Volumetric Black

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Abstract

I have given considerable thought to the image of black bodies in cinema and their reproductions across digital media in general. Specifically related to the digital manifestation of the varying shades and skin tones of blackness represented in everyday life and whether cinematic productions, and the technological apparatus employed to encode the images, offer an accurate representational portrayal. This research series reimagines the question and challenges the trite charge of oversimplification made by technologists—as to whether technology is inherently bias, but instead frames the question as to whether technology has inherited its bias in its conception from a homogenous workforce. And in this case, I am referring specifically to racial bias. *Coded #000000 [Black]* is a java programmed image processor built in Processing. The code analyses video pixels retrieving the W3C's established seventeen colors of hexadecimal browns, magnifying the pixels by appending them within the frame of the video for closer comparison. The program is in its third working iteration currently analyzing a 26-minute video of prerecorded black and brown skin tones. The *Coded #000000* project developed from a series of inquiries stemming from my dissertation research about issues of socioeconomic disparities and racial representations on both the front and back–ends of technology. Created as a practical exercise for furthering the theoretical research, *Coded #000000* derived from the written limitations encountered in the research document Volumetric Black. This essay imagines digital representations of equity both as a speculative history and a technologically

obtainable future. This research investigates the history of the chemical, mechanical, and digital productions of black skin tones in cinema and digital media, reexamining the histories of media–technological bias and discrimination. The fourth iteration currently in progress, will digitally reimagine an episode of *Friends* the popular 1990's American television program, with an all "#000000" cast. This project functions as part of an interventionist practice continuum that aims to foster new conversations on the future of computational media design and digital technology. These are the questions, as researchers and technologists we must not only ask ourselves, but thoughtfully respond to: Will the digital media future have diversity coded into its systems? Can we debug existing digital systems and platforms of their inherited and perpetuation of socioeconomic and racial bias?

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Is it too forward thinking to imagine a mediated experience that could represent and telecast the black body in its fullness?

Is it a futile exercise to wonder what the dominant visual culture and its corresponding industry could have been if black people had had the opportunities to define the production of cinematic experiences? To have been present in the process of the mixing of chemicals that brought us the product of celluloid that we know today and its photosensitive reactions to light. Could we envision the birth of a material substrate developed in place of, or simultaneously alongside photosensitive film stocks? A celluloid that embellishes the representation of black bodies in low light. A material substrate that distinguishes between the many

hues of blackness and registers them as seen in true life. What effect would an alternate history of this magnitude have on the way we see ourselves? I can't stop imagining the endless possibilities of a visual richness that could have been.

"When I meet a German or a Russian speaking bad French I try to indicate through gestures the information he is asking for, but in doing so I am careful not to forget that he has a language of his own, a country, and that perhaps he is a lawyer or an engineer back home. Whatever the case, he is a foreigner with different standards. There is nothing comparable when it comes to the black man. He has no culture, no civilization, and no "long historical past."—Whether he likes it or not, the black man has to wear the livery the white man has fabricated for him." [1]

This is by no means a suggestion to reduce the vibrant visual culture that has been established by the black diaspora. Not at all. This is a speculative desire to see what the diasporic aesthetic might have been if it wasn't largely predicated on the remixing and improvisations of the fragments from a euro-aesthetic left behind in the new world. In the early 1900's Oscar Micheaux, a filmmaker and producer of "Race Films", created and operated the Micheaux Film Corporation. [2]

Post-Cinematic Blackness
With his eyes set on creating black films for black audiences, starring all black casts, Micheaux made a name for himself throughout segregated black communities and urban centers. He even made a name for himself with many of the states' film advisory boards for the overt racial themes depicted in his films. Although Micheaux was successful in constructing his own narrative aesthetic for black productions—the filmic resources that he employed for these productions were the same mechanical cameras and light-sensitive film stocks used in this early time period,

devices that were never intended to film and expose black bodies as they live.

In my expansion on the speculative possibilities of a post-cinematic blackness, I lean on Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1933) among others. [3] A document whose pointed gaze appears determined to disrupt the gilded plumage of a western aesthetic through a mix of cultural sensibilities and impish impulse.

References
1. Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks trans. Richard Philcox (New York NY: Grove Press, 2008), 17.
2. Mary Carbine, "The Finest Outside the Loop: Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis 1905–1928," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, & Media Studies Vol. 8 No. 2,* (1990) 23.
3. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, In Praise of Shadows. trans. Thomas J. Harper & Edward G. Seidensticker (Sedgwick ME: Leete's Island Books, 1977).

Artist Bio
Triton Mobley is an artist, educator, and researcher in new media. Triton's research and practice studies the socioeconomic disparities of emergent technologies on marginalized communities. Triton's interventionist and guerrilla campaigns have been exhibited at Art Basel Miami, Boston, New York, and Japan. Triton has been on the frontier of secondary education for over 15 years as a new media educator, advancing its technological modernization. In 2014 he was awarded a S.T.E.A.M education research grant to the Museo Nazionale Scienza e Tecnologia Leonardo da Vinci in Milan. Triton was recently invited to give artist talks at UCLA and the AADHum Conference in Maryland respectively. Triton received an MFA from RISD in Digital+Media. He is currently a PhD candidate and Annenberg Fellow in Media Arts + Practice at USC.