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

Elizabeth Abel

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.

Following Sedgwick's lead, I seek to redirect our attention from the powerful feelings represented and elicited by images of weeping protestors, shouting mobs, and snarling police dogs to the affective properties of the photographic medium. Rather than the rage, terror, grief, exhilaration, and shame that have been the subject of critical readings, I focus on those feelings that function beneath the threshold of conscious recognition and semantic legibility, those inarticulate, subliminal sensations that now go under the label of affect and that operate across the boundaries between mind and body, action and passion,

self and other. Whereas feelings are "sensations that have found the right match in words," affects are feelings not circumscribed by language or identity; they are "material, physical things" with "an energetic dimension" that can travel across identities nonverbally (TA, 5, 6). Both transpersonal and "prepersonal" intensities, they are the "ability to affect and be affected...the passage from one experiential state of the body to another" or the "encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body."8 The turn from the recognizable feelings associated with individual subjects and actions to the diffusion ofunlocalized physiological states effects a shift from the legibility of faces (physiognomic sign systems on a continuum with the sanitation workers' signs and the traditional interpretive locus of civil rights photography) to the tactile sensations of skin, where intensities are registered and transmitted at the body's (and the photograph's) interface with other bodies. As Deleuze and Guattari explain with characteristic verve:

Not only is language always accompanied by faciality traits, but the face crystallizes all redundancies, it emits and receives, releases and recaptures signifying signs. It is a whole body unto itself: it is like the body of the center of signifi ance [sic] to which all of the deterritorialized signs affix themselves, and it marks the limit of their deterritorialization. . . . The face is what gives the signifier substance; it is what fuels interpretation. . . . The signifier is always facialized. . . . Conversely, when the face is effaced, when the faciality traits disappear, we can be sure that we have entered another regime, other zones infi nitely muter and more imperceptible where subterranean becomings-animal occur, becomings-molecular, nocturnal deterritorializations overspilling the limits of the signifying system.9

Although we will need to revisit the various ways that the face might be effaced (including the representation of illegible faces), what is crucial at this point is that affect is defined as "what overflows the face".

How this affective overflow might be transmitted by the photographic medium is paradoxically suggested by a famous statement of the medium's transparrency: Martin Luther King Jr's claim that the brutality of police repression in the South was "caught—as a fugitive from a penitentiary is often caught—in gigantic circling spotlights. It was imprisoned in a luminous glare revealing the naked truth to the whole world."10 To function as a mode of countersurveillance that reverses the roles of prisoner and watch guard, the camera had to capture the "naked truth" through a "luminous glare"—hardly a neutral term for light—that translates the victims' anger into a journalistic practice.11 Even transparency, it appears, can have affective qualities; "naked truth" is clad in a medium, light, that can glare or shine or glimmer or glow

No one has characterized the materiality of this medium more powerfully and problematically than Roland Barthes: "A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed."12 Since numerous critics have unpacked Barthes's own ambivalent negotiation of race and the carnal medium, I plan to follow a different route that marshals his vision of connective skin against our ingrained images of the violent ruptures—bruises, wounds, breaks, cuts—infl icted during the freedom struggle.13 For along with its vulnerability to penetration, skin also functioned as a site of mediation that was instrumental to the movement's politics. Refusing segregation, the activists staged a politics of proximity: bringing skins of diverse hues into transgressive contact, they dramatized a new social body. Actualizing this body required extending a hand to sympathetic whites, a gesture of outreach that was transmitted by photography's mediating skin. There was a close fi t between a movement that materialized the metaphor of the social body and the haptic features of the photographic medium. How might an address to the eye invite a response of the hand? Emphasizing the etymo logical root of haptic (Greek haptein, to fasten onto, to touch), I call attention to the photographic properties that elicit a desire to reach out than rather those that more aggressively strike or grab the viewer's attention, a capacity exploited by commercial photographs that make the viewer a passive recipient of a message rather than an active participant in a

social gesture.14

Sit-in photographs invite us to join hands with the protestors by extending a "skin" that solicits, in ways that traverse each other, an emotional response to a visual drama and an affective response to a visual texture. It is this traversal, starting from the less recognized position, rather than a sharp opposition, that seems most appropriate to a crossover movement memorialized in the most famous lyrics of its most famous song, "We Shall Overcome," which was traditionally sung with arms crossed over in front of the body rather than simply linked.15 "Hand in hand together, black and white together": both the words and the gesture render mutual entanglement and risk.

Those entanglements traverse a number of related but not identical dyads: vision and touch, feeling and affect, surface and depth, face and skin, black and white, shine and aura, fl esh and skin, and viewer and viewed. To these I would add another, less obvious national pair—the United States and France—that affords an important twist to the "affective turn" by making a positive account of skin and touch available. By tracing a genealogy from phenomenology, a school of fi lm studies has already forged this path, yielding such productive terms as "haptic visuality," "carnal thoughts," and "vision in the fl esh."16 Following a similar path in relation to still photography, I hope to offer a historical account of the coemergence of the American civil rights movement and the French tradition of existential phenomenology. The turn to France is necessary, I believe, because America's tortured racial history has impaired our ability to conceptualize race and touch together nonviolently. Finding a discourse appropriate to the idealism of the civil rights movement requires a detour through another cultural tradition that, not entirely coincidentally, was contemporary with that movement and with the optimistic political climate of the 1960s generally.

That idealism also needs to be qualifi ed, however, by a return to the visual archive of civil rights, particularly a subset of sit-in photographs that highlights a set of related tensions between skin and (il)legible face, shiny surface and impenetrable depth. Since the second of these pairs has also been the crux of an emergent discourse of "surfacism," I make another detour through discussions of modernist and postmodern racial "shine" to specify the affective textures of civil rights photography.17 These textures, and the tensions they negotiate, persist in changing guises as new movements reprise the uncompleted political and philosophical projects of the 1960s. To gesture toward these revisions at the turn of the twentyfi rst century, I conclude by returning to Eve Sedgwick in her guise as experimental writer and queer theorist. A fi nal pair of sections explores the resonance between a photograph by Bruce Davidson that, by putting pressure on an elided distinction between skin and fl esh, introduces some awkward personal racial feelings to the celebratory discourse of affect, and a text by Eve Sedgwick that revisits the racial dynamics the photograph exposes. By tracking multiple twists and turns around and across the interplay between photographic and racial skin, I hope to map some wrinkles of an affectively complex viewing space.

Intertwinings: The French Connection

The map begins with a juncture in French intellectual history, both prongs of which launch critiques of the privileging of sight that has prevailed in Western philosophy, as Martin Jay has exhaustively demonstrated, since the Enlightenment.18 The more familiar fork tracks the perspective of the racialized subject. Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks (1952), written while Fanon was completing his psychiatric studies in France, identifi es skin as putative evidence of what he ironically calls "the fact of blackness."19 This is a "fact" produced by the gaze of the white Other, the "Look, a Negro!" that inaugurates the chapter and sounds as a refrain throughout it. Anticipating by over a decade Lacan's fi guration of the camera as the instrument of the determinative, transpersonal gaze "through which light is embodied and through which . . . I am photo-graphed,"20 Fanon exposes the power relations that allow one race to arrogate the position of the gazing subject. To illustrate the crushing consequences for the

objects of this gaze, Fanon materializes the photographic metaphor: instead of the impersonal, invisible gaze of the photographic apparatus, he renders the process that stabilizes the image as a photographic print: "the glances of the other fi xed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fi xed by a dye" (BW, 109). The skin of the photograph and the skin of the Other converge in a "racial epidermal schema" that imprisons its racialized objects ("sealed into that crushing objecthood") in a "corporeal malediction" (whose equally constraining inverse, as Kobena Mercer and Maurice O. Wallace have demonstrated, is a fetishistic negrophilia) (112). As we can hear from the Fanonian echoes in Coco Fusco's trenchant summary of racial construction in nineteenth-century America—"rather than recording the existence of race, photography produced race as a visualizable fact"—Fanon continues to shape our discourse about photography and racialization.21

For a different direction, we need to follow the complementary theoretical track that challenges, rather than exposes, the tyranny of vision by making the case for one of the "lower" senses associated with four-legged animals. Lacking the abstraction enabled and enacted by vision, allegedly a consequence of evolution toward the upright posture of humans, touch has never garnered the cultural respect or regard (the words themselves are revealing) accorded to sight. An attempt to recharacterize the visual by making it more immediate, thicker, and embodied, by importing the mutuality and motility of touch into the impersonality and sovereignty of sight, gained momentum with midcentury French revisions of phenomenology from the transcendental version associated with Husserl and Heidegger to the existential phenomenology, grounded in the body, pioneered by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.22

Because I can only gesture toward some of the ways that Merleau-Ponty's claims and their resonance for subsequent generations of French and British theorists might inform a reading of photography, especially photography of a movement premised on nonviolence, I will focus on three key interrelated fi gures from a single late essay, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," drafted shortly before his death in 1961—contemporary, that is, with the civil rights movement.23 The essay's title alerts us to the defi ning fi gure of chiasmus as the crossing over and mutual implication of conventional opposites—subject and object, mind and body, viewer and viewed, eye and hand—in "a double and crossed sublation of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible" ("IC," 396). These reversible exchanges produce what Merleau-Ponty calls, in an overdetermined metaphor, the "fl esh of things," "not a thing, but a possibility, a latency," created by the "palpitation of the eye," a "coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body" ("IC," 395, 405). Chiasmus and fl esh, like vision and touch, are mutually constitutive. Flesh is not matter but an "interiorly worked-over mass" that is "the formative medium of the object and the subject" ("IC," 406). Derived in part from his fascination with the textures of painting, especially the highly worked-up textures of Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty's fi gure of "fl esh" folds viewer and viewed together in a dense intermediate viewing space. In language that reverberates against Martin Luther King Jr.'s invocation of the "naked truth" revealed by the camera's "luminous glare" (and the difference in medium both enables and is ultimately subordinated to the larger account of visuality), Merleau-Ponty contends that we cannot see things "'all naked'

because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own fl esh" ("IC," 393).

If in some regards Merleau-Ponty's account of the "anonymous visibility" of a transpersonal gaze recalls Lacan's, his emphasis on "the reversibility of the visible and the tangible" in a collective fl esh both radically embodies and embeds the gaze in an inclusive and implicitly egalitarian community, or what he calls "intercorporeity" ("IC," 403). If shared fl esh is this community's enabling condition, its instantiation emerges from and is enabled by a more active, if delimited, body part that operates more narrowly within the haptic register. Enacting the reversibility of the "touching and the touched," rather than of touch and vision, the hand is both an organ and an object of sensation, since, "while it is felt from within, [it] is also accessible from without, itself tangible" ("IC," 406, 395). This becomes clear when we picture, as Merleau-Ponty repeatedly does in this essay, the right hand touching the left hand that is touching something else, such that the left hand that forms the "'touching subject' passes over to the rank of the touched" ("IC," 395). Reversing and extending this fi gure in a later iteration that reaches toward the social, Merleau-Ponty asks: "If my left hand can touch my right hand while it palpates the tangible, can touch it touching, can turn its palpation back upon it, why, when touching the hand of another, would I not touch in it the same power to espouse the things that I have touched in my own?" ("IC," 401). In this touching in common, or a common sense of touch, this transmission of sensation from hand to hand, community originates. The moment of contact between two hands is a defi ning condition of being in the world. Without suggesting that Merleau-Ponty was aware of or intended to reference the intertwined hands of the civil rights movement, his use of that trope to instantiate chiasmus as a founding gesture of "intercorporeity" links the philosophical and social movements in a shared effort to transgress established boundaries nonviolently.24

Merleau-Ponty's turn toward the embodiment of vision had a psychoanalytic corollary that developed the implications of this mediating fl esh and tweaked the fi gure in a direction better adapted to photography. The process begins with one of Lacan's early followers (and analysands), Didier Anzieu, who expressed his ambivalence about his mentor's emphasis on the formative status of the visual in the mirror stage by describing this stage as "Lacan's heresy," that is, as a signal departure from Freud that consequently should be subjected to further scrutiny.25 In his own departure from Lacan, Anzieu's key concept of the "moi-peau" (ego skin, sometimes inverted in translation as skin ego) both effected a return to Freud's concept of the bodily ego and initiated a turn away from the specularity of Lacan's mirror stage, whose signal enticement and achievement is (however illusorily) a clearly delineated image of the self. The ego skin, by contrast, is a permeable, tactile psychic envelope formed through early

experiences of parental touching that, ideally, are internalized as a sense of self in continuous and fluid relation with the world.26 Within psychoanalysis, the concept of the ego skin generated increasingly refined articulations of intersensoriality as an overlapping series of intersections between internal and external worlds (including the psychic worlds of other people) that reconstituted skin as both a site and metaphor of intersubjectivity.

If psychoanalytic attention was inevitably directed to the borderline conditions, suicidal fantasies, and fractured ego states inflicted by the environment's negative impingement on the ego skin, philosophical discourse, no longer tethered to Merleau-Ponty's painterly aesthetic, provided a frame in which the metaphoric, sensuous, and spiritual—even ecstatic or visionary—possibilities of skin, less burdened than flesh by association with mortality and maternity, could emerge. Complementing Merleau-Ponty's materialization of vision-as-flesh is the dematerialization of skin-into-light initiated by the French philosopher Michel Serres. Arguing that the soul is an extension of the body toward the things for which it reaches, and that the senses are milieus and the skin their meeting place, Serres proposes a diffuse intermediate material-spiritual environment, a modality of skin, composed of mind and body. For Serres, the skin is a perceiving subject as well as a perceived object: like a peacock's tail, "it is as though it could see . . . The pattern of the senses is displayed there, studded with subdued centres and spotted with marks; the skin is a variety of our mingled senses."27

Stephen Connor, who wrote the introduction for the English translation of Serres's Five Senses, has translated Serres's visionary language into a more extended and portable cultural poetics of skin's "implicative capacity" as a "complex manifold," a "place of mingling and a mingling of places," "the most widely distributed and the most various of the organs of the body," "the sensitive expression . . . of the mind's complexion" and consequently "always in part immaterial, ideal, ecstatic."28 If, as Serres and Connor both propose, skin is reconceptualized as "the means of our self-undoing and outgoing," a mediating zone instead of a delimiting boundary, it could help us re-imagine the photographic skin as a meeting ground between the viewer and viewed, and race as a negotiated median space rather than a divisive boundary (BK, 31). Both theorists gesture toward the first of these claims. Connor writes eloquently about the tenderness—a "word that signifies both the quality of something touched and the manner of our touching"—solicited by the glossy finish that tells us a photograph "is a tangible thing which looking is insufficient to encompass" and that consequently, despite its impression of an "ideal skin, flesh transfigured," is nevertheless vulnerable "to the attention of fingers, and the scratches, creases and corrupting smears of greasiness they can impart." Photographs have "been touched and can touch us back" (BK, 59). But the photograph's potential as a milieu of racial crossing does not enter this zone of mutual vulnerability.

In hid eagernes to free the discourse on skin and color from the colonizing and polarizing claims of racial theory which posit
"black" and "white" as mutually exclusive "algebraic" categories,
Connor gives these well-rehearsed positions short shrift (BK, 148).
Because his stake is in elaborating a nuanced cultural history of a
chromatic spectrum that makes a mockery of such oppositions, he
briefl y summarizes in order to dismiss the Anglo-European association of whiteness with purity, transparency, and spirituality and of
blackness with thickness, impediment, and materiality. Although
Connor cites Fanon in order to acknowledge the existence of a
"racial epidermal scheme," his desire to bracket race prevents him
from revisiting the intersection between photography and race. To
map this terrain, and thereby complicate a phenomenological legacy that was able to idealize skin enabled by bracketing race (and
wrinkles and fl esh), we must return to the United States.29

Sitting-in
We should start by giving equal weight to photography and race,
for in contrast to the object of philosophical and psychoanalytic
inquiry, the photographic "skin"—both as surface and as subject—
is framed by conventions of genre. In photographs of the lunch
counter sit-ins in the early 1960s, during which the activists "just
sat—and sat—and sat," the effects of this framing and of the surface texture are especially pronounced and mutually engaging.30
Whereas scenes of violence in the streets demanded an immediate
photographic reaction, the prolonged scenes of inaction that char acterized the sit-ins gave photographers suffi cient time to make deliberate compositional choices. In these interior scenes, moreover, affect was diffused throughout the atmosphere rather than concentrated in a single dramatic action. Shot at close distances in enclosed spaces whose artifi cial lighting was refl ected off the varied
surfaces of polished countertops, metallic stools, textured fabrics,
and rich tonalities of human skin, these photographs—unlike those
of snarling dogs or blasting fi re hoses—extend a haptic allure that
draws the viewer into the scene.

To varying degrees and in various ways, this allure was negotiated (by photographers, subjects, and viewers) through the conventions of a seemingly alien genre. The sit-ins were often a vivid form of political theater, but they were transposed through the
camera's lens into a mode of photographic portraiture. Sitting-in
and sitting-for shared certain attributes: the calm and composure of the subjects, who dressed carefully for the occasion and
sat quietly amid symbolic props (the books, pens, and notepads
they brought to the scene, the advertisements and serving utensils for the food they were denied), and the sympathetic depiction
by photographers who supported their goals and highlighted their
dignity and serious purpose.31 The resulting photographs reframed
their young subjects (however inadvertently) within a long tradition of self-affi rming African American photographic portraiture

that served both to describe an individual and to inscribe a social identity.32 Commanding respect, the conventions of the genre place the viewer at a certain distance.

These conventions were not monolithic, however, and were infl ected signifi cantly by gender in this instance. For the men, the priority assigned the individual or family was reallocated to the collective, as we can see by a quick look at the iconic photograph of the Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-in on February 2, 1960.33 It is not only that the four activists sit next to one another, but also that no one leads: the common purpose that has drawn them to the counter is distributed in similar and equal measure across their four bodies, aligned and allied in contrast to the waiter who has been sent out not to serve them (the counter is bare) but to serve as a reminder of their proper service role. This is a group portrait of an emergent group identity; to focus on an individual fi gure would have contradicted the call to collective action.

Collective identity is articulated primarily through the legibility of faces: here, the nearly identical expressions on the faces of the activists who turn at an identical angle to look at the photographer, presumably at his request. That faces were both central and legible is clear from the responses these photographs evoked. Ebony magazine opened its fi rst story on the sit-ins by asserting "Faces tell the story" and concluding: "In the burning eyes, in the set jaws, in the enigmatic smiles are the real meaning of the unprecedented student protest movement which shook the South to its foundations."34 The previous month, the Chicago Defender had initiated its series on the protests under the title "Sit-Ins Reveal the New Face of Young Negro America."35 For Robert Moses, whom the Greensboro photograph helped to catapult from his position as a New York high school teacher to a leadership role in the burgeoning movement, the contrast between the "sullen, angry, determined" looks on the faces of the students and the "defensive, cringing" expressions of the past was the answer to the question of "being a Negro and at the same time being an American."36

If too much attention to the individual could threaten the legibility of the group, it could also threaten the privacy of the individual by making him or her too accessible. Women were especially vulnerable to the invasion of privacy. Since they were cast as the medium of the movement rather than its stars, they were less often identifi ed in captions or singled out for the media attention granted the male leaders, but nevertheless, whether as a consequence of different practices of protest or of representational practices, or both, they tended to be shown more often either individually or in pairs (or as dispersed throughout a larger, heterogeneous crowd) rather than being clustered in small same-sex groups. Already more exposed emotionally and physically than the men, less protected by outer garments and more susceptible to public censure and sexual

assault, were the women also less defended from the viewer's identifi catory and haptic desires, which are both intensifi ed and qualifi ed by the camera's habitual attention to the female face and form?

I concentrate on photographs of women not as evidence of a foundational difference but as a consequence of a particular set of political and photographic practices that make these images a productive site of visual tensions. The haptic allure is intensified by the camera's tendency to linger on its subjects, producing a finer- grained rendition of light and textures that are also more various— from fur-trimmed coats in winter to silky dresses in summer—than that of their more soberly clad male peers, routinely dressed in dark jackets and button-down shirts. The camera's attention, however, also triggers a self-protective retreat that registers the presence, but not the substance, of an interiority that is both recognizable to and guarded from the viewer. More individuated and less legible, more physically present and psychically remote, the women are set apart from the collective physically or spiritually by a quality of absorption into an interior space. The haptic draw of the surface is qualified less by the legibility of feelings than by the evocation of an illegible psychic depth. These photographs present a tension between a more pronounced but less legible subjectivity and the heightened affect that "overflows" the face onto the surfaces of skin, metal, plastic, and clothing that are defended by, rather than defending, an inaccessible interiority.

It would be helpful to trace this tension through a sequence of three photographs that bring the face into an increasingly complex interaction with the surface, beginning with a pronounced repre- sentation of inaccessible interiority: a somber photograph of two women staging their own sit-in on March 26, 1960, in Nashville, Tennessee (see online). The two women are as closed to the viewer as the roped-off section of the counter is to regular business, dimly visible only at the bakery at the extreme left of the image. The rope the two women have climbed under or over seals them into an impenetrable space that the UPI photographer has chosen not to breach even by suggesting that they turn to face the camera. Rows of empty chairs, extending in both directions, underscore their isolation. As if they had strategized in advance to display their solidarity, they have dressed almost identically in dark overcoats, nylon stockings, and black shoes, and have assumed identical pos- tures, with heads bowed, ankles crossed, and arms straight down; even their hairstyles are similar. If the caption didn't tell us that they were "a Negro woman and a white woman," it would be dif- ficult to determine their race.

Crossing the social barrier to racial unity, they have left the rest of the world behind: not only the segregated social world, but also the larger secular world to which they appear to turn their backs. Neither studying nor staring glassy-eyed into space (two common ways of passing time in sit-in photographs), nor engaging with each other or the photographer, the women seem absorbed in a state of prayer or meditation they are able to sustain indefinitely. (The one whose face we see in profile closes her eyes.) There is no middle ground between us and them. Even the haptic features of the scene—the light reflecting off the stools, the advertisements and variously colored beverage machines—remain on the far side of the rope.

Although the next example, from the sit-in at Portsmouth, Vir- ginia, on February 16, 1960, presents women's faces rather than backs, the impression of illegible and inviolable interiority persists (see online). The caption, "A Negro girl sits at a Portsmouth, VA lunch counter," makes explicit that the center of visual interest (since in fact several African American women are represented at the sit-in) is the woman at the crux of the counter's right angle, and that she is the center because, in the welter of gazes that surrounds her, her composure commands our attention without eliciting, on the photographer's part, a desire to learn her name. Eyes turned downward, chin cupped in hand, lips sealed, bangs curled under, she is the photograph's introverted focal point: impenetrable, self- contained, with an almost sculptural presence that brings Rodin's Thinker to mind. The ruff or collar of fur that frames her oval face is both a haptic lure for the viewer and a safeguard of her private space. No books are open in front of her; no pens are by her side. Instead, this inward-turning figure is associated with the closed purse standing upright on the

counter in front of her, as if her self- extension forward onto the counter is a form of self-enclosure.

The fourth example takes us from this downward-looking, anonymous "Negro girl" in the middle distance to a close-up of a named individual by Calvert McCann, a fellow activist at the Lexington, Kentucky, sit-in in the early 1960s (fig. 1). The sub ject, Nietta Dunn, is known to the photographer as the sister of a friend.37 The unusual intimacy with the subject, who soberly turns to face the camera while affording the photographer no sign of rec- ognition, averting her eyes slightly to the left, produces a gripping portrait of an individual who is both strongly present and opaque.

On the one hand, the camera's proximity and angle realize the haptic potential of the scene to an unusual degree: in contrast to sober uniform coats, surfaces ripple here. The reflected fluorescent lighting turns the polished countertop almost into a mirror and the sheen on Nietta Dunn's one-tone sheath into a silky extension of her highlighted skin. Her purse, made of woven straw and topped by plastic flowers and fruits, introduces diverse textures that in- tensify the desire to touch. Against the risk of such imaginative pawing, Nietta Dunn asserts her self-contained presence: her up- right posture, her arm wrapped around her midriff, her lips turned down slightly in an echo of the arched handle of the purse that is as firmly closed as her expression. Even when revealed, her face is unrevealing. Her carefully guarded interiority holds the viewer at a distance. For the white middle-class female viewer in particular, that distance is somewhat paradoxical, since as Shawn Michelle Smith has argued about the photographic portrait, the "exterior- ized discourse of interiority" actualized in this genre has been a defining attribute of the white middle class.38 The perception of in- terior similarity mandates distance. The perception of surface differences stimulates the desire to touch.

Because the allure of this photograph is a composite of luminous skin that invites us to reach out and a sober face that instructs us to stand back, it offers a locus for a broader meditation, inevitably shaped by my own perspective as a white female viewer, on the al- ternating currents the image sets in motion. My attempt to charac- terize this dynamic viewing space, the effect of an obscured depth at the heart of a shining surface, both participates in and diverges from a range of recent "surfacisms" that seek, often by revisiting Fanon, to articulate a less unilateral exchange between the subject and object of a fetishizing gaze.

Shine and Aura

In his landmark essay on the alluring surfaces of Robert Map- plethorpe's seductively objectifying photographs of (usually nude) black men, Kobena Mercer launches this process by revisiting his earlier objections, routed primarily through Fanon, to find new value in the photographs' undecidable politics (are they racist or anti-racist, homophobic or homoerotic?) and the self-reflection they elicit from the viewer.39 In a more recent version of this gesture that dwells more fully on the surface, Anne Anlin Cheng invites us to embrace a "hermeneutics of susceptibility" by reentering, rather than critiquing, the eroticized, mobile space of Josephine Baker's glossy self-stylings, by opening ourselves to the "flirtation" Baker performs between person and thing, flesh and style, organic skin and artificial surface, essence and covering, corporeality and ab- straction, reification and recognition.40 Through the allure of her "black, airbrushed, and seemingly flawless skin, always greased and polished to a shiny, laminated gloss," Baker holds us captive, in Cheng's eloquent reading, in a moment of "visual pleasure in the contaminated zone" ("ST," 108–9, 101).

The intensity of this glossy surface, an instance of the modernist romance with new synthetic materials and surfaces, is amplified by the dazzling visual culture of hip-hop, as Krista Thompson deftly demonstrates.41 Through her intricate analysis of the brilliantly il- luminated and often technologically en-

hanced photographic sur- faces produced by hip-hop artists such as Kehinde Wiley and Luis Gispert to achieve a paradoxically "blinding hypervisibility" that is also an "emblazoned invisibility," Thompson reveals the reap- propriation of commodified black skin (once polished to a shine on the slave market to conceal evidence of whipping and enhance the body's value as property) as a mode of blinding self-display ("SL," 493, 501). By bathing his subjects in a "super-rapturous light," Wiley "places the black male figure within the shiny surface, the skin, of the luxury commodity" ("SL," 490, 493). Through the production of "bling," defined by the rapper B.G. as "the imag- ined sound produced when light reflects off a diamond," the visual economy of hip-hop exceeds the visual register to constitute what Thompson, building on Alexander Weheliye, calls the "crossroads of sonic and visual modernity," a crossroads that inscribes an im- penetrable resistance to visual domination ("SL," 489, 500).

These increasingly hyperbolic celebrations of what Thompson calls "the representation of black skin and black people as part of a visual economy of surfacism" illuminate by contrast the quality of shine in photographs taken in the theater of political struggle rather than display ("SL," 489). Both Cheng and Thompson set their readings against the backdrop of the commodified African body. Eclipsed in the trajectory from the slave market to modern- ist shine and hip-hop bling is the shine of the political culture of the freedom struggle and the Black Arts Movement that emerged in tandem with it. As the Black Arts Movement poet Margaret Danner explains in "The Convert" (1960), published contempo- raneously with the photograph of Nietta Dunn, the light reflected by the polished surface of an African sculpture becomes visible in the context of this movement as a radiance from within that re- sists, rather than replicates, the commodification of blackness. The speaker undergoes an aesthetic education:
Until, finally, I saw on its stern
ebony face, not a furniture polished, shellacked shine, but a radiance, gleaming as though a small light had flashed internally.42

The 1960s fostered a perceptual change such that light could be seen to shine through the black-skinned body, emanating from within a surface it irradiates rather than displays. It was this qual- ity of light that the Black Arts Movement embraced under the ru- bric of "black light" or, in the variant Larry Neal selected for the title of his signal anthology, Black Fire (1968).43 Emphasizing the texture of dark skin, rather than its "shellacked shine," Danner describes it in another poem as "velvet black," a trope that re- curs in a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks that characterizes "Afrikan velvet" skin as "a physical light in the room."44 As Margo Nata- lie Crawford explains, Black Arts Movement photographers de- liberately embraced the capacity of black-and-white photography to transform the perception of black skin from a negative space understood as the passive absorption of light to a positive light source that projects light rather than receiving it. Or, to translate into the medium more commonly associated with the civil rights movement, "this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine," the freedom song enduringly associated with images of a radiantly em- bodied Fannie Lou Hamer.45 The light of the spirit shines through the body as an emanation that touches us.

If bling operates at the crossroads of sonic and visual moder- nity, the sit-in photographs operate at another crossroads—or in- tertwining—of what we might call haptic and visual modernity. It is not that Calvert McCann or his white counterparts were delib- erately following specific aesthetic guidelines, but that the mate- rial and political circumstances of the sit-ins had aesthetic conse- quences that we can specify most fully in relation to a wide-ranging cultural moment in which theories and practices of light, skin, and touch traverse and reconstitute the visual field beyond the Fanoni- an spectrum of visibility.

Shot in modestly illuminated interior spaces—fluorescent bulbs rather than digitally enhanced super-rapturous light that could only be produced in a studio—these photographs render light as it traverses an obscurity that is both physical and psychological. Illegible rather than invisible, the faces of the protes-

tors signal and safeguard an interiority that is both opaque and palpable. Light works in concert with, is mediated by, the volumetric density of these human subjects; surface is in touch with depth. Modulated by more somber tones, the shine of the surface—in heightened cas- es an optical effect (verging on the sonic) that dazzles the eye but chills the sense of touch—exerts a haptic force that is tempered only by respect for privacy. This texturing of light and dark, this passage of light through the felt presence of what cannot be ren- dered visible but is registered instead as obscurity, this weaving together of invitation and reservation, prolongs the experience of viewing.

Texture, many commentators agree, involves temporality. We register textures by comparing them to others and by speculating, however subliminally, about their implications, applications, and origins.46 Prolonging this temporality of the surface is the evoca- tion of impenetrable depth. The chiaroscuro lighting of the sit-in photographs creates a variegated texture that both draws us in and holds us at a contemplative distance that mirrors the absorption of its subjects. Together, texture and depth suspend the viewer in a medium distance that is neither too close nor too far.

If this recalls Walter Benjamin's definition of aura—"a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be"—that is my intention.47 With some important caveats, I offer aura as a foil to the distanc- ing surface of modernist shine and hip-hop bling. The sit-in photo- graphs, variations on the photographic portraits Benjamin believed retained some of painting's aura, enfold their viewer in a textured weave whose other name is "skin." Steven Connor makes this explicit when he defines aura as "a second skin or series of such skins," both a "visible emanation of light" and a "thickening of light into substance and texture" that constitutes a mediating zone in which viewer and viewed might touch (BK, 157–59). The aura is a "tremulous, cutaneous body-soul, soul-body" that "goes forth from and yet also remains and remains in itself" (BK, 30, 157–58). This is seductive language: aura and skin, soul and body, subject and object, and (we might add) black and white are all chiasmati- cally interwoven in a common substance-space.

That synthesizing, mediating, chiasmatic, or, in a more politi- cally resonant discourse, integrative impulse is also cause for some concern. The more fraught tensions of Benjamin's precarious aura, always at risk of being dispelled by too much proximity or en- shrined by too much distance, are dissolved into an idealized skin/ skein that is able to reconcile all contradictions. What historically circumscribed identities and projects are attenuated by these blend- ed harmonies? The aura-as-skin may capture the brooding, lumi- nous atmosphere of photographs that represent the short-lived mo- ment produced by the convergence of the civil rights movement's material context and spiritual energies, but not only was this moment soon to be displaced by more fractious identity politics, its harmonious atmosphere also inevitably masked tensions within and beyond the represented scene.

Aura and accuracy, Benjamin tells us, are incompatible. The sac- rifice of specificity necessary for an auratic skin to disseminate af- fects across deterritorialized bodies suggests the limitations of the affective turn. Does conceptualizing the photographic surface as a medium that transmits "feelings without owners" allow us to disown unpleasant feelings along with the identities that gener- ate them (UF 25–26)? The transpersonal mobility of affect that has been heralded as an emancipation from bourgeois feelings is also susceptible to an idealization that dilutes the tensions between competing feelings and subject positions. Ironically, the affective wrinkles introduced to texture the perception of photography can themselves be smoothed over by the desire for perfectly connective skin. Comforting as it would be to conclude these thoughts with aura, affect, and integrative skin, these are not the end of the story, either historically or conceptually. We need to look at one more photograph that revisits the elided distinction between idealized skin and the flesh it covers (up), a distinction that is also a racial- ized pressure point at which individual (but not idiosyncratic) feel- ings reenter the picture.48

Flesh and Skin

So palpable are the racial tensions in Bruce Davidson's "New York City, 1962" that the scene might be mistaken for a one-person sit- in (fig. 2). At the New York lunch counter pictured here, an Afri- can American woman and a white woman sit side by side in what appears to be, from the white woman's perspective, undesired in- tegration and from the African American woman's perspective, undesired rep- resentation. The photograph is a study in contrast between the pale-skinned, blond, white-gloved white woman, ar- guably more southern lady than representative New Yorker, and the dark-skinned, straight-backed, slender black woman, argu- ably more African princess than representative New Yorker. As the white woman in the broadly patterned plaid dress spreads her arms out horizontally in an apparent effort to occupy the maximum space, the African American woman in the vertically striped dress draws her- self up in an apparent effort to contract and command her space. The checks on the white woman's dress blend into the background pattern of open and shut windows in the light facade of the building across the street. The African American woman, by contrast, is crisply outlined, alert and vigilant as she regards us with a wary stare, distrustful rather than absorbed, that is seem- ingly provoked by a photographer who lacks the legitimacy of a photojournalist reporting a political protest. Although both wom- en wear dresses that sport the demure Peter Pan collars of the era, the displacement of the string of pearls around the white woman's neck to the African American woman's hair ornament reinforces the latter's regal stature.

Subtending these contrasts is a difference not only of skin color, I would argue, but also of skin quality, a difference that amounts to a distinction between the white woman's flesh (unleavened by her down- ward-turning face and bleached out during the develop- ment process) as a mode of physical extension in space, and the African American woman's taut skin as an extension or expres- sion of consciousness or mind, as (in Steven Connor's words) the "body's face, the face of its bodiliness," a "thinking organ, a form of thought" with "something of the eye distributed across" it. As the body's outermost surface, skin functions as its face. Does flesh also have a face, or is it flesh all the way up? How do these two cutaneous substances differ not only in their physical properties (thin/thick, firm/loose) but also in their cultur- al associations? For if skin has historically been racialized as black (Fanon's racial epidermal scheme), flesh has historically been gen- dered as female. When Hamlet proclaims, "O that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew," he longs to transcend the boundaries of both mortality and mater- nity. Often acknowledged as gendered (men may be flabby but not fleshy), flesh has less con- sciously been racialized as white, with an attendant slew of unappealing connotations: amorphousness, pal- lor, gelatinousness, dullness, and susceptibility to impingement in the form of pimples, wrinkles, bruises: the marks not of trauma but of ordinary living that Susan Sontag describes as "abrasions . . . of flesh."50

To the powerful contrast drawn by Hortense Spillers between the captive woman's exposed, abused, bat- tered, disaggregated flesh and the integrity of coherent bodily form reserved for white wom- en, I would add a more deliberately superficial distinction not be- tween (white) body and (black) flesh but between (black) skin and (white) flesh, between a firm, dark-toned, and consequently light- reflecting outer cover- ing and a formless, faceless pallid flesh.51 It is not, of course, that black skin is invulnerable: it has been branded, whipped, beaten, scarred, and violated brutally; but when not sub- jected to violence, and per- haps because of its resilience in the face of relentless violence, it is easier (for white women) to envision and desire as magically intact.52

What is the cost of this desire? In her reading of Nella Larsen's Quicksand, Sianne Ngai contrasts the "epi- dermal rawness of the feeling and perceiving African-American subject in the novel," and of the novel's irritated textual surface, to "the unbroken smooth- ness of the skin that is objectified in the novel—as if only looked-at black skin can be free of inflammation or soreness" (UF, 207, em- phasis in original).

Shifting media, we could say that aestheticizing the skin of the photograph and its represented subject denies that subject the right to be irritated: the feeling clearly written on the face of the woman at the lunch counter in New York. The white viewer's disidentification from white flesh translates the haptic al- lure of black skin into a lure, a misrecognition or "imaginary cap- ture" that effaces the black subject and evacuates the white ("OG," 107).53 By depicting and eliciting identity-based feelings, including the desire to escape the flesh by inhabiting the skin of the Other, Davidson's photograph checks the transport promised by transper- sonal affect and auratic skin.

Critical Flesh

Does a discourse on "feeling photography" have a particular ver- bal texture or form? Is it fleshy or skinny? Whereas the figure of skin is usually invoked to suggest a thickened photographic sur- face, "the skinny" in relation to discursive forms signals the naked, unembellished truth. Critical discourse is rarely skinny, and a dis- course that attempts to tease out multiple layers and distinctions and experiment with diverse angles of vision may of necessity gain some amplitude. Although the incentive for this essay was to ana- lyze the allure of velvet-textured photographic skin, that analysis has generated some critical flesh—even, I hope, some wrinkles.

Critical flesh, however, does not guarantee an appreciation of photographic skin: indeed, these terms can be antithetical, as they were for the theorist who launched the project of "touching feel- ing" and whose richly textured prose offers an exemplary instance of critical flesh (not least because it problematizes the term). The intertwining of race, photography, and writing, as they travel in new guises across the twentieth century, elicits a final wrinkle that returns us to Eve Sedgwick. In A Dialogue on Love (1999), the most extensive of the dialogues she coauthored with colleagues, friends, and (in this case) her therapist, Shannon Van Wey, who enters the conversation through his treatment notes, Sedgwick weaves a variegated verbal web out of diverse and increasingly reversible voices, typefaces, and genres.54 The metaphor of weav- ing is overdetermined by Sedgwick's elated discovery of fabric arts during the course of the dialogue, for which she also draws inspi- ration from the seventeenth-century Japanese form of the haibun, traditionally a travel narrative that intersperses haiku and prose. Self-consciously exploiting the contrast between white page and dark print, A Dialogue on Love thickens the surface, as well as the subject, of its critical fabric.

A different counterpoint plays out less self-consciously between this carefully woven fabric and the family photographs whose viv- id evocation in language, rather than as actual images, gives them a strong visual presence. Taken by Sedgwick's father, the photo- graphs are introduced into the therapy sessions to illustrate the family dynamics that are produced and concealed by domestic ide- ology, but the turn to the visual medium also stages a new twist on the mutual implication of photography and race.

In a moment of painful self-perception through the camera's lens, Sedgwick depicts her bodily anomaly through a photograph of her attractive, brown-framed, chocolate-eyed Mediterranean Jewish family, from which she stands out as a "a dorkily fat, pink, boneless middle child" nicknamed "Marshmallow"" (DL, 19). The contrast between the fat little white girl and the slender, dark-skinned relatives recurs in a series of recollected and imagined pho- tographs whose defining nucleus is a pair of diametrically opposed sisters: the dark-skinned Nina, "so very thin," and the pallid Eve, "so very fat" (DL, 132), a juxtaposition that echoes the paired women in Davidson's "New York, 1962," with the racialized Oth- er now culturally defined. To be white, Sedgwick tells us repeat- edly, is to be bland, uninteresting, ordinary: the middle-American middle child. The worst adjective in the world, she insists, is "pal- lid," which her friend Tim Gould defines to her delight as "shy and doesn't have a great tan" (DL, 103). Despite Sedgwick's childhood efforts to redeem her status as a marshmallow through a family ro- mance that imagines her true parents to be the "emperor and em- press of Mars," whiteness, in this visual economy, is inextricably yoked with spineless fleshiness. All the dark-skinned people (that is, people who have skin)

are skinny; all the pallid people—herself and Shannon—have abundant flesh. The converse, however, does not hold: to be white is to be fat, but to be fat is not necessarily to be white, which allows for the fat-affirmative politics Sedgwick embraces elsewhere when the issues are bodily substance and size rather than color.55

For Sedgwick, the equation of whiteness with fleshiness is an effect of photography. In a stunning recollection and reversal of Fanon's primal scene, the young child Eve (the archetypal reso- nance of her name is especially strong here) feels imprisoned by the camera's relentless gaze in a racial epidermal scheme: "Look, a Ne- gro!" becomes "Look, a fat white girl": a visual directive echoed by the lines she remembers her mother reciting from Francis Corn- ford's triolet, "To a Fat Lady Seen from a Train," a poem she always felt was "pointed" at her: "Oh fat white woman whom no- body loves, / Why do you walk through the field in gloves" (DL, 193). In a twist on Coco Fusco's assertion that nineteenth-century "photography produced race as a visualizable fact," Sedgwick rep- resents herself trapped by the camera's gaze in a "corporeal male- diction" of white flesh: what we might call, pace Fanon, the "fact of whiteness." This "fact" is produced so effortlessly because in Sedgwick's account, as in Fanon's and Fusco's, the photographic image has no skin, except as it is materialized on the body of the Other. Photography operates in an exclusively and oppressively vi- sual register, a "tyranny of the visual" that fails, in contrast to textiles, to "feed" Sedgwick's fingers, to gratify her "skin hunger" (DL, 146, 199, 206). That hunger leads her out of the photo- graph to textiles, texts, and textures. Unlike Nina, who unfailingly "glues" her "googly eyes" on the camera, Eve struggles to escape from the picture, willing her whole being into her fingertips, "and from them into something else through touch—a stuffed panda, my other hand, a book or cat, the fabric of a skirt" (DL, 20).

Fingertips versus eyes: what if photographs had texture that could gratify skin hunger? Might cutaneous contact with the pho- tographic skin elicit an affective spectrum that could temper the feelings of shame and envy triggered (as for Fanon and Davidson) by the camera's gaze? If she could touch the feelings of the pho- tographic surface, could the white female subject of photography be absorbed into the affective wrinkles of the dialogue on love? Rather than being precipitated out as an obdurate biological lump, referenced by but inassimilable to the textural gradations of the written text, could white flesh be woven into the nuanced critical fabric for which Sedgwick has been our most eloquent practitioner and advocate? Could touch and vision, skin and flesh, black and white, photography and text(ure) be distributed less opposition- ally? For when it comes to this cluster of dyads, we might hesitate to grant Sedgwick's assertion that "nondualism is mother's milk" to her (DL, 215).

Sedgwick forcefully suggests the power of nondualism in her characterization of the haibun as "the fat, buttery condensations and inky dribbles of the mind's laden brush," a visual image of a written text that, by evoking and displacing the language of race, provides an alternative to the deadening effects of Shannon's re- duction of race to nomenclature (DL, 194). We might say that, through this gesture, Sedgwick succeeds in queering race, or bring- ing it, along with eyes and fingers, into the orbit of queerness. For that, of course, for Sedgwick, is the orbit that (more strenuously than the Buddhism to which she also subscribes) carries the poten- tial to unravel social dualisms.

Queer, Sedgwick reminds us in an earlier text, "means across— it comes from the Indo-European root—twerkw, which also yields the German quer (transverse), Latin torquere (to twist), English athwart . . . across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across 'perversions'" are some of the subtitles she considered for Tenden- cies (xii, emphasis in original). The process or relation that queer indicates is "multiply transitive. . . . relational and strange." In the language of this essay, we could say that the twist of queerness reprises the gesture of crossed arms that marks the crossroads of French phenomenology and the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The trope of queerness is chiasmus.

By reaching a hand back (however inadvertently) to the cross- over political and philosophical movements that it extends into the present in a different form, queer theory enacts one of its defining attributes: that it is a "continuing moment, movement, motive— recurrent, eddying, troublant" (T, xii). The gesture of crossing boundaries, moreover, opens a path to and suggests the value of carrying forward the investment in the affective surfaces of pho- tography. A Dialogue on Love reveals the persistence, as specular reversal, of a racializing photographic gaze that fixes the liabilities of black skin or white flesh and the dialectic of shame and envy these fixations impose. We can cross this picture, however, with a queer perspective that renews the practice and discourse of chias- mus. Although they can only temper, not vanquish, the camera's oppressive functions, photography's affective properties can touch Sedgwick's transitive project by awakening the impulse to cross hands across the boundaries of race and medium.