# What You Claim, You Are:
# Black Vernacular, Regimes of Visibility, and the Reproduction of We
# in *The Queen's English* by Martine Syms

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complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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**Abstract**

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This thesis is a close reading of a body of work entitled *The Queen's English*, 2014, by Martine Syms. The Queen's English is an exhibition and reading room inspired by the distribution of information within Black feminist communities in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. Produced in cooperation with photographer Cat Roif and designer Jeff Cain, *The Queen's English* was on view at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena's Mezzanine Gallery between July 13 and August 31, 2014. This thesis traces the inquiry into individual and collective Black embodiment that this work undertakes, understood as the layout of a methodology which repeats itself throughout Martine Syms' work. Methodologically, it follows Syms' introduction of the work as an intergenerational "dialogue about language and representation," interweaving the two strings of visual analysis and theories of language to understand *The Queen's English* as a body of work in the literal sense. The thesis examines this body in its double existence as a body of (epistemological, statistical, digital, biometrical) data and as a material body. It argues that thereby, Black Vernacular as used by the figure of the Bibliographer allows Syms to envision and enact reproduction as a form of reciprocal production, rather than as a replication of the same.

**Acknowledgements**

It is with gratitude and admiration that I acknowledge the work of Martine Syms, which made this thesis possible. I want to thank my supervisor Prof. Johanne Sloan for her support, her generosity, and for returning from her Sabbatical for my thesis presentation. I am indebted to Prof. Alice Ming Wai Jim, who also agreed to examine this thesis during her Sabbatical. Many thanks to Zoë Chan for her reading. My thanks also go to my cohort, who allowed me to trust in the collective process that is learning.

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## Introduction

As a bookseller, publisher and researcher in the field of artists' publication, I first encountered Martine Syms' (born 1988) work in her capacity as co-founder of Golden Age Bookshop and Gallery in Chicago (2007-2011).[1] Later, the publications issued by Syms' imprint Dominica Publishing (since 2013) caught my attention. I took up my research on this work because I was interested in how *The Queen's English* figures in the passage from Syms' emphasis on her work as a bookseller and distributor to that of a visual artist and publisher. Particularly, I was curious about how the notion and practice of reproduction plays out in this transition, a question which is also of concern within both the North American tradition of artist-initiated publishing and Italian feminist theory. In both these realms, the function of reproduction as replicating sameness is questioned. Artists' publications understand visual and material reproduction as the creation of a new work rather than as the documentation of an existing one.[2] Italian feminist theory concerned with reproduction—as articulated for instance by Silvia Federici or Mariarosa Dalla Costa—redefines the "passiveness" of reproductive labour as capable of regenerating society.[3] I am however not attempting to apply these understandings to Syms' work, or use this work to illustrate these theories. Rather I am interested in how Syms' work expands and alters these theories.

In writing this thesis, I understand my position first and foremost as one that is offered to me by Martine Syms' work: that of its reader. Given the fact that the position of the reader is one of power—as it is both demonstrated by and performing in Syms' work—, I am not claiming its neutrality. The Queen's English opens up questions surrounding Blackness and its representation which require a careful examination of my own approach. I therefore further reflect on my position in the following section, entitled "Pre-face." As one reader among many, my focus is on

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1 Artists Marco Kane Braunschweiler and Martine Syms opened Golden Age in 2007, with a focus on creating a public for affordable artists' publications, which bridged the various creative communities in Chicago. It hosted exhibition, lecture and performance programs, and had a publishing arm. See Jason Foumberg, "Exit Interview: End of the Golden Age," accessed April 10, 2017. http://art.newcity.com/2011/11/08/exit-interview-end-of-the-golden-age/.

2 See for instance Joan Lyons, ed., *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985.

3 See for instance Louise Toupin, *Le salaire au travail ménager : Chronique d'une lutte féministe internationale (1972-1977), Avec des entretiens accordés par Mariarosa Dalla Costa et Silvia Federici*, Montréal : Les éditions du remue-ménage, 2014.

tracing the inquiry into individual and collective embodiment in Syms' work, which can be read as the construction—rather than the ultimate or essential conception—of a body. Syms' embodiment is not autonomous, but inscribes itself into the Black literary and radical traditions in her work in general, and into the Black feminist literary production in *The Queen's English* in particular. [4] This work can thus not be categorized as "post-Black."[5] This thesis suggests that the embodiment construed by Martine Syms' work is based on an understanding that knowledge, like politics, is not only something that is passed on, but that it "is something you do with your body."[6]

*The Queen's English* takes form, as what Syms calls, "an accumulation of meaning."[7] Its body of work is construed from historical and contemporary conceptions of individual and social

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[4] I am using the term "Black" rather than African American or West Indian American throughout this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, it is the term that Martine Syms uses. Secondly, because the national-geographic terms do not apply to some of the authors whose works have been of importance in the construction of the theoretical apparatus of this thesis, such as Jamaican Sylvia Wynter or Martinician Édouard Glissant. Alexander G. Weheliye, Professor of African-American Studies at Northwestern University in Chicago, notes: "The theoretical and methodological protocols of Black studies have always been global in their reach, because they provide detailed explanations of how techniques of domination, dispossession, expropriation, exploitation, and violence are predicated upon the hierarchical ordering of racial, gender, sexual, economic, religious, and national differences." Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 5.

[5] The term "post-Black" emerged in the wake of the 2001 exhibition *Freestyle* at the Studio Musem in Harlem featuring twenty-eight emerging Black artists including Rashid Johnson, Adler Guerrier, and Layla Ali. The exhibition was curated by Thelma Golden, who in the catalogue essay clarifies the term evolving in a conversation between Golden and artist Glenn Ligon as follows: "It [post-Black] was a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labelled as 'Black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested in redefining notions of Blackness." Derek Conrad Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015): 4. With post-Obama liberalism, the term was interpreted more widely outside of the art field to describe a "freedom to live and think Blackness just as we please." Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness: What It Means to Be Black Now* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), xvi. This new freedom of interpretation also serves "economic and social advancement." Derek Dingle (Editor of *Black Enterprise*) in Ytasha L. Womack, ed., *Post Black: How a New Generation Is Redefining African American Identity* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), xvi.

[6] Martine Syms quoting Lewis Gordon in "Misdirected Kiss," revised transcription, New Windsor: The Shandaken Project at Storm King Art Center, September 6, 2015.

[7] Charlotte Jansen, "Addressing the History of Black Radicalism with Martine Syms," *Sleek* 50 (Summer 2016), accessed April 5, 2017, http://www.sleek-mag.com/2016/08/04/martine-syms. It is worth mentioning here that Syms' work could also be read in the perspective of questioning value-creation. While it is not the focus of my thesis, this inquiry begins with Syms' description of her work as that of a "Conceptual Entrepreneur." This designation is based on point three of the Black Panther's Ten-Point-Program ("We Want An End To The Robbery By The Capitalists Of Our Black Community"), insisting in the payment in currency of forty acres and a mule as restitution for slave labour and mass murder of

Black bodies. As Sylvia Wynter points out, Black bodies are epistemologically racialized by the "natural" biocentricity of historical "facts," legitimated by the Darwinian narrative of the human as purely biological beings.[8] This biocentric narrative situates Black bodies as naturally unevolved, necessitating the white supremacist logics of colonization. It outlasts history into the contemporary and perpetuates itself by ways of its ongoing reproduction of representational social orders and their embodiments. Though often appearing as visual representations, these social orders are reproduced through language (the Queen's English), including through the information of epistemological, statistical, digital data and biometrical surveillance technologies. They stabilize white supremacy by virtue of registers such as those of language and visible representation, identity and the human, visibility and invisibility, faces and bodies, transparency and the opaque, flesh and data, surveillance and ignorance. In consequence, the biocentric conception of Black bodies conditions a double existence, which is at once discursive and material. A body is both a body of data and a physical body. Zach Blas speaks of "technological control and embodied materiality" as "intertwined concerns of our time."[9]Alexander Weheliye—based on the ideas of Sylvia Wynter, as well as on Hortense Spiller's definition of the flesh"[10]—, replaces the legal concept of *Habeas Corpus* ("You shall have the body") with *Habeas Viscus* ("You shall have the flesh").[11] Syms' work, then, engages these dual registers towards an embodiment which

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Black peoples, as announced by Sherman's Special Field Orders, No. 15 during the American Civil War on on January 16, 1865, https://web.stanford.edu/group/blackpanthers/history.shtml. The first episode of Syms' "Les-sons," which will be discussed later on in this thesis, features an excerpt from a TV show in which a young Queen Latifah blames the U.S. school system for not educating its Black students in how business is at the core of U.S. society. Having been involved in the Black independent music scene early on in her life, Syms applies the term "entrepreneur" in relation to "black-owned businesses, and the idea of self-determination through having a sustainable institution, through institutionalizing yourself." http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/martine-syms-16-faces-of-2016/#. Aware of the abuse of the term through the tech-industry and its overlap with the arts, Syms insists in the declaration of her artistic work as labour. http://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/8506/reality-and-representation-martine-syms-conceptual-world and http://moussemagazine.it/martine-syms-aram-moshayedi-2015. All URLs accessed March 14, 2017.

[8] Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man: Glissant and the New Discourse of the Antilles," *World Literature Today* 63, no. 4 (Autumn, 1989): 637-648.

[9] Zach Blas, "Opacities: An Introduction," in *In Practice: Opacities, Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 2 92 (2016): 150.

[10] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer, 1987): 64-81.

[11] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 25. "*Habeas Corpus*:" Latin for "You shall have the body." The complete phrase *habeas corpus ad*

does not reproduce them. Rather, it performs their dialectical tension in what she terms "Black Vernacular." In this way, it stages a "Black knowledge formation that, while certainly embodied, is not reduced to the biologic," as Katherine McKittrick names it.[12] This irreducible formation interrupts the self-perpetuating analytical system of racial narratives and opens up a space for the collective reimagination of embodiment, because it reproduces its own factuality rather than re-creating or regenerating the information or subjects depicted.

In order to trace the embodiment construed by *The Queen's English*, this thesis follows Syms' introduction of the work as a "dialogue about language and representation."[13] Methodologically, it therefore interweaves the two strings of visual analysis and theories of language to understand *The Queen's English* as a body of work in the literal sense. Reflecting the construction of this body of work, the body of this thesis is therefore structured in four sections: The first section ("Body of Work") attempts a description of the visual elements on view in *The Queen's English*, as well as their immediate contexts. The second section ("Faces") reflects on these visual elements as this body of work's (sur)faces, and foregrounds their invisible counterparts. The third section ("Bodies") looks at the visible body that these faces belong to and the invisible social bodies that form this visible body's wider context and representational order. And finally, section four ("The Bibliographer") examines how the figure of the Bibliographer in *The Queen's English*, using Black Vernacular, enables a redefinition of the notion of "reproduction," and thus a transformation of the bodies in place.

**Pre-face**

I wish to lay bare the criticality of my own subject-position as that of a white Western European newcomer to Canada writing about the work of a Black U.S. citizen. To be more precise, I was born in Switzerland and have been living in Canada since 2007. In 1955, James Baldwin, one of the closest observers of whiteness in North America, published the essay

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*subjiciendum* means "you shall have the person for the purpose of subjecting them (to examination)." "*Habeas Viscus,"* entwining the concept of *Habeas Corpus* with Hortense Spiller's notion of the flesh, translates as "You shall have the flesh."

[12] Katherine McKittrick, "Diachronic loops/deadweight tonnage/bad made measure," *cultural geographies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 4.

[13] Martine Syms, "The Queen's English," introductory text., accessed March 15, 2017. http://martinesyms.com/the-queens-english.

"Stranger in the Village."[14] The essay is an account of his experiences in Leukerbad, a village in the Swiss mountains that he visited several times to work in the remoteness of a friend's chalet. In the essay, Baldwin states that, according to his knowledge, no Black person had ever visited the village before. Through his experience of this state of "white innocence"—remaining undisturbed by nonwhite presence—Baldwin recapitulates how this idea of white innocence is at the core of an ideal of humanity which was a cornerstone of the colonization of America, itself realized using a slave-based workforce, and how this ideal was altered throughout its application in the United States, of which he was a citizen. In the state of white Western European innocence of Leukerbad, nonwhite people were not considered humans, because they were simply not recognized as such. Baldwin witnesses this fact as his essay recounts the reactions by villagers of Leukerbad to his appearance. Once having arrived in North America with colonization, this ideal state of white innocence turned into white supremacy, in response to the claim of the status of human being by nonwhite U.S. citizens, leading Baldwin to state: "At the root of the American Negro problem is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself."[15] The "American white man," and I would like to add, woman, addressed by Baldwin could be of Swiss background.[16] As a result, in this genesis tale of North American colonization, Western European immigrants were able to see themselves as "visitors" or strangers to the West, although a world they created, by "still nourishing the illusion that there is some means of recovering the European innocence, of returning to a state in which Black men do not exist," while "Negroes" struggled for their identity as citizens of the United States.

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[14] James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 159-175.

[15] Ibid., 166.

[16] For instance, Franz Ludwig Michel of Bern travelled twice to Pennsylvania and Virginia between 1701 and 1704. He subsequently drafted a propaganda paper for emigration into a prospering slavery-based economy, and suggested the foundation of a Swiss Colony to Queen Anne of England. She agreed, as did the Bern authorities, who hoped to in this way get rid of dissident minorities such as reformed protestants (which very likely includes some of my ancestors). Approximately one hundred Swiss and South German colonists and later slave owners reached the Neuse River in North Carolina in the fall of 1710 to found the town of New Bern. Thomas David, Bouda Etemad, and Janick Marina Schaufelbühl, *Schwarze Geschäfte: Die Beteiligung von Schweizern an Sklaverei und Sklavenhandel im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, Zürich: Limmat Verlag, 2005 and Hans Fässler, *Reise in Schwarz-Weis: Schweizer Ortstermine in Sachen Sklaverei*, Zürich: Rotpunkt Verlag, 2005.

Baldwin's essay was taken up by Zurich-based daily newspaper's *Tages-Anzeige*r's weekly supplement *Das Magazin* in September 2014, published in an increasingly xenophobic political climate, which has a long history in Switzerland.[17] *Das Magazin* is distributed by several major daily newspapers throughout the country and could be described as a mainstream lifestyle-magazine whose credibility is based on its historical background in critical journalism. Some sixty years after the publication of Baldwin's essay, the magazine sent Nigerian-American writer and photographer Teju Cole to Leukerbad to write an essay on Baldwin's presence there, following in his footsteps. Coles' contribution is introduced by the magazine under the title "Schwarz sein" ("Being Black") with this phrasing: "The most recent unrest makes it clear: Racism is virulent in the United States. Writer Teju Cole came to Leukerbad to think along with James Baldwin about what it means to have a Black body."[18] Both this introduction and the fact that another "Black body" was hired to investigate into the "remnants" of racist ignorance which Baldwin describes in his essay, testify to the fact that this ignorance can by no means be relegated to the annals of history. Baldwin's essay, which so pointedly describes how Western European white innocence and American white supremacism are corollaries of each other—a connection which remains highly relevant—, is still being treated as a case study of North American racism that has nothing to do with the village of Leukerbad, the country of Switzerland, and the white bodies that inhabit it. Following this logic, the historical context in which the essay was written is investigated by an external expert of "Black bodies," maintaining the exact same mechanism of dehumanization today that Baldwin addressed in his essay sixty years prior. These facts imply that this same idea of white innocence, which can be equated with ignorance, is still alive today. Considering Baldwin's sobering analysis, as a citizen of Switzerland, and as a permanent resident of North

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[17] The article appeared a few months after the federal "Stop Mass Immigration Initiative" was voted in by popular vote in February of the same year. The initiative was launched by the far-right-wing SVP (Swiss People's Party) as a part of a series of xenophobic initiatives (starting with the 2009 "Minaret Initiative," which was equally voted in, prohibiting the construction of minarets in Switzerland) and specified that Switzerland should autonomously manage the immigration of foreigners by reintroducing ceilings and annual quotas. This vote does not include the voices of at the time close to 1,899,307 residents that were not Swiss citizens (e.g. foreigners), as well as a rapidly growing number of "Sans-Papiers," (rejected) asylum-seekers without legal residence status (currently estimated between 90,000 and 200,000), who are subjected to increasingly inhuman coercive measures in so-called "emergency shelters." Xenophobic initiatives are however no recent phenomenon in Switzerland, but date back to the 1970 "Over Foreign Initiative" launched by James Schwarzenbach, which did not get accepted by a very tight voting result. Data sources: Swiss State Secretariat for Migration, which recently changed its name from 'Federal Office for Migration,' and http://www.sans-papiers.ch, accessed April 10, 2017.

[18] Teju Cole, "Schwarz sein," *Das Magazin* 38 (20.9.-26.9.2014): 8-17.

America, I feel the need to express my awareness of this ignorance. One of my objectives in undertaking this close reading of Martine Syms' work is to acknowledge, address, and bridge this seemingly natural position of nescience. In the process of this research, I have exposed my experiences of this ignorance to the accounts of the atrocities that it is responsible for, the effects of which—among many other things—are reflected in *The Queen's English*. By not only consulting, but engaging in a conversation with Black voices while aiming to not appropriate them, I wish to let the rich knowledge generously shared with me in this process alter my understanding of my own experiences, and subsequently my position.

**Body of Work**

*The Queen's English* is an exhibition and reading room inspired by the distribution of information within Black feminist communities in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. It was produced in collaboration with photographer Cat Roif and designer Jeff Cain, and was on view at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena's Mezzanine Gallery between July 13 and August 31, 2014, presented by Big City Forum. It was one of the first works by Martine Syms on view in a museum context. After graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2009, in 2011, Martine Syms and partner Marco Kane Braunschweiler chose to close the bookstore and gallery Golden Age, which they ran in Chicago since 2007, and Syms moved back to her hometown of Los Angeles to take on a full-time job. She subsequently quit this job to focus on her career as a visual artist, and at the same time founded her imprint Dominica Publishing.

For the exhibition, the gallery was divided into two rooms by dividers. In the first room, a vinyl print hung from a C-Stand, a piece of equipment used in film production, which is part of Syms' professional background. C-Stands are used to position light modifiers, such as silks, nets, or flags, in front of light sources. The life-sized vinyl print showed a blown-up black-and-white archival photograph of a young Black woman. This image was crisscrossed by the kind of folds that occur when a piece of paper or a photograph is carried around in a pocket over a long period time. A single white shelf led mid-way along the walls of the second room of the gallery, serving as the support for a selection of books. Guiding the visitor's gaze through the room with its visual line, this narrow shelf offered space for only one book at a time, facing outwards into the room. This line of books was interrupted by three pairs of what looked like commercial signage,

also placed face-out on the shelf. These signs did not advertise the books as merchandise; instead, each pair consisted of a cryptic message and a colour photographic print. The message signs all used the same typeface, and were printed in white on black, surrounded by a white printed frame. For instance, the message that read, "For ___, ___, ___, No More Words; For ___, ___, ___, Different Ones," was paired with an image of a naked torso of a Black woman's body whose face was hidden behind what seems to be a piece of clothing. Like the black-and-white vinyl in the first room, these photographs were crisscrossed by folds. But in this case, the photographs used had clearly been shot with a high-resolution-camera, and were in colour.

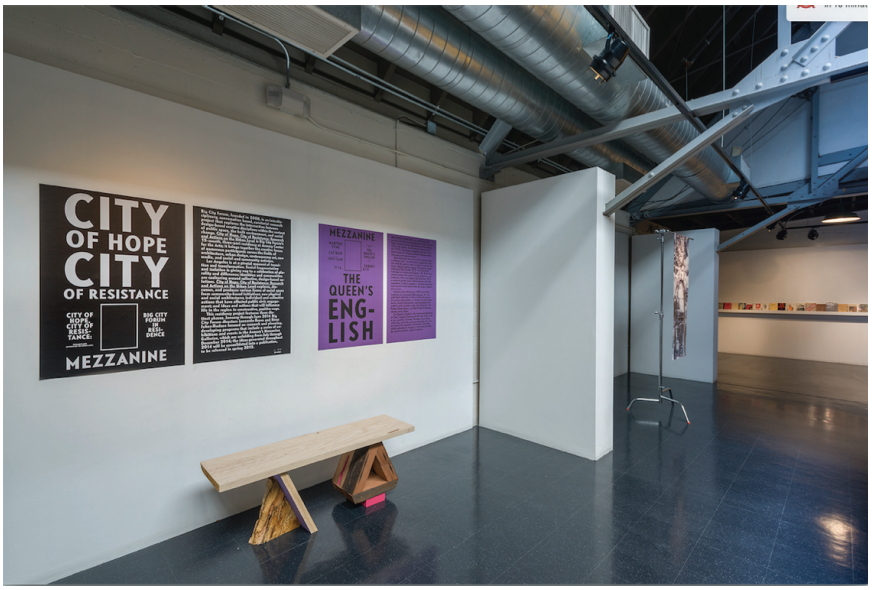


Fig. 1 Martine Syms, *The Queen's English*, 2014, Exhibition View.

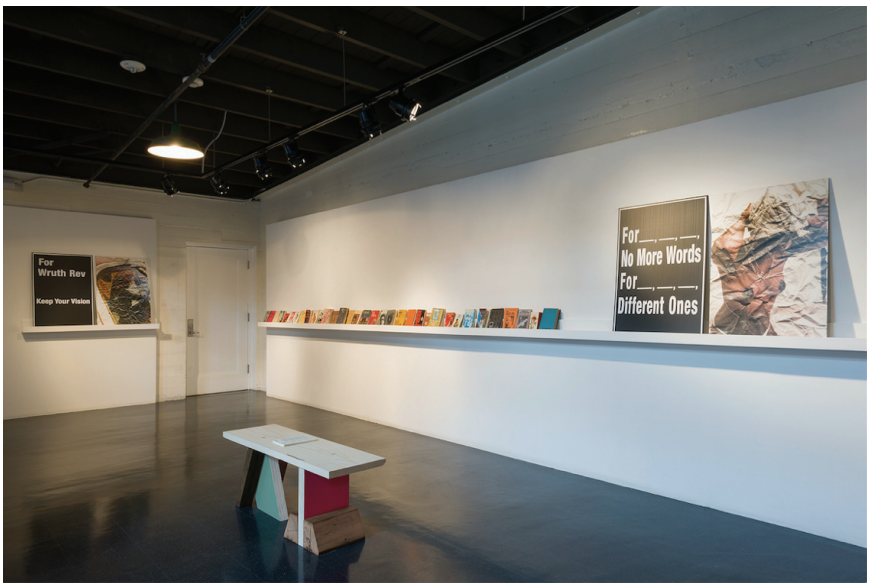


Fig. 2 Martine Syms, *The Queen's English*, 2014, Reading Room, Installation View.

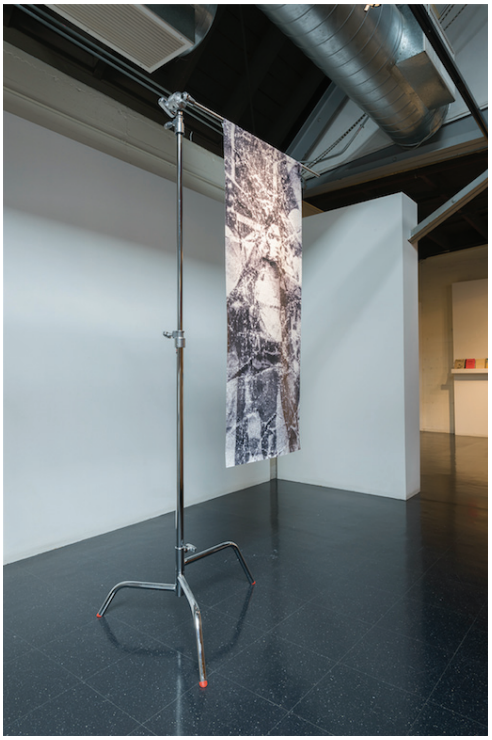

Fig. 3 Martine Syms, *Black Lesbian Caucus, Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade, 1973*, 2014, Installation View.

**Faces—Room 1: On the Face of It**

The woman on the large vinyl print is looking directly into the camera, which is to say, into the eyes of the photographer or the viewer. She wears street clothing: jeans, a jean jacket, a white T-shirt. Her left leg is set in front of her right one: she is in movement, about to take a step forward. She carries a skateboard under her right arm. There is something hanging from her right shoulder, which leads over her chest in a diagonal line, visually disappearing under her left armpit, like a ring. With her left hand, she holds something in front of her face, thus covering up the lower half of it. The viewer is unable to see the woman's nose or mouth, only her eyes staring back at them are visible. Due to the magnification and treatment this photograph has apparently been through, the object held by the woman is not clearly recognizable. It might be another photograph that she is showing the camera, or a hip flask from which she is drinking, or something she is using to amplify her voice, like a microphone or megaphone. Another, slightly taller Black woman is looking over her right shoulder from behind, and she too looks directly into the camera, as she wraps a white blanket around her body. Behind these two figures, I can recognize a

blurry crowd of people, while what looks like a flag alongside something round, like a balloon, hovers above their heads. The perspective in which these elements are arranged within the picture, in a line of flight towards the background, indicates that the crowd is walking down a street, towards the camera. A series of buildings with glass facades lines this street, as they might in the downtown business district of any North American, Asian, or cosmopolitan European city. The photograph provides no exact indication of when and where this event occurred.

**Faces—Room 1: Behind the Face**

The title of the work—*Black Lesbian Caucus, Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade, 1973*, 2014—implies that this photograph was taken during the Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade in New York City in 1973. The image printed on the vinyl banner in *The Queen's English* might stem from a private collection. It could equally be an archived newspaper clipping in the public domain, or it could be from some entirely different source. It is because of the title Syms has given it that I approach this photograph as a historical document, understanding that it was taken during Christopher Street Day in 1973. The Christopher Street Liberation Day (CSD) is held annually in New York and Los Angeles, as well as in several European cities, in memory of the Stonewall Riots. The Stonewall Riots began at the Stonewall Inn, located on Christopher Street in New York City's Greenwich Village, on June 28, 1969, following a routine police raid. Instead of cowering—the usual reaction to police raids, which were common at the time—, this time, the bar guests inside and the crowd gathered outside the bar fought back against the police. Five days of protest followed this incident. In the years since 1969, the Stonewall riots have become a major symbolic event of the gay liberation movement.[19] The clientele of the Stonewall Inn, and hence the initiators of the Stonewall riots, consisted in large parts of gay, lesbian, queer and trans* people of colour. The title of Syms' work further labels the women in the photograph on the vinyl print of *The Queen's English* as members of the Black Lesbian Caucus, which participated in the 1973 New York CSD Parade. The Black Lesbian Caucus split off from the Gay Activist Alliance, which itself split from the Gay Liberation Front, the formal organization established after the Stonewall riots. Rather than further supporting the Liberation Front's radical politics and anarchist methods, which included the support of like-minded liberation movements, the Gay Activist Alliance focused explicitly on gay and lesbian issues. This split between the

[19] Martin B. Duberman, *Stonewall*, Boston: Dutton, 1993.

Liberation Front and the Activist Alliance occurred partly due to the Liberation Front's support of the Black Panthers, which the members of the new organization considered to be homophobic.[20] Later, the Black Lesbian Caucus split from the Gay Activist Alliance as recalled in the accounts of Yvonne (Maua) Flowers, one of its co-founders. Flowers found herself not alone in feeling caught between the endemic sexism of the Black struggle and the pervasive racism in the feminist and gay movements, including that of the Gay Activist Alliance.[21] The Black Lesbian Caucus was later renamed Salsa Soul Sisters, Third World Wimmin Inc. Collective.[22] It was one of the first organizations founded by and for lesbian women of colour in the United States.

When asked where the photograph in the vinyl print stems from, Syms' only answer is that "it is an archival photograph of a protest."[23]

**Faces—Face to Face**

To the complaint that there are no people to be seen in her photographs, photographer and queer activist Zoe Leonard responds with a succinct sharpness: "There are always two people: the photographer and the viewer."[24] Based on the understanding that a photograph is not what it depicts, but a new fact, Leonard understands a photograph to be a product of a relationship between the photographer and their subject. This relationship is then transformed by a relationship between the subject and the viewer, one that incorporates not only aesthetic considerations, but ideological ones as well. Respecting the power dynamics involved in this relationship, why does it matter who the photographer is, who the subject, and who the viewer? These are the questions that Syms asks by not indicating the photograph's source.

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[20] Samuel Galen Ng, "Trans Power! Sylvia Lee Rivera's STAR and the Black Panther Party," *Left History* 17.1 (Spring/Summer 2013): 11-41 and David Paternotte*, The Ashgate Research Companion to Lesbian and Gay Activism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 138.

[21] Martin B. Duberman, *Stonewall*, 233-234.

[22] Joan Nestle, "When the Lions Write History," in *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1985), 176-187.

[23] Martine Syms, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 2016-March 2017.

[24] Zoe Leonard, "A Continuous Signal: An Essay of Excerpts and Quotations," in *Analogue: Zoe Leonard* (Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, and Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 169.

Fig. 4 Martine Syms, (Detail) *Black Lesbian Caucus, Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade, 1973*, 2014.

Syms is asking this set of questions because it generates awareness for the fact that a photograph is a tool of power and authority through which both the photographer and the viewer, by way of their gaze, conquer the world of the depicted subject and assign meanings to it.[25] In "Representations of Whiteness," which appears in her collection of essays entitled *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks recounts how in North America, slaves and later indentured servants could be brutally punished for simply looking at the white people they were serving. To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity, which did not correspond to the object-status of bodies that were regarded as commodities.[26] In her essay "The Oppositional Gaze," which forms

[25] Ibid., 175.

[26] bell hooks, "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press 1992), 168.

a part of the same collection, hooks states that this repression, rather than eliminating Black people's desire to look, instead produced "an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.'"[27] According to hooks, a Black look can therefore cause a shattering of identity, which she describes as follows: "When I face this image, this Black look, something in me is shattered. I have to pick up the bits and pieces of myself and start all over again—transformed by the image."[28]

Addressing the representation of women, Amelia Jones calls the conquering or hegemonic gaze of the (predominantly male) photographer or (less so) viewer the "projective gaze," and names three ways in which the depicted subject may react to it: the subject can internalize this gaze passively, she can enact her subjectivity according to the rules this gaze establishes (the masquerade of femininity), or she can throw this gaze back at the viewer.[29] When analyzing Syms' vinyl print with Jones' proposal in mind, it can seem that the subjects depicted in the vinyl print of *The Queen's English* choose the last option. They stare back at the photographer, and, subsequently, at the viewer, while the face of the picture's "protagonist" remains half-covered. In this way, the photographer/viewer's gaze, which is lured inwards to follow the photograph's line of sight, is sent back towards them.

In *The Queen's English*, this situation does not however take place in isolation. The C-stand is deflecting the lighting of this staged encounter between depicted subject and external gaze. The folds that mark the photograph are traces of a previous viewer who left physical marks on the picture. Seen in this light, the folds covering the image could be read as scars, witnesses to the encounter with the viewer, an act that can be as violent as it is intimate.

**Faces—Familiar Strange Faces**

This image might be a part of a publicly accessible archive. Or it might be a part of the personal archive of Syms' great-aunt, which she often incorporates into her work. This archive was stored at this great-aunt's house in Los Angeles' Arlington Heights neighbourhood. The

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27 bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," in *Black Looks*, 115-133.

28 bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 7.

29 Amelia Jones, "Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman," in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (London and New York: New York Thames & Hudson, 1997), 35.

house was inherited by Martine Syms' father, and when he sold it, Syms assisted in cleaning it out, and adopted the photographic archive:

> More recently, I've been looking at a lot of photos of my aunt. My aunt was born in Mississippi, then she moved to St. Louis, and then she moved to Los Angeles in the '60s, and her house was kind of the center of our family. Most of my extended family lives in St. Louis, but my dad moved out to live with this aunt. Her name is Burnetta, we always called her Bunt. . .. And she died when I was about fourteen or fifteen, and growing up with her, we didn't have a great relationship, she was always just in the kitchen drinking "High Lifes" and telling me how I should be—how I should stand, how I should dress, how I should talk. But recently, my dad sold her house and I've been taking things from it and trying to get to know her better through her photographs. It got me thinking about—can you really know anything through a photograph?[30]

This quote is taken from a transcript of Syms' lecture-performance entitled *Misdirected Kiss*, for which she used her great-aunt's collection extensively. A video interview conducted by friends of the artist in 2015, documents Syms' browsing through this collection, which includes images with diverse material qualities.[31] Some photographs are black and white, some are in colour; some are matte, and others glossy; some look like reproduced photo copies. They are different sizes, ranging from the standard 3½ × 5¼ inch-format of paper photographs, to some that are much bigger, and some that are cropped to reveal details. Various techniques are evident, including mechanically printed photographs and polaroids. Syms' documented immersion in this archive of images is interesting for several reasons. These photographs obviously stem from a variety of photographers and sources. As the family's gathering place, Syms' aunt's home served as the repository of this family's expanded memory. Given that this house was also a boarding house from the late 1970s onward, its memory and material manifestation was expanded to that of its guests, who could have come from all over the world. Some of the photographs might have been given to the boarding house keeper in confidence, others were perhaps lost by guests or found by the owner after their departure. The unlabelled photographs themselves do not tell who the people depicted are in relation to Syms' great-aunt, or in relation to Syms herself—whether they are family or strangers, friends or acquaintances.

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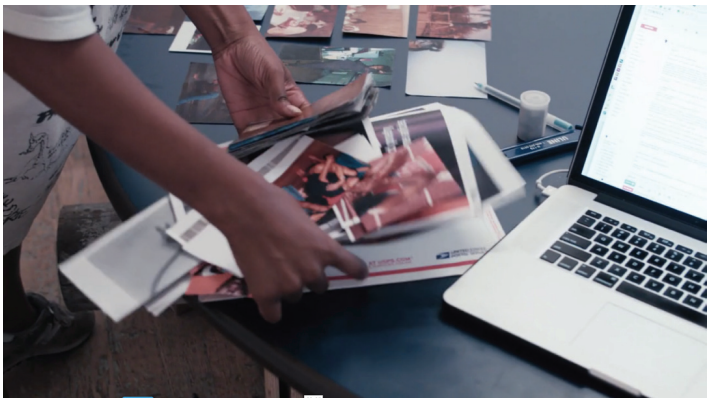
30 Martine Syms, "Misdirected Kiss," revised transcription, New Windsor: The Shandaken Project at Storm King Art Center, September 6, 2015.

31 Robin and Wilson Cameron, "Martine Syms: Scenes from the Studio," accessed February 6, 2017, http://scenesfromthestudio.com/artists/martinesyms.html.



Figs. 5 + 6 Stills from Robin and Wilson Cameron, "Scenes from the Studio," 2015.

Syms has made use of her aunt's collection, but it is important to note that the material appearing in *Misdirected Kiss* intermingles photographs from this personal collection with images sourced from television and the internet. These screen grabs from the internet or TV show celebrities such as Janet Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, or Queen Latifah performing in a '90s sitcom, as well as less prominent actors. For her exhibition entitled *Fact & Trouble,* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in the spring of 2016, Syms arranged the images from "Misdirected Kiss" on the screen of her laptop into a digital collage, and blew them up to larger-than-life sized prints. These blown-up photographic prints covered the walls of the entrance to the exhibition as a wallpaper, welcoming its visitors, and allowing Syms to "think through inheritances: familial inheritances, cultural inheritances, and historical inheritances."[32] In putting her memory of and relationship to the people depicted on the photographs of her aunt's collection on the same level as her memory of and relationship to mass media figures, Syms opens up what she calls

[32] Martine Syms, "Fact & Trouble," Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, April 20-June 19, 2016, accessed February 6, 2017, https://www.ica.org.uk/whats-on/martine-syms-fact-trouble.

"the gulf between lived experience and representation."[33] In Syms' work, images are that which emerges at this threshold. In *The Queen's English*, the photographs or images that appear in different contexts are shown to circulate through technological and social circuits, and are material objects showing evidence of wear and tear as they pass through people's lives and screens and enter into new relationships with captions, messages, and other linguistic signs, the reading of which produces further images. Taken together, these images designate neither a biography nor an identity, but, in Syms' words, "a collage of the way that I perform."[34]

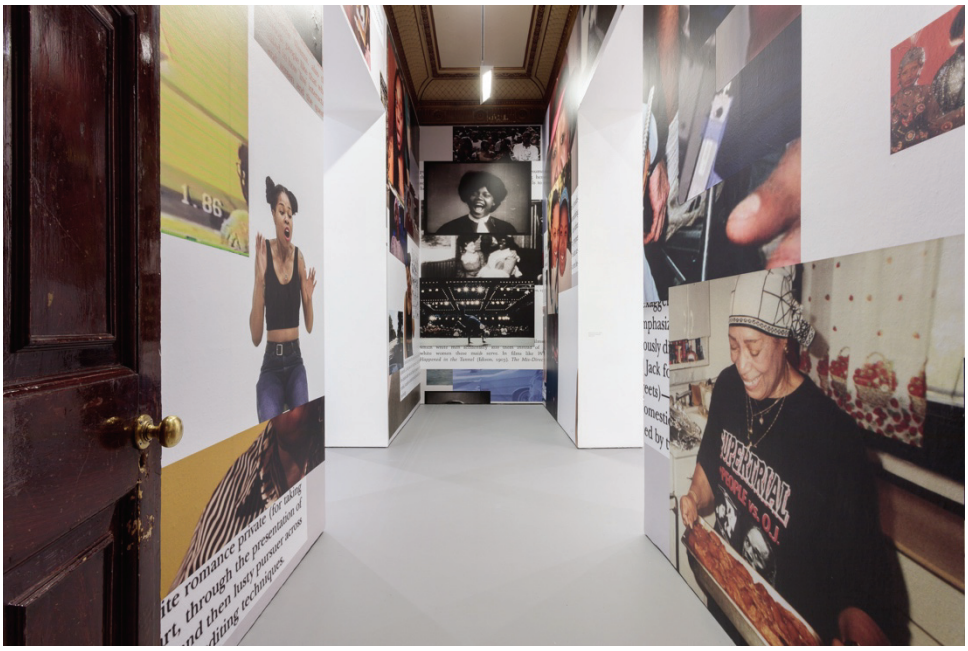


Fig. 7 Martine Syms, *Misdirected Kiss*, 2016, Installation View.

In an interview handed out to the visitors of the exhibition, Syms speaks of *Misdirected Kiss*, and expresses her interest in "how images are embodied, and conversely how people get flattened out through visual regimes."[35] As a visual artist, Syms is not alone with this concern. In her *Vanilla Nightmares* series, begun in 1986, Adrian Piper drew in charcoal over *New York Times* articles on race relations, and over advertisements. The drawings represent Black figures acting as complements to the white figures described or depicted. The drawings are rendered in a bold, cartoonish style, reminiscent of the tradition of satirical caricature in U.S. newspapers.

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33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Martine Syms in conversation with ICA curator Matt Williams, *Fact and Trouble*, Exhibition Handout, 2016.

These supplementary figures add to the meaning of the article or ad by foregrounding another image, present though invisible. These images are representations of the irrational nightmares, the deep fears, anxieties and fantasies of Blackness that the look of white normativity seeks to control. In *Untitled (Guess who's coming for dinner),* 2001, Lorna Simpson arranged a series of near-identical profile shots of a woman—who turns away her face from the viewer— into a white frame, alongside two long vertical lists of titles drawn from films, artworks, music album and song titles at the bottom of the frame. The title of the work refers to the 1967 film of the same name, in which a Black man and a white woman in the North American white liberal middle-class milieu of the time fall in love. The film is set almost entirely at the white woman's family's house, without any representation of the Black man's background besides his parents who come for dinner. On the split screen of the video *My Twilight Zone Thing,* 2014 by Sondra Perry, the movements of the artist appropriate those of white male actors of the U.S. 1950s TV show *Twilight Zone*. Perry's Black female body imitates the white male bodies of the actors, thus channeling their gestures through her own body. Jessica Karuhanga in her performance *Carefree, Fine and Mellow*, 2016 undertakes a similar adaption and channelling of gestures. But in her case, these are the gestures of Black women as already imitated and mediated, in the online self-archiving sites of Social Media, YouTube, Vimeo, etc. Here, it is no longer clear where the circulating reproduced gesture comes from. The first part of the video *My Bodies*, 2014 by Hannah Black, whose collection of essays was published by Martine Syms' Dominica Publishing, collects mass media images of white business executives and samples the voices of singers Aaliyah, Beyonce, Whitney Houston, Jennifer Hudson, and many more, all singing the phrase "my body." In the first of two pilot episodes of a sitcom that she is currently working on, Martine Syms picks up where Sondra Perry left off. Like Perry's *My Twilight Zone Thing*, Syms' *A Pilot For A Show About Nowhere*, 2015 is presented in the form of a split screen. But this time, the screen no longer represents a white male actor on one side and a Black female artist imitating his movements on the other. Instead, the artist appears on one of the screens, and this is complemented by the information she consumes and internalizes, such as the screen-shot of her Google Search, a TV show, or her ongoing iPhone chat, on the other. The second pilot episode for Syms' sitcom *Laughing Gas*, 2016, has four channels, all filled with low-tech filmed reenactments of the artist's life.

While not invited to observe white bodies as hooks points out, women of colour find that their physical bodies are being interpreted by white looks on a daily basis. These white looks reproduce, and in this way depersonalize their gestures to stabilize a "public" white regime of visibility, which simultaneously renders the bodies that belong to these gestures invisible.[36] This reproductive depersonalization can for instance be found in Piper's invisible figures and in Simpson's depiction of Blackness in a white frame. In order to gain visibility in this visual regime, Black women then internalize these depersonalized gestures (Perry adapting the "wrong" gestures, and Karuhanga). Evelynn Hammonds depicts the paradox that these artists, who are also all Black women, are facing: If "partially self-chosen" invisibility supports the regime of white and the taboo of Black looks, "visibility in and of itself does not challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen."[37] This includes the hypervisibility of the singers featured in Black's video, whose gestures are imitated in the selfie-archives that Karuhanga draws from.[38] All of these works add layers of interpretative meaning to this visual structure of domination. Black in her *My Bodies* video and Syms in her multi-channel sitcom attempt to explode this structure by not only multiplying the images used, but also declaring their own body as multiple. At the same time, for instance, in an attempt to embody these recognizable gestures in a unique way in the construction of a screen persona as required by Social Media, every user performs these gestures differently. This difference is thus again captured by, and perhaps only becomes visible through an image.[39] In her *Misdirected Kiss* lecture, Syms asks whether this bodily difference could possibly be compressed into a gif that reproduces itself endlessly.[40]

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36 "Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken distortion of vision, Black women have on the one hand always been highly visible, and on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism." Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984), 91.

37 Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 6.2+3 (1994): 126-145.

38 Nicole R. Fleetwood applies the term "Excess Flesh" to describe the performance of hypervisibility, aiming to expand its frame in *Troubling Vision: Peformance, Visuality, and Blackness*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

39 In her lecture, Syms refers to Giorgio Agamben's "Notes on Gesture," which elaborates on this moment. In *Means Without End* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 49-62.

40 Here, Syms refers to Hito Steyerl's "In Defense of the Poor Image" and curator Jason Epping who "talks about the gif as an actual image that takes the place of a gesture." (Syms, *Misdirected Kiss*.)

In assembling, arranging and blowing up the photographs from her great-aunt's personal collection and combining them with images of a dispersed collective archive of contemporary images, Syms is conscious of the gap between her singular bodily experiences as Black woman, and the "public" representation, reproduction and circulation of these experiences. She is therefore intent on the construction of an identity that becomes simultaneously that of an individual body, of a person, and of a collective body. The memories attached to these images are personal as much as they are collective, and pertain to Syms' "real" experiences as well as to the re-lived experiences of her ancestors and contemporaries. With the term "prosthetic memory," media theorist Alison Landsberg, who Syms frequently refers to, suggests that mass media—including cinema, museums, and the internet—enables the experience of memories that have not been lived through.[41] To understand the specific usage of images in Syms' practice, it is worth remembering that in the U.S., the emergence of a technologized mass media, such as cinema during the 1910s, coincides with the Great Migration, that is, the migration of Black peoples from the South to the North of the United States. This period also coincides with the first mass immigration wave from Europe. The memory of immigration and of diaspora is based on an original loss, in the sense that, for many immigrants to the United States, or migrants within the country, there is an inability to return to the "real" experience. Prosthetic memories however have no obvious connection to a person's lived past, and yet they can become essential to the production and articulation of subjectivity. Landsberg dedicates a chapter of her book to what she calls "late-twentieth century mass media accounts of the slave experience" including the bestselling novels *Kindred* by Octavia Butler (1979), *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison (1987), and *Roots* by Alex Haley (1976), the movie productions *Daughters of the Dust* by Julie Dash (1992) and *Rosewood* by John Singleton (1996), as well as the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit (1997). She argues that these productions, which are representations circulating as commodities, enable a sharing of memory across generations and communities, even when "true" memories do not exist. I suggest it is this sharing of a reproduced physical experience, which is desirable to Syms, not the return to a "real" experience of a place of origin.

[41] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2004.

According to Landsberg, such representations have the potential to become bodily memories, "like an actual limb worn on the body."[42]

**Faces—Room 2: On the Face of It**

The circulating commodities in *The Queen's English* are the books available for reading. Arranged face-outwards in a row along a single book shelf, the book covers on view in *The Queen's English*'s Reading Room bring together many colours: light and dark blues, shades of yellow and orange, a couple of reds, black, and white. These colourful cover designs alongside sometimes psychedelic, sometimes standard typefaces are reminiscent of the era during which most of these publications were produced, beginning in the 1960s, throughout the 1970s, and into the early 1980s.

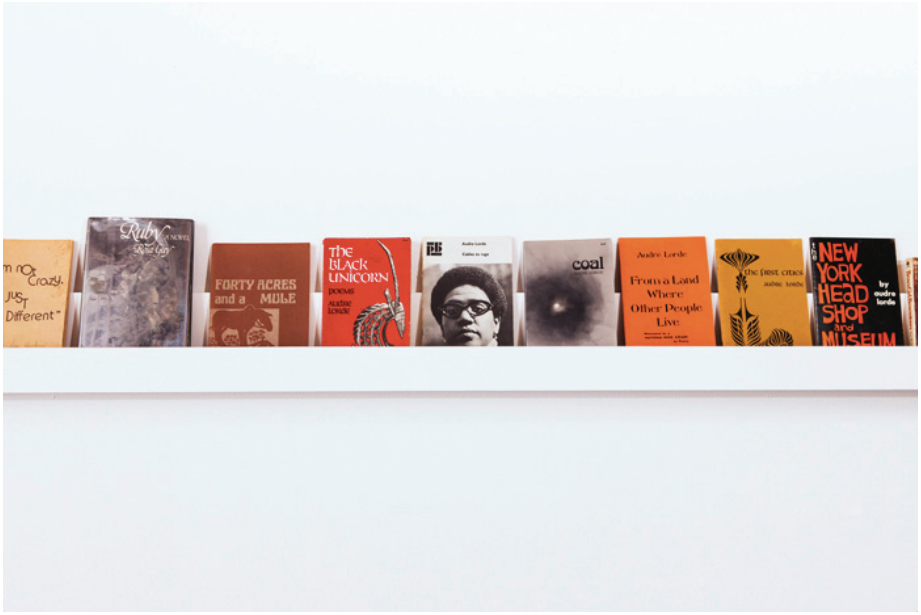
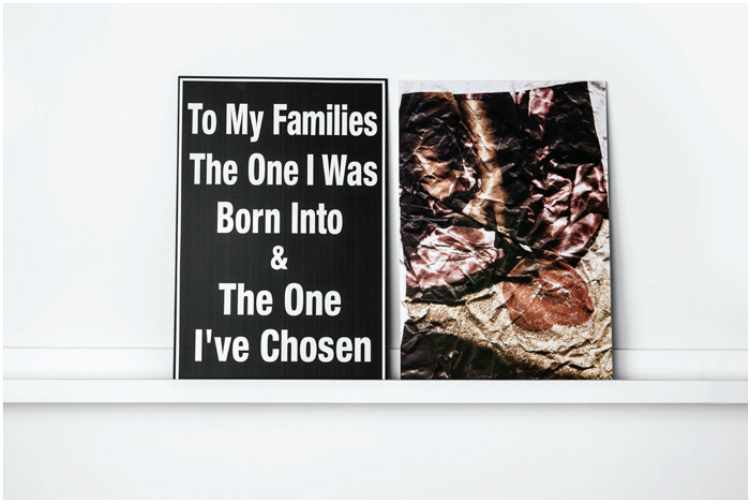


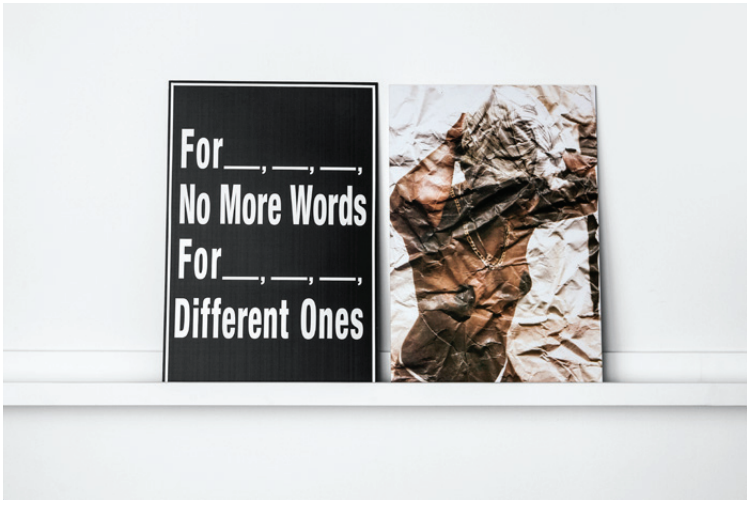

Fig. 8 Martine Syms, (Detail) *The Queen's English*, 2014, Reading Room.

As described earlier, this line of books is interrupted by what looks like commercial signage. These signs repurpose, or in Syms' words, "recast" some of the protest slogans used by the Black Lesbian Caucus during the 1973 Christopher Street Day parade. Syms describes these signs as "dedication pieces." Rather than appropriating or aestheticizing the politics of the Black

42 Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 20.

Lesbian Caucus, she wishes "to connect the words of each author to a new audience."[43] For instance, in the message: "To My Families, The One That I Was Born Into & The One I've Chosen," the words "To My" are Syms' contribution while "The Families I Was Born Into & The One I've Chosen" was the phrase from the sign in the protest.




Figs. 10+11 Martine Syms, *Black Lesbian Caucus, Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade, 1973*, 2014/Martine Syms and Cat Roif, *For Nights Like This One*, *1979*, 2014.

Likewise, in the other message depicted here it is "No More Words, Different Ones," that is borrowed from the protest sign authors, while the "For ___, ___, ___," is Martine Syms' redirection of their message to the contemporary viewers of her exhibition. These signs therefore reproduce the protest signs of the Black Lesbian Caucus in a contemporary context, where they

[43] Martine Syms, *The Queen's English*. Accessed December 12, 2016, http://martinesyms.com/the-queens-english.

now take the form of a dedication. The way the signs are placed alongside the books on display implies that they might also be blown-up dedications like those found on the inside covers of these books. Each linguistic message is accompanied by a colour photographic print or digital collage, which was realized collaboratively by Martine Syms and the photographer Cat Roif. This series of works is called *For Nights Like This One, 1979*, 2014 a reference to Becky Birtha's book of the same name, a collection of "Stories of Loving Women."

**Faces—Room 2: Behind the Face**

Much like the black-and-white vinyl-printed photograph of *Black Lesbian Caucus,* Christopher *Street Liberation Day Parade, 1973*, 2014 in the first room, these photographs are criss-crossed by folds. Because they were shot with a high-resolution-camera, and are in colour, here, the folds appear much more artificial and interruptive, as if to mask the person depicted. It appears to be the same person in all the images, evidently a Black woman, although the viewer never sees her face. In one image, it seems that she is putting on or taking off a shirt, in such a way that her head is fully covered by it. This stands in contrast to her naked torso underneath, covered only by a set of golden necklaces. The fabric of the shirt melds with the folds in the photographic print in a different way from how the naked body is marked by these same folds. The folds give the textile life, it appears more physical, while the photograph takes on a textile-like quality, becoming a fabric itself, which simultaneously covers and delineates a body. Accordingly, both other photographs in the series show fabric: collages of this woman's clothes, maybe in a suitcase; or her bedsheets; or the edges of her furniture; or all three at once in a digital assemblage.

**Faces—Facing It**

In *Black Looks*, bell hooks suggests that a fundamental task of Black critical thinkers is "the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves . . ., to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory. Without this, how can we challenge and invite non-black allies and friends to dare to look at us differently, to dare to break their colonizing gaze?"[1] The female subject that Amelia Jones had in mind when writing "Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman" was clearly a white subject (Cindy Sherman), and she analyzes this subject by way of the theories of a white thinker (Maurice Merleau-Ponty). Considering this fact, it is questionable whether the constructed

visibility it addresses can include representations of Blackness at all. Jones suggests a re-examination of the projective gaze, and a photographer-subject relationship not based on a one-way gaze, but as a reciprocal construction of visibility.[1] She thereby refers to Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "Chiasm." In 1959, Merleau-Ponty converted his project of writing a book about truth into a book about the visible and the invisible, which remained unfinished at the time of his death.[44] It proposes a new conception of the body as a "chiasm," a crossing-over: both or all participants in the viewing process are viewing and being viewed, depicting and being depicted. The invisible becomes flesh through this chiasm of seeing and being seen, where "every vision or very partial visible that would here definitively come to naught is not nullified (which would leave a gap at its place), but, what is better, it is replaced by a more exact vision and more exact visible, according to the principle of visibility."[145]Again, the questions that Syms asks by, also here, not revealing who the depicted subject is, remain: Why does it matter who participates in this chiasm? What is the nature of the photographer-subject relationship, and subsequently, how is what becomes visible and/or remains invisible influenced by Black or white looks?

In the photographs in Room 2 of Martine Syms' *The Queen's English*, the only partially depicted subject is not staring back. The person's face remains invisible. Reading this gesture with Okwui Enwezor's interpretation of a similar gesture in Lorna Simpson's work as mentioned earlier leads to the assumption that "the insistent refusal of the face of the woman alludes to her negation by the culture at large."[46] However, here, not only a face, but a body refuses to entirely become the subject or object of any gaze or chiasm. This body neither deflects a "projective gaze" nor reflects a "palpable look." It is either hidden, or fragmented, digitally collaged, or folded in such a way that it is no longer clearly recognizable as a person. It leaves a gap in its place. In the archive or reading room, this gap, the "gulf between lived experience and representation" opens anew. It is in this gap that an encounter with the viewer takes place, a viewer whose view remains partial. In this encounter with the photographic prints, assembled fragments of body parts, clothes, furniture, and textiles become the outlines of yet another body, which does not reproduce any visible bodily gestures. And yet it exists. Looking at these fragments of clothing

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44 Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Thomas Baldwin, ed., *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 247.

45 Ibid., 55

46 Okwui Enwezor, "Repetition and Differentiation—Lorna Simpson's iconography of the Racial Sublime," in *Lorna Simpson* (New York: Abrams, 2006), 117.

and furniture, the viewer conjures up a person that might correspond more to the viewer themselves than to the depicted subject. Moreover, the image-altering process of folding, like the modifications caused by the blow-up in the vinyl print, underline the material factuality of the photograph itself versus the "facts" depicted by it. Several encounters are at work in this one artwork, and they are historically mechanized by the apparatus of the camera.

**Faces—Janus-faced**

The history of this apparatus is immanent to the present: the Google Images that result from the search term "Black woman" are generated by a recognition routine involving characters, faces, objects, and landmarks. These image results are generated based on information contained in or associated with these images. In the understanding of semiotician Gérard Genette, a search term is therefore a hypotext, serving as the basis for a hypertext.[47] In the case of Google Images, both hypertext and hypotext are algorithmic designs based on user behaviours, e.g. numbers of entries and clicks.[48] When entering the keywords "Black woman," Google suggests: "Did you mean 'Black women?'," and lists categories such as "face," "business," "standing," "portrait," "professional," "sassy," "African," "profile," and "smiling." "She" is mostly young, often wearing an afro, and often scantily clothed. Most of the time, she is wearing make-up. She is desperate at times, tired or suffering from a migraine at others. She rarely holds public speeches, and gets beaten in equal measure. She smiles a lot, sometimes looks contemplative—and never angry.[49] Mikhel Proulx demonstrates how both the suggested adjustment to the search term and the attribution of resulting images to categories are a part of a digital method, but also a basic condition of digital culture, "in which ambiguities are expunged systematically."[50] All of the images that appear when entering the hypotext "Black woman" are a part of this hypertext that generates them, a seemingly endless archive of Google images. In the same way, the image collections of

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47 "By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary." Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.

48 Sam Gendler, Engineer in Search Infrastructure at Google, Inc., "How does Google image search engine work?," How does Google image search engine work?," May 6, 2016, https://www.quora.com/How-does-Google-image-search-engine-work.

49 Google Image Search as undertaken on December 26, 2016.

50 Mikhel Proulx, "The Progress of Ambiguity: Uncertain Imagery in Digital Culture," MA Thesis (Concordia University Montreal, 2016), 10.

Piper, Perry, Karuhanga, and Black, arise from pre-existing archives, which are themselves part of larger archives. The images that appear as a Google search result do not, however, represent all the visible images within these archives. Rather, these visible archives delineate another generic image, invisible but nevertheless present, that appears for instance in Piper's *Vanilla Nightmares*. Thus, not only do bodies get reproduced, but a body also emerges out of the process of reproduction.

Allan Sekula speaks of an invisible *shadow archive*, which was created alongside the visible archives established by the photographic apparatus in its beginnings.[51] In the mid-nineteenth century, in the West, the photographic documentation of people generated archives of bourgeois family portraits alongside visual records of medical subjects, anthropological studies, or criminals in forensic police photography. Taken together, these mechanically processed visual archives of bodies delineated a "social body" in which the camera apparatus ascribed to each individual a particular social position, while concurrently generalizing the categories they belonged to. These visual archives were indeed applied as a measure of social control, and led for instance to Francis Galton's "Composite Portraiture," in which he merged several portraits of a specific racial cate-gory (e.g. "Jewish boy") into one picture by overlaying their negative frames. In this way, singular facial characteristics were lost in favour of the generation of a "type." A "truth apparatus" was thus constructed that "cannot be adequately reduced to the optical model provided by the camera."[52] In the invisible but nevertheless present shadow archive, this truth-apparatus produces its subjects as much as it organizes and dictates their positions, that—in order to escape this restrictive visibility—seemingly only invisibility allows them to eschew.

**Faces—Making a Face**

> That made me really conscious of how every step of the process has a visual result. I guess I knew that from jobs I've been on, but it's different when it's for my artworks, where every person on set, you see them in the work. It made me realize the systematic racism of making images, too. I learned that the default in film production is a white guy working on it. Doing colour was crazy, thinking about film stocks and making things for black skin. Colour, just on a programmatic level, kind of freaked me out—every way you make a film look, what darkness represents or what lightness represents. With skin, how to

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51 Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter, 1986): 10.

52 Ibid., 16.

> make dark skin look better, the defaults aren't built that way. . . I guess it's about an image being a text and thinking about how it can be changed and worked on.[53]

Martine Syms based these reflections on experiences in making her first movie, the manifesto-documentary *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto*.[54] What is she referring to when speaking of "the systematic racism of making images?" And how is an image a text? Earlier, I discussed how what an image depicts is both visible and invisible. It has become evident that every image is a part of an archive, which itself creates a shadow-archive, and that these archives can be used as part of an apparatus of social control. Sekula's "truth-apparatus" has since the invention of photography, been expanded by available technologies, including the internet, where images allude to a hypertext. Technology able to transform the archive of human portraiture into readable, analyzable, and evaluable data is called "biometrics." Here, an image is quite literally a text. Biometric technologies include facial recognition, iris and retinal scans, hand geometry, fingerprint templates, vascular patterns, DNA scans, gait and other types of kinesthetic recognition. These technologies are used by most sovereign nation-states today to control people's movements across borders via their passports. They also are integrated into private and "public" visual surveillance contexts including schools and universities, parking lots, supermarkets, prisons, gas stations, Social Media (tagging), refugee camps, corporate office buildings, residential streets, and so on. Rather than further adding to the searchable archive of images, actors in the fields of political thought, media studies, queer theory, and art criticism today, increasingly employ what Zach Blas sums up as "informatic opacity." This concept is based on the ideas of philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant, as developed in his book *Poetics of Relation*. Blas describes it as follows in a 2016 article entitled "Opacities: An Introduction:"

> Opacity is an unknowability—and, hence, a poetics, for Glissant—that makes up the world, and it must be defended in order for any radically democratic project to succeed. Glissant defines opacity as an alterity that is unquantifiable, a diversity that exceeds categories of identifiable difference. Opacity, therefore, exposes the limits of schemas of visibility, representation, and identity that prevent sufficient understanding of multiple perspectives of the world and its peoples. These limitations are a form of barbarism according to Glissant. Thus, while Glissant's opacity is an ethical proposition, it also can be understood

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53 "The Conceptual Entrepreneur, Emily McDermott in conversation with Martine Syms", *Interview Magazine*, December 29, 2015. http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/martine-syms-16-faces-of-2016#.

54 Martine Syms, *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto*, 2015, accessed December 15, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otUJvQhCjJ0.

as an ontological condition and a form of political legitimacy, as well as being fundamentally aesthetic. . .. In contrast with identity politics' claim to visibility as a political platform, . . . opacity [is] both a tactic and a material condition in order to address two intertwined concerns of our time: technological control and embodied materiality.[55]

Fig. 12 Martine Syms and Cat Roif, *For Nights Like This One, 1979,* 2014.

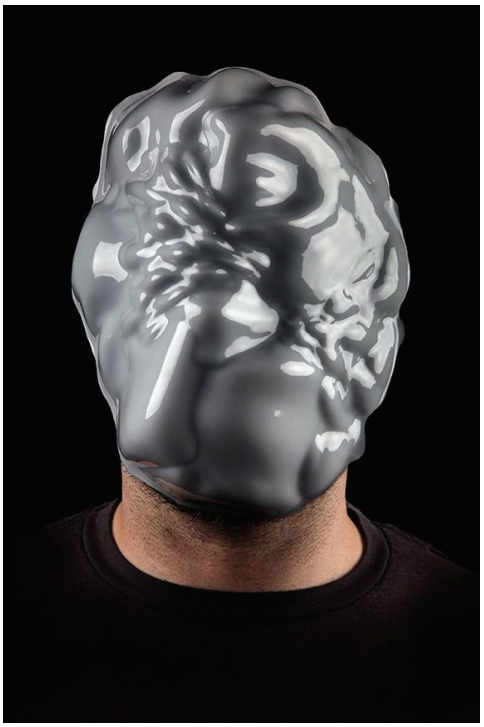

Fig. 13 Zach Blas, *Facial Weaponization Suite: Mask - May 19*, 2014.

As an artist, Blas has produced a body of work entitled *Facial Weaponization Suite*, 2011–14, in which he deploys biometric data in the construction of abstract masks. According to Blas, the wearing of these masks enables at once an invisibility towards surveillance technologies, and the experience of an anonymous collectivity among the wearers of these masks.

Glissant's text, which forms the basis for Blas' theory, addresses language rather than aesthetics or visuality. Glissant, a poet, writer, philosopher and literary critic, was born on the Antillean island of Martinique, neighbour to the island of Dominica, which lends its name to Martine Syms' imprint. The archipelago of the Antilles is situated between the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Atlantic Ocean. These islands belong to what Christopher Columbus described as the "West Indies" after he first landed on an Island in today's Bahamas in 1492,

[55] Zach Blas, "Opacities: An Introduction," *In Practice: Opacities, Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 2 92 (2016): 148-153.

mistaking it for the "Indies," today's India. While the island of Dominica is today an independent republic, Martinique is an overseas department of France.[56] Other Antillean islands, such as Jamaica, have been colonized by the British, and yet other by the Spanish (such as Cuba) or the Dutch (such as Bonaire and Saba), and some were partitioned among colonizers (such as Haiti, which was partitioned between Spain and France, and later subject to U.S. military occupation). With Columbus' arrival in 1492, a genocide of Indigenous peoples—the Taíno, the Ciboney, the Caribs, and the Arawak— present on the islands since around 400 B.C., was set into motion. The European settlers set up plantations in the region. During the Middle Passage, these self-made landowners traded European commodities for enslaved people from the continent of Africa, to labour in the production of newly circulating commodities such as sugar.[57] Slaves subsequently began to form the majority of the population of the Antilles, governed by the white European minority now present in the region.[58] In the first of the two chapters of his book addressing "Opacity," Glissant elaborates on the idea of "transparency," particularly on the idea of a "transparent" language, such as the French language, which was the language of the colonizers in the part of the Antilles in which he lived. According to Glissant, a "transparent" language is transparent by virtue of the fact that it is the vehicle of humanist colonial ideology, reproducing humanism's universality in being read and spoken by an ideal human individual. It implies the existence of a universal, correct and "right" language, towards which the individual strives. This is exactly the connotation of the phrase "the Queen's English," which Syms used as the title for her work. The Queen's English was presumed to be the language colonial subjects aspired to, across the planetary scope of the British Empire. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is "standard or correct English, usually as written and spoken by educated people."[59] Since the colonial social orders of the British and French Empires did not favour the education of slaves, the majority of the Antillean population was therefore precluded from learning this ideal language, which does not mean that it did not speak English or French at all. "Opacities" occur in the

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[56] Kristen Stromberg Childers, *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

[57] The term "Middle Passage" describes the passage of the Atlantic Ocean on ships between the European, African and North American continents during the slave trade, between approximately 1500 and 1900.

[58] Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano, *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

[59] "Queen's English," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed February 5, 2017, http://www.oed.com.

realization of this alleged "transparency" of language. With the term "realization," Glissant describes basically any act of reading or writing, including learning or translating the transparent language in a particular geographical or social situation. In reality, the supposedly transparent language does not realize itself as transparent, rather, "opacities" occur that distort the transparency of universal penetration. Vernacular—as opposed to vehicular—languages such as Creole, Quebecois or Swiss French, belong to this realm of the opaque. In literary textual practice, "the multiplicity of vernacular languages has invaded the transparent language's intangible unicity."[60] In the second chapter elaborating on "Opacity" in *Poetics of Relation***,** Glissant states that the opaque "is that which cannot be reduced" (to the unicity of the transparent).[61]

In Simone Browne's account of visual surveillance technologies, Glissant's philosophical irreducibility becomes technical "immeasurability," which is applied as a counter-strategy in what Browne names Black "sousveillance." It also becomes the colour of skin. In her book on the surveillance of Blackness, she examines, in the context of eighteenth-century New York City, the bifurcation of the security of light and the danger of darkness, and how the (in)visibilities produced by this bifurcation, were regulated by Lantern Laws. These laws foresaw that "no Negro or Indian Slave above the age of fourteen years do presume to be or appear in any of the streets of New York City . . . in the night time above one hour after sunset without a lanthorn and a lighted candle."[62] Associating darkness with dark skin, while light represented white skin, these laws had a double effect. On the one hand, they treated Black and Indigenous bodies as incalculable security risks, which therefore needed to be surveilled by the technologies of (white) light. In this way, these bodies also maintained the literal transparency of the white social order into nighttime, in that they served as living street lighting, rather than being recognized as actual human beings. Whiteness scholar Richard Dyer supports the thesis that "there are inevitable [historically rooted, for instance, in Christian and Jewish iconography] associations of white with light and therefore safety, and black with dark and therefore danger, and that this explains racism, whereas one might well argue about the safety of the cover of darkness, and the danger of

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60 Édouard Glissant, "Transparency and Opacity," in *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 111-120.

61 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 191.

62 Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 78.

exposure to the light."[63] In contemporary biometrical techniques— and here, Browne's study parallels Sekula's truth-apparatus—, which have been developed since the late nineteenth century, "very dark-skinned" users produce higher fail-to-enroll rates than "lighter-skinned" users.[64] This means that the algorithms of apparatuses of visual surveillance reproduce a white prototypicality. One mundane example for this higher FTE rate for dark skin is the face-focus-recognition tool on built-in cell-phone cameras, which captures light-skinned faces before dark-skinned ones. This does not exclude an inversion of the same logic, in effect also enabling a "racial programming" of contemporary surveillance technology. This visual realization of the reflection of light on black or white skin, which echoes Glissant's concept of transparency and opacity, is what Syms refers to when she asks what darkness and lightness represent in film technology and equipment. This equipment too is based on a white prototypicality, which has been constructed in a palimpsest of technologies of social control over several centuries, and produces the irreducible and unmeasurable invisibility of Blackness alongside the transparent and ideal visibility of whiteness. The not only philosophically and aesthetically, but also socio-politically and historically-grounded conditions of transparency, light and opaqueness that Glissant describes are reproduced by the contemporary technological apparatus of image-creation. These conditions inscribe themselves onto the images produced, and can be read through them.

I would like to return to Zach Blas' theoretical and visual work on opacity to better understand the importance of Syms' work for a contemporary discourse. In his article, Blas references a few contemporary writers in the extended art field. This includes *Excommunication,* 2013 by Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Acker, and McKenzie Wark; the work of The Invisible Committee; Nicholas de Villier's *Opacity and the Closet*, 2012; Irving Goh's *Prolegomenon to a Right to Disappear*, 2006; and *Empire*, 2000 by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. All of these writings investigate ideas of "opacity," "invisibility," and "non-existence" under the conditions of mass surveillance. The above image of one of Blas' masks has been on view in the framework of a group exhibition at MUAC in Mexico City entitled *Teoría del Color* (*Colour Theory*). The exhibition featured works by artists from various generations and geographical backgrounds,

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[63] Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 142.

[64] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters*, 113-114.

which according to the curatorial statement addressed "the display of the complex web that underlies racism."[65] However, as helpful as the concept of "informatic opacity" is not only to this thesis, the majority of writers mentioned by Blas in his article are participants in a predominantly white Western-European-and-US-centric discourse, which remains the dominant context of contemporary art and conditions its visibilities and invisibilities.[66] Alongside the statistical data listed in the preceding footnote, this observation can be supported by the fact that Martine Syms' upcoming exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City as a part of its "Projects" series —according to the institution's online exhibition archive—is the second solo show by a Black female artist in the institution's history after Lorna Simpson's 1990 exhibition in the same series, which is to be followed by Adrian Piper's retrospective in 2018. Blas' theory is however clearly based on the work of a Caribbean writer whose theories countered the colonial attributes imposed upon him.[67] It is important to mention here that the concept of "countersurveillance" has been developed and deployed by several art theorists, New Media artists, and hackers of colour in the United States, such as Sondra Perry, Erin Christovale, and Simone Browne—unrefe-

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[65] Cuauhtémoc Medina, Helena Chávez, and Alejandra Labastida, *Teoría del Color*, curatorial statement, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), accessed February 15, 2017, http://muac.unam.mx/expo-detalle-18-teoria-del-color.

[66] Regarding representation of "minority" backgrounds in North American art institutions, see for instance *A Decade of Arts Engagement: Findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2002–2012: National Endowment for the Arts Research Report #58*, Washington: National Endowment for the Arts, 2015. The 2015 *Art Museum Diversity Survey* by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation notes: "Among its chief findings, the survey documented a significant movement toward gender equality in art museums. Women now comprise some 60 percent of museum staffs, with a preponderance of women in the curatorial, conservation and education roles that can be a pipeline toward leadership positions. The survey found no such pipeline toward leadership among staff from historically underrepresented minorities. Although 28 percent of museum staffs are from minority backgrounds, the great majority of these workers are concentrated in security, facilities, finance and human resources jobs. Among museum curators, conservators, educators and leaders, only 4 percent are African American and 3 percent Hispanic." Accessed February 28, 2017, https://aamd.org/our-members/from-the-field/art-museum-diversity-survey. And in Canada: Alison Cooley, Amy Luo and Caoimhe Morgan-Feir: "Canada's Galleries Fall Short: The Not-So Great White North," *Canadian Art*, April 21, 2015, http://canadianart.ca/features/canadas-galleries-fall-short-the-not-so-great-white-north, Michael Maranda, "Hard Numbers: A Study on Diversity in Canada's Galleries," April 5, 2017, http://canadianart.ca/features/art-leadership-diversity.

[67] "Often much of what western theory imagines as the 'new' can only be understood as such when the object of critique is delimited so as not to include the cultural production of, or the experiences of marginalized subjects." Dwight A. McBride, "The Ghosts of Memory: Representing the Past in Beloved and The Woman Warrior," in *Re-placing America: Conversations and Contestations: Selected Essays*, ed. Ruth Hsu, Cynthia G. Franklin, and Suzanne Kosanke (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 164.

renced by Blas in his article. Instead, he mentions Swiss curator Ulrich Loock's essay on "Opacity" in *Frieze* Magazine.[68] While this article is certainly not representative of Blas' entire work in the field of informatic opacity, but rather functions as its introduction or summary, and perhaps precisely because of this discursive function, the question that arises is to what extent not only contemporary image technologies, but also the discursive apparatus of contemporary art reduces the participation of people of colour and reproduces the construction of a white prototypicality up to the present day. Seen in this light, Syms' frequent use of C-stands in her installations is not only a symbolic gesture, rather it can be understood as a reference to this fact, and as an attempt to replace it. The C-stand is the technology that directs or deflects, intensifies and filters the light feeding the truth-apparatus; it is the metaphorical and visual framework of enlightenment. The image presented on the C-stand has been produced by this framework as much as it is supported by it. At the same time, Syms' C-stand intervenes in the optical path of illumination, deflects and redirects this light. It resets its own framework. Or, as Glissant puts it, it enables "the understanding that it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth they would not have generated on their own."[69]

**Bodies**

In the preceding section of this thesis, entitled "Faces," I presented Martine Syms' body of work entitled *The Queen's English* by describing its surface appearance. What becomes clear is that this surface has many faces, which can be visualized, recognized, registered, archived, and analyzed. Faces can be exposed, lit, or rendered opaque. They can be encountered, blown up, hidden, or turned into weapons. This section of this thesis, by way of its title, "Bodies," acknowledges that these visible faces do not exist independently, but belong to bodies, which are sometimes visible, and sometimes not. These bodies—like their faces—are many. Two distinct groups can be discerned so far. Both of these two groups are comprised of both individual and collective bodies. The first group pertains to the bodies of experience. According to Gloria Anzaldùa—who gets a mention by Blas in an interview accompanying his article—,[70] the face is the surface of the

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68 Blas, "Opacities: An Introduction," 149.

69 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 194.

70 Zach Blas and Jacob Gaboury, "Biometrics and Opacity: A Conversation." *In Practice: Opacities, Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 292 (2016): 154-165.

body that is the most noticeably inscribed by social structures, and marked with their instructions.[71] But these marks stem from experiences which have been lived through by the physical, material body. The bodies of experience referred to thus far are the gendered female body, the racialized Black body, and the migrating body, among others. Experiences belong to an individual body. This individual body is multiple unto itself, as a body can be racialized, gendered, and migrating all at once. These individual experiences can then circulate and be shared in the form of gestures, leading to collective bodies: the gulf between experience and representation that gives rise to the collective body of depersonalized autobiographical recollection of the Black Radical Tradition[72] and the artworks discussed, or the limb of prosthetic memory allowing for the formation of a collective body based on shared, re-lived experiences. These collective bodies lead to the second group, which are the bodies of context, history, and knowledge: social bodies, such as that of the shadow archive, including the social body formed in the reading of the Google "Black woman." These social bodies remain invisible, but they are nevertheless present. The two groups are mutually dependent, indeed, they produce each other. Not only do social bodies instruct the bodies of experience, but bodies of experience can also lend visibility to social bodies. The following sections detail a few examples of this reciprocal production of bodies.

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[71] Gloria Anazaldúa, "Haciendo caras, uno entrada, An Introduction" in Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color. xv.

[72] Autobiography has been a frequently used format in articulations of the Black Radical Tradition, from Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, via James Weldon Johnson, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, to Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde, and the list goes on. However, there are significant differences to be noted in the approaches taken by the latter three women, alongside that of gender. Davis stated that she is not a "real" person separate from being a political person: "I did not really write about myself . . . I attempted to utilize the autobiographical genre to evaluate my life in accordance with what I considered to be the political significance of my experiences." bell hooks (born Gloria Watkins) in her account of writing her autobiography says that "telling the story of my growing up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die. I wanted to kill that self in writing. Once that self was gone—out of my life forever—I could more easily become the me of me." Audre Lorde calls her book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* a "biomythography, which is really fiction. It has the elements of biography and history and myth. In other words, it's fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision."[72] Davis, hooks and Lorde are conscious of the gap between the singularity of their experiences as Black women, and the representation of these experiences in their account, the retelling or depiction of their memories toward a social body. They are also intent on the construction of an identity that becomes simultaneously that of an individual body, of a person, and of a collective body. Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Radicalization in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 179-180; bell hooks, "writing autobiography," in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988), 155-159; Claudia Tate, ed., *Black Women Writers at Work*, (New York: Continuum, 1986), 115.

**Bodies—The Body of Knowledge, 1: Identity**

The books exhibited in Room 2 of *The Queen's English* were collected by Martine Syms, and stem from the annotated bibliography *Black Lesbians*, compiled by JR Roberts in 1981. *The Queens' English* makes these publications available for reading to the visitors of the exhibition. In the foreword to Roberts' book, Barbara Smith describes this bibliography as "a kind of a miracle."[73] It was the first attempt to produce a general bibliography of Black lesbian literature in North America. The 341 titles listed were assembled by librarian Roberts, who in her introduction to the bibliography describes herself as a "white lesbian" who has chosen to do the work "because it needed to be done." Roberts began collecting some of the materials listed to use as readings for a lesbian history project at the Goddard-Cambridge Graduate School, a collaborative program between Goddard College in Vermont and the Cambridge Institute in Massachusetts in the 1970s. Encountering difficulties in tracking down these publications, she decided to dedicate more time to compiling materials from and on Black lesbians in the United States. The bibliography is organized into seven sections: *Lives and Lifestyles* (biographies, autobiographical writings, diaries, oral histories); *Oppression, Resistance, and Liberation* (position papers, essays of political analysis, interviews, letters, news and feature articles); *Literature and Criticism* (novels, short stories, poems, book reviews); *Music* (printed and recorded material); *Periodicals*; and *Research, Reference, and Popular Studies* (bibliographies, archives and library collections, historical research, social science studies and critiques). The collection gives insight into the momentum and reach of Black independent feminist publishing at the time of its publication, and also lists many scholarly studies. This main corpus of the bibliography is followed by a special section containing materials related to the "Norton Sound Case," a "lesbian witch-hunt" conducted aboard the USS Norton Sound, a Navy missile test ship and one of the first with a female crew. The other articles listed in the appendix include a call by twin sisters Barbara and Beverly Smith addressing the need for documentation of the Black feminist movement, by suggesting concrete activities in Black lesbian research, such as preserving the records and papers of Black lesbian groups or tracing the appearance and treatment of lesbianism in the Black press. The appendix concludes with a thorough Subject and Author Index, and a note "About the Bibliographer."

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[73] Barbara Smith, "Foreword," in *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography*, ed. JR Roberts (Cambridge: The Naiad Press, 1981), ix.

The importance of this publication must be seen against the historical background of the emergence of what Patricia Hill Collins describes as "Black Feminist Thought."[74] Collins argues that intersecting forms of oppression (such as those based on race, gender, and class) have urged Black women in the United States—understood as a collectivity of bodies of experience—to forge self-definitions which are based on the experience of these oppressions, and also to craft and pass on the knowledge gained at these intersections. This produces a dialectical movement, in which these self-definitions engage the very experience of these oppressions and their opposition. Such self-definitions involve discovering, reinterpreting, and analyzing for the first time the works of Black women, in particular that of "subgroups" within this larger collectivity, such as that of Black lesbians. Barbara Smith was also a member of The Combahee River Collective, who with their April 1977 statement published what today is frequently interpreted as one of the first articulation of a politics of identity.[75] Her famous essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" appeared in the same year.[76] In this essay, Smith denotes a lack of intersection of Black and female identity in both Black and feminist literary criticism, and calls for its articulation. She was also the co-editor with Lorraine Bethel of *Conditions: Five, The Black Women's Issue*, which appeared two years prior to Roberts' Bibliography, and collected poetry, fiction, autobiographical fiction, journals, essays, song lyrics, and reviews by Black women from the early 1900s until the time of the issue's publication, with the majority of writings being contemporary. These contributions were responses to an open call through which the editors attempted to reach outside of the usual "feminist" networks.[77] According to Cheryl Clarke, it was *Conditions: Five*[78]

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[74] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, London: Routledge, 2002.

[75] "Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. . . . Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism." Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 1983): 264-275.

[76] Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *The Radical Teacher* 7 (March 1978): 20-27.

[77] Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, eds., *Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue* (Brooklyn: Conditions, 1979), 11.

[78] The journal's full title was *Conditions: a feminist magazine of writing by women with a particular emphasis on writing by lesbians*.

that first introduced Audre Lorde to a wide readership.[79] In their foreword, the editors encouraged all women of colour to produce autonomous publications that "embody their particular identity." They also criticize the missing access to material resources for the development of Black women writers and artists. What resulted from this call was not only Roberts' bibliography, but what Pauline Gumbs calls "Black feminist literary production," as distinct from "Black women's writing" in the period between 1970-1990.[80] This distinction is important, because "Black feminist literary production" theorizes writing as a productive act, through which Black feminists not only passed on knowledge, but also transformed publishing possibilities. Black feminist literary production and its institutions created and sustained writings by Black women in predominantly white literary markets. It emerged in an environment that was sustained on one side by the Black Nationalist effort to construct a Black patriarchy, and on the other by white feminist tokenism in the publishing industry, which exploited the labour of women of colour. This "tokenism" does not include important work undertaken by white women like Roberts, but the frequent phenomenon of one or two Black writers on publishers' backlists, and the reasons that landed them there, often related to sales. Gumbs' assumption that feminist literature was a market is supported by the fact that *Conditions: Five* sold 3000 copies in the first three weeks following its publication. During the period in question, dozens of publishing initiatives and collectives, small presses, journals and magazines run by Black women and women of colour sprung up across the United States.[81] Cross-references among publications and their editors became frequent—often, an editor or contributor to one publication was also a contributor to, editor of, or commentator of another. This multiplicity of calls and responses, comments, interdependency and interactions not only wove a collectivity and its web of discourse together, but also gradually formed a body

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[79] Cheryl Clarke, "Living the Texts Out: Lesbians and the uses of Black women's traditions," in Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia, eds., *Theorizing Black Feminisms* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993): 214-227.

[80] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: A Dialogically Produced Audience and Black Feminist Publishing 1979 to the 'Present'," *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies*, Issue 22, 2008. http://genderforum.org/black-womens-writing-revisited-issue-22-2008.

[81] Cheryl Clarke describes the 1980s as a "watershed" of "multicultural" feminist self- and independent publishing, which challenged the racism of the lesbian-feminist movement, naming a few: *Top Ranking: Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community* (Gibbs and Bennett, 1980), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* (Anzaldua and Moraga, 1982), *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Hull, Bell-Scott and Smith, 1981), *Nice Jewish Girls* (Beck, 1982), *Calyx's Bearing Witness/Sobreviviendo: An Anthology of Writing and Art by Native American/Latina Women* (Cochran, 1984). Clarke, "Living the Texts Out," 214-227.

through its distribution network, which rendered this self-sustained production visible without becoming categorizable.[82] Robert's bibliography embodies this knowledge and its social body. As Barbara Smith points out in her foreword, the achievement of this bibliography was to articulate and render tangible a body of Black lesbian literature that was not visible in the same way prior to this point, in such a way that its existence was no longer deniable. The term "body" here has a double connotation: The description of a "body of literature" merges with a discourse on the human body. In Syms' work, an image is also always a text, and a physical body exists concurrently with its reproduction.

**Bodies—Corpora of Documents: The Human**

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault describes how the autonomous form of a book is "caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences." In relation with these references, the book's unicity becomes relative; it is no longer a static object or "integer subject."[83] The English edition of this book was published in 1972, just one year before the photograph of *Black Lesbian Caucus* was taken. Foucault introduces the book as an attempt to describe how he wrote his prior books. The subjects of these earlier books were concepts or topics, and the books investigated the complexes or institutions that these concepts or topics established in the Western world, such as the Human Sciences in *The Order of Things.* Foucault's earlier books analyzed these subjects (topics and concepts) by looking at the ways in which their knowledge has been passed on over time, and the forms it took in this passing, that is, its methods and epistemologies. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, these methods and epistemologies of knowledge themselves become the subject. Foucault sums up this oscillation between an object of knowledge or subject of analysis and its documentation as follows:

> History, in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorize' the *monuments* [Foucault's italics] of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in

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[82] "Women-of-colour writers were raising questions about the world, about power, about philosophy, about politics, about history, about white supremacy, because of their raced, gendered, sexualized bodies; they were wielding a genius that had been cultivated out of their raced, gendered, sexualized subjectivities. . . . That these women are being forgotten, and their historical importance elided, says a lot about our particular moment and how real a threat these foundational sisters posed to the order of things." Díaz, Junot in conversation with Paula M.L. Moya, "The Search for Decolonial Love, Part I," *Boston Review,* June 26, 2012.

[83] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 26.

> themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*.[84]

Rather than being based on an historical event, epistemological knowledge is based on this event's documentation, and the continued circulation of this documentation within archives of knowledge. In this process, the partiality of historical events, their non-verbal or silent elements, get verbalized and become discourse. The task of general history, then, is to organize these documents into levels and series, to describe the relationships among these levels and series, to name and to organize them. This organization leads to the establishment of actual systems of knowledge based on these relationships. Continuities in this organization designate coherent and homogeneous *corpora* of documents, such as a collection of writings on a particular subject, which may or may not materialize in book form, but can be reproduced.[85] *Corpora* is the plural of the Latin word *corpus*, which translates as *body*. JR Robert's bibliography is such a corpus. Its body of knowledge stems from a collectivity of bodies of experience, that of the Black feminist literary production. As a *corpus*, it forms a body based on this experience's documentation, and this documentation's organization and circulation.

Not only can social bodies be embodied by bodies of experience, but bodies of experience are also constructed by the discourse of social bodies. These bodies must be understood, following Stuart Hall, as "produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies."[86] Bodies of experience are also a product of the technologies, including discursive technologies, that bring them into being. In this way, corpora of documents, for instance that of JR Robert's bibliography, are connected to a body that is brought into view by surveillance technology, which engages technologies of visibility. Depending on how they are programmed, biometrics can read certain bodies, and subsequently render them visible, but not others. The same is true for discourse, which can only integrate what it is able to recognize by means of its levels and series, its categories and disciplines. Beyond detecting faces, biometrics is a technology of measuring the living (physical, material) body. This measurement of the living body is undertaken by machines. But, as Browne

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[84] Ibid., 7-8.

[85] Ibid., 11.

[86] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 4.

argues, *it is through the human aspects of the process of sorting this data that the digitized, biometric body is brought into view*.[87] Biometrics translates life into data, not unlike how history translates monuments into documents as described by Foucault. The question that then imposes itself is: How do we read this body of documents and data? And further: Which irreducibilities and immeasurabilities come into play? And subsequently: Who is "we?" To answer these questions, it is necessary to read Foucault anew with Sylvia Wynter.

**Bodies—The Body of Knowledge, 2: The Queen's English**

In her 1989 essay *Beyond the Word of Man: Glissant and the New Discourse of the Antilles,* Jamaica-born (1928) Sylvia Wynter refers to Foucault's analysis of the coming into being of "man" in *The Order of Things* by adding a correction to it.[88] The purpose of Wynter's essay it is to analyze Édouard Glissant's oeuvre rather than Foucault's. Therefore, it respects the processes of intellectual and social assimilation specific to the Catholic French model of colonization prevalent in Martinique, which are different from those in her home country of Jamaica, itself colonized by the British. Based on this diversity of cultures imposed upon the Caribbean region by Western European colonization as outlined on page 27, in addition to the genocide perpetrated by the colonizers, Glissant's project as a writer was to theorize (contemporary Caribbean) identity as being heterogeneous and fragmented, instead of universal and transparent.[89] Wynter describes how the articulation of this identity has in the past been psycho-culturally blocked by the dominant discourses of colonialism. She understands Glissant's writings to be "performative acts of counter-meaning" directed against the present French order of discourse. This order is the order of cultural reason as described by Foucault in *The Order of Things*. In this book, in which he developed the concept of *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault relates the knowledge of living beings (or biology), the laws of language, and the knowledge of economic facts to the philosophical discourse of a period extending from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Foucault does not so much address the difference between these disciplines, but rather their analogies and

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87 Browne, *Dark Matters*, 115.

88 Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man: Glissant and the New Discourse of the Antilles," *World Literature Today* 63, no. 4 (Autumn, 1989): 637-648.

89 Shireen K. Lewis, "Rerooting the Uprooted: Édouard Glissant's Antillanité and Beyond," in *Race, Culture and Identity: Francophone West African and Caribbean Literature and Theory from Négritude to Créolité* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 70-88.

shared methodologies, their rules of formation, their "episteme." In this way the book reveals, in Foucault's words, "a *positive unconscious* [Foucault's italics] of knowledge, a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse."[90] This "positivity" consists in a fundamental shift in the ways knowledge was and is being produced during these periods.[91] Throughout the Classical age, a coherence existed between the theory of representation of the partially religious and partially secular natural order of divine infinitude, and the theories of language, themselves based on analogies, similarity or equivalence between things. This coherence provided a foundation and justification for words. This configuration of the representational order changes entirely from the nineteenth century onward: the theory of representation disappears and is replaced by language as an indispensable link between things and their representation. The figure who masters this language, who "attains knowledge in him of what renders all knowledge possible," is the figure of "man."[92] Representation is no longer of an infinite order, but subject to man's analytics of finitude. A being no longer manifests its identity through representation, but by way of the external relation it establishes with the human, which, as Wynter argues, gets concurrently reduced to a biological being with Darwin.[93] While Foucault traces the emergence of the figure of "man" meticulously throughout his book, it seems astounding that he did not elaborate further on who embodies "man" in the society that produced the documents that he consulted and subsequent discourse, that is: white Western European men. Fourteen years prior to the publication of *The Order of Things*, Martinique-born psychiatrist, writer, and political activist Frantz Fanon, referencing his compatriot Aimé Césaire, reclaims the being of Man in his famous treatise on the psychosomatic and social consequences of the internalization of racism, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*.[94] This localized line of thought was picked up and continued by Glissant. Aside from the term's spelling in lower case and upper case respectively, what is the difference between Foucault's "man" and Fanon's "Man"?

In Wynter's analysis of Foucault, the institution of the figure of man is not introduced on its own, but concurrently with its "other." Drawing a line from the Original Sin of Genesis, via

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90 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), xi.

91 Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 200.

92 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 318.

93 Ibid., 313.

94 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto Press, 1986. Originally published in 1952 by Editions de Seuil, Montrouge, as *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*.

the Battle of Ravenna (which marks the defeat of the Holy League against the French) to the eclipse of the divinely created being through Darwin's theories, Wynter demonstrates how for the maintenance of the representational order of colonial society, its foundational principles must remain located in a "Space of Otherness" outside of human temptation, which replaces the precondition of the infinite divine. With the representational shift in the order of things, this "Space of Otherness" was relocated as follows:

> In the wake of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the rise of the new discourse of evolutionary biology, the supernational "Space of Otherness" inhabited by God could no longer serve to stabilize the representation of optimal being as that of the rational human defined by its divinely created rational nature. Instead, in the shift which now occurred from the representation of rational-being Man to that of Man on the model of a pure natural organism, a new "Space of Otherness" term now took the place of that of God. This new term was that of "Race."[95]

In these few sentences, Wynter describes the fatal and seemingly irreversible impact of the colonial act. That is, the logic of this act implies that its reversal would lead to the collapse of society. In this new biocentric logic, if Foucault's man unnoticeably embodies a white male Western European, then, in the supernational logic of colonialism, Indigenous and Black peoples—both of which inhabit the Antilles—embody this "Otherness," based on an indisputable biological determination of bodies.[96] This dual subject-formation of man and its other cannot only be found on the Antilles, but in a most contemporary societies which did not exist prior to the colonial act, including the United States and Canada. Nor is this formation purely historical.

In March of 2011, poet Claudia Rankine published an open letter, in which she asked a series of questions addressing "The Racial Imaginary," and invited fellow writers to respond to them.[97] These questions addressed for instance the negotiation of differences in writing, the invention of a language of racial identity, and what role fear plays in addressing these questions. She collected the responses she received to these questions, and published some of them in the form of a book in 2015. In their introduction to this book, editors Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine define the "racial imaginary" more closely as follows:

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[95] Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man," 642.

[96] This being the basis of the subsequent internalization of this indisputability, which Frantz Fanon tries to get at with the term "epidermalization," implying that race is directly inscribed onto a body's skin. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 4.

[97] "An Open Letter from Claudie Rankine," *The Rumpus*, February 12, 2011, http://therumpus.net/2011/02/an-open-letter-from-claudia-rankine/.

> What we mean by a racial imaginary is something we all recognize quite easily: the way our culture has imagined over and over again the narrative opportunities, the feelings and attributes and situations, the subjects and metaphors and forms and voices, available both to characters of different races and their authors. The racial imaginary changes over time, in part because artists get into tension with it, challenge it, alter its availabilities. Sometimes it changes very rapidly, as in our own lifetimes. But it has yet to disappear.[98]

This racial imaginary was already invoked by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, 1992, in which she argues that an "Africanist presence" has been instrumental in the development of North American literature: "Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and invisible mediating force."[99] Following Morrison, it is only in the presence of this "Africanist persona" that whiteness articulates itself as a texture, a kind of flesh, while the Africanist persona remains invisible, echoing the dual subject-formation of man and its racial other,

The consequences of this dual formation of Blackness and whiteness exceed the realms of the social imaginary, and can be relocated in contemporary statistical data. Available studies predominantly focus on Blackness, such as that by Michelle Alexander from 2010, who speaks of "The Rebirth of Caste System," which is maintained by a cooperation between the "War on Drugs" as introduced by U.S. President Richard Nixon's administration in the early 1970s, and the "prison-industrial complex."[100] Claudia Rankine is currently working towards the establishment of the Racial Imaginary Institute, which will support the study of whiteness rather than Blackness.

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[98] Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine, eds., *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (Albany: Fence Books, 2015): 22.

[99] Toni Morrison, "From Playing in the Dark," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to Be White*, ed. David R. Roediger (New York: Schocken Books), 156.

[100] It was during her mandate as the Director of the Racial Justice Project of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in Northern California, that Wallace came to realize that mass incarceration in the United States had emerged as a comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control. Since President Ronald Reagan's administration took over in 1981, up to the publishing of Wallace's book in 2010, the U.S. penal population exploded from around 300,000 to more than two million, with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase. According to studies by governmental organizations such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, people of all skin colours use and sell drugs at remarkably similar rates. Nevertheless, the United States imprisons a larger percentage of its Black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. According to Alexander, today, there are more Black U.S. citizens under correctional control—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than

What does the presentation of historical and statistical data accomplish, and, more importantly, what does it *do*?[101] Which objects and which subjects does the reiteration of this data produce? In what ways does it reproduce the rational humanist and dominant representational order of man? Is it necessary to include this data in a close reading of a body of work of art? What does it mean that this verbal reiteration is undertaken by a white Western European settler? How does this influence its meaning and effects? Why speak of "race" in the singular, when it is obvious by now that the dual-production of subjectivity of man and its other introduces at least two races? How not to reproduce this dual-production? And: Which categories, irreducibilities, and immeasurabilities does this telling reproduce?

The transparent language of colonialism represents and regulates the social order in place. Hortense Spillers therefore calls it "the symbolic order called American Grammar," and finds that in addition to subjects and objects, this grammar reproduces such complexes as the "captive body," which is historically rooted in slavery, "ethnicity," "vestibular cultural formations," "patterns of dispersal," and "scaled inequalities."[102] According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the expression "the Queen's English" refers to "standard or correct English." But what are the definitional criteria for this correct language? Its definition is subject to judgment. Any one English-speaker can identify another as not speaking the Queen's English. The only person that can be

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were enslaved in 1850. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colourblindness*, New York and London: The New Press, 2010.
The statistical situation is similar in Canada. On June 16, 2015, Canadian Correctional Investigator Howard Sapers released his accessible online Annual Report, which notes that "in the ten year period between 2005 and 2015 the federal inmate population grew by 10%. Most of this growth is attributed to steady year-on-year increases in admissions of Aboriginal people, visible minorities and women. . . . Over the same period, the Black inmate population grew by 69%. The federal incarceration rate for Blacks is three times their representation rate in general society. These increases continue despite public inquiries and commissions calling for change and Supreme Court of Canada decisions urging restraint." Eight years prior, the "Report of the Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System" found evidence of systemic racism at every level of the system: in policing, in courts, and in correctional institutions. Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System, co-chairs: Margaret Gittens, David Cole, *Report of the Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System,* Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1995.

[101] This "doing" relates to the notion of performativity as articulated by J.L. Austin as a linguistic theory and taken up and applied to gender theory by Judith Butler. J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, Oxford: Clarendon, Oxford University Press, 1962 and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

[102] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer, 1987): 64-81.

sure of speaking, and who therefore defines this ideal language, is the Queen herself. Accordingly, the Oxford English Dictionary lists its entry on "The Queen's English" under "Queen," and defines it as "the English language regarded as under the guardianship of the Queen of England."[103] Syms' *The Queen's English*, then, aims to not only understand, but alter this grammar's mechanisms of reproduction—with Wynter, to go "Beyond the Word of Man." For this alteration, what is at stake is not only the shift from "being" to "doing" in which Judith Butler insists,[104] but also, and perhaps more importantly, "a shift from ontogeny [the coming into being of an individual] to sociogeny [the coming into being of a society], from *Être* to *Étant*, and the new frontiers of being and knowing that such a shift opens."[105]

**The Bibliographer—The Position of the Reader is a Position of Power**

How might one undertake this shift in the field of contemporary art? When asked about the purpose of art, Martine Syms frequently refers to a statement by Samuel R. Delany, a writer of science fiction and queer theory, in a conversation with whom the term "Afrofuturism" was coined:

> I saw Samuel Delany speak last year, and somebody asked him what he thought the purpose of art was, and if art could change the world. He said poetry is everything; poetry is nothing. He didn't think any one individual or artwork could make change, but that art could change discourse and discourse could change things. I like that idea.[106]

In different ways, Foucault's *Order of Things*, Sekula's shadow archive, and JR Robert's bibliography all address the formation of social bodies within the representational order of Western society, its complexes of power, and its racial imaginary. This order reproduces and governs

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103 "Queen's English, n. (usu. with the): the English language regarded as under the guardianship of the Queen of England; (hence) standard or correct English, usually as written and spoken by educated people in Britain; cf. King's English n. at king n. Compounds 4b." "Queen's English, n. (usu. with *the*)," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed February 5, 2017, http://www.oed.com.

104 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990/1999): 25.

105 Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man," 645-646.

106 Rachel Elizabeth Jones, "The Conceptual Entrepreneur: Martine Syms in Conversation," *ArtSlant*, 03.08.2015, https://www.artslant.com/global/articles/show/43635-the-conceptual-entrepreneur-martine-syms-in-conversation.

itself through the documentation, registration, and circulation of physical bodies that are racialized, gendered, and classed.[107] The statistical and surveillance data resulting from this reproduction is no longer based on bodily experience, but rather on the documentation and registration of these bodies, and the translation of their experiences and movements. This data is selected, analyzed and organized into corpora of information, which subsequently circulate within archives, on the internet, through surveillance apparatuses, and within global economic systems. This includes, up to and including the present day, the circulation of human bodies as commodities.[108] A human body is both a physical body, a body of experience, as well as being a body of data, which informs and is informed by social bodies. Martine Syms locates this duplication by asking the question: "Think of your most internet-famous friend. Do you even recognize her life?"[109] Alexander Weheliye, Professor of African-American Studies at Northwestern University in Chicago, replaces the legal concept of *Habeas Corpus* with his concept of *Habeas Viscus* as follows: "If the body [of data, *corpus*] represents legal personhood qua self-possession, then the flesh [physical body, *viscus*] designates those dimensions of human life cleaved by the working together of depravation and deprivation." [110]As bodies of data, our biographies are written for us,

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[107] Foucault's later concepts of "Governmentality" and "Biopolitics" dealt with this complex, continuing however his focus on Western society and its "internal other" (madness, sexuality) ignoring the concurrent production of race and its constitutional importance for this society. See Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983, edited by Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Graham Burchell, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

[108] "There's a long, long, long history of using black women's bodies for spectacle, and that has only been exacerbated by networked images now. . . . Historically my body in this country is a commodity, even slaves were a form of technology, and neoliberalism turns everyone into a commodity." "Reality and Representation: Martine Syms' Conceptual World," *AnOther* Magazine, March 21, 2016, http://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/8506/reality-and-representation-martine-syms-conceptual-world.

[109] Martine Syms, "A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere," in eds. Omar Kholeif and Sarah Perks, *Fear Eats the Soul* (Manchester: Home Publications, 2016): 83.

[110] Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 25. "*Habeas Corpus*:" Latin for "that you have the body." The complete phrase *habeas corpus ad subjiciendum* means "you shall have the person for the purpose of subjecting them (to examination)." These are the opening words of writs in 14th century Anglo-French documents requiring a person to be brought before a court or judge. In the US system, federal courts can use the writ of habeas corpus to determine if a state's detention of a prisoner is valid. A writ of *habeas corpus* is used to bring a prisoner or other detainee (e.g. institutionalized mental patient) before the court to determine if the person's imprisonment or detention is lawful. A *habeas* petition proceeds as a civil action against the State agent (usually a warden) who holds the defendant in custody. It can also be used to examine any extradition processes used, amount of bail, and the jurisdiction of the court. See, e.g. Knowles v. Mirzayance 556 U.S.___(2009), Felker v. Turpin 518 US 1051 (1996) and McCleskey v. Zant 499 US 467 (1991). "Habeas Corpus," Cornell University Law School Legal Information Institute, accessed February 20, 2017. https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/habeas_corpus. "*Habeas Viscus,"* entwining

they do not belong to us and we do not possess them—the consequences of which are not the same for all. In this perspective, I feel compelled to insist in the question "Who is we?" This "we" leads inevitably back to the "royal we" as applied for instance by the Queen of England, who speaks of herself in the plural.[111] Moreover, the further question "How to read these bodies of data?" gains urgency, since writing them is not an option if biographies are dispossessed. The strategies of depersonalizing autobiography (of an individual body) towards a collective body, such as those of Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde, are therefore not enough.

If I let go of man and its other, and embrace Wynter's effort of re-imagining human being into a different representational order, another question arises: Who embodies the human aspect in the organization of this data (as described by Browne), taking responsibility for the process of sorting these documents, information, and data, which is to say, the process that brings bodies of data into view? It seems obvious to identify this subject with a representative of the representational order in place, such as for instance a U.S. or Canadian Customs and Border Protection officer. However, any intellectual labour requires the same kind of activity. The practice of academic research is that of scanning, selecting, and analyzing documents, information, and data. But the person that undertakes the labour of sorting out documents and data is not only the academic or intellectual themselves. Rather, academics and intellectuals have access to libraries and archives that have already done some of the labour of manufacturing information for them. The job title that best fits this description is that of the Bibliographer. The Bibliographer is not the measure of criteria that the organization of data caters to. They are not he who "attains knowledge in him of what renders all knowledge possible"—Foucault's description of "man." Rather it may be Morrison's (invisible) Africanist Persona – themselves a bibliographer of whiteness who refuses to continue to enable the visibility of white figures, instead calling for different knowledges. This figure is concurrently a reader and the manufacturer of this knowledge. Reading thus becomes a form of production, which eludes the capitalist logic of profit and accumulation. This position is indeed a position of power, as it provides the data on which any

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the concept of *Habeas Corpus* with Hortense Spiller's notion of the flesh, translates as "You shall have the flesh." Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 4.

[111] "royal we, n.: the pronoun 'we' used in place of 'I' by a monarch or other person in power, esp. in formal declarations, or (freq. *humorously*) by any individual." Oxford English Dictionary, April 2017.

representation, including its categories, social orders, and racial imaginaries, is based.[112] I could go as far as to say that it was bibliographer JR Roberts who enabled the body of work of *The Queen's English*. Had she not collected this information, documents and materials, Martine Syms might never have encountered the body of knowledge that her bibliography represents. Comparably, Syms understands her pool of video footage as an image bank that she adds to and draws from.[113] The invisible body of knowledge of Robert's bibliography is the framework in which *The Queen's English* operates, its database or pool. The bibliography, the book itself is one possible embodiment of this knowledge. But the faces in *The Queen's English*, its visible body of work and its coming into view, are also born through Martine Syms' reading of this opaque body of knowledge. In a later work, entitled *Reading Trayvon Martin*, a website and personal bibliography for the criminal case following the shooting of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, Syms meticulously bookmarks articles relating to the case, which she read.[114] Syms comments that "with this piece, I tried to understand my own perspective as the 'audience' of this event and its subsequent media coverage, particularly given my experience as a young Black woman."[115] In reading these bookmarks, the image that is invisible but nevertheless present, is that of this young Black woman, who is appearing in the process.

**The Bibliographer —Black Vernacular**

Understanding her approach to theorization of visual culture, and to visual production as that of a writer,[116] Syms has dedicated two of her lectures to the term "Black Vernacular,"

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112 "For the past few years, I've been very interested in the 'reader' as a position of power, the reader makes meaning and pleasure (or displeasure)." Martine Syms, *Reading Trayvon Martin*, accessed February 11, 2017, http://readingtrayvonmartin.com.

113 Martine Syms in "Borrowed Lady: Martine Syms in Conversation with Amy Kazymerchyk," *C Magazine* 132 (Winter 2016): 14.

114 Syms, *Reading Trayvon Martin*, http://readingtrayvonmartin.com.

115 Ibid. While Syms' implication is not explicit, it can be noted that the spectacularization of Black suffering and death has a long history in the United States, to name lynching as one example. Mainstream media coverage of Black deaths in recent years focused on the killings of young men (not women) through law enforcement—which occurs in lower frequency than the coverage of Black law offenders—, with few exceptions such as the killing of Sandra Bland in 2015. According to a report released by the Violence Policy Center in March 2017, 86 percent of all reported Back homicide victims in 2014 in the United States were male. However, there is a number of 829 reported female victims in the same year, compared to 115 incidents reported as "justifiable" homicides of Black victims killed by law enforcement. The gender discrepancy in media coverage might have to do with the fact that female deaths are often subject to domestic violence, which also points towards gendered movement in public.

116 "I'm a writer in so many ways and there are a lot of similarities between writing and editing

without offering a handy definition of the term in either.[117] With "Black Vernacular," Syms transposes the technologies of making visible, which are technologies of the visual, to the technologies of reading, which are technologies of language. If language seemingly escapes the hypervisibility-invisibility paradox and racial visual identification as applied by biometrical technologies, then these technologies themselves, like all images, carry linguistic information. Nevertheless, the basic conjunctive element of Black Vernacular is Blackness, which is based on visual identification. In a short text accompanying the foundation of Dominica Publishing, which was published through a blog by LA-based publishing colleagues, Syms states that she launched Dominica "to explore Blackness as a topic, reference, marker and audience in visual culture."[118] She immediately adds a corrective in the next sentence: "I don't feel comfortable asserting myself as 'Black,' but I'm excited to explore that tension." With this second part of her statement, Syms adds a discursive dimension to visual "Blackness." This is because an engagement with Blackness necessarily implies an engagement with both the material and linguistic images that represent it, and the tension between them. In an interview with Aram Moshayedi, Syms says:

> I get really bored with the idea that there is some specific way that Black art looks. I am, however, very intrigued by the idea of making an image in a Black way. . . . With regard to my own process, I think less about myself as a Black artist than I do about making work for a Black viewer. I think a lot about the ideal viewer / reader / listener / user, and how assumptions about who they are and what they want influence aesthetic choices in pop culture. I usually out myself in reference or language or appearance, but I see an opportunity to be vague about Blackness, to refuse an identity by shifting focus from author to audience.[119]

The fact that here too reading becomes a position of power (of definition), and a form of production, leads to an opening that the shift from making visible to reading enables. It allows for the reading of these images as bodies of data, as Toni Morrison demonstrated long before

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media." Syms, "Borrowed Lady: Martine Syms in Conversation with Amy Kazymerchyk," 14.

[117] Martine Syms, "Black Vernacular: Reading New Media," South by Southwest (SXSW) Interactive Festival, 2013, accessed December 10, 2016, http://martinesyms.com/black-vernacular-reading-new-media/, and Martine Syms "Black Vernacular: Lessons of the Tradition." Insights Design Lecture Series, Walker Art Center, March 18, 2014, http://martinesyms.com/black-vernacular-lessons-of-the-tradition/.

[118] Martine Syms, "The Curtain Raises," *Swill Children,* January 14, 2013. http://paperweight.swillchildren.org/articles/?tag=dominica-publishing.

[119] Martine Syms and Aram Moshayedi in Conversation, "The Unreliable Narrator: Martine Syms," *Mousse* 49 (Summer 2015), http://moussemagazine.it/martine-syms-aram-moshayedi-2015/, accessed February 20, 2017.

biometrics: “The point for this discussion is the alliance between visually rendered ideas and linguistic utterances. And this leads into the social and political nature of received knowledge as it is revealed in American literature. Knowledge, however mundane and utilitarian, plays about in linguistic images and forms cultural practice.”[120] It is the reading-as-production of this knowledge which allows for the altered reproduction of images. In an artwork, this reading is not only done by the artist, but in equal measure by the viewer or reader. But how precisely does this image-reproduction of bodies of data work?

The phrase “The Queen’s English” refers to standard or correct English, a kind of ideal language. Like Glissant’s description of the French language, it implies the existence of a universal, “right” language. It represents the universal social order of civic humanism, of which man is the center, and which is reproduced by the Queen’s royal “we”. The notion of the “Vernacular,” then, is related to that of the “Mundane.” Martine Syms released a manifesto to accompany her work in video form in 2015, entitled *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto*.[121] In the video, her own reading of the manifesto text in a studio-like setting is interspersed with in-depth interviews with four Southern California artists engaged with problems of representation—novelist Tisa Bryant, musician/producer Delroy Edwards, film programmer Erin Christovale and visual artist Nicole Miller. Referencing Afrofuturism, the manifesto’s stated aim is to “look for a new framework for Black diasporic production.”[122] The figure of the Bibliographer as laid out in the previous paragraph allows for a reading of Afrofuturism as a form of prospective bibliography. In her film, Syms demonstrates how the term “Afrofuturism,” which was coined by Mark Dery in 1993,[123] addresses cultural productions that read, interpret, and imagine the archives of Black Diaspora of the past toward the future.[124] Its goal is the (re)imagination of this future. This includes the activation of fantastical possibilities such as time travel, and the introduction of futuristic species that escape the bifurcation into man and its other, into Black and white. Syms’

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120 Morrison, “From Playing in the Dark,” 158.

121 Martine Syms, *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otUJvQhCjJ0, accessed December 15, 2016.

122 Ibid.

123 Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994.

124 This includes beyond Dery’s interviewees for instance the science fiction novels by Octavia Butler, and the musical work of Sun Ra.

correction to Afrofuturism in her manifesto is the introduction of the "Mundane." If the "Vernacular" belongs to the realms of the "Opaque," which occurs in the realization of a transparent language in a particular situation, the "Mundane"—as per the Oxford English dictionary—is "of this earthly world, rather than a heavenly or spiritual one."[125] I would like to suggest that in Syms' work, Afrofuturism's imagination is transformed into an embodiment—which equally aims to escape the bifurcation into man and its other, into Black and white.[126] Both the Mundane and the Vernacular inverse the movement from the universal toward the singular or the opaque; they move from the singular or opaque toward the universal. Here, in Los Angeles, California, U.S.A., space is not the place, but place is the space. This place is not a locus, no occupation, no closed analytical system, but an "excursus from the primary text"[127] in Syms' words, or a "network of words that unfold to produce a knowledge system that momentarily moves outside of itself" in Katherine McKittrick's words.[128] No-one has fantastic capacities, but everyone knows how to read. Or, as Alexander Weheliye puts it, "because Black suffering figures in the domain of the mundane, it refuses the idiom of exception."[129]

According to Syms, Black Vernacular includes for instance the techniques of double entendre (words or phrases having double meanings), call and response (a statement followed by an answering statement), and indirection (also "signifying," playing with the denotative and figurative meaning of words, for instance insulting someone to show affection).[130] June Jordan adds "minimal inflection of verb forms (*I go, he go, we go, he go*)" consistency of syntax (*you going to the store*)", "infrequent, irregular use of the possessive case," "logical use of multiple negatives within a single sentence (*You ain gone bother me no way no more, you hear?*), "other logical consistencies, such as *ours*, *his*, *theirs*, and, therefore, *mines*)."[131] All of these techniques involve

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125 "Mundane," Oxford English Dictionary, February 10, 2017. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mundane.

126 This notion of "embodiment" is perhaps related to that which Alexander Weheliye, based on his reading of Hortense Spillers, calls "flesh:" "I am not making any claims about the desirability of flesh, the unmitigated agency it contains, or how it abolishes the violent political structures at its root, but rather I investigate the breaks, crevices, movements, languages, and such found in the zones between the flesh and the law." Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 10.

127 Martine Syms, *The Queen's English*.

128 Katherine McKittrick, "Diachronic loops/deadweight tonnage/bad made measure," 13.

129 Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 10.

130 Martine Syms, "A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere," in eds. Omar Kholeif and Sarah Perks, *Fear Eats the Soul* (Manchester: Home Publications, 2016): 82.

131 June Jordan, "White English: The Politics of Language," *Black World* (August 1973): 9.

the partial view of perspectives and elements that remain non-verbal in the logic of transparent language. In fact, these techniques derive precisely from these gaps in meaning. These gaps emphasize their own factuality over that of the transparent language, much as the folds in the photographs of *Black Lesbian Caucus* and *For Nights Like This One* underline the fact of the photograph itself versus the "facts" depicted by it.

This double factuality of language or image does not imply an indisputable truth, but rather that which poet Kevin Young, a member of the Dark Room Collective in Cambridge, calls "storying" as practiced by Black communities in Louisiana, where Young grew up.[132] If someone would not tell the truth, they would not be accused of lying, rather, they would be told: "you are storying." Young's aim regarding the first half of the book is to recollect a Black literary tradition in the United States from slave narratives to the present, while the second half focuses on music. To do this, rooted in the notion of "storying," he traces "the tradition of counterfeit," a "tradition in which the freedom of fiction, of crafting one's own identity (much like the manufacture of money), allows the author a literal freedom."[133] This tradition derives from slave narratives, where it describes forged papers, and thus forged identities, that might lead into freedom. It creates loopholes for a derailing of meaning from a narrative or a truth that does not correspond with that of Black experience. It can be a specific moment in a text, or a larger counterfeit body of text in and of itself. As a figure, it is both on the inside and the outside, it inverts the white-based construction of authentication and forges Black identity by renegotiating its borders.

**The Bibliographer—Reproduction**

One of the first examples that Young uses to explain the notion of "storying" is a carte-de-visite of Sojourner Truth dating from 1864.[134] The card shows a black and white photograph, in which Soujourner Truth, who was sixty-seven years old at the time when this picture was taken, is sitting on a chair facing the camera while taking a break from her knitting work, which

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132 Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, Baltimore: Graywolf Press, 2012.

133 Ibid.

134 *Carte-de-visite*: Inexpensively produced photographic visiting cards showing portraits, often of society figures or celebrities, which were given away and sold at stationer's shops. See Helmut Gernsheim, "Portraiture and Genre," in *A Concise History of Photography* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965), 55-58.

she holds in her hands. On the white frame of the card mount underneath the photograph, the following words are engraved in red: “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance. SOJOURNER TRUTH.” Though this carte-de-visite is more than a pointed comment on Sekula’s concept of the shadow archive, it does not appear in his essay “The Body and the Archive” as cited earlier. Selling the shadow means refusing to reproduce the biocentric data, the racial violence of epistemological facts inscribed in her image, which also ascribe it a position in the social order replicated by the truth-apparatus of the camera and the Queen’s English: that of a formerly enslaved Black woman, who was not in the position to sell anything, but rather could be sold and bought herself. But it is also the selling of the shadow that allows her to support the substance. I do not wish to reiterate the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s slightly dismissive description of the photograph, except for one sentence, which reads: “More than most sitters, Sojourner Truth is both the actor in the picture’s drama and its author, and she used the card mount to promote and raise money for her many causes.”


Fig. 14 Sojourner Truth, *I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance*, 1864.

As a circulating commodity, this shadow's data not only "raises money for her causes," but it also multiplies this body, it enters into correspondence with other texts, accumulates meaning, repeats and circulates endlessly, adds interpretative layers, can be worn like a limb on a body. If Syms points out how New Media is based on manufacture in the sense of "a process or context that provides repetition,"[135] then the Bibliographer's repetitive manual labour can be that of posting, sharing, and reframing, as Lauren Cornell observes.[136] Knitting, like generating a bibliography, is repetitive labour. However, here this knitting is no longer contributing to the accumulation of value towards someone else's profit. Knitting, like bibliography, also crafts a collective body in the circulation of this image. Neither Sojourner's shadow nor this collective body can be reduced to the biometric apparatus of the camera or the preformatted grid of Social Media. It is neither clearly a physical body (substance) nor a body of data (shadow), but comes into existence in the tension between both, as a new fact.

The lecture "Black Vernacular: Lessons of the Tradition," which Syms delivered at the Walker Art Center on March 18, 2014 was based on the five lessons of the Black tradition woven throughout Young's *Grey Album*. These lessons were also the basis of a series of 30 second videos by Martine Syms commissioned by the Walker Art Center, to which she added further lessons. They were later inserted to the above mentioned sitcom-pilots as their "commercials." For the ICA exhibition in London in 2016, this series was presented as a long, incomplete poem in 180 sections, of which forty-five have been completed so far. As linguistic sentences, the first five lessons also appear on Dominica Publishing's website. Through the various forms in which it appears, associated with the places, institutions and people it connects, Syms' work not only gradually forms a body from its sites of production and dissemination, but also from the vast pool of references, relationships and conversations that this production instigates and maintains, such as the collaboration with Cait Roif and Jeff Cain in *The Queen's English*, the interview partners of the *Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto*, and all the authors and editors who contribute to the material body of Dominica Publishing, with many overlaps between the three. In this way, reading becomes a reciprocal process, in which meaning is continuously added and altered, and, not to forget, returned.

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135 Martine Syms, **"**Black Vernacular: Reading New Media.**"**

136 Lauren Cornell, "Martine Syms: Reading Trayvon Martin, accessed February 10, 2017. http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/reading-trayvon-martin-by-martine-syms.

**The Reproduction of We**

The first of Young's five lessons is: "What we claim, we are."[137] In Syms' vocabulary, Young's "we" turns into a "you:" "What *you* claim, *you* are" [emphasis added].[138] Both Young and Syms address a Black audience. However, this audience cannot be predetermined, it is not a given measure. In the tradition of (illicit) counterfeiting Young's *we* can be understood as a counter to the Queen's royal "we." This royal "we" (hypotext) places collectivity as a given, reproducing its sameness (hypertext), as does the hegemonic white singular "public" of the United States.[139] The exclusivity of this given collectivity produces a social body based on a biocentric script and its common properties. Syms is aware of this script in her address to a reader. For in order to arrive at identifications that do not reproduce this script and its racial imaginary and violence, it is this social body itself that needs to be continuously reproduced: "from ontogeny [the coming into being of an individual] to sociogeny [the coming into being of a society], from *Être* to *Étant*."[140] Bibliography is a social process. Like Blas, Syms employs opacity, the shadow, the invisible but nevertheless present, the irreducible as "both a tactic and a material condition in order to address two intertwined concerns of our time: technological control and embodied materiality," but without situating this opacity "in contrast with identity politics' claim to visibility as a political platform."[141]

In *The Queen's English*, which draws on Black feminist thought, identity is the very body which opacity constructs. Its visibility—including visibility as a body of work—is based on Black Vernacular, which is able to recode the biocentric script of this visibility. It is a Black body, and I cannot speak for it. But I do question if a discourse that continues to reduce the shades of visibility and invisibility that the reproduction of this script produces as traced throughout this thesis does actually generate the collectivity of what Blas describes as a "radically democratic project,"[142] or if it does not rather reproduce and perpetuate the sameness of "we." Similarly, any theory concerned with reproduction—including those of artists' publication and feminist theories

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137 Keving Young, *Grey Album*, 91.

138 *Dominica Publishing*, accessed March 14, 2017, http://www.dominicapublishing.com.

139 See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80 and Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York: Zone Books, 2005.

140 Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man," 646.

141 Blas, "Opacities: An Introduction," 150.

142 Zach Blas, "Opacities: An Introduction," 150.

of reproduction as briefly outlined in the introduction—needs to consider its own blind spots with regards to the reproduction of this script and its visual representations and embodiments.

Also in *The Queen's English,* reproduction, which manifests itself as the activity of reading, is not a duplication. In her reading of Robert's bibliography, Syms repeats bibliographer Roberts' work, but towards a different purpose. She is less concerned with the existing archive of images, than with the images that this archive produces and circulates, whereby each reader generates further images. The collective body that this reading produces, is not a concept, but a construction. This accumulation of meaning —rather than capital—eludes neoliberal biopolitical governmentality as intertwined with the logic of colonialism and its biocentric script: The figure of the Bibliographer in *The Queen's English* redefines the notion and practice of "reproduction" by understanding the term as a form of reciprocal production, rather than a replication of the same. It is through the particular ways of claiming information from the data banks and reservoirs of knowledge that a social body comes into being. In *The Queen's English*, these particular ways of claiming information are driven by the—in the order of transparent language— irreproducibility of queer Black experience and its non-verbalized elements, which calls a social body into being, and whose collectivity, forging Black life, cannot be reduced to transparent language and its unicity of "we." It inserts gaps and silences into this language's text, information, and data. It produces what Katherine McKittrick calls "diachronic loops," which "undo [the violence of] biocentric logic by looking in on it and demanding the reader contend with the ability for this logic to sustain itself."[143] June Jordan, advocating for the curricular use of Black Vernacular English in an essay for the August 1973 issue of *Black World*, suggests a redefinition of the "we:" "Power belongs to the ones who can determine the use, abuse, rejection, definition/redefinition of the words—the messages—we must try to send to each other."[144] The immeasurability of Black Vernacular requires other parameters than the units of man and its other. It is the very force that can recode the biocentric script of the Queen's English, by breaking up its text in its reading, and thus enabling reproduction as renewal: "What You Claim, You Are".

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143 Katherine McKittrick, "Diachronic loops," 15.

144 June Jordan, "White English: The Politics of Language," 4.

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