Press Release

SONDRA PERRY

TYphoon COMING ON

6 March – 20 May 2018
Serpentine Sackler Gallery

Press images at serpentinegalleries.org/press

“When making a piece I want people to feel like they have space and agency’
Sondra Perry

This spring, the Serpentine presents the first European solo exhibition of American artist Sondra Perry (b. 1986, Perth Amboy, New Jersey) who explores the intersection of black identity, digital culture and power structures through video, media, installation and performance.

Perry makes work about blackness, black femininity and African American heritage, often taking her personal history as a point of departure. Her use of digital tools and material, ranging from blue screen technology and 3D avatars to found footage from the internet, reflects on these modes of representation and the abstraction of black identity in art and media. Perry has said: ‘I'm interested in thinking about how blackness shifts, morphs, and embodies technology to combat oppression and surveillance throughout the diaspora. Blackness is agile.’
This exhibition continues the Serpentine's engagement with Perry's practice, following her acclaimed performance for Park Nights 2016, where she shared a billing with the American poets Fred Moten and Eileen Myles.

Perry is committed to net neutrality and ideas of collective production and action, using open source software to edit her work andleasing it digitally for use in galleries and classrooms, while also making all her videos available for free online. This principle of open access in Perry's practice aims to privilege black life, to democratise access to art and culture, and to offer a critical platform that differentiates itself from the portrayal of blackness in the media. With viral imagery of black deaths in the US both sensationalised and the subject of widely disseminated memes, Perry wants to (re-)claim this digital space by foregrounding the use of technologies in her work.

This new site-specific installation at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery will incorporate existing works by Perry, including Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation (2016), a 3-D avatar of the artist questioning the current productivity and efficiency culture, and Wet and Wavy Looks—Typhoon coming on (2016), which both references and digitally alters JMW Turner's 1840 painting, The Slave Ship.

‘Perry's aim is to give agency to the black meme, imbuing it with a radical purpose that no longer infects just the internet but physical space.’
Bomb Magazine, 2017

The Serpentine spring season continues with the first UK solo exhibition of American artist Ian Cheng at the Serpentine Gallery from 6 March to 28 May 2018.

Perry's works can be viewed here: http://sondraperry.com/

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Image Credit: Sondra Perry, Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation (2016), courtesy of the artist.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

Sondra Perry (b. 1986, Perth Amboy, New Jersey) videos and performances foreground the tools of digital production as a way to critically reflect on new technologies of representation and to remobilise their potential. Her work revolves around blackness and black American history and ways in which technology shapes identity, often with her own personal history as a point of departure.

Recent solo exhibitions include flesh out, at Squeaky Wheel Film and Media Art Center in Buffalo, New York (2017); Resident Evil at The Kitchen, New York (2016) and at the Institute for New Connotative Action (2017). Group exhibitions include Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon, New Museum, New York (2017); Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism's
TYPHOON COMING ON

Sondra Perry
Sondra Perry (b. 1986, Perth Amboy, New Jersey) constructs powerful multifaceted narratives that explore the imagining – or imaging – of the black subject in contemporary media and culture, often taking her own history as a point of departure. Perry makes work that revolves specifically around black American history and the ways in which technology shapes identity; the artist’s use of digital tools and platforms – from blue screens to Chroma key to 3D avatars to footage found online – reflects critically on these modes of representation. Her investigations demonstrate that digital technology is an attribute of power, giving shape to and encompassing representation. The artist said: ‘I’m interested in how blackness is a technology, changing and adapting, through the constant surveillance and oppression of black folks across the diaspora since the 1600s. Unmediated seeing isn’t a thing’.

Perry engages with how identity is abstracted. In her seductive approach, abstraction serves simultaneously as subject matter and means: it manifests itself in the manipulation of hyper-visibility and invisibility of the body, as evident in her *Resident Evil* (2016) installation, where an extreme close-up of her skin is projected to create a ‘skin wall’.

This abstraction gives me a type of freedom of expression, an expanding of the visual language. But the issue I have with abstraction is that in art it is perceived as a neutral act. Abstraction isn’t neutral. Abstraction allows you to turn an entire group of people into a monolith. And when political abstractions happen over marginalised bodies, that’s a huge issue.

The Serpentine Galleries exhibition is Perry’s first solo presentation of her work in Europe. She has created an immersive environment with a newly conceived soundscape to accompany a fresh iteration of her animation *Wet and Wavy Looks—Typhoon coming on* (2018). The entire perimeter of the gallery space is wrapped in a series of seamless immersive projections. This animation features a digitally manipulated image of J.M.W. Turner’s 1840 painting *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*, which depicts the drowning of 133 slaves by the captain of the British slave ship *Zong* to claim compensation for these ‘goods’ under the salvage clause of the ship’s insurance policy. The visitor, too, is submerged within the metaphorical reconstitution of Turner’s painting.

The idea of abstraction, effacing, or being a stand-in, is expressed through Perry’s use of Chroma key blue walls, with which the viewer is confronted as they enter the Gallery. This visual effect and post-production technique allows the compositing of images or videos together. When Perry
uses this technique, she suggests that the visitor is a participant in the work against a backdrop that has yet to be defined and within a context that is yet to be developed through post-production technologies.

The exhibition at the Gallery also includes the artist’s ‘workstations’, such as *Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation* (2016), modelled after a bicycle workstation that the visitor can actively engage with and use. Positioned above the handlebars are three monitors that present the viewer with a bald avatar who delivers a monologue on the contradictory definitions of success offered by contemporary capitalism. Also featured in the show is a revisited version of *Resident Evil* (2016), an audio-visual collage of footage of police brutality as reported by victims and protesters, juxtaposed with that of Fox News, and eventually cut through with Eartha Kitt singing ‘I Want to Be Evil’ – an ironic reference that deconstructs racial prejudice and discrimination.

Our conversation with Perry began during her participation in one of Serpentine Galleries’ Park Nights in 2016, during which she brilliantly responded to a reading by poets Fred Moten and Eileen Myles with a moving-image intervention. We were delighted to work with Perry then, and are thrilled to have been able to strengthen this relationship while collaborating on this exhibition. We are deeply grateful to her for accepting our invitation to conceive the site-specific installation at the Serpentine Galleries. Her dedication, energy and enthusiasm have been key to creating this wonderful and meaningful exhibition.

This volume, designed by Kristin Metho, is Perry’s first catalogue. We are grateful to the authors, Nora N. Khan, Natasha Marie Llorens and Soyoung Yoon, whose voices provide great insight into her practice. The publication includes reprints of essays that offer context for reading Perry’s work and that have been foundational source texts in the development of the artist’s thinking. We are also grateful to the contributors who have granted us permission to reprint these essays: the chapter ‘Branding Blackness’ from Simone Browne’s *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015) and Elizabeth Alexander’s essay “‘Can you be BLACK and look at this?’: Reading the Rodney King video(s)” published in 1994. We also extend our gratitude to contributors to Perry’s zine designed by Haynes Riley and produced on the occasion of the artist’s exhibition at The Kitchen, New York in 2016, manuel arturo abreu, Hannah Black, Aria Dean, Robert Jones, Jr., Sable Elyse Smith, Hito Steyerl and Lumi Tan.

The exhibition at the Serpentine Galleries would not have been possible without the generosity of a number of individuals and organisations. Special thanks to Shelley Fox Aarons and Philip Aarons; Bernard I. Lumpkin and Carmine D. Boccuzzi; and Rena and Scott Hoffman for their invaluable support towards the exhibition. We are grateful to Bridget Donahue for her commitment to Perry’s work and support throughout the development of the exhibition.

We would like to offer our continued thanks to Bloomberg Philanthropies for partnering with us on the Serpentine’s Digital Engagement Platform, which enables us to widen the reach of our audiences. Our thanks also go out to our advisors AECOM and Weil who offer their exceptional expertise to help us realise the ambitions of our exhibitions.

The Council of the Serpentine is an extraordinary group of individuals that provides ongoing and important assistance to enable the Serpentine to deliver its ambitious art, architecture, education and public programmes. We are sincerely appreciative, too, of the support from the Innovation Circle, the Americas Foundation, the Asian Council, the Learning Council, Patrons, Future Contemporaries and Benefactors of the Serpentine Galleries.

The public funding that the Serpentine receives through Arts Council England provides an essential contribution towards all of the Galleries’ work and we remain very appreciative of their continued commitment.

Finally, we would like to express our appreciation to the remarkable Serpentine team: Lizzie Carey-Thomas, Head of Programmes; Amira Gad, Exhibition Curator; Mike Gaughan, Gallery Manager; and Joel Bunn, Installation and Production Manager. They have worked closely with the wider Serpentine Galleries staff to realise this project.

Hans Ulrich Obrist Yana Peel
Artistic Director CEO
He should be left to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible tormentors, ever ready to snatch, from his infernal grasp, his trembling prey. In pursuing his victim, let him be left to feel his way in the dark; let shades of darkness, commensurate with his crime, shut every ray of light from his pathway; and let him be made to feel, that, at every step he takes, with the hellish purpose of reducing a brother man to slavery, he is running the frightful risk of having his hot brains dashed out by an invisible hand.
— Frederick Douglass

And in the theater, I want to change my seat
Just so I can step onto everybody’s feet.
— Eartha Kitt

We could argue that Sondra Perry has created a new type of modern exhibition space to display her video installations – from the black box of the cinema theatre to the white cube of the museum or the gallery to, now, ‘the blue room’. For Perry’s exhibitions, the walls of the gallery are painted a bright, matte blue – precisely, Chroma key blue – the background colour used in film and video production. For her solo show Resident Evil at The Kitchen in New York City in 2016, Perry’s blue room also contained a roving, robotic Roomba vacuum cleaner, which carried on its back a set of photocopied zines containing a selection of theoretical texts. The vacuum cleaner circled the space of the gallery, criss-crossing the floor in spirals, moving in between artworks and at times brushing up against or bumping into viewers’ feet. It not so much offered as insisted upon its perspective from the ground: read me. After seeing Perry’s exhibition, we might be reminded of the tale of the ‘rogue Roomba’ that somehow switched itself on, rolled onto a hot plate and set itself ablaze. If the malfunction of the Roomba circulated as an urban myth of a defiant act of self-immolation – ‘a rogue Roomba makes robot history’ – it also inscribed the vacuum cleaner into the history of robots, as a robot, underscoring the etymology of the word ‘robot’ as forced labour, or serf or slave.

In Perry’s blue room, the reference to the Chroma key blue of digital world-making speaks to fantasies of space travel: the possibility of positioning a subject against any projected background, in any place, every place, particularly amidst the darkness of the night sky or deep space. The blue screen, because of its low luminosity, functions as an especially effective background for projecting the black void of outer space, its infinite nothingness. Perry’s blue room then would seem to be a logical extension of cinema’s black box as a quasi-sensory-deprivation chamber that seeks to negate the mobility of viewers’ bodies and to deprive or rather suppress our sense of the immediacy of our surroundings, so as to project us into the narrative space of the film on screen: ‘I’ am ‘free’ of the determinations...
of my body, as worlds move around me, for me. In the context of new scholarship returning to the problematic of the cinematographic apparatus, art historian Noam M. Elcott argues for the historical significance of ‘artificial darkness’. As a complement to modernity’s conquering of the dark with artificial light, a controlled production of darkness as technology is deployed specifically to create ‘spacelessness’, a suspension of corporeality in the theatre, for the fusion of the physical space of bodies and the virtual space of images. However, the possibilities of the blue screen or green screen technique depend upon the sharpness of the contrast between the subject in the foreground and the background, that is, upon the subject’s capacity to separate and define itself as a figure against the ground. Figure versus Ground. Light versus Dark. White versus Black (Blue)... What, then, of subjectivities – and bodies – that do not seem to possess the stabilised configuration of an ‘I’? What of the figure that is diffuse, disporic, both one and many, localised in neither a body or an identity? What of the flesh?

Figure versus Ground: recent scholarship attests to the historic instability of photographing or filming dark skin in colour. The very technology of colour photography was developed with white skin as the norm, blowing out the varying tones and textures of darker skin, rendering it at times inseparable from the background, as if the illegibility of blackness were but a technical error. Technology is ideology. In the late 1970s, while on assignment in Mozambique, filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard famously refused to use Kodak film because of its inherent, built-in ‘racism’. In his 2016–17 retrospective exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York – which coincided with Perry’s own exhibitions in New York – artist Kerry James Marshall critiqued film’s norms of colour calibration with a self-portrait, Black Artist (Studio View) (2002), shot under a black light bulb. The ultraviolet radiation submerges the scene in a dark blue hue that highlights his white shirt with a brilliant, fluorescent light but renders his black skin even more indiscernible at first glance. The photograph compels us to look and look again, and again, before we can grasp the lines, figures, curves and depth of the darkness of the blue.

At the Met Breuer, Marshall’s challenge for viewers to recalibrate ways of seeing and to shift attention away from the reflective luminosity of whiteness is made all the more devastating – and necessary – since it is displayed immediately adjacent to, as if facing off, another work from the same year, Heirlooms and Accessories (2002). The triptych of prints presents three white women’s faces, from across three different generations, picked out against a white background by ornate gold lockets. The women look back at us as our eyes slowly start to see – and to recognise – the faintly traced figures that emerge from the background, which at first look like the empty space of a blank canvas: the whitened-out bodies of two young black men hanging from a tree and the tightly packed,
In Perry’s work, the fraught relation to the personal pronoun ‘I’ – as a form of political subjectivity, of narrative agency, of being – is evidenced through the precarity of black bodies, brought (again) to national attention in the United States via the circulation of video-taped police violence, as in the killing of Eric Garner, Freddie Gray or Korryn Gaines, which followed years of prosaic surveillance, repeated stop-and-searches, and relentless, arbitrary harassment for small-scale infractions. To watch, however, is not necessarily to witness, and Perry underscores the heavy price of witnessing, the weight born by those with the absolute necessity to record – and to share. In 1994, in view of the Rodney King video, the poet Elizabeth Alexander wrote of the spectacle of black bodies in pain as an American national tradition, staged primarily for and by white people. She adds, ‘but in one way or another, black people also have been looking’. For Alexander, emphasis is on the function of this looking, how it constitutes a knowledge of violence and her vulnerability to it, the certainty that ‘it would be my turn next’. It is a bodily experience that comes ‘to reside in the flesh’ as shared forms of storytelling, of history, of memory, of the lived experience of becoming, of being black in this country. ‘I am talking about what it is to think of oneself, in this day and age, as a people.’ To assert again that race is a social construct is also to emphasise how race is practised in everyday life, instilled in the body as a habit, a reflex, a need – or an ‘interface’.

As part of the video installation Resident Evil, a centrepiece of Perry’s eponymous exhibition at The Kitchen, a video plays on a television monitor on top of a piece of living-room furniture. Over a Chroma key blue screen, the video begins with an audio interview with Ramsey Orta, who recorded his friend Eric Garner’s death by means of a police officer’s illegal choke hold in 2014. The reporter comments on the steadiness of Orta’s hand, which remains remarkably steady, firm, unwavering, holding up the mobile-phone camera, despite the distressing intimacy of the scene (‘took my life from me, took my friend’s life from me’). Perry’s video ends with an audio recording of Korryn Gaines narrating her own impending death over Instagram in 2016. ‘Record everything’, we hear her say to her five-year old son. This is layered over a scrolling text that recounts an episode from Perry’s own childhood that took place at the entrance of her home, eerily echoing the scene of Gaines’ death. The daily strain of such proximity to premature death, its utter normalcy, collapses pronouns as well as verbal tenses: that could be me, that is me.

Perry’s video installation Resident Evil takes its name from the video-game-based media franchise created by Shinji Mikami and Tokuro Fujiwara. Released in 1996, the debut game centred around characters who are trapped in the maze-like inner sanctum of a mansion and must fight off sudden attacks from zombies and a variety of other mutants and monsters resulting from bio-weapons research gone awry; in Japan, the game is called Biohazard. The games initiated the term ‘survival horror’ for a new sub-genre that emphasised the player’s vulnerability and lack of control over a hostile environment; the plot is not so much to fight as to survive and to get out. Perry’s Resident Evil appropriates the conventions of the survival horror genre to turn the simple act of walking home alone at night into the horror of stalking/being stalked, scored to soundtrack excerpts from sci-fi horror films such as Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979) and Predator (John McTiernan, 1987). However, the alien other, the ‘evil’, that awaits in the living room is none other than the glorious Eartha Kitt. ‘I wanna be evil, little evil me / Just as mean and evil as I can be.’ Is the plan to get in or to get out?

In Perry’s work, there is not only the burden of the necessity to record and to share, but also the exuberance, the black joy, of this existence through sharing. In the netheind asynciotheels, the video ends with another rotating image window of black death, the video ends with another rotating image window of a spontaneous scene of voguing. Under the orange streetlights and the ill-at-ease looks of armed police, the protestors clap and dance in rhythm and in jubilation with the voguing dancer, the transgender rights activist Micky Bradford, as she struts, poses, sashays, dips and drops, turning with a flip of long hair and a defiant raising of clenched fist as a face-off against the police. To repeat: it’s the ‘interface’, the Perry-like avatar tells us.

Via her Roomba zines, Perry refers to the proposal for a new measure of virality, indeed promiscuity, for evaluating images, what filmmaker and theorist Hito Steyerl called the ‘defense of the poor image’ – the image that is valued for the ‘velocity, intensity, spread’ of its circulation, exemplified in the ludic velocity of the Roomba, that purveyor of critical intervention underfoot. According to Steyerl, the poor image is ‘a copy in motion’. Across innumerable rips, reformattting, re-editing, uploads,
natural death, it would be the loss of the owners of the ship; but if they
were thrown alive it would be the loss of the underwriters. Another ten
slaves threw themselves overboard in what Collingwood later described as
an act of defiance. In Turner’s painting, the sea is abstracted into luminous
swirls of yellows, reds, oranges and blues, dabs of paint as body parts,
the hands, the feet, the shackles, and the voracious rush of the fish and
the sea gulls. Through the animating close-up, Perry further abstracts the
swell and dissipation of waves, the morph, warp, mutation of the sea-as-
flesh, ‘the hurried blur’.

Sea-as-flesh, flesh-as-sea: if the fantasy of science fiction pivots around
the primal scene of the ‘close encounter’ with the alien other, then according
to artists of Afrofuturism, filmmaker and theorist Kodwo Eshun argues,
the close encounter has happened ‘on a giant scale’ via the almost 400
years of trans-Atlantic slavery. ‘Afrofuturism uses extraterrestriality as a
hyperbolic trope to explore the historical terms, the everyday implications
of forcibly imposed dislocation, and the constitution of Black Atlantic
subjectivities: from slave to negro to coloured to African American.’
Eshun offers an example of a retelling of the Middle Passage as science fiction from the Detroit-based electronic music duo
Drexicya. In the liner notes to the CD of their 1997 album The Quest,
they speculate that ‘Drexicyans’ are mutated descendants of the African
slaves who were thrown overboard, of the children who were born,
survived and thrived underwater, of those who mutated and migrated along
with the currents of the Atlantic Ocean, to become the stuff of myth:

Could it be possible for humans to breathe under-
water? A foetus in its mother’s womb is certainly
alive in an aquatic environment. During the greatest
holocaust the world has ever known, pregnant
America-bound African slaves were thrown over-
board by the thousands during labor for being sick
and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could
have given birth at sea to babies that never needed
air? Recent experiments have shown mice able to
breathe liquid oxygen. Even more shocking and con-
clusive was a recent instance of a premature
human infant saved from certain death by breathing
liquid oxygen through its underdeveloped lungs.
These facts combined with reported sightings of
Gillmen and Swamp Monsters in the coastal swamps
of the South Eastern United States make the slave
trade theory startlingly feasible. Are Drexciyans
water breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of
those unfortunate victims of human greed? Have
they been spared by God to teach us or terrorize
us? Did they migrate from the Gulf of Mexico to the
Mississippi river basin and on to the great lakes of Michigan? Do they walk among us? Are they more advanced than us and why do they make their strange music? What is their Quest?

The effects of such myth telling, Eshun argues, is not a disavowal of the reality of slavery but rather its defamiliarisation through ‘a temporal switchback’. Moreover, it attends to the memory of the trauma of trans-Atlantic slavery by not only relating it to the violence of the present but also paying heed to ‘the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory, and the future conditional’. And to the myth of the Drexciyans, could we not add the Perry-like avatar in the liminal space, the interface, of the Chroma key blue or better yet, her skin-become-flesh-become-sea-become-skin?

To see videos such as Wet and Wavy Looks — Typhoon coming on for a Three Monitor Workstation or Graft and Ash for Three Monitor Workstation, we are invited to sit in rowing machines, exercise bikes, or treadmills, advertised as ‘workstations’, but here transformed into infernal machines. The machines have ill-fitting seats, the pedals are flipped and the effort to produce ‘a healthier, better you’ is further impeded by containers of Eco Styler hair styling gel, as if to underscore the fatigue – the futility – of the desire to be a productive subject of capital, a good subject of the state. In Graft and Ash, Perry’s likeness appears as an ill-fitting avatar – ‘Sondra’s body type was not an accessible pre-existing template’ – and its automated voice speaks of the absurd, even fatal, exhaustion of such desires, such wishful thinking, as in the belief in ‘the just-world hypothesis’. Indeed, it is the predictive philosophy of policing behaviour (‘broken windows theory’) that has been the motor for expanding the scope and intensity of the surveillance of particular communities, exposing the entire neighbourhood to a harsh, punitive light, where every move, every gesture could become probable cause. For one of the most recent plans by the City of New York to make neighbourhoods safer, floodlights have been installed around public-housing units, as part of a new strategy called ‘Omnipresence’. Critics have pointed out the abrasiveness of the lights and their loud, continued hum, their disruption of sleep, of rest. Historian Simone Browne emphasises the continuity of Omnipresence with eighteenth-century ‘lantern laws’ that required slaves to carry a lit candle after dark; technology-as-race: the black body as cyborg.

‘I wanna be evil’, we hear Kitt sing. We could also recall Bertolt Brecht’s description of a police chief’s fitful dreaming, where, amidst the hallucinatory fumes of fear and bad conscience, the tentative stirrings of the people are envisioned as a flood. ‘Once it has begun, it never ceases... they fill everything, like water, they seep through everything, like water, they have no substance. Of course, the police throw themselves against them, of course, batons are flying, but what’s this? They strike right through the bodies.’ Such dreams have consequences, Brecht adds. In Perry’s blue room, we understand the force, the urgency of that flood.

Soyoung Yoon is Assistant Professor and Program Director of Art History & Visual Studies at The New School in New York. Also, Yoon is a Visiting Faculty at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program (ISP).
NOTES

1 This is a revived and expanded version of an essay published in Millennium Film Journal, no 65, spring 2017, pp 30–17 in tandem with Sondra Perry’s exhibition at Film, The Kitchen, New York City, 2016 and Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center, Buffalo, 2017.

2 Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (New York: Penguin, 2003 [1855]) p 236

3 An electronic file of Perry’s zine 000.000 Nothing. No Confidence, NoNothing, No000 can be downloaded here: <https://sondarperry.com/Resident-Evil> [accessed January 2018]


5 "Resident-Evil' [accessed January 2018]

6 Indeed, canonical essays such as the 1970 text by Marshall, mentioned in the introduction, in Kerry James Marvel: Black to the Future, edit. (London: Verso Books, 2017). Especially in relation to the killings in Baltimore, Maryland, see the contribution of Tumil Vasquez’s ‘The Baltimore Uprising: This is how an entire community can be criminalized and could reveal in part why Freddie Gray was so far from black, hidden, ‘front up like a pretzel’, and arrested outside the Gilmore Momes on Thursday night, April 30, 2015, when he did all he had done was make eye contact with a police officer and then run as fast as he could.’

7 "Memes move like blackness itself, and the meme’s trajectory is often described as a ‘black hole’ into which the meme is swallowed. The meme’s power is in its ability to absorb other memes and reappropriate them, creating a new meme that is larger and more powerful than the original. This process is known as meme multiplication, where the original meme is replicated and modified, creating a new meme that is different from the original but still recognizable as belonging to the meme’s family.


9 "Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries. This history moves from public festivals, pinings, and lynchings to the gladiatorial arena of basketball and boxing. In the 1990s African American bodies have been the site on which national trauma – sexual harassment, date rape, drug abuse, AIDS, racial and economic urban conflict – has been dramatized," Elizabeth Alexander, "Can you be BLACK and Live at That?" Reading the Rodney King Video(s), Public Culture, 7 no. 1, fall 1994, p 79

10 Alexander cites Hume Spellers’ differentiation between ‘joke’ and ‘falsch’ in ‘Mas’s Baby, Papa’s Meme: An American Grammar Book', Diacritics, vol 17, no 2, summer 1987, pp 64–61. ‘If we think of the flesh as a primary narrative, then we mean its textual, dirred, riped-sapteness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard.’ Spillers, n.p. p 87

11 ibid p 78

12 In the epilogue to her Roomba zines, Perry cites the Afrofuturist artist Sun Ra: ‘So all you see on this planet is something evil like the white man being successful and successful and successful and I see evil killing black men every day, destroying him. Why should the good? No! It’s better for me to come to the white race and say, “Yes, we evil people should sit down to the table and talk together. You evil, I evil too. Now them other folks you dealing with are good black folks. I’m not good and you’re not good. We understand each other”’

13 Lecture excerpt from the course ‘The Black Man in the Cosmos’, UC Berkeley, 4 May 1972


15 ‘Memes move like blackness itself, and the meme’s trajectory is often described as a ‘black hole’ into which the meme is swallowed. The meme’s power is in its ability to absorb other memes and reappropriate them, creating a new meme that is larger and more powerful than the original. This process is known as meme multiplication, where the original meme is replicated and modified, creating a new meme that is different from the original but still recognizable as belonging to the meme’s family.’


19 ‘Memes move like blackness itself, and the meme’s trajectory is often described as a ‘black hole’ into which the meme is swallowed. The meme’s power is in its ability to absorb other memes and reappropriate them, creating a new meme that is larger and more powerful than the original. This process is known as meme multiplication, where the original meme is replicated and modified, creating a new meme that is different from the original but still recognizable as belonging to the meme’s family.’


21 Kodwo Eshun, ‘Further Considerations on Afrofuturism’, CI: The Centennial Review, vol 3, no 2, 2003, p 299. For a particularly vivid portrayal of the ‘giant scale’, see the following from Rediker’s The Slave Ship: ‘The most extraordinary four hundred years of the slave trade, from the late fifteenth to the late nineteenth century, 12.4 million souls were loaded onto slave ships and carried through a “Middle Passage” across the Atlantic to hundreds of delivery points stretched over thousands of miles. Along the dreadful way, 1.2 million of them died, their bodies cast overboard to the sharks that followed the ships. Most of the 10.2 million who survived were thrown into the bloody maw of a killing plantation system, which would in turn resist in all ways imaginable, yet ever these numerical annihilation do not convey the magnitude of the drama. Many people captured in Africa died as they marched in chains and boats and coffee (human) slaves to the ships, though the lack of records makes it impossible to know their precise number. Another way to look at the loss of life would be to say that an estimated 14 million people were enslaved to produce a “yield” of 3 million longer-surviving enslaved Atlantic workers.’ Ibid p 5

22 Eshun, op cit p 299

23 Ibid p 300

24 Ibid p 293

25 Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter, Jordan T. Camp and Christine Heatherton (ed.), (London: Verso Books, 2017). Especially in relation to the killings in Baltimore, Maryland, see the contribution of Tumil Vasquez’s ‘The Baltimore Uprising: This is how an entire community can be criminalized and could reveal in part why Freddie Gray was so far from black, hidden, “front up like a pretzel”, and arrested outside the Gilmore Momes on Thursday night, April 30, 2015, when he did all he had done was make eye contact with a police officer and then run as fast as he could.’


Two days before embarkation, the head of every male and female is neatly shaved; and if the cargo belongs to several owners, each man’s brand is impressed on the body of his respective negro. This operation is performed with pieces of silver wire, or small irons fashioned into the merchant’s initials.

—Theodore Canot, Memoirs of a Slave Trade

We have been branded by Cartesian philosophy.

—Aime Cesaire, Discourse on Colonialism

Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name.

—Hortense Spillers

You can find Wilson Chinn on eBay.com or other online auction sites for sale among antebellum ephemera. Wilson Chinn’s portrait was taken around 1863 by Myron H. Kimball, a photographer with an interest in daguerreotype and a correspondent with the Philadelphia Enquirer during New York’s 1853 World’s Fair. Kimball also served as an official photographer for the Freedman’s Bureau. In this particular portrait, a chain is tied around Chinn’s ankle and various tools of torture lie at his feet: a paddle, a leg iron, a metal prodding device. The caption below the image reads, “exhibiting instruments of Torture used to punish slaves.” The carte de visite captures Wilson Chinn’s stare at the camera. Particularly striking is the “longhorn,” or pronged metal collar, fastened around Chinn’s neck. An 1862 copy of Harper’s Weekly describes this torture device as consisting of three metal prongs, “each two feet in length, with a ring on the end,” to which would be attached a chain to “secure the victim beyond all possible hope of escape.” This burden-some device would prevent its wearer from “lying down and taking his rest at night.”

Not entirely visible in this carte de visite is the brand on Chinn’s forehead: the initials V.B.M.

Two days before embarkation, the head of every male and female is neatly shaved; and if the cargo belongs to several owners, each man’s brand is impressed on the body of his respective negro. This operation is performed with pieces of silver wire, or small irons fashioned into the merchant’s initials.

—Theodore Canot, Memoirs of a Slave Trade

We have been branded by Cartesian philosophy.

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namely written narratives, runaway notices, a carte de visite. This is a difficult archive to write about, where iron instruments fashioned into rather simple printed type became tools of torture. It is also a painful archive to imagine, where runaway notices speak of bodies scarred by slavery and of those that got away: “Twenty dollars reward. Runaway from the subscriber, a negro woman and two children; the woman is tall and black, and a few days before she went off, I burnt her with a hot iron on the left side of her face; I tried to make the letter M.”

The branding of the slave played a key role in the historical formation of surveillance. Although branding was practiced as a means of punishment for white servants and sometimes to punish abolitionists, it is not the focus of my discussion here. This practice has been documented by Marcus Wood’s research on the branding of abolitionist Jonathan Walker with ss for “Slave Stealer” on his right palm in 1844 as punishment for his attempt to help enslaved people make their escape from Florida to freedom. Wood argues that Walker’s branding was “the most visible brand in the history of American slavery” and that through its display, its reproduction in printed texts and the suffering of the slave. “Instead, I look here at how the branding of blackness remains visible, and also makes certain brands visible. Put differently, this chapter examines the discursive practices for its own making and, in the case of Thomas’s Banded series, unmaking.

BRANDING BLACKNESS

Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, “This is your ma’am. This,” and she pointed, “I am the only one got this mark now executing if anything happens to me and you can’t tell me by face, you can know me by this mark.” Scared me so. All I could think of was how important this was and how I needed to have something important to say back, but I couldn’t think of anything so I just said what I thought, “Yes, Ma’am.” I said, “But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me too,” I said. —Sethe in Toni Morrison’s Beloved

What can branding during the transatlantic slave trade tell us about the production of racial difference? In her influential 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers emphasizes that the trafficking of humans in the trans-atlantic slave trade marked a violent “theft of the body,” rendering the captive body “a territory of cultural and political maneuver.” Branding was a practice through which enslaved people were reduced as commodities to be bought, sold, and traded. At the scale of skin, the captive body was made the site of social and economic maneuver through the use of iron type. The brand, sometimes the crest of the slave trade, often denoted the relation between the body and its said owner. In an early eighteenth-century account of slavery along the Cape Coast of Africa, John Atkins, a surgeon for the British Royal Navy, remarked of those enslaved there, “they are all marked with a burning iron upon the right Breast, D.Y. Duke of York.”

In this chapter, I examine the role played by prototypical white-master, black-slave, movies that market biometric information technology: Enemy of the State, Men in Black, and I, Robot. As well, I look to visual artist Hank Willis Thomas’s Banded series for the ways in which it points to and questions the historical presence of branding blackness in contemporary capitalism. I do this to suggest that these moments and texts allow us a reading of branding and biometrics as a commodification of information and about the body. What is at work here is a set of discursive practices for its own making and, in the case of Thomas’s Banded series, unmaking.

What this narrative also makes known is that branding was not only a mass corporate and crown registration of people by way of corporeal markers, but an exercise of categorization whereby those deemed most fit to labor un-free, that being the “good and sound” were distinguished from others and imprinted, literally, with the mark of the sovereign. Here, African children, women, and men were violently made objects for trade. Slave branding was a racializing act. By making blackness visible as commodity and therefore sellable, branding was a dehumanizing process of classifying people into groupings, producing new racial identities that were tied to a system of exploitation and gendered. Branding was also a gendering act, as with women a discretionary concern was said to be taken. In this “large plain” turned slave factory, bodies were made disabled, as those named contagious or defective in their limbs, eyes, and teeth were rejected. Thus the barracoon, or slave barracks, was a slave factory where the surgeon’s classificatory, quantifying, and authorizing gaze sought to single out and render disposable those deemed unsuitable, while imposing certain visual signifiers on the body on the enslaved. That Barbot chose to name the spatial logic of capture as a purpose-built prison gestures toward the bureaucratic regulation of branding as part of the much larger carceral and traumatic practices of trans-atlantic slavery.

Later in this narrative, Barbot describes the enslaved Africans at Fida as sourced from various countries “where the inhabitants are lusty, strong, and very laborious people,” he writes, although not “so black and fine to look at as the North-Guinea and Gold-Coast Blacks,” are more suitable “for the American plantations, than any others; especially in the sugar islands, where labour and strength.” On the topic of uprisings, Barbot warns that “Fida and Ardra slaves are passed as good, is marked on the breast with a red hot iron, imprinting the mark of the French, English, or Dutch companies, that so each nation may distinguish their own, and to prevent their being chang’d by the natives for worse, as they are apt enough to do. In this particular, care is taken that the women, as tenderest, be not burnt too hard.”

What is problematic in biometric technology and in the making of some bodies and not others remains visible, and also makes certain brands disposable those deemed unsuitable, while imposing certain visual signifiers on the body on the enslaved. That Barbot chose to name the spatial logic of capture as a purpose-built prison gestures toward the bureaucratic regulation of branding as part of the much larger carceral and traumatic practices of trans-atlantic slavery.
of all the others, the most apt to revolt aboard ships, by a conspiracy carried on amongst themselves.” The baracon, it seems, was also a space for ascribing an ontological link between labor preparedness, race, ethnicity, and resistance. A struggle to know and to think about this making of intergroup distinctions here is what Joe Feagin has termed the “white racial frame.” Distinctions made by Barbot and other merchants of slavery between the “black and fine” and the “lusty and strong” speak to the other “dominant white racial frame” in categorizing difference, where blackness is framed as unruly, with some said to be more unruly than others. Feagin outlines the dominant white racial frame as consisting of a “black subframe” that worked to rationalize slavery and its attendant violence by framing, or I would say by branding, blackness as “bestial,” “alien,” and “rebellious,” among other markers of difference, in the white mind. With this antiblack subframe came representations of blackness as ungrateful and unruly.

To unpack this antiblack subframe, Feagin looks to the travels of Edward Long, an English settler in Jamaica. Long was a slave owner and a self-fashioned ethnographer who minutely detailed the flora and fauna of the island and outlined the usual suspects of pseudo-scientific discourse used to falsify evolutionary trajectories and straitly human groupings: physiology, phrenology, temperament, primate analogies, and even dental anatomy: “no people in the world have finer teeth than the native Blacks of Jamaica,” Long wrote. In his three-volume The History of Jamaica (1774) attempts to place Jamaicans within the taxonomic space of flora and fauna. His effort at botanical classification, and human categorization and division is part of a larger imperial project of colonial expansion that aimed to fix social hierarchies that served the order of the day: colonial expansion, slavery, racial typology, and racial hierarchization. In an earlier passage, Barbot writes that although Fanania, a banana-flavored chocolate drink first sold commercially in France in the early 1900s and popularized with a caricature of a smiling, red-fez-wearing Senegalese soldier with his rifle at his feet gracing the drink’s packaging. Such commodity packaging is invested with the scientific racism, like that expressed by both Long and Barbot, which depicted Africans as servile, primitive, and ranked as an inferior species. An earlier campaign for this product featured an image of a woman, destined to be the Caribbean woman, flanked by two banana bunches and holding an open can of Banania in each hand, pouring its contents onto the celebrating and joyous French masses pictured below. The French word for “energy” force, “health,” and “vigor” animating the powdered drink mix as it is pictured flowing from the woman’s hands, as if to say that the cocoa and banana plantations of the Caribbean and Central America will restore national vigor through the consumption. The promotional copy tells us in French, a suralimentation intensive, a revitalizing boost of energy. With this, the Caribbean is made an erotic, as well as an erotized, source of power of the French colonial project.

Since then, Banania’s advertising campaigns continue to convey what Anne McClintock calls “commodity racism,” where “mass-produced consumer spectacles” express “the narrative of imperial progress.” McClintock explains that commodity racism is distinct from scientific racism in its capacity to expand beyond the literate, propertied elite through the marketing of commodity spectacle. If, after the 1850s, scientific racism saturated anthropological, scientific and medical journals, novels, and novels, these cultural forms were still relatively class-bound and inaccessible to most Victorians, who had neither the means nor education to read such “scientific” texts, as consumer spectacle, by contrast, could package, market and distribute evolutionary racism on a hitherto unimagined scale.

Today, the chocolate drink’s mascot is a child-like cartoon character with exaggerated red lips, though still sporting a red fez and a wide toothy grin. His name is simply Banania. He dances, rollerblades, builds snowmen, and walks through the jungle, among other activities, hawking a variety of chocolate products on the Banania website. Truly an object among objects. This is the epidermal racial schema that, as Fanon tells us, returned his body to him “spread-eagled, disjointed, redone” and in so being negatively racialized. This epidermal racial schema makes for the ontological insecurity of a body made out of place, and overdetermined from the outside. McClintock explains that commodity racism is an “imperial kitsch project” that positions a supposedly distant and exotic Other as the source of power of the French colonial project, reinforced into a new subject position (“Look, a Negro!” or “Look, an illegal alien!” or some other negatively racialized subject position). In other words, it is the moment of contact with the white gaze – a moment where, as Fanon describes, “all this whiteness burns me to a cinder” – that produces these moments of fracture for the racial Other, indeed making and marking one as racial Other, experiencing it’s “being for others.” This is not unusual that by being object to the white gaze one is interpellated into a completely passive, negated object, existing only as object. Instead, Fanon offers us an insightful correction to theorizing moments of object to the white gaze, where instead the racial subject’s human-ness is already established, and identities are
realized and constructed by the self; where “black consciousness does not claim to be a loss. It is. It merges with itself.” If it is the making of the black body as out of place, an attempt to deny its capacity for humanness, which makes possible the power of epidermalization. So this making of blackness as out of place must be read as also productive of a rejection of lived objectivity, as being out of place. 

Think here of ex-slave Sam’s facetness, as told in chapter 2, and the remarkable way in which he turned up the white of his eyes, escaped, and made his own way, as if to say, “I’ll show them! They can’t say I didn’t warn them.”

Epidermalization continued in its alphanumeric form through a series of steps and measures upon disembarkation, during the purchase of slaves and in plantation punishment. Abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, in his efforts to collect evidence of the brutalities of the slave trade, conducted interviews with those involved in the trade, namely aggrieved sailors, first in Bristol, England, beginning in June 1787, and later Liverpool, and then in August 1788 he traveled to the River Thames. One of these accounts tells of slave merchants branding slaves at the moment of disembarkation in the West Indies. Clarkson’s informant explained the process, relating that “the gentleman, to whom the vessel was consigned” would board the ship, making “use of an iron pot, in which he put some rum. He set the rum on fire, and held the marking iron over the blaze.” The enslaved were then ordered “to pass him one by one” as he “applied the branding iron to the mark to make them mark that name” on the ship Phenix.

Sherry Anne Williams’s novel Dessa Rose tells the story of Dessa, who, when traveling as a part of a coffle of slaves, was injured in an uprising and was condemned to death for her role in that battle. Pregnant at the time of her recapture, with assistance Dessa eventually escaped from her jail, marked with the scars of corporeal punishment: whip scarred and marked with iron restraints fastened upon her at her left shoulder blade,” the advertisement states. In this advertisement Cato is described as a “sly artful fellow” who “deceives the coddulous, by pretending to tell fortunes, and pretends to be free.” In this way, the B and the C on Cato’s shoulder served as a sign that could betray his identity despite his cunning use of an alias and other artful tactics. An August 29, 1757, advertisement placed in the New York Gazette lets us know that over a year later Cato was still unaccounted for, or rather that he had changed his name and asserted himself as someone who counted, as “it is supposed he has forged a pass.” While a January 3, 1778, runaway notice for “a Negro boy named ALICK” placed by Richard Wright in New York’s Royal Gazette notes that Alick “is branded on the breast with the letters R.W.”

Although branding was a practice of racializing surveillance that sought to deny black human life, it being frequently experienced (every body mark of the DEUZ), runaway away and numerous other counterpractices suggest that dehumanization was not fully achieved on an affective level, and that those branded were still ungovernable under the brand, or in spite of it. For example, the diaries of English overseer-turned-planter and slave owner Thomas Thistlewood tell of plantation conditions in eighteenth century Jamaica and the life of an enslaved woman named Coobah (or Cooba, or Cooba, as it is often called by Thistlewood in his diaries), one of the many women, children, and men that were subjected to its brutalities, as detailed in his diaries. Among the data that he collected on the people he enslaved, Thistlewood would record in his diaries the dates and locations of his predatory sexual advances by wearing the letter T, a sign of his particular formation. Coobah is described as “4 feet 6 inches and 6/10 high, about 15 years of age, Country name Molio, an Ebo” when she was purchased by Thistlewood in 1761. Eventually Coobah, or Molio, was branded on her right shoulder with Thistlewood’s brand mark, a T, within an inverted triangle. In his diaries Thistlewood records Coobah as often ill, having suffered from pox in 1765 with “stout water” prescribed as a remedy, the loss of her infant daughter Silvia in 1768, and as enduring Thistlewood’s sexual assaults (one time recorded in his diary in broken Latin: “Cum Coobah (mea) in Coffee gd. Stans! Backwd” – “with Coobah in the coffee ground. Standing! Backwards”).

Coobah escaped captivity numerous times. Each time she was recaptured, she was severely punished: flogged, chained and collared (although she escaped and was recaptured still wearing the chain and collar), or branded again and made to serve in the “iron return” until “noon and night.” Even after being branded on her forehead for punishment after one escape (“flogged her well and brand marked her in the forehead”), Coobah continued to run away from Thistlewood. On July 11, 1770, five days after Coobah was brutally branded with TT on her forehead as a form of punishment for her escape, Thistlewood wrote in his diary that he had found “Coobah wanting this morning.” In defiance of the brand, she ran away and made her own way, accompanied by a shipmate in Bluefields on the south coast of the island. Another time Thistlewood wrote that he “heard of my Coobah’s robbing a Negro Wench … in the wood, under the pretense of the more cautious handling for her, March’d away with it.” In Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study, Orlando Patterson explains that slave branding “backfired” in Brazil, where the letter F that branded a recaptured runaway was “proudly displayed” to the “more cautious handling for her, March’d away with it.”

 instructions for administering the brand were formally articulated: “as you purchase slaves you must mark them at the upper right arm with the silver marken CCN, which is sent along with you for that purpose,” and the procedure was laid out through scripture or the use of other means (for example, abduction or leasing out). For instance, in 1655 the Barbados Council prescribed branding the letter R on the forehead of any runaway slave found to have set fire to the sugarcane fields, while the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Barbados ceased branding SOCIETY on the chests of those it enslaved in 1732. Of course, many ran away, regardless of receiving this marking as slave. A notice published in the Pennsylvania Gazette on April 17, 1756, offers a reward of forty shillings for “a Negro named Cato, alias Toby” to attest: this was “he was branded when a boy in Jamaica, in the West Indies, with a B (and I think) C on his left shoulder blade,” the advertisement states. In this advertisement Cato is described as a “sly artful fellow” who “deceives the coddulous, by pretending to tell fortunes, and pretends to be free.” In this way, the B and the C on Cato’s shoulder served as a sign that could betray his identity despite his cunning use of an alias and other artful tactics. An August 29, 1757, advertisement placed in the New York Gazette lets us know that over a year later Cato was still unaccounted for, or rather that he had changed his name and asserted himself as someone who counted, as “it is supposed he has forged a pass.” While a January 3, 1778, runaway notice for “a Negro boy named ALICK” placed by Richard Wright in New York’s Royal Gazette notes that Alick “is branded on the breast with the letters R.W.”

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In Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route (2007), the Dutch West India Company (WIC) branded the enslaved on arrival in Curaçao, as the island served as the hub, of sorts, for slave trading throughout the Caribbean. In Curaçao, the brand was sometimes administered at the slave market right on the auction block, and the scars that remained as evidence of that trauma were used to identify enslaved people at public hangings, legal proceedings, and postmortem. For captains of slave ships under the Dutch charter companies,
countless others who repurposed the brand mark for social networking and used the scars that remained from the violence done to their bodies as a means to reestablish kinship ties or forge connections to shipmates with whom they shared the hazards of the Middle Passage, reveal the limit of these acts of dehumanization.\textsuperscript{52}

SELLING BLACKNESS

In another carte de visite of Wilson Chinn, taken by Kimball, Chinn is not staged wearing shackles or a longhorn around his neck; rather he stands boldly with one foot on top of the mechanisms of bondage laid in front of him on a wooden floor. The color and the initials V.M. remains, however, revealing the spectacular punishment of plantation life. Kimball, along with another photographer, Charles Paxson, produced several images of emancipated or disowned ex-slaves, notably white-looking ex-slave children. These portraits were reproduced as carte de visite photographs and sold for the viewer a certain equity between the same line of sight as Chinn, establishing a way to invoke fascination and compassion of their philanthropic efforts and circulated as a means to trouble their intended white audience.

The fascination here is with the one-drop rule made collectible, as the children in the portraits were quantified as black under the racial nomenclature of slavery. These images trouble the large-scale sexual violence, coerced sex, rape, and the breeding system that underwrote the large-scale sexual violence, coerced sex, rape, and the breeding system that underwrote that mother’s owner, regardless of whether born to enslaved women were the property of the children in the portrait. I wonder if the owner was kin. The compassion that was sought through these cartes de visite is that although named black, for the intended white audience, these children were seemingly white, or at least postslavery could enter into the category of whiteness through adoption, sponsorship, schooling, and certain ways of dress. Wilson, Charley, Rebecca and Rosa, Slaves from New Orleans, a carte de visite produced by Paxson, features Chinn seated in a leather chair reading a book along with the ex-slave children who are doing the same and are seated around Chinn, with only Charley looking some affirmative action benefits (Limited time offer. May already be prohibited in some areas); also, “the Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while voting in the United States or Florida,” as well as not recommending “that this Blackness be used while demanding fairness.” Or simply put: “The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while demanding.” The benefits and warnings listed disclose the surveillance of blackness while shopping, while seeking employment, or during legal proceedings.

In an interview with Coco Fusco, Keith Obadike provides some insight as to why Blackness for Sale was a necessary counterframing to concurrent net.art in that it critiqued the commodification of blackness. The beneﬁts and warnings of some of the colonial narratives are reproduced through Internet interfaces: “While watching what many were doing with net.art, I didn’t really see net artists dealing with this intersection of commerce and race. I really wanted to comment on this odd Euro colonialist narrative that exists on the web and black peoples’ position within that narrative. I mean, there are browsers called Explorer and Navigator that take you to explore the Amazon or trade in the eBay. It’s all just too blatant to ignore.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52} Mendi + Keith Obadike’s Internet art project (or “auctionism”) is one of black counterframing where the institutionalized and the everyday surveillance, appropriation, and negation of black life is satirized as a way to highlight its structural embeddedness and the pervasive nature of that very surveillance. Auctionism is a type of Internet art that, as Alexander R. Galloway explains, is a “strange new form of commerce” that “unveils the limited nature of eBay” and “the performance is not only on eBay but also on the e-mail lists, message boards, and other social spaces of the Internet that drive traffic to the piece and discussion of it.”\textsuperscript{56} From the case of Blackness for Sale, an announcement of the auction was posted to the Internet-based arts organization Rhizome, while blackplanet.com ran a poll where “26% thought the project was brilliant, 29% found it offensive,” while 45 percent of the auction’s time offer. May already be prohibited in some areas); also, “the Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while voting in the United States or Florida,” as well as not recommending “that this Blackness be used while demanding fairness.” Or simply put: “The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while demanding.” The benefits and warnings listed disclose the surveillance of blackness while shopping, while seeking employment, or during legal proceedings.

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\textsuperscript{52} Mendi + Keith Obadike’s Internet art project (or “auctionism”) is one of black counterframing where the institutionalized and the everyday surveillance, appropriation, and negation of black life is satirized as a way to highlight its structural embeddedness and the pervasive nature of that very surveillance. Auctionism is a type of Internet art that, as Alexander R. Galloway explains, is a “strange new form of commerce” that “unveils the limited nature of eBay” and “the performance is not only on eBay but also on the e-mail lists, message boards, and other social spaces of the Internet that drive traffic to the piece and discussion of it.”\textsuperscript{56} From the case of Blackness for Sale, an announcement of the auction was posted to the Internet-based arts organization Rhizome, while blackplanet.com ran a poll where “26% thought the project was brilliant, 29% found it offensive,” while 45 percent of the auction’s
generally.\(^6\) \(\text{Blackness for Sale,}\) then, points to the productive possibilities of black expressive practices and, perhaps satirically, to the apparent limits of black antiracist counterframing, or at least a part of someone, is there, ideally. By digitized code I am referring to the possibilities of identification that are said to come with certain biometric information technologies, where algorithms are the computational means through which the body is measured and, increasingly, performances of the body are mathematically coded as data, making for unique templates for computers to then sort by relying on a searchable database (online or one-to-many/LN identification answering the questions: Who are you? Are you even enrolled in this database?), or to verify the identity of the bearer of the document within which the unique biometric is encoded (offline or one-to-one/LN verification? Are you who you say you are?). Popular biometric technologies include facial recognition, iris and retinal scans, hand geometry, fingerprint templates, vascular patterns, gait and other kinesthetic recognition, and, increasingly, DNA. Biometric technology is also used for automation (one-to-many/one-to-none/answering the question: Is any body there?), for example with computer webcams that make use of motion-tracking software or touchless faucets, toilets, and hand dryers and produce capacitive sensing to detect a user’s presence and gestures. In the case of those technologies, it is not for recognition or verification of a user’s identity that the biometric is put to use, but rather for an affirmation of the user’s presence or an awareness that someone, or at least a part of someone, is there, ideally. In simple terms, biometrics is a technology of measuring the living body. The application of this technology in verification that accompanies identification, and automation practices that enable the body to function as evidence. Identities, in these digitizing instances, must also be thought through their construction within discourse, understood to function as data encoded in specific historical and institutional sites within specific constitutive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies.\(^6\) The notion of a body made out of place, or made ontologically insecure, is useful when thinking through the moments of contact enacted at the institutional sites of international border crossings and contexts of the internal borders of the state, such as the voting booth, the welfare office, the prison, and other sites and moments where identification, and increasingly biometric, information is required to speak the truth of and to make sense of different bodies that are productive of, and often necessitate, ontological insecurity, where “all around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.”\(^3\) This atmosphere of certain uncertainty is part of what Lewis Gordon points out as “the problematic of a denied subjectivity.”\(^3\) On this, Gordon is worth quoting at length:

Fanon’s insight, shared by DuBois, is that there is no inner subjectivity, where there is no being, where there is no one there, and where there is no link to another subjectivity as ward, as guardian, or owner, then all is permitted against him or her.\(^3\) For Gordon, this problematic of a denied subjectivity is a structuring violence where “all is permitted” and where this structured violence is produced in and produced by certain racialized bodies as predictive of and constitutive of what Goldberg terms “racially invisible.”\(^3\) Interestingly, Nott and Gliddon’s Types of Mankind,\(^2\) in a linear fashion to regulate those artificial boundaries that could never be fully maintained (e.g., mustard seed-filled skulls in Crania Americana, polygenism and the ranking of races by way of recapitulation, black woman as surrogate man, the desexualized Asian man, diagnoses of the slave’s desire for freedom as the so-called sickness of the runaway named drapetomania, and Nott and Gliddon’s Types of Mankind.\(^3\) Interestingly, when their gender classifier was made “ethnicity specific” for the category “African,” they found that images of African females would be classified as female about 82 percent of the time, while the same African classifier would produce images of women to be female 95.5 percent of the time, and 96 percent for “Caucasoid” females. In other
words, even when calibrated to detect black women, the African classifier is better suited to detect “Mongoloid” females and “Caucasoid” females.

Using actor Will Smith’s face as the model of generic black masculinity, Gao and Ai, the study’s authors, are left to conclude that “the accuracy of gender classifier on Africans is not as high as on Mongoloid and Caucasoid.” The racial nomenclature of “Mongoloid” and “Caucasoid” is seemingly archaic but not uncommon in certain biometrics R&D. It is worth noting here that, as a different study put it, the “statistical knowledge of anthropometry” is still being invoked in biometric information technology, without one study, nearly Li, Zhou, and Geng argue that “the difference of Races is obvious, and it is the core field of research of anthropology. Anthropometry is a key technique to find out this difference and abstract the regulation from this difference.” Anthropometry, or Bertillonage, was introduced in 1883 by Alphonse Bertillon as a system of measuring and then cataloging the human body by distinguishing one individual from another for the purposes of identification, classification, and criminal forensics. This early biometric information technology was put to work as a “scientific method,” along-side the pseudo-sciences of craniometry (the measurement of the skull to assign criminality and intelligence to race and gender) and phrenology (attributing mental abilities to the shape of the skull, as the skull was believed to hold a brain made up of individual organs). First developed by taking the measurements of prisoners, Bertillonage made use of a series of measurements of the head, torso, and limbs gathered through a choreographed routine where the subject would sit, stand, and stretch out limbs, including measuring the length of the head, the right ear, and the left foot. Later, Bertillonage included descriptions of other markers of identification, such as eye color and scars.  

With Li, Zhou, and Geng’s study quoted above, we can see that pseudo-scientific discourse of racial difference rests on the theoretical basis from which to develop a facial computational model that could qualify (and mathematically quantify) difference to allow for identity authentication. Li, Zhou, and Geng claim that “as a result of using the statistical information of the Mongolian Race’s feature, our method is suitable to be used in the north of China." Claims such as these demonstrate that some advances in biometric information technology are organized around the idea of digital epidermalization.  

Epidermalization – the imposition of race on the body – is present, for example, when Nanavati, Thieme, and Nanavati note that in comparative testing of biometric systems and devices using control groups, higher fail-to-enroll (FTE) rates appear with those whose fingerprints are said to be unmeasurable. They state, “Elderly users often have very faint fingerprints and may have poorer circulation than younger users. Construction workers and artisans are more likely to have highly worn fingerprints and to enroll. Such dermatoglyphic differences are reported in the literature, as are differences in fingerprint patterns from people who come in contact with caustic chemicals and frequent hand washing in their work environments, such as mechanics, health care workers, and nail salon technicians or manicurists. Some massage therapists also fail to enroll due to occupational wear of their fingerprints. This unmeasurability forms part of what Torin Monahan calls “body discrimination” in technology design, where “unequal power relations are reproduced and reinforced by technological means.” Could these systems, then, be calibrated to allow for cutaneous gender detection, or for class differentiation? Or could they be programmed to allow for the “digital segregation of racialized population groups,” as Joseph Pugliese suggests?  

Nanavati, Thieme, and Nanavati note that facial scan technology may produce higher FTE rates for “very dark-skinned users,” not due to “lack of distinctive features, of course, but to the quality of images provided to the facial-scan system by video cameras optimized for lighter-skinned users.” What their research and development tell us is that their technology privileges whiteness, or at least lightness, in its use of lighting and in the ways in which certain race-related data is lit and measured in the enrollment process.  

Prototypical whiteness in biometrics is an extension of the “general culture of light” that Rice, B. Dyer (in this ratio, biometric information technologies) have on “cultural enactments of gender” and of race; we must uncover how such technologies are “ideologically shaped by the operation of gender” and seek to understand the role they play in racializing surveillance and in reinforcing “traditional gendered patterns of power and authority.”  

Given this, some important questions to ask here include: How do we understand the body once it is made into data? What are the underlying assumptions with surveillance technologies, such as passport verification machines, facial recognition software, or fingerprint template technology? There is a notion that these technologies are infallible and objective and have a mathematical precision, even when calibrated to detect black women. As the above R&D reports make clear, there is a certain assumption with these technologies that categories of gender identity and race are clear cut, that a mismatch can be programmed to assign gender categories or determine what bodies and body parts should signify. Such technologies can then possibly be applied to determine who has access to movement and stability, and to other rights. I take up this possibility in chapter 4 through a discussion of the airport and DNA technology. Following Anne Balsamo here, I am suggesting that we must question the effects that certain algorithms, in this regard, biometric information technologies have on “cultural enactments of gender” and of race; we must uncover how such technologies are “ideologically shaped by the operation of gender” and seek to understand the role they play in racializing surveillance and in reinforcing “traditional gendered patterns of power and authority.”
credible enemy must be “cunning, threatening and just barely beatable by truly ingenious and heroic technologies” and, importantly, Franklin argues, there is historical precedent of the state’s war machine turning inward and “seeking the enemy within.” Think here of this act of seeking the enemy within as signaled by the term “home-grown terrorists.” Mayfield was held for nineteen days and released only after Spanish authorities announced that they had arrested someone else.

Although verification machines now do the work of sorting the bearers of identity documents, these machines are designed and operated by real people to sort real people. It is through this process of sorting that the digitized, biometric body is brought into view. Through this process of visualizing and sorting, the digitized body and in effect its material human counterpart could be epidermalized. My intent here is not in defense of “race-thinking,” but nor is it an effort to reontologize race, but to situate certain biometric information technologies as techniques through which the cultural production of race can be understood. Following scholar Eugene Thacker’s call for a “critical genomic consciousness” in relation to biotechnology, I am suggesting here that we must also engage a critical biometric consciousness. Such a consciousness entails informing public debate around these technologies and their application, and accountabilities by the state and the private sector, where the ownership of and access to one’s own body data and other intellectual property that is generated from one’s body data must be understood as a right. A critical biometric consciousness must also factor in the effects of the supply chain, production, and disposal of the hardware of these technologies, whether that be the mining of conflict minerals, like coltan, or where the assembly of the devices is tied to sweatshop labor. A critical biometric consciousness could be engendered by the type of learning that takes places with, for example, the Keeper of Keys machine (KK) developed by Marc Böhlen (aka RealTechSupport) in the context of the Open Biometrics Initiative. The Open Biometrics Initiative argues: the “Open Biometrics idea,” as Böhlen names it, understands all body data as probabilistic. By taking seriously the idea that identification and verification of fingerprint biometric data through computational means involves probability – that a match is more akin to an approximation than a confirmation – the Open Biometrics Initiative designed the KK to subvert the notion that biometric identification technology is infallible. The KK is “designed to re-imagine, beyond the confines of security and repression, notions of machinic identity control and biometric validation.”

The KK is a fingerprint analysis application that takes an image of the user’s fingerprint. Rather than reducing this fingerprint data to a representative subset, the results of the fingerprint scan that the KK provides is a “mathematically precise but open list of probable minutiae” allowing “the user in sight into the internals of an otherwise hidden process.” This information is printed out for the user as a set of minutiae or characteristic points and probabilities, what the Open Biometrics Initiative calls a “probabilistic ID.”

Importantly, a critical biometric consciousness must contend with the ways that branding, particularly within racial slavery, was instituted as a means of population management that rendered whiteness prototypical through its making, marking, and marketing of blackness as visible and as commodity. As well, it must contend with the ways in which branding was a commentary on the dystopic potential of undermining androids or a commentary on enslavement. In Spooner’s grudge causes him to commit “technological profiling,” revealing the film’s “undercurrent of racial irony.” Seemingly a commentary on the dystopic potential of unregulated androids or a commentary on enslavement, perhaps I, Robot is a commentary on racial slavery, or rather, a commentary on the dystopic potential of unregulated androids. In I, Robot, biometric information technology is a mere backdrop to a slave revolt; a palm scanner here, some voice recognition there. According to Scott, Spooner’s grudge causes him to commit “technological profiling,” revealing the film’s “undercurrent of racial irony.”

BLACKNESS @ANCED

Formerly a domain reserved for human feared or perceived as black, biometric extraction can now be translated into executable computer code. In the machine, both minutiae map and minutiae matching are found within degrees of error and translated into probabilities. However, the results of these mathematical operations going the envious way that is valid within certain limits and under certain assumptions. The rules of probability theory ensure that the assumptions are computationally tractable. Error is translated into a fraction of unity. The Open Biometrics idea, as Böhlen names it, understands all body data as probabilistic. By taking seriously the idea that identification and verification of fingerprint biometric data through computational means involves probability – that a match is more akin to an approximation than a confirmation – the Open Biometrics Initiative designed the KK to subvert the notion that biometric identification technology is infallible. The KK is “designed to re-imagine, beyond the confines of security and repression, notions of machinic identity control and biometric validation.”

I want to return to Will Smith for a moment to question what his image is doing in a biometric technology industry publication on new research and development. What kind of work is his picture doing here? Smith is the star of at least three Hollywood blockbuster action movies in which surveillance technology plays a role: Enemy of the State (1998), I, Robot (2004), and to a lesser extent Men in Black (1997). Seeing how surveillance is displayed, discussed, and depicted in and through Smith’s films is important for an understanding of the various ways in which biometric surveillance technologies, from CCTV to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones) to facial recognition technology, are marketed through popular entertainment. I, Robot is set in Chicago in the year 2035, where robotic workers, seemingly replicas of each other, act as servants (sometimes referred to in the film as slaves) are stored in stacked shipping containers when decommissioned, and eventually plot a nationwide revolt and imprison their human owners. Will Smith’s character, police detective Del Spooner, was injured in a car accident and became an involuntary subject in a cybernetics program for wounded police officers. This left him with a prosthetic left arm built by the same company that created the robot servants. U.S. Robotics. Spooner uses biometric information technology, namely hand geometry access and voice pattern recognition, in the film, but he is antirobot. As the New York Times’ film critic A.O. Scott put it: Spooner is “a raging anti-robot bigot, harboring a grudge against the helpful, polite machines that shuffle around the city running errands and doing menial work.” According to Scott, Spooner’s grudge causes him to commit “technological profiling,” revealing the film’s “undercurrent of racial irony.”

In the comedy Men in Black, however, biometrics is that which can take one to a fixed identity, Smith’s character in Men in Black, James Darrell Edwards III, has his dental records, Social Security number, and even his Gold’s Gym membership deleted from various databases, and his fingerprints are permanently erased from his body, leaving him without identifying marks and documents,
rendering him anonymous. He becomes simply Agent J of the secret agency Men in Black (MIB). During this process of anonymization, a voiceDELIVERED by a voice-DELIVERED recognition system guarantees its own effectiveness.

Lyon names this an "apparent sociological shallow-ness" of Enemy of the State, but also notes that this attitude is significant "especially in the American context where belief in the efficacy of technological 'solutions' far outstrips any evidence that technical devices can be relied upon to provide 'security'.”

Enemy of the State closes with Dean and Brill turning the tables on the NSA agents and analysts that have tracked them throughout the film. Answering Jeremy Bentham's question of "quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" (who watches the watchers?), Dean and Brill surveil their surveillers; they watch the watchers. In this way, the film offers a "neutrality thesis" regarding surveillance technology which suggests that if placed in the right hands surveillance loses its negative valence and it becomes merely a "sociological shallow-ness" of the State, but also notes that this attitude is significant "especially in the American context where belief in the efficacy of technological ‘solutions’ far outstrips any evidence that technical devices can be relied upon to provide ‘security.’”

Articulating here the racial terror imposed on black life in America by an overseeing surveillance apparatus in effect on September 10, 2001, and long before, Smith received criticism for his comments, and some called for a boycott of his films. I, Robot grossed over $345 million in box office sales that year. Many criticize Smith for playing only "safe" roles, and although a "bad boy" (he played Detective Mike Lowrey in the 1995 film Bad Boys), many blockbusters’ films means that the movie-franchise, standing alongside his blockbuster roles, America is often seen saving America, and by extension the planet, from alien Others (Independence Day, the Men in Black franchise, Wild Wild West, I Am Legend, Hancock, I, Robot, and After Earth), or cast in some policing role (the Bad Boys franchise). It should not go without notice that the image of the prototypical white man featured in Gao and Al’s article on their biometric gender classification system is that of Tom Cruise, the star of Minority Report and the Mission Impossible franchise, standing alongside his). The larger point, however, is that common technology play an important yet common-place role in those films. For example, one scene in Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol (2011) features a contact "lens cam" that ascribes Smith’s eyes so they face scanned in a crowd and could then trigger an alert to an iPhone of a match of a possible target for assassination. Such product placement was not so far off at the time of that film’s release. In 2013, Google filed patent applications with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office for contact lenses that integrate cameras and other sensors. This patent-pending lens cam could capture the wearer’s every blink pattern, or could use motion detection to alert blind wearers to oncoming vehicles at crosswalks. The “social optics of race” in Minority Report has been theorized by Lisa Nakamura, who argues that in that film, “the act of seeing itself has become inseparable from the political economies of race, retailing, crime and surveillance.”

So commerce, in Minority Report, is readily enabled by technologies of surveillance (like retinal scans) that link identity, and by extension race, to product placement and marketing.

Priceless #1 (2004) is part of Hank Willis Thomas’s @anded series, in which the artist questions how black bodies were branded as a sign of ownership during slavery, and how their descendants’ bodies are branded today through corporate advertising. As such, the meaning of branding for Thomas is not only about the violence inflicted on black skin, but also about how black bodies brand certain consumable goods. The series is part of Thomas’s creative response to the fatal shooting of his twenty-seven-year-old cousin Sangha Willis during a mugging for a gold chain in Philadelphia that took place in 2000. Priceless #1 is a photograph of mourners at Sangha Willis’s funeral with the MasterCard
people with tiny figures in plank position similar to the stowage plan of the slave ship 'Brooks in Absolut Power' (2003), or shaped into a door frame with the view from the Door of No Return on Goree Island in 'Absolut No Return.' When asked about the intent behind his 'B@onded' series, Thomas has said that he "was interested in the way that black men are the most feared and revered bodies in the world in this weird way" and that he was "trying to figure out why that was and what that was about, and the relationship to slavery and commodity, which is commerce, culture, cotton, and that body type." With this series we see Thomas uncover the moments in advertising when blackness is pitched "as casket for your son" or street culture or urban icon. One such icon of street cool is Nike's brand logo known as the Swoosh that adorns the company's shoes, clothes, and other sporting apparel. In the 'B@onded' series, however, the Swoosh is instead branded on the male black body, first as a large scar on the side of a bald head in 'B@onded Head' (2003), and also in a series of nine raised keloid-appearing scars on the upper torso in 'B@onded Torso.' 'B@onded Head' gives viewers a profile view, but the image is cropped in such a way that we do not see the face of the branded subject, while 'Scarred Chest' is cropped at the neck and the genitals. Keloid scars have been known to grow, itch, and remain painful posthealing, and are said to occur more often within black populations. 'B@onded Head and Scarred Chest' are photographic reckonings with the trauma of racial injury, traumatic head injuries, raised keloids, and the carving and uncarving of the boundary of the seemingly healed original wound, commercial branding, and the power of advertising to crop and frame the black body, and the power of the artist to counterframe.

In 2004 'B@onded Head' was part of the public space art installation 'Jamaica Flux: Workspaces and Windows' and was placed in the ad space adjacent to a telephone booth at the corner of Union Hall Street and Jamaica Avenue in Queens, New York. The telephone booth was neatly embedded in this site of commerce as it sits directly in front of a Chase Bank and was located close to a food vending cart in this busy shopping district. JPMorgan Chase, the parent company of Chase Bank, is "one of the oldest financial institutions in the United States. With a history dating back over 200 years," according to its website. The Merchant Bank and the Leather Manufacturers Bank both merged in the 1920s with what would later become Chase Bank, and they both had favorable policies for African-american families. On a nearby building at the time of this installation was a billboard ad for Nike footwear featuring National Football League (NFL) quarterback Michael Vick, then signed to the Atlanta Falcons. The tagline of the ad was "to fly, your head must reach the ... Air Zoom Vick II." The NFL suspended Vick in 2007 for violating his player contract due to his involvement in unlawful dogfighting and gambling. Criminal charges led to the loss of Vick's lucrative Nike endorsement contract and an eventual conviction, followed by a twenty-month incarceration, with house arrest by way of an electronic ankle monitor and travel restrictions imposed after his release from prison. Vick signed with the Philadelphia Eagles in 2009 and was named 2010 NFL Comeback Player of the Year. Nike re-signed Vick in 2011 stating that it supports Vick's effectiveness and willingness to re-signing, then, marks Vick's rebranding, the first professional athlete in the United States to lose and then regain a major endorsement deal.

CONCLUSION

This chapter began by offering a longer history of biometric information technology and the ways in which this history is closely entangled with the commodification of blackness. Current biometric technologies and slave branding, as we have seen, are not one and the same; however, when we think of our contemporary moment when "suspect" citizens, trusted individuals, prisoners, and others are having their bodies informationalized by way of biometric surveillance, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes without consent or awareness, and then stored in large-scale, automated databases, some managed by the state and some owned by private interests, we can find histories of these accountings of the body in, for example, the inventory that is the 'Book of Negroes,' slave ship manifests that seeks out maritime insurance purposes, banks that issued insurance policies to slave owners against the loss of enslaved laborers, and branding as a technology of tracking blackness that sought to make certain bodies legible as property. My suggestion here is that questioning the historically present workings of branding and racializing surveillance, particularly with regard to biometric technologies, allows for a critical rethinking of punishment, torture, and our moments of contact with our increasingly technological borders. This is especially important given the capabilities of noncooperative biometric tagging by way of wearable computing, such as Google Glass, or through utilization of drones, or other flying objects employed in U.S. counter-insurgency measures and other military applications, for example targeted killings or search-and-rescue missions.

Understanding how biometric information technologies are rationalized through industry specification and popular entertainment provides a means to falsify the idea that certain surveillance technologies and their application are always neutral regarding race, gender, disability, and other categories of determinability and their intersections. Examining biometric practices and surveillance in this way is instructive. It invites us to understand the ways that this history is in close alignment with the current extraconstitutional treatment of certain bodies as property. My suggestion here is that questioning the historically present workings of branding and racializing surveillance, particularly with regard to biometric technologies, allows for a critical rethinking of punishment, torture, and our moments of contact with our increasingly technological borders.
NOTES

3. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (2008), 89.
4. Gilroy, Against Race, 46.
5. "Branding Slaves," in The Anti-Slavery Almanac (1840), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Image ID: 41302.71
11. Ibid., 110–111.
14. Fugitive Slave Law, 2nd ed.
15. Ibid., 55.
17. Ibid., 592.
18. Ibid., 326. See also Mimi Sheller, "Qiasheba, Mother, Queen," in Citizenship from Below. Young, Colonial Desire, from Below.
21. Ibid.
23. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (2008), 911–92.
24. McClintock, Imperial Leather, 93.
25. Ibid., 209.
26. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (2008), 93.
27. Ibid., 95.
28. Ibid., 94.
29. Ibid., 89.
30. Ibid., 214.
31. "Out of place" here, as explained further in chapter 2, gestures to the Caribbean vernacular usage of the term "fruit place," along with "faccy," "fase," "not face," and "back chat"—all of which were and continue to be used in the subversive acts of looking and talking back.
32. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (2008), 94.
34. Ibid., 77.
35. Hartman, Lose Your Mother, 79.
37. Postema, The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 386.
38. Ibid., 52–53.
39. Williams, Dezzra Rose, 229.
40. Morrison, Elowed, 73.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. In his content analysis of fugitive slave notices that appeared in the Royal Jamaica Gazette during one week in June 1823, Clarkson, The Argument That the Colonial Slaves Are Better Off, writes that branding was not occasioned solely at the factories of the transatlantic slave trade, but took place in the colonies as a form of punishment and an identification practice by planters "that they may know them again" should the enslaved run away. Clarkson tells us that Creoles (those born in Jamaica) were branded, including "one individual branded with no less than ten capital letters." 44. Walvin, Black Ivory, 284, 250.
45. Hodges and Brown, Pretends To Be Free, 58, 69.
46. Ibid., 209.
47. Box 2, Folder 12 (December 17, 1861), 308, Thistlewood Papers, "Mark’d my New Negroes on the right Shoulder" (found adjacent is a diagram of Thistlewood’s brand mark, 17, inside a triangle). Also see Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 72.
48. Box 5, Folder 14 (Wednesday, September 27, 1765), Thistlewood Papers.
49. Box 4, Folder 21 (Friday, July 6, 1770), 110, Thistlewood Papers.
50. Box 4, Folder 21 (Sunday, July 17, 1770), 105, Thistlewood Papers.
51. Patterson, Slavery and Social Death, 50.
52. See Hartman, Lose Your Mother.
54. See Fuggeo, "All Too Real." 55. For a discussion on the sale and collection of Black Americans, see Turner, Ceramic Urns andCelluloid Names and Patterson, Rituals of Blood and Spike Lee’s film Bamboozled (2000).
56. See Orlando Patterson’s discussion of the Lynchings as ceremony and sacrifice in the postbellum South in the chapter "Feast of Blood: 'Race', Religion, and Human Sacrifice in the Postbellum South," in Rituals of Blood.
57. Fugico, "All Too Real.
59. Ibid.
60. Fuggeo, The White Racial Frame (2010), 172. Like Mendi and Keith Obadike’s Blackness for Sale, conceptual artistdamali ayo’s conceptual artwork Blackness for Sale can be read in its online critique of the objectification of black people. This satirical work pictured a black anti racist counter frame, as visitors to the site could choose from a list of services, such as touching a black person’s hair, that a professional black person would render for a set fee. See Catanzaro, "How Do I Rent a Negro?" for a more detailed discussion of discourses of rent-a-negro.
62. Gilroy, Against Race, 37.
65. Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (2008), 80.
67. Ibid.
69. Gordon, "The Human a Teleological Suspension of Man?" 219–220.
70. Gao and Ai, "Face Gender Classification on Consumer Images." 175.
72. On one recorded on the Niche and facbiometric and with the use of photo identification, proposed a way of knowing the criminal body psychiatric tools and that biometric identifiers are suggested by the database linking individual identity to bodily measurements. The fingerprint later replaced Bertolliangene as the standard biometric for individualizing people and identifying suspects and repeat offenders.
73. Liu, Zhou, and Geng, "Facial Pose Estimation." 78.
74. Nanawati, Thiene, and Nanawati, Biometrics, 36–37, emphasis mine.
75. Monahan, Surveillance in the Time of Insecurity, 114.
77. Nanawati, Thiene, and Nanawati, Biometrics, 37. Also see Pugliese, "In Silica Race and the Heteronomy of Biometric Proxies;" for further discussion of FTE rates and the notion that certain biometric technologies are "infrastructurally calibrated to whiteness" (5).
78. Dyer, White, 103.
80. The term "dark matter" and "white proto-typicality" are borrowed from Lewis R. Gordon’s discussion of double consciousness in "Is the Human a Teleological Suspension of Man?" 67.
82. For example, Canada’s Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, Building a Nation, in advocating for biometrics, states: "We start with the use of photo identification, proposed as a security feature for the new card. The first thing to note is that human beings are not particularly acute at recognizing individuals from photographs, identification, particularly across cultural lines. Moreover, glasses, hairstyles and (for men) facial hair may change, which may lead to questions even when the holder of the card genuine (emphasis mine). It is interesting to note here that biometric identifiers are suggested by the committee as a means to solve detection problems resulting from human beings’ lack of ability to recognize individuals from photographs. I argue that what is suggested here is that digitized body data can be a technology to secure accurate photographs are detected and then matched to friends’ profiles (a known set of users); the subject’s age (gender/‘mender’ meter); and mood can be guessed. Combined with GPS data, the app can also augment the location of the subject. The company also created Celebrity- find, a face recognition application that matches photos of celebrities with pictures posted on the social networking site Twitter. Lauren O’Neill, "Facebook Buys Facial Recognition Platform Face.com," CBC News, June 17, 2012, accessed June 19, 2012, http://www.cbc.ca/news/blogs/bloggers/2012/06/facebook-buys-facial-recognition-platform-face.com.html.
83. Gao and Ai, "Face Gender Classification on Consumer Images," 175.
84. By then "auto-tagged," meaning the uploaded body data can be a technology to secure accurate
and presumably, fixed race and gender detection. Moreover, in this system it is apparently understood that only men have facial hair.

Balsamo, Technologies of the Gendered Body, 8–10.

Mayfield was held under the material witness statute of the USA Patriot Act for over two weeks and then released. Spanish authorities had earlier informed U.S. authorities that Mayfield’s fingerprint was not a match with that found at the scene of the bombing on knapsack used to contain detonating devices. See Cole, “Brandon Mayfield, Suspect.”

Franklin, The Real World of Technology, 74.

Ibid., 74–75.

Gilroy, Against Race, 30.


See Lisa Nakamura’s discussion of iPhone assembly and production at Fosscon’s electronics manufacturing factories in “Economies of Digital Production in East Asia.”

Böhlen (under the moniker “RealTechSupport”), “The Open Biometrics Initiative,” 2.

Böhlen’s Open Biometrics idea is that given the probabilistic nature of biometric data, a person should assemble an array of their own biometric data and “I’m borrowing from Foucault. Archaeology of Knowledge, here, “leave it to the bureaucrats and the police to see that our papers are in order” (17). For Böhlen, since it is now up to authorities to make determinations beyond a mathematical doubt, the biometric data that a person assembles can mean statistical significance and can create “a new buffer zone for citizens in the age of big bio data.” M. Böhlen, personal communication, September 6, 2014.


Ibid., 3.

Ibid.


Ibid.

To which the special advisor to the deputy director of operations of the NSA, Thomas Brian Reynolds (who we learn was born on September 11, 1940), played by actor Jon Voight, responds, “Liberal hysteria.”

Enemy of the State pays homage to an earlier film on surveillance, The Conversation (1974), also starring Gene Hackman as wistapping expert Harry Caul. Caul and Hackman’s Brill in Enemy of the State share similar characteristics, indicating, perhaps, that the characters are one and the same.

Lyon, Surveillance Studies, 147.

Ibid.

Light, “Enemies of the State?,” 44.

Balsamo, Designing Culture, 52.

Lyon, Surveillance Studies, 141.


For a discussion of Cruise’s films, see Lyon, Surveillance Studies, 146–148; and also Nakamura, Digitizing Race, 114–120.


Michael Vick was drafted first overall by the Atlanta Falcons in 2001, becoming the first black quarterback to be drafted first overall in an NFL draft. He played for the Falcons for six seasons. As of the end of the 2011 NFL regular season, Vick held the record for most rushing yards by a quarterback per season, per game, and over the span of his career.

It should be noted here that the black codes governing the lives of free Negros during Reconstruction in the southern United States often included “cruel treatment to animals” as a punishable crime. In summarizing recurrent themes in Angela Y. Davis’s theorizing on penal practices, Eduardo Mendieta names “social branding,” where once a “black American has been in prison, he or she is permanently branded” and situates this as making it “more difficult for former black prisoners to regain entry into society than it is for their white counterparts.” Davis and Mendieta, Abolition Democracy, 14. For more on social branding as a criminalizing process, see also Pagar, “The Mark of a Criminal Record.”

Wynter in Thomas, “Proud/Flesh Interviews.”

Gilroy, Against Race, 41.

Fanon, Black Skin, White Mask (2008), 204.
Sondra Perry’s (b. 1986, Perth Amboy, New Jersey) videos and performances foreground the tools of digital production as a way to critically reflect on new technologies of representation and to rearticulate their potential. Her work revolves around blackness and black American history and ways in which technology shapes identity, often with her own personal history as a point of departure.

Sondra Perry

Typhoon coming on

6 March – 20 May 2018

Exhibition Guide
Sondra Perry

*Typhoon coming on*

6 March – 20 May 2018

Sondra Perry (b.1986, Perth Amboy, New Jersey) constructs multifaceted narratives that explore the imagining, or imaging, of blackness throughout history. Often taking her own life as a point of departure, she makes works that revolve specifically around black American experiences and the ways in which technology and identities are entangled. Her use of digital tools and platforms, such as Chroma key blue screens, 3D avatars, open source software, and footage found online, reflects critically on representation itself. Perry’s investigations demonstrate that digital technology functions as an attribute of power, and another tool that reimagines the possibilities of networked collectivity. As the artist says: “I’m interested in how blackness is a technology, changing and adapting, through the constant surveillance and oppression of black folks across the diaspora since the 1600s. Unmediated seeing isn’t a thing.”

This exhibition is the first solo presentation of Perry’s work in Europe. She has created an immersive environment with a newly-conceived soundscape to accompany her animation *Typhoon coming on* (2018). Featuring a digitally manipulated image of J.M.W. Turner’s 1840 painting *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*, the original work depicts the drowning of 133 slaves by the captain of the British slave ship, Zong, to claim compensation for these ‘goods’ under the salvage clause of the ship’s insurance policy.

*Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation* (2016) and *Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation* (2016) are modelled on a bicycle and rowing machine workstations that the visitor can actively engage with and use. Positioned above the handlebars are three monitors that present a bald avatar, which delivers a monologue on the contradictory definitions of success offered by contemporary capitalism. *Resident Evil* (2016), an audio-visual collage of footage depicting police brutality as reported by victims and protesters juxtaposed with excerpts from Fox News. The work is cut through by the sound of American singer Eartha Kitt singing ‘I Want to Be Evil’, an ironic reference that deconstructs racial prejudice and discrimination.

The idea of abstraction, effacing or being a stand-in is expressed through Perry’s signature use of Chroma key blue walls. This visual effect and post-production technique allows the compositing of images or videos together. When Perry uses this technique, she suggests that the visitor is a participant in the work against a backdrop that has yet to be defined and within a context that is yet to be developed through post-production technologies. Perry’s blue becomes a digital space for representing absence.
1. Typhoon coming on, 2018
This immersive environment, conceived specifically for the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, is an adapted version of the videos presented on monitors in Sondra Perry’s Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation (2016) also included in the exhibition. The series of seamless projections coursing through the gallery space is accompanied by a new ambient soundscape. The projected videos begin with an animation of an ocean that the artist created using the open source software Ocean Modifier that allows users to simulate, generate and deform ocean surface. In her video, the ocean is purple as is the colour warning that appears on the software when there is an error with the simulation. The animation then blends into a digitally manipulated image of J.M.W. Turner’s 1840 painting Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On). The original work depicts the drowning of 133 slaves by the captain of the British slave ship, Zong, to claim compensation for these ‘goods’ under the salvage clause of the ship’s insurance policy.

Modelled after a bicycle workstation, Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation (2016) confronts the viewer with Sondra Perry’s own avatar. Three video screens positioned above the handlebars with a bald avatar that delivers a monologue on the contradictory definitions of success offered by contemporary capitalism. Visitors are encouraged to actively use the workstation as they watch the film.

Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation (2016) is a water-resistance rowing machine – its chamber filled with hair gel – revealing images across the attached screens of purple computer-generated images of waves and extreme close-ups of the sea in J.M.W. Turner’s 1840 painting Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On). Sounds of chimes and loud distorted voices accompany this piece, creating a dizzying effect. Similarly to Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation, visitors are encouraged to actively engage with and use the modified rowing machine.

4. Resident Evil, 2016
This installation features Perry’s signature use of Chroma key blue walls in her exhibitions across another projected animation of an extreme close-up and modified image of the artist’s skin. The monitor positioned against the backdrop of her ‘Skin Wall’ shows Resident Evil (2016), an audio-visual collage of footage depicting police brutality as reported by victims and protesters juxtaposed with excerpts from Fox News. The work is cut through by the sound of American singer Eartha Kitt singing ‘I Want to Be Evil’, an ironic reference that deconstructs racial prejudice and discrimination.

All works courtesy the artist
**Programmes and events**

**SATURDAY TALKS: SONDRA PERRY**
Free talks take place at 3pm on selected Saturdays to explore the works on show in greater depth.

24 March, 3pm: Amira Gad, Curator
21 April, 3pm Claude Adjil, Curator

**PROGRAMMES: SONDRA PERRY**
Throughout the run of her exhibition, Sondra Perry invites artists, activists and theorists to participate in a series of public discussions and screenings. Please visit serpentinegalleries.org or ask at the reception desk for further details.

**SERPENTINE CINEMA: SONDRA PERRY AND CAULEEN SMITH**
Friday 11 May, 6.30pm
Peckhamplex Cinema
95a Rye Lane, SE15 4ST
Tickets £5 via peckhamplex.london
Sondra Perry hosts an evening of screenings and conversations with interdisciplinary filmmaker Cauleen Smith.

**FAMILY WEEKEND**
April, Free, Drop-in, Serpentine Gallery
Please ask at the reception desk for full details
Families work with artists to construct a temporary studio that will change and grow over the weekend. The event is free, drop-in and suitable for families with children of all ages.

**RIGHTS TO THE CITY?**
Saturday 12 May
Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, WC1R 4RL
Booking essential via ticketweb.co.uk
The Serpentine presents an international forum that brings together artists, writers, educators and activists to discuss what it means to arrive, work, study, grow up and grow old in the city. Featuring projects and research developed through the Serpentine’s Education and Projects programme over the last four years, the symposium will also host arts organisations and neighbourhood projects from around the world.

**MOBILE TOURS**
Free public wifi: Serpentine Public sgtours.org
Discover mobile tours of the Serpentine's internationally acclaimed programmes by connecting to our free wifi on your smartphone. Serpentine Mobile Tours offer visitors an interactive gallery experience by providing access to additional content, artist interviews, audio guides and curator tours. Supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.
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