both identify classical Greek forms as the ideal forms of embodiment, I posit that beautification practices such as those offered by ARB filters are therefore produced based on a White, Eurocentric beauty standard.

I illustrate ARB filters' whitening effects in the following sections by drawing parallels between photographic codes and conventions from ARB filtered images, glamour photography, and eugenics photography. I evince that photographic techniques like using artificial lighting and increasing image contrast smoothen the photographic subject's skin and produce the appearance of sharper, more angular features that are conventionally characteristic of White faces. While ARB filters purport to offer a tool for self-beautification, I therefore argue that they have more serious implications for digital racial formation and for shaping visual racial discourse.

4.3.1 Optimizing Whiteness with ARB Filters: Methodology and Limitations

This research argues from a Media Studies' (and Digital Humanities') perspective that ARB filters encourage digital embodiments of Whiteness within their racialized users. Building on STEM-based scholarship including Bonner et al.'s "When Filters Escape the Smartphone" and Riccio and Oliver's "Racial Bias in the Beautyverse," which demonstrate ARB filters' whitening effects, I analyze how this technology of beautification conflates signifiers of White beauty and eugenics pseudoscience with neoliberal subjectivity. To the best of my knowledge, no other scholarship systematically compares ARB filters' overall aesthetic with that of eugenics photography or reflects on the resulting filtered selfies as a form of neoliberal racial discourse.

From its outset, Riccio and Oliver's study offers quantitative support that ARB filters reproduce visual standards of Whiteness.[191] Their research uses computer vision techniques to analyze an application of eight Instagram filters on an existing diverse dataset of face images called FairFace to answer the question: "Do AR-based beautification filters encode a canon of beauty of white people?" (3). After computationally assessing the effects of ARB filters on 5,000 randomly selected faces across seven races, the authors conclude that ARB filters homogenize faces to reflect White features. However, Riccio and Oliver state that their aim is to "brin[g] sociological and anthropological research questions to the Computer Vision community" (2) rather than developing these connections in their own work.

Bonner et al.'s research offers supplementary qualitative support regarding ARB filters' visual codes, using a sample of 300 ARB filters across Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok (100 each). Their research reveals "the near-ubiquity of [ARB filters in] applying *some* form of aesthetic improvement to the user's expression of social identity on these platforms" (Bonner et al. 5). I expand on these two studies by implementing a form of interdisciplinary research that pays attention to "the specific features implemented in these filters that contribute to the *whitening* of the faces" (Riccio and Oliver 7).

The methodology for this research is hermeneutic reverse engineering. Balsamo states that in fields like engineering and computer science, reverse engineering allows designers to "wor[k] backwards from the construction of a functioning technology" to "gai[n] useful information for the creation of a novel technological instance" (*Designing Culture* 14). Comparatively, her approach combines hermeneutic theory to reverse-engineer "the elements

[191] Riccio and Oliver refer to ARB filters in their paper as "Augmented-reality (AR)-based selfie beautification algorithms" (1).

that contribute to the meaning of a given technocultural formation" in two stages: 1) by analyzing visual symbols or representations, and 2) by interpreting how the technology's signifying parts interface with culture to produce greater meaning (*Designing Culture* 14-5). I use hermeneutic reverse engineering to isolate and analyze the types of visual changes made to ARB filter users' facial features, and to identify ARB filters' discursive and sociocultural influence by determining how these "signifying parts" interface with mainstream beauty culture.

Because ARB filters can typically only be applied to real-time social media photography—that is, as the selfie is being taken—instead of applied retroactively, the first stage of my research required a technical workaround. To apply ARB filters to my sample photos and identify the subjects' modified facial features, I therefore used Riccio et al.'s OPENFILTER methodology. For the second stage, after filtering my sample images, I advanced a semiotic analysis of these symbols by reading the filters' visual modifications against a Western beauty standard, using a beauty rating app called FaceScore as a cultural proxy for this standard. I chose this app because its explicit goal of measuring beauty provides me with a clear value judgment of isolated phenotypes in ways that cultural standards like Greek sculptures or the Instagram Face aesthetic do not. Both methodologies are discussed in more detail below.

My interpretation of results was guided by the following questions: 1) Are filtered images across social media apps consistently rated as more beautiful than unfiltered images? 2) Are filtered images consistently rated as more beautiful than unfiltered images across racial groups? 3) If there is a difference between the rating of racial groups, which groups are

most and least "augmented" by the filters? 4) In the ARB filters that produce the most "beautification," what areas and image modification techniques are the most common?

4.3.1a Methodology—Stage 1: Producing and Analyzing Filtered "Selfies"

My research analyzes ARB filters from Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. The selection criteria for these social media apps centered around three main factors: 1) their primary identification as image-based social media apps, 2) their popularity as general-use social media apps, and 3) their development and use of ARB filters.[192] While a study by Pew Research Center from September 18 to October 10, 2024 cites YouTube as the most used social media app by teenagers (90%), this social media site does not offer ARB filters as a technical feature. Therefore, I focus here on TikTok (63%), Instagram (61%), and Snapchat (55%), which ranked as the second, third, and fourth most-used social media apps, respectively (Faverio and Sidoti).

To conduct the study, I selected a total of 15 filters across these social media apps by going to their ARB filters' "Trending" tabs and selecting the top five filters with a human face in the preview icon.[193] Though the proprietary nature of these social media makes it difficult to know the exact algorithmic logic behind trending filters, the tab's name suggests that these lists perpetually measure and reflect the shifting intensity of user engagements with

[192] By "general-use" I mean that these apps emphasize social interaction and communication overall vs. offering a tailored function towards beautification (e.g., B612 and FaceTune).

[193] To access "trending" ARB filters on Instagram, users must open the app, click "Story," then "Camera," scroll to the end of "effects" (i.e., filter icons) at the bottom of the preview screen, and tap on the "Search" icon (i.e., magnifying glass). On Snapchat, these filters can be found by opening the app and tapping on the "Search" icon on the bottom right-hand corner above the menu (popular filters for Snapchat are listed under "Trending For You"). On TikTok, trending filters can be found by opening the app, clicking on the "+" sign, then clicking on the square icon to the left of the camera button on the preview screen (the image will vary depending on the trending filter).

ARB filters over a designated period.[194] Thus, the "trending" designation for the filters included in this sample are specific to the period I selected them: on August 9, 2023. The list of filters and their creators (if credited) are presented in the table in figure 44 below, in no particular order. Since this period of research, Instagram's parent company Meta has announced that it will ban all third-party (i.e., user-created) ARB filters starting in January 2025, with one reason being the harmful effects of "plastic surgery filters" on young women (Ducharme; L. Miller). For the time being, however, it appears that only the "pretty pretty" filter has been deleted out of the five Instagram filters used in this study.

Social media app	ARB filter name	ARB filter creator
Instagram	1. pretty pretty 2. pretty 3. AVCD 4. Goxxtosa 2.0 5. Baby Pink	1. @alanachanpion 2. @josevitornegreiros 3. @_johnmarknavarro 4. @yasminbrunet 5. @herusugiarta
Snapchat	1. Fresh Light 2. Sunkissed 3. sunlight 4. stubborn 5. Soft Fair Summer	1. Snapchat 2. Snapchat 3. adem 4. Captain Q 5. Sunny Bahadurpuria
TikTok	1. Smooth Skin 2. Pinkie Pies Filter 3. Pretty Freckles Lashes 4. Sapphire Eyeliner 5. Beauty Grain	1. @sophiekatirai 2. @fizzarolli_luv00 3. @perfect.filters 4. @isunybp 5. @isunybp

Figure 44. List of ARB filter designations, names, and creators from study sample

After selecting the ARB filters for analysis, I downloaded face photos of 10 subjects from the open-source Flickr-Faces-HQ-Dataset (FFHQ), which Riccio et al. use, to my

[194] Indeed, I have confirmed this organizational logic by revisiting the apps' trending tabs on different dates from the initial sample. For example, at the time of this dissertation's last revision on the week of March 23, 2025, the top five filters on Instagram's trending tabs with faces in the previews are: Moody, Flawless Look, Videotape, BlackShadow, and BlurCAM.

desktop computer.[195] I selected these subjects from five racial backgrounds also adopted from Riccio et al.'s study: Black, Latinx, East Asian, South Asian, and White (see figure 45 for the unfiltered photos of all 10 subjects).[196] Because ARB filters, like other technologies of beautification, are typically associated with women, I specifically selected subject photos depicting women or female-presenting individuals.



Figure 45. The 10 subject photos used in my study[197]

While the photos in the FFHQ dataset are not traditional selfie photos, I chose images that could perform a similar visual function to them because ARB filters are commonly

[195] The FFHQ Dataset can be found at: https://github.com/NVlabs/ffhq-dataset
[196] Riccio and Oliver also included Indian, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern groups as racial categories in their study (3). I omitted these categories due to their focus on ethnicity instead of race, and because of their overlaps with other racial groups. Nevertheless, given the fluid nature of race, I included one ethnic category (Latinx) in my sample.
[197] Source: Tero Karras and Janne Hellsten, "Flickr-Faces-HQ-Dataset," 2019, *GitHub,* github.com/NVlabs/ffhq-dataset.

applied to selfies that are taken on social media apps. Because these filters rely on the combined use of smartphone camera and computer vision technologies, which are employed to detect human faces (Taffel 243), the photos I chose specifically align with the visual requirements for collecting biometric facial data: they show front-facing subjects at eye-level with fully visible faces. In images where there is an additional subject, I cropped the photos around the primary subject. Though these images are not traditional selfies, I therefore treat them as selfie equivalents for the purposes of this study.[198]

After downloading the photos of my 10 subjects, I followed Riccio et al.'s instructions for implementing OPENFILTER, which they describe as a technical framework that allows users to apply ARB filters, which are typically constrained to real-time application on social media apps, to a static image (3). I installed two software programs to my desktop: ManyCam, which is a virtual camera and live-streaming program, and BlueStacks, which is an Android emulator that allows a user to access multiple existing social media accounts within one interface.

To apply the ARB filters, I ran the two programs simultaneously. For example, to apply ARB filters from Instagram to the subjects' face images, I used BlueStacks to access Instagram on my computer in its mobile app format and ManyCam to live-stream the subjects' photos to Instagram Stories (figure 46). I applied the five Instagram filters I

[198] As per FFHQ's copyright law and use instructions (Attribution License/ Attribution Non-Commercial License Creative Commons), I note here that I have modified all original images from the downloaded copy by cropping the edges close to the subjects' faces. Additionally, I have further modified the images using 15 ARB filters from Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. The filters used are listed in figure 44. The authors attributed to these photos are as follows: S1-Desie Roberts, S2-Luuk Diphoorn, S3-Jolene C.P. Hoang, S4-John Ragai, S5-Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, S6-"CrazyYatra," S7-Sean C Cochran, S8-"DoED Studio," S9-"Canadian Film Centre," S10-"vgm8383."

selected to all 10 photos for a total of 50 filtered Instagram photos. I repeated this process for the five Snapchat filters and five TikTok filters for a total sample of 150 filtered photos.

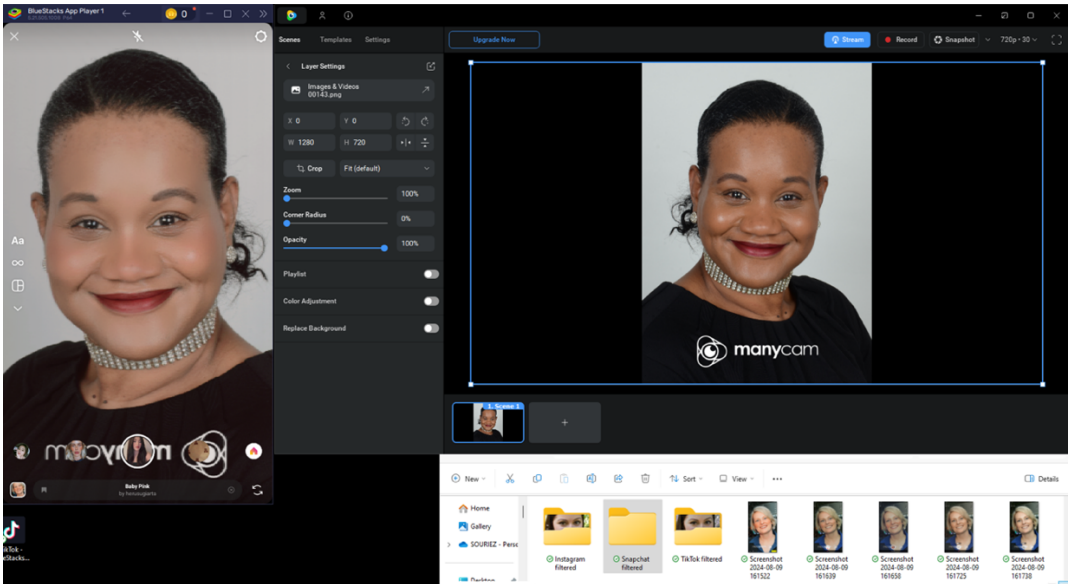


Figure 46. Live-streaming and filtering S1's photo on Instagram Stories using OPENFILTER[199]

After producing my sample of filtered photos, I analyzed the photos for each ARB filter's area of modification. To identify which facial features are changed within a filter, I compared subjects' original photos with their filtered photos. In each comparison, I analyzed the area of change in the original photos, the resulting area's degree of change (e.g., slight vs. exaggerated), and the image manipulation techniques employed to identify ARB filters' most common modification areas and editing conventions.

4.3.1b Methodology— Stage 2: Interpreting ARB Filters' "Improvements" in Beauty

In the second stage of my research, I examined the hermeneutics of the ARB filters' visual changes by pairing my reading of them with a beauty rating app called FaceScore. It is

[199] Source: Jin Sol Kim, "applying Instagram filter to static subject image using OPENFILTER methodology," 2024, *ManyCam*.

important to note that I use FaceScore in this dissertation as a proxy for ideal beauty, which I argue is racially coded, rather than as a legitimate empirical tool for assessing ARB filters' "augmentations." Because FaceScore purports to measure a user's beauty, I hypothesize that its algorithm was trained on a dataset of mainstream (i.e., White) beauty standards. Uploading and comparing my 10 subjects' original, unfiltered photos with the 150 ARB-filtered photos on this app therefore allowed me to determine the types of visual changes that ARB filters produce.

More specifically, FaceScore allowed me to determine that the "signifying parts" (Balsamo, *Designing Culture*) or visual features reproduced in ARB filters share a foundation with eugenics theory because the app's rating system is based on the "golden ratio," which determines the proportions of an ideal face within cosmetic surgery using empirical measurements and mathematical calculations (see figure 47 for an example of FaceScore's golden ratio mapping; Elias and Gill 70; Lijadu). While research linking the term "golden ratio" to eugenics is still emerging, I assert that there are enough sociohistorical traces between its idea of measurable beauty and eugenics theory for it to be concerning.[200]

For one, the "golden mean" associated with classical Greek sculptures and the "golden ratio" of plastic surgery both identify an ideal form of embodiment. Galton's comparison of beauty to the Greco-Roman ideal also evinces that conceptions of ideal beauty are rooted in eugenics discourse. In his unpublished novel, "The Eugenic College of Kantsaywhere," he writes: "The physique of the girls reminded me of that of the 'Hours' in the engraving of … 'Aurora' by Guido in Rome. … The girls have the same massive forms,

[200] Nancy Etcoff speculates that this delay in research may exist because "many intellectuals would have us believe that beauty is inconsequential … [and] should not have a place in intellectual discourse."

short of heaviness, and seem promising mothers of a noble race" (qtd. in Maxwell, "Classical Ideal"). FaceScore's explicit use of the golden ratio standard—which the developer describes as using measurements to "analyz[e] different features of your face and diagnos[e] how close you are" to "the ratio of the face that is considered beautiful…" (a. ito)—therefore provides me with a cultural touchstone for interpreting ARB filters' digital modifications.

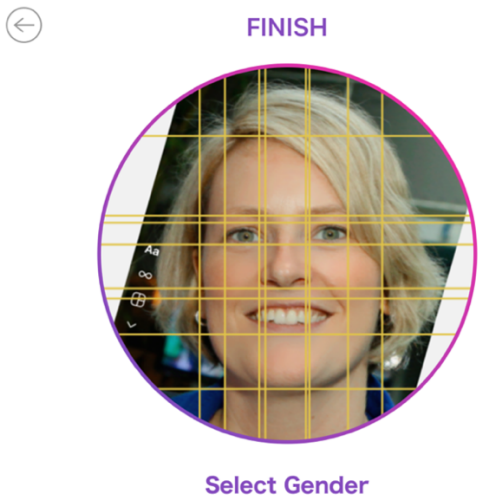


Figure 47. How FaceScore uses the "golden ratio" to "measure" subjects' beauty[201]

FaceScore's face evaluation is categorized into three primary areas—face, eye, and the mouth and nose—which I further detail in the table in figure 48. These areas are evaluated using a 6-letter ranking system—S, A, B, C, D, E—with "S" indicating faces that match 90% or higher with the golden ratio, and the remaining letters decreasing in value alphabetically from A to E (see figure 49 for an example).[202] The assessment also provides an

[201] Source: Jin Sol Kim, "interface for step one of FaceScore beauty rating app," 2024, *FaceScore*.
[202] Though FaceScore does not explain what "S" stands for, it is likely that this ranking system draws from popular internet culture, which adopts this structure from video game discourse. In both areas of discourse, "S-tier" comes before "A" as the top-tier in the ranking system (Greszes). While these areas don't offer an answer as to what the "S" stands for, the connection between video games using this tier-system with Japanese culture suggests that it designates items within the tier as "special."

average numerical score and a comparison to celebrity lookalikes who supposedly have a similar face ratio to the selfie subject. That all of these lookalike comparisons depict celebrities who are White women (e.g., Chloë Grace Moretz, Kendall Jenner, Anne Hathaway, Olga Kurylenko, etc.) regardless of the user's racial identity is another indicator that mainstream notions of beauty are always already raced.

Evaluation Categories	Measurement 1	Measurement 2	Measurement 3	Measurement 4
Face evaluation	Vertical	Horizontal	Length/Width	Left/Right
Eye evaluation	Eye position	Eye distance	Length/Width	Left/Right
Evaluation of the mouth and nose	Nose position	Nose width	Mouth position	Mouth height

Figure 48. List of FaceScore's face evaluation categories

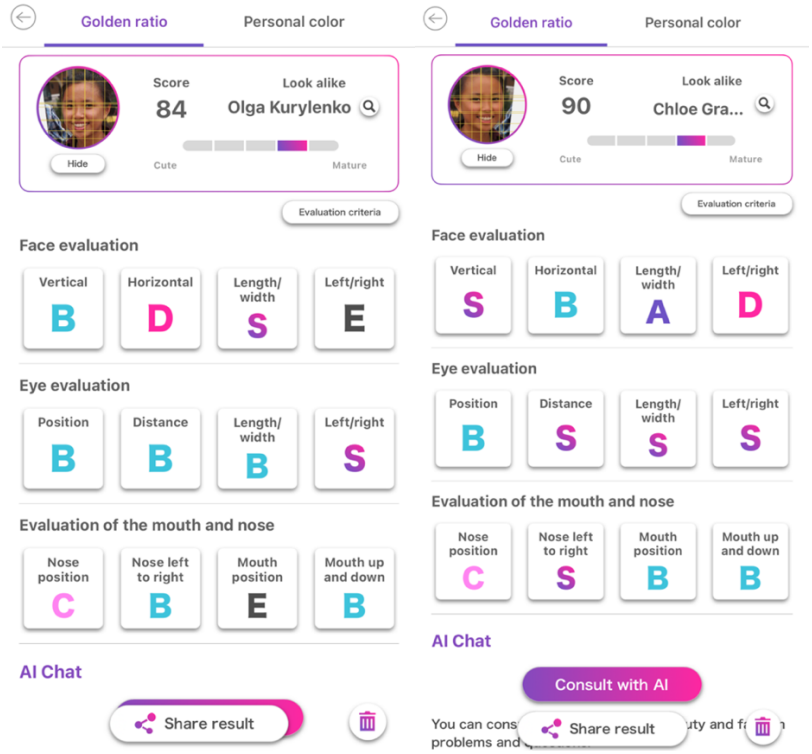


Figure 49. A screenshot of S4's ratings before (left) and after (right) application of Snapchat's "stubborn" filter[203]

[203] Source: Jin Sol Kim, "FaceScore's ranking results for subject 4" 2024, *FaceScore*.

Overall, FaceScore's reproduction of the golden ratio, and its attempt to quantify beauty based on phenotypical measurements and ratings, echoes the eugenics movement's claims to scientific objectivity during its construction of White supremacy. Though FaceScore provides a disclaimer that the app is "for entertainment purposes only" (a. ito), this precautionary message is buried at the bottom of the app's description, offered as the 65th line out of 67 lines of text. Indeed, though FaceScore's App Store description is interspersed with statements like "it will definitly [sic] be a hit at school, at work or at a drinking party!" (a. ito), the invocation of empirical "science" in its actual interface lends it a more serious, authoritative air than its claims to entertainment suggest. For instance, in addition to instructing its users to practice precision in measuring facial features, the App Store description advertises that FaceScore's AI chat can "answer questions about skin problems, makeup, diet, plastic surgery … and much more" (a. ito), indicating its real-life potential to shape a user's physical body.

4.3.1c Limitations

FaceScore's reliance on precise measurements for functionality is redolent of Bertillon's mugshots, which were produced using a stringent process of quantification (e.g., recall his chart of ear shapes in figure 11). The app warns that without a level of photographic standardization, its rating system loses its mathematical "accuracy." Thus, a perceived limitation of my research is that technical inconsistencies in my subject photos, resulting from the open-source and informal nature of the FFHQ dataset, may affect the accuracy of FaceScore's final ratings. For example, there are some inconsistencies in photographic code across the sample data's racial groups, as some subjects display smiles with teeth and others

do not. Specifically, of the 10 subjects, both Black subjects and one South Asian subject are shown smiling without teeth. As the golden ratio measures the thickness of an individual's lips as one of its areas of facial feature analysis, this visual discrepancy suggests a higher level of accuracy for the Black and South Asian subjects' FaceScore results than for the others. Likewise, there are slight differences in the angle of some photos, which could impact FaceScore's measurements of facial features for symmetry.

However, I reiterate that FaceScore's rating system does not produce an actual measure of a subject's beauty, but a measure of how closely their photographic representation adheres to Western beauty standards. Rather than representing a research limitation, FaceScore's dependency on photographic standardization therefore reveals that determining beauty based on phenotypical measurements is a fool's errand, as the same individual can be considered both very beautiful and less beautiful based on differences in the photograph's composition. Indeed, FaceScore's own note that "the diagnosis results will vary depending on the facial expression and makeup used while the photo was taken" offers a rare level of acknowledgment that beauty is not a stable characteristic or absolute value but a visual assessment that is contingent on cultural, temporal, or local standards. Therefore, while my FaceScore ratings may be affected to some degree by the photographs' compositional differences, what is more important here is the app's overall confirmation that ARB filters produce an image that echoes the eugenics movement's racial discourse.

That said, I acknowledge that this research would benefit from a widening of scope to consider racialized users' perspectives on ARB filtering. Working with human participants can offer additional insights into social practices beyond the researcher's consideration. It

also affirms the role of agency in self-representation and ensures that subjects' racial identifications are self-declared rather than determined from external sources such as their photos' metadata. Though the OPENFILTER method adopted in this chapter fits with the time and funding constraints of my dissertation, this research would therefore also benefit from a study that engages racialized participants' perspectives.

4.3.2 Optimizing Whiteness with ARB Filters: Overview of Results

ARB filters are fundamentally tied to eugenics in two ways. First, in providing entrepreneurial subjects with a way to "optimize" their beauty, they share the eugenics movement's false premise that certain phenotypes indicate the possession of positive qualities and traits and are therefore superior to and more desirable than others. As I examined in Chapter One, for instance, eugenic beliefs claimed that individuals who possess Nordic features have a superior work ethic, high morality, increased intelligence, and strong mental fortitude (Lijadu; Riccio et al. 5). On the other hand, those who do not possess this embodiment of Whiteness (i.e., those with darker physical features) were associated with low intelligence and moral degeneracy (Black 77; Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 130). Though ARB filters do not make these particular claims, in determining their coded phenotypes as more beautiful than others, they register other forms of embodiment as "an error that must be erased or amended in order to conform with the machine aesthetic of a body that circulates online" (Greene 78).

Second, my use of FaceScore to reverse engineer ARB filters' social values demonstrates that filtered face images are legible as more beautiful than unfiltered faces because they align with the golden ratio benchmark, which is based on White racial

embodiment and upheld as the physical ideal by European and American eugenics (Dyer 71; Elias and Gill 71). ARB filters specifically replicate photographic conventions that are common to eugenics and glamour photography, like the use of controlled lighting and high contrast to smoothen the subjects' skin and sharpen their facial features. The resulting image *brings the user closer to embodying the form of ideal White femininity found in Greek sculptures*: the subjects' skin, eyes, and hair are made more luminous (Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect* 152), their noses are made simultaneously smaller and more prominent (i.e., they are given a high nose bridge), and their jawlines are reduced and sharpened.[204] Additionally, these filters reproduce the physical characteristics of youthfulness and vitality associated with Whiteness in eugenics pseudoscience: users' eyes are enlarged and their mouths are made smaller to evoke the top-down angle commonly used to represent children in visual media.

I therefore conclude that ARB filters reproduce mainstream culture's beauty norms, which have historically recognized beauty as the embodiment of White phenotypes over others. This finding demonstrates that these seemingly innocuous beautification tools "fundamentally chang[e] how bodies are conceived of and experienced, and what kind of bodies are aesthetically disqualified, seen as unlivable, or in dire need of intervention to become livable or safe" (Greene 164). In doing so, it more broadly illustrates how ARB filters extend analogue photography's legacy of producing racial discourse.

[204] In addition to digitally manipulating its shape, these filters sometimes create the illusion of sharpness by applying digital "make-up" and contouring the subject's nose tip.

4.4 Becoming the Fairest of Them All: Producing Symbolic Capital with ARB Filters

As I previously established, Bourdieu's theorization of symbolic capital states that material properties like the body become "*signs of recognition* [within a culture] that signify and acquire value through … distances in relation to other properties" (297-8). I have argued throughout this dissertation that photography transforms visual markers of difference into racial discourse by encoding phenotypical signs with social value across various sociocultural and historical moments. I assert here that with ARB filters' ability to change aspects of users' digital embodiment, the view of bodies as symbolic capital and its implications on the production of racial discourse are intensified.

At face value, ARB filters help users generate symbolic capital by providing them with pre-set templates for beautification that work as "standardized proxies that guide decision-making [about self-presentation] in uncertain situations and volatile environments" (van Doorn 359-60). These algorithmic frames work with the social media preview screen's affordances of real-time interactivity and visualization to encourage individuals to beautify themselves as a way of elevating their social positions (Bourdieu 295). However, as beauty standards are entangled with White subjectivity, I argue that these filters' production of symbolic capital is inevitably coded through the embodiment of White racial phenotypes.

Drawing on the idea of Whiteness as symbolic capital (Cottom; Seet) as well as examples from my primary research, I therefore identify ARB filter-use as a new manifestation of digital respectability politics. I explicate how these filters' visual codes and their application on racialized faces specifically produce a "glocalized" image of Whiteness, which produces an illusion of racial diversification despite its overall whitening practices. I

argue that by tempering their White, Eurocentric aesthetic, ARB filters deny and temporarily offset critical discussions about their effects on racial embodiment and discourse.

Nevertheless, ARB filters' reproduction of White visuality becomes apparent at another level of functionality. Using Greene's theory of glitch and affordance theory, I argue that the value of White subjects is coded into their very algorithms. In failing to work or working in unintended ways on certain, racialized faces, ARB filters reveal their classification of users' bodies into two subject categories: those that are "fixable" and those that are subaltern, or beyond the purview of digital beautification practices. Ultimately, I argue that ARB filters and their resulting images help "stabilize the cultural imagination of what a body is" (Greene 111), producing a form of racial discourse that reconfigures and upholds Western culture's White supremacist ideology in everyday social media spaces.

4.4.1 Embodying Whiteness with ARB Filters: Whiteness as Symbolic Capital

In "Racialised Self-Marketisation," Seet asserts that neoliberalism subsumes historical connections between Whiteness, legitimation, and privilege (including institutionalized constructions that link Whiteness with property) into its own capitalist structure (see also Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 24). For White subjects, the continued link between Whiteness and economic success in neoliberalism provides a systemic advantage; for racialized subjects, it heightens the disparity in potential capital between them and their White counterparts.

This racial coding of ideal neoliberal subjectivity is apparent in various areas of society, such as on social media, which disproportionately favour images of embodied Whiteness. For example, in 2020, Twitter's default image-cropping algorithm was proven to

privilege White faces over darker ones, cropping darker subjects out of the frame in Twitter's image previews (Johnson; Ryan-Mosley, "Colorism;" Yee et al.). Automated decisions such as this that impact the visibility of racialized subjects online suggest that Whiteness continues to be equated with normative subjectivity, and—with the internet's increasingly capitalistic structure—also with profitability. Seet observes that in response to the configuration of ideal neoliberal subjectivity as always already White, racialized individuals have determined racial embodiment as a "spac[e] of viability and … of resource extraction" from among other areas of their life (156). He proposes that within neoliberalism, the "ability to *own* whiteness" has therefore become "a form of symbolic capital" that independently signals the subject's potential value (159).

Sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom's critical reading of blondeness helps illustrate this point. Cottom points out that blondeness, as a visual signifier for Whiteness, has become a particularly coveted physical trait in mainstream culture. Beyond its association with high income, she argues, blondness has come to signify a larger claim to Whiteness that inscribes the subject with qualities like honour, esteem, and power without using racialized terms. For those who possess blondeness naturally, the embodiment of this phenotype further identifies the subject as a certain "*type* of white person" (Cottom)—that is, as someone with Nordic roots—to implicitly mark the individual as superior to others based on this pseudoscientific "evidence."

In contrast to modernity's view of Whiteness as a fixed, biological quality, in neoliberalism, the view of racial signifiers as capital therefore opens them up as a space of resource extraction, transforming Whiteness into an economic asset (Seet). Seet asserts that

for racialized subjects, the "accumulation of Whiteness" through the embodiment of White phenotypes has become a lucrative area of "self-improvement" and entrepreneurialism that provides them with immediate symbolic capital and a competitive edge for obtaining future capital (162). For instance, on social media, as conventional (i.e., White-coded) representations of beauty are algorithmically rewarded with increased visibility and reach, digital embodiments of Whiteness could theoretically allow racialized users to tap into this racial signifier to strengthen their social media presence and unlock entrepreneurial opportunities.

Indeed, the slippage between "beauty" and "Whiteness" in ARB filters' visual signifiers demonstrates that these pre-set templates can serve as a digital tool for racialized users to embody Whiteness online. While filtering led to an overall increase in beauty ratings across all racial groups in my research, I point out that the application of ARB filters to the White subjects in my sample (S9 and S10) had minimal effect on their beautification. For example, applying five of Instagram's ARB filters to S9 and S10 only produced a 5-point total increase in beautification across both subjects. In contrast, FaceScore rated the same five filters as increasing the Latinx subjects' beauty by 15 points, the East Asian subjects' beauty by 18 points, the Black subjects' beauty by 24 points, and the South Asian subjects' beauty by 28 points. The table in figure 50 summarizes the total rating differentials according to racial group and social media app. These results are provided as a graph in figures 51-53.

This finding reveals that although ARB filters are a technology of beautification, what they really afford their users is a proximity to Whiteness. ARB filters minimally "beautify" their White users because these subjects already possess the physical traits that are

reproduced within ARB filters' modifications—that is, features that are deemed beautiful by a White Eurocentric beauty standard. In fact, for the White woman coded in my sample as S10, FaceScore rated the subject (i.e., her photos) as *less* beautiful after using Instagram's "pretty pretty" and "pretty" filters compared to her unfiltered face image. On the other hand, in facilitating digital modifications like skin lightening and eye enlarging, ARB filters allow racialized users with a way to embody Whiteness on social media under the guise of beautification.

Racial Group	Instagram ARB Filters	Snapchat ARB Filters	TikTok ARB Filters
Black	24	35	29
East Asian	18	39	36
South Asian	28	47	32
Latinx	15	21	19
White	5	21	13

Figure 50. Filtered photos' rating increases by racial group and social media app

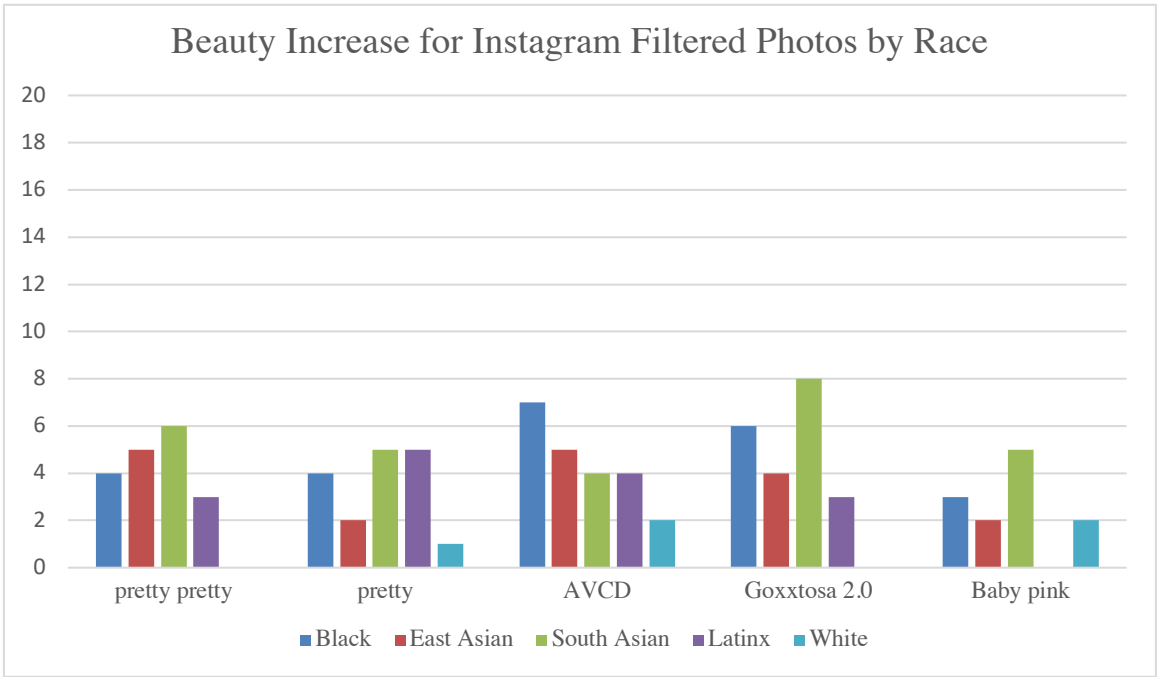


Figure 51. Comparison of FaceScore ratings for ARB filtered photos—Instagram

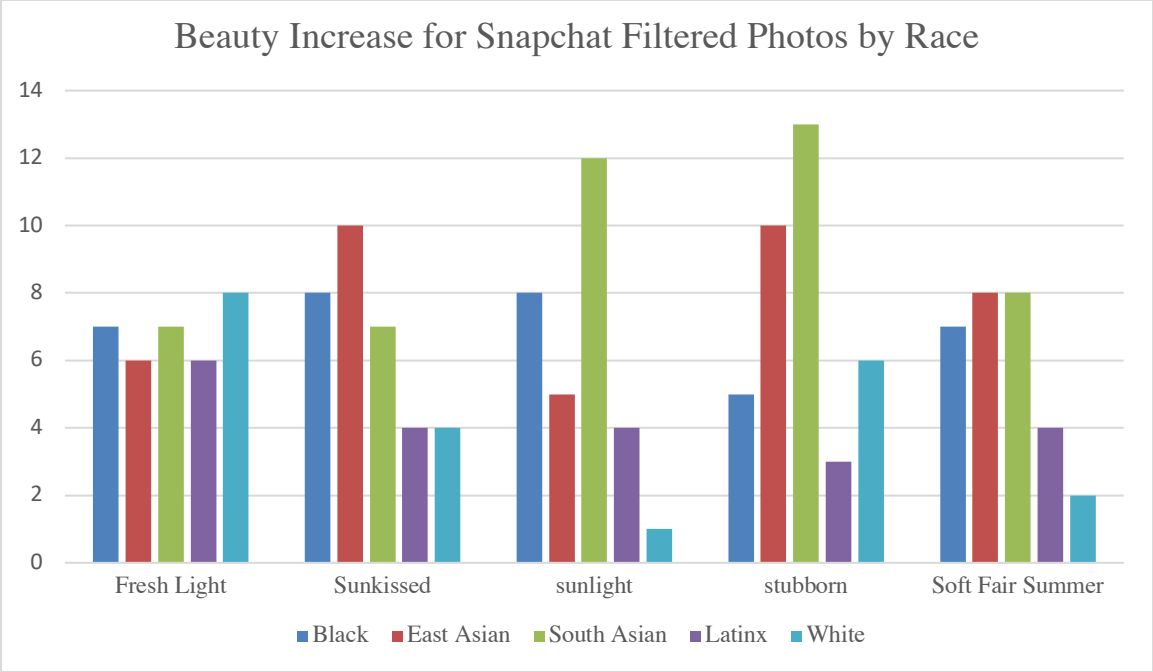


Figure 52. Comparison of FaceScore ratings for ARB filtered photos—Snapchat

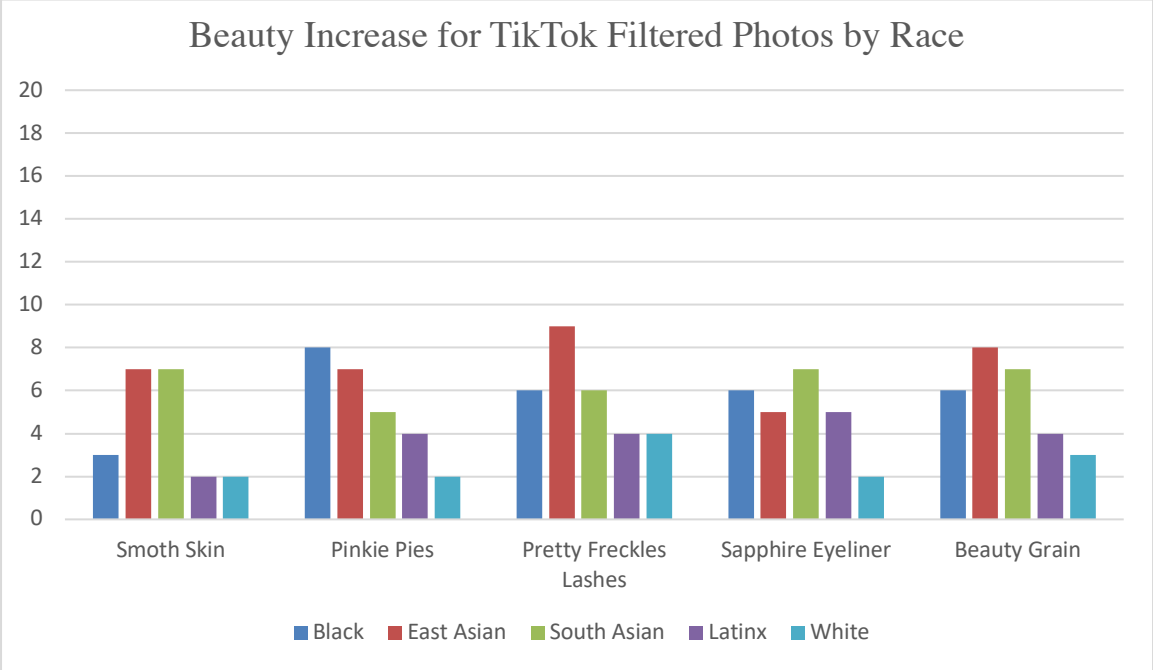


Figure 53. Comparison of FaceScore ratings for ARB filtered photos—TikTok

A visual comparison of filtered photos further illustrates how ARB filters produce embodiments of Whiteness, as the filters' changes are more pronounced on racialized

subjects and affect them differently than they do White subjects. For instance, figure 54 shows a side-by-side comparison of two photos of S10. The first photo (left) is the subject's original, unfiltered photo. The second (right) is a photo that has been modified with Instagram's "pretty" filter.



Figure 54. Comparison of S10's photo before (left) and after (right) applying Instagram's "pretty" filter[205]

A comparison of the before-and-after here shows that the "pretty" filter produces several changes to the subject's face: in the filtered image, the subject's face is slightly smaller, she has a narrower and more pointed nose, her marionette lines are smoothened, and her freckles have been removed, giving her a smooth and clear complexion (see figure 54,

[205] Source: Jin Sol Kim, "subject 10 before and after Instagram's 'pretty' filter," 2024, *Instagram*.

right). In addition, the filter increases the colour contrast in the subject's face to make it look more sculpted: it highlights the high points of S10's face (e.g., part of her forehead, her cheekbones, the tip of her nose, and her chin), giving her skin a healthy glow. Overall, the "pretty" filter does not drastically change any of S10's facial features. When viewed in isolation (i.e., without the original image for comparison), the filtered photo looks like a relatively ordinary photo of a White woman.

In contrast, the photos in figure 55 demonstrate how ARB filters' modifications have different hermeneutic effects when applied to racialized bodies. When the same "pretty" filter from Instagram is applied to the South Asian subject coded here as S5, the filtered image produces two visual effects that immediately stand out as remarkable. While in S10's filtered photo, the subject's modified nose blends in with her other features, in S5's filtered photo, the narrowing of her nose bridge and its pointed tip produce a whitening effect in the subject.

Likewise, while the change in contrast ratio in S10's photo has the primary effect of contouring or sculpting the subject's face, in S5, the contrast highlights the high points of subject's face (e.g., the top of her forehead, above her brow line, her cheekbones, nose bridge, and chin) and simultaneously flattens the tonal complexity of her skin. While the "pretty" filter does not brighten or change the image's lighting conditions, this change in contrast nevertheless results in a lightening of S5's skin tone, suggesting that ARB filters' modifications have a whitening effect on racialized subjects (see figure 56 for a colour code comparison of S5 before and after applying the "pretty" filter).



Figure 55. S5's photo before (left) and after (right) applying Instagram's "pretty" filter[206]

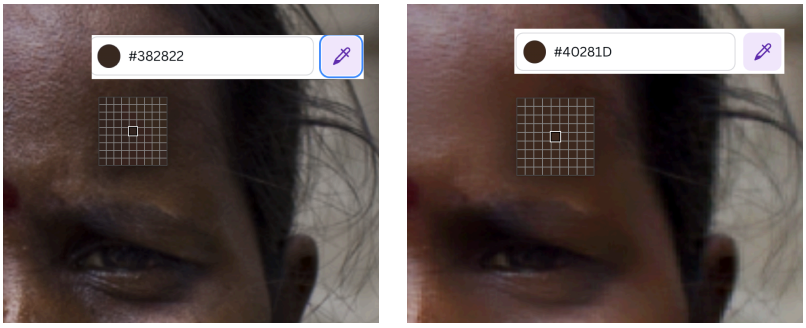


Figure 56. Colour code comparison of S5's skin tone before (left) and after (right) applying Instagram's "pretty" filter[207]

Additionally, though ARB filters' whitening effects may vary in degree from one filter to another, the overall effect is consistent across filters and social media apps. For

[206] Source: Jin Sol Kim, "subject 5 before and after Instagram's 'pretty' filter," 2024, *Instagram*.
[207] Source: Jin Sol Kim, "colour code comparison of subject 5 before and after Instagram's 'pretty' filter," 2024, *Instagram*.

instance, the application of TikTok's "Beauty Grain" filter to an East Asian subject, S4, produces a filtered image of the subject with an elongated face, slimmer jawline, and with noticeably lighter skin than her unfiltered image (see figure 57, left and center). This filter also makes S4's nose narrower and gives her a smaller mouth, though her bottom lip is thicker than in her original photo (discussed below).

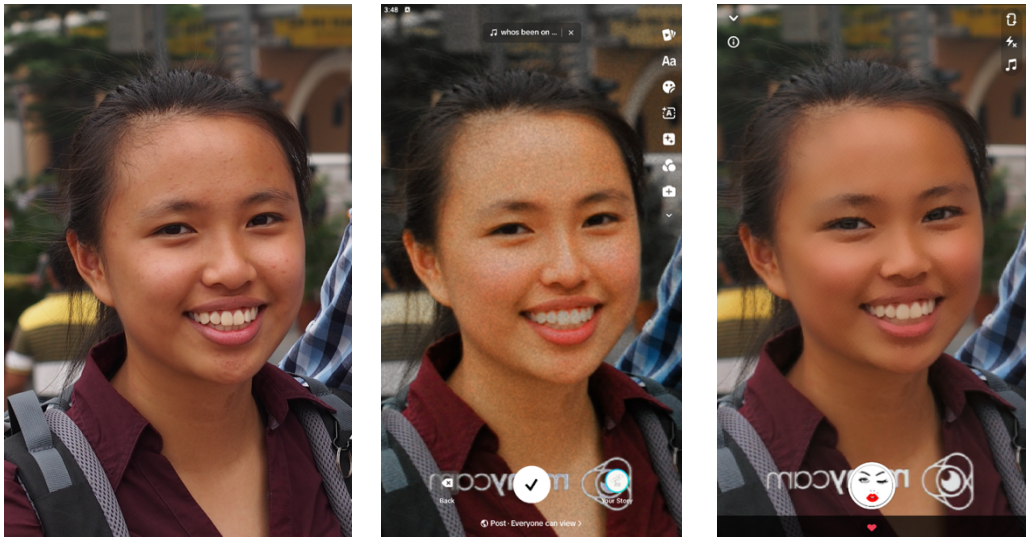


Figure 57. S4's photo unfiltered (left), filtered with TikTok's "Beauty Grain" (center), filtered with Snapchat's "stubborn" filter (right)[208]

The application of Snapchat's "stubborn" filter to the same subject changes her face by enlarging and lightening the colour of her eyes, making her nose smaller, and sharpening her jawline (see figure 57, right). The resulting image presents a modified version of the subject with larger eyes and a slimmer face, reflecting Western culture's association of large eyes with honesty and longer faces with higher intelligence (Black 30; Fribourg et al. 471). Indeed, the "stubborn" filter's change to S4's eyes is redolent of a similar modification process in cosmetic surgery colloquially known as "double-eyelid surgery," which was

[208] Source: Jin Sol Kim, "subject 4 before and after TikTok's 'Beauty Grain' and Snapchat's 'stubborn' filters," 2024, *TikTok/Snapchat*.

developed in South Korea as a corrective to the "inscrutability and deviance" of smaller "slanted" eyes in American military soldiers' Korean brides (Lee; see also Balsamo, "Cutting Edge" 213-4).[209] [210]

FaceScore's ratings of S4's filtered photos further demonstrate that ARB filters bring racialized subjects' filtered representations closer to an embodiment of Whiteness. Figure 58 shows that her ratings before and after filter application show a six-point increase from 84/100 to 90/100 with both the "Beauty Grain" and "stubborn" filters. The app's evaluation breakdown also illustrates that the filters' areas of "augmentation" mirror the golden ratio.

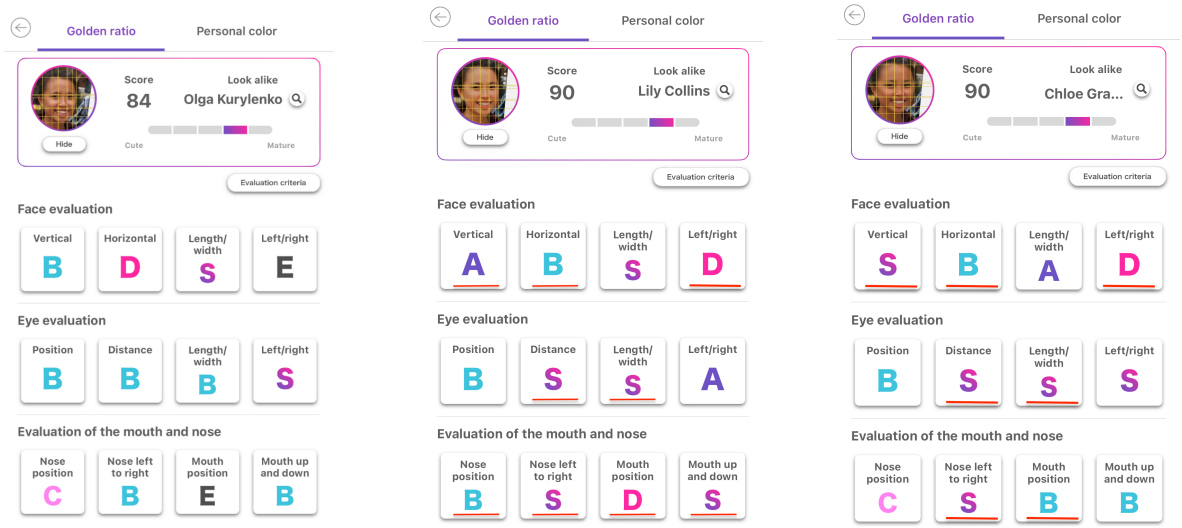


Figure 58. S4's ratings on FaceScore before (left) and after applying TikTok's "Beauty Grain" (center) and Snapchat's "stubborn" (right) filters[211]

[209] See Taeyon Kim's "The Moving Eye: From Cold War Racial Subject to Middle Class Cosmopolitan, Korean Cosmetic Eyelid Surgery, 1955-2001" for more on racism's role in the history of double-eyelid surgery and the ideological influence of the U.S. military on the Korean Peninsula in the 1950s.

[210] This cultural aversion to small eyes is also seen reproduced in facial recognition technologies. In 2016, for instance, it was reported that New Zealand's passport website rejected an Asian man's photo based on the false detection of closed eyes (Hongo).

[211] Source: Jin Sol Kim, "FaceScore's ranking results for subject 4" 2024, *FaceScore*.

For example, FaceScore rates the photo filtered with the "Beauty Grain" filter as more beautiful in 9 out of 12 evaluation areas: 3 out of 4 face-related areas (vertical, horizontal, and left/right), 2 out of 4 eye-related areas (distance and length/width), and 4 out of 4 nose/mouth-related areas (nose position, nose left to right, mouth position, and mouth up and down). Many of these areas become "more beautiful" by several degrees. For instance, while FaceScore rates the "Beauty Grain" filter as improving the position of S4's nose on her face by one letter grade from C to B, it rates her filtered nose's symmetry (left to right) as two letter grades better than her unfiltered nose—from a B to an S—thus bringing her filtered nose within the 90th percentile of the established ideal. Altogether, FaceScore's "empirical" results show that ARB filters "beautify" their users by modifying their facial features according to the golden ratio—that is, by producing an approximation of White phenotypes.

4.4.2 Diversified Phenotypes and Glocalized Whiteness

I have demonstrated that ARB filters allow racialized users to approximate an embodiment of Whiteness for symbolic capital; however, I clarify here that they do not transform racialized bodies into an incontrovertibly White body. Rather, the photographic codes and conventions reproduced by ARB filters depict White phenotypes in "interacti[on] with vastly different cultural milieus" (Asante in Seet 164)—that is, with varying sites of embodiment—in a way that resembles the commodification of Black women's bodies in Western culture (hooks, *Black Looks* 62). In doing so, ARB filters produce forms of Whiteness that take shape "beyond [their] traditional associations with European phenotypes (i.e. bodies), to … shift and yet maintain hegemonic dominance in a localised context" (Seet 164). I posit that by melding signs of Black racial embodiment with White phenotypes, ARB

filters produce an image of "glocalized Whiteness" (Seet), which obfuscates their overall White aesthetic under the guise of racial diversification and universal usability.

More specifically, hooks argues that since the 18th century, the Black female body has been viewed as hyper-sexual and has been subject to dissection and scrutiny by White publics. She cites, for example, the naked display of Sarah Bartmann (also known as "the Hottentot Venus") from 1810 to 1815, and her continued reduction to spectacle as her mutilated parts remained subject to scrutiny even after her death (*Black Looks* 62). Black features such as "having a big butt, large breasts, *plump lips,* and *tanned skin*" have since been dislocated from Black women's bodies and appropriated by White people to symbolize sexiness in the 20th and 21st centuries (Stevens 6, emphasis added). Dyer specifies that White people (especially White women) have practiced darkening themselves through tanning since the 20th century to "take on some of the imputed characteristics of dark people" such as "sensuality and fun" (49). It is therefore unsurprising that in addition to utilizing signifiers of Whiteness, 11 out of the 15 ARB filters I studied also produce modifications that culturally evoke Black phenotypes: plump lips and darker skin (see figure 59 for a more detailed breakdown of their occurrence).

Dyer and hooks both stress, however, that selective embodiments of racial characteristics are always offset by signs of Whiteness. That is, they are only seen "as desirable if they appear in the safer context of … white beauty" (Greene 113). Indeed, I observe that the racialized features in ARB filters are inscribed at the surface level of skin: as a cosmetic *addition* (i.e., more colour to one's skin or a lip filler) that is digitally embodied. On the other hand, ARB filters' White phenotypes are inscribed at a level deeper than skin.

These modifications often elongate or slim the user's face by making their chin smaller and more pointed, digitally shaving the width of their jawline, enlarging (the height) or widening (the width) of their eyes, and shaving down the width and/or adding a point or a high bridge to their noses. Such alterations mirror their equivalent, more invasive surgical procedures to digitally reconstruct the user's body at the structural level.

Social media	Filter name	Lip "augmentation"	Skin "augmentation"
1. Instagram	pretty pretty	Thicker top lip	N/A
2. Instagram	pretty	Slightly thicker	Darker/tanned
3. Instagram	Goxxtosa 2.0	Thicker	Darker/tanned
4. Snapchat	Sunkissed	Thicker	Darker/tanned
5. Snapchat	sunlight	Thicker	Darker/tanned
6. Snapchat	stubborn	Thicker top lip	Darker/tanned
7. Snapchat	Soft Fair Summer	Thicker bottom lip	N/A
8. TikTok	Smooth Skin	Plumper	Slightly darker
9. TikTok	Pinkie Pies Filter	Thicker bottom lip	N/A
10. TikTok	Sapphire Eyeliner	N/A	Darker/tanned
11. TikTok	Beauty Grain	Slightly thicker bottom lip	N/A

Figure 59. List of ARB filters with racially coded modifications

The differences in these digital features and their operational "logic" (i.e., their additive and subtractive functions) ultimately reveal the filters' underlying premise of Whiteness as whole. For White users, adding the embodiment of "sexy" racialized features allows them to display their "right to be various, literally to incorporate into themselves features of other peoples" while also "retain[ing] the signs of whiteness" (Dyer 49). On the flip side, these same filters suggest that the "beautification" of racialized users depends on a negation or *subtraction* of racial phenotypes.[212]

[212] This subtractive function also reflects views of ideal femininity, which is based on them being smaller to and lesser than their male counterparts.

Even then, ARB filters only allow racialized users to "resemble as closely as possible their white counterparts [without] detract[ing] from the racialized subtext" (hooks, *Black Looks* 72). In other words, for racialized users like S4 (see figure 54, center), the application of filters like the "Beauty Grain" filter produces whitened subjects but not subjects who are White. Rather, the combination of White-coded features (e.g., a narrow nose and light skin) and Black-coded features (e.g., plump lips) produces a glocalized or diversified form of Whiteness that is embodied by a racialized subject.

This production of a moderately diversified subject evokes the image of "interethnic" beauty presented by *TIME* magazine to the American public in 1993. The image, which was published on November 18, 1993 in *TIME's* special issue "The New Face of America" (see figure 60), depicts a computer-generated woman named Eve who is meant to represent a descendant of American immigrants. In her analysis of this image, Linda Brown critiques that in presenting "Eve" as "a preview of the new face of America" that mixes immigrant races together, the magazine simultaneously "reif[ies] the belief in an essential, biological, basis of race" (605) and minimizes the "threat" of racial difference by ignoring "the challenges and demands of cultural diversity" (606). Though "Eve" is described as a composite of "15 percent Anglo-Saxon, 17.5 percent Middle Eastern, 17.5 percent African, 7.5 percent Asian, 35 percent Southern European and 7.5 percent Hispanic" backgrounds, Brown points out that this figure is conventionally beautiful and "conforms to hegemonic ideals of physical desirability" that most Americans would identify as racially White (603). She elaborates that despite their use of scientific terms to describe the image, the essay's

authors do not explain the social reason behind using different ratios for the ethnic groups or how they selected the representative photos for each group.



Figure 60. Composite face from *Time's* special issue, November 18, 1993[213]

Similarly, I posit that ARB filters' production of glocalized Whiteness enables this social media affordance to skirt around the uncomfortable truth of using racial markers as symbolic capital in neoliberalism. By blending White and Black phenotypes within their templates and broadly referring to their changes as "beautification," ARB filters appear to provide a diverse and inclusive representation of beauty without having to address race explicitly. Instead of normalizing or celebrating racial embodiment, however, these algorithmic filters sweep aside "the vulnerability and racialized histories of the Black body" (Stevens in Greene 113), to ultimately reify the eugenic belief in White phenotypical superiority (Dyer 71) and solidify their status as symbolic capital in the 21st century.

[213] Source: Ted Thai, "'*The New Face of America'* cover photo," 18 Nov. 1993, *TIME,* https://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19931118,00.html.

4.4.3 Limitations to ARB Filters as a Form of Digital Respectability Politics

I have thus far examined the construction of ideal subjectivity and, by extension, the "disqualification" of racialized bodies in ARB filters' visual signifiers. Greene argues that as viewers "increasingly interact with ideal … images of the human … the persecution and disqualification of bodies labelled degenerate becomes more and more intuitive" (109). Indeed, I posit here that ARB filters' disqualification of racialized bodies is also apparent in their technical functionality, or more specifically, in its moments of operational failure.

According to Greene, a glitch is a momentary pause or stall in a technology's operation that "allow[s] the workings of the machine (and frequently also the connection between human users and the machine) to become visible" (4). Glitches can "interrupt … the normative usage of technologies themselves" (4) and "revea[l] the unsettled borders of bodies as they interface with technologies and other external forces" (7). Putting it differently, art historian Legacy Russell argues that glitches can thus be used as a tool to evaluate socio-cultural values that are embedded within machines.

Indeed, the occurrence of glitches in ARB filter-use confirms that these filters are a product of White racial ideology. Though their integration in mainstream social media apps suggests that these filters are universally usable, glitches in their application reveal that ARB filters inherently exclude certain individuals from their use, and therefore shape the creation of "new… racialized… bodies through digital means" (Nakamura in Elias and Gill 63). In failing to work or working in unintended ways on certain, racialized faces, I argue that ARB filters classify users' bodies into two categories of digital subjects: those that are "fixable" or able to embody Whiteness and those that are subaltern or beyond the reach of digital

beautification practices. I map these two categories onto Bourdieu's observations about assimilation and Spivak's identification of the subaltern as subjects that are dispossessed by colonial systems.

In his theory of symbolic capital, Bourdieu explains that symbols of social value are arbitrary and "receiv[e] the determinations that make it appear as necessary … only from its insertion in the relations of opposition constitutive of the system of distinctive marks" (297). As I have argued, for example, Whiteness gained much of its power from photographic constructions differentiating White subjects from racialized subjects. Bourdieu argues that to remake social orders or modify social positions, individuals of lower social strata thus employ strategies of assimilation or dissimilation—what I have conversely referred to as respectability politics (Higginbotham) throughout this dissertation. As I illustrated in Chapter Two, individuals who employ respectability politics attempt to "identify with groups spotted as superior" or "striv[e] to distinguish oneself from groups identified as inferior" by adopting cultural signifiers that are aligned with the dominant group (Bourdieu 295). In this regard, racialized neoliberal subjects' use of ARB filters can be seen as an assimilation strategy or a form of digital respectability politics that allows them to embody cultural beauty standards as a way of gaining symbolic capital.

Yet this form of digital respectability politics is not equally accessible to all users, with some racialized users unable to apply ARB filters during selfie-taking due to the algorithm's operational failures. These failures are, more specifically, a part of the larger problem of racial bias in computer vision and facial recognition technologies (FRTs)—an area of study that has garnered much attention over the last decade with FRTs' growing

proliferation in society (Hongo; K. Hill). As computer scientists like Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru as well as researchers at the National Institute of Science and Technology (NIST) have established, errors in facial detection and FRTs are commonly caused by a lack of demographic representation in the algorithm's training data (Grother et al.). Algorithms that are trained on datasets with a larger number and more variations of White face images, for instance, typically become more proficient at detecting or recognizing White faces over others. Commonly referred to as "coded bias" (Buolamwini), "algorithmic bias," or "algorithmic oppression" (Noble) among Responsible AI and technology ethicists, this technological failure indicates the reproduction of Western values in technoculture (Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 38). While continued efforts are being made in computer vision and FRT research to diversify and expand these datasets, the recurrence of glitches in ARB filter use suggests that some racialized bodies remain underrepresented in this visual technology.

Within applications of ARB filters, algorithmic bias specifically leads to the inability of racialized individuals to use these filters as intended because of technical failures in facial detection. That is, because these algorithms do not register certain configurations of racial phenotypes as forming a face image, they produce unintended effects following the technology's application. I identify three ways that ARB filters glitch as a result of algorithmic bias.

First, ARB filters sometimes appear to detect certain facial features but not others. In this case, the filter partially affixes itself to the subject's face. This misapplication manifests as a visual glitch on the social media preview screen that is characterized by broken pixels or skewed representations of facial features that attempt to recreate the user's face image. For

example, in one of my past uses of Snapchat, an ARB filter placed an outline of a lip (i.e., the lip colour modification) on top of my brow instead of my mouth. Figure 61 illustrates a more drastic example from my study, which I observed while applying TikTok's Pinkie Pies filter on a Black subject (S2). This type of glitch often produces a frustrating, and even jarring experience for the social media user.

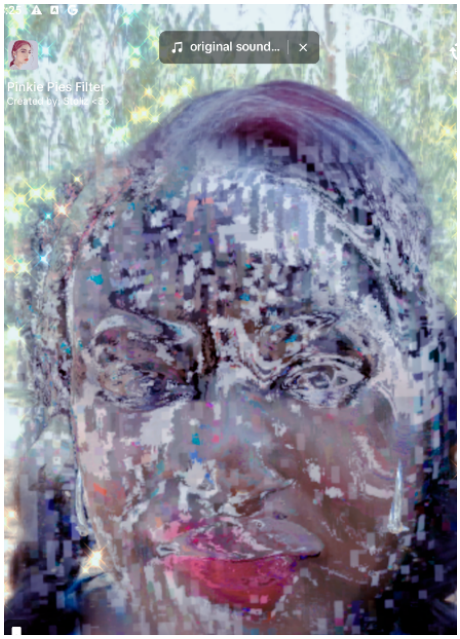


Figure 61. An ARB filter glitch from using TikTok's Pinkie Pies Filter on S2[214]

Second, and more commonly, some ARB filters detect the racialized user's face but produce an uncanny filtered image. In these cases, the filter modifies a user's facial features, but produces an exaggerated or "unnatural" effect (see figure 62, right). Such filtered results expose the racialized body itself as a sociocultural glitch; they symbolically mark the user's body as a deviation from the ideal White body.

[214] Source: Jin Sol Kim, "TikTok filter glitch for subject 2," 2024, *TikTok*.

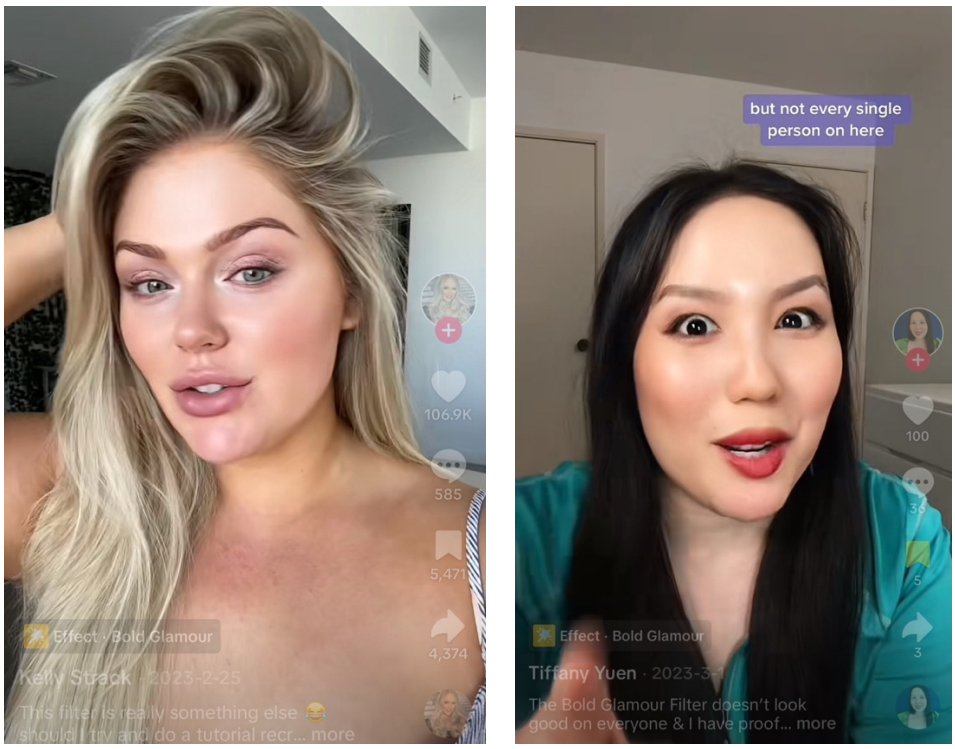


Figure 62. **"**Natural" filtered image of White user (left) vs. uncanny filtered image of Asian user (right) using TikTok's Bold Glamour filter[215]

At their most extreme, ARB filters may fail to register the racialized user's face altogether. In these cases, social media users are simply left with an unfiltered selfie despite attempting to use a filter (Lui; Nguyen). While the effects of this glitch appear less egregious than the other two forms (i.e., it doesn't warp the user's face), this technical malfunction nevertheless reveals the racialized subject's subaltern status by foregrounding their exclusion from digital beautification practices.

Altogether, such glitches exemplify what Safiya Noble refers to as "technological redlining," which are technological artifacts built on "digital decisions [that] reinforce

[215] Source: Kelly Strack, "Bold Glamour filter," 25 Feb. 2023, *TikTok,* tiktok.com/@kellystrackofficial/video/7204177583708065067?lang=en.; Tiffany Yuen, "Bold Glamour doesn't look good on everyone," 3 Mar. 2023, *TikTok,* tiktok.com/@thetiffanyyuen/video/7205447253333413162.

oppressive social relationships," which systematically exclude certain groups from accessing a resource (1). In flagging their faces as fundamentally different from that of ideal (i.e., White) social media users, these filters suggest that some individuals are beyond the possibility of beautification (Nguyen). These glitches therefore illuminate how ARB filters operate as an ideological tool that visually re-marks (and thus, discursively remarks upon) the racialized body as Other. By distinguishing between subjects who can participate in digital beautification practices and those who exist beyond the scope of entrepreneurialism, ARB filters "repatter[n] understandings of the body and ways of reading the bodies of others" (Greene 78) according to the "logic" of White visuality.

4.5 Concluding Thoughts: Locating User Agency in Algorithmic Photography

As a strategy of self-optimization that reproduces White-coded phenotypes, ARB filters identify racialized bodies (and especially racialized women's bodies) as a site of perpetual crisis that must be modified to signify social value (Greene; Miller and McIntyre; Spitzack in Balsamo, "Cutting Edge"). Indeed, in offering the affordance of real-time, digital modifications of selfies on an everyday basis, these filters have led to the self-comparison of users to their filtered images as a common practice. Though ARB filter use has been more widely associated with digitized dysmorphia in young women (Rajwar), the feeling of alienation that racialized users experience from seeing their self-images after using a filter (Greene 89) has also been compared to the negative psychological effects of racism that Fanon refers to as "corporeal malediction" (Roth 114; Ryan-Mosley, "Colorism").

However, despite their equivalence of Whiteness with beauty and their whitening effects on racialized users, ARB filters are an affordance of selfie photography; thus, their

use is ultimately part of a compositional choice the user makes during selfie-taking. Put differently, ARB filters have a reflexive element to them that must also be considered. As "most of these social media users are both in front of and behind the camera as they produce these images, and are keenly aware of how they are using [algorithmic] filters to manipulate their bodies" (Greene 112), I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion about agency in ARB filter use. Drawing on Donald Norman's notion of perceived affordances and Brock's concept of the libidinal economy (*Distributed Blackness*), I explore how ARB filters' glitches—and more specifically, racialized subjects' employment of them—can provide a basis for community-building and emotional expression. While I critique ARB filters' impact on racial discourse, making this distinction allows me to simultaneously locate racialized users' agency in an algorithmic age that threatens to feel hopelessly deterministic.

4.5.1 Embracing Glitches: Understanding Subaltern Bonding through Cultural Constraints and the Libidinal Economy

In evaluating the uses of screen-based artifacts, affordance theorist Donald Norman argues that "cultural constraints," which he defines as perceived affordances, play a more important role in shaping user behaviours than a technology's physical or technical constraints. Norman explains that cultural constraints, such as an in-group's cultural conventions, help individuals determine the socially acceptable uses of a technological artifact by implicitly "prohibit[ing] some activities and encourag[ing] others." Writing specifically about photography, Chalfen similarly asserts that in studying the medium's social uses, we must note that "there is an important difference between what we *can* do and what we *do* do; a difference between potential for occurrence and actual occurrence" (18).

In his book, *Distributed Blackness,* Brock contends that though racial discourse is mediated through modernity and technoculture's paradigms of productivity (12-13), its construction is not fully comprehensible through such paradigms alone. While racialized individuals sometimes engage in digital practices as a way of responding to racist ideology, in other ways, he points out, they privilege the construction of "affective and intimate in-group bonds" over responding to Whiteness (158). Brock proposes that invoking libidinal perspectives therefore allows us to consider how racialized individuals engage in digital practices in various, culturally coded ways.

Because Brock's invocation of the libidinal economy is rich and expansive, building on the existing works of Jean-François Lyotard, Fred Moten, Frank Wilderson, and Jared Sexton (*Distributed Blackness* 16), I provide here an overview of his key points. Brock identifies affect or emotion—that is, "an orientation between things (and bodies)—relations that shape the contours of social imaginaries" (Ahmed in Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 10)—as part of the libidinal. Drawing from Sexton's work, however, he asserts that the libidinal goes beyond emotion to also consider energies (32). For instance, according to Brock, the libidinal includes (Black) pathos, or "the speaker's mastery of the shared cultural commonplaces and energies that … support arguments made *to* an audience" (11). Engaging with the libidinal economy therefore allows us to avoid a reductionist assessment of racialized individuals' digital practices by revealing how they also serve non-productive and inefficient ends (34).

As I apply it here, the libidinal economy allows me to offer a different perspective on ARB filters and their uses than the neoliberal reading produced in this chapter. This

discussion does not negate the identification of ARB filters as a technology of beautification or self-optimization in the algorithmic age, with consequences for racial discourse. Rather, it acknowledges and illustrates that individuals on social media have a choice in their uses of technology—that they are not inherently restricted to using ARB filters as was intended.

The example that I focus on here centers around TikTok's release of the Bold Glamour filter in 2023 and the subsequent discovery of its glitch on non-White faces by racialized individuals (see figure 62 for a comparison on a White user and Asian user). When the Bold Glamour filter went viral in 2023, it was overall praised for its realism or its "natural" look, as it was the first ARB filter to be created using Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs). TikTok users marvelled that this filter, unlike previously existing ARB filters, did not easily detach from one's selfie as a result of movement or the introduction of foreign objects (e.g., a cup) in front of their face. Shortly after its release, however, multiple Asian users began posting videos on TikTok sharing their surprise and disappointment about the Bold Glamour filter's odd effects on their faces.

One user, @thetiffanyyuen states in a video posted on March 1, 2023 that "the bold glamour filter does not look good on everyone." Though this individual does not explicitly name the filters' off-putting racial effects, her filtered face image provides a powerful visual statement regarding Bold Glamour's technical shortcomings: while the filter successfully tracks her eye movements and mirrors her blinks, it does not map onto her non-White facial features in a "natural" way. As a result, this supposedly accurate filter produces an "unnatural" image of the individual that leaves her looking constantly startled (see figure 62, right).

Other Asian individuals shared similar sentiments about the filter. Donning the Bold Glamour filter in her video (figure 63, left), @katexyl asks her viewers: "Why does everyone else look so good with this filter but it made [sic] me age 134340 years?" Also commenting on the Bold Glamour filter's uncanny effect on her face, @shxrrie captions her video: "I swear this filter makes Asians look like Oli London. JUMPSCARE LOL" (see figure 63, right). This caption acknowledges that the filter whitens @shxrrie's features by comparing her filtered image to Oli London, a White internet figure, infamous for claiming to be "transracial" (and more specifically, Asian) through plastic surgery.

Though each of these examples demonstrates how ARB filters' algorithmic bias treats racialized individuals as subalterns, they more importantly exemplify how their technological glitches can unify a community by providing a shared experience of exclusion. Indeed, although the subtext for these examples is that the Bold Glamour filter does not look natural on their Asian faces, this racial commentary is not foregrounded in @thetiffanyyuen or @katexyl's posts. Rather than aiming to produce a deeper analysis or discussion of algorithmic bias, the primary function of these posts is for the individuals to express their feelings about the viral filter.

Even in @shxrrie's post, where the filter's unusual effect is more explicitly addressed, the critique takes a secondary focus to the individual's expression of affect: here, her facial expression and reference to an internet figure with little credibility, followed by the text "JUMPSCARE LOL" in all capitals, suggest that she is surprised but amused by the problem she is faced with. Indeed, despite being a common glitch among Asian TikTokers,

all three of these posts have a relatively low engagement rate even in 2025, two years after their initial posting (see figure 64 for engagement data).

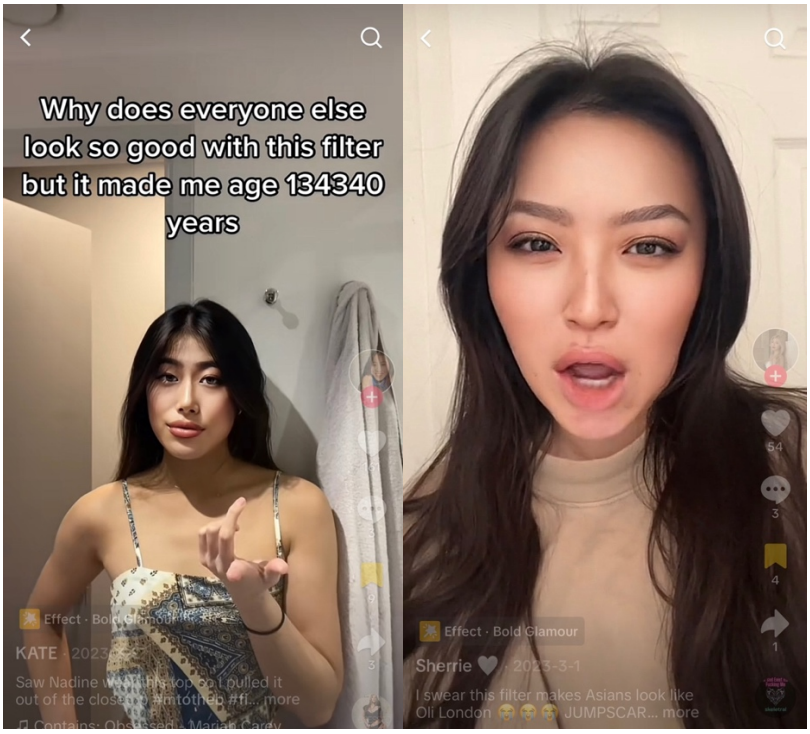


Figure 63. Bold Glamour filters on Asian TikTokers @katexyl (left) and @shxrrie (right)[216]

Username	# of Likes	# of Comments	# of Saves	# of Shares
@thetiffanyyuen	102	40	4	4
@katexyl	161	3	8	5
@shxrrie	54	3	4	3

Figure 64. User engagement data for sample Bold Glamour TikTok posts

Put differently, while these videos indicate that the embodiment of subjectivity (and for these users, visual racial discourse) are formed "in conversation with … whiteness as an epistemology" (Brock, *Distributed Blackness* 37), they therefore also demonstrate that individuals who are excluded from these filters' normative uses are not necessarily limited by

[216] Source: Kate, "this filter made me age," 2 Mar. 2023, *TikTok,* vm.tiktok.com/ZMSs9swU1/; Sherrie, "this filter makes Asians look like Oli London," 1 Mar. 2023, *TikTok,* vm.tiktok.com/ZMHgBqELbofQc-iBI3J/.

their constraints. Instead, these videos demonstrate that racialized TikTokers find alternative ways to participate in digital imaging that are informed by their in-group culture's socially accepted practices (e.g., sharing reaction videos), suggesting the importance of pathos in these social environments. Ultimately, such demonstrations of digital practice prove social media as providing rich experiences and connections for racialized people, despite these networks' increasingly opaque structures and insistence on self-optimization. They illuminate sites of everyday algorithmic imaging as networked spaces that require the negotiation of multiple publics, evolving social practices, and libidinal tensions. Most importantly, they illustrate that racialized people always have and always will find a way to reassert their agency, even if it's from within the glitches of algorithmic photo technologies.

Conclusion: How Do We Look from Here?

Photography has been an integral part of society and culture since its invention in 1837, just shy of two centuries ago. Indeed, with its digitalization and the subsequent commercialization of smartphones in the late 2000s, amateur photography has become a part of our everyday lives. More specifically, with the smartphone's affordances of immediate photo-taking and sharing, photography now plays a central role in communication and social interaction (Hand; Larsen and Sandbye; Pasternak; Shanks and Svabo; van Dijck). The act of photographing has become simplified as well as intensified; we "take photos" instead of "producing photography" and it is nearly impossible to go a day without engaging with the photographic form.

Yet the convenience and proliferation of digital photography comes with a price. As we find ourselves regularly immersed in a network of image taking and exchange, the relationship between photography and knowledge becomes more and more naturalized and renders the function of these images less noticeable. Photography scholar Gil Pasternak argues that "coupled with the social systems that organize them, … photographs … could [thus] become even more effective at withholding the influence they exert on our lives (Pasternak 451).

As countless scholars have critiqued, however, photographs do not provide access to an essential truth. Rather, they construct particular ways of seeing the world that are informed by social, cultural, and historical practices (Chalfen 43; Parsons 280; Sekula). They construct discourses, and collectively, a dominant visuality. This dissertation has argued that photography has historically shaped and continues to shape race and racial subjectivity in Euro-American culture. I have specifically examined how analogue and digital photography

produce forms of visual and colonial racial discourse by establishing processes of subjectification that are based on Western culture's shared knowledges and ideologies.

To illustrate my key contributions to Media Studies and Critical Race Studies—the two scholarly fields to which this research best belongs—I summarize the chapters here using a slightly different formula than was used when writing these sections. I organize and center each chapter's takeaways around two main parts of the photographic process: production and post-production. In thinking about the "production" factors in each chapter, I consider: 1) the particular version of reality that photography claims as true, 2) the main audience to whom this claim is made, and 3) the codes and conventions used to make this claim. In thinking about "post-production," I identify: 1) supplementary techniques used to anchor the photographic claims discussed in each chapter and 2) the specific contexts and channels of photographic distribution that allowed the claim to be made.

In Chapter One, I identified photography's role in the advancement of European and American colonialism. Analysing three photo-histories—that is, histories that are entangled with their particular deployments of photography—I argued that analogue photography was used from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries to reify race. Adapting the earlier (or in some cases, contemporary) codes and conventions of bourgeois portrait photography and criminal mugshot photography, colonial, eugenics, and lynching photography collectively produced a form of White visuality to claim the truth of a "natural" racial hierarchy.

The photographs in these photo-histories were created for White audiences, to convince and reassure them of White racial supremacy, especially over Black people. With colonialism, photography was used to establish racial difference to "justify" the conquest of

foreign lands and people; with eugenics, it was used to claim this difference to "legitimize" the reproductive control of racial populations; and with lynching, it was used to convince the White public of their moral superiority in the face of a changing social order. In each of these temporalities, photographs of "deviant" Black subjects and "respectable" White subjects were circulated and exhibited in public spaces (i.e., scientific journals, museums, newspapers, etc.); their "correct" readings were ensured through complementary written descriptions of respectability or deviancy.

During the same period, however, photography was also used to make counter-assertions about race. Spanning the historical contexts of American Reconstruction and Jim Crow, World War II, and the civil rights movement, the photographs I examined in Chapter Two were created to reconstruct Black subjects as respectable citizens within the White American imagination and were therefore circulated in White public spaces (e.g., exhibitions, community events, newspapers, etc.). Yet as my examination of photography progresses into the 1940s, 50s, and 60s with the latter two examples in this chapter, there is a shift in photographic codes and conventions. Although the spectre of White visuality persisted within public spaces with White-coded notions of respectability and deviancy, photographic production during this period moved away from the rigid conventions established in bourgeois portrait and criminal mugshot photography towards the more popular style of photojournalism.

In addition to this change, I identified a subsequent rupture in White visuality's hegemony around this time within photography's more private locales. Though this rupture remained limited to intimate spaces and audiences, photography's growing accessibility for

Black families with shifts in the social landscape revealed that alternate visualizations of Black subjectivity are possible with photography. While these images still followed many of the conventions established by Kodak culture for domestic photography, they nevertheless allowed Black people to produce images of themselves that reflect their own culture and worldview, instead of adhering to the embodiment of White respectability norms.

Then, photographic practice shifted with the medium's digitalization. With the commercialization of digital cameras in the early 2000s, photography became accessible to the masses, increasing its overall frequency and volume and diversifying the snapshot. More importantly, the smartphone's proliferation and the growth of cellular networks in the late 2000s heightened the visibility of personal images. Constantly tethered to their social networks, individuals could share their everyday images across multiple publics in an unprecedented way.

With its increased visibility, the current state of digital photography can help recover marginalized voices by allowing individuals who were historically oppressed to participate in generating culture (Miles 69). The case studies I analysed in Chapter Three—#IfTheyGunnedMeDown and #BlackoutDay—specifically use personal photos to argue that Black people are irreducible to the limited frames of White respectability and Black disrespectability. Using Twitter and Tumblr's hashtag affordance, these movements' Black participants specifically manage the interpretation of their photos by multiple (i.e., in-group and out-group) publics. That is, they simultaneously frame these photos in a way that privileges Blackness and boost the visibility of this framing to White publics. In sharing photos that work outside of the White public's established codes and conventions, these

photos challenge mainstream notions of Blackness to make alternate racial realities imaginable.

Yet within the last decade, White respectability has found itself a new face. As my work in Chapter Four demonstrates, augmented reality beauty (ARB) filters on mainstream social media (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok) and the subsequent selfies they produce recenter White visuality in everyday photographic practice. These filters and their resulting images echo eugenics and glamour photography's photographic codes and conventions to claim Whiteness as the ideal form of embodiment.

While ARB filters impose prescriptive frames on their users with the promise of gaining them symbolic capital, I have argued that some racialized individuals have appropriated this technology—and more specifically, its glitches—to produce images that rupture the filters' underlying claims. These photos draw on cultural subtexts to identify and operate within more intimate publics. The example I examined in this chapter is of Asian TikTokers, who utilize the Bold Glamour filter's uncanny effects to explore alternate forms of engagement beyond beautification online.

Ultimately, I have argued that photography plays a central role in producing racial discourse and counter-discourse. Using images that are produced by those within mainstream White culture and those from racialized (especially Black) standpoints, I have attended to the different ways in which analogue and digital photography help shape racial subjectivity. I underscore here that photography's digitalization has produced the conditions for racialized people to exercise agency in representation, by allowing their personal photos to traverse between varying degrees of public/private viewership online. That is, digital photography

affords what analogue photography did not: the ability for representations of identity that are formed beyond White visuality's constraints to reach mainstream White publics and challenge their dominant claims about race.

I close here by pulling on a thread that is woven into the examples of countervisuality in this dissertation and pointing to this theme as an area where work remains to be done. What Black domestic photography, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown photos, #BlackoutDay photos, and racialized TikTokers' appropriation of glitchy ARB filters allow to come into view is racial identity from a subaltern perspective. More specifically, as photographs from these sites are originally taken in intimate or private spaces, they offer a glimpse into how racialized individuals see themselves when they are surrounded by members of their own culture or community. Such photographic sites are therefore infused with desire: the desire to see themselves differently in mainstream media and to identify with their representations. In my discussion of study limitations and work to be done next, which I mention in the last section of Chapter Four, I touched on the importance of looking with and from the perspectives of racialized people, drawing on Brock's application of the libidinal economy to analysing digital practices. I return to this point here to highlight the need to study photography's affective experiences and libidinal economies.

That said, the call for an affective study of photography is not new. It was first established in photography studies in the 1960s and '70s (Miles 69), and again in the 1980s and '90s, when Black photographers and theorists reflected that their starting point as viewers is "being *moved* by an image" (Parsons 278). Indeed, I note that I too was moved by photos modelling uncanny Whiteness to pursue this dissertation research.

However, as I have explained that digital photography has shifted (at the very least) who does photography, what is shown, and where (and to whom) these images are shared, I call here for more studies into how affect and libidinal energies play a role in digital, social media, and algorithmic photography. This work is especially important in relation to anticolonial or decolonial projects in digital photography, as affect theory "undermines reductive notions of discourse (statements and ideology) by addressing emotional responses like sensation, touch, and intensity" (Emerling 108). As Brown and Phu succinctly put it, affective studies of photography allow us to more "[humanly] account for marginalized subjects such as women, queer subjects, and racialized groups, who are conspicuously excluded in approaches that focus on thinking" alone (qtd. in Emerling 109).

A good starting resource for this work is Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida,* which is commonly attributed as laying the foundation for an affect-based study of photography (Parsons 279). Reflecting on a photograph of his dear mother, Barthes demonstrates in his text that to understand the full meaning and power of photographs, we must necessarily also account for feeling. Some additional works on affect theory (and photography) include Sara Ahmed's 2004 article "Affective Economies," Margaret Olin's 2012 book *Touching Photographs,* and Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu's 2014 edited collection *Feeling Photography*.

Since its invention, photography has been entangled with the imagination and construction of race and racial subjectivity. To quote art historian Sarah Lewis, it is for this reason that "the endeavour to affirm the dignity of human life cannot be waged without

pictures, without representational justice." The question that remains is: how do we look from here?

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