Skin, Flesh, and the Aff ective Wrinkles of Civil Rights Photography

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If we needed confirmation of our ongoing investment in the civil rights movement and the visual media that brought its local confrontations to a national audience, For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights, a summer 2010 exhibit at the International Center for Photography, provides a vivid example. Drawing its title from Mamie Till's heroic insistence on an open coffin for her brutally murdered son and from the determination of African American photographers and newspaper editors to make the shocking image of Emmett Till's face visible to the public, the exhibit and its accompanying volume powerfully affirm the role of the visual media in bringing racial violence into public view. Simultaneously and less explicitly, however, the volume also illustrates how much more vexed this role is than the language that affirms it, for the horrific photograph to which the title refers does not—indeed could not—accompany the title on the cover. Instead, the image is discreetly positioned at the volume's interior.

Replacing Till's photograph on the cover is a more uplifting image by the same photographer. Ernest C. Withers's depiction of the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike shows a long horizontal line of male demonstrators proudly carrying signs declaring "I AM A MAN." Celebrating and extending the strikers' visibility, the photograph also implicitly effaces its own status as a visual medium in favor of the written word, collapsing seeing with reading, image with text—unequal binaries that, as W. J. T. Mitchell has argued, have also historically been gendered and racialized. What if we inverted the accepted hierarchy to focus on the less legible features of the photographic medium instead of the declarative statements it depicts and enacts? If seeing is not reading, and if the visual medium is neither transparent nor exclusively visual, but also engages other senses, as the obscured visual referent of the exhibit's title suggests, a photograph so painful that it can only be experienced, in Fred Moten's powerful reading, as the sound of "black mo'nin'," we may need to add a wrinkle to the seamless web of photography, activism, and visibility.

I choose the metaphor of "wrinkle" deliberately to shift the conversation from the sound or tone of photography, which perpetuates the traditional use of musical metaphors to render feeling in art, to the textural—in contrast to the textual—features of civil rights photography. I hope to bring into play a cluster of overlapping contexts—historical, aesthetic, and philosophical—for thinking about the "particular intimacy" between textures and emotions that Eve Sedgwick has so memorably named "touching feeling," that meaningful redundancy in which "the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional," inhabits both terms. This convergence of touching and feeling narrows the emotional frame, as we see in the slippage from "feeling" to "affect" in the sentence that immediately follows, Sedgwick's gloss of the vernacular "touchy-feely," whose hyphenation suggests to her that "even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact." Feeling becomes affect becomes skin, that permeable interface between touching and feeling, inside and outside, self and other. Although Sedgwick herself does not engage these distinctions directly, they have become a theoretical crux with a special bearing on the question of "feeling photography," a medium whose special relationship to touch is often noted and whose surface is often figured as a second skin.