The 'do-it-yourself' artwork

Participation from Fluxus to new media

Edited by
Anna Dezeuze

Contents

The face and the public: 10
race, secrecy and digital art practice

Jennifer González

Today we are constantly reminded of the degree to which we are participating in public culture, in political culture, and in online digital culture. A media-saturated environment requires us to define our identities in relation to the culture we consume, while the internet invites us to take up new (and multiple) subject positions in virtual worlds or social networks sites such as Facebook. This chapter explores the way race discourse operates in contemporary digital art as a site for public encounter, and as a trope of 'participation' for artists, audiences and critics alike.

Coming face to face with racial difference has been the focus of partici-patory artistic practice since the 1960s. Early conceptual examples include Adrian Piper's mediated social encounters, where the formal artistic device of commonplace textual interfaces – calling cards and questionnaires – propelled sometimes unwitting participants to come to terms with their own racial bias. Other live performances in the 1980s and 1990s, like James Luna's *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, or Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco's *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...*, seduced audience members to enter into carefully choreographed encounters designed to draw out specific forms of racial and cultural bias in relation to the history of photography or ethno-graphic museum displays, respectively. The works discussed here, by Nancy Burson, Keith Piper and Mongrel, can be seen to converse with these earlier investigations, inviting viewers to attend to race politics, including the colour of their own skin, as a form of social, historical or ethical encounter. The physical actions of participants in these digital works may be fairly minimal (such as clicking a mouse or having a photograph taken) but each of these gestures, however small, proves to be effective in revealing the extent to which race is itself a radically participatory discourse.

* * *

The function and importance of race and race discourse in online digital spaces and in contemporary digital art revolves around an apparent paradox. On the one hand, there is a recurring desire to see online digital spaces as sites

of universal subjectivity that can escape the limitations of race. This desire tends to intersect with assumptions about public space and systems of ethics that valorise the neutralisation of cultural, racial and sexual difference, as well as historical specificity. The apparently neutral space of the internet is viewed as a potentially progressive domain for overcoming barriers that may otherwise obstruct or restrict ideal forms of participation in the public sphere. On the other hand, a proliferation of racially-marked avatars and experimental hybrids (human and non-human) increasingly populate artificial worlds and online chat spaces. Race, as a set of visual cues operating in graphical interfaces, has literally become a fashion accessory to be bought, sold, traded and toyed with experimentally and experientially online.[1] This proliferation of typologies and pseudo identities provides the opportunity for the expanded display of difference, and this display seems directly and actively to undermine the prospect of the neutral, universal, online subject.

It is not a real paradox, of course, because both conditions operate in parallel to reduce cultural and racial difference to a question of appearance: the domain of visual signs. Online identity, participation and power have become tethered to images (or their elision) for social and political ends. Questions arise, however, concerning the way race discourse actually intersects with the internet, and with digital culture.[2] What are the conditions for ethical relations that entail encounters with racial difference? How do theoretical explorations of 'the face' and 'the public' bear on the subject? If vision and visibility are central to the operative dynamics of race, as has been argued not only by Franz Fanon but many others subsequently, then might it be possible to undo the power of race discourse as an oppressive regime by decoupling it from vision or the visible?[3] Or, alternately, might it be that visual culture is the very place where contemporary race discourse might be most powerfully critiqued and transformed?

These questions are central to recent theories of digital art practice that directly engage race as a dominant and pervasive visual discourse within an emerging public sphere. Technoculture is often praised for the ways it enhances democracy by realising an ideal public sphere. But this view is generally inattentive to the fact that the experience of the technocultural public sphere can also be one of aggression, exclusion and invisibility. Taking the writings of media theorist Mark Hansen as a provocative and symptomatic starting point, this essay explores how the desire for racial 'neutrality' can lead to the unintentional repression of important forms of cultural difference. Two models of ethics, grounded in the writings of Giorgio Agamben and Emmanuel Levinas, respectively, are posed as alternatives in the quest for understanding the importance of 'the face' as a device for the unfolding, or unmaking of race in the public space of the internet.

Universal address

In 2004 Mark Hansen published an essay entitled 'Digitizing the racialized body or the politics of universal address', which was later expanded and substantially revised as a chapter entitled 'Digitizing the racialized body, or the politics of common impropriety', in his 2006 book *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*. In both versions, Hansen argues that the internet provides an unprecedented possibility for a new ethical encounter between humans, in part, because it can render them invisible to each other. Hansen observes that digital art can produce affective states in the user that might ultimately lead to recognising incongruities or incommensurabilities between categories of identity and embodied singularity.[4] Race becomes a lens for Hansen's thinking about online identification as making possible community beyond identity, namely:

> Because race has always been plagued by a certain disembodiment (the fact that race, unlike gender, *is* so clearly a construction, since racial traits are not reducible to organic, i.e., genetic, organization), it will prove especially useful for exposing the limitations of the internet as a new machinic assemblage for producing selves. For this reason, deploying the lens of race to develop our thinking about online identification will help us to exploit the potential offered by the new media for experiencing community beyond identity.[5]

Hansen's use of contemporary art and discourses of racial (dis)embodiment to illustrate his argument are worth further analysis precisely because they signal a set of consistent, symptomatic desires within media theory regarding the potential of the internet. While I applaud Hansen's anti-racist goals, the general framework of both essays risks returning us to an overly utopian, universalising understanding of human relations that leaves little room for more subtle analyses of the concrete effects of cultural, racial and sexual differ-ence operative online today.

Hansen's argument is engaging and nuanced, but reveals a certain racial and cultural privilege. For example, he finds that 'passing' in online environ-ments, that is, posing as someone other than oneself, particularly in terms of race or gender, suspends 'the constraint exercised by the body as a visible signifier or as a receptive surface for the markings of raced and gendered particularity'.[6] In other words, since we are all theoretically invisible online (webcams notwithstanding), and cannot be marked or mapped visually, we can all pass. Hansen hopes that by celebrating the ubiquity of passing online (we all are equally subjected to the condition of *having* to pass) that cultural signifiers (of race, gender) will be shown to have no natural correlation to any particular body and will thus be revealed as no more than 'social codings'.[7] Hansen presents this vision of cyberspace as not merely experimental, but also

pedagogical: through the transcendence of visibility, those who are engaged in passing online will, of necessity, learn the very bankruptcy of categories of identity.

Yet 'social codings' are precisely the forms of ideology that are most resistant to transformation. If race is revealed to be (or has scientifically been proven to be) a social *code*, rather than a natural or biological *condition*, this revelation has yet to transform the social function of race in the maintenance of uneven power relations. While some aspects of race, gender and sexuality are performative, as Judith Butler so convincingly argues, it must also be observed that not all forms of performance are equal, nor do they have equal effects.[8] Lisa Nakamura has effectively argued in her book *Cybertypes* that online passing frequently produces stereotypes of race that become solidified through their repeated performance through a kind of 'identity tourism'.[9] Nakamura writes, 'identity tourism is a type of non-reflective relationship that actually widens the gap between the other and the one who only performs itself *as the other*'.[10] While Hansen philosophically hopes performative repetition will render stereotypes void of meaning, Nakamura observes that it appears to merely reinforce narrow conceptions of race. Her argument is echoed in sociological studies showing that racial 'identities' may be more immutable, fixed and shallow in online interaction than offline.[11]

Passing in the real world, or online, entails more than visually choreographing one's appearance, it is a complex *psychic* activity that foregrounds precisely the ways in which subjects are generally fixed by racial typologies. Anyone who has racially passed, or who has worn black face, knows that there is nothing, truly nothing, disembodied about it.[12] Stuart Hall has argued that race is best understood as a discourse, constructed by thought and language, which responds to real, concrete conditions of cultural difference.[13] If the complexity of race discourse is grasped in the fullness of its multiple articulations, then it is not possible to discount processes of identification, fantasy and dominance that racial difference elicits simply because an online image may or may not have a 'real world' referent. Race is always an embodied discourse that acts on, and through, living human beings at the level of corporeal practices, movements, gestures,, and gazes, ultimately constructing and deconstructing the psychological states of individual subjects.[14]

In her essay 'Cyberfeminism, racism, embodiment', Maria Fernandez argues that unspoken anxieties attending the conception of race and racial difference produce a kind of physical haunting that emerges as a set of frequently unconscious and involuntary rote behavioural habits.[15] Drawing on earlier feminist analyses of embodiment, Fernandez suggests that, although much has been written about race as an ideological construct, the *performance* of racism in everyday physical and social interactions is of fundamental concern for understanding its continued reproduction.

Race as a set of embodied practices supports Michael Omi and Howard Winant's conception of race as a social formation that is constantly under revision. What they call 'racial formations' can be found both in small moments (at the micro-level) of racist encounter and in systemic (or macro-level) epistemological approaches to cultural and ontological understandings of human being.[16] Taken together, these theorists provide a framework for understanding race as a complex and nuanced discourse functioning at every level of individual and collective representation, consciousness, behaviour and organisation. Online passing is never free from the social, historical, linguistic and psychological constraints and conditions that also shape racial discourse offline. The invisibility of 'real' bodies cannot, alone, produce a racially neutral space or even racially neutral subjects.

Visual corruption, affective purity

Hansen supports his argument for the liberating aspects of the internet, not with an online art project where passing is an essential element of engagement, but rather with an offline video game called *Caught Like a Nigger in Cyberspace* (figure 10.1), which appeared on a CD-ROM that British artist Keith Piper included in the catalogue for his exhibition *Relocating the Remains* (1997). The game requires the user to encounter a series of obstacles on the way to the promising realm of 'cyberspace'. Standardised identification forms, for example, offer limited choices for the user who must select among such identities as 'tech-head' or 'Al Gore'. If the user clicks on 'Other', the application for entry into cyberspace is put on hold. At this point, the user can choose to wait indefinitely in a waiting room or click a button that says, 'Do not touch.' If one chooses to disobey and touch the button, a black male figure appears on the bottom of the screen. Seen from behind, the figure appears to be running, either toward a promising future or into the labyrinth of a hostile territory, depending on the subsequent choices of the game player. *Caught like a Nigger in Cyberspace* invites the player to identify with the running figure whose future unfolds in a dystopic landscape. Because there is no clear way to win the game, it ultimately provides a counter-discourse to utopian visions of cyberspace, and it more specifically indicates the racial divide that exists, both economically and culturally, between those with access to the internet and those without.

For Hansen, the game also offers an unusual opportunity for a new kind of feeling – frustration. He describes his own experience of struggling to succeed at playing the game, his various thwarted attempts at success and a final 'affective-overflow' that occurs when he is unable to 'correlate the sensations generated by the video game with some appropriate action'.[17] More specifically, he states:

the work compels its viewer to live through the exclusion of certain bodies from cyberspace via the frantic temporal mode of a survival exercise, thereby mobilizing the disappointment of viewer expectations concerning the payoff of video game-playing (where some kind of clear victory is an always achievable goal) in order to deliver a message about racial inequality.[18]

Hansen implies an underlying parallel between his own affective response of frustration playing the game and the materially specific situation of 'living through exclusion' from cyberspace. For Hansen, this affective response is uniquely possible in the artificial space of the digital realm, precisely because he can enter into the space of the game, experience the artificiality of racial identifications, and thereby become distanced from his own social position by recognising the 'bankruptcy' of the racialised image of the other.

Hansen argues that the 'raced image' (I presume he means images of non-white subjects) can no longer broker processes of identity formation or struggles for recognition precisely because the image is always already corrupted by the spectacle that is capitalism, as well as by the long history of racially oppressive regimes of visual representation (particularly in the human sciences) that remain in force as instruments for classification and exclusion.[19] I agree that people bring to the internet (consciously and unconsciously) the inheritance of image cultures that precede them when encountering hegemonic visual discourses online that tend to co-opt, transform, or overpower other forms of image signification. Hansen clearly grasps the ways in which
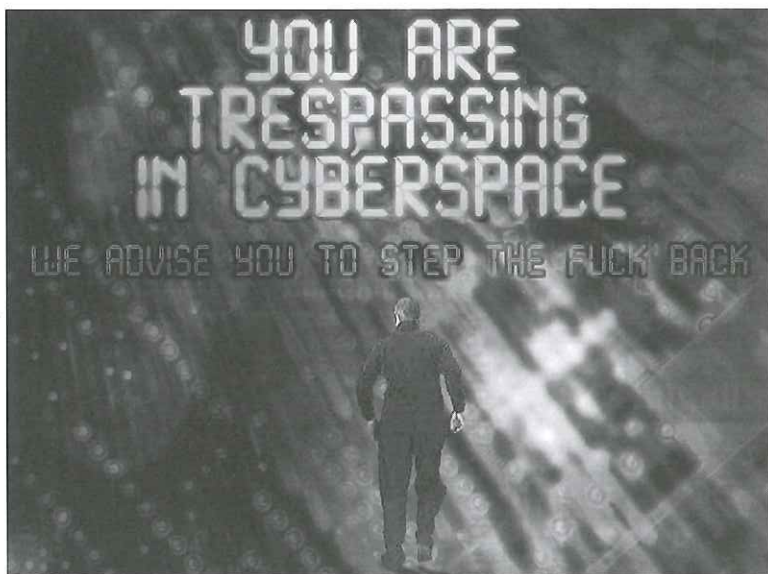
10.1   Keith Piper, *Caught Like a Nigger in Cyberspace*, 1997.

power operates unequally to create robust forms of racial oppression for different subjects. He nicely summarises Franz Fanon's discussion of the 'racial epidermal schema' in order to articulate how both black and white subjects suffer when real black bodies are reduced to racially stereotyped images.[20]

Along with Fanon, Hansen suggests that racial difference and racial oppression, can interrupt coherent forms of identification for all subjects. I agree with these observations, but not with Hansen's conclusion that the problem hinges exclusively on the *visual*. He argues that, because 'technically facilitated' forms of community suspend 'the overdetermination exercised by the (visual) image of the racial other, online identity play creates the possibility for a "zero-degree" of racial identification, a potential universality rooted in the precariousness of any identity as a fixation of embodied individuation.'[21] For Hansen, images on the internet should therefore be summarily rejected as a viable system of meaning or exchange. By pitting the concrete particularity of the visual image against the ineffable and transitory experience of *affect*, Hansen hopes to show how the 'raced image' is an always already corrupted medium 'stripped of any positive meaning for the subjects that it would mark.'[22] Affect thus emerges as a kind of pure and universal category of feeling. Hansen summarises:

> Piper seizes the empty husk of the raced image, not to rehabilitate it against capitalist fetishism, but to extract its redemptive kernel. In the various ways we have explored, he deploys this empty image as the catalyst for a reinvestment of the body beyond the image, for an exposure of the rootedness of life in a source, affectivity, that lies beyond identity and individuality and thus beyond the reach of commodification.[23]

There are two problems with this argument. First, affect is not impervious to capitalism, nor does it exist abstractly, beyond the experience of actual human subjects and their particular identities. Eliciting affect, in the form of pre-packaged desires, might be one of capitalism's most successful means of self-reproduction. Specific kinds of affect (anxiety, horror, compassion) that can be predicted and managed might even be one of capitalism's primary commodities. More to the point, affect is historical, not a-temporal, both in the life of the individual and for groups. In her essay on contemporary websites that operate through a model of collective feeling or experience (the Aryan Nations website presenting white supremacy as a form of love rather than hate, for example), Sara Ahmed writes,

> the role of feelings in mediating the relation between individual and collective bodies is complicated. How we feel about another – or a group of others – is not simply a matter of individual impressions, or impressions that are created anew in the present. Rather, feelings rehearse associations that are already in

place, in the way in which they 'read' the proximity of others, at the same time as they establish the 'truth' of the reading. The impressions we have of others, and the impressions left by others are shaped by histories that stick, at the same time as they generate the surfaces and boundaries that allow bodies to appear in the present.[24]

For Ahmed, it is structures of feeling that shape the very appearance of bodies in the domain of the visual, and provide the conditions for their legibility. Affect does not exist 'beyond' individuals and communities, nor is it separable from the circulation of signs – including visual signs – that produce it or derive from it.

Second, images cannot be 'empty' or 'full'. Images are signs deployed strategically within the context of an ongoing circulation of other signs. Whether 'raced' or not, images have different meanings for each subject who encounters them, regardless of their hegemonic or subaltern position. It is not possible therefore to argue, as Hansen does, that a given image is 'stripped of any positive meaning' a priori. If the 'raced' image is merely an 'empty husk' for Hansen, it may have more to do with his acceptance of it as stereotype, than with its actual potential for progressive transformation and identification. It is true that a long history of racist portrayals has repressed human qualities in order to depict a given subject as a caricature or 'type' rather than as a unique individual.[25] For this reason, it is all the more important to attend to the ways that particular images perpetuate this tradition, and the ways in which other images work against it. As with semantic reversals of words, such as 'black', images that have served as tools of domination (i.e. racial stereotypes) have also been redeployed to serve a counter-hegemonic purpose.[26] Although Hansen's reading of Piper's work is clearly sympathetic, his insistence on the emptiness of the image in favour of the fullness of his own affective response obscures the deep, critical engagement with image culture that is its very basis.

The original installation of *Relocating the Remains* addressed the history of the African diaspora from the period of colonisation, through the Atlantic slave trade, to the migrations of the present. In one example, *Surveillances: Tagging the Other* (1992), Piper installed a row of four video screens on which a black male body is seen to be subject to the gaze of a variety of dominant surveillance technologies, from eugenics to criminology. Each screen shows a head and shoulders view – sometimes in profile like a mug shot, sometimes with a frontal view – framed by a map or landscape and a set of geometric diagrams, suggesting that he is both surveyed and silenced, both made to appear and prohibited from enunciation. When this piece was originally shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, viewers were invited to activate the four screens by pointing an infrared gun and shooting at each image like a target. It was a decidedly unpleasant element of engagement.

What became clear immediately was that the work was not only about the body – or the face – as a target of racist violence but also about the responsibility one takes in relation to that body: the moment of pulling the artificial trigger became entwined with forms of physical assault in the culture at large; the violence necessary to activate the image in the space of the gallery invited comparisons with other forms of representational violence both in the history of art and in forms of museum display.

As with *Caught Like a Nigger in Cyberspace*, the digital interface had a powerful effect, but the image of the targeted subject was far from secondary; it was the very ground of the work's signification. The 'black' body is a signifier of critical importance, as an organising condition of possibility for historical subjectivity, as well as a locus for forms of subjection or subjugation. For Piper, visual images are not, or not only, always already corrupted signs participating in the spectacle that is capitalism; they can also be the site for significant identifications particularly for those subjects who are interpellated by them and can recognise themselves in specific histories of embodiment.

The face

Underlying Hansen's basic argument is a hopeful interest in the possibility that some kind of unprecedented ethical relation might emerge from the anonymity – the facelessness – of the internet and other forms of new media. He turns to the notions of the 'improper' and the 'whatever body' from the writings of Giorgio Agamben in order to argue for digital media's potential to produce the conditions for the emergence of an identity-less, subject-less singularity, citing the following passage from *The Coming Community*: 'if humans could, that is, not be-thus in this or that particular biography, but be only *the* thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable'.[27] Agamben suggests, in essence, the utopian possibility of human encounter that relies on a kind of purity of presence, where all else (history, memory, gender, race and class) falls away. Counter-intuitively, for Agamben 'the face' is not the human visage, in its material presence, but rather what he calls an opening to communicability. He writes, 'there is a face wherever something reaches the level of exposition and tries to grasp its own being exposed, wherever a being that appears sinks in that appearance and has to find a way out of it. (Thus art can give a face even to an inanimate object … and it may be that nowadays the entire Earth, which has been transformed into a desert by humankind's blind will, might become one single face.)'[28]

For Agamben, 'the face' is a restless power, a threshold, a simultaneity and being-together of the manifold 'visages' constituting it; it is the duality

of communication and communicability, of potential and act. It seems, there-fore, to be both the form and the function of signification. Yet it is also an ontological or existential state. He writes, 'in the face I exist with all of my properties (my being brown, tall, pale, proud, emotional …); but this happens without any of these properties essentially identifying me or belonging to me.'[29] Agamben wants us to be able to imagine the unique character of each human subject without limiting this uniqueness to surface representations, to the limits of particular resemblances between people, to the frameworks of socially defined characteristics. He not only wants us to be able to imagine this state but also to somehow voluntarily achieve it. He writes in the impera-tive: 'be only your face. Go to the threshold. Do not remain the subject of your properties or faculties, do not stay beneath them; rather, go with them, in them, beyond them.'[30]

Artist Nancy Burson's *Human Race Machine* (1999–) echoes Agamben's call, but replaces the universal singularity of the subject with universal sameness, emphasising the physical and racial properties of humans in an effort to precisely erase or transcend their significance. The artwork combines a complicated viewing-booth apparatus with a patented morphing technology that will transform a snapshot portrait of the user into a series of racially distinct replicas. A digital algorithm adjusts bone structure, skin tone, and eye shape, automatically reproducing the same face with a range of facial features, which is then displayed on the computer screen as a row of uncanny doppel-gangers. Burson claims that the *Human Race Machine* is her 'prayer for racial equality' and suggests that, 'there is only one race, the human one.'[31] 'The more we recognize ourselves in others', Burson writes, 'the more we can connect to the human race.'[32] Her work adheres to the same conception of race as prima-rily a concern with visual appearance found in Hansen, but she reverses the importance of the image in the production of a universal subject. The power of visual representation, for Burson, lies in its ability to produce forms of cross-racial identification, whereas for Hansen visual representations of race are always already corrupted by their ideological history and therefore cannot be used productively as sites of identification.

Burson also claims that 'the *Human Race Machine* allows us to move beyond differences and arrive at sameness.'[33] Despite her progressive inten-tions, Burson's desire seems strangely undone by the artwork itself. Instead of promising greater human sameness, the *Human Race Machine* appears to offer a thinly veiled fantasy of *difference*. Presenting the argument that 'there is no gene for race', the *Human Race Machine* allows the user to engage in what Lisa Nakamura might call 'identity tourism'. As a form of temporary racial tourism, Burson's machine may make the process of cross-racial identification appear plausible, but its artificiality does nothing to reveal how people live their lives, or even how they engage with cyberspace.

To be more specific, the *Human Race Machine* does not offer users any insight into the privileges or discriminations that attend racial difference, such as the experience of being ignored by taxis or denied housing, being harassed by the police, receiving unfair legal representation, or having one's very life threatened. Instead, it offers users a kind of false promise of universality through the visual mechanics of race. By using the face as a device that is ultimately mutable and theoretically non-identitarian, she shows how any face (this time the actual visage) might become like any other face, any *whatever* face, and by doing so implies that the racial discourses attached to those signs will fall away. Like Agamben, Burson invites us to attend to our physical traits, our 'properties', in order that we might transcend them. Yet both fail to attend to the social and political constraints that might impede this transcendence.

In contrast, Franz Fanon has eloquently theorised the involuntary condition of *epidermalisation* that precisely interrupts the concrete possibility of being *only* one's 'face' (in Agamben's sense) because of one's racially defined, physical 'visage'.[34] Fanon describes the moment when he realised his own 'properties' were in fact created by others, writing: 'below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me … by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.'[35] As Delan Mahendran nicely summarises, for Fanon 'the racial-epidermal schema is the interior horizon of self and others in immediate perceptual experience of the world. The racial epidermal schema impacts a black person's tacit sense of self. The racial epidermal schema immediately in play is the phenomenon of appearing or showing up as black in an anti-black world.'[36]

When Agamben suggests that 'there is a face wherever something reaches the level of exposition and tries to grasp its own being exposed, wherever a being that appears sinks in that appearance and has to find a way out of it', he reveals the very fact of a subject who is undergoing the process of exposition, that is, of being defined, of being explained, framed, delimited and exposed as an *appearance*, and who is trying to grasp this exposition. One might say that this is an insightful description of the very process of racial formation, of epidermalisation, or of subjection per se. But for those human subjects who are constantly enclosed into these properties or faculties by *others*, Agamben's call to 'go with them, in them, beyond them' seems not only utopian (literally appropriate for a space that does not exist) but also blind to the conditions by which humans subjects are, indeed, produced through elaborately constructed discourses and relations with *other* humans. These discourses and relations are designed to prevent precisely this voluntary opening of 'the face', to prevent any movement beyond racial particularity. Perhaps this is why Agamben, to his credit, frames his argument as a conditional statement that marks the edge of the possible: if humans *could* be only 'their face' – that is, exist in a state

of utter openness and non-identity – then they might for the first time enter into a 'community without presuppositions'. Agamben's approach to ethics is ultimately privileged in origin and messianic in structure, working toward a future point of unknowable possibility without attending in any depth to the material conditions of difference in the present.

Writing before Agamben, Emmanuel Levinas elaborated 'the face' as the critical site of human ethical encounter. For Levinas, the absolute infinity of the Other, legible in the physical presence of the face, simultaneously manages to appear within and exceed this material frame. Levinas foregrounds his ambivalence concerning visual knowledge by opening his discussion of 'Ethics and the face' in *Totality and Infinity* by stating, 'inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power over them'.[37] He goes on to explain how the face is the condition for the visibility of the other *as* Other, and the origin for the opportunity to enter into speech and discourse. He writes, 'the idea of infinity is produced in the opposition of conversation, in sociality. The relation with the face, with the other absolutely other which I cannot contain, the other in this sense infinite, is nonetheless my Idea, a commerce'.[38] We can see clear parallels with Agamben's theorising of the face, which is clearly indebted to Levinas, but the latter seems to be more attuned to the involuntary nature of this coming into relation via the face-to-face encounter and to the responsibility and possible fraternity that emerges from this. He writes,

> one has to respond to one's right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one's fear for the Other. My being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun', my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?'[39]

Even given this sombre revelation that the encounter with the Other, with 'the face', is not a pure state of abstracted unity but also always grounded in the conditions of history and contingency, Levinas is not without hope that the radical and uncontainable Otherness that appears in face-to-face encounters can nevertheless be maintained 'without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity. The resistance of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical'.[40] While Agamben grounds the possibility of ethical encounters through an *erasure* of difference, Levinas grounds it *through* difference, since 'the face resists possession, resists my powers'.[41] It is this very resistance that allows us to recognise the infinity of the Other who always exists beyond, and in excess of, the mechanisms (whether visual or discursive, historical or taxonomic) which we might use to frame or delimit it. More to the point, our own historicity depends upon the Other, our
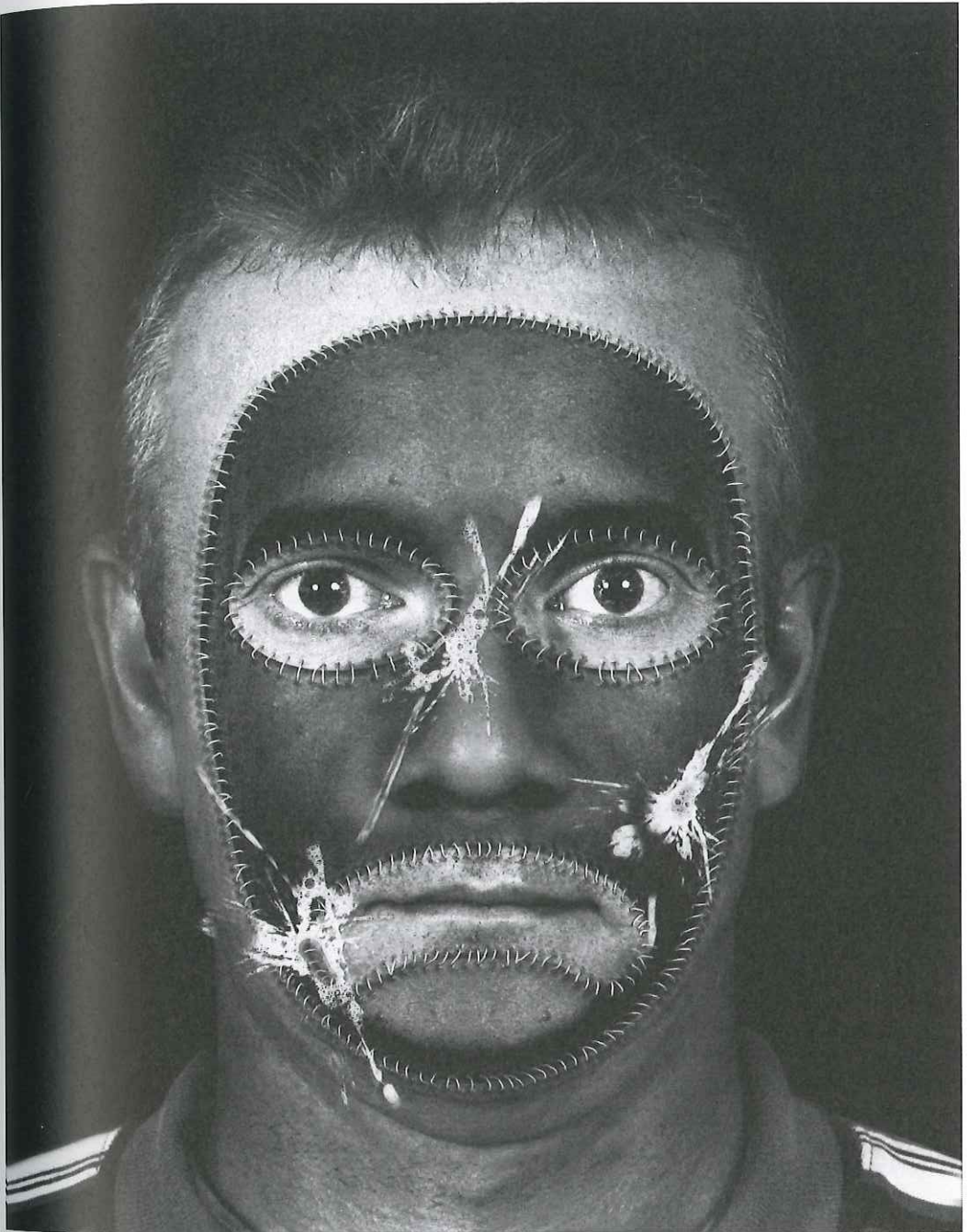
Mongrel, *Colour Separation*, 1997.   **10.2**

situatedness becomes defined by having to answer to, and for, histories which we may not have previously conceived as our own.

In contrast to Nancy Burson's *Human Race Machine*, which works to produce a form of seamless identification in her audience through the visual production of racial equivalence, the British-Jamaican artist collective Mongrel (Graham Harwood, Mervin Jarman, Matsuko Yokokoji, Richard Pierre Davis and Matthew Fuller) leverages the iconicity of the face to elicit a structure of ambivalence. Their print and online project *Colour Separation* (1997) offered users the opportunity to encounter masked subjects who signified as imaginary projections of racial types (figure 10.2). Each of the composite images consisted of a simple frontal head shot of a man or woman, upon which a smaller photographic mask of a different racial type was apparently sewn, revealing the eyes and mouth of the subject underneath. Produced with their own morphing software, strategically named 'Heritage Gold', the images were compiled from over one hundred photographs of people who were somehow connected to the core members of the art group into eight racial stereotypes. Echoing the processes of composite photography used in the early twentieth century to define criminal and racial types, these images emerged as the sign of the impossible referent – that is, they signified subjects who do not exist except in digital form, and in the imagination of those who created them. The phrase 'colour separation' also refers to an image processing technique that entails creating separate screens (magenta, cyan, black and yellow) for colour image printing – an artificial and mechanical process not unlike racial categorisation.

The layering of a racially distinct mask on top of the face implied not one but two subjects defined both by difference and intimacy, by their mutual interdependence and potential interchange. These double portraits reappeared in Mongrel's installation *National Heritage* (1999) with a dynamic, interactive element: by clicking on individual faces the user added another layer, of spit. These unexpected marks, not immediately legible as saliva, marred the surface of the face. At the same time, a voice recounted in some detail a personal narrative of everyday racial abuse, of which the spit was a visual sign. In drawing out the complexity of human race relations – its micro-violence and the inescapable complicity of every viewer – the work functions as a disruptive device in the ongoing experiments of race discourse. By naming its specialised morphing software Heritage Gold, Mongrel played off the rather insidious euphemistic term 'heritage', used in British culture typically to signify the preservation of a white, English patrimony. Rachel Green observes, 'based on the ubiquitous graphics software Adobe Photoshop, Heritage Gold replaces its banal tools and commands ("Enlarge", "Flatten") with terms pregnant with racial and class significance ("Define Breed", "Paste into Host Skin", "Rotate World View")'.[42] Pull-down menus

allow users to transform photographic images according to racial types such as East Indian, Chinese and Caucasian.

Such designations reveal the strange equation of national identities with racial identities and seem to parallel the kind of morphing fantasies and identity tourism found in Nancy Burson's *Human Race Machine*. One crucial difference is that Heritage Gold is a free, unpatented, shareware that allows users to produce these visual manipulations and transformations themselves rather than imposing a homogenising algorithm on all participants. Both *Colour Separation* and the Heritage Gold software engage not merely the question of racism as a complex, multi-participant event without immediate remedy; both also emphasise the ways in which this condition is mediated by visibility and invisibility. As Graham Harwood writes, 'In this work as in the rest of society we perceive the demonic phantoms of other "races". But these characters never existed just like the nigger bogeyman never existed. But sometimes … reluctantly we have to depict the invisible in order to make it disappear.'[43]

In drawing out the impasses and intersections of human race relations, the work functions as a salutary disruptive device that more closely approximates a Levinasian ethics in which the resistance to possession takes place in the public domain of cyberspace. Common to all of these examples is the logic of the face as a visible threshold to the domain of communication, and ultimately to a practice of ethics. In the long tradition of portraiture, so thoroughly theorised in the history of art, the face is the object of public encounter, a device that mediates the historicity of the subject and its interior character. As many scholars have argued, the portrait and the face are primarily rhetorical, functioning like speech acts in both argument and address.[44] Sharing an etymology with façade, the face is architectural in its features, and potentially false in its design. This is the lure and disappointment of the face, both for the early twentieth-century eugenicist who hopes to discover in the features of the face the proof of racial superiority, and for the artist who hopes to capture in a glance or profile the essence of identity. At the bureaucratic level, however, the face guarantees legal status, defines passport control, and provides the focus of most surveillance and security technologies. As Sandy Nairne observes, 'In a future presumed by many thinkers to involve digital enhancement, electronic recording and constant surveillance, the technology of recognition (attributed to increased security pressures) promises to make the science of the face an arena for further work and development.'[45]

As the most reproduced visual sign on the internet, the face continues to operate as the threshold to public space. Facebook, the largest social networking site on the internet with more than 80 million registered members, has uploaded more than four billion images between 2003 and 2007.[46] Ninety per cent of the profiles on Facebook contain an image; most are faces. Each

face is presented as one point in a nexus of other faces, each with its own extending network, creating vast pools of tenuous social links that grow exponentially. Unlike the portraits of previous eras, depicting wealth or fame, the faces on Facebook depict anyone who can follow the simple uploading directions on the website. More importantly, the face is no longer presented as singular and isolated, but becomes the ultimate origin of other faces; always defined by, surrounded by, and in some way guaranteed by the visual presence of others. The meaning of the Facebook face is not limited to facial features, to the façade, but extends to the other faces to which it is linked. Within multiple trajectories of signification, the face enlivens and mobilises social connections that become much more significant than the photographic representation of individuals. Yet race and class still play a role in the way Facebook and other sites, like MySpace, construct networks of inclusion and exclusion, such that membership and a sense of belonging are already circumscribed via categories existing in the culture at large.[47]

The public secret

The desire to locate a universal quality in human subjects or the allure of forms of universal address – the two are not the same, but the latter frequently presupposes the former – is probably tied to a will to eradicate not merely individual differences, but any difference that is believed to create an impediment to public action, public consensus, or communication. Race has traditionally been thought of as a 'quality' of individuals, therefore reducible by Agamben and other theorists, like Hansen, to a property or mere set of appearances that one can theoretically 'move beyond'. But race is not a *property*; it is a *relation of public encounter*.

In her book, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*, Jodi Dean observes that our widespread differences in culture, practice, language, information, race, status, religion and education in the world (and especially in online digital culture) preclude the possibility that 'the public' can refer to 'all of us'. Why, then, does the idea of 'the public' persist? For Dean 'the public' is symbolic; it may not exist in fact, but it still has real social effects both in political thought and in law. For these discourses, 'the public' is a central organising trope commonly contrasted with 'the private', such that the borders of this demarcation are the subject of theory, debate and controversy. Dean shifts this opposition by proposing another: that between 'the public' and 'the secret', and writes,

> few contemporary accounts of publicity acknowledge the secret. Instead they adopt a spatial model of a social world divided between public and private spheres. For the most part, the accounts claim either priority of the one or the

other ignoring the system of distrust, the circuit of concealment and revelation, that actively generates the public. To this extent they seem unable to theorize the power of publicity, the compulsion to disclose and the drive to survey.[48]

The 'other' of the public is not the private but the hidden, the unknown, even the unknowable. The secret is both the object of desire and fascination and the threat to the coherence of the public as homogeneous, open, knowable condition of universal participation.

Publicity requires secrets, for Dean, in so far as the secret maps the limit of public discourse. Secrecy is always a public fact. Revealing secrets is one of the goals of publicity, but producing secrets is another goal. Power resides in what people conceal as well as what they reveal, whether as part of the hegemony or the subaltern classes. Race and other forms of cultural difference have been historically presented as secret unknowns that require definition, mapping, measuring and legislating by those in power, in order to render them public. Race both constitutes and is constituted by the public. Race produces a form of resistance to ideals of the public because it stands as a marker of difference that stubbornly resists transformation or incorporation. Race serves as an aspect of secrecy in the logic of publicity, but as an already publicly constructed discourse, its secrets are plainly evident. This is its fundamental contradiction. As Homi Bhabha has observed

> the fetish of colonial discourse – what Fanon calls the epidermal schema – is not, like the sexual fetish, a secret. Skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as 'common knowledge' in a range of cultural, political and historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies.[49]

Racial schemas work to hide or mask not only individuals *as* individuals but also their real and imagined historical conditions.

If racial difference has frequently accompanied an emerging relation of imperial or colonial domination and violence, and a resulting economic and social asymmetry that profoundly mark our present moment, the humans living through this history have been, and continue to be, produced in radically different ways from each other and thus remain mysterious to each other. The sign of this mystery on the body, through the skin, elicits a general suspicion and curiosity. A fascination and compulsion to know or to reveal the mystery (which is the past), is countered by a simultaneous desire *not* to know this past. This ambivalent condition guards against the memory of the historical meaning of race. Hence, as David Marriot observes in his book, *Haunted Life*, the fearful projections accompanying the gaze that produces the raced subject are always haunted by the past, but 'what haunts is not so much the imago

spun through with myths, anecdotes, stories, but the shadow or stain that is sensed behind it and that disturbs well-being'.[50]

The philosophical imperative for a homogeneous universal subject, without racial or cultural specificity, who might therefore properly participate in a 'neutral' public sphere can be seen as a demand for subjects not only to reveal their secrets, but to find ways to live without them; in other words, to find ways not to be *disturbing*. Jodi Dean argues that while the internet may, indeed, provide one site for democratic politics, it does not constitute a public sphere, particularly in the Habermasian sense of equal access and homogeneous participation. In fact, she suggests that the public sphere, with all of its structure of spectacle, suspicion, or celebrity, is the wrong model for understanding political process or democracy, especially within technoculture; rather, she suggests that we conceive of the web as an intersecting nexus of 'issue networks' that produce 'neo-democracies', borrowing these terms from Richard Rogers and Noorjte Marres.[51] For Dean, traditional 'public sphere' models rely on the nation as a site, consensus as a goal, rationality as a means, and individual actors as a vehicle, whereas the 'neo-democracy' model relies on the web as a kind neutral institution with contestation as a goal, networked conflict as a means, and the issues themselves (rather than individual actors) as a vehicle.

In different ways, Piper and Mongrel offer visions of race discourse as embedded in the domain of the public yet, like Dean, they eschew the ideal of a Habermasian public sphere. They instead examine the domain of technoculture with a healthy suspicion of the forms by which race discourse can be reproduced within it, particularly as a new form of capital or as an object of surveillance. For Piper, the public is an archive to be mapped, and an obstacle course to be run. For Mongrel, the public is an uneven terrain where unpredictable encounters can result in confrontation and transformation, but never final resolution. The kind of visual artefacts they produce offer alternatives to the hegemony of the images found elsewhere on the internet, and they participate in the kind of critical discourse important to any neo-democracy.

We can conclude that it is not yet possible to decouple race discourse as an oppressive regime from vision or the visible, and that visual culture (both on- and offline) is the very place where contemporary race discourse might be most powerfully critiqued and transformed. As Judith Butler has written,

> The media representations of the faces of the 'enemy' efface what is most human about the 'face' for Levinas. Through a cultural transposition of his philosophy, it is possible to see how dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended. This has implications, once again, for the boundaries that constitute what will and will not appear within public life, the limits of a publicly

acknowledged field of appearance. Those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil, authorize us to become sense-less before those lives we have eradicated, and whose grievability is indefinitely postponed. Certain faces must be admitted into public view, must be seen and heard for some keener sense of the value of life, all life, to take hold.[52]

The idea of a neo-democracy, with its emphasis on contestation and conflict centred on political issues rather than a consensus model addressing universal subjects might be a more appealing ideal, not only for the interactions of cyberspace, but also for the lived politics of our everyday lives.

Notes

This chapter was originally written for the journal *Camera Obscura*, 24: 1 (April 2009) and is excerpted here by permission. I would like to thank Wendy Chun, Lynn Joyrich, the students in the 2007–8 cohort of the Whitney Independent Study Program, and Jonathan Weiss for comments and responses to an early draft of this chapter.

1 Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 57.

2 See Jennifer González, 'Electronic *habitus*: agit-prop in an imaginary world', in John R. Hall, Blake Stimson and Lisa Tamiris Becker (eds), *Visual Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 117–38; 'Morphologies: race as visual technology', in Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (eds), *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003), pp. 379–93; and 'The appended subject: race and identity as digital assemblage', in Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, Gil Rodman (eds), *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 27–50.

3 Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967).

4 Mark Hansen, 'Digitizing the racialized body or the politics of universal address', *Substance*, 33 (2004), 107–33. All citations are from the revised version: 'Digitizing the racialized body, or the politics of common impropriety', in *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 139–73. I include the title of the first essay because it indicates Hansen's emphasis on the ways in which the internet can serve as a site of 'universal' address or participation. Hansen's revised version of the essay offers a much more nuanced articulation of the way race discourse forms conditions for embodiment both on and offline.

5 Ibid., pp. 140–1.

6 Ibid., p. 144.

7 Ibid., p. 147.

8 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 25.

9 Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, p. 57.

10 Ibid., p. 57 (my emphasis).

11 Byron Burkhalter, 'Reading race online: discovering racial identity in usenet discussions', in Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (eds), *Communities in Cyberspace*

(New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 63.

12 See Marlon Riggs's film *Ethnic Notions*, 1987.

13 Stuart Hall, 'Subjects in history: making diasporic identities', in Wahneema Lubiano (ed.), *The House that Race Built* (New York: Vintage, 1998), pp. 289–99.

14 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 88.

15 Maria Fernandez, 'Cyberfeminism, racism, embodiment', in Maria Fernandez, Faith Wilding and Michelle M. Wright (eds), *Domain Errors: Cyberfeminist Practices* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2002).

16 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 60.

17 Hansen, 'Digitizing the racial body', p. 167.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 172.

20 Ibid., p. 156

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 172.

23 Ibid.

24 Sara Ahmed, 'Collective feelings, or the impressions left by others', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21:2 (2004), 39.

25 Henry Louis Gates Jr, 'The face and voice of blackness', in Christopher C. French (ed.), *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710–1940* (San Francisco: Bedford Arts, 1990), pp. xxix–xliv.

26 There are many examples in the fine arts, but the work of Betye Saar (*Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972) or Fred Wilson (*Mine/Yours*, 1995) come to mind.

27 Agamben, quoted in Hansen, 'Digitizing the racial body', p. 143.

28 Giorgio Agamben, 'The face', in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 63.

29 Giorgio Agamben, 'Without classes', in *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 98.

30 Ibid., p. 99.

31 Nancy Burson, www.nancyburson.com/human_fr.html (accessed March 21, 2008).

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 11.

35 Ibid., p. 111.

36 Delan Mahendran, 'The facticity of blackness', *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, 5 (Summer, 2007), 198.

37 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 194.

38 Ibid., p. 197.

39 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Ethics as first philosophy', in Seán Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), p. 82.

40 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, p. 197.

41 Ibid., p. 193.

42 Rachel Green, 'Web work: A history of Internet art', *Artforum*, 9 (May 2000), 162–7, 190. www.articlearchives.com/computing/software-services-applications/836959 –1.html (accessed September 2008).

43 Harwood, www.mongrel.org.uk/colourseparation (accessed 31 March 2008).

44 Görel Gavalli-Björkman, *Face to Face: Portraits from Five Centuries* (Stockholm: National Museum, 2002), p. 141.

45 Sandy Nairne, 'Introduction', in Sandy Nairne and Sarah Howgate (eds), *The Portrait Now* (London: The National Portrait Gallery), p. 15.

46 Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, Cliff Lampe, 'The benefits of Facebook friends: social capital and college students' use of online social network sites', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12 (2007), 1153.

47 Zeynep Tufekci, 'Grooming, gossip, facebook and Myspace: What can we learn about these sites from those who won't assimilate?' *Information, Communication & Society*, 11: 4 (June 2008), 544–64. See also Thomas Claburn, 'Migration from MySpace to Facebook shows class divide' www.informationweek.com/news/internet/showArticle.jhtml?articleID= 200000822 (accessed 18 December 2008).

48 Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 44.

49 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 78.

50 David Marriot, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 2.

51 Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, p. 170.

52 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. xviii.