

SHINE

The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice

KRISTA THOMPSON

Duke University Press
Durham and London 2015

munity of innovative scholars at Northwestern University who compose the Blacks Arts Initiative, which includes Lisa Corrin, E. Patrick Johnson, Ramón Rivera-Servera, Ivy Wilson, and Harvey Young, are sources of inspiration and support. I thank the chair of the Department of Art History at Northwestern University, Jesús Escobar, for his encouragement and willingness to create conditions for me to further my endeavors. My deepest gratitude goes to my colleague and friend Huey Copeland for his close and critical reading of parts of the manuscript; for his wisdom, humor, and vision.

I want to acknowledge Richard Iton, my former professor and good friend, who passed away suddenly as I was finishing this manuscript. Your generosity, integrity, humility, and wit, and your scholarly legacy of redefining politics through a reading of popular culture, are things I will keep with me always. I also want to acknowledge two of my mentors, the late Richard Long and Ivan Karp, who were so influential on my scholarly career.

Thanks to James Bliss, Emilie Boone, John Farmer, and Frances Trempe, who helped in the preparation of the manuscript, with research assistance, copyright permissions, and copyediting. I want to acknowledge publications where aspects of this book previously appeared: *Art Bulletin* (chapter 4) and *African Arts* (chapter 3).

Thanks to A.K. for always being there, literally and figuratively, with an umbrella. My deepest thanks to my family, who so patiently live with my work and projects. Thank you Ella and Anthony Thompson, Antonia and Andre Carey, Gabriella and Xavier Carey, and Chaz Thompson for supporting me throughout my endeavors.

INTRODUCTION

Of Shine, Bling, and Bixels

Genealogies of performance attend not only to “the body,” as Foucault suggests, but also to bodies—to the reciprocal reflections they make on one another’s surfaces as they foreground their capacities for interaction.

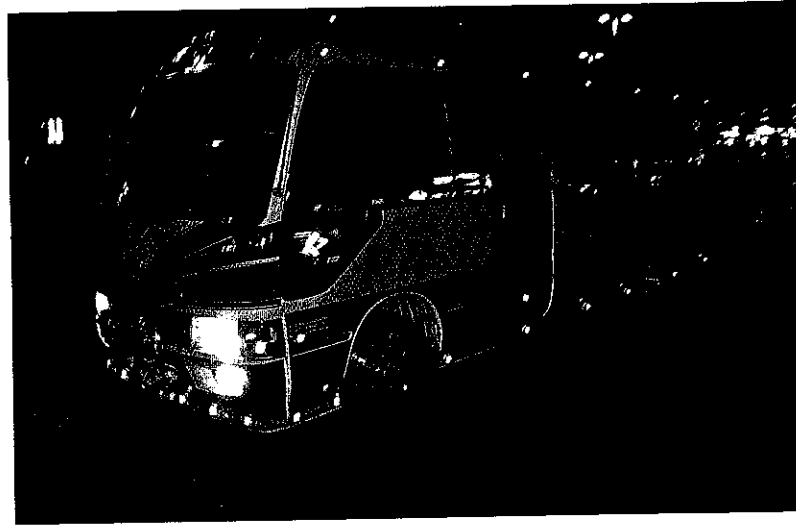
—Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (1996)

This is not counter-discourse but a counterculture that defiantly reconstructs its own critical, intellectual, and moral genealogy in a partially hidden public sphere of its own.

—Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (1993)

It is eleven o’clock at night, and a bus christened Bashment careens down the streets of Kingston, Jamaica (fig. 1.1). A rainbow of colors radiate from the front of the Route 39 bus in quick succession, reproducing in aerodynamic design its swift movement. These shimmering colors reflect the shine of the bus’s rims, detailing, and arabesque insignia. On this night, the bus transports a group of dancehall performers, the MOB and Cadillac dancers, a videographer, and me to a stage show north of the city. We are late, so the bus blazes through the winding streets to make up time. Beaming with bright white and electric-blue lights, it appears to hover over the potholed streets, like an object from the future. Flat television screens built into its exterior give Bashment its glow. When red traffic lights bring it to a momentary halt, children approach with wide eyes, their faces lit by the flickering yet persistent light from African American hip-hop and R&B music videos emitted from the bus’s HD panels. But before many of the accidental spectators can fully take in its music video offerings, Bashment is gone in a noisy flash.

I open with a description of Bashment because its display of the latest consumer electronics and music videos, featuring shimmering contemporary consumer culture, makes explicit a fact that animates this book: photographic and videographic expressions and even the



1.1. Bashment, a public bus in Jamaica with HDTV screens on its exterior. Kingston, Jamaica, 2009. Photo by author.

display of visual technologies like the camera or the HDTV screen and their shining effects are central among African diasporic communities, not only in Kingston but also in other parts of the Caribbean and the United States. Especially among young people, images—whether beaming from buses, animating miniature screens in taxis, radiating from local and foreign music-television channels, emanating from makeshift projector screens, or transmitted through cellophane-covered DVDs—dominate how people in the African diaspora experience culture, music, their sense of the world, and their places within it.

My point is not to argue for the uniqueness of the popularity of visual technologies in black communities in the United States and the Caribbean, even though studies suggest that it is especially pronounced among these groups, but to understand the distinct historical, socio-political, and ultimately aesthetic ways African diasporic communities take up photography, videography, and other forms of lens-based technologies at the turn of the twenty-first century.¹ What do these visual expressions—their content, form, and affect—signify for black producers and consumers, who often hail from the urban working-class communities of these post-civil rights and postcolonial societies? How do they offer the means for these subjects to reflect on, represent, and recast their relationship to the modern, the past, the commodity, the global, the diasporic, and the national? How do these expressions influ-

ence the ways people across the African diaspora think about their self-presentation, self-representation, visibility, and viewership in black public spheres in and beyond their communities?²

This book takes up these questions by considering contemporary popular uses of the camera in different parts of the African diaspora, primarily over the last twenty-five years. Specifically, it examines how lens-centered practices have informed both a representational system and a network of material and performative practices in the United States and two of its diasporic neighbors in the northern English-speaking Caribbean: Jamaica and the Bahamas.³ This marks in the African diaspora a geopolitical and cultural space that has been described as the circum-Caribbean.⁴ It is a region with intense and intimate historical ties maintained in the twenty-first century through lens- and screen-based technologies. Focusing on this area as a unit of analysis pries open national, geographic, and disciplinary boundaries between places bound together by networks of people, goods, and visual and performance practices. Analyzing the photographic and videographic genres that circulate across populations in the circum-Caribbean allows for a concentrated view of more widespread processes. These forms offer a glimpse of the way specific visual technologies mediate the ways disparate groups of people of African descent come to think of themselves as a transnational community.

While attentive to the photographic and videographic expressions these groups share, I am equally interested in the distinct ways that people engage photography and video in different locations. These representational practices are uniquely informed by the historical circumstances that forged the African diaspora in the Americas and by postcolonial formations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and culture in each place. They also respond to the ways African diasporic groups have precisely been defined as such through vision and visual technologies. The popular visual expressions inform performance practices, consumption habits, transnational aesthetic communities, configurations of economic and cultural value, contemporary art, and new modes of visibility—and “un-visibility”—that highlight shifting configurations of politics in the contemporary circum-Caribbean.⁵

This book offers a historical and critical analysis of several of the most widespread forms of photographic and videographic practice among black urban populations in this region. It also presents an art-historical analysis of the work of artists who draw on these popular expressions, including the late Charles H. Nelson, Ebony G. Patterson, Ke-



1.2. Kehinde Wiley, *Three Boys*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 92 × 92 in. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

hinde Wiley, and Luis Gispert. Like the artists of the popular genres, studio artists have developed photographic practices locally that they circulate transnationally. The US-based artist Wiley, for one, works in different locations and in 2013 produced a series of paintings, *The World Stage: Jamaica*, some of which featured Jamaican dancehall participants (fig. 1.2). In the same year Jamaican-born artist Patterson worked on the art project *Illuminated Presence* with urban youth in Chicago.⁶ The contrapuntal analysis of transnational contemporary art and popular practices offers a broader view of the social, political, and aesthetic contexts in which both forms flourish. At stake in exploring works of art in relation to popular culture is not simply an expansion of the sources art historians typically consider in interpreting contemporary art. Artists considered here use approaches to representation from black popular

visual culture to assess critically genres ranging from painted portraits canonized in the history of art to contemporary print advertising. Informed in part by their engagement with popular practices, many of these artists foreground the effect of light and the illusion of the real in the history of Western painting. In this way, they highlight distinct forms of image-making in the African diaspora and offer a critical and illuminating perspective on the history of Western art.

Performing Visibility and Popular Photography in Urban Communities in the Circum-Caribbean

The social significance and even predominance of the camera in contemporary African diasporic communities may be elucidated by describing what unfolded at the stage show after *Bashment* arrived in Santa Cruz. When *Bashment* finally appeared, ablaze both visually and sonically, it immediately brightened a disaffected atmosphere. Some of the headliners had pulled disappearing acts, and would-be partiers milled about outside the modest-looking club in disgruntled pockets. The bus's glowing entrance promised excitement, hype, and connectedness to a black transnational urbanity in this quiet country community. As the dancers stepped off the beaming bus, coordinated in dress and oversized rock-star shades, the fledgling affair came alive. While the fanciful dance moves of the performers and the break-dancing of their country counterparts warrant a separate analysis, I want to call attention to one particular member of the entourage: the videographer. With a large camera perched on his shoulder, like a searching mechanical bird, the videographer produced the party's visual charge. Entering the dimly lit club, he turned on his video camera and its bright light. As the DJ increased the music's volume, matching the light's intensity, the videographer scoped the room, coming to rest on the MOB dancers, who seemed energized by the camera's spotlight (fig. 1.3).

Since the late 1980s, the videographer wielding a large camera crowned with a searing bright white light (a harsh light without a diffuser) has become a fixture in Jamaica's urban dancehall and club cultures. Performers often compete, performing creatively, agilely, or sexually, to attract the videographer's attention and to bask in what is described locally as the "video light": the bright light from the video camera. An informal payola system exists, fights break out between performers, and dancehall attendees even bleach their skin (which purportedly prepares them for the video light), all in an effort to become



1.3. MOB dancers performing in the video light, Santa Cruz, Jamaica, 2009.
Photo by author.

visible—to be made spectacularly present in the lens of the video camera.⁷ Many seekers of the video light hope that the circulation of their images through DVDs, the Internet, or television will bring them fame and fortune.⁸ Michael Graham (“Crazy Hype”) of the MOB dancers expressed faith, for instance, that the video light would take the dance group “to the stars.”⁹ As veteran videographer Jack Sowah (Courtney Cousins) explained, “Light can do so much for them [dancehall participants]. If not in the video light no one will see them. . . . The more the light shine on you the brighter you get.”¹⁰ Light has the power to bring geographic transcendence and social ascendance. Photography and videography, as well as the spectacle of picture-taking, so evident in video light, have restructured and reoriented more long-standing cultural sites and expressions, like the half-century-old dancehall culture, and have been central to the creation of new aesthetic practices.¹¹

The significance of these technologies was underscored that night in Santa Cruz. Some forty-five minutes into the festivities, the light on the videographer’s camera went out, leaving only its afterimage ablaze, followed by a vacuous darkness. Although the dancehall beats continued to sound throughout the dimly lit hall, the dancers immediately dispersed and meandered away, seemingly released from the cam-

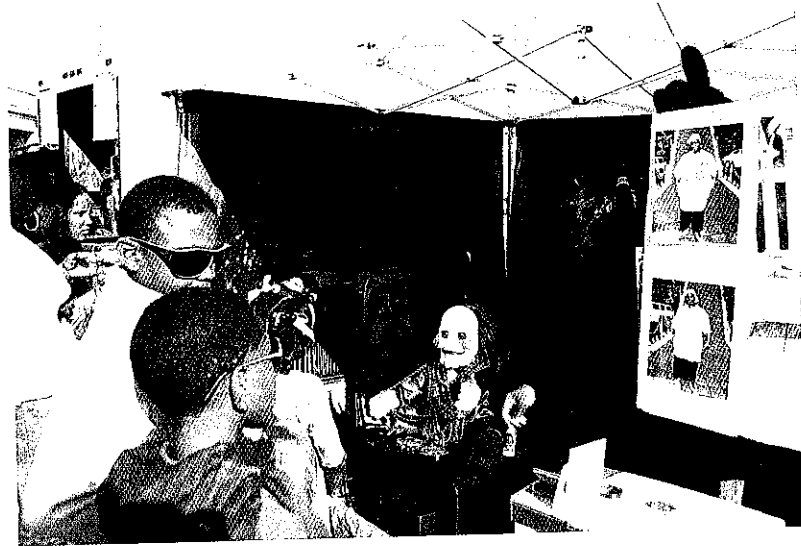
era’s orbit. As the videographer worked feverishly to remedy the outage, one *partier* decided to take the video-light concept into his own hands. Holding his cell phone, equipped with a surprisingly bright beam of light, he stretched out his hand and cast the beam onto a woman standing next to him. Assured that the small light illuminated her, she started to dance amid the restless gazes of onlookers, a few of whom replicated the man’s makeshift video-light technology.

This impromptu staging of video light was revelatory for me. It testified to the centrality of visual technology, to the fact that the dance could not take place outside its auspices. It also called attention to the dancers’ state of waiting for visual technology to become active—indeed, to become subjects. The camera’s substitution by a beam of light also highlighted some of the alternate uses and meanings of photographic and videographic technology evident in Jamaica’s dancehall communities and across other populations in the African diaspora. The incident spotlighted, for one, the way participants in some popular visual practices in the circum-Caribbean emphasize the physical presence of technology and the display of objects associated with photographic or videographic representation—lights, cameras, screens, backdrops. Technology often becomes a prop in performances of visibility rather than or in addition to being a tool that produces a physical representation. In these practices the process of being seen being photographed constitutes its own ephemeral form of image-making. The pose, the gesture, and the choreography of the body before a photographic lens and an audience are types of representation that do not need the physical image produced by the camera.

For some, like the woman performing before the light of the phone, being illuminated in the aura of visual technologies is an intrinsic part of these practices. Indeed, the very term “video light” attests to this interest in and awareness of the optical affect and effect of light generated at the moment of photographic or videographic production. The expression brings into focus the visual and representational work of light within these diasporic photographic practices. The materiality of the photographic appears reconfigured in popular practices that emphasize the optical effect of the moment of being photographed as important in its own right.

Photography, Cultural Identity, and the Practice of Diaspora

This book focuses on several photographic and videographic genres in the circum-Caribbean in which light and the *effect* of being represented



1.4. Street photography studio in New Orleans, 2009. Photo by author.

take center stage and explores some of the shared visual technologies that have informed such approaches to the camera and visibility in public space. Many of these practices have not been subject to scholarly consideration. I offer, for one, a history of video light. This visual practice has played a central role in the creation of local and African diasporic communities, which were formed around the distinct types of viewership that were produced through the rapidly moving video camera and its bright light in the dancehalls and through resulting videos and DVDs. Another popular photographic genre found across black urban communities in the United States and Jamaica is “street” or “club” photography (fig. 1.4). Photographers such as Ivery McKnight, Greg Sanders, and Richard Sims popularized street photography in Washington, DC, in the late 1980s. In this genre clients pose for Polaroid or digital photographs before makeshift hand-painted backdrops, often in front of an audience and under bright lights. These backdrops, found at hip-hop concerts and festivals celebrating black culture across urban communities in the United States, often depict fantastical displays of wealth, from gleaming luxury items to Caribbean seascapes. Street photography gained currency in Jamaica in the 1990s when an individual known locally as “Sonny” became one of several photographers who introduced the form; the backdrops there are regularly found in the island’s dancehalls.¹² The hand-painted backdrops provide one means by which signifiers of status

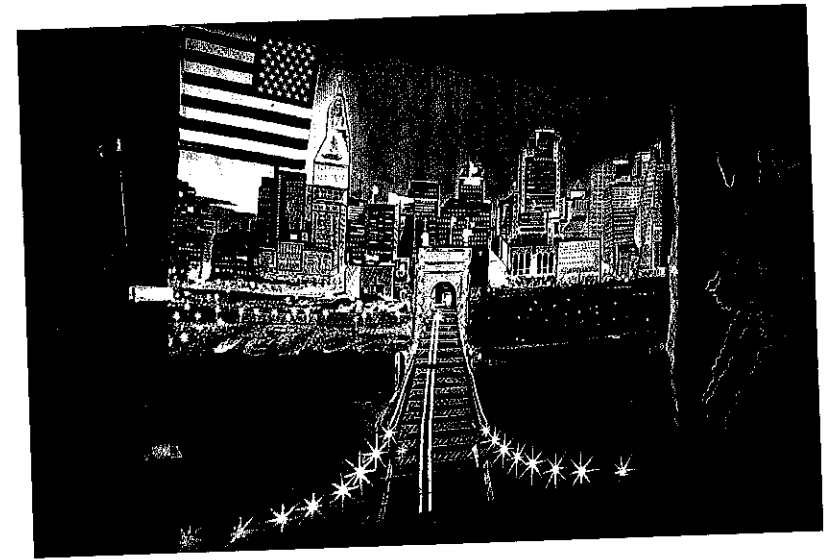
in hip-hop culture and black urban cultures in the United States become present in and configured through Jamaican dancehall culture. The very process of posing, of staging one’s visibility for the camera as a display of social standing, has also traveled with the transient photographic studios. High school proms in the Bahamas present another local practice focused on public performances for the camera. These public events are the most popular and anticipated occasions for youths and their relatives in the capital, Nassau. Young people stage elaborate red carpet entrances—many inspired by hip-hop music videos—to produce events that will live on in spectators’ memories. In addition to evincing spectacular forms of image-making, I examine how these practices take specific material forms—the Polaroid, the VHS tape, the digital print, and the projected video image.

All of the popular visual practices considered here circulate between or are influenced by different African diasporic groups or cultural forms. In the past, black intellectuals and political leaders, newspapers and magazines, oral histories, music, and sartorial styles profoundly shaped how modern African diasporic groups came to think of themselves as a community who shared political concerns, cultural routes, social values, historical experiences, and intertwined futures.¹³ The writings of Brent Hayes Edwards and Paul Gilroy have been central in highlighting the role of print culture and vernacular music, respectively, in creating a poetics that was open and translatable to a range of diasporic audiences, across language barriers, geographies, and temporalities in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ But there has been a relative neglect of the work of visuality in scholarship on cultural formation and exchange in the African diaspora, despite the fact that a key text on the subject, Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” takes film and to a lesser extent photography as its starting point.¹⁵ Contemporary African diasporic formation across many black urban communities in the circum-Caribbean, I demonstrate, takes place in the light of technology, in the flickering, unsettled, reflective and bright surfaces, the pixels, of photographic and videographic representation.¹⁶ How have the unfinished or “fantastic” qualities of music in the African diaspora been transformed when visual means of expression become primary modes of cultural circulation?¹⁷ How do photographic and videographic technologies and the material and aesthetic effects of photographic and videographic forms newly articulate the joints and gaps formed between diasporic groups?¹⁸ How is diasporic formation conducted through aesthetic formations and toward what end?¹⁹ How do visual technologies expand, constrain, and

change the terrain through which diasporas are imagined and brought into being?

As visual modes of transmission have informed and transformed ongoing processes of diasporic translation, the “practice of diaspora” has changed: ways of seeing and performative approaches to being seen and represented have become intrinsic to and constitutive of contemporary African diasporic communities. The circulation of photographic and videographic expressions has influenced how people across the African diaspora learn to see and assign value to being seen, to perceive and participate in viewership and spectacles, and to create forms of cultural production in which the camera—the video camera, the still camera, even the telephone camera—is central. These technologies facilitate a shared visual literacy and spectacular visibility, which is manifest in the way diasporic subjects engage in shared performances of visibility—practices that involve staging the act of being seen and being seen in the process of being seen. These expressions have created new forms of participation in black public spheres, even as the aesthetic communities of viewers and performers across the diaspora who use these expressions have transformed the political meaning of visibility in their respective societies. The camera, the right to be seen, the right to self-representation, might even confer what Paul Gilroy characterizes as the “dimensions of citizenship blocked by formal politics and violently inhibited by informal social codes.”²⁰

Recent scholarship has explored “photography’s capacity to build or envision [an African diasporic] community across geographic location,” to quote photography historian Leigh Raiford.²¹ Photographic and videographic genres are mobile and mobilized, affective and effective, in picturing and producing notions of black community across geographies and cultures in the African diaspora. The ways photographic practices of diaspora work to create and secure attachments to broader communities, geographies, and cultures in the African diaspora might be elucidated by considering a street photography studio set up in Kingston, Jamaica, in 2010, that featured a backdrop portraying the Brooklyn Bridge and the United States flag in paint (fig. 1.5). The backdrop represented the bridge with sparkling white lights, from a bird’s-eye perspective, portraying it as a visually accessible metropolitan landscape. Electric light, so emphasized by the use of white paint in the backdrop, became an essential part of representing the city, the modern, the cosmopolitan, the American dream, the dazzling possibilities of bright lights. By posing against the drop in Kingston, clients could have a cer-



1.5. Photo Sonny’s street photography studio, Kingston, Jamaica, 2010.
Photo by author.

tain proximity to the New York borough, home to one of the largest and most diverse communities in the African diaspora.²² Photographic forms like the street photography not only circulate particular iconographies and represent specific geographies, but the shared genres inform a sense of connection between diasporic groups, encouraging similar approaches to posing in public, to a photographic self-fashioning. They also offer the possibility of recognition by one’s peers and diasporic counterparts as coparticipants, with different levels of power and visibility, in visual cultural expressions. The different configurations of diasporic spaces in the street photography studios highlight the way contemporary practices of diaspora, aided by visual technologies, involve forms of projection, of virtual extension into and imaginative dwelling in other geographies, communities, and temporalities.

The photographic medium, which often captures an unrecoverable moment from the past, allowing it to reside “freeze-framed” in other times and spaces, might have a special analogous relation to African diasporic communities who are often cut off or removed from spaces and times. As Christian Metz so eloquently describes it, “Photography is a cut inside the referent, it cuts off a piece of it, a fragment, a part object, for a long immobile travel of no return.”²³ Metz’s observation might be particularly prescient for African diasporic subjects, who use photog-

raphy at times to negotiate their conditions as African diasporic subjects. If African diasporas come to think of themselves as such through a memory of or consciousness of the experience of rupture, removal, the cut, then they might seize onto photographs because in some respects they ontologically reproduce and redress a diasporic condition.²⁴

Often these photographic genres circulate across media and through informal and underground economies. Kingston's videotaped dancehall performances sometimes travel—as DVDs sold on urban streets, through YouTube, or on stations like HYPE TV—across Jamaica, the United States, the Bahamas, and more broadly.²⁵ It is not uncommon, as Sowah explains, for video footage from Jamaica to be copied multiple times by its producer in Kingston, counterfeited by a distributor in Flatbush, New York, and uploaded as a compressed file by a purchaser to a website.²⁶ At each stage the video (and more recently the DVD) can deteriorate, becoming visually marked or pixelated with each copy. Even with recent advances in Internet bandwidth speeds and video compression, in the case of dancehall videos in Jamaica there are literal gaps in translation of the image on screen. The brightness of video light and the rapid movement of the camera in the dancehall can result in streaks of light within the footage, in a visual noise materialized on the surface of video. This is evident in a video recording of the MOB dancers available online (fig. 1.6). The processes of duplication and reduplication reproduce a type of cultural formation in the African diaspora, one in which the form constantly changes over time and across space, bearing traces of and constituted by these processes of transformation and loss.²⁷ The formative role of visual technologies, of bytes and pixels, in the translation of African diasporic cultures is often visualized as viewers across the diaspora experience black culture through the matter, grain, and texture of visual technologies.

These popular visual technologies also cause interruption, disruption, and blindness that are equally significant in the formation of diasporas. What escapes translation and is lost if a primary means through which Jamaicans in the diaspora and African Americans experience dancehalls is through pixelated videos? How significant is it that street photography backdrops in Kingston picture the Brooklyn Bridge and a cityscape full of lights, while in Atlanta and New Orleans these backdrops represent the Caribbean as a beach space devoid of streetlights or any signs of modernity and urbanism? How do these practices cause or reflect misrecognition and new forms of cognition that are intrinsic to the creation of diasporic communities?



1.6. The MOB dancers, Kingston, Jamaica, 2011. Video still from YouTube video, posted January 12, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Avj4jKvVuYY.

The exchange of visual media has also been a means through which performances of gender and sexual identities have been reinvented and reimposed in each context. Photographic practices offer modes through which normative ideals of gender and sexuality have been unsettled. For example, the prevalence of male dancers in hip-hop music videos, as Jamaican cultural historian Donna Hope has argued, contributes to the popularity of male performers in the dancehalls and to the presentation of new modes of masculinity.²⁸ In these popular expressions, signifiers of gender have become unmoored from the ways they historically produced meaning and remain in flux, in formation, refusing easy categorization and capture.²⁹

To examine these expressions, this book puts photographic practices into conversation with performance studies. Sonjah Stanley Niaah and Joseph Roach have analyzed the way African diasporic and other social groups use performance practices to occupy, always imperfectly, the gaps in social-cultural networks. They explore the way these populations produce and enact counter-memories and counter-histories through performances.³⁰ Such performances, mediated through visual media, have increasingly come to be about staging one's visibility. Visual technologies occupy the spaces, virtually extend the worlds, and create the reflective surfaces of interaction between African diasporic groups.

In order to assess the social and sensorial effect of visual technologies and how they intercede in "performance genealogies," I did much of

the research for the book with and through a video camera or still camera.³¹ In addition to taking my own photographs, I worked closely with videographers (like Jermaine Richards, whose video light went out in Santa Cruz) and photographers in Jamaica, Nassau, Washington, DC, Atlanta, and New Orleans.³² I aimed to take seriously predominant aesthetic practices and technologies of representation in black communities. I sought to pursue an art history formulated not just in the archives but in the streets, sites where art historians typically do not look for their subjects. What are the tools, methods, and sites for the formation of alternate modes of writing African diaspora art history?

On Photographic Becoming: The In-Between State of Photography in the African Diaspora

These popular African diasporic expressions take specific forms that expand existing considerations of what constitutes photographic practice. The use of light produced through visual technologies generates distinct aesthetic, synaesthetic, physiological, and phenomenological effects, creating or denying types of viewership in particular performative and spatial contexts. The special preference for being within and producing a brilliant unrelenting white light, for one, in these popular forms of photography and videography can produce a blinding, even painful effect on both the subject before the camera and surrounding spectators (fig. 1.7). In the context of the dancehalls, the video camera's light generates a form of representation at the moment of blinding, when the visual senses are inundated and exceeded. It induces a sublime state of visibility in which the subject is so hypervisible that it disappears from view. Video light and some of the other photographic practices inhabit the representational edge of hypervisibility and invisibility, optical saturation and blindness, presence and absence, blackness and white light. They produce a form of excess, a visual superfluity, that points precisely to the limits of vision or what lies just beyond photographic and visual capture.

In so doing, they create what might be described as "afterimages" that can be seen and felt after the moment of the photograph's production. Afterimages are typically defined as optical illusions that persist in one's vision after exposure to light or a visual stimulus.³³ I use the term here to refer to the way light from photographic and videographic technologies sears itself into the retinal memory of viewers after their exposure to a source of illumination has ceased. Afterimages are ephemeral, fugi-



1.7. Performers at Uptown Mondays dancehall in front of the intense undiffused video light, Kingston, Jamaica, 2010. Photo by author.

tive, existing in what Walter Benjamin referred to as the “irrevocable instantaneity of a lightning flash” and the “now of recognizability.”³⁴ Despite this fleeting nature, they can create an indelible embodied form of representation. Audre Lorde used “afterimage” to refer to representations, specifically photographic, whose “force remains within my eyes . . . etched into my visions” even after her eyes “are averted.”³⁵ The use of blinding, visually inundating light in the popular photographic practices produces this lingering and forceful type of image that insists on occupying vision even if one looks away. Afterimages do the work of memory over and against the possibilities of disappearance or forgetting, shaping the very matter of memory and photography through their embodied forms.

In addition to focusing on the ephemeral effects of light, in these popular practices there is a notable refusal of or disinterest in certain physical forms of photographic record. Often when photographers and their patrons produce material images, as is the case with the photography studios set up on the streets and in public spaces in the United States and Jamaica, they use photographic technologies, like the Polaroid, that are singular. Even when street photographers produce digital photographs, they habitually erase the files after printing them, in effect creating nonreproducible images like Polaroids. These forms of picture-making are not solely bound to celluloid or built of pixels but appear both to invest in and to disavow, exceed, or eschew the material image. These expressions elude capture through photographic form. In the age of digital reproduction these popular photographic practices deny easy serial replication and dissemination. They linger in between representational states, appearing simultaneously like an analog and digital photographic form, like a still photograph or a moving image; they are about the pose and performance and about hypervisibility and emblazoned disappearance; and they are invested in image production and destruction.

Although these practices vary widely, in different ways they emphasize a process of representational becoming before the photographic medium settles into its more conventional material form.³⁶ Whether focusing on the emblazoned moment of picture-taking, disrupting the trace of the negative, or producing a photographic form with a painted backdrop, the popular urban diasporic photographic expressions remain at home in an unsettled and in-between state.³⁷ These African diasporic expressions often freeze, hinder, or prevent the conventional ways the vernacular photograph offers a likeness of something else, appears onto-

logically identical with what it depicts while detracting from its own surface and physical structure. These African diasporic practices prevent the photograph from turning to its referent (the person or thing represented in the image), which, according to one preeminent scholar of photography, Roland Barthes, defines what photography is and does.³⁸

The ways these liminal representational forms call attention to and refuse the typical appearance, materiality, and seriality of popular photographs are notable, given the historical uses of photography by authorities, colonial officials, tourists, and criminologists to render black people legible as a group in the circum-Caribbean.³⁹ People with different agendas have employed the medium to define blackness and to deny the rights of blacks as subjects and citizens capable of self-possession or governance. This is typified in the use of a torn *carte de visite* on a reward notice for a runaway slave from Georgia in 1863. In this image the miniature photographic portrait, identified with the democratization of the image and mobility of the working classes in Europe and the United States, sought precisely to hold in place social hierarchies that defined blacks as property rather than free persons (fig. 1.8).⁴⁰ Unlike the photograph's seemingly transparent surface, photographs of black people in these contexts often foregrounded black skin as a signifier, representative of more than surface: of a host of ever-changing characteristics inherent to black people. In this respect, black people's surface appearances (unlike the photograph's surface) often could *not* be seen through or beyond. Photography often delimited the ability to see black people as subjects with complex interior lives.⁴¹

In particular, contemporary African diasporic photographic forms may be understood in the context of the history of uses of photography to define criminals. Allan Sekula notes the way photography served almost from its inception as a tool to capture such types.⁴² But what he defines as the repressive role of photography is not confined to the production of wanted posters or mug shots. More expansively, photographs—whether honorific studio portraits or composite photographs of criminal types—only make sense within a broader system that depends on assigning bodies places within social and moral hierarchies. Sekula terms this ordering of individuals through photography a “shadow archive.” These multiple and mutually constitutive applications of photography provide a useful broader frame for understanding the urban contemporary practices under consideration here, which precisely involve communities defined variously as “urban” that have often been subject to oversight, in all its implications of surveillance.⁴³

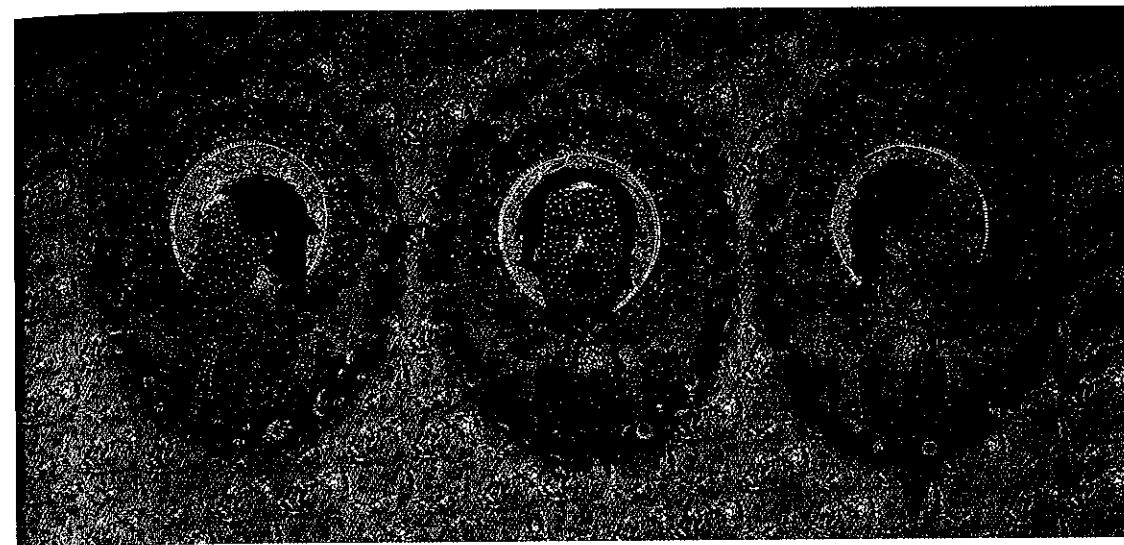
\$ 50.00 Reward!!



Ran away from the yard corner of Jackson & Broad
Streets, Augusta Ga. — on the evening of Tuesday 7th April
1863 a Woman "Dolly", whose likeness is here seen. —
She is thirty years of age, light complexion — hesitates
somewhat when spoken to, and is not a very healthy
woman — but rather good looking, with a fine set of
teeth. Never changed her owner and had been a house
servant always. It is thought she had been enticed
off by some White Man, being herself a stranger to
this City and belonging to a Charleston family. —
For further particulars apply to Antoine
Poullain Esq. — Augusta Ga. — 11/17

Augusta Police Station
Louis Manigault, Owner of Dolly

1.8. Reward notice for runaway slave, c. 1863. Manigault Papers, no. 484,
Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North
Carolina at Chapel Hill.



1.9. Ebony G. Patterson, *Di Real Big Man*, 2010. Mixed-media tapestry with
wallpaper and flowers, 6.75 × 5 ft. Collection of National Gallery of Jamaica.
Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery.

Notions of the carceral, the criminal, the socially aberrant, and the shadow archive haunt the popular expressions considered in this book. The artists I discuss bring popular photographic forms into proximity with state criminal photographic archives, stressing how they are intimately intertwined. Patterson, for example, reframes and embellishes mug shots of black men with aesthetic elements used to gain visibility in Jamaica's dancehalls (fig. 1.9). Nelson used crime-scene photographs as the basis of his backdrops, while wanted posters in part motivate Wiley's photographic engagement with black male subjects in his photographic series *Black Light*.⁴⁴ More broadly, the popular diasporic expressions and works of art explored here both use and refuse certain ways blackness has been framed.

But I want to do more than suggest that popular practices merely offer new structures for being seen that exceed the representational containers fashioned for them by those in authority. Rather, I want to stress a point Tina Campt makes very succinctly: "The visibility of race and the indexicality of the photograph have been powerful twin forces in the deployment of the racialized index to produce subjects to be seen, read, touched, and consumed as available and abject flesh objects and commodities, rather than as individual bodies, agents, or

actors."⁴⁵ As such, it is significant that contemporary photographic expressions neither quite allow the photograph to materially secure its black subjects nor in some instances permit it to produce widely disseminated photographic records or archives. These expressions often remain in process, interrupting, if not undermining, the determinacy evident in many of the uses of photography to configure blackness in the past. Or they foreground what might be described as a photographic opacity, the highlighting of the materiality of the photograph's surface, the process and physiological effects of its making, the inability of photography to capture its subjects transparently.⁴⁶ The African diasporic use of blinding light, for one, highlights photography as a medium that induces blindness, exceeds the visual, rather than creating legibility or indexicality.

Light and the Culture of Celebrity

Some participants in the circum-Caribbean incessantly and narcissistically use the camera to partake in what Daniel Boorstin has described as "the white glare of publicity," "the specious brilliance" he associates with a US-styled brand of celebrity.⁴⁷ At least since the 1950s, well-knownness has increasingly become its own claim to fame, "an achievement that must be performed before an audience."⁴⁸ Photography, television, and film all played roles in creating a sense of the ubiquity of fame, which seemed "unbounded by time or space: constantly present, constantly recognizable, and therefore constantly existing."⁴⁹ This sense of the temporal and spatial unboundedness of celebrity may have facilitated the co-optation of ideals of fame in disparate locations, such as New Orleans, Kingston, and Nassau, where individuals and groups redirected the structures and visual technologies of celebrity to focus on themselves. These popular appropriations of celebrity culture—particularly in the case of video light and the red carpet performances at proms—testify to the pervasiveness, persuasiveness, and pluralist spread of Hollywood's culture of celebrity, as well as to its capriciousness, instability, and fungibility of meaning and the broadening scope of its subjects of illumination.

Numerous scholars have critically assessed the shallowness and simulated reality of celebrity culture.⁵⁰ Such criticisms are germane and generative here. Although investing in the luminous effects of picture-taking might be the height of mystification, "the authentication of illusion as more real than the real itself," the fervent attentiveness to celeb-

erity in these local contexts may reveal a certain fixation with status in societies where fame and fortune increasingly appear to be achieved on the basis not of merit but of the mastery of skills related to techniques of the visual and the production and dissemination of one's image.⁵¹ By examining these distinct local manifestations of celebrity, we may glimpse structures of longing in post-civil rights and postcolonial contexts—local people's efforts to negotiate the political, economic, sociological, and aesthetic spheres that make possible, maintain, or constrain their ability to transcend their social status and the fixity of their station, space, and time.⁵² These forms offer the possibility of mobility and transcendence.

As attentive observers of the power and possibilities of performing celebrity, participants in these African diasporic practices cast a spotlight on the constitutive components of global visual media, the effect and affect of its production of fame. They invest in but dissect structures by putting the illusion of celebrity on view. Using lights, cameras, and red carpets, they make a spectacle of the spectacle of celebrity, perpetuating, picturing, and performing the gestures, sights, and visual apparatuses used in the manufacture of fame. The spectacle of stardom becomes an end in itself, testifying to the way these practitioners simultaneously reconstitute and reify notions of celebrity as both conscripts and transformers of its visual machinations, possibilities, and limits—its power of persuasion and illusory effects.

These African diasporic popular lens-destined practices also highlight photography's role as a technology of race in which light has played an intrinsic role. My primary interest in light lies less in its physical properties than in how it has become refracted into Western epistemes of representation since the Enlightenment. Since 1666, when Isaac Newton studied the color spectrum and postulated "it was white light that contained all other colours, rather than, as had been believed before black," whiteness has increasingly been associated with the meaning of representability.⁵³ Through the work of Newton and others, whiteness came to seem invisible and universal, the ground on which representation took place. The ideals that surrounded whiteness became manifest in lighting techniques and photographic and cinematic technologies. Richard Dyer details how photographers pictured white women in ways that associated them with celebrity, glamour, spirituality, universality, ideality, and moral and aesthetic superiority.⁵⁴ Intriguingly, he also observes that photographers used lighting to create a sense of white femininity as disembodied, not of the flesh, while they typically lit nonwhite

subjects to create the appearance of shine and sweat—a glistening that highlighted the body and its surface. Photography long privileged and universalized particular constructions of race and gender without appearing to do so.

The “racial character” of photographic technologies, as Lorna Roth and Dyer point out, directly informed the appearance and illegibility of black people.⁵⁵ Roth, for instance, examines light-skin bias in color-film stock emulsions, in “flesh-tone” reference cards used to achieve skin-color balance in analog photography, and in the digital-camera technologies.⁵⁶ The different popular photographic practices in the African diaspora explored here intervene in these histories of technologies of light and the production of race, making different claims on and investments in the photographic effect of white light.⁵⁷ How can black people, through popular practices, create different forms of legibility through photographic and videographic technologies, given the historical relation between whiteness and light and the very notion of the representable? How might they differently shine, glow, or bling through the photographic and videographic medium and in the public sphere?

Skin bleaching in Jamaica’s contemporary dancehalls, which increased in popularity with the rise of the video camera and video light in the early 1990s, is a revealing case in point. In this complex practice, subjects often lighten the surface of their faces with chemicals. Some dancehall participants believed that having lighter skin readied them to be in the scope of the video light and in the videos or photographs that might result from them.⁵⁸ Many factors contribute to this practice, but I want to call attention to skin bleaching as a response to and as a form of visual technology. That skin bleachers lighten the surfaces of their bodies to appear on video and in the video light, to be representable, testifies to the ways photography privileges whiteness and to the drastic, body-altering lengths to which some people go to be representable, registered, and recognized, given the historical facture and uses of the medium to image race.

But photography as a technology is not simply imposed and engaged in a hegemonic way in the locations examined here. It is transformed in the process. The bodies of men and women, manipulated to reflect light, become a new form of photographic surface, absorbing and reflecting light, appearing permanently marked by the light of representation. Bleachers make their skins sensitive to light through the application of a variety of chemicals.⁵⁹ These substances make their bodies reflect and absorb light the way photo emulsion makes photographic paper sensi-

tive to the impressions of light. In this way the bleached subjects transform their skins into photographs, becoming both what we might think of as the subject of the photograph and its material matter. Skin bleaching is an example of what we might describe as a body of photography, the result of and transference of the effect of photographic technologies on the body and part of a broader creation of a social body through vision, light, and visual media.⁶⁰

Skin bleaching, video light, street photography, and the contemporary art that engages these complex practices all raise questions about what constitutes photography in these and other cultural and geographic contexts. In this way these expressions form part of “photography’s other histories.”⁶¹ This is Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson’s prescient term for scholarly analyses of the medium that take into account a range of geographic locations and a variety of different media that inform how photography is rethought across cultural contexts and over time. These practices expand notions of photography beyond understandings of the photograph as “a three-dimensional thing . . . [that] exist[s] materially in the world, as chemical deposits on paper,” as Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart describe it.⁶² While lens-centered African diasporic expressions at times take more conventional forms, these expressions also emphasize the moment of the photograph’s taking, the pose, the performance for the camera—ephemeral processes and effects that elude or do not privilege forms of material capture.⁶³ These representational practices put pressure on assumptions about materiality and reproducibility that very much undergird most histories of photography. In this respect, they highlight what might be described as other ontologies of photography—photographic practices that precede and exceed the material forms conventionally associated with the medium. Perhaps the pose, the staging of the photographic event and its spectacular effects, and the body as photograph complicate and refuse notions of the ontology of photography because the material image is often beside the point. What matters instead is how people use the camera in conjunction with other technologies to construct a complex set of relations to their local, transnational, and diasporic communities.

The Visual Life of Things: Materialism Reconfigured through the Visual Economy of Light

Photographic and videographic expressions created by black urban populations in the circum-Caribbean also offer an opportunity to ex-

plore African diasporic perceptions of and approaches to global consumer culture. Across these representational practices people choose to be pictured with particular consumer goods and often engage in displays of conspicuous consumption. There is a distinct aesthetic of material excess or what Kobena Mercer characterizes as “too-muchness” evident in many of these expressions.⁶⁴ They manifest a “bling-bling” aesthetic—“bling” being a word that in its doubling highlights the spectacular display of material surplus. Such expressions involve not only the possession of material things, but their embellishment or appearance alongside signifiers of wealth and prestige. Bashment, the pimped-out public bus, epitomizes a bling-bling aesthetic and its ability to transform the ordinary into the spectacular. The most audacious participants in these practices seem to be poster children for identity formation in the society of the spectacle, who engage in consumerism for the purpose of being seen and in some instances are turned into products to be displayed and consumed through photography, video, or digital technologies.

While many people who participate in the representational and performance practices studied here portray their personhood and prestige through consumer goods, they simultaneously produce other forms of value and status that mitigate, take on, and transform the shimmering world of consumer culture. People in the African diaspora who engage in these practices have created their own visual economy, a shared system of value that circulates across geographic boundaries and that revolves in part around the visual production and recognition of light. I use the term “visual economy,” as Deborah Poole does, to be attentive to the circulation of objects and images in local political economies and across global networks—to emphasize the industries and economies surrounding image production.⁶⁵ The phrase as employed here also stresses the way aesthetic qualities or ephemeral visual effects inform the local, transnational, and diasporic circulation of goods and their broader social life.⁶⁶

In the practices considered here not just any expensive luxury item has currency. Objects have value and are circulated if they exhibit certain aesthetic characteristics. Things that bling, shine, or shimmer, that emit light, are especially privileged. Such investments in the visual economy of light abound in hip-hop, where rappers often boast of the blinding effects of their bling or the status they accrue through the effect of light.⁶⁷ Indeed, “bling” is often attributed to the New Orleans-based rapper B.G., who purportedly coined the word in 1998 to charac-

terize “the sound light makes as it hits a diamond.”⁶⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* would later define “bling” as “representing the visual effect of light being reflected on precious stones or metals.”⁶⁹ This attentiveness to producing (or “sounding”) light is amply evident in the backdrops of street photographs, which often portray material things with an attention to starbursts, reflect light through mirrors, or use words attesting to the different qualities of light: “shimmer,” “shine,” and “bling.” As such, although many participants in popular photographic practices may appear to be deeply invested in the appearance of material wealth, this consumerism is based on luminous effect—on the intangible and ephemeral visual qualities of commodities.⁷⁰ This is not to suggest that material wealth does not matter—it can matter with deathly consequences—but to call attention to how it is mitigated and even negated by the aesthetics of light. Bling and its local variants as such may be seen as a mode of transmission in the contemporary African diaspora, one that informs the ways communities of viewers differently recognize and interpret value in their local and transnational contexts.

In other words, cultural forms associated with conspicuous consumption in some ways reject or refashion notions of materialism, privileging the shine of things as constitutive of value. What I describe as a visual economy of light is in part a product of everyday aspirational practices of black urban communities, who make do and more with what they have, creating prestige through the resources at hand. But these very processes can have a critical valence because they have the potential to disrupt notions of value by privileging not things but their visual effects. These popular expressions make conspicuously hypervisible the economy of late capitalism and how it creates objects of desire through technologies of light. Such practices complicate simplistic assumptions about conspicuous consumption, “pecuniary emulation,” and black urban populations. The display of flashy objects or the effects of the performative moment of being photographed matter most within this visual economy.⁷¹ Through a range of different types of photographic and videographic images, objects, spectacles, and the verbal re-creation of the moment of the picture’s taking a new, ever-changing, and unpredictable community of viewers is created who reconstitute and reenvision value.

This consideration of the value of light adds another voice to considerations of materiality by emphasizing the way aesthetics shape material practices.⁷² It also speaks to scholarly critiques of historical materialism offered from the perspective of the African diaspora. Theorists

from Cedric J. Robinson to Fred Moten have examined the way histories of diasporic formation, particularly racial slavery, allow us to expand and put pressure on our understandings of modernity, capitalism, materialism, and Marxism and offer alternate ways of thinking about notions of the commodity, value, property, and humanity.⁷³ Bling and related notions of shine may be understood as part of a black popular cultural and scholarly approach that is attentive to diasporic peoples' intrinsic place within, estrangement from, or relationship to modern capitalism and Western societies' definitions of citizenship.

Bling has historical precedents in the African diaspora. The folk hero known as Shine bears this out. In African American and Caribbean oral traditions recorded since the 1930s and 1940s in the United States and the Bahamas, Shine was a heroic figure who worked in the bowels of the *Titanic* (the ill-fated luxury liner, which was racially segregated).⁷⁴ According to legend, it was Shine who first noticed water filling the supposedly unsinkable ship. He warned his dismissive captain several times over, to no avail. "Finally," as historian Lawrence Levine summarizes the many oral accounts, "perceiving the captain's blindness, Shine jumps overboard, withstands a series of temptations and threats, and with superhuman skill swims to shore, the ship's only survivor."⁷⁵ Shine turns down several offers of material wealth and sexual favors from passengers (who want him to rescue them) before successfully swimming on. There is much to be gleaned from the popular account of Shine and his experiences on the *Titanic*, which in its day was a beaming symbol of modernity, luxury, and Western technological advances and progress. I focus on Shine because this folk hero is related to ideas of blackness and light, African diasporic subjects' locations within modernity and Western nations, and African diasporic ways of seeing and coming to terms with consumer culture and technology. Shine importantly sees the fatal flaws of the modern ship because of his vantagepoint in the belly of the vessel, even though his insights at first go unrecognized. Shine is symbolic of an African diasporic location within and visual perspective on modernity, Western capitalism, and notions of citizenship from an interior of Western society. Shine—whose very name calls attention to the effect of light—quite literally represents this eye, this vision into modern and consumer society.⁷⁶ The story of shine, and by extension bling, crucially is not confined to a study of the African diaspora but is an assessment of and a reflection on processes of consumer culture, capitalism, and the modern more broadly: their aesthetic, political, and social effects and their often unrecognized perils.

Citizenship and Visibility in the Post-Civil Rights and Postcolonial Eras

In every local context considered here, populations who engage in the various manifestations of the visual economy of light have solicited widespread rebuke as examples of crass materialism, individualism, and narcissism, if not nihilism, by politicians, government officials, newspaper columnists, an older generation of entertainers, and academics.⁷⁷ The populations participating in these forms and in many instances the practices themselves have been the foci not only of moral panics but of social policing. Curtailments have ranged from cable companies restricting access to music video channels and governmental efforts to curb proms in the Bahamas to deadly police raids of dancehalls in Jamaica.⁷⁸ These popular representational practices have become central in public discourses about rights to and within public space and what the responsibilities of citizens are in contemporary black and post-civil rights and postcolonial societies.

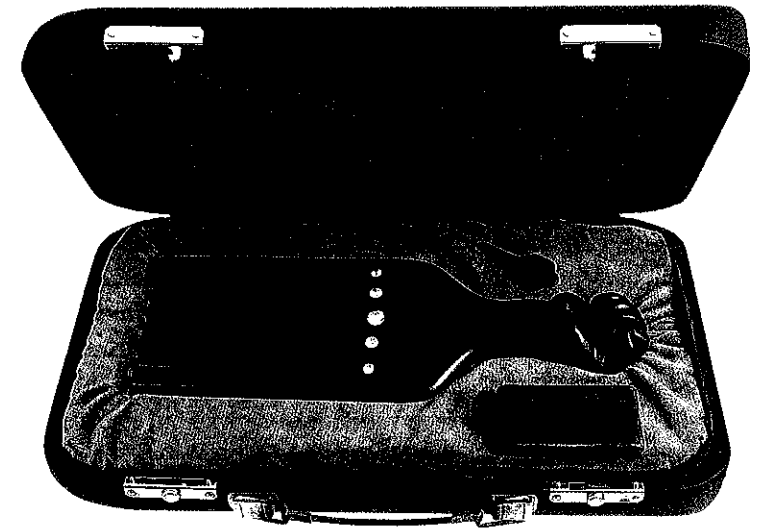
These expressions have been subject to controls in part because they do not appear to buy into configurations of nation, culture, blackness, respectability, and class that have been articulated since the civil rights movement in the United States and the independence movements in Jamaica and the Bahamas of the 1960s–1970s.⁷⁹ Indeed, critics often lament that expressions like video light or proms manifest a detour from, if not an end to, the black nationalist agendas that informed cultural and political life across these communities a generation ago.⁸⁰ They seem antithetical to the expressions designated and financially supported as "culture" in the 1960s–1970s by black leaders.

Many producers and users of these popular expressions came of age in and after the 1980s—after the social, political, historical, and economic shifts of the 1960s–1970s. Local communities also splintered along lines of class, party affiliation, and color in this period. In the United States this era, which started in the 1970s and early 1980s and continues to shape African American communities in the United States, has been described as postindustrial.⁸¹ It was a period marked by deindustrialization, desegregation, the suburbanization of the black middle classes, Reagan-mandated cuts to the welfare state, the AIDS crisis, the commodification of black popular expression, the cocaine and heroin trade, and a rise in the culture of individualism and materialism, all of which transformed and fragmented black communities. In Jamaica, in 1980, the neoliberal Jamaica Labour Party came to power, opening up the



1.10. Hank Willis Thomas, *Black Power*, 2008. Lightjet print, 20 × 30 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

island's market to global capital. To deal with steep cuts mandated by the International Monetary Fund, the Jamaican government decreased spending on transportation, health, and education, contributing to a rise in unemployment and poverty and the expansion of an informal sector of the economy.⁸² This period, marred by violent bipartisan politics, saw the rise of a brown middle class in the business and political realms and the deepening of an economic and cultural gulf between the classes.⁸³ In the Bahamas in the 1980s, the black populist Progressive Liberal Party government officially embraced a policy of Bahamianization. It retained national control of utility companies and attempted to limit foreign control of businesses, jobs, and land, as the predominance of tourism, the offshore banking industry, and the illegal drug trade evinced the islands' integration into global economies and financial markets that catered to very wealthy foreign clients. The early 1990s saw the removal of many barriers to trade and land ownership, which contributed to an increase in land prices, crime, and the maintenance of a regressive tax system that burdened the poor. Many blacks also remained shut out of the business sector, still controlled by white Bahamians.⁸⁴ In these neoliberal environments, consumer goods freely circulated, and urban populations had limited means to acquire many of these things.



1.11. Satch Hoyt, *From Mau Mau to Bling Bling*, 2005. Ebony, zirconias, key, velvet-lined case, and audio components, accompanied by a soundscape, 38 × 19 × 7 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

Several contemporary artists draw on urban practices in their work to address these shifts and reconstitutions of black politics and culture. They invoke the icons and slogans of black nationalism from the 1960s–1970s but highlight the ascendancy of a new representational moment in which a bling-bling aesthetic dominates the contemporary social, political, and artistic landscape. This tendency is evident in Hank Willis Thomas's photograph *Black Power* (2008) (fig. 1.10). This image comes from his *Branded* series, in which he used print advertisements from 1968 to 2008 that capitalized on black culture and black bodies, from which he removed explicit references to the brand or object for sale. In *Black Power*, for example, the words "BLACK POWER" appear to be composed of diamonds or rhinestones on the gold grill worn by a smiling black man.⁸⁵ The closely cropped image of the male figure's face calls attention simultaneously to the appearance of conspicuous consumption in black culture after the black power era as well as to the way blackness functions readily as a container of consumer culture more broadly. Satch Hoyt similarly weds a globally inflected symbolism of people power and working-class rights from the 1970s to contemporary consumerism in his 2005 work *From Mau Mau to Bling Bling*

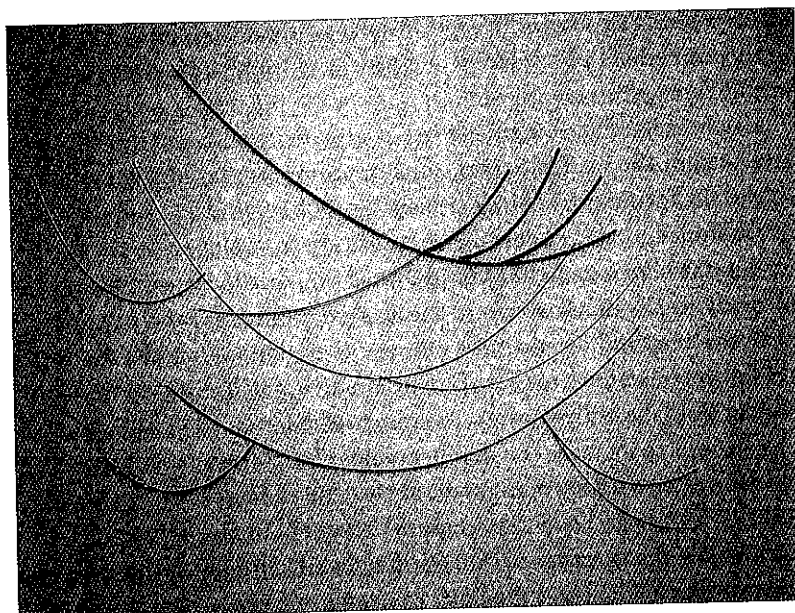
(fig. 1.11). The piece features a carved ebony Afro pick in the shape of the iconic clenched upraised fist, which is inlaid with zircons and embedded in an opened plush velvet case. Thomas, Hoyt, and several other artists, particularly in the way they juxtapose images or texts associated with black nationalism from the 1960s–1970s with bling-bling materials from the 2000s, heighten the question of the relation between these two eras.⁸⁶ Is the contemporary focus on materialism an outgrowth of the civil rights and independence movements or metastasis of its aims and imaginative possibilities? How might the political be rethought today and what symbols might be effective in mobilizing affiliation in the era of individualism? What is or might be the relationship between citizenship and consumerism for black subjects at the turn of the twenty-first century?

The works of art discussed in this book highlight the way the acquisition and display of material wealth may indicate the changing and complex ways that the ability to gain access to consumer goods interfaces with contemporary notions of citizenship and informs the way groups and individuals think about their representation within democratic societies. Making this case in relationship to different Latin American cities, Nestor Canclini acknowledges the importance of viewing programming from Hollywood, Televisa, and MTV: “Especially [for] youth, the question[s] specific to citizenship, such as how we inform ourselves and who represents our interests, are answered more often than not through private consumption of commodities and media offerings than through the abstract rules of democracy or through participation in discredited political organizations.”⁸⁷ In other words, private consumption may be seen as indicative not of the demise of the political but of the changing ways people represent their interests in the face of widespread disenchantment with long-standing political institutions, which have changed the meaning and possibilities of politics.⁸⁸ I read the visual economy of light employed and deployed by the subjects under consideration here as taking up and reconfiguring this right to consume as a crucial aspect of contemporary belonging that is mitigated by the relations provided by image culture and not by the state. Further, urban subjects’ ability to occupy the frame of the video or still camera and to picture themselves having access to particular consumer goods has become one means through which they see themselves as represented within civil society. The popular visual practices generate new subjectivities and configurations of the political in what might be considered

a post-rights era, when the expectations surrounding rights fought for in the immediate postcolonial and post-civil rights eras seem to some unfulfilled.

Historically, since Emancipation in 1833 in Jamaica and the Bahamas and 1863 in the United States, consumption has played a complicated role in the formation of black citizenship. Colonial rulers used the allure of consumer goods as a tool in the transition from slavery to freed labor in the Caribbean and the United States. In Jamaica and other places, for instance, British lawmakers encouraged recently emancipated slaves to desire material acquisitions because they hoped that the desire for things would transform them into productive and disciplined workers.⁸⁹ Some colonial administrators and imperialists even advocated Emancipation so as to increase the number of possible consumers.⁹⁰ In more recent history, as Gilroy points out, in the United States blacks were conceived as potential consumers before they could freely participate in the sociopolitical system as citizens.⁹¹ They had rights (even though these were negated sometimes) to buy into forms of freedom and mobility afforded by consumer goods like the automobile, to discover “themselves and their agencies through their social life as consumers.”⁹² Gilroy suggests that “there is evidence to suggest that, at times, forms of conspicuous consumption contributed to the strategies that the minority pursued in order to win and to compel recognition as human beings, as fellow citizens.”⁹³ Despite this history, he remains skeptical of materialism in contemporary African American hip-hop culture, arguing that “consumerism has largely superseded the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.”⁹⁴

Some contemporary art practices that focus on conspicuous consumerism intriguingly locate this phenomenon within this broader history of black people’s long-standing and complicated relationship to notions of the commodity in the Americas, one that goes back to modern racial slavery. This is underscored in Robert Pruitt’s 2004 work *For Whom the Bell Curves* (fig. 1.12). Creating a map occupying five feet across a wall, Pruitt represented the transatlantic slave trade by draping twelve fake gold chains. This glimmering minimalist sculpture draws a connection between chains as a black urban accessory and global economies of enslavement, highlighting a complicity and continuity between bling-bling and racial slavery. Such a return to the history of slavery as imagined through shiny consumer goods and representational practice also abounds in popular culture. The rapper Kanye West, for one, makes



1.12. Robert Pruitt, *For Whom the Bell Curves*, 2004. Twelve gold chains, 47 × 60 in. Collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph courtesy of the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.

the case in the song “All Falls Down”: “We shine because they hate us, floss cause they degrade us. We trying to buy back our 40 acres.” Here, he connects contemporary instances of shining to the broken promises of Emancipation. The contemporary artwork and rap lyric are but two examples that elucidate that bling is a form through which diasporic people return to and reenvision the memory, the time-space, of slavery and the unfulfilled promises of full citizenship after Emancipation and the civil rights and independence eras. Bling, then, is central as a mode of transmission between contemporary diasporic cultures and the particular formative moments in the past that diasporic people hoped would transform their status in modern Western societies. Bling also reflects the way blackness, as Saidiya Hartman points out, was and is inextricably related to the “use of, entitlement to, and occupation of the captive body.”⁹⁵ This cutting back to and highlighting of slavery raises and returns to the question, how do people whose forebears were defined as property use objects to negotiate and represent their personhood and citizenship in the contemporary context?

The focus on shiny things and the photographic spectacle of consumption in black urban practices in the circum-Caribbean might con-

structively be assessed within this longer history of the relationship between black people and the commodity, a relationship that continues to persist in global capitalism in the twenty-first century. The visual economy of light shows up the way blackness continues to connote fungibility. Recent studies suggest that blacks are so associated with consumption that when asked to imagine themselves in different social roles, white students were more inclined to desire “high-status products” if they were role-playing as black characters.⁹⁶ This study emphasizes how conspicuous consumption among black urban populations reflects a broader culture of consumption in the circum-Caribbean and globally, even as it is often identified with or seen as visible on certain segments of the population by critics of materialism among black urban populations.

In many respects, we might see the fascination with adorning and picturing the body’s surface in jewels, the taking-on of the shine of things, as a type of screen. A screen in its basic common definition refers to a surface onto which images are projected, displayed, or attached. A screen may also characterize something that separates space or shelters or protects someone or something, serving to obscure or conceal it.⁹⁷ Jacques Lacan’s influential formulation of the cultural screen is germane here, particularly as interpreted by Kaja Silverman.⁹⁸ For Lacan the screen refers to the external representations or the image repertoire that one aims to assimilate into and through which one structures one’s visual identity or ego. Those deemed “different” — whether because of gender, sexuality, or race — may have a negative relation to their bodily ego because of this cultural screen.⁹⁹ In the case of the flaunting of shiny material things in black popular expressive cultures, we might see these urban practices as mimicking the image repertoire that mainstream society has of blackness that long wedded it to consumption, whether the association of persons seen as black with property or the use of black culture to sell the latest commodity. The ostentatious display of things might be interpreted as a protective means. We might understand the use of material goods and the production of blinding light as a shield or apotropaic, simultaneously reflecting and deflecting the deidealizing gaze on black subjects. Moreover, the photographic effect of light, bling, visually suspends that which is not of the subject, the cultural screen. The popular expressions analyzed here, with their attention to the reflection of light off of surfaces, highlight a space just beyond the surface, lingering on the gap between the viewer and the subject. This taking-on and holding the gaze in abeyance is precisely the space/site

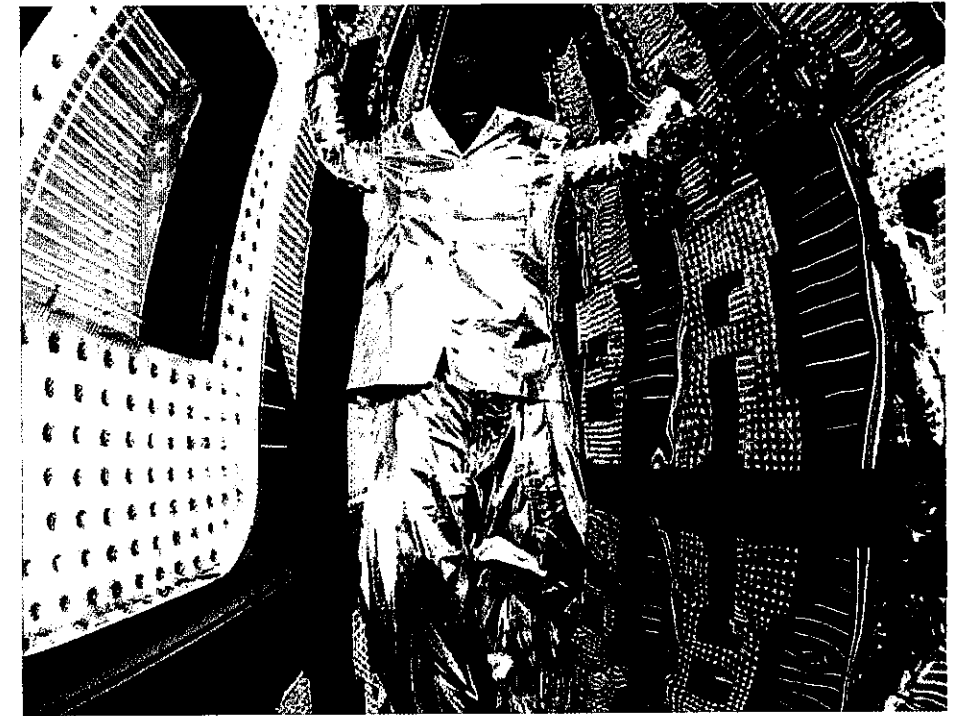
that African diasporic subjects negotiate in their photographic and expressive practices.

Describing photographs as structuring a relation to the screen, Kaja Silverman maintains that many people pose themselves and attempt to be seen as they are imaged through the gaze. Many of the practices examined here do not rely on the physical image as a source of alignment with ideality. Afterimages, created in the body, are precisely not subject to some of the kinds of negative responses or refusals of recognition that black people have often experienced.¹⁰⁰ What participants in these popular expressions strive for is the reification provided by the moment of photographability itself, and the witnessing of that moment by present and future audiences. This offers reification through a different image, a memory image or an ideality achieved through that which is always fleeting, in the now, in the moment, complete in its ephemeral form.

Contemporary Art and the Aesthetics of Bling

Several contemporary artists describe African diasporic urban visual expressions as formative in their artistic approaches to representation. They came of age using and consuming popular photographic and videographic technologies, as in the case of Wiley's and Nelson's experiences with street photography and Patterson's engagement with dancehall. Many grew up in what Mark Anthony Neal describes as the postsoul era in the 1980s, when televisual representations of black culture were omnipresent for the first time and many globally marketed consumer products were branded through blackness. These artists' formative teen years took place in front of television screens beaming MTV and the cable channel Black Entertainment Television (BET) (founded in 1981 and 1980, respectively). Artists across the circum-Caribbean, including Ras Kassa, Rashaad Newsome, and Wiley, cite the influence of music video director Hype Williams (Harold Williams), known for his flashy hip-hop and R&B music videos and his film *Belly*.¹⁰¹ Williams came to be recognized for a form of music video shot with a fish-eye lens that saturated its subjects with bright lights and emphasized reflective surfaces (fig. 1.13). This was also the era when hip-hop in the 1980s and dancehall in the early 1990s achieved global visibility through visual media like the music video.

The contemporary artists examined here create figurative work, often centered on the black male body, in an era when black male subjects appear ubiquitously and in hypervisualized form in advertising, hip-hop,



1.13. Hype Williams, video still from *Feel So Good* by Mase, 1997. Bad Boy Entertainment, New York. © Harold [Hype] Williams.

dancehall, and other forms of popular culture. They do so by using aspects of popular practices to stage their subjects. Many draw their models from the streets, highlight the process of being seen as its own form of image, create work at the interstices of photography and painting, and examine the effect of light and its relation to beauty, prestige, objecthood, subjectivity, race, blackness, the modern, and the representable. They variously highlight the haptic, opaque, performative, and luminous character of their photographs. They present their subjects in ways that call attention to notions of surface—the embellished surface, the reflective surface, the surface of the body, the surface of the photograph or screen, the backdrop and green screen. While modern artists working globally since the early twentieth century have long emphasized the surface of their canvases or sculptures in their artistic practice, these creators who draw on African diasporic practices call attention to what might be described as the surface of the surface—the effect of light reflecting off of surfaces—as the representational space for figuring black subjects.



1.14. Kori Newkirk, video still from *Bixel*, 2005. Single-channel video. Courtesy of the artist.

Kori Newkirk highlights this attention to surfaces in his single-channel video art piece *Bixel* (2005) (fig. 1.14). In this five-minute work, the artist pictures himself partially clad, and eventually covered in a glittery silver substance, whirling in a lush green landscape. One scene presents a close-up showing the glimmering silver gushing from his mouth. It covers his upper torso, creating a sparkling second skin, a surface that reflects lights and appears to pixelate across the video's screen. The artist chose glitter as central medium of figuration, visibility, and concealment in his first excursion into video work and into self-portraiture.¹⁰²

Newkirk explains that he was compelled by the word *Bixel* because it sounded “like a lot of other things.”¹⁰³ While for the artist the term is indeterminate, the word and the subject and media of the video simultaneously evoke the ideas of pixel and the black body. What might it mean to bring the pixel, the discrete unit of representation that composes the surface of an image on a digital television or computer screen, into proximity with blackness, which has long been so intrinsically defined through the surface, through black skin? “Bixel” — if understood as a composite of *pixel* and *black* — would seem to foreground the partiality of vision and visual representation. It frames blackness as a fragment that often comes to stand for the whole and insists that blackness be understood as a surface constructed through vision and visual

technologies. Bringing together the constitutive elements of images or highlighting the pixelated composition of video and foregrounding the black body as another sparkling pixelated surface, *bixel* connotes a form of blackness that remains unsettled — suspended in the representational possibilities of bits and bytes. *Bixel* also captures how African diasporic urban culture often circulates through visual forms that call attention to the material makeup of visual technologies; the subject presented is marked by the bytes and pixels that bring it into being.

Bixel hints at the representational processes through which many urban African diasporic subjects bring themselves into visibility through visual technology, joining prosthetically with photographic and video media. Through their engagement with photography and video they become part technology and part flesh, inorganic and organic, a subject partially revealed and concealed within multiple skins, surfaces, and screens. Anne Cheng’s insightful discussion of light and sheen in photographs of Josephine Baker seems generative for a discussion of *bixel*.¹⁰⁴ Cheng makes the case that the harsh shine of Baker’s body made her appear almost inorganic and inconsumable in some ways. The focus on her gleaming skin did not simply objectify her but rendered her visually impenetrable: “Baker’s ability to escape into surfaces paradoxically allows her image to deflect misogynist and racist logic.”¹⁰⁵ Newkirk’s literal acts of consumption and the silvery substance that issues from his mouth, the artist stresses, “from the inside” and covers a part of his body seem another act of escape, of slipping into and out of surfaces that might overdetermine, hypervisualize, and visually consume blackness and obscure any sense of an interior life. I want to suggest more broadly that through the *bixel*, by merging always partially with the matter of the screen or photographic surface, black urban subjects in the circum-Caribbean come into visibility but seek to remain unfixed, indeterminate, sparkling in the transformative possibilities of visual technologies.

The emphasis on the surface in contemporary African diasporic popular and studio art may be seen as part of a long artistic and scholarly engagement with the surface in the history of art. Scholars studying a range of artistic genres, from seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings to African studio photography from the 1950s to 1970s, have analyzed how attention to representing the surface often coincided with global changes in the market economy and modern life. Some have been attentive to how slavery, imperialism, and responses to colonialism informed an emphasis on surface aesthetics or “surficism.”¹⁰⁶ This term, as delineated by Christopher Pinney, refers to an emphasis on the ma-

teriality or visual texture of objects within or of the picture plane: "the elaborately wrought and highly finished representations of objects that are themselves elaborately wrought and highly finished."¹⁰⁷ Several of the contemporary artists discussed in this book re-create paintings from the history of Western art and place black subjects at their center (at times choosing work from periods when surfacist aesthetics were prevalent). These subjects underscore how the representation of black figures and modern slavery at times literally provided the background and formed the flesh against which the surfacist aesthetics could be staged. Such approaches, whether manifest in the representations of black subjects or slaves as accessories in Dutch landscape painting or in Baker's influence on the surfacist aesthetic in the work of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, underscore the historical relation between the surface in modern art and blackness. The contemporary studio practices that I explore here emphasize the bounce of light off the reflective surface, the space where visibility and invisibility come together, the edge of that which is representable and unrepresentable in modern art.¹⁰⁸

While considering works of art in the context of urban popular photographic forms, this book also addresses where such practices come together and diverge, the tensions and critiques generated when they are brought into proximity in artworks and art-historical scholarship. Notably, studio artists have frequently turned to black popular culture as a subject in the last decade, even as opportunities for the public presentation of black popular expressions in the public sphere have diminished in places like Jamaica and the Bahamas. The issue of gender and sexuality is another aspect that comes to light at the interstices of these artistic and popular practices. As a gay black male, Wiley describes feeling cast out of the performances of masculinity or hyperheterosexual bravado common in expressions for the camera and in public space and seeks to highlight forms of visibility and subjectivity that are occluded. Nelson, too, in his backdrops put pressure on misogynistic images of the black female bodies that often circulate in backdrops and music videos. And Patterson explores new performances of masculinity that have come to light in dancehalls. These practices, which use or address issues of public space, underscore how urban popular photographic forms are often sites where conservative conventions of gender and sexuality manifest throughout society meet the transformative space of the bixel, where gender identities are constantly being reframed.

Un-visibility and a New Politics of Spectatorship

Importantly, we can see the investment in the spectacularized visibility evident in popular practices as offering a new take on an approach to politics widely espoused since the 1960s–1970s: the long-standing faith placed in visibility as a proxy for or path to political representation. Peggy Phelan's observation that we need to interrogate the "implicit assumptions about the connections between representational visibility and political power which have been a dominant force in cultural theory" is relevant here.¹⁰⁹ Investments in representational visibility have been mainstays of modern black politics since the early twentieth century. One may interpret W. E. B. Du Bois's belief that artistic representations of blacks would bring political rights or British-born Jamaican artist Edna Manley's insistence on making blackness representable in Jamaican art in the 1920s as early manifestations of the equation of black visibility and representability with political uplift.¹¹⁰

Such strategies increased in the lead-up to the civil rights and independence eras, when the racially denigrated presence and histories of black citizens gained new visibility.¹¹¹ Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952), the prologue to which centers on a protagonist illuminated by siphoned electricity and 1,369 lightbulbs, has been seen as a precursor to and emblem of the ways visibility delineated a black political agenda in the mid-twentieth century. It may also be interpreted, for present purposes, as an early precursor to the contemporary emphasis on the technology and effect of light. The incessant focus on claiming visibility that is manifest in black popular practices captures a more long-standing emphasis on visibility as a mode of social and political representation. The case could be made, however, that the orchestration of contemporary cultural practices in which those who continue to find themselves on the social and economic margins seem to demand visibility more than anything else points to the limited effectiveness of strategies of visibility—their failure to produce the political power they were supposed to assure and secure.

But these twenty-first-century practices nevertheless reveal much about the possibilities of the politics of visibility for different constituents in postcolonial, postblack, circum-Caribbean societies. In particular, different social groups have been rendered "un-visible" within the structures of visibility forged since the 1960s–1970s and in an era in which media and technology have facilitated what some refer to as a state of "hypervisibility." The term "un-visible" comes from Elli-

son's introduction to the 1981 edition of *Invisible Man*.¹¹² He describes blacks in US society as so hypervisible that they have been rendered *un-visible*—a phenomenon that has increased exponentially since the 1980s. Un-visibility describes the state of not being seen or not being recognized, as well as the “moral blindness” toward the “predicament of blacks.”

The contemporary performances and photographic practices examined here not only address efforts to be visible but create new communities and communal public spaces through forms of viewership.¹¹³ These practices produce sites of visibility, where spectators are active and engaged.¹¹⁴ Through these expressions different groups negotiate what Gerard Aching refers to as the “degrees of recognition, misrecognition, and nonrecognition” in these post-civil rights and post-colonial societies. Popular visual practices are particularly significant, given that some of the cultural expressions and sites that the popular classes once used to attain a level of visibility in the Caribbean, like Carnival, have rendered certain “native subjects invisible today in the islands that have assumed various modes of political autonomy.”¹¹⁵ The representational practices studied here forge spaces of visibility outside the domains used historically by the popular classes, many of which are now those claimed and celebrated by the nation-state and by the middle classes who have emerged since the 1960s–1970s. Black urban communities in Nassau, for instance, create prom spectacles that incorporate aesthetic and musical aspects of Junkanoo but do so outside the designated space and time of that celebrated festival.¹¹⁶ Street photography studios offer another mode of costuming and performance at Mardi Gras, taking place in close proximity to the masking traditions of New Orleans (fig. 1.15). I make the case that traditional masking practices have been reconstituted and relocated in these popular performances of visibility.¹¹⁷

But these practices are not simply alternate strategies of visibility aimed at creating greater representation in postcolonial societies. These expressions, with their emphasis on effecting a blinding, bright white light, may produce modes of visibility quite distinct from political investments in being socially visible. Indeed, we might see the black urban expressive practices as constituting what Phelan characterizes as an “active vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility.”¹¹⁸ In other words, the production of blinding visibility may be interpreted precisely as not investing in existing “representational economies” tied to certain investments in visibility. It is



1.15. Sthaddeus Terrell, photograph of Terrell and a Mardi Gras Indian chief posing before Terrell's backdrops, New Orleans, n.d. Courtesy of the photographer.

not clear what the payoffs of un-visibility are. They may be in line with Richard Iton's description of the fantastic possibilities of popular culture, with their “willingness to embrace disturbance, to engage the apparently mad and maddening, to sustain often slippery frameworks of intention that act subliminally, if not explicitly, on distinct and overlapping cognitive registers, and to acknowledge meaning in those spaces where speechlessness [and, I would add, illegibility] is the common currency.”¹¹⁹ These practices are political in that they refuse existing structures that define more formal political activity, highlighting the limits of these structures. Further, we might see the production of representational disappearance in these black urban practices as performing a state of un-visibility, as tacitly producing the state of being unseen, or of making the un-visible's disappearance seen. In sum, these expressions highlight a certain visual opacity that emphasizes the spectacle of the un-visible as a mode of representation in postcolonial societies.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 analyzes the genre of street photography. In street photography, as in video light, clients place a premium on the process of posing, so much so that some commission dozens of photographs so as to prolong the spectacle of their picture-taking. This response highlights how, as photographer Darrin Clark describes it, “being at a picture booth is definitely . . . a status thing. . . . To be at the picture booth you definitely will be recognized and be seen.”¹²⁰ Posing and being seen inhabiting sites where one is photographed are significant aspects of the genre. In this genre, the Polaroid remains a favored photographic technology. This photographic form involves capturing the now, the moment, but facilitates a temporal return to the 1960s–1970s and the unfinished project of civil rights. Indeed, in the 1970s a group calling themselves the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement, in their black-revolutionary and diasporic efforts to actualize civil rights, targeted the Polaroid Corporation.

This chapter also focuses on the contemporary art of the late Charles Nelson, who was based in Atlanta. One of the first artists to take up the form, in 1999 he started creating his own backdrops, placing them outdoors in highly trafficked black urban locations from Atlanta to New York (fig. 1.16).¹²¹ His *Backdrop Project* series investigates the form and function of street photography, as well as notions of pictorial realism in Western painting and photography.

Chapter 2 focuses on the use of video light in Jamaica’s dancehalls, allowing further consideration of a place where street photography resides but where video predominates. This discussion moves from considering more recognizable and conventional forms of photography to examining the afterimage and bleached skin as types of photographs. It centers on Jack Sowah, the first videographer to introduce video light and screens into dance venues, and on the circulation of his footage as well as instances in which his images did not circulate. In part by analyzing the photography-based, multimedia art of Ebony G. Patterson, I explore a broader set of visual practices—from queer sartorial styles to skin bleaching—engaged in by dancehall-goers who seek to be “inna da light.” Patterson’s critically acclaimed work has extended the visibility and global circulation of dancehall’s visual economy. This chapter makes the claim that video light has democratized access to being on-screen and serves as a mode of claiming visibility as citizens in contemporary Jamaica.



1.16. Charles H. Nelson, *Y'all Niggas Ain't Ready*, from the *Backdrop Project* series, December 1999. Public artwork, Atlanta. Courtesy of the family of Charles H. Nelson, Jr.

Chapter 3 shifts to the Bahamas to discuss a local practice in which performing for the camera is central and as valued as the physical photograph: proms. Here, young people stage elaborate entrances that are projected onto screens within the prom venue. One famed prom entrance in 2004 featured a young woman who arranged for faux paparazzi to line the red carpet for the event. She did not hire the photographers to produce photographs (and in fact she did not retain a single photograph of the entrance) but instead to highlight her own visibility and representability. Such prom practices draw on and reconfigure other diasporic cultures, local masquerade traditions, and global cultures of celebrity.

Chapter 4 focuses squarely on how black urban aesthetic and representational practices reverberate in contemporary art. It considers the work of Kehinde Wiley and Luis Gispert, two artists who explore the nexus between urban popular expressive practices, photography, and

visual constructions of status, prestige, and personhood in the history of art. This chapter analyzes Wiley's paintings and his photographic series *Black Light* (2010), which foreground issues of black visibility and technologies of light (fig. 1.17). For this series, Wiley sought black male models on the streets of urban communities across the United States using a small contingent of photographers and videographers—his own team of “paparazzi.” Further, he looked for men who moved through public space as if they were on a runway, as if they possessed a sense of their own prephotographic photographability. These models assume poses from paintings found in art history books. I contrast this series with earlier efforts by African American artists in the 1970s to give black light visual form.

This chapter also considers the work of the Miami-born, New York-based artist Luis Gispert, who focuses on what he describes as the “urban baroque” aesthetic of black and Latino urban populations in his photographs and video art. These works drive home the point that some of the aesthetic practices in the African diaspora are shared with other groups who tune in to the same visual technologies and share the same urban landscapes. Finally, this chapter discusses works by Hank Willis Thomas and Paul Pfeiffer, who engage photography, light, and the spectacularity of blackness in global consumer culture. This chapter emphasizes that popular representational practices and ways of seeing offer an optic on a range of representational practices at the center of Western culture, from globalized consumer-oriented media to European portraiture.¹²²

African Diasporic Art History in a New Light

I locate this project within the field of African diasporic art history. I acknowledge that the visual economy of light in contemporary diasporic cultures has many sources and is related to broader artistic, visual, cultural, and political histories in and beyond the diaspora. Robert Farris Thompson in his often-cited *Flash of the Spirit* as well as Henry J. Drewal and John Mason in *Beads, Body, and Soul: Art and Light in the Yoruba Universe* (1998) have understood light in part as representative of the spirit of Africa that remained ignited in the diaspora. Although multiple historical influences and modes of circulation and translation of the visual economy of light are often difficult to trace precisely, this book does not outline a flash of something intuitively or innately diasporic but highlights how African diasporic communities are created through networks



1.17. Kehinde Wiley, *The Annunciation*, from the *Black Light* series, 2009. Archival inkjet print on Hahnemühle fine art paper, 30 × 24.531 in., edition of six. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California.

of shared visual media and visual technologies and consumer culture that inform ways of seeing at specific historical junctures. In the case of the expressions examined here, photographic and videographic cultures that emphasize light begat cultural forms invested in being on camera, on the screen, and in the light. This book envisions African diasporic art history more broadly as a field that explores how African diasporic communities are, and have been, constituted through a shared attentiveness to how they are seen and how they respond to the ever-changing states and stakes of visibility and disappearance that inform the histories and contemporary realities of these communities.

The aesthetic practices and visual networks explored here often go undocumented and unarchived.¹²³ One of the challenges and opportunities that art historians of the African diaspora might take up is to put pressure on the forces, institutions, and disciplinary structures that might erase, discount, and render certain African diasporic practices un-visible in academia. This having been said, the project does not make the claim that an archival or institutional visibility is needed or necessary. This institutional illusiveness (that is, that these forms are often not archived in institutions) and the ephemerality of these forms and their documentation are also parts of what these practices are and enact.

Finally, this book tries to move away from an investment in the politics of visibility evident in the field of African diasporic art history, which has strategically been invested in inclusion and recognition in more conventional art-historical paradigms, to explore the possible alternative formations of image- and art-making in the diaspora. In addition to charting an art history that responds to popular types of creative expression in parts of the diaspora, analyzing Western modes of visuality from a diasporic perspective, and looking at contemporary representational spaces available for the figuration of the modern black subject, this book highlights how the objects and subjects of study in this field may take unique forms. It brings studio art into conversation with popular representational practices and considers a variety of media from still photography to video across a range of practitioners and creators to create a shared space of visibility within the pages of the book. In doing so, it offers one possible model of African diasporic art history.

1

“KEEP IT REAL”

Street Photography, Public Visibility, and Afro-Modernity

The observer thought he was seeing. Changed into the observed, he enters into an “astonishment” which is not accompanied by any representation. The experience of the gaze is a surprise without an object. The gaze of the other excludes the possession of an image. It deprives of sight, it blinds.

—Michel de Certeau, “The Gaze: Nicholas of Cusa” (1987)

We [black people] don't have no fucking wealth. . . . I'm not talking about rich, I'm talking about wealth. I'm talking about the white families that own all the Similac and own the color blue. . . . Wealth will set us fucking free. Wealth is empowering. It can uplift communities from poverty. . . . It's not all white people's fault that black and brown people don't have any fucking wealth. Maybe if we didn't spend all our money on rims we might have some to invest. Black people, we love rims.

—Chris Rock, *Never Scared* (2004)

I first saw the street photographers in Atlanta in 1996, during the African American spring break event known as Freaknic. They had set up makeshift photography studios along the main site of the annual Sweet Auburn Festival. They lined their booths with brilliantly painted backdrops against which they invited passersby to take Polaroids. Three years later I encountered the photographers again, but in New Orleans. They had built and were operating (until the police arrived) temporary photography studios in a vacant parking lot near a route where a black Mardi Gras krewe filled an overcast day with a trail of music and color. Young men and women in particular enthusiastically posed before the photographers' lenses and created another space of performance at the parade. In contrast to the comparatively modest surroundings in both locations, the backdrops, which floated like clothes hung across the horizon line of the urban landscape, portrayed either landscapes of leisure or high-end consumer products. In the street-side studios, grand