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"What a Racist Camera": Elucidating the Invisible Norm of Photography

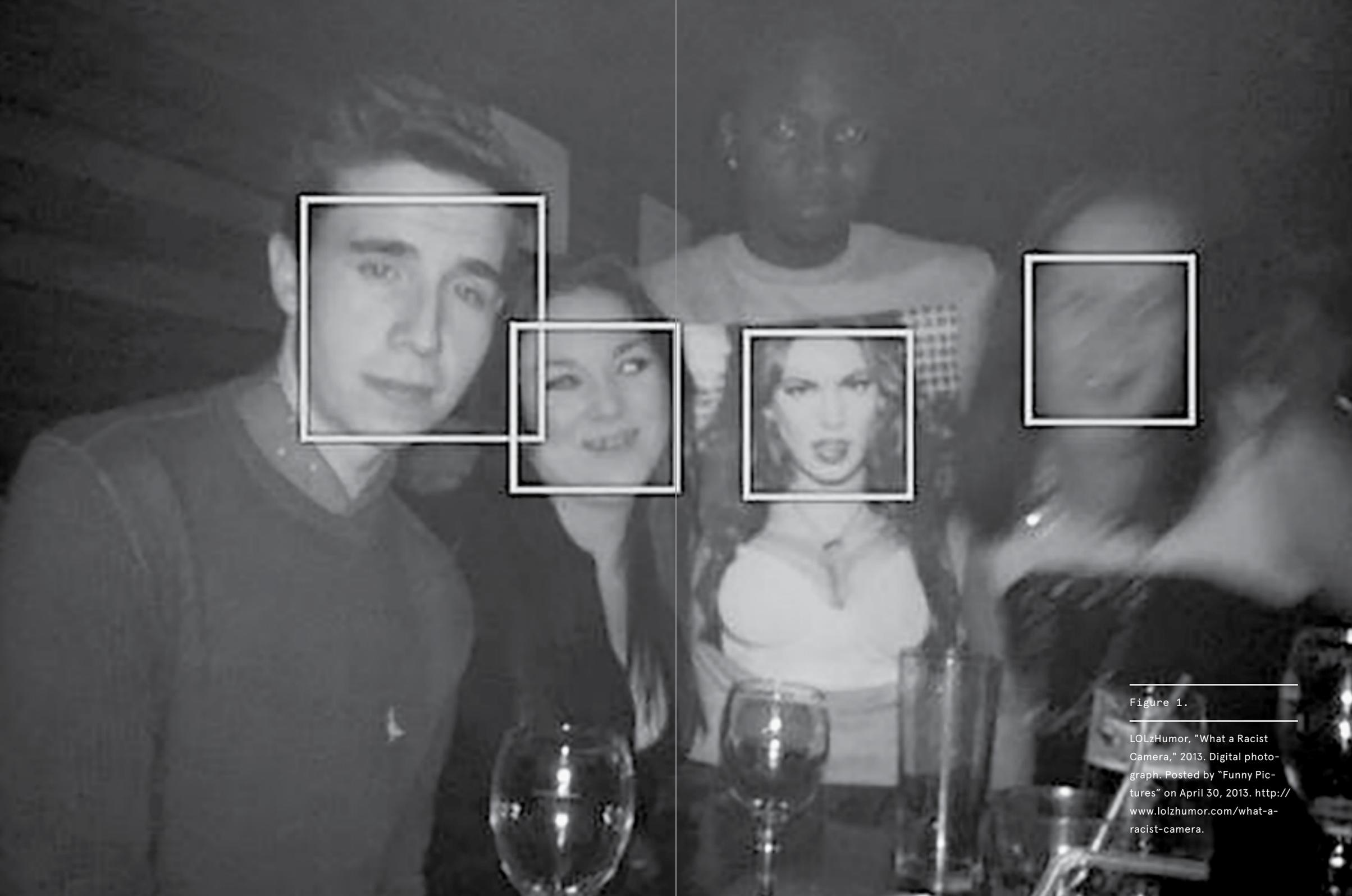On a website that collects humorous Internet images, a photograph posted in 2013 showcases a particular face-detection error. In a dimly lit bar, the people in the photograph gather around a table for a group shot (fig. 1). Although they lean in over the empty wine and beer glasses, the camera's flash catches only the bodies closest to it. Four bright-yellow squares stretch across the image. Three seated white women and one white man grin bleary-eyed at the camera, the face of each marked with a square. One of them has been caught mid-movement, blurred to the point of unrecognizability, yet her pixilated face still merits detection. A fifth person, who is black, stands far enough away from the flash's throw that he almost disappears into the darkness of the bar, but his relaxed smile remains visible. He wears a T-shirt with a realistic printed image of a woman's almost life-size torso; her face, framed by wavy brown hair, is almost as white as the low-cut tank top she wears. From this angle, the woman appears to sit at the table next to the other women. According to the camera, she might as well be present, since the camera's automated squares include her in the detected faces. While each white subject—no matter if blurry or not actually human—was detected, the black subject was not.

This image was posted on LOLzHumor.com, a website that promises "Funny Memes" uploaded "every hour."[1] The website formulaically displays an image paired with a caption, which functions as a punch line. This website, like many other hosts for posting and reblogging memes, often relies on the interplay between image and text and aims to create new, comedic meaning. For the image described above, two captions appear, above and below the image: "What a racist camera.." [sic] "Can we really blame it?"[2] Additionally, the image is categorized under the hyperlinked tags *black guy, racist camera, T-shirt*. While the image alone depicts what appears to be a racially discriminatory gesture, the text adds an extra layer of ludic meaning. With the repeated labeling of "racist camera," this image prompts the following question: can a camera be racist?

Within the context of LOLzHumor.com, the answer is "no," because the idea is presented as something self-evidently ridiculous. Here, and in culture more broadly, *racist* and *camera* are an unexpected pairing. In this particular context, *racism* connotes a specific definition that invokes the idea of an individual's intentional and subjective discrimination between races—something that humans do to each other. It is therefore incongruous with the expectations we have of a machine, which cannot "think" in order to intentionally discriminate against someone because of race.

Face-detection software, now standard in many point-and-shoot digital cameras, assists the photographer by demarcating

1. LOLzHumor.com, accessed March 24, 2014, http://www.lolzhumor.com.

2. "What a Racist Camera," LOLzHumor.com, April 30, 2013, accessed March 23, 2014, http://www.lolzhumor.com/what-a-racist-camera/.

the human faces it perceives. The camera then meters exposure and focus precisely for portraits. The technology identifies visual data that typically constitute a human face: the basic shapes and shadows of eyes, nose, and mouth. If certain data match up to programmed expectations of *face*, then the camera software generates a square that latches on to the subject during live-feed footage on a liquid crystal display (LCD) screen. If we did not understand that automated software had produced the squares around these faces, we might assume that a person had *intentionally* added squares around the white faces but not the black one. Although the resulting image could still be interpreted as "about race" in some form, there would be no clear reason why these squares were even on the image. In contrast, "What a Racist Camera" produces discordant meaning because we know that face detection—a software program that purports to detect all faces—has automatically found certain bodies more legible than others in a way that mirrors existent social relations of racial discrimination in the real world.

The idea of a racist camera, however, merits more serious attention when we think of racism as something structural, rather than as an individual's subjective opinion. Structural racism acts as an ideology that has become naturalized in systems of knowledge production.[3] If we think of a structural racism that permeates photographic conventions, then we can think of the machine as something that not only reiterates dominant ideas about race, but produces them through the very apparatus in one's hands. Although this image and others like it are shared in comedic settings, racist camera memes invoke a historical legacy as well as an ongoing phenomenon of how racial ideologies mediate photographic technologies.

While the uses of the camera to construct and validate racial differences along socially constructed hierarchies have been elaborated upon in recent scholarship, what is often left unexamined is how ideology shapes the constraints and capabilities of the photographic apparatus itself. For example, in the catalogue accompanying the landmark exhibition *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, curator and theorist Coco Fuso observes,

> During the first 150 years of U.S. history, race was considered a theoretically coherent system of human classification; from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, racial hierarchies were widely accepted as having a basis in science. Because of its purported technological objectivity as a recording device, photography during this period was marshaled to document the "fact" of racial difference. The premise of this exhibition, however, is that

rather than recording the existence of race, photography produced race as a visualizable fact.[4]

In addition to the history of racialized *content* in photography summarized by Fusco, the production of race takes place in the *form* of the photographic apparatus.

Inasmuch as cameras always differentiate between darker and lighter values, and given that skin colors absorb and reflect light along a spectrum, "What a Racist Camera" reveals that the preset capabilities of the face-detection system do not necessarily include all faces. It might seem natural that white faces are easier for a camera to detect since white skin, comparatively, reflects more light than does darker skin. However, there are unexamined racial connotations to this very idea. In its allocation of which faces can and cannot be detected, "What a Racist Camera" visualizes the typically unseen normative body underlying photographic technology, in which the white body is assumed as the prioritized point of visualization. Historically, the representation of white skin served as the unspoken, racially unmarked norm in photographic conventions ranging from analog practices to digital add-ons like face detection.

Can a Film Stock Be Racist?

On the *Guardian*'s website, an article published by David Smith on January 25, 2013, brandishes the sensational title, " 'Racism' of Early Colour Photography Explored in Art Exhibition."[5] Immediately below the title, the site features a portrait of a smiling white woman, whose auburn hair curls into a voluminous style. She faces the camera with a direct gaze. Her icy blue eyes are framed by false lashes, but she otherwise wears relatively unobtrusive makeup over her light skin. Her smile is forced and sterile, while her head is cocked to one side in a contrived, institutional pose. Long, sparkly earrings dangle above bare shoulders, and the image ends precisely at the divot where her collarbones meet. She sits in front of a gray background, with two blocks of color—one red, one blue—that ascend diagonally out of the frame like mismatched wings behind her. The image caption below states, " 'Kodak Shirley' cards used for calibrating skin tones in photographs were named after the first model featured." Regardless of her actual identity, the woman with the white skin, blue eyes, and false lashes *is* Shirley, an appellation applied to each sequential model for decades. Contemporary artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin reproduced a selection of Shirley cards in their photography series *To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light* (2012–13), featured in the art exhibition to which the *Guardian* article refers. The article serves less as a traditional art review,

3. Rebecca Aanerud, "Thinking Again: This Bridge Called My Back and the Challenge to Whiteness," in <u>This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation</u>, ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 74-76.

4. Coco Fusco, "Racial Time, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors," in <u>Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self</u>, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 15-16.

5. David Smith, " 'Racism' of Early Colour Photography Explored in Art Exhibition," <u>The Guardian</u>, January 25, 2013, accessed December 30, 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2013/jan/25/.

Figure 2.

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Shirley,* 2012; C-41 photographic print; 7.5 x 10 in.

6. Goodman Gallery Johannesburg, "Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin," accessed September 3, 2013 http://www.goodman-gallery.com/artists/adambroombergoliverchanarin.

7. Lorna Roth, "Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity," <u>Canadian Journal of Communication 34</u> (2009): 15.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 97.

10. Smith, " 'Racism' of Early Colour Photography." See also Lorna Roth, "The Fade Out of Shirley, a Once Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity," in <u>Melanin Millennium: Skin Color as 21st Century International Discourse</u>, ed. Ronald E. Hall (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2013), 273-86.

and more as an expository piece on the motivations behind Broomberg and Chanarin's artwork that purports to "explore the notion that [racial] prejudice might be inherent to the medium itself."[6] Here we face another iteration of the unexpected juxtaposition of *racist* near *camera*, this time analog. Another perplexing question emerges: can a film stock be racist? If so, what role does Shirley play in the investigating of such a query?

If we could see the rest of the Shirley card featured here, we would see her hand adorned with a black evening glove as it reaches up to clasp the white fur shawl around her arms (fig. 2). We also would see that the two color blocks are part of three throw-pillows placed beside the model, one for each primary color. The function of this photograph as a reference card is partially masked by using the throw pillows integrated into the mise-en-scène; in fact, the only element that truly prevents this photograph from being a typical headshot is the inclusion of a gray card in the lower left corner with the following text: EKTACOLOR S NORMAL. The text refers to how the image has been, and should be, printed using Kodak's film chemicals. These cards, which featured white women until the 1990s, served as the mass-produced, industry-wide standard points of reference for color photochemical calibration. That is: Shirley's white skin was the gauge by which "correct" color printing was determined and ensured. Shirley functions as "emblematic" of how both color film and typical portraiture conventions assumed the white body as the norm for the majority of the twentieth century, according to sociologist Lorna Roth.[7]

Regarding portraiture conventions, Shirley cards are part of a broader phenomenon of white bodies positioned rhetorically as "neutral" reference models in technical instruction for analog photography. Film theorist Richard Dyer examined the racial composition of models in mainstream photography manuals from the late twentieth century; almost all used white faces as the standard point of reference.[8] Generally, he found, the manuals evaded written racial identification, "except when the topic of photographing non-white faces is addressed"—an endeavor often characterized as "a problem" to be solved with additional and markedly different lighting compositions.[9]

Concluding his article, Smith comments, "Today such cards show multiple races."[10] This assertion, paired with the title of the article—" 'Racism' of Early Colour Photography Explored in Art Exhibition," which emphasizes the past ("Early") and includes intentional quotation marks around *racism*—leads one to conclude that the matter, if it truly existed, has since been resolved. However, as recently as 2011, highly racialized language appears in photographic instructional literature. The below quote introduces an article titled "Photographing People of Color" by Monte Zucker, published on the New

York Institute of Photography's website:

> There is probably no question in portraiture that is more confusing to beginning photographers than how to photograph people with black skin. . . . Fortunately, in this day and age, it is a question that can be dealt with directly. It is simply a question of photographic technique for photographing subjects with dark skin, rather than a racially charged issue.[11]

Although this racialized paradigm evokes Dyer's studies on analog film during the late twentieth century, the article is about contemporary digital photography. Responding directly to this particular article, visual studies theorist Jennifer González comments, "If black skin creates 'confusion' it is because neither the original design of the apparatus, nor common techniques for its use have taken blackness, or other nonwhite skin colors, as a standard."[12] González, like Dyer, perceives that racial hierarchies impact the ways in which skin color has been mediated through photographic technologies and the accompanying conventional discourse.

Returning to the history of color film, media historian Brian Winston studied the phenomenon that color film "more readily photographs Caucasian skin than other types."[13] He concluded that the drive to increase color film's capabilities was conflated with racialized beauty ideals. Within Kodak's institutional literature produced during the 1950s, black skin tones, or any others, were not subject to consideration. In fact, this discourse evidenced the decisions to photochemically render white skin in its idealized form—"a whiter shade of white" than existed in reality.[14]

Kodak's push for film stock with a greater capacity for rendering dark colors resulted from demands made by manufacturers of furniture and chocolate in the 1960s and '70s, according to Roth.[15] The company claimed to be unaware of the racialized aspect of its film's inadequate representation of darker skin tones and, supposedly, did not receive "pressures from the Black community."[16] And yet the title of Broomberg and Chanarin's photography series *To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light* came from Kodak's promotional literature in the 1980s that "describe[d] the capabilities of a new film stock [Gold Max] developed . . . to address the inability of [Kodak's] earlier films to accurately render dark skin."[17] The artists, as well as Roth, identify this particular phrase as racially "coded" language, despite the company's assertions of racial neutrality.[18]

11. Monte Zucker, "Photographing People of Color," accessed February 5, 2014, http://www.nyip.edu/photo-articles/archive/photographing-people-of-color.

12. Jennifer González, "Morphologies: Race as Visual Technology," in Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 387, 379-93.

13. Brian Winston, "A Whole Technology of Dyeing: A Note on Ideology and the Apparatus of the Chromatic Moving Image," Daedalus 114, no. 4 (October 1, 1985): 106, 121.

14. Ibid., 121.

15. Roth, "Looking at Shirley," 119-20.

16. Ibid., 120.

17. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, To Photograph a Dark Horse, http://www.choppedliver.info/to-photograph-a-dark-horse/ (accessed February 12, 2014).

18. Ibid. See also Roth, "Looking at Shirley," 121-22.

19. Richard Dyer, "The Light of the World," in White (London: Routledge, 1997), 82-144.

20. Ann Hornaday, " '12 Years a Slave,' 'Mother of George,' and the Aesthetic Politics of Filming Black Skin," The Washington Post, October 17, 2013, accessed October 31, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/movies/12-years-a-slave-mother-of-george-and-the-aesthetic-politics-of-filming-black-skin/2013/10/17/282af868-35cd-11e3-80c6-7e6dd8d22d8f_story.html.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Nikon USA website, "Smart Portrait System," accessed February 8, 2014, https://www.nikonusa.com/en/Learn-And-Explore/Article/ftlzi4ue/smart-portrait-system.html.

A racially unbalanced paradigm remains largely unchanged across analog and digital, and supports Dyer's claim that all photographic media—both cinematic and still photography—are affected.[19] In a recent *Washington Post* article regarding the "aesthetic politics of filming black skin," journalist Ann Hornaday directly calls out the history of white racial privileging in cinematic conventions as "embedded racism extended into the aesthetics of the medium itself, which from its very beginnings was predicated on the denigration and erasure of the black body."[20] Filmmakers interviewed within the article refer to the camera as "not racially neutral."[21] In line with thinkers like Dyer, Winston, and Roth, Hornaday explains, "For the first hundred years of cinema . . . disregard for black skin and its subtle shadings was inscribed in the technology itself, from how film-stock emulsions and light meters were calibrated, to the models used as standards for adjusting color and tone."[22] (In terms of reference norm models, photography had Shirley cards, while television and cinema used "China Dolls.")[23] Hornaday concludes that, compared to color film and its more overt racial prioritizing of white skin, the combination of digital cameras and postproduction editing software enables a more dynamic range of darker skin tones than was ever achievable in analog film.

Considered in the context of mass media such as cinema, face detection in point-and-shoot cameras might seem like a minor issue, but it is an arena in which whiteness as a norm remains under-interrogated. Face-detection errors posted under the tag *racist camera meme* in online popular culture evidence how the white body as a reference norm persists, even though photographic technologies change.

Did Someone Blink?

Some digital cameras provide a subset of face detection that filters portraits if the subject was photographed mid-blink. When the camera identifies what it perceives to be a half-closed eye in a portrait, it prompts the question, "Did Someone Blink?" A photographer then makes the subjective decision of whether or not to retake the picture (although in the most recent version of the Nikon Coolpix, the "Blink Proof" feature within the "Smart Portrait System" now automatically takes two pictures if a blink is detected, thereby eliminating the need for the human photographer's editorial discretion altogether).[24] As in the case of face detection, blink detection relies upon a normative body that permits the camera to differentiate between what an open and a closed eye might look like.

The original source for the following racist camera meme was created by Joz Wang, the woman pictured in the display screen (fig. 3). In the photograph she posted on her personal blog in 2009, she sits

25. Joz Wang, "Racist Camera!
No, I Did Not Blink, I'm Just
Asian!," JozJozJoz (blog), May
13, 2009, accessed December
31, 2013, http://www.jozjozjoz.
com/2009/05/13/racist-camera-
no-i-did-not-blink-im-just-
asian/.

26. Joseph Pugliese, Biomet-
rics: Bodies, Technologies,
Biopolitics (London: Rout-
ledge, 2010), 4.

27. Ibid., 73.

28. Ibid., 67.

29. Wang, "Racist Camera!"

30. Adam Rose, "Are Face-
Detection Cameras Racist?,"
Time.com, January 22,
2010, accessed March 23,
2014, http://content.time.
com/time/business/arti-
cle/0,8599,1954643-1,00.html.

in a large stadium, out-of-focus bleacher chairs behind her. Wang has light tan skin, and her face is framed by long, dark hair. She smiles up toward the camera, her left arm outstretched in a familiar "selfie" pose; the image is shown on her display screen in the suspended moment after taking a picture on a digital camera. Above her face framed by a neon square, a banner of text floats the words, "Did Someone Blink?" But her eyes were open. Wang titled the blog post accompanying the photograph, "Racist Camera! No, I Did Not Blink, I'm Just Asian!"[25]

The image reveals that the blink-detection software has not been designed to account for eyes shaped by an epicanthic fold, which is a common trait among Asians and Pacific Islanders. Face- and blink-detection software are forms of biometrics, which measures the body in order to "authenticate" or "verify" a specific individual and includes facial recognition technology.[26] Although point-and-shoot digital cameras make no promises (yet) to recognize the faces they detect, the technologies are closely related. Media theorist Joseph Pugliese has shown that the calibration of such technologies' operations is predicated on what he calls "the white template body" as a reference norm with a byproduct of the systemic misrecognition of nonwhite bodies.[27] If Pugliese's insights on technology's racial normativity are accurate, the camera's misreading of a racialized facial feature reveals that the camera was not designed to recognize certain marked phenotypes. The blink-detection system knows to recognize rounder eye shapes as open, and narrower, angular eye shapes as closed or half-closed. The glitch reveals the finite constraints resulting from a presumed norm, the white template body. Although, like biometric systems, the digital camera doubtlessly has been designed with some room for "error," the phenotype common to Asian bodies evidently exceeds the "irregularities" accounted for in the software.[28]

Wang, who is Taiwanese American, explains in her blog post that the Nikon camera posed the question continuously to her and her family, but she writes with humor: "[I]t kept asking 'Did someone blink?' even though our eyes were always open. Sheesh! RACIST! :P."[29] The last line shows Wang's combined frustration and amusement. Her casual writing style suggests a joking tone through the use of the onomatopoeic sigh, the overly emphatic use of all-caps, and the typed emoticon that references sticking out one's tongue. Her sentiment is similar to that in "What a Racist Camera," pairing a face-detection error with text to add a declaration of racism that is immediately disavowed through the use of humor. The popularity of this racist camera meme even garnered it mainstream media attention from *Time* magazine, which included an interview with Wang.[30]

Figure 3.

Joz Wang, "Racist Camera! No, I Did Not Blink, I'm Just Asian!," 2009. Digital photograph. Used with permission by Joz Wang/ JozJozJoz.com.

"Liking" and "Sharing" Stereotypes

Wang's image went viral, resulting in memes that play off the humor of "racist camera"; many added stereotypical anti-Asian language (figs. 4 and 5). The networked digital culture of the meme utilizes repetition and alteration of an original text. The word *meme* itself, more broadly defined outside of Internet usage, is a "cultural element or behavioural trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by nongenetic means ([especially] imitation), is considered as analogous to the inheritance of a gene."[31] On most websites that collect memes, icons for "liking" and "sharing" on social media websites appear beneath each posted image, indicating the ways in which the images are frequently disseminated. Additionally, anyone can quickly and easily create memes on websites like MemeGenerator.com, which allows sharing without tracing back to an original "author," or even a username. Speaking generally, meme culture cares little about individual authorship. A person can thus "share" and "like" racist stereotypes with significantly less risk of social ostracism than one likely would face in real-life, embodied encounters.

Wang's original photograph has at least six distinct memes that use her image, which include anonymously added-on text. Most of the text additions repeat the (self-evidently) humorous prospect of a racist camera, though some memes regenerate racist stereotypes, such as mispronounced syllables within the English language. Among the strands of this racist camera meme, one image borrows from *and* visually alters Wang's source image (fig. 6). Posted on LOLbrary.com, the imagery surrounding the LCD screen remains the same as in the original: Wang's thumb, the stadium bleachers, and the camera body with the prompt "Did Someone Blink?" The LCD screen, however, has been replaced with a completely new scene. Twelve adolescent children crowd together in a group portrait, wearing navy and gray clothing. They have black and dark-brown hair, a range of long and short styles. And the superimposed photograph is not the only noteworthy alteration that has taken place: Each face is uncannily identical—eyes, noses, and unsmiling mouths. Each feature is on the subject's face where it should be, but closer examination reveals that each feature has been clone-stamped, an action resulting in a repeated composite "Asian" face. And each face is surrounded by a yellow square, mimicking the one produced by a digital camera's face detection.

This authorless set of manipulations to the original photograph visualizes the racist stereotype that "all Asians look the same." (A comment thread on the meme hub Reddit.com reveals that the image of the adolescents had originally stood alone as its own joke, without the face-detection squares, and prior to being pasted into Wang's camera's screen.)[32] This construction of homogenized, essentialist perceptions of the racially

31. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "meme," accessed September 16, 2013, http://www.oed.com.

Figure 6.

The LOLbrary.com, "Racist Camera." Digital photograph. Posted by Georgia Sutton on January 14, 2011. http://www.lolbrary.com/Funny/Racist-Camera/3233.

32. BenHurrr, comment on iKillTitans, "Racist Nikon," Reddit.com, October 7, 2012, accessed March 21, 2014, http://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/1137xq/racist_nikon/c6ixxzd.

33. Pugliese, Biometrics, 25–55.

34. Lisa Nakamura, Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 38–39.

marked body by white Europeans dates back to the early nineteenth century, from colonialist categorizations of nonwhite persons, and the history continues to affect how racial, ethnic, and national differences are constructed today.[33] This is not a neutral or benign stereotype that one might pass off as simple confusion of shared phenotypic traits, but one imbued with a power dynamic connected to xenophobic nationalism and warfare in the United States.[34] The tactic of racial "othering" fixates on the perceptible differences between bodies. The manipulated image on LOLbrary.com not only fakes, but exaggerates the initial face-detection error to the point of absurdity by playing up a racist stereotype.

Can We Really Blame It?

A YouTube video evidencing a phenomenon similar to racist camera memes received significant public attention in 2009. Wanda Zamen and Desi Cryer's video *HP Computers Are Racist* documented how a face-detection-equipped, motion-tracking webcam installed in a Hewlett-Packard laptop could not track a black subject's face, but always latched on to the white subject's face.[35] Hewlett-Packard responded promptly, due to the popularity of the video, commenting that proper lighting could affect any webcam's ability to recognize faces in general.[36] A *Consumer Reports* test, however, confirmed that significant extra lighting was necessary for the camera to track black subjects, in comparison to the amount of light required for white subjects.[37] In the new developments of face-detection technology, the same trope from analog history reappears: the white body serves as the unspoken norm, and the black body is rhetorically treated as a deviation from that norm.

Wang has posted twice on her blog that she does not actually think the camera is racist; she reiterates that the blog post was meant only as a joke, and is not a serious allegation against Nikon as a company.[38] Likewise, Zamen and Cryer have publically refuted the idea that cameras can be racist.[39] Surely for individuals whose names are tied to such claims, the risk of large corporations' accusations of libel merits some backpedaling.

But what is at stake socially in maintaining the conceptual separation between *racist* and *camera*? As mentioned earlier in this essay, *racist* is too subjective a term. The phrase *racist camera* gives too much agency to the machine and not enough to the complicated ways in which racial ideologies infuse social and technological representations. Likewise, declaring that all cameras are racist evades the complex historical phenomenon of racial privileging in photographic apparatuses. These moments of error evidenced by racist-camera memes enable us to see the white template body that underlies photographic media, a supposedly neutral reference point that continues to exist even as the technologies

35. Wanda Zamen and Desi Cryer, "HP Computers Are Racist," YouTube video, December 10, 2009, accessed March 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-4DT3tQqgRM (video no longer available).

37. Dean Gallea, "Are HP Webcams Really Racist? Consumer Reports Weighs In," YouTube video, 2:12, December 22, 2014, accessed March 23, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NphmOV0lrBg.

38. Joz Wang, "Racist Camera Strikes Again," JozJozJoz (blog), January 22, 2010, accessed March 23, 2014, http://www.jozjozjoz.com/2010/01/22/racist-camera-strikes-again-and-last-day-to-votecpaf-org/; and "Do I Really Think a Camera Is Racist? Or that Nikon Is a Racist Company?," JozJozJoz (blog), January 23, 2010, accessed March 23, 2014, http://www.jozjozjoz.com/2010/01/23/do-i-really-think-a-camera-is-racist-or-that-nikon-is-a-racist-company/.

36. Mallory Simon, "HP Looking Into Claim Webcam Can't See Black People," CNN.com, December 29, 2009, accessed March 21, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/12/22/hp.webcams/.

39. Ibid.

change from color film to multiple forms of face-detection-equipped digital cameras.

While biometrics used for surveillance receive growing critical attention due to their role in police investigations and international border monitoring, perhaps what makes face-detection errors documented by racist camera memes even more insidious is that they represent our everyday consumers' cameras. The errors in these memes took place when photographing friends at a bar and families at a ballpark, or when making quick self-portraits. Digital photography communicates lived experiences through visual, electronic, and networked means, such as on social media sites, on blogs, and through webcams. These mundane moments are interrupted when racial difference is hierarchically evaluated by a point-and-shoot camera, a device we least expect to be influenced by race. The unbalanced evaluation of difference from a normative white perspective is validated by the seemingly neutral camera.

Whiteness is not expected to affect a digital culture that speaks in zeros and ones. Nonetheless, the white body as norm is at its most visible in "What a Racist Camera," when it is literally marked by the yellow squares of face detection while the black subject remains marginalized to the point of nondetectability. Digital technologies are alluring in a way somewhat unique to the medium in that they connote a sense of infinity that analog technologies, seemingly, could not. If digital technologies can be refined with increasing sophistication, does the algorithm offer liberation from the confines of racial norms that underpin photographic technologies? In other words, can we program our way out of this mess? If a digital camera could be designed to better detect subjects of color—based on a range of skin colors and eye shapes—would we want this camera? Clearly, a hypothetical camera that offered "ethnic settings" does not solve the larger problem of race, but it would leave pre-established categories of race unquestioned.

Reflecting on her own filmmaking education in Hornaday's article, Montré Aza Missouri comments, "It was never an issue of questioning technology."[40] Racism built into institutions and apparatuses is harder to identify, and thus harder to interrogate. Reference norms like Shirley cards and digital photography's white template body are complicit with and constitutive of the diffuse operation of racial hegemony in which whiteness positions itself as a norm, at the expense of other racialized bodies' appearances. This is how racial ideologies emerge under our radar as naturalized forces—and structural racism gains its power through the illusion of invisibility. Rethinking cameras as structurally racist is a start. The continued unwillingness to accuse technology allows whiteness to remain the norm, only because we allow it to remain unspoken.

40. Hornaday, " '12 Years a Slave.' "