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Surface-becoming: Lyle Ashton Harris and brown jouissance

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This essay analyzes Lyle Ashton Harris’s large-format Polaroid, *Billie #21*, as a site to think about the epistemological transformations that surface thinking or thinking with the flesh enables. It does so by focusing on the surface aesthetics of shine, Harris’s citation of Holiday, and the politics of engaging with black femininity. These surface tensions, the essay argues, show us ways to think about the relationship between self, performativity, and brown jouissance – that mysterious fleshiness that resists legibility but hovers on the surface.

Keywords: Jouissance; black femininity; Lyle Ashton Harris; Polaroid; citation; becoming-woman

An image rises to the surface as if by magic. We see flecks of white slowly emerge. They become shimmering accents indicating the fullness of lips, the edges of teeth, the tip of a nose, the crease of an eyelid, or the sheen of pearls in an image that resolves into that of a head tilted slightly back with eyes closed and mouth sighed open. The shallow focus foregrounds shine while the rest of the image – shoulders backlit and covered with a fur stole – is hazy. This is Lyle Ashton Harris’s *Billie #21*, one of a series of performative self-portraits from Harris’s 2002 series “Billie, Boxers, and Better Days.” In addition to Holiday, Harris includes photographs of himself in the guise of Josephine Baker, a bloodied boxer, and other iconic images of black performers from the early twentieth century. Taken together, the series features an array of gender performances, which Anna Deavere Smith (2004) describes as “an improvisation. As jazz” (1). But it is *Billie #21* that I chose to focus on because it sits at the crossing of multiple aspects of thinking about the surface. It shows us surface aesthetics in its emphasis on shine; it uses the surface technology of large-format Polaroid; and it shows us surface transformation in its citation of Holiday. These surface tensions add up to more than superficiality, however, they show us something about the relationship between self, performativity, and brown jouissance – that mysterious fleshiness that resists legibility but hovers on the surface.

In *Billie #21*, it is significant that many of the elements that shine — pearls, eye shadow, and lipstick — decorate or cover Harris’ body. They alter its surface and also make a spectacle of these superficial alterations. Taken together these attributes emphasize the ways that surface hints at the pleasures of opacity. This follows Anne Anlin Cheng’s (2011) argument that the twentieth-century fascination with surface emerges from a fetishization of transparency and “the mysteries of the visible” (1). In other words, we can understand surface as the underside of the scientific/pornographic drive toward locating knowledge in an “objective”

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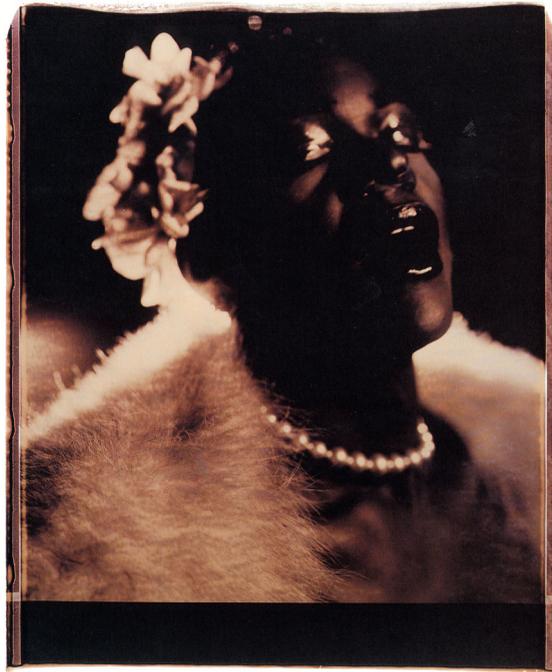


Figure 1. Lyle Ashton Harris, *Billie #21* (2002). Courtesy of the artist.

image. In contradistinction with the ideology of objectivity and transparency, flirting with the surface, Cheng asserts, can lead to “profound engagements with and reimaginings of the relationship between interiority and exteriority, between essence and covering” (11). This means that surface offers the possibility of doubleness, troubling transparency and the idea of authenticity. In this way, surface complicates categorization because it confounds ideas of what knowledge is, where it lies, and how we can apprehend it. Cheng writes that the problem of the modern surface is “distinguishing decoration as surplus from what is ‘proper’ to the thing” (29).

Shine also complicates matters because of the way that it is imbricated in representations of blackness. Krista A. Thompson (2015) argues that the popularity of shine in black diasporic art has to do with its ability to thwart intimacy. Shine distracts from the mandate of transparency and mobilizes hypervisibility – the cover of surface — so that interiorities remain opaque. Thompson argues that shine enables an “un-visibility,” so that blackness is spectacular, but not knowable. Shine, however, is also explicitly linked to the commodity and the history of the commodification of brown bodies. Thompson argues that shine calls attention to the excess of materiality that commodification entails. In particular, she describes shine as “a distinct aesthetic of material excess ... [that] highlights the spectacular display of material surplus” (24). By drawing attention to this material excess, however, shine illuminates the possibilities of resistance – namely un-visibility –

that emerge when we think with the commodity. Un-visibility is what happens when we turn commodification and objectification on its head. In other words, shine makes it difficult to separate the fleshiness of black bodies from the materiality of the decorative. This calls into question the separateness of the categories of person and thing without embracing any of the negative affects of commodification. Shine plays joyfully with the idea of the body as body while rejecting the demand to present anything other than surface. Thompson writes: “In many respects, we might see the fascination with adorning and picturing the body’s surface in jewels, the taking-on of the shame of things, as a type of screen” (33).

That Harris makes shine the focus of *Billie #21*, then, can be read as a form of resistance to an “intimacy” mandated by dictates of white supremacy – even and especially in Negrophilia – which is explicitly the focus of Harris’s series. There are, however, other intimacies, albeit murky ones, afire in the photograph; most notably the image allows us to imagine that we are seeing an intimate glimpse of Holiday. Intimate because we can imagine that we are glimpsing Holiday in ecstasy. The closed eyes are signs of a private reverie while the open mouth suggests excess. These are pleasures that cannot be contained; their expression exceeds the frame. We might, for example, begin to imagine that we know some of these private pleasures because we have a concept of Holiday and her life. We might ask if this is the Holiday of Emerson’s Bar and Grill — high and drunk, stumbling and slurring words and emotions as she remembers a history in the limelight and the various betrayals, arrests, and addictions that altered her trajectory toward stardom. Is this the Holiday of Carnegie Hall – wounded and rambling and so eager for a comeback that she accidentally punctured her head with a hatpin attached to the gardenias? Is this a younger Holiday, just beginning to sing in jazz clubs after a youth spent in brothels? Holiday is iconic; her voice famously layers pain and yearning. *Billie #21* indexes these histories of wounded fleshiness even as it allows us to imagine an inhabitation that exists in excess of them, an excess in the voice, an excess of selfhood that cannot be fully subsumed by her iconicity and public self. But, it is important to remember that the excess that we do witness is performed by Harris.

Performing Otherness in and through black femininity

Harris’s description of *Billie #21* as a performative self-portrait puts him in conversation with Judith Butler and her theorization of performativity. While arguing that gender is integral to the formation of the subject because it produces legibility, Butler (1990) argues that it is not an inherent attribute of the subject. Rather gender is the product of repeated acts that coalesce into masculinity/femininity and male/female. What we imagine to be a coherent inner core of gender identification or subjectivity is actually a product of these practices of citation. Importantly, these performances are compulsory, largely under-thought, and driven by a “passionate attachment” to subjectivity (Butler 1997). Butler’s theorization of the citational self has to do with the way these acts aggregate into the idea of a coherent subject with depth. Harris’s performance in *Billie #21* works antithetically to the idea of coherence in its attachment to surface. Further, knowing that Holiday is not Harris’s final destination – the other photographs in this series feature other performances of black iconicity – allows us to see that Harris is not necessarily interested in producing Holiday (or himself as Holiday) as a coherent self – even as an avatar – in relation to psychic interiority.

Instead, Harris as Holiday is but one momentary surface that we contend with. In this way, Harris's vision of the citational self works to reveal the spaces of otherness within the self.

This production of the mysterious self is in keeping with Amelia Jones's (2002) analysis of the work that performative self-portraits do. She argues that by "exaggerating their performances of themselves, [performative self-portraits] explore the capacity of the self-portrait photograph to foreground the 'I' as other to itself, the artistic subject as 'taking place' in the future through interpretive acts that bring her or him back to life via memory and desire" (950). What Jones means by this is that these versions of self-portraiture go beyond mere representation and mark creative forms of expressivity that reveal forms of self that exceed capture. In this way, the photograph becomes what Jones describes as a "*technology of embodiment*, and yet one that paradoxically points to our tenuousness and incoherence as living embodied subjects" (950). The force of *Billie #21*, then, emerges in our recognition that the photograph is explicitly not revealing Harris's interiority, but that it instead illuminates the possibility of reading Harris as a plural self both in relation to Holiday through his performance of citation *and* in relation to the otherness of himself that he summons.

Harris's citation of Holiday is not just about his relationship to her; it is also about black femininity and understanding the way it functions as a space of otherness within Harris's formulation of selfhood. In describing Harris's work, Anna Deavere Smith (2004) positions Harris's approach to black femininity as part of his self-narration, but his relationship to it is complex. In an essay that accompanies this series, she writes: "If you know Lyle, you know that he says a lot of words very quickly. One such string of words was, 'A sissy by five, a faggot by seven, a bitch by twelve, a cunt by eighteen. These were all called to me'" (2). In these phrases we see that black femininity is both an entity that coalesces into violence because it emerges in the sexual pejoratives thrown upon him by others and an entity that operates as a resource for his selfhood, that he wants to inhabit. This duality illuminates the way that the idea of otherness hovers around black femininity itself.

This otherness is not just the otherness that comes from the performative self-portrait. It is an otherness produced by racism and phallogentrism. It is an otherness that makes it difficult to hold blackness and gender differentiation together so that femininity and blackness are not concepts that are at odds with each other. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar," Hortense J. Spillers ([1987] 2003) unpacks the precise maneuverings that lead to black female flesh being produced as a transit point between animality and subjectivity. The transatlantic slave trade, Spillers argues, is what transforms bodies, which is to say entities within the symbolic order, into flesh: "Before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the crush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography ... we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding" (227). Black bodies become flesh through violence and blackness becomes equated with depersonalization, non-subjectivity, and thingness. This is also a deeply gendered process, Spillers argues, in which black women become estranged from femininity because they are denied the symbolic space of the mother and assigned to the category of materiality. This fleshiness circulates within the realm of objectification, but does not grant black women even the imaginarity of interiority. As such, Spillers (1984) describes black women as "the beached whale of the sexual universe" (74). This is to

say that black femininity exists outside of the symbolic order, which is part of the territory that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ([1988] 2010) maps out in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where she argues that the subaltern cannot make herself known because Eurocentric and phallogocentric projections leave no space for her otherness.

While black femininity is not interchangeable with black women, Spillers’s comment that black women lack access to conventional discourses of sexuality allows us to see that femininity as a gendered term is wrapped up in particular ideologies of what constitutes being desired and desiring. To argue that black women do not have access to femininity is to say that they are not imagined to possess desire. This seeming contraction is what leads Denise Ferreira da Silva (2013) to argue that the sexual female racialized body presents a particular form of disruptive excess. This body is excessive because it inhabits the space of desiring even as it emerges from a structure that presumptively negates access to desire and interiority. This form of inhabitation has no mode of expression within the realm of the linguistic, however. She describes this “preposed excess” as “the violence that is desire itself and the desire that is violence, not subjected to the rules of Colonial and Patriarchal (re)production” (52). This excess exists on the side of the Thing: “Here the body is a figuring of an unrepresentable/unregulated desire which ... does not refigure the sovereign (the prime figuring of self-determination) but remains without the legal-moral order and without economic and symbolic production, as a figuring of The Thing” (53).

Reading Spillers, Spivak, and da Silva together, then, we come toward understanding black femininity as closely connected to the flesh, objectification, and Thingness and exterior (other) to discourses of sovereign subjectivity and the symbolic. We see this fleshiness of black femininity, this refusal of a linguistic imperative toward speech, and sensual excess in *Billie #21*. By explicitly aligning himself with black femininity, Harris emphasizes his relationship with otherness. To take up Holiday even momentarily is to foreground his inhabitation of sissy, faggot, bitch, and cunt. These words are indicative of black femininity’s relationship to objectification and proximity to violence. To position them in explicit dialogue with Holiday is to make central the ways that black femininity is experienced in relation to woundedness – even as it gestures toward the resistive possibilities of excess.

Surface transformations and surface technologies

Though we might understand this movement toward black femininity as a form of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe as becoming-woman, Harris is performing something else. His explicit invocation of black femininity and fleshiness challenges the assumed (and impossible) gendered and raced neutrality upon which becoming-woman relies (Spivak [1988] 2010).¹ Harris uses his citation of Holiday to illustrate the pull of otherness that black femininity produces. This is why it is important that his transformation is so surface – enacted through make-up and surgical tape. This is also not a performance of becoming. Harris does not become-Holiday in that he does not inhabit her worldview or positionality; instead he cites her – positioning his body alongside hers so that we might read the image to understand their mutual investment in black femininity. Though becoming-woman or becoming-minor is not about inhabiting interiority or claiming psychic depth, it does rely on a particular form of sincerity in that we approach the possibility of woman or minor as a concrete possibility. What Harris’s citation of Holiday shows us,

on the other hand, is the ways in which black femininity is always fluid, always shifting and never quite attainable. In its impermanence, the transformation that Harris enacts is not sincere because it does not have depth, but surface in that it relies on and highlights the mutability of the flesh rather than interiority. This position enlarges what we understand as black femininity. It also, importantly, gives us a way to understand citation as a mode of inhabitation that shifts the dimensions of selfhood. One does not become, but rather one sits alongside the other in citation. This alongsideness, in turn, makes it impossible to think of Harris's self-portrait as displaying a sovereign self. Instead, *Billie #21* shows us Holiday and Harris in relation, as a plural self.

Through posture, gloss, surgical tape, and props, Harris's citation of Holiday mid-song on stage gives Harris a way to illustrate the particular parameters of race, gender, and sexuality that make his body and his mode of inhabiting the world legible while also providing him with a blueprint for exploring what exceeds this frame. I use the word citation because it helps us to see the transgenerationality of their relationship and it allows us to understand the relationship as one that relies on fleshiness and surface. Harris uses surgical tape to reshape his nose, so that he appears more similar to Holiday. Likewise, the other superficial elements of his performance can be located in his use of pearls, flowers, and make-up. These help us to merge Harris and Holiday visually, but citation is a deeper act. It is an act that requires Harris to read Holiday – which is to say to attempt to understand her, her life, her experience, and to translate those elements using his flesh into something that we can understand. This is not about exchange – Holiday cannot borrow from Harris, but Harris links his body to hers in a way that emphasizes gesture as a mode of knowledge transmission – or objectification because Harris puts his body on the line not so that we can produce Holiday as object but so that we can imagine inhabitation. This gesture may be connected to Holiday as icon, but it is manifest in Harris as body, as interpreter. Citation, then, allows us to ponder what exactly one inhabits when one borrows from Holiday – what comes from Harris and what comes from Holiday and what do we do with this trans-temporal merging of corporeality? That this citation is articulated through the form of a Polaroid draws our attention to the fleshiness of time.

The Polaroid delivers immediacy. In 1947, its inventor, Edwin Land hailed the technology as “one-step photography” because it removed the need for the dark room by moving photographic processing to the surface. When one takes a Polaroid, chemicals wash over paper and the image reveals itself after several minutes (or seconds – depending on the actual camera used). In contrast to previous methods of making photographs, then, the Polaroid offers both the glimpse and experience of the instant. This speed, in turn, reveals that the representation of the instant belongs to the surface. The Polaroid cannot promise to represent depth, it only skims the surface of the world, making visible immediately the endless possibilities of movement and images that are attached to what Kaja Silverman (2015) might describe as an analogy, representation that reveals the flesh of the world. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard (1988) understands the Polaroid as illuminating the surface of reality. He writes:

The ecstasy of the Polaroid is of the same order: to hold the object and its image almost simultaneously as if the conception of light of ancient physics or metaphysics, in which each

object was thought to secrete doubles or negatives of itself that we pick up with our eyes has become a reality.

It is a dream. It is the optical materialization of a magical process. The

Polaroid photo is a sort of ecstatic membrane that has come away from the real object. (37)

In Baudrillard's description of the Polaroid as "an ecstatic membrane," we see that in addition to revealing the relationship between the surface and the instant, reading the Polaroid as a surface technology brings forth the relationship between the Polaroid and singularity and the relationship between singularity and intimacy. The Polaroid's singularity, as Peter Buse (2007) describes it, has to do both with the lack of a negative, which ensures no possibility of replication, and the image's mutability before the dyes set more permanently. It is this singularity that leads Buse to argue that the Polaroid image rearranges the relationship between subject and object by capturing an image without the process of objectification. Buse writes: "Intimacy in the Batailleian sense, is an impossible immanence, a conjunction of immediacy and proximity. This is what the Polaroid often promises, when it is asked to signify" (42). Buse's enthusiasm for the Polaroid's intimacy is important because it emphasizes the form's relationship to materiality. If this were merely a question of immediacy, we would be entering the realm of the digital, but the Polaroid's insistence on the material object of the photograph in conjunction with its commitment to surface produces another thing altogether. It produces at an understanding of the world and time as fleshiness, a sensual quality that emanates from and exceeds materiality. This is to say that we experience time as material in a particular way that allows us to understand it as an infinite set of layers or surfaces.

In this way, citationality is an explicit manipulation of the layering of different moments of temporality. The Polaroid, after all, captures just the surface of fleshiness and citation produces a non-linear path through these temporalities. Through citation, time becomes legible as surface, material, and fleshy. By positioning his fleshiness alongside Holiday's, by drawing on her complex history of loss and pain, and by attaching himself to it, Harris is moving toward the way that citation alters what we understand as the self and what constitutes excess.

Fleshy excess and the question of brown jouissance

Excess, I argue, disrupts already articulated forms of thought by revealing the largeness of what cannot begin to be conceived. This is the territory that Alexander G. Weheliye articulates as "alternative modes of life alongside the violence, subjection, exploitation, and racialization that define the modern human" (2) in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Weheliye 2014). It is the strategic deployment of "excess flesh," which empathizes the faulty notions of a "'visual truth' of blackness by representing excess and fantasy" that Nicole Fleetwood (2011, 29) describes in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. Da Silva argues that we position the destabilization of excess that black femininity offers alongside Luce Irigaray, writing: "Irigaray's 'female lover' is a productive critical tool because she is also in her flesh, in which her uncomprehensible desire, that sexual which is the female's unresolvable (undeterminable, unpredictable, unmeasurable) power. What can she allow us to say that

has not been said before?" (55–56). Da Silva draws on Irigaray because her critique of phallocentrism insists on positioning the body as the site of excess. Instead of a linguistic rejoinder to masculinity, she offers the power of the body and its materiality. Since black femininity must already be thought outside of the space of traditional femininity, which is to say an order of thought outside of a symbolic order dominated by masculinity, it offers us the possibility of thinking about the relation between subject and object differently. This reordering, which da Silva describes as "a power other than the sovereign's . . . one that is beyond and before the re/productive capabilities of the fe/male native/slave body. It is always already defined in a given – economic and symbolic – productive regime: as object, other, or commodity," tells us what it is to take up Thingness, otherness, and objectification in order to build a self (Da Silva 2013, 49–50, 52). It tells us that willfully existing as flesh is not only to challenge the subject/object binary, but to de-prioritize the sovereign subject in favor of thinking about the multiple possibilities of selfhood that circulate around the Thing, the Other, and the object.

This Thingness is especially highlighted by Harris's use of surgical tape, which functions, in my reading, as the image's punctum, its affective center. This small matte strip partially sutures Harris's nostrils, narrowing his nose so that his face more closely approximates Holiday's. I focus on this strip of tape because it shows not only the superficiality of Harris's transformation, but also its temporariness. This citation is momentary; it does not settle into identity, but rather works to illuminate the contours of fleshiness as they pass through the circuit of black femininity. The tape offers momentary containment and legibility, gesturing toward a world without tape – a world of excess flesh – and highlighting the importance of mutability for thinking of the relationship between materiality and selfhood.

This, I argue, leads us toward brown *jouissance*. Importantly, this is not the *jouissance* of self-shattering, but it offers a way to think about the strategic possibilities of fleshiness. Following Lacan, I take *jouissance* to be the experience of being a body, what Néstor Braunstein (2003) in his interpretation of Lacan describes as "positivity, it is a 'something' lived by a body when pleasure stops being pleasure. It is a plus, a sensation that is beyond pleasure" (104). *Jouissance*, then, can be understood as excess sensation. Lacan describes it as the feeling of being a Thing, but when we think about the relationship between fleshiness, which is also about feeling the body's materiality, and *jouissance*, we see that there are other power relations at work. Namely, when we think about black femininity and fleshiness, we are not just thinking about the Thingness that one feels, but also about the webs of objectification that one is ensnared in and the agential and relational possibilities – what I think of as selfhoods – that emerge from this existence. As such, brown *jouissance* exists in the oscillation between self, object, and Thing. I emphasize this admixture of relationships to agency, desire, and coherence because it positions brown *jouissance* as strategic, rather than undirected. One might say that brown *jouissance* is a deliberate reveling in Thingness, but it still remains bound to the external mechanisms of desire, which form the conditions of objectification, and the possibilities of expressivity, which are contained in flesh's mobility.

In brown *jouissance*'s emphasis on the mobility of flesh, we are given an opportunity to tap into its creative potential. Flesh moves; it is always in motion. Its mobility gives us ways to imagine otherwise because it emphasizes the contingency and liquidity of the world. This is to say that it reminds us that flesh is produced on a sea voyage in the waves that separate

continents and countries. It is in the violence of the whip that extracts blood, which renders people closer to animals than humans. It is in the tears that accompany the severing of families. Most tellingly, the beached whale – black female sexuality – is the animal deprived of its life-sustaining liquid. I position this emphasis on movement alongside recent work in new materialisms that aims to articulate the specificities of fleshiness in terms of race and gender and to find ways to work with difference without falling back into the difficulties of inclusion and wounded subjectivity. Here, I suggest we think Mel Y. Chen's (2012) use of animacy, Uri McMillan's (2015) theorization of avatars, and Kyla Wazana Tompkin's (2012) analytics of eating as pointing us toward incorporating movement into thinking the flesh. The series of verbs and adjectives that these theorists offer brings us toward the particular forms of sensuality and spectacle that the liquidity of flesh allows us to probe.

When we read for movement, for the oscillations between Thing, object, and self, we see the Thingness of Harris's flesh, the objectification that hovers around Holiday and Harris, and the plural self that emerges from this movement. Citation, then, is Harris's mode of producing brown jouissance and *Billie #21* shows us brown jouissance in several ways. It summons the ghost of Holiday's performances of brown jouissance by eliciting our anticipation of and nostalgia for her. Most immediately, however, Harris's explicit citation of Holiday offers us a glimpse of his brown jouissance in this inhabitation of the space alongside Holiday. Finally, I see *Billie #21* as a material manifestation of brown jouissance itself in that its presence as an artifact, as a Polaroid, as a performative self-portrait, gives us its own entry point into the aesthetics, surface in this case, that brown jouissance traffics in. It highlights brown jouissance's refusal of a mandate of authenticity and its particular relationship to the fleshiness of the instant. Importantly, it allows us to move from brown jouissance as momentary embodiment toward imagining what alternate forms of selfhood and intimacy become legible by the capture of this moment.

In her description of *Billie #21*, Deavere Smith (2004) focuses on the motivations behind Harris' citation of Holiday. She frames this experimental inhabitation as one that centers addiction and sacrifice. She writes: "That which entrances him and haunts him about Billie Holiday is that which he longs for: the sacrifice. He is interested in her addictions. He is interested in how far Billie went. He would like to go that far [...]" (7). She concludes: "I know what I think Lyle would have to risk. He would have to risk touching the loss in black life. It's hard to touch the loss. But Lyle is trying to touch it" (7). Deavere Smith foregrounds Harris's investment in Holiday's pain as part of the precarity that surrounds black life. This renders Harris's act of citation as one of exposition – it aims to tell us something about black life. This is a citation that dwells upon Holiday's meaning for others, Holiday's position as signifier, and an exploration of what addiction and loss mean for thinking about what it is to be black. It shows us the way that the image traffics in woundedness and hovers around the territory of abjection.

If we read for fleshiness, for surface, not depth, however, we come toward thinking about the formations of selfhood in the image. This does not negate Deavere Smith's analysis, but it allows us to think about the work that Harris performs in a different light. Instead of asking whether or not this is a commentary on addiction and blackness, I want to read the parted lips as indexing hunger and ask what it might mean to understand

brown jouissance in this way. In theorizing hunger, Weheliye (2014) poses a set of questions asking how we might use the concept to imagine otherwise:

How might we read the scripture of the flesh, which abides among us “in every single approach to things,” but too often lingers in the passing quicksands of indecipherability, otherwise? What does hunger outside the world of Man feel like? It is a different hunger, or just the same as the famines created by racializing assemblages that render the human isomorphic with Man? How do we describe the sweetness that reclines in the hunger for survival? (113)

What Weheliye’s questions reveal is the way the state of hunger combines possible insatiability, joy, and freedom. This is precisely the territory of brown jouissance, and so I want to ask how we can understand a self that amalgamates around these points. I argue that hunger demands that selfhood coalesce in this state of insatiability. This reading of hunger, then, transforms the image into one where pleasure mingles with want; or, rather, there is joy and there is selfhood in finding the limitlessness of insatiability. The self that Harris presents, the self who hungers, cannot be understood through the matrix of sovereign subjectivity. This is a self-created in and through a relationality with Holiday. It is a plural self; it is not Harris performing as Holiday, but Harris using a citation of Holiday to move toward an embodiment of hunger. This tells us nothing of Holiday or Harris, but it reveals a sensuality or mode of being and relating that prioritizes an openness, vulnerability, and a willingness to ingest without necessarily choosing what one is taking in. This is not the desire born of subjectivity in which subject wishes to possess object, but an embodied hunger that takes joy and pain in this gesture of radical openness toward otherness. In contrast to an ecstasy that imagines transcending corporeality, the photograph shows us that brown jouissance resides in this mixture of self-possession, insatiability, joy, and citation that is this inhabitation of fleshiness.²

Further, to argue that hunger is the form of brown jouissance at work in the sensual excess of the photograph is also to suture Harris’s citational self and the Polaroid’s materialization of temporality to insatiability and vulnerability. It enables us to wonder whether the oscillation between Thing, object, and self that speak to hunger and its vulnerability are also structured by impermanence, layered temporality, and the plural, porous self of citation? That the aesthetic allows us to ask these questions and draw these ideas together signals its importance in making sense of the epistemological questions that emerge from brown jouissance.

Brown jouissance, I argue, gives us ways to think about the possibilities of sensuality, that amorphous quality that Spillers argues was assigned to “the captive body” – rather than sexuality – by prioritizing fleshiness. It does this by showing us that flesh’s excess produces alternate epistemologies while also allowing us to pay attention to the violence that produces flesh. We see this in Harris’s redirection of sympathy or empathy for Holiday into a meditation on hunger and selfhood. The excess of brown jouissance is what violence produces and cannot incorporate. In the case of *Billie #21*, sticking with the surface – through the use of Polaroid and shine – illuminates the possibilities of imaging a self whose interiority we do not have plumb, but who still generates creative possibilities for resisting the mandate of sovereign subjectivity.

Note on contributor

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Notes

1. Alice Jardine (1984) also criticizes Deleuze for his appropriation of the feminine position in his concept of becoming-woman. In her seminal essay “Woman in Limbo: Deleuze and His Br (others),” Jardine argues that the feminine is posited as a step towards freedom, but its materiality is never considered as a thing unto itself.
2. Jennifer Nash (2014) and José Esteban Muñoz (2009) both use the term *ecstasy* in reference to feeling beyond the self. For more on a genealogy of ecstasy see Jennifer Nash (2014), *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* and José Esteban Muñoz (2009), *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*.

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