

The Queen's English

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Depicting

The young woman on the large vinyl print hanging from a C-stand in the first room of *The Queen's English* by Martine Syms is looking directly into the camera, which is to say, into the eyes of the photographer or the viewer. The blown-up image is 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 of time. 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 of the image, 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.

The title of this work by Martine Syms—*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 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, a major symbolic event of the gay liberation movement. 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 by the queer community to police raids, which then were common in NYC—this time, the bar guests formed a crowd and fought back against the police. As a result, five days of protest followed this incident. The clientele of the Stonewall Inn, and hence the initiators of the Stonewall riots, largely consisted 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 politics, which included the support of like-minded liberation movements, the Gay Activist Alliance focused explicitly on gay and lesbian issues. This split between the 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 (Ng 138). 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 sexism she experienced in the Black struggle and the racism she encountered in the feminist and gay movements, including that of the Gay Activist Alliance (Duberman 233-234). The Black Lesbian Caucus was later renamed Salsa Soul Sisters, Third World Wimmin Inc. Collective (Nestle 176-187). It was one of the first organizations founded by and for lesbian women of colour in the United States.

According to bell hooks, a Black look can cause a shattering of the identity of the viewer rather than that of the depicted subject (hooks 7). 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.

Recognizing

Martine Syms defines *Recognizing* as an act of interpretation that applies a double-entendre, in that it concurrently identifies an image and pays respect to what it represents by not interpreting it. Thus, *Recognizing* allows a witness of such an interpretation to recognize the image, but it

does not allow them to recognize the interpreter, their gestures, approaches, and views. According to Syms, the methodology of *Recognizing* thus hints at how “Blackness defines itself in absence” (Syms, “Reading New Media”).

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. According to the semiotician Gérard Genette, a search term is a hypotext serving as the basis for a hypertext (Genette 5).¹ In the case of Google Images, both hypertext and hypotext are algorithmic designs based on user behaviours, e.g. numbers of entries and clicks.² 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.”³ 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” (Proulx 10). The images that appear when entering the hypotext “Black woman” or “Black women” are a part of this hypertext that generates them, a seemingly endless archive of Google images. Thus, not only are bodies 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

¹ “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.”

² Sam Gendler, Engineer in Search Infrastructure at Google, Inc., “How does Google image search engine work?,” May 6, 2016, <https://www.quora.com/How-does-Google-image-search-engine-work>.

³ Google Image Search as undertaken on December 26, 2016.

the photographic apparatus in its beginnings (Sekula 10). In the mid-nineteenth century's 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 to which they belonged. 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 category (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" (Sekula 16). In the invisible but nevertheless present shadow archive, this truth-apparatus produces its subjects as much as it organizes and dictates their positions, that seemingly only invisibility allows them to eschew.

The Queen's English

Reflecting on the experiences of making her first movie, the manifesto-documentary *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto*, Martine Syms states during an interview with McDermott:

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 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. (Syms)

What is Syms 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. As previously demonstrated, every image resulting from a Google search is part of a hypertextual archive, which alludes to a hypotext. This hypertextual archive in turn generates a *shadow archive*, in that it ascribes social positions (in the social order) to these reproductions and generalizes them. If what is being organized are reproductions of bodies, these archives can be used as part of an apparatus of social control. Since the invention of photography, Sekula’s “truth-apparatus” has been expanded by available technologies, including the Internet. technology that is 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 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 (Browne 109). 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 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. (Blas, “Opacities” 148-153)

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 of Blas’ theory, addresses language rather than visuality or visibility. 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.⁴ 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, mistaking it for the "Indies," today's India. Subsequently, further Antillean islands, such as Cuba, have been colonized by the Spanish; other islands, such as Jamaica, have been colonized by the British and by the Dutch, such as Bonaire and Saba. Some islands were partitioned among colonizers, such as Haiti, which later was subject to U.S. military occupation. With the arrival of European settlers, a genocide of Indigenous peoples—the Taíno, the Ciboney, the Caribs, and the Arawak—was set into motion. Plantations colonized the land. 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 (Palmié/Scarano). Slaves subsequently began to form the majority of the Antilles, governed by a white European minority. Chattel slavery was abandoned in the French Empire at the end of the 18th century. At this point in time, an economic structure based on subordination to and dependency from the nation-state, affecting all societal institutions including the law, families, education, labour, among others, has been fully implemented. While the island of Dominica is today an independent republic, Martinique remains an overseas department of France (Stromberg Childers).

In the first of the two chapters of his book addressing "Opacity," Glissant elaborates the idea of "transparency," particularly the notion of a "transparent" language, such as French, which is 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

⁴ <http://www.dominicapublishing.com/>

of humanist colonial ideology. Being read and spoken by an ideal human individual, it implies the existence of a universal, correct and “right” language, towards which this individual strives (Glissant 111-120). 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 is presumed to be the language colonial subjects aspire to, across the planetary scope of the British Empire. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is “standard or correct English.”⁵

“Opacities” occur in the 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. The transparency of universal penetration is distorted by situated opacities: Vernacular—as opposed to vehicular—languages such as Creole, Québécois 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” (Glissant 118). In the second chapter, Glissant states, that the opaque “is that which cannot be reduced” [to the unicity of the transparent] (Glissant 191). What does this irreducibility have to do with the irreducibility of Sekula’s truth-apparatus to the camera’s optical model?

Making a Face

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

⁵ “Queen’s English,” The Oxford English Dictionary, accessed February 5, 2017, <http://www.oed.com>.

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” (Browne 78). 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 acknowledged as human beings. Richard Dyer, a scholar on “whiteness,” 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 exposure to the light” (Dyer 142). 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 (Browne 113-14). This means that the algorithms of apparatuses of visual surveillance reproduce a white prototypicality. One mundane example for this higher Failure-To-Enroll-rate (FTE) 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 technology does neither exclude the inversion of the same logic as argued by Dyer. In effect, contemporary surveillance technology enables a racial programming. 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. Also this equipment is based on a white prototypicality, which has been constructed in layers 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. 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, which according to the curatorial statement addressed "the display of the complex web that underlies racism" (Medina/Chávez/Labastida). However, 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.⁶ Alongside the statistical data listed in the preceding footnote, this observation can be supported by the fact that Martine Syms' recent 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, followed by Adrian Piper's current retrospective. Blas' theory is clearly based on the work of a Caribbean writer whose theories countered the colonial attributes imposed upon him. It is important to mention here that the concept of countersurveillance has been created 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—unreferenced by Blas in his article. Instead, he mentions Swiss curator Ulrich Loock's essay on "Opacity" in *Frieze Magazine* (Blas, "Opacities" 149). While this article is certainly not representative of Blas' entire work in the field of

⁶ 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>.

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' use of the C-stand 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; and it resets its own framework. In Glissant's words, 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" (Glissant 194). The framework created by Syms' C-stand renders visible the conditions of the production of the image on view. This resetting produces not only visibility, but allows for the coming into being of a subject that escapes its body of data by way of its own reproduction.

Black Vernacular

Syms has dedicated two lectures to the term "Black Vernacular," without offering a handy definition of the term in either (Syms, "Black Vernacular" 2013 and 2016).⁷ I suggest that the term enacts Glissant's concept of opacity, by understanding digital images as a form of materialized text. Syms uses Black vernacular to transcode technologies of making visible, which

⁷ "I'm a writer in so many ways and there are a lot of similarities between writing and editing media" (Syms in conversation with Kazymierchyk 14).

are technologies of the visual, into technologies of reading, which are technologies of language. This is not to undertake some kind of postmodern deconstruction, but to bring into view the factuality of the reproduction of data, which overwrites the materiality of “bodily facts.”

If Zach Blas speaks of technological control and embodied materiality as “intertwined concerns of our time” (Blas, “Opacities” 150), then these concerns are not the same for everybody. As Sylvia Wynter points out, Indigenous peoples and people of colour are epistemologically racialized by the natural biocentricity of historical facts, legitimated by the Darwinian narrative of the human as purely biological beings (Wynter). This reductionist biocentric narrative situates people of colour as naturally unevolved, necessitating the heteropatriarchal white supremacist logics of colonization. It outlasts history into the contemporary and perpetuates itself by ways of its ongoing reproduction in representational social orders and their embodiments. Though often appearing as visual representations, these social orders, which stabilize a white supremacist heteropatriarchy, are reproduced through language (the Queen’s English), through the information of epistemological, statistical, digital and biometrical data.

The technique of Recognizing as seen above is a Black vernacular technique of language. It is based on Double Entendre, where words or phrases have double meanings. According to Syms, Black vernacular further includes 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) (Syms, “A Pilot” 82). June Jordan, who inspired Syms’ use of Black vernacular, 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 inconsistencies, such as ours, his, theirs, and, therefore, mines)” (Jordan 9). All of these techniques involve the partial view of perspectives and non-verbal elements, that which becomes lost when experiences become data. In fact, the techniques in question derive precisely from these gaps in meaning, by realizing them as opacities. These gaps have the effect of being untranslatable into the representational or symbolic order of transparent language. As such, Black vernacular techniques emphasize their own factuality over the biocentric facts of transparent language. Much as the folds in the photograph on the vinyl print of the Black Lesbian Caucus, the techniques of Black vernacular underline the fact of reproduction itself versus the facts depicted by it. Moreover, Recognizing, Double Entendre, Call and Response, and Indirection require the participation of at least two people in the generation of meaning. That is, meaning depends on the reciprocity of the speech acts involved. In their multiplication, these techniques form technologies that negotiate meaning rather than an apparatus ascribing positions. Black vernacular technologies, then, do not reproduce a social body. Because if reciprocal production overwrites the replication of the same, reproduction shapes a formation of diverse knowledges that cannot be reduced to the biologic and its embodiments alone.

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