

Kristopher L. Cannon

# Cutting Race Otherwise: Imagining Michael Jackson

Consider, from the start, the seemingly simplistic but all too intricate or entangled distinctions between black and white. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that black is “the very darkest color,” “the opposite of white,” or “due to the absence of or complete absorption of light” while white is “the opposite of black,” or “due to the reflection of most wavelengths of visible light.” We are afforded these simplistic distinctions through a chromatic conceptualization of colors, which are polarized in relation to light—chromatic colors, which only function as differentials, dependent on difference without positive distinction. But when the distinctions between Black and White or, more appropriately, Blackness and Whiteness are transplanted to skin, they lose the transparency that the physical properties of light appear to offer. The mobilization of visual signifiers for race gives rise to a complex interchange with the scopic regime of chromatic color. What follows becomes an interrogation of the identifiable tropes of Blackness and Whiteness, an interrogation beyond the conceptual confines of binary ontologies within scopic regimes of color, especially when visual *identities* and what may or may not be visually *identifiable* in relation to the body begins to transition within, across and beyond racial signifiers for bodies as they are de- or re-constructed.<sup>1</sup>

Picture one formulation of how, “in the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person.”<sup>2</sup> Fanon considers this because of the child that hailed him as Negro (“Look! A Negro!”): chromatically “[t]he proof was there, implacable. My blackness there, dense and undeniable.”<sup>3</sup> In other formulations, these pictures of chromatic visibility shift—thus, in the form of race/d performance, consider the visibility of blackface and passing. Blackface functions as “a statement of social imperfection, inferiority, and mimicry that is placed in isolation with an absent whiteness as its ideal opposite”—always an excessive visible cover enabling the “white fantasy that posits whiteness as the norm.”<sup>4</sup> Passing, as “a kind of theft,”<sup>5</sup> often occupies the realm of unseen success—of course, only “successful assimilation on the terms allowed to Americans of European descent but routinely denied to African-Americans.”<sup>6</sup>

These racial tropes (identifiable visual signifiers, masks un/covering the identity beneath, and lingering shadows of identity-theft) are and have been rich fields of inquiry unto themselves.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I employ a method of tropological crosscutting to consider how these axes transition until race is understood otherwise. This process

illuminates how racial identities elide visibility as a source of certainty and, by extension, how (racial) identities infrequently stabilize in singular formation.<sup>8</sup>

Michael Jackson, once titled “possessor of the PomoBod,”<sup>9</sup> functions as a locus that precipitates, prompts, and provokes visual instability—where focusing on instability proffers an understanding about transitional bodies that attract, cut and hold meaning in fascinating ways. Jackson’s body becomes an extravagant site to explore visual signifiers for race—cut from the confines of visibility that enable scopic regimes to reduce race to chromatic contrast. Cutting, in fact, influences the thrust of this paper—to consider divisions or transitions for all of the possibilities that they contain: across and beyond (as in transgression), through (to transform or transcend) or from (to break, split or alienate). The cut, then, as transitional action in gerund form, implies particular types of motion. Cutting to analogy, a cinematic cut literally breaks or slices the connection between frames to offer some form of transition toward another framing—filmic meaning carried through cuts, from one frame to another. To only explore cutting as this broken, sliced movement would limit the possibility to understand the visual cut outside of dialectical opposition.<sup>10</sup>

Kathryn Bond Stockton illuminates how cutting transitions mobilize beyond dialectical opposition, as multiple cutting functions (both literary and visual) maintain a patina for various forms of visual fascination. To wit: Begin with a detail, “a compelling detail (or striking set of details),” in a text that can be read as “a kind of love—or at least an intensification of our attraction or attention.”<sup>11</sup> This detail “can also be said to cut the text ... since it may carry the mind away, and thus in a sense cut the viewer away, from the forward flow of plot or message by drawing attention to itself as a source of fascination.”<sup>12</sup> As a cut-away, fascination functions to contain or become filled by this production of meaningful connections. This meaningful cut is, here, made full: each break from forward flow simultaneously functions as “a kind of holding pen,” to “hold our interest,” where we find within the cut, “tucked in the cut (and, therefore, held in it),” “a cache of interest that may take many forms.”<sup>13</sup> These forms

of visual fascination compellingly contribute to richer understandings of transition. Connections between attraction, cutting and holding leverage our ability to reconsider how race mobilizes (chromatic) visual signifiers and perceptions of racial bodies—beyond dialectical reductions to absence or presence. Visual manifestations of Jackson’s transitional body reveal fascinating details that oscillate between (historical) moments of Blackness and Whiteness.

I will address Jackson’s body as a racial image, which has been (but possibly must always be) Black and has been (was becoming, became, will henceforth be) White. The oscillation between chromatic signifiers places Jackson within the images of racial con/texts I initially offer: as a de/constructed body that reformulates Fanon’s famous primal scene (“Look! He was a Black Man.”), as a masked body that cannot assimilate back into Blackness, and as a body that passes as White while producing a shadow that bemoans the space he occupies in-between racial boundaries that pass. Images of Jackson occupy an in-between space; through cyborgian theft, Jackson’s body enters the space between pictures of race and undoes the power of pictures to decisively signify racial identity. Jackson is a (visual body as) hyphenate, an imag(in)ing of cyborg bodiedness that deconstructs the visual signifiers for race, gender and sexuality by occupying the space of the hyphen in post-human. In this space, words cut or spaced from connection are stitched, conjoin and offer mutual critical reflections.

Unlike scopic ontologies that differentiate between bodies as visual binaries that are *either/or* (Black or White), Jackson’s body image occupies the in-between hyphenated space: a visual body containing visual and textual traits that are *both/and* (Black, White, Post-Black...), which perpetually forces viewers to reconcile dissonant signifiers as they proliferate beyond simple reductions. Even post(-)humously, where I turn to end this paper, imag(in)ing Jackson’s raced-body need not and cannot correlate to his lived-body in the first place. Jackson’s visual body occupies space outside of live-ness, as a hyphenate imag(in)ed through lively processes that transitionally cut and re-stitch every attempt to identify with epidermal pictures of skin. Jackson’s identity becomes (un-)identifiable through body images that confront

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the un-sticking epidermal signifiers within fecund fantasies of perfect (Jackson) pictures—stickiness cut by our attraction, transitioning and held within images and imaginations where we find livelier visual forms.

### Picturing Jackson: Look! He was a Black Man.

Michael Jackson's release of the *Thriller* album offered visual images as a site of public spectacle and visual fascination, contributing to questions about the "fact" of Jackson's Blackness—questions that only intensified with the release of subsequent albums, each providing additional visual representations through cover art or music videos.<sup>14</sup> Kobena Mercer draws attention to several changes in Jackson's appearance that accompanied his release of the *Thriller* album: The former "cute child dressed in gaudy flower-power gear" while "sporting a huge 'Afro' hairstyle" transformed into a young adult who became "a paragon of racial and sexual ambiguity."<sup>15</sup> These ambiguities prompt a number of initial questions about Jackson's Blackness: Is Jackson Black? If so, how do we understand race in relation to the chromatic color of skin; or, is it possible to assert that there is a "fact of Blackness" when someone sees Jackson? If not, at what point is it possible to mark or recognize his transition from Blackness to Whiteness; or, how and in what ways is his Blackness concealed or contained? While Mercer suggests that Jackson's popularity had much to do with his ambiguous, innovative style, metaphor becomes Mercer's method to account for flickering signifiers of bodies and identities transition. Jackson, Mercer suggests, "may sing as sweet as Al Green, dance as hard as James Brown, but he looks more like Diana Ross than any black male soul artist."<sup>16</sup> Mercer's analogy about Jackson's ambiguous monstrosity functions as an historical node for Jackson's visual body. The delimited boundary set up by Mercer—that Jackson looks like a Black female instead of a Black male—addresses how Jackson's image fluctuates in relation to gendered codes of difference but does not fully interrogate chromatics in visual transition.

"While Jackson was forced to assert on Oprah that he was 'proud to be a black American,'" Victoria Johnson explains how Jackson's self-assigned racial identity still confronts:

his apparently increasing whiteness, or, at the least, 'aracial' identity (his skin tone has radically changed since he has fallen victim to the depigmentation process caused by vitiligo), visually paralleled the togetherness message of the major anthems of his *Dangerous* LP and tour ("Black or White" and "Heal the World").<sup>17</sup>

Johnson inserts brief reference to Jackson's victimization in an intriguing place; vitiligo becomes a parenthetical excuse for Jackson's skin condition and literally cuts or divides the argument that Johnson constructs. By her account, Jackson's white pigmentation validates his promotion of (racial) togetherness, but his ability to assert Black pride warrants a disclaimer about the visual disconnect between past and present chromatic colors of his skin.<sup>18</sup> When Johnson employs vitiligo—through a (parenthetical) cut—as her means to explain and understand visual discontinuity, grammar functions in the stead of and simultaneous to the process that always already occurs when reconciling differences between pictures and images or flickering signifiers of visibility.

W.J.T. Mitchell contributes to how we might understand this process while clarifying the distinction between pictures and images—where images are the "mental thing" or virtual manifestation that becomes material through the medium of a picture.<sup>19</sup> Each picture of Jackson becomes a material manifestation of visibility<sup>20</sup> and contains various signifiers for his body. These material visual signifiers do not contain intrinsic meaning, but flicker and become virtual images—a liminal space in virtuality where material signifiers encounter mental imaginings in a feedback loop. Signification remains irreducible to absent or present meanings, flickering between understandable patterns of signification and the randomness of imagined meaning.<sup>21</sup>

This oscillatory process prohibits pictures of Jackson from acting as singular signs for racial ambiguity; instead, these pictures contribute to the broader process of imaging and, in turn, illuminate the work done with and to race. I explore Jackson's visibility through imaging but find textual and theoretical leverage by way of a

textual cut(-in). Imaging is reframed as imag(in)ing to emphasize the dual-function of images, as processes of material mediation and imaginary conceptualizations, which occur within and through the function of imaging.<sup>22</sup> What unfolds below complicates race and visibility at the intersection between categories—what Mercer only addresses implicitly in his discussion about social hieroglyphs.<sup>23</sup> Jackson's transitional visibility cuts a viewer from the ability to categorize through binary opposition and simultaneously shifts his body into a liminal holding pen, where meanings gather and proliferate. The stability of Jackson's pictorial meanings will cut to the virtual possibilities of images, whereby the non-visual process of imag(in)ing race is laid bare.

Consider, as an initial example, Jackson's image in the music video "Bad." Jackson's image in this video, as well as in other videos from the *Bad* album, complicates our understanding of and identification with the visual presence of his body. Mercer's recollection of Jackson's childhood picture(s) collides with a contrasting hairstyle pictured in the "Bad" music video. Attraction to this visual body invites the recognition of Jackson's past Blackness, where an image cuts to the past and tucks a recognizable loss of Blackness within this cut. The visible hairline between woven and unwoven hair becomes a weave that wanes from Jackson's Afro past: an identifiable mark to distinguish between hair that grows from his head—the hair of his past or what some might call his "natural" or "original" hair—and the hair that has been used as a cover. The cover or new weave of hair beckons any viewer to remember Jackson's past, and the cut we encounter at this hairline pierces the viewer and prompts various imag(in)ings of the transition that has taken place.

While this pictured hairline is not the only visual cue that draws attention to Jackson's past, it illuminates one way to imag(in)e the intricate details of the past becoming tucked within the present. Jackson's perpetual visual transformation points to past-Blackness and draws attention to a body undergoing re- and de-construction. The most significant visual mark, beyond the intricate detail of a hairline, is the omnipresent visibility of Jackson's skin color. Jackson's body creates an image of visual transgression through the perpetual

oscillation between past and present (or presently absent) chromatic Blackness. The color or tone of Jackson's skin is inescapable, unavoidable, and pictures testify to the visibility of a chromatic presence in conflict with the racial identity in *our* image of Jackson's past. This is hyphenated identity through mediation; Jackson's image oscillates between chromatic contrasts that remain contingent upon an understanding of the visible present and the unseen past. Blackness wanes within the visible through perplexing chromatic contradictions, only to reenter the visual through the processes of imag(in)ing—where flickering signifiers of "past-ness" and "post-ness" flourish.

### Not Quite the Right White

While Jackson's visual images draw attention to past- or post-Blackness, the need to consider how and in what ways this visual presence can or cannot connote Whiteness remains. This consideration reveals how Jackson's visual presence becomes pictorially masked, unable to escape imag(in)ed pasts. Images of masks, illuminated by Homi Bhabha's provocative prose, point to moments of mimicry. To wit: "Excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence."<sup>24</sup> Jackson exhibits a partial presence that takes up residence within the interstices between Blackness and Whiteness. Jackson's body, under continual re/construction, attracts imag(in)ings of pictured visual presences that are not Black *and* not White. Attraction to these images cut to recognizable contrasts between Blackness and Whiteness, and held within this cut is unmistakable unassimilability. If we reconfigure Bhabha's notion of mimicry, Jackson's visible unassimilability can be imagined as masked mimicry—a partial presence that is *almost the same* White, but tucked in an historical cut is his past Blackness, thus *never quite the "right" White*.<sup>25</sup>

Jackson's visual presence comes to occupy the interstitial space between Blackness and Whiteness through his relationships to bodies in his music videos. In the music video "Black or White," we first see Jackson dancing in the midst

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*"Black or White," Jackson Among "Africans"*

of "African" people. Throughout the video, cultural tropes are imag(in)ed but prevent him from reaching racial similitude because the chromatic color of his skin signifies universal Whiteness—still not quite the "right White," but always an image of a "Whiter-than" presence. As the video progresses, Jackson mobilizes between tropological scenes—from "African" to "Asian," "indigenous American," "Eastern Indian," and "Russian"—with pictures of bodily presences in contrast to Jackson's chromatically-lighter skin and, as the contrasts accumulate, it becomes apparent that Jackson is unable to mimic any bodily presence within these visual contexts. Imag(in)ing Jackson through pictures of chromatic contrast inevitably provokes reconsiderations of the visual relations that structure identifiable and bodily signification. Jackson's rhythmically mobile bodily reduces to mimetic tropes touring cultural contexts—an identifiable image being cut away from the relational structures of raced bodies altogether.

Contrasting contexts continue in music videos like "Scream" or "You are Not Alone," and the ability to picture his presence within identifiable chromatic configurations becomes a futile exercise of virtual imagination. In "Scream" Jackson co-stars with his sister Janet Jackson, and while siblings may have different skin tones, Michael's lighter skin chromatically contrasts Janet. If our imag(in)ing cuts to the past, we might remember images of greater visual similarity between his skin tone and Janet's chromatically-darker skin in this video. Skin tone acts as one, although not the only, way to designate between race and ethnicity, and

memories of chromatic signifiers flicker until an image of Michael's past can structure a relationship between chromatic contrasts that linger within this visual gap. These historical imaginings persist in "You are Not Alone," where Jackson remains chromatically Whiter than his Caucasian co-star, Lisa Marie Presley. Jackson's image of "Whiter-than-ness" becomes strikingly un-relatable or un-definable, a chromatically visible body appearing unassimilable within any contrast or context. Jackson's unidentifiable image enters a space of imag(in)ing where flickering signifiers could be said to literally "cut" pictures and images of Jackson's visual presence from the process of comparative semiotic and chromatic interchange. Jackson's unassimilability reveals a body undergoing continual de- and re-construction—a construction opening the possibility to explore Jackson's body as a visual site for imag(in)ing identities that cut away from human form altogether.

### The Cyborgian Border-Body: Shadows of the Unhuman Image

Donna Haraway thoroughly investigates the complexity of border-bodies at the site of the cyborg—a hybrid at the juncture between various binary breakdowns (namely human/animal, and organism/machine). The cyborg offers a conceptual framework to illuminate distinctions and similarities between the human body and Jackson's imag(in)ed body—on the brink of becoming non-human.<sup>26</sup> Images of Jackson enter Haraway's



*"Black or White," Jackson among "American Indians"*

cyborg ontology at the border breakdown between organism and machine—where “disturbingly lively” machines confront “frighteningly inert” humans, prompting dichotomous differences like “natural and artificial” to lose distinction.<sup>27</sup> This breakdown reveals a deep-rooted hybridity that is (or, has become) part of the human condition, and gestures at what Haraway envisions as “the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end.”<sup>28</sup>

The construction of Jackson’s body—birthed through biomechanical production via plastic surgery—reiterates Jackson’s hyphenate identity. The genesis that brings about the birth of a child does not account for the production(s) of Jackson’s visible body; rather, Jackson’s images connote the radical reconstruction that takes place with the assistance of plastic surgery.<sup>29</sup> Beyond imag(in)ing Jackson as a visual hyphenate, his physical body occupies the space of a similarly hyphenated shadow presence—a presence that cannot pass as purely human because it cannot hide the “ghosts in that machine”—that is, imag(in)ing Jackson’s visual image perpetually threatens to reveal how Jackson’s body was produced; each embodied signifier escapes into virtuality and flickers with a haunting potentiality to reveal the laborious technological productions that culminate in his machinated fleshed-construction(s). Jackson’s visual identity commands our attentive attraction, to imagine how his visible presence is never wholly human. This visual attraction cuts to the recognition of his constructed-body and tucked within this cut are the intimate details of technological contribution to the production of Jackson’s cyborgian, hybrid body.

Jackson’s body comes to signify optic Whiteness, through “technological fantasies” as Harryette Mullen might explain, which “feature mechanical production as an asexual reproduction of whiteness.”<sup>30</sup> This fantasy, Mullen contends, is the “contemporary electronic version of the miscegenated text,” producing “a media cyborg constructed as a white body with a black soul.”<sup>31</sup> Jackson’s Black soul certainly remains within virtual imag(in)ings, withheld from his picture/d body. Jackson’s image no longer maintains a chromatically Black visual presence and becomes

hyper-White in such a way that he comes to signify a body that has been “cut away” from the human, the hyphenate occupying the space between post(-)human and post(-)identity—potentially best understood as post-identifiable.

Near the end of the video “Black or White,” we confront this technological fantasy through the race machine: a technologically constructed visual illusion, picturing the post-human possibility for one body to transition to another—no matter one’s race or gender. These images are edited to eradicate racial, gendered, or bodied borders through visual transitions between various videos (or pictures) of different bodies. Literal cuts, between shots or pieces of film, do not appear within these images. Rather, each body transitions into the next and each transition contributes to a morphological image with the intention to hide the technological labor that takes place to construct this utopian (visual) fantasy. This technological fantasy produces what Jennifer González considers an “historical elision that erases any complex notion of cultural identity” whereby “a hybrid identity is presumed to reside in or on the visible markers of the body, the flesh.”<sup>32</sup> Within these images, bodies transition according to identity markers on the surface of skin—one facial feature morphs into another or one skin tone blends into the next. This is “a thinly veiled fantasy of *difference*,”<sup>33</sup> González might say, especially when we consider the filmic-focus on faces as “a device that is ultimately mutable and theoretically nonidentitarian” as “any face...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.”<sup>34</sup>

If there is the possibility for the racial soul to remain, this fantasy of technological production collapses within the race machine; visual identity is effaced through transitional imaging, which need not or cannot be imag(in)ed again. Jackson remains the conspicuous absence within these visual transitions, but the visual manifestation of his body-in-transition need not reiterate how Jackson’s transitional identity is already imag(in)ed. Jackson cannot be imag(in)ed as a body that transitioned from one race to another because he occupies the hyphenated terrain where racial imag(in)ings cannot attach to identifiably chromatic bodies. He slips into images that are simultaneously un-

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"You Rock My World."

identifiable and un-human, unable to fully escape humanness or identity either. This hyphenated space expands when Jackson's body is imaged in relation to shadows, the disembodied index of presence.<sup>35</sup> Picture, if you will, one scene from the "You Rock My World" music video where Jackson emerges from behind a curtain where a backlight creates a shadow of his body on a screen. Optic Blackness, which W.T. Lhamon Jr. addresses through the silhouettes in the works of Kara Walker, emerges as a contrast between Jackson's (already seen) chromatic skin color and the color of his indexical shadow. The shadow functions as identifiable Blackness; it is a phantasmatic indexical presence that warps, haunts, and buggers (Jackson's) bodily presence from behind—a bodied presence that can only ever follow behind Jackson but never transform into part of his body.<sup>36</sup>

Jackson's shadow is the only "fact" of his Blackness that can be pictured visually. In the video for "Blood on the Dancefloor," bodies are in perpetual contrast (dancers are paired with different chromatic skin tones and Jackson's chromatic skin tone is Whiter than any skin tone in the video). Shadows reiterate these contrasts, by continually appearing without any indexical trace to Jackson's body, to haunt and taunt the fact that his Blackness cannot attach to skin. Planned lighting, for proper visual contrasts, reveals the constructed nature of visibility to construct shadows in Jackson's videos. These music videos hide their visual constructions just as the technological construction of Jackson's body is meant to remain hidden. The visual manifestations of technological or cyborgian

reconstructions suggest a theft: Jackson's inability to visually "pass"—as an image of Black- or Whiteness—moves outside of the realm of assimilation and toward the possibility to radically construct a visual body/identity that need not be subject to chromatic distinctions at all.

### Imag(in)ing Post-Humous Presence

Lingering within each consideration of Jackson's visual presence thus far is the notion of picture as corpse, an ironic imag(in)ing that confronts Jackson at an intersection between metaphor and memorial. Roland Barthes explores how photographs metaphorically connote death, with pasts arrested and frozen in images.<sup>37</sup> Pictures or photographs come alive through imag(in)ings, such as remembering the past, and Barthes's confrontation with the (virtual) memorial process—a photograph of his mother, a picture of her youthful past immobilized in the present—became horrific when he locates a corpse, living as a corpse. The picture lives, as an image of death, because his mother remains frozen, in memories and (living) material photographs.

After his untimely death, Jackson's public memorial visualized photographic memorial, as imag(in)ings surrounded and animated pictorial (past) lives in excess. The memorial included a montage of pictures, flashing on the back of the stage in the Los Angeles Staples Center, where Jackson lingered as hyphenate. Each picture proffered limitless virtual imag(in)ings of Jackson, but these transitional pictures could not fulfill the fantasy of a unified perfect picture. It is a utopian fantasy to suggest that images of Jackson transform visual ontologies of race, embodiedness or identity. This paper unavoidably testifies to the impossible discussions of race outside of chromatic color—reinstating a binary between Black and White to illuminate how these colors can transition, change and/or become un-identifiable. Jackson illuminates how it is possible to rupture the connections between chromatic, epidermal signifiers and racial identities, to transform or transgress chromatic racial indices and reveal how the *iconic* function of chromatic color might not leave an indexical trace at all.

Jackson's perpetual visual and bodily transformations reveal his post-human, before



"Scream" and Anime



"Scream" and Janet

posthumous, image. One framing, in the "Scream" video, places Jackson in close proximity to anime projection. This scene almost hilariously suggests greater visual similarities between Jackson and the anime character than with his sister Janet. Jackson illustrates the possibility to escape Humanist body boundaries, and how technological fantasies (whatever they may be) enacted through plastic surgery can reconstruct the human form in new ways. Jackson has metaphorically and literally cut his body otherwise—a striking and fantastic visual transgression beyond human body boundaries. Jackson could not exist within the fantasy a perfect picture, and escapes pictorial index near the end of his memorial. At the end of the performance "Man in the Mirror," a single over-head spotlight shot a ray of light, cutting through blackness on empty, darkened stage, to illuminate and encircle a microphone. Illuminated emptiness becomes an ideal visual icon and metaphor for Jackson: visible as hyphenate within an image that is only a likeness, where pictured-pasts flicker within virtual imag(in)ings to illuminate identifiable meaning.

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### End Notes

1 My focus on Western ontologies about binary difference in the United States does not deny philosophical and ideological applicability in other socio-cultural contexts.

2 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1952]), 90.

3 *Ibid.*, 96.

4 Manthia Diawara, "The Blackface Stereotype," in *Blackface*, ed. David Levinthal (Santa Fe, NM: Arena Editions, 1999), 7.

5 Harryette Mullen, "Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness," *Diacritics* 24 no. 2-3 (1994), 73.

6 *Ibid.*, 96.

7 Several works illuminate the scopic regimes I discuss. Regarding racial bodies, see Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (Modern Library Edition, 1995); Fanon, *Black Skin*; Frantz Fanon and Ragnar Farr, *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference, and Desire* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995); and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and The "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). On Masks, see Stuart Hall, "The After-Life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why Black Skin, White Masks?," in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. Alan Read (WA: Bay Press, 1996). Regarding shadows, see Elizabeth Abel, "Shadows," *Representations* 84 (2004) 166-99; and Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

8 I not only rely on numerous accounts of racial visibility to cut, weave and stitch my exploration of race and identity, but I extend these discussions outside of a formal chronological framework to broaden our understandings of flickering pictures as productive images of

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race and identity. There are minute historical details that I do not account for, but this cross-cut pathway will emphasize the significance of inbetweenness to reconsider solidified modes of inquiry about race and identity. This form follows visual culture studies scholars who initiate interdisciplinary conversations. See, as an example, Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography, and the Index," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, eds. C. Fusco and B. Wallis (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003).

9 Lance Olsen, "Introduction: The Michael Jacksonization of American Fiction," *ANQ* 5 (1992), 172.

10 A model for dialectical montage—where dialectical oppositions between or within shots prompt (political) understanding—is initially and productively theorized by Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harcourt, 1977 [1949]).

11 Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* (Durham: Duke University, 2006), 106.

12 Ibid., 107. See also: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). These cutting textual details closely relate to Barthes's conceptualization of the punctum, which Stockton later addresses in relation to aesthetic wounding.

13 Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom*, 107.

14 An intentional pun on the original chapter title "The Fact of Blackness" in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*—re-translated to "The Lived Experience of a Black Man" in 2008. The fact of inaccurate translation productively stimulates (visual culture) scholars to re-consider and re-theorize the fact(less)ness of visual Blackness. See, as a primary example: Stuart Hall, "The After-Life."

15 Kobena Mercer, "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's 'Thriller,'" in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, eds. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg (New York: Routledge, 1993), 94.

16 Ibid., 94.

17 Victoria Johnson, "The Politics of Morphing: Michael Jackson as Science Fiction Border Text," *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (1993), 61.

18 This discussion about Jackson's possible skin condition (causing pigmentation loss and various whitish patches on the skin) circumvents considerations of his visual presence: the visibility of Jackson's chromatically Black body does not merely deteriorate post-*Thriller*, the entirety of Jackson's visible body shifts from non-white to white synchronously. Johnson's account of Jackson's visuality denies the possibility for his transitional marks of difference to mobilize beyond simplified distinctions between Blackness and Whiteness. I disregard vitiligo as part of my argument because it only functions as one, among many, explanations for Jackson's visual transformation and neglects why chromatic Blackness need not exist within pictures of his chromatic Whiteness.

19 See "The Surplus Value of Images" in W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

20 In this context, "material" applies to media that broadly range from photographs and paintings to film and digital pictures. To consider the materiality of racial photographs and their material meaning, see P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Who's Your Mama? 'White' Mulatta Genealogies, Early Photography, and Anti-Passing Narratives of Slavery and Freedom," *American Literary History* 14, no. 3 (2002), 504-39.

21 Additional information about the semiotic structures of flickering signifiers and non-linear visual formations is found in N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

22 Imaging, as a non-visual mediation between images and pictures, is explored through phenomenological purview in Mark B.N. Hansen, "Introduction," *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

23 Mercer, "Monster," 95.

24 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge), 123.

25 While Jackson's identity and images do not correlate with the colonial subject, this play on Bhabha's words draws on the contextual performance of Whiteness that both performances share. Neither occupy the space or employ the identity of Whiteness; rather, both subjects/identities perform the *function* of Whiteness, only ever asymptotically approaching that designation.

26 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-81.

27 Ibid., 152.

28 Ibid., 150.

29 Although Jackson's plastic surgery is a valid realm of inquiry, I have chosen to focus on the *visible* manifestations of Jackson's body, which secure un-seen plastic surgery processes. This shift productively heightens our awareness of imag(in)ing as a process to reconsider unseen visuality within any picture/d medium.

30 Mullen, "Optic White," 77.

31 Ibid., 85-6.

32 Jennifer González, "The Appended Subject: Race and Identity as Digital Assemblage," in *Race in Cyberspace*, eds. Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 305.

33 Jennifer A. González, "The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice," *Camera Obscura* 70, no. 24 (2009), 49, her emphasis.

34 González, "The Face and the Public," 50.

35 The shadow, as semiotic index, becomes an index for race in the work of several visual culture scholars. See Mirzoeff, "Shadow"; Abel, "Shadows"; and Victor Leronim Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).

36 W.T. Lhamon Jr., "Optic Black: Naturalizing the Refusal to Fit," in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, eds. Harry J. Elam Jr. and Kennell Jackson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 115.

37 Barthes, *Camera*, 30-2.