

DARK MATTERS

ON THE SURVEILLANCE OF BLACKNESS

SIMONE BROWNE

© 2015 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Natalie F. Smith
Typeset in Arno Pro by Graphic Composition, Inc., Athens, GA

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Browne, Simone, [date] author.
Dark matters : on the surveillance of blackness / Simone Browne.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8223-5919-7 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN 978-0-8223-5938-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN 978-0-8223-7530-2 (e-book)

1. African Americans—Social conditions. 2. Blacks—Canada—Social conditions. 3. United States—Race relations. 4. Canada—Race relations. 5. Electronic surveillance—United States. 6. Government information—United States. I. Title.

E185.86.B76 2015
305.896'073—dc23 2015012563

COVER ART: Robin Rhode (South African, born 1976), *Pan's Opticon*, 2008.
Photographs, fifteen C-prints face-mounted on four-ply museum board.
Photos courtesy of Lehmann Maupin.

Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the support of the
Office of the President at the University of Texas at Austin, which provided
funds toward the publication of this book.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction, and Other Dark Matters 1

1

Notes on Surveillance Studies
Through the Door of No Return 31

2

“Everybody’s Got a Little Light under the Sun”
The Making of the Book of Negroes 63

3

B@anding Blackness
Biometric Technology and the Surveillance of Blackness 89

4

“What Did TSA Find in Solange’s Fro”?
Security Theater at the Airport 131

Epilogue: When Blackness Enters the Frame 161

Notes 165 Bibliography 191 Index 203

West Africa, her enslavement in South Carolina, her journey to Manhattan, and her eventual escape from her slave master to become a bookkeeper at Fraunces Tavern. Diallo eventually works with the British under the proclamations, emigrates to Nova Scotia and then on to London, and finally returns to Africa. Through Diallo we are offered a remembering of Fraunces Tavern and those archived in the *Book of Negroes* as she is tasked by the British to interview, inspect, and register the names in the ledger: "I wanted to write more about them, but the ledger was cramped."⁶³ Diallo was set to leave New York City for Nova Scotia on the ship *Joseph*, but a claim was made on her person as recoverable property and she was taken in front of the Board of Inquiry at Fraunces Tavern, "wrists tied and legs shackled."⁶⁴ In this claims court, promises of freedom were broken, despite the pleas and testimony. Diallo narrates,

At the back of the room, I heard claims against two other Negroes who, like me, had been pulled off ships in the harbour. Both—one man, and one woman—were given over to men who said they owned them. I despised the Americans for taking these Negroes, but my greatest contempt was for the British. They had used us in every way in their war. Cooks. Whores. Midwives. Soldiers. We had given them our food, our beds, our blood and our lives. And when slave owners showed up with their stories and their paperwork, the British turned their backs and allowed us to be seized like chattel. Our humiliation meant nothing to them, nor did our lives.⁶⁵

Diallo voices a story of life, surveillance, and the making of the *Book of Negroes* different than one of acts of British compassion. By approaching surveillance technologies through stories of black escape—Al and Garfield's televisual escape, Sam's disruptive *staring in* "turning up the white of his eyes," lantern laws, Aminata Diallo's *narrative acts*—the brutalities of slavery are not subject to erasure; rather, such a renarration makes known the stakes of surveillance, emancipation, and freedom. The next chapter begins with another image of escape, *Wilson Chinn, a Branded Slave from Louisiana*, to enter into a discussion of branding, biometric technology, and the commodification of blackness.

3

B®ANDING BLACKNESS

BIOMETRIC TECHNOLOGY AND THE SURVEILLANCE OF BLACKNESS

Two days before embarkation, the head of every male and female is neatly shaved; and if the cargo belongs to several owners, each man's brand is impressed on the body of his respective negro. This operation is performed with pieces of silver wire, or small irons fashioned into the merchant's initials.

—THEODORE CANOT, *Memoirs of a Slave Trader*

We have been branded by Cartesian philosophy.

—AIMÉ CÉSAIRE, *Discourse on Colonialism*

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name.

—HORTENSE SPILLERS

You can find *Wilson Chinn* on eBay.com or other online auction sites for sale among antebellum ephemera. Wilson Chinn's portrait was taken around 1863 by Myron H. Kimball, a photographer with an interest in daguerreotype and a correspondent with the *Philadelphia Enquirer* during New York's 1853 World's Fair. Kimball also served as an official photographer for the Freedman's Bureau. In this particular portrait, a chain is tied around Chinn's ankle and various tools of torture lie at his feet: a paddle, a leg iron, a metal prodding device. The caption below the image reads, "exhibiting Instruments of Torture used to punish slaves." The *carte de visite* (figure 3.1) captures Wilson Chinn's stare at the camera. Particularly striking is the "longhorn," or pronged metal collar, fastened around Chinn's neck. An 1862 copy of *Harper's Weekly* describes this torture device as consisting of three metal prongs, "each two feet in length, with a ring on the end," to which would be attached a chain to "secure the victim beyond all



FIGURE 3.1.
Wilson Chinn, a Branded Slave from Louisiana.
 Carte de visite (1863).
 Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

possible hope of escape.” This burdensome device would prevent its wearer from “lying down and taking his rest at night.”²¹ Not entirely visible in this carte de visite is the brand on Chinn’s forehead: the initials V. B. M. Valsin Bozonier Marmillion was a Louisiana planter and slaver. When Chinn was in his early twenties, he was sold to Marmillion’s father, Edmond. The Marmillions had a penchant for branding: “Of the 210 Slaves on this plantation 105 left at one time and came into the Union camp. Thirty of them had been branded like cattle with a hot iron, four of them on the forehead, and the others on the breast or arm.”²² The brand here is a traumatic head injury that fixed the black body as slave—or, at least, attempted to. An ex-slave,

Chinn escaped to Union lines in New Orleans and was “freed” by Major General Nathaniel P. Banks.

Wilson Chinn, the carte de visite, brings plantation punishment, branding, and escape into focus. I continue here with the discussion begun in chapter 2 on the *Book of Negroes*, lantern laws, and how the tracking of blackness as property informs the contemporary surveillance of the racial body by now questioning how the intimate relation between branding and the black body—our biometric past—can allow us to think critically about our biometric present. Biometric information technology, or biometrics, in its simplest form, is a means of body measurement that is put to use to allow the body, or parts and pieces and performances of the human body, to function as identification. In order to understand the meanings of branding as historically situated, in this chapter I explore some early applications of this biometric information technology and question its role in the racial framing of blackness as property. What I am suggesting here is that branding in the transatlantic slave trade was a biometric technology, as it was a measure of slavery’s making, marking, and marketing of the black subject as commodity.

The first section of this chapter, *Branding Blackness*, provides a discussion of the practice of branding and its role in the making of the racial subject as commodity at the ports of the transatlantic slave trade. I do this by looking to narratives, some written by abolitionists, others by slave merchants and owners. As well, I look at the uses of branding as a form of racializing surveillance: as both corporeal punishment in plantation societies and in urban domestic settings of slave ownership, and for identification purposes. I do this through a reading of Frantz Fanon’s observations on epidermalization, that being the “epidermal racial schema” that sees the black body fashioned as “an object among other objects.”²³ Epidermalization, Paul Gilroy tells us, stems from “a historically specific system for making bodies meaningful by endowing in them qualities of ‘colour.’”²⁴ Drawing on Frantz Fanon’s theory of epidermalization, I consider the historical specificity of branding as a practice put to use to ascribe certain meanings to certain bodies: as a unit of tradeable goods, runaways, survivors. To more clearly draw the links between biometric information technology and transatlantic slavery, I trace its archive, namely written narratives, runaway notices, a carte de visite. This is a difficult archive to write about, where iron instruments fashioned into rather simple printed type became tools of torture. It is also a painful archive to imagine, where runaway notices speak of bodies scarred

by slavery and of those that got away: "Twenty dollars reward. Ranaway from the subscriber, a negro woman and two children; the woman is tall and black, and a few days before she went off, I burnt her with a hot iron on the left side of her face; I tried to make the letter M."⁵

The branding of the slave played a key role in the historical formation of surveillance. Although branding was practiced as a means of punishment for white servants and sometimes to punish abolitionists, it is not the focus of my discussion here. This practice has been documented by Marcus Wood's research on the branding of abolitionist Jonathan Walker with ss for "Slave Stealer" on his right palm in 1844 as punishment for his attempt to help enslaved people make their escape from Florida to freedom. Wood argues that Walker's brand became "the most visible brand in the history of American slavery" and that through its display, its reproduction in printed texts including children's books, photographs, John G. Whittier's ballad "The Branded Hand," and Walker's personal appearances, it "became a fragmentary monument to the cause of abolition and the suffering of the slave."⁶ Instead, I look here at how the branding of blackness remains visible, and also makes certain brands visible. Put differently, this chapter examines branding not only as a material practice of hot irons on skin, but as a racializing act, where the one-drop rule was a technology of branding blackness that maintained the enslaved body as black.

Can the epidermal racial schema that Fanon makes plain be found in some contemporary biometric information technologies—the iris scanners and fingerprint readers that are said to secure borders and protect a collective "us" from identity fraud and personal data theft? To answer this question, in the second section of this chapter, Branding Biometrics, I examine the role played by prototypical whiteness and how it is coupled with dark matter in the making of some bodies and not others as problematic in biometric technology and its attendant practices. By "practices" I am referring here specifically to research and development (R&D) coming out of the biometrics industry. In the third section, Blackness B@anded, I discuss the branding of blackness in contemporary capitalism with a focus on actor Will Smith's blockbuster movies that market biometric information technology: *Enemy of the State*, *Men in Black*, and *I, Robot*. As well, I look to visual artist Hank Willis Thomas's B@anded series for the ways in which it points to and questions the historical presence of branding blackness in contemporary capitalism. I do this to suggest that these moments and texts allow us a reading of branding and biometrics as a commodification of in-

formation of and about the body that is highly contingent upon discursive practices for its own making and, in the case of Thomas's B@anded series, unmaking.

Branding Blackness

Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, "This is your ma'am. This," and she pointed. "I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark." Scared me so. All I could think of was how important this was and how I needed to have something important to say back, but I couldn't think of anything so I just said what I thought. "Yes, Ma'am," I said. "But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too," I said.

—SETHE IN TONI MORRISON'S *Beloved*

What can branding during the transatlantic slave trade tell us about the production of racial difference? In her influential 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers emphasizes that the trafficking of humans in the transatlantic slave trade marked a violent "theft of the body," rendering the captive body "a territory of cultural and political maneuver."⁷ Branding was a practice through which enslaved people were signified as commodities to be bought, sold, and traded. At the scale of skin, the captive body was made the site of social and economic maneuver through the use of iron type. The brand, sometimes the crest of the sovereign and at other times alphanumeric characters, denoted the relation between the body and its said owner. In an early eighteenth-century account of slaving along the Cape Coast of Africa, John Atkins, a surgeon for the British Royal Navy, remarked of those enslaved there, "they are all marked with a burning Iron upon the right Breast, D.Y. Duke of York."⁸ In this case, these marks of identification served to distinguish those who were enslaved by the English from other slaveholding entities. In this way, branding before embarkation, on the slave vessel, and at the point of disembarkation must be understood alongside its implication in the formation of the "racial state."⁹ David Theo Goldberg has shown that in its effort to oversee economic possibilities, the racial state shapes labor relations and "will open or stem the flow of the racially figured labor supply in response to the needs of capital, but delimited also by political demands and worries."¹⁰ Goldberg further points out that in the "naturalistic extreme, racially

identified groups are treated much like the natural resources found in the environment, no different than the objects of the landscape available for the extraction of surplus value, convenient value added to raw material."¹¹ Branding before embarkation on the slave vessel was executed in such a fashion, where humans seen as resources to be extracted were branded with a clinical precision. The following passage is taken from a late seventeenth-century account of a barracoon by French slave merchant John Barbot. It tells of branding for the purposes of identifying those made slaves as units within a larger cargo:

As the slaves come down to Fida from the inland country, they are put into a booth, or prison, built for that purpose, near the beach, all of them together; and when the Europeans are to receive them, they are brought out into a large plain, where the surgeons examine every part of every one of them, to the smallest member, men and women being all stark naked. Such as are allowed good and sound, are set on one side, and the others by themselves; which slaves so rejected are there called Mackrons, being above thirty five years of age, or defective in their limbs, eyes or teeth: or grown grey, or that have venereal disease, or any other infection. These being so set aside, each of the others, which have passed as good, is marked on the breast with a red-hot iron, imprinting the mark of the French, English, or Dutch companies, that so each nation may distinguish their own, and to prevent their being chang'd by the natives for worse, as they are apt enough to do. In this particular, care is taken that the women, as tenderest, be not burnt too hard.¹²

What this narrative also makes known is that branding was not only a mass corporate and crown registration of people by way of corporeal markers, but an exercise of categorization whereby those deemed most fit to labor unfreely, that being the "good and sound," were distinguished from others and imprinted, literally, with the mark of the sovereign. Here, African children, women, and men were violently made objects for trade. Slave branding was a racializing act. By making blackness visible as commodity and therefore sellable, branding was a dehumanizing process of classifying people into groupings, producing new racial identities that were tied to a system of exploitation. But as the above quote details, branding was also a gendering act, as with women a discretionary concern was said to be taken. In this "large plain" turned slave factory, bodies were made disabled, as

those named contagious or defective in their limbs, eyes, and teeth were rejected. Thus the barracoon, or slave barracks, was a slave factory where the surgeon's classificatory, quantifying, and authorizing gaze sought to single out and render disposable those deemed unsuitable, while imposing a certain visibility by way of the brand on the enslaved. That Barbot chose to name the spatial logic of capture as a purpose-built prison gestures toward the bureaucratic regulation of branding as part of the much larger carceral and traumatic practices of transatlantic slavery.

Later in this narrative, Barbot describes the enslaved Africans at Fida as sourced from various countries "where the inhabitants are lusty, strong, and very laborious people" who, he writes, although not "so black and fine to look at as the North-Guinea and Gold-Coast Blacks," are more suitable "for the American plantations, than any others; especially in the sugar islands, where they require more labour and strength." On the topic of uprisings, Barbot warns that "Fida and Ardra slaves are of all the others, the most apt to revolt aboard ships, by a conspiracy carried on amongst themselves."¹³ The barracoon, it seems, was also a space for ascribing an ontological link between labor preparedness, race, ethnicity, and resistance. A useful concept to help think about this making of intergroup distinctions here is what Joe Feagin has termed the "white racial frame."¹⁴ Distinctions made by Barbot and other merchants of slavery between the "black and fine" and the "lusty and strong" speak to the early role of the "dominant white racial frame" in categorizing difference, where blackness is framed as unruly, with some said to be more unruly than others. Feagin outlines the dominant white racial frame as consisting of an "anti-black subframe" that worked to rationalize slavery and its attendant violence by framing, or I would say by branding, blackness as "bestial," "alien," and "rebellious," among other markers of difference, in the white mind.¹⁵ With this antiblack subframe came representations of blackness as ungrateful and unruly.

To unpack this antiblack subframe, Feagin looks to the eighteenth-century writings of Edward Long, an English settler in Jamaica. Long was a slave owner and a self-fashioned ethnographer who minutely detailed the flora and fauna of the island and outlined the usual suspects of pseudo-scientific discourse used to falsify evolutionary trajectories and stratify human groupings: physiology, phrenology, temperament, primate analogies, and even dental anatomy: "no people in the world have finer teeth than the native Blacks of Jamaica," Long wrote.¹⁶ Long's extensive, three-volume *The History of Jamaica* (1774) attempts to place Jamaicans within the taxonomic

space of flora and fauna. His effort at botanical classification, and human categorization and division is part of a larger imperial project of colonial expansion that aimed to fix, frame, and naturalize discursively constructed difference by situating black Jamaicans as at once innately primitive and corrupting, and as objects to fear, through his claims of the existence of cannibalism in the colonies with statements such as, “many Negroes in our colonies drink the blood of their enemies.”¹⁷ On black women, Long had much to say regarding servility, sexuality, and the intersection of both in the colonial context: “the Europeans, who at home have always been used to greater purity and strictness of manners, are too easily led aside to give loose to every kind of sensual delight, on this account some black and yellow *quasheba* is sought for.”¹⁸ Although “*Quasheba*,” also known as “*Quashie*,” is a stereotyped caricature of a black Jamaican enslaved woman known for her outspokenness and independent qualities, or her facetiness, the way that Long invokes *quasheba* here functions to displace the sexual violence of slavery onto enslaved women, and in so doing, masking the violence of the colonizer. In this way neither desire nor “sensual delight” could be removed from the relations of power within the colonial project where, as Robert Young argues, the “paranoid fantasy” of “the uncontrollable sexual drive of the non-white races and their limitless fertility” abounded.¹⁹

Barbot’s narrative of branding at the barracoon comes out of the same taxonomic project as Long’s, where appeals to the naturalization of difference aimed to fix social hierarchies that served the order of the day: colonial expansion, slavery, racial typology, and racial hierarchization. In an earlier passage, Barbot writes that although he was “naturally compassionate,” he sometimes caused “the teeth of those wretches to be broken, because they would not open their mouths” in their refusal to eat.²⁰ The false pretense of naming resistance to force-feeding as unruliness is an attempt to mask the violence of the slave trader by displacing the violence of slavery onto the African. However, such refusals by the enslaved were agential acts that challenged the slaver’s attempts at force-feeding, correction, and the imposition of a lived objecthood. In its creative remembering of the brutalities of transatlantic slavery, abolitionist Smith H. Platt’s fictionalized account, *The Martyrs and the Fugitive; or a Narrative of the Captivity, Sufferings, and Death of an American Family, and the Slavery and Escape of Their Son* (1859), gives us some insight into the violent practice of branding onboard the slave ship. This fictional narrative tells the story of Bobah and Mabowah, who were kidnapped, along with their two children, from the interior of south-

western Africa and were later renamed Jacob and Ruth Welden when they arrived in Savannah, Georgia. During their journey, Platt writes, “mothers with babes at their breasts were basely branded and lashed, hewed and scarred,” and hot irons were fashioned “in the form of certain letters or signs dipped into an oily preparation, and then pressed against the naked body till it burnt a deep and ineffaceable scar, to show who was the owner.”²¹ All of this was done, Platt’s account explains, under threat of a cat-o’-nine-tails, an instrument often put to use when the brand was met with resistance, and those made slave “were lashed without mercy on the bare back, breasts, thighs” with “every blow bringing with the returning lash pieces of quivering flesh.”²² On those marked for death, branding sought to inscribe a slow, premature death on black skin.

SILVER WIRE AND SMALL IRONS: EPIDERMALIZATION

Epidermalization, Stuart Hall writes, is “literally the inscription of race on the skin.”²³ It is the disassociation between the black “body and the world” that sees this body denied its specificity, dissected, fixed, imprisoned by the white gaze, “deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning *Y a bon Banania*.”²⁴ “*Y’a bon*” is the slogan for Banania, a banana flour-based chocolate drink first sold commercially in France in the early 1900s and popularized with a caricature of a smiling, red fez-wearing Senegalese soldier with his rifle at his feet gracing the drink’s packaging. Such commodity packaging is invested with the scientific racism, like that expressed by both Long and Barbot, which depicted Africans as servile, primitive, and ranked as an inferior species. An earlier campaign for this product featured an image of a woman, ostensibly a Caribbean woman, flanked by two banana bunches and holding an open can of Banania in each hand, pouring its contents onto the celebrating and joyous French masses pictured below. The French words for “energy,” “force,” “health,” and “vigor” animate the powdered drink mix as it is pictured flowing from the woman’s hands, as if to say that the cocoa and banana plantations of the Caribbean and Central America will restore national vigor through, as the promotional copy tells us in French, a *suralimentation intensive*, a revitalizing boost of energy. With this, the Caribbean is made an exotic, as well as an eroticized, source of power of the French colonial project.

Since then, Banania’s advertising campaigns continue to convey what Anne McClintock calls “commodity racism,” where “mass-produced

consumer spectacles" express "the narrative of imperial progress."²⁵ McClintock explains that commodity racism is

distinct from scientific racism in its capacity to expand beyond the literate, propertied elite through the marketing of commodity spectacle. If, after the 1850s, scientific racism saturated anthropological, scientific and medical journals, travel writing and novels, these cultural forms were still relatively class-bound and inaccessible to most Victorians, who had neither the means nor education to read such material. Imperial kitsch as consumer spectacle, by contrast, could package, market and distribute evolutionary racism on a hitherto unimagined scale.²⁶

Today, the chocolate drink's mascot is a childlike cartoon character with exaggerated red lips, though still sporting a red fez and a wide toothy grin. His name is simply Banania. He dances, Rollerblades, builds snowmen, and walks through the jungle, among other activities, hawking a variety of chocolate products on the Banania website. Truly an object among objects. This is the epidermal racial schema that, as Fanon tells us, returned his body to him "spread-eagled, disjointed, redone" and in so being negatively racialized.²⁷ This epidermal racial schema makes for the ontological insecurity of a body made out of place, and "overdetermined from the outside."²⁸ I am taking epidermalization here as the moment of fracture of the body from its humanness, refracted into a new subject position ("Look, a Negro!" or "Look, an illegal alien!" or some other negatively racialized subject position). In other words, it is the moment of contact with the white gaze—a moment where, as Fanon describes, "all this whiteness burns me to a cinder"²⁹—that produces these moments of fracture for the racial Other, indeed making and marking one as racial Other, experiencing its "being for others."³⁰ This is not to say that by being object to the white gaze one is interpellated into a completely passive, negated object, existing only as objection. Instead, Fanon offers us an insightful correction to theorizing moments of contact with the white gaze, where instead the racial subject's humanness is already established, and identities are realized and constructed by the self; where "black consciousness does not claim to be a loss. It is. It merges with itself."³¹ It is the making of the black body as out of place, an attempt to deny its capacity for humanness, which makes for the productive power of epidermalization. So this making of blackness as out of place must be read as also productive of a rejection of lived objectivity, as

being out of place.³² Think here of ex-slave Sam's facetiness, as told in chapter 2, and the remarkable way in which he turned up the white of his eyes, escaped, and made his own way, as if to say, "I'll show them! They can't say I didn't warn them."³³

Epidermalization continued in its alphanumeric form through a series of steps and measures upon disembarkation, during the purchase of slaves and in plantation punishment. Abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, in his efforts to collect evidence of the brutalities of the slave trade, conducted interviews with those involved in the trade, namely aggrieved sailors, first in Bristol, England, beginning in June 1787, and later Liverpool, and then in August 1788 he traveled to other ports along the River Thames. One of these accounts tells of slave merchants branding slaves at the moment of disembarkation in the West Indies. Clarkson's informant explained the process, relaying that "the gentleman, to whom the vessel was consigned" would board the ship, making "use of an iron pot, into which he put some rum. He set the rum on fire, and held the marking irons over the blaze."³⁴ The enslaved were then ordered "to pass him one by one" as he "applied the irons to each slave" and "branded them before they went out of the ship."³⁵ An assembly line of simple but violent instruments: rum, oil, silver wire, iron pots, fire. Branding upon disembarkation was not only the domain of British slave merchants. As Saidiya Hartman explains in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), the Dutch West India Company (wIC) branded the enslaved on arrival in Curaçao, as the island served as the hub, of sorts, for slave trading throughout the Spanish Americas.³⁶ In Curaçao, the brand was sometimes administered at the slave market right on the auction block, and the scars that remained as evidence of that trauma were used to identify enslaved people at auction, during criminal proceedings, and postmortem.³⁷ For captains of slave ships under the Dutch charter companies, instructions for administering the brand were formally articulated: "as you purchase slaves you must mark them at the upper right arm with the silver marker CCN, which is sent along with you for that purpose," and the procedure was laid out in two parts: "note the following when you do the branding: (1) the area of marking must first be rubbed with candle wax or oil; (2) The marker should only be as hot as when applied to paper, the paper gets red."³⁸ These were the instructions for branding set out by the Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie, or the Trade Company of Middelburg, a Dutch charter company that later displaced the wIC in slave trading. The wIC kept detailed records and used

Arabic numeral branding irons until 1703, after which time the company began to use alphabetic branding irons in an A–Z sequence, with the exception of the letters *U* and *J* so as not to be confused with the letters *V* and *I*, and the letter *O* was not used due to the iron being worn down. Think here of what it means for a branding iron, used to mark humans as property, to be worn down. The WIC's A–Z sequence was first complete in 1715, recommenced, and then last put to use in 1729 with the letter *T* to mark those enslaved on the ship *Phenix*.³⁹

Sherley Anne Williams's novel *Dessa Rose* tells the story of Dessa, who, when traveling as part of a coffle of slaves, was involved in an uprising and was condemned to death for her role in that battle. Pregnant at the time of her recapture, with assistance Dessa eventually escaped from her jail, marked with the scars of corporeal punishment: whip scarred and branded with the letter *R*, a mark of punishment that remains inscribed on the body. These scars made the private space that is Dessa's body publicly legible as commodity, in a way: "he could prove who I was by the brand on my thigh."⁴⁰ However, she refused the idea that her body was a text that could be so easily read. Similarly, Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) could not comprehend it when her mother slapped her when she said, "Mark the mark on me too."⁴¹ "Not till I had a mark of my own," Sethe said, did she come to understand her mother's rejection of the brand.⁴² Although a fictionalized account, *Dessa Rose* articulates and disrupts branding as an attempt at making the body legible by functioning as a means of identification. This story, like those of nonfictional enslaved people found in the archive of racial slavery, makes known that branding was a practice of punishment and accounting, and a preemptive strike at marking the already hypervisible body as identifiable outside of the plantation and other spaces of enslavement, whether those branded found themselves outside through escape or by other means (for example, abduction or leasing out).⁴³ For instance, in 1655 the Barbados Council prescribed branding the letter *R* on the forehead of any runaway slave found to have set fire to the sugarcane fields, while the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Barbados ceased branding *SOCIETY* on the chests of those it enslaved in 1732.⁴⁴ Of course, many ran away, regardless of receiving this marking as slave. A notice published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on April 15, 1756, posting a reward of forty shillings for "a Negro man named Cato, alias Toby" attests to this: "he was branded when a boy in Jamaica, in the West Indies, with a B (and I think C on his left shoulder blade," the advertisement states. In this advertise-

ment Cato is described as a "sly artful fellow" who "deceives the credulous, by pretending to tell fortunes, and pretends to be free." In this way, the *B* and the *C* on Cato's shoulder served as a sign that could betray his identity despite his cunning use of an alias and other artful tactics. An August 29, 1757, advertisement placed in the *New York Gazette* lets us know that over a year later Cato was still unaccounted for, or rather that he had changed his name and asserted himself as someone who counted, as "it is supposed he has forged a pass."⁴⁵ While a January 3, 1778, runaway notice for "a Negro boy named ALICK" placed by Richard Wright in New York's *Royal Gazette* notes that Alick "is branded on the breast with the letters R.W."⁴⁶

Although branding was a practice of racializing surveillance that sought to deny black human life from being multiply experienced (every body marked *SOCIETY*), running away and numerous other counterpractices suggest that dehumanization was not fully achieved on an affective level, and that those branded were still ungovernable under the brand, or in spite of it. For example, the diaries of English overseer-turned-planter and slave owner Thomas Thistlewood tell of plantation conditions in eighteenth-century Jamaica and the life of an enslaved woman named Coobah (or the possessive "my Coobah," as she is often called by Thistlewood in his diaries), one of the many women, children, and men that were subjected to his brutalities, as detailed in his diaries. Among the data that he collected on the people he enslaved, Thistlewood would record in his diaries the dates and locations of his predatory sexual advances by marking the letter *x* three times in a triangular formation. Coobah is described as "4 feet 6 Inches and 6/10 high, about 15 years of age, Country name Molio, an Ebo" when she was purchased by Thistlewood in 1761.⁴⁷ Coobah, or Molio, was branded on her right shoulder with Thistlewood's brand mark, a *TT* within an inverted triangle. In his diaries Thistlewood records Coobah as often ill, having suffered from pox in 1765 with "stout water" prescribed as a remedy, the loss of her infant daughter Silvia in 1768, and as enduring Thistlewood's sexual assaults (one time recorded in his diary in broken Latin: "Cum Coobah (mea) in Coffee gd. Stans!Backwd"—"with Coobah in the coffee ground. Standing! Backwards").⁴⁸ Coobah escaped captivity numerous times. Each time she was recaptured, she was severely punished: flogged, chained and collared (although she escaped and was recaptured still wearing the chain and collar), or with iron restraints fastened upon her at "noon and night." Even after being branded on her forehead for punishment after one escape ("flogged her well and brand marked her in the forehead"), Coobah contin-

ued to run away from Thistlewood.⁴⁹ On July 11, 1770, five days after Coobah was brutally branded with *TT* on her forehead as a form of punishment for her escape, Thistlewood wrote in his diary that he had found “Coobah wanting this morning.” In defiance of the brand, she ran again and made her own way, once to see a shipmate in Bluefields on the south coast of the island. Another time Thistlewood wrote that he “heard of my Coobah’s robbing a Negroe Wench . . . in the wood, under the pretense of carrying her load for her, march’d away with it.”⁵⁰ In *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Orlando Patterson explains that slave branding “backfired” in Brazil, where the letter *F* that branded a recaptured runaway was “proudly displayed” to the “more cautious but admiring fellow sufferers,” marking its resignification as a mark of honor, not of capture.⁵¹ Eventually Coobah was sold by Thistlewood for forty pounds and transported out of Jamaica to Savannah, Georgia, on May 21, 1774. Coobah’s running away, despite the *TT* that marked her forehead and her right shoulder, and the countless others who repurposed the brand mark for social networking and used the scars that remained from the violence done to their bodies as a means to reestablish kinship ties or forge connections to shipmates with whom they shared the Middle Passage, reveal the limit of these acts of dehumanization.⁵²

SELLING BLACKNESS

In another carte de visite of Wilson Chinn, taken by Kimball, Chinn is not staged wearing shackles or a longhorn around his neck; rather he stands boldly with one foot on top of the mechanisms of bondage laid in front of him on a wooden floor. The brand of the initials V. B. M. remains, however, revealing the spectacular punishment of plantation life. Kimball, along with another photographer, Charles Paxson, produced several images of emancipated or disowned ex-slaves, notably white-looking ex-slave children. These portraits were reproduced as carte de visite photographs and sold by Freedman’s Relief Associations in support of their philanthropic efforts and circulated as a way to invoke fascination and compassion and to trouble their intended white audience. The fascination here is with the one-drop rule made collectible, as the children in the portraits were quantified as black under the racial nomenclature of slavery. These images trouble the large-scale sexual violence, coerced sex, rape, and the breeding system that underwrote slavery: *partus sequitur ventrem*, which codified into law in Virginia in 1662 that children born to enslaved women were the prop-

erty of that mother’s owner, regardless of whether the owner was kin. The compassion that was sought through these cartes de visite is that although named black, for the intended white audience, these children were seemingly white, or at least postslavery could enter into the category of whiteness through adoption, sponsorship, schooling, and certain ways of dress. *Wilson, Charley, Rebecca and Rosa, Slaves from New Orleans* (figure 3.2), a carte de visite produced by Paxson, features Chinn seated in a leather chair reading a book along with the ex-slave children who are doing the same and are seated around Chinn, with only Charley propped up in a way that allows him to share the same line of sight as Chinn, establishing for the viewer a certain equity between sixty-year-old Wilson Chinn and eight-year-old Charley Taylor. A *Harper’s Weekly* article reporting on these ex-slaves makes this distinction, that being the color line, clear with its caption, “Emancipated Slaves, White and Colored.”⁵³ Now collector’s items, these pictures of ex-slaves are currently authenticated and then auctioned online with bids set anywhere from around \$750 to \$2,000.

Wilson Chinn marks the circulation of the nineteenth-century photographic archive of slave branding and, in some ways, the ex-slave carte de visite photographs, along with other slavery ephemera, are the contemporary instantiations of the auction block. These artifacts live on as heirlooms on the Internet. One such was Item #140035393839, a “BLACK AMERICANA ANTIQUE SLAVE Branding Iron 19TH c.,” advertised for sale on eBay by seller ThE StRaNgEst ThING in 2008 (figure 3.3). This item was described as “In Fantastic Condition” and of “RARE HISTORICAL Museum Quality” but with “some oxidation” and “protected from the elements by an old light coat of black paint,” which the seller suggests should not affect the value of the piece. With its “unique design FORGED AT THE END to identify a particular slave,” this instrument of torture was listed at a “Buy It Now” fixed price of \$1,126.25, reduced from \$1,325.00 with the advertised option of a 0 percent annual percentage rate until 2009, if purchased with a new eBay MasterCard. Seller ThE StRaNgEst ThING also specified, “from what I have read and researched, each Slave was normally branded twice. Once in Africa when leaving their Country and once in the Americas upon their arrival” and said that the branding iron “can be purchased and then gifted to a Museum for display for all to SEE and LEARN from.” Why this seller chose not to donate this “strange thing” to a museum rather than auctioning it on eBay is not mentioned in the description of the branding iron. I wonder



FIGURE 3.2. *Wilson, Charley, Rebecca and Rosa, Slaves from New Orleans.* Carte de visite (1864). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

whether it is the thing itself that is strange, or the selling of this thing that was used to brand humans that is, in fact, strange—or, at least, should be made stranger than it already is.

The contemporary circulation of slavery-era branding tools and other so-called Black Americana for sale in online auction spaces is questioned and made strange with conceptual artists Mendi + Keith Obadike's *Blackness for Sale* (2001), an Internet art piece, or "Black.net.art," that saw Keith Obadike auctioning Item #1176601036—his Blackness—on eBay as a way to disrupt the trade in slave memorabilia and commodity kitsch on the Internet, and the commodification of blackness more generally.⁵⁴ This com-

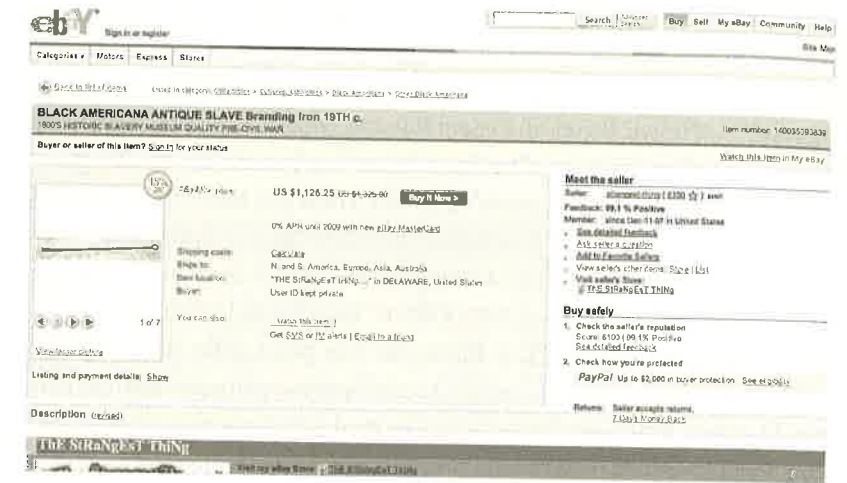


FIGURE 3.3. Slave branding iron for sale on eBay in 2008.

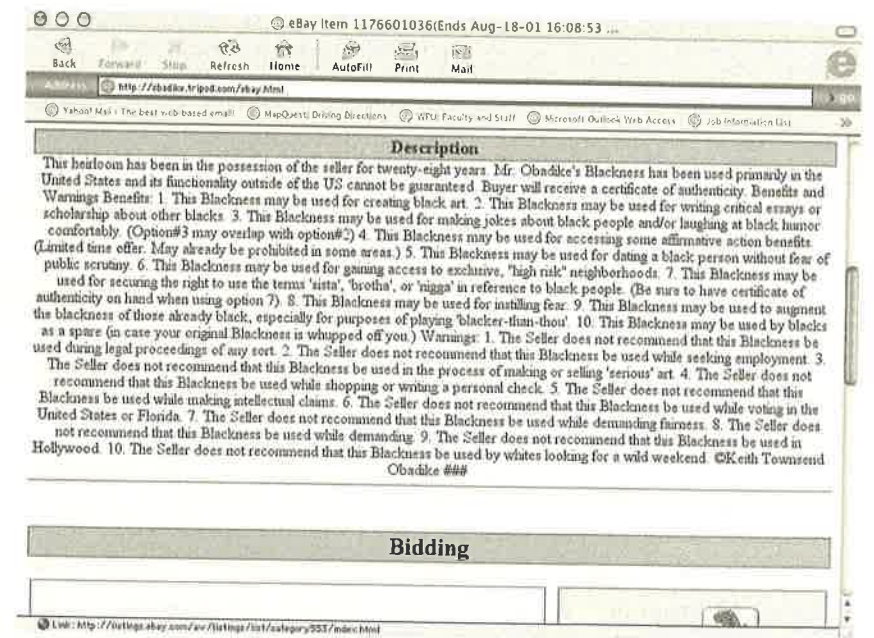
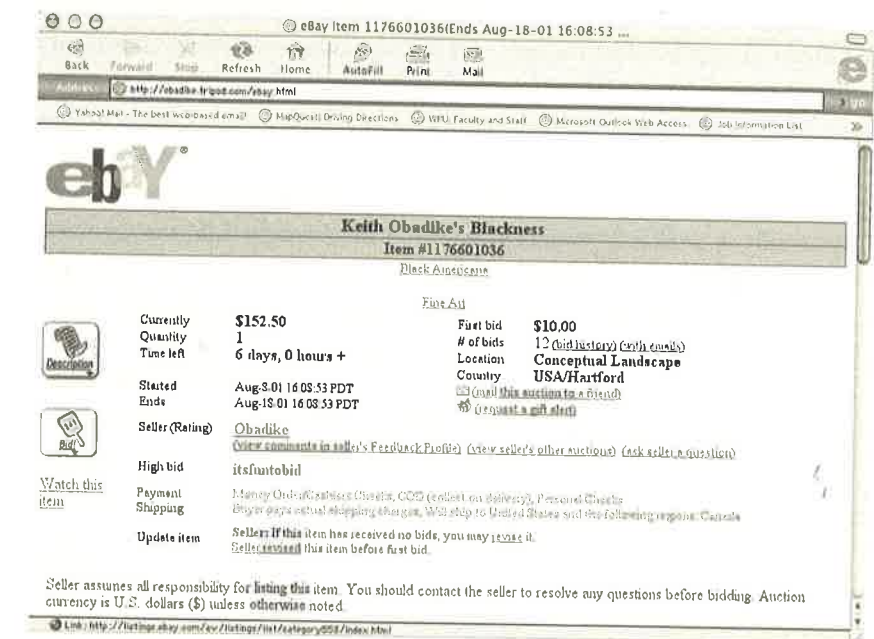
modity kitsch is the formerly ubiquitous and everyday items of distorted blackness—namely kitchen utensils like mammy cookie jars and Uncle Mose sugar and creamer sets—that are now labeled “vintage,” named “collectibles,” and traded in a way that seemingly belies their original intent: commodity racism, that being to consume while at the same time alienating blackness.⁵⁵ Collecting and consuming blackness, and black people, whether kitsch or corporeal, forms part of the larger history continuing to the present of the ritualized practices and trauma of white supremacy, as the archive of lynching makes plain. After such extrajudicial killings and the ceremony that accompanied death, memorabilia would be taken, and oftentimes sold, as souvenirs: pieces of the victim’s charred clothing, pictures and postcards (now made coffee table books), and mementos from the scene of the lynching including fingers, genitals, organs, and other dismembered parts and pieces of the victim.⁵⁶ The collection of such memorabilia was a way for members of the collective that partook in a lynch mob to depart the scene with something, or to own a part of someone, as a keepsake to remember their role as participant in acts of antiblack terrorism that served as a means of (re)constituting a community (or re-membering) through white supremacist violence.

Obadike’s auction was scheduled to last for ten days but was deemed inappropriate by eBay, and after only four days Item #1176601036 (figures

3.4 and 3.5) was removed from the website. The opening bid was listed at \$10.00 and the auction garnered twelve bids overall, the highest coming in at \$152.50. With the “Location: Conceptual Landscape” but able to be shipped “to United States and the following regions: Canada,” Obadike’s Blackness is described as an “heirloom” that “has been in the possession of the Seller for twenty-eight years.” This Blackness has been used primarily in the United States so “its functionality outside the US cannot be guaranteed.” No pictures of Obadike accompany this item’s description. Instead, potential buyers are provided with a list of “Benefits and Warnings” regarding Obadike’s Blackness: “This Blackness may be used for instilling fear” and “this Blackness may be used for accessing some affirmative action benefits (Limited time offer. May already be prohibited in some areas)”; also, “the Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while voting in the United States or Florida,” as well as not recommending “that this Blackness be used while demanding fairness.” Or simply put: “The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while demanding.” The benefits and warnings listed disclose the surveillance of blackness while shopping, while seeking employment, or during legal proceedings.

In an interview with Coco Fusco, Keith Obadike provides some insight as to why *Blackness for Sale* was a necessary counterframing to concurrent net.art in that it critiqued the commodification of blackness and the ways that colonial narratives are reproduced through Internet interfaces: “While watching what many were doing with net.art, I didn’t really see net artists dealing with this intersection of commerce and race. I really wanted to comment on this odd Euro colonialist narrative that exists on the web and black peoples’ position within that narrative. I mean, there are browsers called Explorer and Navigator that take you to explore the Amazon or trade in the ebay. It’s all just too blatant to ignore.”⁵⁷

Mendi + Keith Obadike’s Internet art project (or “auctionism”) is one of black counterframing where the institutionalized and the everyday surveillance, appropriation, and negation of black life is satirized as a way to highlight its structural embeddedness and the pervasive nature of that very surveillance. Auctionism is a type of Internet art that, as Alexander R. Galloway describes, is a form of “social exchange” that “unravels the limitations of the network” as the performance is not only on eBay but also on the e-mail lists, message boards, and other social spaces of the Internet that drive traffic to the piece and discussion of it.⁵⁸ In the case of *Blackness for Sale*, an announcement of the auction was posted to the Internet-based



FIGURES 3.4 AND 3.5. Mendi + Keith Obadike, *Blackness for Sale* (2001). Courtesy of the artists.

arts organization Rhizome, while blackplanet.com ran a poll where “26% thought the project was brilliant, 29% found it offensive,” while 45 percent thought Obadike had too much time on his hands.⁵⁹ *Blackness for Sale* is auctionism that explores a black antiracist counterframing. As Feagin explains, black antiracist counterframing provides a “counter system analysis” of “how, where, and when white hostility and discrimination operate interpersonally, as well as in society generally.”⁶⁰ *Blackness for Sale*, then, points to the productive possibilities of black expressive practices and, perhaps satirically, to the apparent limits of black antiracist counterframing, or as Mendi + Keith Obadike put it: “This Blackness may be used for writing critical essays or scholarship about other blacks” and “the Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while making intellectual claims.”

Branding Biometrics

Information machines are the sole means of vision in digital visual culture, but as the body itself becomes socially defined and handled as information, there is even more at stake in paying attention to the incursions of machines in everyday life and the forms of resistance available to us.

—LISA NAKAMURA, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*

Paul Gilroy observes that where previously the idea of race was produced as that which is anatomical, where a certain and essential truth was said to be written on the body, scopic and microscopic regimes of seeing (for example, genomics, ultrasonography, neuroimaging, computed tomography) are laying bare the previously unseen at increasingly intimate scales.⁶¹ The highly mediated production of racial discourse through scientific method that relied on cultural production, representation, myth, and colonial project making and where the intention was “to make the mute body disclose the truth of its racial identities” has been augmented by technologies of seeing that have the minute as their focus. Gilroy suggests that “the observational habits that have been associated with the consolidation of today’s nano-science might also facilitate the development of an emphatically postracial humanism.”⁶² My intervention here is not meant to negate this potentially progressive moment that Gilroy alerts us to, but to claim that unlike the technological advances of, say, ultrasonography and other body imaging technologies, with certain biometric information technologies and

their attendant “observational habits” this potentially postracial humanism is elided. Instead, with biometrics it is the moments of observation, calibration, and application that sometimes reveal themselves as racializing.

If, as Gilroy suggests, the pseudoscientific enterprise of truth seeking in racial difference can be more fully comprehended through the Fanonian concept of epidermalization,⁶³ how can epidermalization, as a concept, be made useful at a scale of the body made biometric? I suggest here that we come to think of the concept of digital epidermalization when we consider what happens when certain bodies are rendered as digitized code, or at least when attempts are made to render some bodies as digitized code. By digitized code I am referring to the possibilities of identification that are said to come with certain biometric information technologies, where algorithms are the computational means through which the body, or more specifically parts, pieces, and, increasingly, performances of the body are mathematically coded as data, making for unique templates for computers to then sort by relying on a searchable database (online or one-to-many/1:N identification/answering the questions: Who are you? Are you even enrolled in this database?), or to verify the identity of the bearer of the document within which the unique biometric is encoded (offline or one-to-one/1:1 verification/answering the question: Are you who you say you are?). Popular biometric technologies include facial recognition, iris and retinal scans, hand geometry, fingerprint templates, vascular patterns, gait and other kinesthetic recognition, and, increasingly, DNA. Biometric technology is also used for automation (one-to-none/1:0 automation/answering the question: Is any body there?), for example with computer webcams that make use of motion-tracking software or touchless faucets, toilets, and hand dryers that employ infrared or capacitive sensing to detect a user’s presence and gestures. In the case of those technologies, it is not for recognition or verification of a user’s identity that the biometric is put to use, but rather for an acknowledgment of the user’s presence or an awareness that someone, or at least a part of someone, is there, ideally.

In simple terms, biometrics is a technology of measuring the living body. The application of this technology is in the verification, identification, and automation practices that enable the body to function as evidence. Identities, in these digitizing instances, must also be thought through their construction within discourse, understood, following Hall, as “produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies.”⁶⁴ The notion of