



From *Colour Separation* (Mongrel, 1997).
Courtesy of the artist.

The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice

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The function and importance of race and race discourse in online digital spaces and in contemporary digital art revolve 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 valorize the neutralization 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 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 nonhuman) 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 pseudoidentities provides the opportunity for the expanded display of difference, and

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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 how 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 by not only Frantz 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 in an emerging public sphere. Technoculture is often praised for the ways it enhances democracy by realizing 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 the 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 Hansen published an essay titled “Digitizing the Racialized Body; or, The Politics of Universal Address,” which was later expanded and substantially revised as a chapter titled “Digitizing

the Racialized Body, or the Politics of Common Impropropriety,” in his 2006 book *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*. In both versions of this essay, 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.⁴ Hansen observes that digital art can produce affective states in the user that might ultimately lead to recognizing incongruities or incommensurabilities between categories of identity and embodied singularity. Race becomes a lens for Hansen’s thinking about online identification as making possible community beyond identity:

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. (140–41)

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 in media theory regarding the potential of the Internet. While I applaud Hansen’s antiracist goals, the general framework of both essays risks returning us to an overly utopian, universalizing understanding of human relations that leaves little room for more subtle analyses of the concrete effects of cultural, racial, and sexual difference operative online today.

Hansen’s argument is engaging and nuanced, but it reveals a certain racial and cultural privilege. For example, he finds that “passing” in online environments “suspends the constraint exercised by the body as a *visible* signifier—as a receptive surface for the markings of racial (and gendered) particularity” (144, emphasis original). In other words, since we are all theoretically invisible online (Web cams 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), cultural signifiers (of race or gender) will be shown to have no natural correlation to any particular body and will thus be revealed as no more than social codings (147). 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 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. The claim that “online self-invention effectively places everyone in the position previously reserved for certain raced subjects” ignores the many ways in which cultural privilege and hierarchy exist online in terms of literacy, access, social networks, and even forms of self-invention (145).⁵ Hansen suggests that because race is performative and not ontological, online performances of blackness, for example, are all essentially equivalent to the degree that they all are equally subject to the available cultural meanings of blackness. Hansen equates online self-invention, blackface, and racial passing as forms of “imitation of an imitation; a purely disembodied simulacrum” (146).

While some aspects of race, gender, and sexuality are performative, as Judith Butler has so convincingly argued, it must also be observed that not all forms of performance are equal, nor do they have equal effects.⁶ Lisa Nakamura effectively argues in her book *Cybertypes* that online passing frequently produces stereotypes of race that become solidified through their repeated performance via a kind of “identity tourism.”⁷ 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*” (57, emphasis added). While Hansen philosophically hopes performative repetition will render stereotypes void of meaning, Nakamura observes that it appears merely to 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 interactions than offline.⁸

Passing in the real world, or online, entails more than visually choreographing one’s appearance; it constitutes 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 blackface, knows that there is nothing, truly nothing, disembodied about it.⁹ Indeed, every element of existence as an embodied subject comes to the fore in real-life moments of racial passing. Every nuance of skin tone, every glance and gesture, might betray the subject’s secret. Passing always presumes conditions of unequal power. The *need* to pass (historically to avoid racial discrimination) and the *desire* to pass (to experiment with subjectivity online) are limited in Hansen’s argument to an enforced *condition* of passing.

Stuart Hall has argued that race is best understood as a discourse, constructed by thought and language, that responds to real, concrete conditions of cultural difference.¹⁰ 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. In her essay “Cyberfeminism, Racism, Embodiment,” Maria Fernandez makes a parallel argument, suggesting that unspoken anxieties that attend the conception of race and racial difference produce a kind of physical haunting that emerges as a set of frequently unconscious and involuntary rote behavioral habits.¹¹ 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 microlevel) of racist encounters and in systemic (or macrolevel) epistemological approaches to cultural and ontological understandings of human being.¹² 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, behavior, and organization. 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.

Race as a discourse is not an unchanging historical framework that limits identities to fixed taxonomies; it is rather a dynamic system of social and cultural *techniques* carefully calibrated to constrain, define, and develop a nexus of human activity where the ontology of the human, the representation of the body, and the social position of the subject intersect. At this intersection, the invention and perpetuation of various forms of race discourse can be understood effectively to employ the human organism as an *experimental* object of signification. The domains of law, commerce, and medicine have participated and continue to participate in this experiment. Thus the Internet might be better understood as, among other things, a new opportunity for such experiments in signification to play out, rather than as the condition for their disappearance.

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*, which appeared on a CD-ROM that the British artist Piper included in the catalog 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. Standardized 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 at 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 counterdiscourse 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 it.

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.”¹³ 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” (167). 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 recognizing the “bankruptcy” of the racialized image of the other.

This affective response, for Hansen, relies on conditions of identification *not* rooted to visual signs. He suggests that the “raced

image" (I presume he means images of nonwhite 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 (172). I agree that people bring to the Internet (consciously and unconsciously) the inheritance of image cultures that precede it 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 power operates unequally to create robust forms of racial oppression for different subjects. He nicely summarizes Frantz 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 (156). 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 I disagree 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" (156). 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" (172). Affect thus emerges as a kind of pure and universal category of feeling. Hansen summarizes: "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” (172).

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 prepackaged 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 atemporal, both in the life of the individual and for groups. In her essay on contemporary Web sites that operate through a model of collective feeling or experience (the Aryan Nations Web site 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.¹⁴

For Ahmed, structures of feeling 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 in 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 have repressed human qualities to depict a given subject as a caricature or type, rather than as a unique individual.¹⁵ For this reason it is all the more important to attend to the ways in which particular images perpetuate this tradition, and to 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 counterhegemonic purpose.¹⁶ Although Hansen’s reading of Piper’s work is clearly sympathetic, his insistence on the emptiness of the image in favor of the fullness of his own affective response risks obscuring 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 colonization through the Atlantic slave trade to the migrations of the present. As a series of thematically integrated individual works produced primarily between 1990 and 1997, the exhibition deployed a carefully choreographed montage of contemporary and archival images—including British colonial maps, nineteenth-century anthropometric photographs, and recent surveillance images—to emphasize the long history of optical techniques for defining and controlling racial difference. While some works evoked the history of sea passage, with titles such as *Long Journey* or *Trade Winds*, Piper also included several works that sought to make more concrete the conditions of the lived black body in an emerging digital technoculture. Ashley Dawson has observed that the exhibition revealed the homologies among colonial discourses, contemporary cyberlibertarian dogma, and neoliberal accounts of globalization today, drawing “our attention to the rhetorical constructions through which information technologies come to be socially understood as well as the technical architectures through which such technologies shape society.”¹⁷

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 the man 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 organizing 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 recognize 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 Agamben to argue for digital media's potential to produce the condi-

tions for the emergence of an identityless, subjectless 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.”¹⁸ 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. Counterintuitively, 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.)”¹⁹ 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, therefore, 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.”²⁰ 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 imperative: “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” (99).

The artist Nancy Burson’s *Human Race Machine* echoes Agamben’s call, but it replaces the universal singularity of the sub-

ject with universal sameness, emphasizing the physical and racial properties of humans in an effort precisely to 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 doppelgängers. Burson claims that the *Human Race Machine* is her “prayer for racial equality” and suggests that “there is only one race, the human one.” “The more we recognize ourselves in others,” Burson writes, “the more we can connect to the human race.”²¹ Her work adheres to the same conception of race as primarily 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.” Despite her progressive intentions, Burson’s desire to “move beyond differences and arrive at sameness” seems strangely undone by the artwork itself. Instead of Burson’s promise of 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 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 nonidentitarian, 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,” so that we might transcend them. Yet both fail to attend to the social and political constraints that might impede this transcendence.

In contrast, Fanon has eloquently theorized the involuntary condition of epidermalization that precisely interrupts the concrete possibility of being *only* one’s face (in Agamben’s sense) because of one’s racially defined, physical visage.²² Fanon describes the moment at which he realized that 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” (111). As Delan Mahendran nicely summarizes, 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.”²³ 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 epidermalization, or of subjection *per se*. But for those human subjects constantly enclosed in 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 human 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 nonidentity—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, 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: An Essay on Exteriority* by stating, “inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power over them.”²⁴ 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” (197). We can see clear parallels with Agamben’s theorizing of the face, which is certainly 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?”²⁵ Even given this somber 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.”²⁶ While Agamben grounds the possibility of ethical encounters through an *erasure* of difference, Levinas grounds it *through* difference, writing that “the face resists possession, resists my powers” (193). It is this very resistance that allows us to recognize the infinity of the other that always exists beyond and in excess of the mechanisms (whether visual or discursive, historical or taxonomic) that we might use to frame or delimit it. More to the point, our own historicity depends on the other; our situatedness becomes defined by having to answer to and for histories that we may not have previously conceived as our own.

In contrast to 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*. Its print and online project *Colour Separation* (1997) offered users the opportunity to encounter masked subjects who signified as imaginary projections of racial types. Each of the composite images consisted of a simple frontal head shot of a man or woman on which a smaller photographic mask of a different racial type was apparently sewn, revealing the eyes and mouth of the subject underneath. Produced with the collective’s own morphing software, strategically named Heritage Gold, the images were compiled from more than 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, the 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 *color separation* also refers to an image processing technique that entails creating separate screens (magenta, cyan, black, and yellow) for color image printing—an artificial and mechanical process not unlike racial categorization.

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—their microviolence and the inescapable complicity of every viewer—the work functions as a disruptive device in the ongoing experiments of race discourse. By naming its specialized 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’).”²⁷ 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 Burson's *Human Race Machine*. One crucial difference is that *Heritage Gold* is free, unpatented shareware that allows users to produce these visual manipulations and transformations themselves, rather than imposing a homogenizing algorithm on all participants. Both *Colour Separation* and *Heritage Gold* software engage not merely the question of racism as a complex, multipar-

ticipant event without immediate remedy; they also emphasize the ways in which this condition is mediated by visibility and invisibility. 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.”²⁸ As Nakamura has observed, “women and racial and ethnic minorities create visual cultures on the popular Internet that speak to and against existing graphical environments and interfaces online. Surveys of race and the ‘digital divide’ that fail to measure digital production in favor of measuring access or consumption cannot tell the whole story, or even part of it.”²⁹

Colour Separation has received attention from a number of scholars including Hansen and Wendy Chun. Hansen’s book *New Philosophy for New Media* includes an analysis of *Colour Separation* that suggests quite rightly that the work “compels the viewer to confront the power of racial stereotypes at a more fundamental level than that of representation; it aims to get under the viewers skin, to catalyze a reaction that might possibly lead to a loosening up of the sedimented layers of habitual, embodied racism.”³⁰ Chun’s book *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* raises some important and provocative questions about *National Heritage*, pointing out that “making users spit may expose our relation to another’s pain, but it also flattens differences between users. Also, making the ‘faces’ speak after being spit on exposes the ways in which the other speaks its truth in response to the demands of the would-be user/subject, but it forecloses the possibility of silence and refusal.”³¹ This important observation reminds us that the lack of freedom, flexibility, and choice in the software may not only mimic similar restrictions that exist in the world at large; this lack can also repress the forms of resistance existing there as well. Yet the fact that solutions and reconciliations are not presented in *Colour Separation* should not be read as a form of cynicism or simple resentment. In drawing out the impasses and intersections of human race relations, the work functions as a salutary disruptive device that rather closely approximates a Levinasian ethics in which the resistance to possession takes place in the public domain of cyberspace.

Common to all 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 theorized 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.³² Sharing an etymology with *facade*, 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 a 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 Narine 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.”³³

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 4 billion images in the past four years.³⁴ Ninety percent 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 Web site. More important, 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 facade, but extends to the other faces to which it is linked. Within multiple trajectories of signification, the face enlivens and mobilizes 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.³⁵

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) are 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*.

These relations of encounter were the subject of the artist Keith Obadike’s performance and conceptualization of blackness in his playful and well-known project *Keith Obadike’s Blackness* (2001), wherein he proposed to sell his blackness to the highest bidder on eBay. While the work clearly referenced the history of slavery when black bodies stood on the public auction block, Obadike was nevertheless careful not to equate his cultural “Blackness” (with a capital B) with a black body made visible. By not including a photograph of himself, Obadike thwarted the common expectation that objects for sale on eBay will be visible online—further underscoring the difference between the concept of blackness and physical traits assigned to the term, specifically skin color. On an actual eBay page, the artist described the object for sale, stating that this “heirloom has been in the possession of the seller for twenty-eight years” and that it “may be used for creating black art,” “writing critical essays or scholarship about other blacks,” “dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny,” and, among other rights, “securing the right to use the terms ‘sista,’ ‘brotha,’ or ‘nigga’ in reference to black people.” Certain warnings also applied: for example, the

seller recommended that this Blackness not be used “during legal proceedings of any sort,” “while making intellectual claims,” “while voting in the United States or Florida,” or “by whites looking for a wild weekend.”³⁶

Obadike here toys with the idea that blackness is a commodity that can be bought and sold for the purpose of cultural passing, tapping into a long-standing fantasy in the history of race politics of crossing the color line. But the artist also wrote, “this Blackness may be used to augment the blackness of those already black, especially for purposes of playing ‘blacker-than-thou.’” Structured around the perceived desires of others to occupy or “own” blackness even if they are already black, Obadike’s project brings out the hierarchies operative in cultural conceptions of racial identities while revealing the social inequities that always attend blackness in the US. The artist uses humor to reveal the daily pain and the ubiquity of racism that revolves around the concept of blackness, yet he also demonstrates the impossibility of selling oneself out of being black, with all of its attendant advantages and disadvantages, both personal and systemic.

Rather than presenting the Internet as an ideal place to racially pass, *Keith Obadike’s Blackness* addresses relations of commodification, wherein aspects of performativity are not simply a question of shifting appearances but a set of cultural expectations that inflect ethical, political, and social relations with others online and off. If any user can join Second Life and pay to accessorize their avatar with racially specific visual signs, Obadike’s project reminds us of the purely phantasmatic nature of this commodity relation to race that takes place in the public sphere of the Internet. It also reveals the involuntary (i.e., inherited) relations of discursive inclusion and exclusion attending the concept of Blackness as a set of obstacles and choices for those who are perceived as black and, by implication, for those who perceive others as black.

The use of eBay as the quintessential marketplace, as the site of the public or of publicity, demonstrates not the demos of the Internet as public sphere, but as a platform for what Jodi Dean (borrowing from Paul Passavant) calls “communicative capitalism,” which is the condition by which technoculture works in the

interest of capital growth while appearing to enhance public access to information and communication.³⁷ Communicative capitalism leverages the public space of the Internet for its own ends, while advertising this space as a site of democratic potential. Obadike's work draws attention to the Internet as a site of communicative possibility, while simultaneously leveraging its publicity to display private—that is, “individual”—experiences of race, reminding us that Blackness and the race politics associated with it are precisely *not* individual, but entirely public, relational, and important elements of today's communicative capitalism.

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 organizing 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.” She 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” (44). 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 a homogeneous, open, knowable condition of universal participation.

Publicity requires secrets, for Dean, insofar 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 one. Power resides in what people conceal as

well as what they reveal, whether as part of the hegemony or of 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.”³⁸ 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 marks 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, 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.”³⁹

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 also to find ways to live without them; in other words, to find ways not to be disturbing. 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 Noortje Marres.⁴⁰ 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 of neutral institution with contestation as a goal, networked conflict as a means, and the issues themselves (rather than individual actors) as a vehicle.⁴¹

In different ways, Piper, Mongrel, and Obadike 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 Obadike, the public is a set of social abilities and constraints that demonstrate their own status as non-commodifiable through the failed act of their attempted sale. For Mongrel, the public is an uneven terrain in which unpredictable encounters can result in confrontation and transformation, but never in final resolution. The kind of visual artifacts 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 online and off) is the very place where

contemporary race discourse might be most powerfully critiqued and transformed. As 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 senseless 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.⁴²

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

Notes

1. Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 57.
2. See Jennifer González, “Electronic *Habitus*: Agit-Prop in an Imaginary World,” in *Visual Worlds*, ed. John R. Hall, Blake Stimson, and Lisa Tamiris Becker (New York: Routledge, 2005), 117–38; González, “Morphologies: Race as Visual Technology,” in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003), 379–93; and González, “The Appended Subject: Race and Identity as Digital Assemblage,” in *Race in Cyberspace*, ed. Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gil Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 27–50.
3. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967).

4. See 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 Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006). 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. For discussions of the psychological and material conditions of racial passing, see Julie Cary Nerad, "Slippery Language and False Dilemmas: The Passing Novels of Child, Howells, and Harper," *American Literature* 75 (2003): 813–41. For an interesting discussion of racial passing and cinematic cyborgs, see LeiLani Nishime, "The Mulatto Cyborg: Imagining a Multiracial Future," *Cinema Journal* 44 (2005): 34–49.
6. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 25.
7. Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 57.
8. See, for example, Byron Burkhalter, "Reading Race Online: Discovering Racial Identity in Usenet Discussions," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (New York: Routledge, 1999), 63.
9. See Marlon Riggs's film *Ethnic Notions* (US/Canada, 1986).
10. Stuart Hall, "Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities," in *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage, 1998), 289–99.
11. Maria Fernandez, "Cyberfeminism, Racism, Embodiment," in *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices*, ed. Maria Fernandez, Faith Wilding, and Michelle M. Wright (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2002).
12. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 60.
13. Hansen, "Digitizing the Racialized Body," 167.
14. Sara Ahmed, "Collective Feelings; or, The Impressions Left by Others," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 21 (2004): 39.

15. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Face and Voice of Blackness," in *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710–1940*, ed. Christopher C. French (San Francisco: Bedford Arts, 1990), xxix–xliv.
16. There are many examples in the fine arts, but the works of Betye Saar (*Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972) or Fred Wilson (*Mine/Yours*, 1995) come to mind.
17. Ashley Dawson, "Surveillance Sites: Digital Media and the Dual Society in Keith Piper's *Relocating the Remains*," *Postmodern Culture*, no. 12 (September 2001): paragraph 6, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/v012/12.1dawson.html>.
18. Agamben, quoted in Hansen, "Digitizing the Racialized Body," 143.
19. Giorgio Agamben, "The Face," in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 63.
20. Giorgio Agamben, "Without Classes," in *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 98.
21. Nancy Burson, www.nancyburson.com/human_fr.html (accessed 21 March 2008).
22. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 11.
23. Delan Mahendran, "The Facticity of Blackness," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 5 (2007): 198.
24. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonse Lingus (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.
25. Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 82.
26. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197.
27. Rachel Green, "Web Work: A History of Internet Art," *Artforum* 9 (2000), www.articlearchives.com/computing/software-services-applications/836959-1.html (accessed September 2008).
28. Graham Harwood, www.mongrel.org.uk/colourseparation (accessed 31 March 2008).

29. Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures on the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 172.
30. Mark Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 148.
31. Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 167.
32. Görel Gavalli-Björkman, *Face to Face: Portraits from Five Centuries* (Stockholm: National Museum, 2002), 141.
33. Sandy Narine, introduction to *The Portrait Now*, ed. Narine and Sarah Howgate (London: National Portrait Gallery), 15.
34. Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and 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.
35. Zeynep Tufekci, "Grooming, Gossip, Facebook, and MySpace: What Can We Learn about These Sites from Those Who Won't Assimilate?" *Information, Communication, and Society* 11 (2008): 544–64. See also Thomas Claburn, "Migration from MySpace to Facebook Shows Class Divide," *InformationWeek*, 26 June 2007, www.informationweek.com/news/internet/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=200000822 (accessed 19 December 2008).
36. Keith Obadike, *Keith Obadike's Blackness*, obadike.tripod.com/ebay.html (accessed 19 December 2008).
37. Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 117.
38. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 78.
39. David Marriot, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 2.
40. Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, 170.
41. Following Slavoj Žižek and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Dean suggests that the Web is a "zero institution": an empty signifier that itself has no determinate meaning but that signifies the presence of meaning.
42. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), xviii.

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Caught Like a Nigger in Cyberspace (Keith Piper, 1997).

Courtesy of the artist.

