

5 A brief history of artificial darkness and race

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Introduction

Darkness has a history and a uniquely modern form. Centuries and millennia ago darkness was seen as chaos and absence, night and shadow, evil gods and melancholic thoughts, the color or noncolor black. Darkness was known principally as negation. By the nineteenth century, artificial light was mobilized to conquer the dark, disenchant the night, and create new media and art. The dark corners untouched by artificial light retained the qualities of ancient darkness, whatever its modern labels: gothic, sublime, unconscious, uncanny. This much is well known. Less familiar, but no less vital, is the history of artificial darkness. Modern artificial darkness negated the negative qualities ascribed to its timeless counterpart: divorced from nature and metaphor, highly controlled and circumscribed, it was a technology that fused humans and images. More precisely, controlled artificial darkness negated space, disciplined bodies, and suspended corporeality in favor of the production and reception of images. In the middle of the nineteenth century, physiologists cleaved blackness from darkness, inventors patented photographic darkrooms, and impresarios extinguished the lights in their theaters. By the late nineteenth century, darkness was controlled in a series of complementary sites, above all dark theaters and the velvet light traps known as ‘black screens’ (the direct ancestor of contemporary green screen technologies). These sites for the production and reception of images formed circuits of darkness that helped shape modern art, modern media, and their subjects.

Previously, I explored at length the history of artificial darkness.¹ In that book-length study, I argued that the history of artificial, technologized darkness unfolded by and large independently from discourses on race. As best I can tell, that claim remains true. At the same time, there are more than enough intersections between controlled darkness and race, especially in contemporary art, to tell the history of artificial darkness—and the forms of darkness that precede, follow, and persist alongside it—with race at its troubled center.

The short history that follows unfolds in three acts. First, I will briefly interrogate the dark side of enlightenment as ideology and technology,

particularly how they interlink violently in eighteenth-century United States. Second, I will revisit the myths that undergird the rise of artificial darkness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally, I will sketch several trajectories of technological and cultural darkness in the art of our times through the works of Kerry James Marshall, Carrie Mae Weems, Hito Steyerl, and others. In short, we will traverse darkness as a chaotic force to be contained, as a technology to be controlled, and as a relic to be preserved and interrogated.

Oppressive light, liberatory darkness

Metaphoric darkness was the enemy against which the Enlightenment fancied its forward march. But nascent technologies of light and darkness regularly operationalized Enlightenment ideals toward oppressive ends. Exemplary was the Panopticon envisioned by Jeremy Bentham, for whom a dark dungeon was instrumentally inferior to a well-lit inspection house (Bentham, 1995: 65–66). The Panopticon perfectly blended Enlightenment ideals and disciplinary power, with light serving both ends at once. In Foucault’s famous account:

The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon. [...] Full lighting and the eye of a superior capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.

(Foucault, 1995: 202)

Bentham would not theorize the Panopticon until the end of the eighteenth century. The first Panopticon proper would not be built until the early nineteenth century. But the impulse to discipline through light was long developed, not least against black and other oppressed bodies.

In March 1713, the Common Council of New York City passed a ‘Law for Regulating Negro and Indian Slaves in the Nighttime’ that declared ‘no Negro or Indian Slave above the age of 14 years do presume to be or appear in any of the streets’ of New York City ‘in the night time above one hour after sun sett without a lanthorn and a lighted candle’ (See Browne, 2015: 76–83). The law was enacted one year after a revolt by enslaved people; the threat of insurrection was its immediate concern. But more was at stake than law and order. The ‘Law for Regulating Negro and Indian Slaves in the Nighttime’ attacked the possibilities of independence afforded by darkness. As A.B. Huber has eloquently argued:

Those enacting and enforcing the law understood these as intolerable intimacies with freedom, fugitive forms of deliverance abetted by the absence of light, and they sought to limn the racial boundary with

lantern light. A candle may seem to be a weak tool of domination, but its pale light was not meant to master the night's vast darkness; it was meant to further expose vulnerable bodies, and to eclipse forms of freedom and movement that threatened white supremacy.

(Hubler, 2018)

The desire to discipline darkness—nocturnal and racial—through enlightened technology was hardly limited to the eighteenth century. Indeed, in many respects, it has only become more nuanced and pervasive in the intervening centuries. Where the late nineteenth century breaks with its predecessor is not in the use of light to oppress bodies in the dark, but in the technologization of darkness toward the same end.

Technologized darkness as racist joke

Photographic darkrooms, darkened theaters and cinemas, and scientific and popular uses of 'the black screen' (more on this below), all required highly controlled, technologized darkness, a condition I have termed artificial darkness. Its popularization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was decisively tied to race. More precisely, the conjunction of artificial darkness and race was a joke. A racist joke. The joke was told notoriously by the poet Paul Bilhaud, a member of Les Arts Incohérents, a satirical art movement now most famous for its 'anticipation' of sundry avant-garde techniques, not least monochrome painting. On August 2, 1882, Jules Lévy organized the first presentation of the Incohérents, followed two months later by an exhibition at his Parisian home. Infamously, Lévy exhibited a black monochrome by Bilhaud titled *Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel* (1882) (Figure 5.1). The French writer and humorist Alphonse Allais elaborated on the conceit with *First Communion of Chlorotic Young Girls in the Snow*, *Apoplectic Cardinals Harvesting Tomatoes on the Shore of the Red Sea*, *Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel by Night*, and other monochromes dutifully collected in his *Album primo-avrilisque (April-Foolish Album)*, a portfolio of seven monochromatic images and more-and-less racist titles published by Paul Ollendorff in 1897.

Racism was a mainstay of this line of humor. Technologized darkness was not. That changed when Émile Cohl, father of cinematic animation and onetime Incohérent, brought the gag to the screen for the French film studio Gaumont in the summer of 1910. Titled *The Neo-Impressionist Painter*, but clearly derivative of the Incohérents, the film depicts an artist in his studio visited by an eager bourgeois collector. The artist presents one monochrome after another. Intertitles announce their content—for example, 'A cardinal eating lobster and tomatoes on the shore of the Red Sea,' whereupon the film cuts to a red-tinted animation in which appear the said cardinal, lobster, tomatoes, and seashore. The gag is reprised with a 'Chinaman' transporting corn on the Yellow River, a Pierrot on a pile of snow, and so forth, such

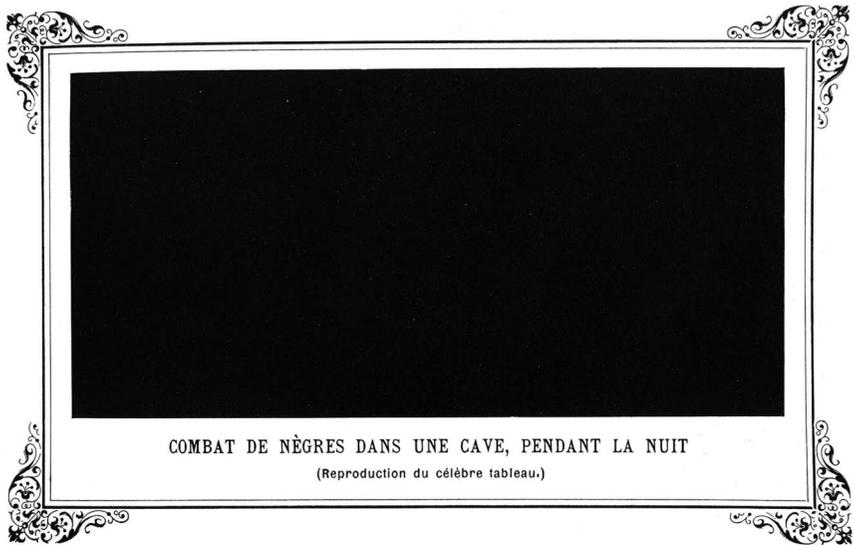


Figure 5.1 Paul Bilhaud, *Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel* (aka *Negroes Fighting in a Cellar at Night*), 1882, as reproduced in Alphonse Allais, *Album primo-avrilisque* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1897).

that frequently racist intertitles precede tinted sequences of animated line drawings. The collector becomes progressively more agitated until a black monochrome sends him into a buying frenzy. The black monochrome, we are told, represents ‘Negroes making shoe polish in a tunnel at night.’ The film cuts to black leader (that is, opaque black film that impedes all light) and, in contradistinction to every other sequence, begets no animation. The screen—and auditorium—remains a uniform black.

Bilhaud, Allais, and Cohl portioned their wit from the same commonplace stew as Hegel, who famously condemned the formalism of Friedrich Schelling and others as that undifferentiated ‘night in which, as we say, all cows are black’ (Hegel, 2003: 9). Hegel’s jibe helps us distinguish Bilhaud’s original joke from the elaborations proffered by Alphonse Allais, a distinction articulated clearly in the film by Émile Cohl. Whereas all the objects in a red monochrome must be red (cardinals, tomatoes, and so forth), all cows need not—indeed, must not—be black. Red is a color. Darkness—the physical absence of light—is an environmental condition. In Cohl’s film, the red monochrome sequence comprises hand-drawn animation tinted red; in the green monochrome sequence, the animation is tinted green; and so forth. That is, all but one monochrome in Cohl’s film are represented as discernible, animated content tinted with the appropriate colors. Only his black monochrome completely negates the image, plunges the auditorium in darkness, and turns its rows of spectators into a darkling plain of black cows. That darkness is a condition as much as (or more than) it is a color

was too obvious to garner mention. No less ‘natural’—that is, ideological, as Barthes properly understood it (Barthes, 1977, 2012: 66–69)—was the absolute identity of darkness and race. The interdependence of technologized darkness—that is, darkness produced through complex imbrications of media, architecture, and spectatorial conditions—and race was entirely ignored at the turn of the twentieth century, a lapse that has only begun to be addressed by pioneering scholars and critics (Cole, 2015; Lewis, 2019).

A second story—among the foundational myths of technologized darkness in the late nineteenth century—repeats the toxic and wholly naturalized mix of orientalism, race, and controlled darkness. It revolves around the magic act and stage technique known as Black Art, which helped promulgate the black screen as a media technology that would eventually yield the blue- and green screen technologies of today. The origin story of Black Art bears all the signs of showman apocrypha, but the tale dates at least to the turn of the century, and its basic contours are telling. In the early 1880s, during an engagement with the National Theater in Berlin, Max Auzinger played character parts and served as stage manager. A certain scene depicted a farmer who cast his daughter, Lucy, into a dark prison, which Auzinger draped in black velvet. Auzinger expected applause when a ‘valiant negro’ appeared at the window of the prison to rescue Lucy. But he heard nothing. And he saw, in place of a white actor in black face, only a row of shining white teeth. The rescue of Lucy by the ‘invisible negro’ caused such a stir that Auzinger went about devising Black Art. The Incohérent artists Paul Bilhaud and Emile Cohl reduced the ‘negro in the dark’ to a sight gag. But where Bilhaud and Cohl saw a joke, Auzinger saw an opportunity.

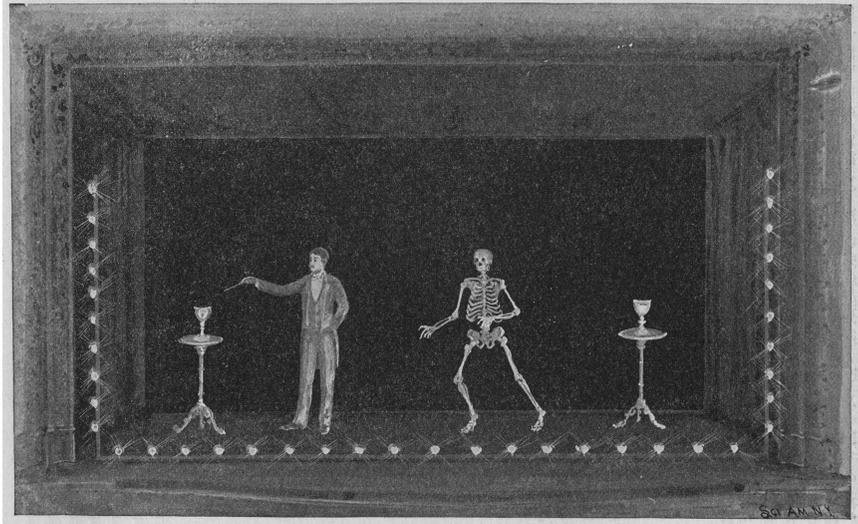
The basic arrangement that undergirded Black Art was nearly identical to that which underpinned media dispositifs like Pepper’s Ghost and Étienne-Jules Marey’s chronophotography. By the turn of the century, the details of the technique were an open trade secret (Figure 5.2):

Everything is performed in a dark chamber—either the whole stage or a chamber fitted up in the centre of it—draped entirely in black—sides, back, floor, and ceiling. The hall is placed almost in darkness, the only lights being a set of sidelights and footlights, which are turned towards the audience with reflectors behind, making it impossible for eyes to penetrate into the darkness beyond them. Everything used in the chamber is white, even the performer’s dress, forming a contrast necessary to the illusion.

(Sensational Magical Illusions, 1902: 754)

Like many others, the magician and magic popularizer Ellis Stanyon championed the uniqueness of the act: ‘The most astonishing magical effects, not possible in any other form of Conjuring, are produced’ (Stanyon, 1904). Today, we know it as a particularly efficacious instantiation of the black screen. The black screen, in turn, was no screen at all. Instead it was a cavity or chamber, draped in black velvet, whose open side circumscribed a darkness

(a)



(b)



(c)

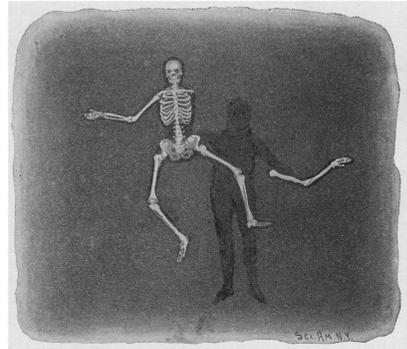


Figure 5.2 ‘The Stage Setting for Black Art’ (top) and ‘Black Art Revealed’ (bottom), from Albert A. Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions and Scientific Diversions, Including Trick Photography*, 1897.

so impenetrably deep as to appear two-dimensional. Anyone or anything draped in black velvet would vanish before the black screen. Black-clad assistants could work inconspicuously in the darkness. Objects—even body parts—could be made to appear or disappear with the elimination or introduction of a black covering. This was the technical core of Black Art—and an essential technical element of artificial darkness. But technique alone makes for incomplete magical theater.

Late nineteenth-century magical personas tended to be ‘professorial’ or ‘Oriental.’ Auzinger was the latter. He first performed as Maxistan

A-Uzin-Ger, an anagram of his birth name, and, more famously, as Ben Ali Bey. (An 1885 reviewer pegged him as an ‘Orientalized German, with a hint of West Prussian dialect’ [*Neue Preußische (Kreuz-)Zeitung*].) An act born of racism blossomed through orientalism. Auzinger’s act premiered in the summer of 1885 and had its first sustained run—still unsuccessful—at the end of the year. The showman Charles Arbre engaged Auzinger, working as Ben Ali Bey, to perform Black Art as part of his larger stage show at Castan’s Panoptikum in Berlin’s Kaisergalerie, where it finally achieved recognition. As Hardin Burlingame recounted at the end of the century: ‘The success was so great that it was imitated immediately by the entire profession all over the world’ (Burlingame, 1895: 20). Nearly every major magic act in Europe, America, and beyond soon had its own Ben Azra El Muz, Achmed Ali Bey, Achmed Ben Ali, or Nana Sahib (Beckman, 2003; Steinmeyer, 2005: 76–92). Props were procurable through magic dealers, including, in all likelihood, Auzinger’s former partner Charles Arbre. Eventually Black Art instructions and materials were pedestrian commodities available in nearly all magic publications and stores.

Black Art techniques—first developed in scientific circles by Marey—soon flourished in cinema halls, thanks to film pioneer Georges Méliès and his acolytes, like Segundo de Chomón. And in just a few decades, it arrived as a Hollywood moneymaker through the enormous commercial success of James Whale’s 1933 Universal Studios feature *The Invisible Man*, starring Claude Rains as the eponymous antihero. (It nearly goes without saying that Claude Rains—like nearly all the earlier and later invisible man actors fabricated by black screen and related technologies, many of whom played orientalized characters—was a white man.)

By the interwar period, the center and power of visual culture had shifted from painting to technological media like photography, photomechanical reproduction, and film. But if a single painting could stand in for this phase in the history of darkness, it would surely be Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915) (Figure 5.3). Malevich’s ponderous emblem of suprematism meant many things to many people. But it is hardly happenstance that scholars recently unearthed—scrawled on the painting by an uncertain hand—the words: ‘A battle of negroes’²

A technical history of artificial darkness could dismiss the repeated recourse to race and racism without sacrificing its technical precision. But technique alone makes for incomplete history. As Peter Galison has argued in a different context, ‘In general, the cultural meaning of concepts or practices [...] is indissolubly tied to their genealogy’ (Galison, 1994: 264). The genealogy of artificial darkness is mired in racist rhetoric. It is an unwelcome but unavoidable legacy for contemporary artists.

Relic

The uniquely modern forms of technologized darkness that emerged in the late nineteenth century and persisted well into the twentieth are now

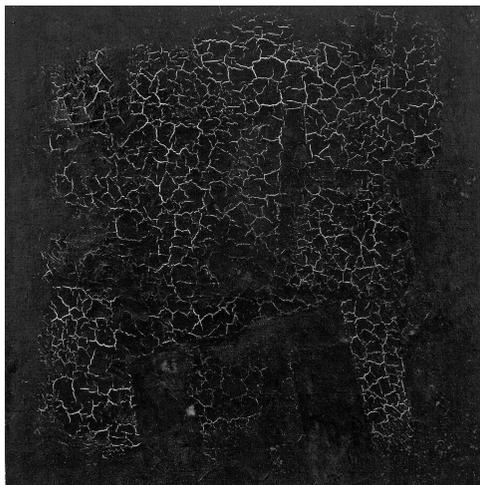


Figure 5.3 Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915.

historical. Separately and in aggregate, darkrooms, cinemas, and black screens figure marginally, if at all, in the production and circulation of contemporary media images and subjects. The history of black screens follows a familiar path of technological obsolescence. By the time the black-screen-based Williams process commanded the box office in *The Invisible Man*, it had largely ceded the technological vanguard to processes that employed the properties of colored light: first the Dunning-Pomeroy self-matting process, which reigned in the 1920s and 1930s, and, following the commercial success of color film, the blue-screen color separation process, which served as the basis for modern blue screen techniques. Black screens turned blue. Cinema blue screens gave way to chroma key video blue and green screens. Blue and green screens migrated from video art and professional videography to everyday digital consumer devices. And yet as modern artificial darkness yields to ever more luminous and ubiquitous screens, new aesthetic and historiographic possibilities emerge—not least in the confrontation between artificial darkness and race.

Three separate trajectories can be plotted in the twilight of controlled darkness. The first is characterized by preservation. In contradistinction to the statutes and ideals of the eighteenth century, it is no longer natural darkness that threatens and artificial light that saves, but natural darkness that is threatened by artificial light. In a word, there are few places on earth untouched by light pollution (Bogard, 2013). Simultaneously, artificial darkness is being hunted into extinction. Black screens are long obsolete. Photographic darkrooms are ever fewer. Cinemas, home of the big silver screen, have been overtaken by the small LCD or OLED screens of smartphones

and related devices. Darkness—natural or artificial—has become like a nature preserve, a zoo, or a museum.

The second trajectory extends the logic of the black screen but takes up the challenge of its current iteration as the green screen. Even more than their black and blue screen predecessors, green screen technologies are so ubiquitous as to garner mention only rarely. Like montage, they constitute a fundamental technique of digital film and video in all its forms: cinema, television, amateur, and art. Occasionally, contemporary artists have interrogated green screens and race simultaneously—works like Stan Douglas's multimedia theater piece, *Helen Lawrence* (2014), in which a racially vexed film noir is created, live on a blue screen set with virtual backgrounds interpolated and projected onto a fourth-wall scrim; and Isaac Julien's nine-screen video installation *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), which features film stars Maggie Cheung and Zhao Tao as 'green screen goddesses,' appearing at times with special effects ropes and green screens conspicuously visible—but specific resonances between blue or green screens and race are largely elusive.

More concrete, if still circuitous, are the connections between green screen techniques and race in Hito Steyerl's fifteen-and-a-half minute video *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013). Steyerl, among the most influential artists working today, drew the title and basic conceit of the work from a darkly satirical 1970 Monty Python sketch. Her instructional (and often humorous) video tackles surveillance and its avoidance, alongside complex imbrications of imaging, politics, class, and war. Chroma keying—along with visible green screens, green suits, and so forth—is the most widely utilized and interrogated technique in the video, a lynchpin of technologized invisibility. But the most direct connection to race and ethnicity is hidden in plain sight: throughout the video, Steyerl dresses in the black garment worn by 'kuroko,' the black-clad stage assistants in Kabuki and Bunraku, who serve as stage-hands and whose black (*kuro*) outfits are meant to render them invisible or at least unobtrusive while they help with onstage costume changes, manipulate puppets (in Bunraku), and so forth³ (Figure 5.4a). *Kuroko* are centuries-old relatives of the black-clad assistants to Auzinger and other practitioners of Black Art; unlike the Black Art assistants rendered invisible by the black screen, they do not disappear entirely but are simultaneously present and absent. Steyerl extends this early modern Japanese practice into the realm of green screens, as her green-suited performers are frequently rendered translucent rather than invisible, that is, simultaneously present and absent (Figure 5.4b).

Steyerl's own *kuroko* outfit, of course, does not partake in any technologized invisibility, ancient or modern, but instead draws attention to itself and to the artist's Japanese ancestry. Her costume is technologically outmoded and ethnically/racially marked. The same is true of a crucial sequence in the second of five lessons in invisibility, 'Be invisible in plain sight,' in which Steyerl has chroma key makeup applied to her face in patterns that



Figure 5.4 (a–c) Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational. MOV File* (2013). Frame grabs from high definition video. Courtesy Hito Steyerl.

variously reproduce resolution targets—a set of patterns adopted by the US Air Force in 1951 to analyze and validate imaging systems—and appear vaguely ‘oriental’ (Figure 5.4c). The use of chroma key face paint recalls seminal video pieces like Peter Campus’s *Three Transitions* (1973) and, as in Campus’s video, carries faint echoes of black face. Thus, even as Steyerl



Figure 5.5 Kerry James Marshall, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, 1980. Egg tempera on paper, 8 × 6.5 inches. LACMA Collection. © Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

tends to recoil from identity politics, the confluence of invisibility in plain sight (the defining attribute of *kuroko*) and ethnicity/race seems to point toward a politics of passing applicable to regimes governed by race no less than those governed by surveillance.⁴

For Steyerl, invisibility is the solution to the problem of ubiquitous surveillance. For Kerry James Marshall, the most lauded living African American painter, invisibility is the problem. Inspired by Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952)—rather than the physical, technologized invisibility espoused by Wells, Rains, and others—Marshall abandoned the abstract collage and painting practice that preoccupied him since art school and set down the path of figurative painting laser focused on making visible the invisibility of African Americans. His breakthrough painting was *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self* (1980) (Figure 5.5). Its lineage in the racist jokes and artificial darkness of the late nineteenth century is immediately apparent today and seems to have been recognized, albeit negatively, by Marshall:

I thought there might be a visual way of representing that same condition of invisibility—which was not the total transparency described by H. G. Wells in his novel *The Invisible Man*, nor a scene in the Claude

Rains movie, where he takes off his clothes and just vanishes. Ellison describes a psychological and perceptual invisibility that is conditioned by the political and social realities of America, rather than by any particular lack of density. [...]

A Portrait of the Artist has that toothy grin. Around then, I started reading about folklore. I had always heard jokes about blackness, because even in the black community blackness was a state or condition for derision, a negative state. Back then, calling somebody black could get you beat up. There were sayings—don't marry anybody blacker than you—and jokes about people being so dark you can't see them at night unless they're smiling: folk humor and folklore.

(Marshall, 2000: 117)

Marshall's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self*—and the series of *Invisible Man* paintings that followed—gather up a century of racist jokes by Bilhaud and Allais (and whoever scrawled on Malevich's *Black Square*), along with the technologized, artificial darkness of Pepper (and his Ghost), Marey (and his chronophotography), Méliès (and his stage and cinematic magic), and Claude Rains (and his star turn as the invisible man). Marshall gathers up these entangled and often objectionable traditions to combat—with grace and beauty, ferocity and wit—the 'psychological and perceptual invisibility [of black people] that is conditioned by the political and social realities of America.' In this respect, he builds on the work of artists like Norman Lewis, who, between 1944 and 1977, painted over 50 works in which the color black is used 'as both a dominant compositional element in his abstract paintings and as a social comment,' as Kellie Jones has persuasively demonstrated (Jones, 2011: 485). Marshall, too, attends to the technologies and techniques of darkness specific to painting, especially as they related to the realities of black skin. As Lanka Tattersall has argued:

There are three blacks in Kerry James Marshall's paintings. Their names are Ivory, Mars, and Carbon. [...] The figures in the majority of Marshall's paintings are not various shades of umber, ocher, and sienna, pigments that more accurately match the skin tones of people of color; Marshall's bodies are literally black.

(Tattersall, 2016: 59)

Auzinger's apocryphal tale of the 'valiant'-cum-'invisible negro' fails not least because black skin—the actual skin tones of people of African descent—is no substitute for the absolutely black body suits of Black Art assistants. Absolute, artificial darkness and racial blackness are resolutely distinct. Auzinger conflated the two in order to produce an origin story for Black Art as a technology of invisibility. Marshall substitutes literal black for black skin tones in order to render visible the invisibility of black people in American society and in the history of art.

Indeed, Marshall's oeuvre is directed as much toward the long history of art as it is toward recent American politics. This commitment is in evidence in the specific medium utilized in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self*: tempera. An ancient emulsion most closely associated with late-medieval and early-Renaissance European painting, egg, and other tempera paints were largely replaced by oil paint by the end of the fifteenth century. Among its few significant twentieth-century practitioners was Jacob Lawrence, one of the best-known African American painters. The choice of paint thus immediately inscribes Marshall's *Portrait of an Artist* in a centuries-long tradition from which black were overwhelmingly excluded, despite accomplishments like those of Lawrence and Marshall. The flimsy material support (paper), diminutive dimensions (8 by 6.5 inches), and elaborate title, however, point away from the exalted realm of fine art and toward a more directly political struggle for freedom, one that returns us yet again to late nineteenth-century America. Images were indispensable weapons in the struggle against slavery. Famously, Fredrick Douglas was the most-photographed man in nineteenth-century America. Almost as famous as Douglas's photographed visage was the caption on the diminutive, black-and-white *carte de visite* photographs sold by Sojourner Truth to raise money for the cause of freedom: 'I sell the shadow to support the substance' (see Wallace and Smith, 2012). Marshall's self-portrait as a shadow—diminutive, black-and-white, paper—registers itself in an ongoing struggle for equality.

Artificial darkness survives in Marshall's work like a techno-media relic; his ivory, mars, and carbon blacks do not, technically speaking, produce the artificial darkness of Marey's chronophotographs, Auzinger's Black Art, Pepper's Ghost, or Rains's Invisible Man. A recent piece by Carrie Mae Weems, however, ventures a direct confrontation between technologies of artificial darkness and the racist tropes with which they have intersected. *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me—A Story in 5 Parts* (2012) is an intricate work that revisits, thematically and technologically, American slavery and its legacy (Figure 5.6). The eighteen-and-a-half-minute video installation is one of many recent works in art, theater, and popular culture to resurrect the nineteenth-century optical attraction called Pepper's Ghost, using contemporary materials (such as Mylar) and technologies (such as video projection) (Elcott, 2016). Commonly and erroneously called 'holograms,' Pepper's Ghost installations have conjured the ghosts of Tupac Shakur at Coachella in 2012, Michael Jackson at the Billboard Music Awards in 2014, and, most powerfully, enslaved African Americans at The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration (Montgomery, Alabama), which opened its doors in April 2018. The setup is simple: a slanted transparent surface (originally glass, now Mylar) is placed between the stage and the audience so that offstage actors (or videos) can be superimposed onto the set (Figure 5.7). Crucially—and here is where artificial darkness first consolidated as an entertainment technology—virtual, reflected actors (or videos)



Figure 5.6 Carrie Mae Weems, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* (2012). Installation view. © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

only gain solidity if they and their reflection in the glass screen are backed by absolutely black backgrounds. If the actors' background is visible, it will appear reflected in the glass and ruin the illusion. If their reflected image appears in an area of the set not backed in black, it will appear translucent, like a ghost. Pepper took advantage of this uncanny effect to visualize ghost stories like Charles Dickens's *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Weems marshals the technology to visualize ghosts and to combat them.

Lincoln, Lonnie, And Me appears to be structured around a perfect coincidence and an essential difference. The coincidence: Pepper's Ghost premiered in 1863, the same year Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, which features prominently in Weems's work. (Weems declaims lines from the address with her own inimitable intonations, cadences, and repetitions as several ghostly figures, including Abraham Lincoln—barely visible in his black-on-black frock coat, vest, trousers, and stovepipe hat—appear from and disappear into the darkness.) The difference is what separates the absolute black necessary for the Pepper's Ghost illusion to succeed and the dark—but hardly absolute black—skin tones of the African American performers in Weems's piece. That difference, as we know, is what gives the lie to Auzinger's apocryphal origin story for Black Art and provides the catalyst for Kerry James Marshall's literally black figures.

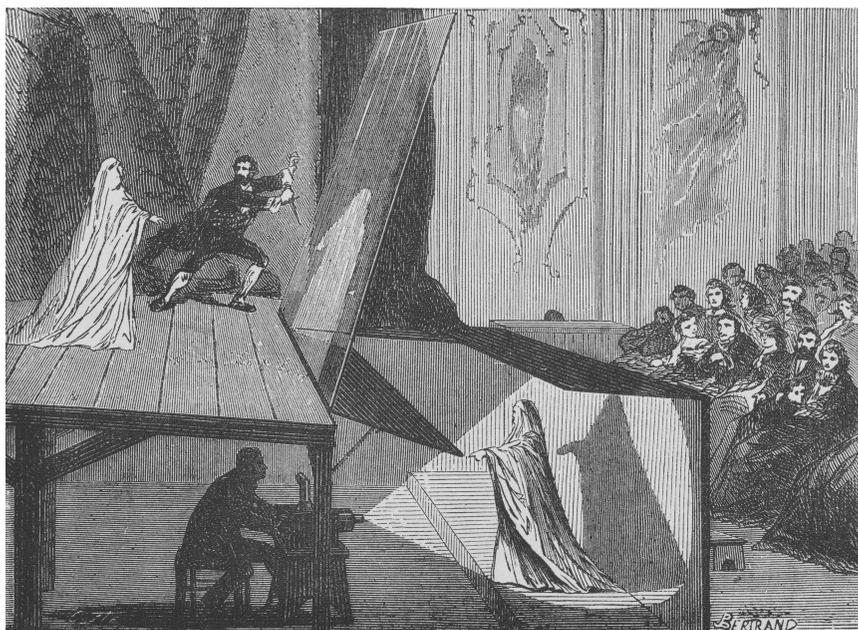


Figure 5.7 Pepper's Ghost, with Silvester's mirror in the lower stage. From *Natural Philosophy for General Readers and Young Persons*, 1876.

The piece opens to the sounds of Blind Willie Johnson's 'Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground.'⁵ An African American tap dancer appears in a black suit and top hat; the only bright whites visible are the triangle of shirt not covered by the double-breasted jacket, the tip of his cuffs, the whites of his eyes, and his 'toothy' smile. In the hands of Bilhaud or Auzinger, we would have the making of yet another racist joke abetted by black screen technologies. But Weems is no nineteenth-century white entertainer; indeed, it is precisely this tradition she interrogates.

Black screens were almost always an all-or-nothing affair. White costumes were visible; black cloaks rendered their contents invisible. Cover a head in a black velvet bag and the results were the magical decapitations executed by Auzinger, Méliès, and, before them, Pepper's Ghost performers. Efficacious phantasmagoric presence—such as Tupac at Coachella—requires (in the nineteenth century like today) a perfectly dark background. Weems does not deal in efficacious tricks any more than she trades in racist jokes. (Or rather, she shrewdly toys with the efficacy of tricks just as, in her early series *Ain't Jokin'* (1987–1988), she dealt slyly with racist humor.) In 1863, the African American tap dancer may have been forced to perform in one of those 'more mundane displays of power' in which 'it is difficult to discern domination from recreation,' as Saidiya Hartman has argued. 'Behind the

facade of innocent amusements lay the violence the master class assiduously denied; but what else could jigs danced in command performances be but the gentle indices of domination?" (Hartman, 1997: 42–43). Decisively, the tap dance routine flouts every convention of *Pepper's Ghost*, destroying the illusion even as it engenders a spectral presence. The dancer's image will not be contained within the black ground and instead regularly passes over the red curtain, losing its semblance of solidity and presence. More to the point, his black suit and black skin are often illuminated in strong raking light that similarly undermines the illusion and rebuffs the dicta established by Bilhaud and Auzinger for cheap, racist laughs. *Pepper's Ghost*—like chronophotography, Black Art, and diverse black screens—operates in binaries: invisible black and visible white. Weems's installation modulates the many physical shades and historical resonances of darkness. As an illusion, *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* regularly falters, and thus generally fails to convince. For Weems, darkness is not an optical illusion. Quite the contrary. *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me* succeeds precisely in its insistence that artificial darkness and race cannot be separated—neither from each other nor from history—and in its capacity to make that history uncannily present, disquietingly spectral, and pulsing with righteous anger and jubilant abandon.

Notes

- 1 This essay attempts to rectify an omission in my book-length study *Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media* (2016). There, associations with total darkness, shadows, the color black, night, artificial light, and race were strategically tabled. It is the aim of this essay to revisit the intersections of artificial darkness and race, above all in contemporary art. My thanks to Kellie Jones for her invaluable critical feedback and to Paula Kroll for her research assistance.
- 2 The precise attribution and chronology of the inscription is mired in controversy—into which I will not wade. But the fact remains: the inscription is there. For an indignant rejection of the attribution of the graffito to Malevich, see Shatskikh, 2017.
- 3 I am indebted to Matthew McKelway for this astute reading, which was confirmed through correspondence with Hito Steyerl (July 13, 2019). The full video is available online at <https://www.artforum.com/video/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen-a-fucking-didactic-educational-mov-file-2013-51651>.
- 4 A similar complex of issues reached an audience of million in summer 2019 in the televisual and social media exploits of the hip-hop star Lizzo. See her Twitter @lizzo (June 17, 2019 and August 12, 2019).
- 5 The work is more complex than can be recounted here. For an incisive review, see Copeland, 2014. A video of the installation can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xssAQn6dsW4>.