ӨMISFÉRICA

Framing Whiteness

Coco Fusco

The act of visualizing and looking at racial difference continues to seduce and enthrall American viewers, whether or not the racial discourse is objective, and whether or not all Americans even agree on the existence of racism. The sheer volume of racial imagery that has been and continues to be produced for private consumption, public education and entertainment, erotic stimulation, and aesthetic appreciation signals that America's attraction to race exceeds the boundaries of a discussion of institutional racism. In that sense, it is possible and indeed probable that we like to *see* race even if we don't consider ourselves racist. Some would hold that consuming racial imagery proves one's love for the other or is a substitute for engagement with the social and political realities of race relations. Others argue that the inclusion of images of nonwhite people in mainstream media and art indicates that racism is over and race is no longer salient. Serious discussion of the meaning of our desire to *see* race in visual representation is impeded by the difficulties we have in distinguishing between racialization as a visual process, and racism as an ethical and political dilemma.

It is fairly clear that race as a measurement of inferiority could be deployed to legitimize colonization and slavery, and to defend segregation, xenophobia, and imperialist adventurism. Sociologist Michael Banton notes that theories of white superiority were most prevalent between 1890 and 1920, a period when European colonialism was at its zenith (Banton 1987: 76): Jim Crow reigned in the American South; the U.S. government's genocidal campaign against Native Americans had been completed; and the Spanish-American War brought Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines under U.S. control. What is less obvious is how whiteness makes itself visible photographically, even when racial difference is clearly delineated and legally enforced, as it was during that period. Many historical exhibitions have limited the issue of whiteness in photography to images of white ethnics—Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants who emigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and who underwent a process of Americanization that broadened the category of whiteness beyond its original Anglo-Saxon Protestant base. However, in his book *White*, British cultural theorist Richard Dyer explains that the centrality of whiteness in Western visual culture depends on Christian ideas about incarnation and embodiment, specifically the notion that white people are *more than* bodies (Dyer 1997: 1-41; see also Dyer 2003).

Whereas systems of racial classification from the eighteenth century onward reduced people of color to the corporeal, whiteness was understood as a spirit that manifests itself in a dynamic relation to the physical world. Whiteness, then, does not need to be made visible to be present in an image; it can be expressed as the spirit of enterprise, as the power to organize the material world, and as an expansive relation to the environment. We might consider some of the photographs in the exhibition that mythologize the

construction of the transcontinental railroad and the opening of the Panama Canal in relation to these concepts of whiteness. Michael Heizer's earthwork *Double Negative* and its aestheticized "opening" of southwestern lands as a heroic gesture, and John Baldessari's *California Map Project* could also be reconsidered in light of Dyer's formulations. Similarly, Richard Misrach's photographs of the U.S. Navy bombing exercises in the Nevada desert—territory considered sacred by the Northern Paiute— provides a chilling coda to the triumphal version of the history of American expansionism.

Dyer underscores the centrality of images of the conquest of the West and of the metaphor of borders to the formation of white American identity. Postcards such as William S. Prettyman's *The Race* (1907) helped to draw whites to areas being opened for settlement. The image shows scores of white men on horseback dashing across a field in Oklahoma, presumably carrying the marks they would use to stake out their own plot of land. Eugene Omar Goldbeck's 1926 panoramic view of a row of armed U.S. Immigration officers at the Texas-Mexico border merges notions of white authority with the right to territorial control of the United States. Don Bartletti's photo of the 1991 "Light Up The Border" campaign in Southern California with its motto "Control Immigration or Lose America," an expression of white backlash against the perceived threat of illegal immigration, shows how the expansive urge to take over land is now recast as a frantic plea to hold onto it.

Dyer also points out how crucial cowboys were to the construction of white masculinity. It bears emphasizing here that the dominant cultural representation of cowboys as white men supported by Indian scouts—the stuff of Hollywood Westerns—obscures the historical evidence of the widespread existence of black, Native American, and Mexican cowboys, and the Mexican origins of cowboy culture. Richard Prince's postmodern reframing of the cowboy icon in his "Marlboro Man" series leaves this aspect of history untouched. On the other hand, Isaac Julien's video *The Long Road to Mazatlan* underscores the intercultural dimensions of what is often conceived of as a quintessentially American cultural identity. Nonetheless, because whiteness is distinguishable from embodiment, it is a somewhat mercurial category. Whiteness often requires otherness to become visible. In other words, white people look whiter when there are nonwhite people around them. Whiteness can also be articulated as the capacity to masquerade as a racial other without actually being one. Whiteness emerges most clearly when it can mold others into imitations of itself.

By the early twentieth century, it had become more expedient and socially productive for official propaganda to stress the legitimacy of reasoned rule, and to present white Americanness as a civilizing force. The notion of whiteness as an implicit normative code of appearance pervades the before-and-after photographs of black and Native American children "saved" by assimilationist boarding schools education. Photographs taken during the Puerto Rican Reconstruction campaign illustrated the view that the "backward" Puerto Rican peasantry lived in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions that could be remedied by proper instruction in modern American ways, including methods of personal hygiene that would enable them to work as servants in the United States. These

performances of civilized, industrious, and patriotic behavior would become the basis for many contemporary artists' ironic commentaries on the psychosocial dynamics of inclusion. Tseng Kwong Chi's well known self-portraits in a Mao suit posting with American icons that range from the Twin Towers to Mickey Mouse, and Pedro Meyer's image of a man clinging to the face of the Statue of Liberty are but two of many examples of the playful and at times sardonic repositioning of national icons characteristic of a great deal of photography about cultural identity from the 1980s and 1990s.

During the period when dominant political forces endorsed racial hierarchies by means of photographic illustration of "objective" principles, and a burgeoning entertainment industry capitalized on the spectacle of racial difference as a panorama of archetypal polarities and human oddities, antiracist efforts, quite logically, sought to visualize the immorality of racism with documentary "evidence" of its deleterious effects. Most of what is identified by American audiences in the post-Civil Rights era as "photography about race" is more precisely defined as documentary photography about racism. Scores of socially engaged documentarians throughout the twentieth century have produced a vast archive of photographs that link inequality with injustice, and that foreground the merits of the racially oppressed with images that elegize their dignity and will to resist in the face of adversity.

The finest examples of this counter-hegemonic humanism are distinguishable from what Allan Sekula describes as the liberal humanism of the Cold War period epitomized by the photographs chosen by Edward Steichen for *The Family of Man*. The works I am interested in suggest an antiuniversalist politics of race and foreground the impact of racism on the raced individual. The most visually striking images render race relations as a poetic drama about political idealism in the subaltern population. I am thinking here of the poignancy of Roy DeCarava's teenaged black girl in a party gown who stands alone in a garbage strewn lot looking at a billboard advertisement for a Chevrolet sedan; the quiet defiance of Horace Poolaw's relative as she stands before a sign in a field that says "Stop State Law"; and the remarkable intimacy of Don Normark's view of a Mexican-American migrant worker who, four years after World War II, still wears his soldier cap as he prepares his breakfast. In works such as these, the visual contrasts are not about ritualized role play—they detail how subaltern people negotiate their subjection, not just in public confrontations but also in orchestrated private moments.

Postmodern critique of documentary realism has focused on the fallacy of the logic that asserts that positive images can refute negative ones. The premise of the critique is that photographs are representations, not unmediated documents of preexisting realities, and therefore positive images are no truer than negative ones—no picture can "tell it like it is." While I do not dispute that assertion, I would suggest that it has at times led to the problematic assumption that documentary realism is inherently nonreflexive. This hypothesis does not give sufficient consideration to how the subjects of a photograph, not just its maker, may self-consciously construct the "real." This is not so much a matter of whether, in the early days of photography, nonwhite people reinvented themselves in commissioned studio portraits, just as whites did. I am more concerned here with

pointing out that counterhegemonic humanism entailed a self-conscious politics of realism. In the early twentieth century, Leigh Raiford notes, the NAACP appropriated the postcards taken for whites of lynchings and used them in their antilynching campaigns. They also sponsored "Beautiful Baby" contests and commissioned portraits of the winners for black magazines. Gordon Park's 1963 photograph of Malcolm X holding up a photograph of a murdered black man suggests an awareness of the power of a carefully chosen iconic image to shape a discourse on reality, rather than an unquestioning faith in photographic indexicality.

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