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B®ANDING BLACKNESS

BIOMETRIC TECHNOLOGY AND THE SURVEILLANCE OF BLACKNESS

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

—THEODORE CANOT, *Memoirs of a Slave Trader*

We have been branded by Cartesian philosophy.

—AIMÉ CÉSAIRE, *Discourse on Colonialism*

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

—HORTENSE SPILLERS

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



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

possible hope of escape.” This burdensome device would prevent its wearer from “lying down and taking his rest at night.” Not entirely visible in this carte de visite is the brand on Chinn’s forehead: the initials V. B. M. Val-sin Bozonier Marmillion was a Louisiana planter and slaver. When Chinn was in his early twenties, he was sold to Marmillion’s father, Edmond. The Marmillions had a penchant for branding: “Of the 210 Slaves on this plantation 105 left at one time and came into the Union camp. Thirty of them had been branded like cattle with a hot iron, four of them on the forehead, and the others on the breast or arm.”² The brand here is a traumatic head injury that fixed the black body as slave—or, at least, attempted to. An ex-slave,

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

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

The first section of this chapter, *Branding Blackness*, provides a discussion of the practice of branding and its role in the making of the racial subject as commodity at the ports of the transatlantic slave trade. I do this by looking to narratives, some written by abolitionists, others by slave merchants and owners. As well, I look at the uses of branding as a form of racializing surveillance: as both corporeal punishment in plantation societies and in urban domestic settings of slave ownership, and for identification purposes. I do this through a reading of Frantz Fanon’s observations on epidermalization, that being the “epidermal racial schema” that sees the black body fashioned as “an object among other objects.”³ Epidermalization, Paul Gilroy tells us, stems from “a historically specific system for making bodies meaningful by endowing in them qualities of ‘colour.’”⁴ Drawing on Frantz Fanon’s theory of epidermalization, I consider the historical specificity of branding as a practice put to use to ascribe certain meanings to certain bodies: as a unit of tradeable goods, runaways, survivors. To more clearly draw the links between biometric information technology and transatlantic slavery, I trace its archive, namely written narratives, runaway notices, a carte de visite. This is a difficult archive to write about, where iron instruments fashioned into rather simple printed type became tools of torture. It is also a painful archive to imagine, where runaway notices speak of bodies scarred

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

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

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

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

Branding Blackness

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

—SETHE IN TONI MORRISON'S *Beloved*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SILVER WIRE AND SMALL IRONS: EPIDERMALIZATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SELLING BLACKNESS

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

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

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



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

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

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

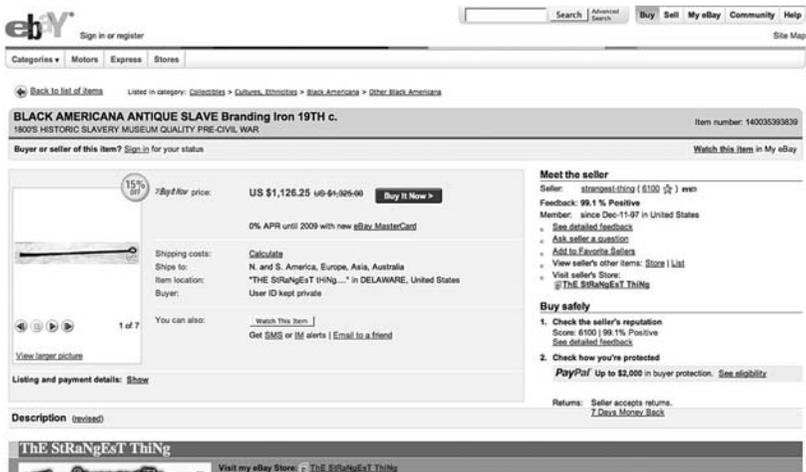


FIGURE 3.3. Slave branding iron for sale on eBay in 2008.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Branding Biometrics

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

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

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

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

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

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

a body made out of place, or made ontologically insecure, is useful when thinking through the moments of contact enacted at the institutional sites of international border crossings and spaces of the internal borders of the state, such as the voting booth, the welfare office, the prison, and other sites and moments where identification, and increasingly biometric information, is required to speak the truth of and for muted bodies. These sites and moments are productive of, and often necessitate, ontological insecurity, where “all around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.”⁶⁵ This atmosphere of certain uncertainty is part of what Lewis Gordon refers to as “the problematic of a denied subjectivity.”⁶⁶ On this, Gordon is worth quoting at length:

Fanon’s insight, shared by DuBois, is that there is no inner subjectivity, where there is no being, where there is *no one there*, and where there is no link to another subjectivity as ward, as guardian, or owner, then *all is permitted*. Since *in fact* there is an Other human being in the denied relationship, evidenced by, say, antiblack racism, what this means is that there is a subjectivity that is experiencing a world in which all is permitted against him or her.⁶⁷

For Gordon, this problematic of a denied subjectivity is a structured violence where “all is permitted” and where this structured violence is productive of and produced by a certain white normativity, meaning that whiteness is made normative and, in so being, raceless, or what Goldberg terms “racially invisible.”⁶⁸ What Gordon insightfully calls the “notion of white prototypicality” is the enabling condition of the structured violence of “the dialectics of recognition.”⁶⁹ This prototypical whiteness is one facet of the cultural and technological logic that informs many instances of the practices of biometrics and the visual economy of recognition and verification that accompanies these practices. Digital epidermalization is the exercise of power cast by the disembodied gaze of certain surveillance technologies (for example, identity card readers and e-passport verification machines) that can be employed to do the work of alienating the subject by producing a truth about the racial body and one’s identity (or identities) despite the subject’s claims.

To understand the practices of prototypical whiteness (as well as prototypical maleness, youth, and able-bodiedness) and the ways that biometric information technologies are sometimes inscribed in racializing schemas that see particular biometric systems privileging whiteness, or lightness, in

the ways in which certain bodies are measured for enrollment, I turn now to some findings appearing in publications in biometrics R&D. These publications tell of industry concerns and specifications, and they also tell us something about what kinds of bodies these technologies are designed to suit best. One such study examined how face detection technology could be employed in a “multiethnic environment” to classify facial features by race and gender.⁷⁰ A technology like this could be applied, for example, in shopping malls, casinos, or amusement parks or for photo tagging applications similar to that used by Facebook for what that social networking service calls photo summary information or, in other words, facial recognition technology. This technology is employed to match uploaded photographs to a specific user’s profile.⁷¹ The authors of this study found that when programmed generically for “all ethnicities,” their gender classification system “is inclined to classify Africans as males and Mongoloid as females.”⁷² So black women are presumably male, and Asian men are classified as female, in this way mirroring earlier pseudo-scientific racist and sexist discourse that sought to define racial and gendered categories and order humans in a linear fashion to regulate those artificial boundaries that could never be fully maintained (e.g., mustard seed-filled skulls in *Crania Americana*, polygenism and the ranking of races by way of recapitulation, black woman as surrogate man, the desexualized Asian man, diagnoses of the slave’s desire for freedom as the so-called sickness of the runaway named drapetomania, and Nott and Gliddon’s *Types of Mankind*).⁷³ Interestingly, when their gender classifier was made “ethnicity specific” for the category “African,” they found that images of African females would be classified as female about 82 percent of the time, while the same African classifier would find images of “Mongoloid” females to be female 95.5 percent of the time, and 96 percent for “Caucasoid” females. In other words, even when calibrated to detect black women, the African classifier is better suited to detect “Mongoloid” females and “Caucasoid” females.

Using actor Will Smith’s face as the model of generic black masculinity (figure 3.6), Gao and Ai, the study’s authors, are left to conclude that “the accuracy of gender classifier on Africans is not as high as on Mongoloid and Caucasoid.”⁷⁴ The racial nomenclature of “Mongoloid” and “Caucasoid” is seemingly archaic but not uncommon in certain biometrics R&D. It is worth noting here that, as a different study put it, the “statistical knowledge of anthropometry” is still being invoked in biometric information technology R&D.⁷⁵ For instance, in one study, authors Li, Zhou, and Geng argue

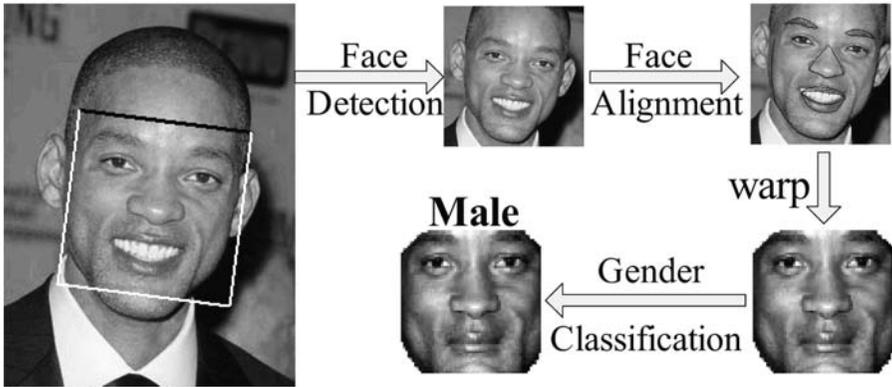


FIGURE 3.6. “Face Gender Classification Flowchart,” from Gao and Ai, “Face Gender Classification on Consumer Images in a Multiethnic Environment.” A face detection algorithm is first applied to a photo of Will Smith. Then, eighty-eight facial feature points are mapped out and used for face texture normalization and gender classification. Courtesy of Haizhou Ai and with kind permission from Springer Science and Business Media.

that “the difference of Races is obvious, and it is the core field of research of anthropology. Anthropometry is a key technique to find out this difference and abstract the regulation from this difference.”⁷⁶ Anthropometry, or Bertillonage, was introduced in 1883 by Alphonse Bertillon as a system of measuring and then cataloguing the human body by distinguishing one individual from another for the purposes of identification, classification, and criminal forensics. This early biometric information technology was put to work as a “scientific method,” alongside the pseudo-sciences of craniometry (the measurement of the skull to assign criminality and intelligence to race and gender) and phrenology (attributing mental abilities to the shape of the skull, as the skull was believed to hold a brain made up of individual organs). First developed by taking the measurements of prisoners and repeat offenders, Bertillonage made use of a series of measurements of the head, torso, and limbs gathered through a choreographed routine where the subject would sit, stand, and stretch out limbs, including measuring the length of the head, the right ear, and the left foot. Later, Bertillonage included descriptions of other markers of identification, such as eye color and scars.⁷⁷ With Li, Zhou, and Geng’s study quoted above, we can see that pseudo-scientific discourse of racial difference forms the theoretical basis from which to develop a facial computational model that could qualify

(and mathematically quantify) difference to allow for identity authentication. Li, Zhou, and Geng claim that “as a result of using the statistical information of the Mongolian Race’s feature, our method is suitable to be used in the north of China.”⁷⁸ Claims such as these demonstrate that some advances in biometric information technology are organized around the idea of digital epidermalization.

Epidermalization—the imposition of race on the body—is present, for example, when Nanavati, Thieme, and Nanavati note that in comparative testing of biometric systems and devices using control groups, higher fail-to-enroll (FTE) rates appear with those whose fingerprints are said to be unmeasurable. They state, “Elderly users often have very faint fingerprints and may have poorer circulation than younger users. Construction workers and artisans are more likely to have highly worn fingerprints, to the point where ridges are nearly nonexistent. Users of Pacific Rim/Asian descent may have faint fingerprint ridges—*especially female users*.”⁷⁹ Unmeasurable fingerprints are often those of the elderly and people who come in contact with caustic chemicals and frequent hand washing in their work environments, such as mechanics, health care workers, and nail salon technicians or manicurists. Some massage therapists also fail to enroll due to occupational wear of their fingerprints. This unmeasurability forms part of what Torin Monahan calls “body discrimination” in technology design, where “unequal power relations are reproduced and reinforced by technological means.”⁸⁰ Could these systems, then, be calibrated to allow for cutaneous gender detection, or for class differentiation? Or could they be programmed to allow for the “digital segregation of racialized population groups,” as Joseph Pugliese suggests?⁸¹ In this same study, Nanavati, Thieme, and Nanavati note that facial scan technology may produce higher FTE rates for “very dark-skinned users,” not due to “lack of distinctive features, of course, but to the quality of images provided to the facial-scan system by video cameras optimized for lighter-skinned users.”⁸² What their research and development tell us is that their technology privileges whiteness, or at least lightness, in its use of lighting and in the ways in which certain bodies are lit and measured in the enrollment process.

Prototypical whiteness in biometrics is an extension of the “general culture of light” that Richard Dyer lays out regarding photography, film, and art.⁸³ This is a culture in which, as Dyer asserts, “white people are central to it to the extent that they come to seem to have a special relationship to light.”⁸⁴ The logic of prototypical whiteness is seemingly present in ear-

lier models of iris-scanning technology that were based on 8-bit grayscale image capture, allowing for 256 shades of gray but leaving very dark irises “clustered at one end of the spectrum.”⁸⁵ The distribution of this spectrum’s 256 shades of gray is made possible only through the unambiguous black-white binary; the contrapuntal extremes that anchor the spectrum, leaving the unmeasurable dark matter clustered at one end. Prototypical whiteness cannot be understood without the dark matter that gets clustered at one end of the spectrum, without those bodies and body parts that fail to enroll.⁸⁶ Such epidermal thinking is present in other research on facial recognition technology that found that when “the facial feature quantities (spacing between eyes, turn up of the eyes, thickness of mouth etc.) are classified,” it is possible that these systems “can search for faces with a certain feature, if the degree of the feature quantity is designated.”⁸⁷ Here the possibilities for racializing surveillance are revealed. This is especially so when facial recognition technology is calibrated to cull matches only from within specified racial and gendered groupings, leading to high FTE rates for some groupings, as discussed earlier. The application of surveillance technologies in this way leads to questions concerning the idea that gender and race can be specified, and also how and if nonbinary, gender nonconforming, mixed-race, intersexed, or trans people fit into this algorithmic equation. They are unaccounted for in the algorithm that is set to fix race and gender.

As the above R&D reports make clear, there is a certain assumption with these technologies that categories of gender identity and race are clear cut, that a machine can be programmed to assign gender categories or determine what bodies and body parts should signify.⁸⁸ Such technologies can then possibly be applied to determine who has access to movement and stability, and to other rights. I take up this possibility in chapter 4 through a discussion of the airport and DNA technology. Following Anne Balsamo here, I am suggesting that we must question the effects that certain technologies (in this case, biometric information technologies) have on “cultural enactments of gender” and of race; we must uncover how such technologies are “ideologically shaped by the operation of gender” and seek to understand the role they play in racializing surveillance and in reinforcing “traditional gendered patterns of power and authority.”⁸⁹

Given this, some important questions to ask here include: How do we understand the body once it is made into data? What are the underlying assumptions with surveillance technologies, such as passport verification machines, facial recognition software, or fingerprint template technology?

There is a notion that these technologies are infallible and objective and have a mathematical precision, without error or bias on the part of the computer programmers who calibrate the search parameters of these machines or on the part of those who read these templates to make decisions, such as the decision in 2004 in which U.S. citizen Brandon Mayfield was wrongfully determined to be involved with the Madrid, Spain, train bombings based on a latent fingerprint.⁹⁰ Mayfield had served in the U.S. Army and is a Muslim, having converted to Islam shortly after marrying his Egyptian-born wife in 1986. He is a lawyer and did not hold a valid U.S. passport at the time of the synchronized bombings on four commuter trains that killed 191 people and wounded and maimed many others on May 11, 2004. A latent fingerprint was found on a bag containing detonator devices that was recovered by Spanish authorities from a vehicle that was parked at a train station. The FBI matched this latent fingerprint with Mayfield's. It was later revealed that Mayfield's print was one of twenty possible matches, but that additional biographical information was used by the FBI to bolster the case to detain Mayfield as a material witness. His military training, his religion, and the fact that he did not have a valid passport rendered him under the category of the "credible enemy," the rationale being that Mayfield would have to have traveled using a counterfeit passport to commit the commuter train bombings. I borrow the term "credible enemy" from Ursula Franklin's discussion of the task of the state in the "real world of technology," where, as she says, "the state has to guarantee the on-going, long term presence of a credible enemy, because only a credible enemy justifies the massive outlay of public funds" for arms productions and securitization.⁹¹ According to Franklin, the credible enemy must be "cunning, threatening and just barely beatable by truly ingenious and heroic technologies" and, importantly, Franklin warns, there is historical precedent of the state's war machine turning inward and "seeking the enemy within."⁹² Think here of this act of seeking the enemy within as signaled by the term "home-grown terrorists." Mayfield was held for nineteen days and released only after Spanish authorities announced that they had arrested someone else.

Although verification machines now do the work of sorting the bearers of identity documents, these machines are designed and operated by real people to sort real people. It is through the human aspects of this process of sorting that the digitized, biometric body is brought into view. Through this process of visualizing and sorting, the digitized body and in effect its material, human counterpart could be epidermalized. My intent here is not

in defense of “race-thinking,”⁹³ nor is it an effort to reontologize race, but to situate certain biometric information technologies as techniques through which the cultural production of race can be understood. Following scholar Eugene Thacker’s call for a “critical genomic consciousness” in relation to biotechnology,⁹⁴ I am suggesting here that we must also engage a critical biometric consciousness. Such a consciousness entails informed public debate around these technologies and their application, and accountability by the state and the private sector, where the ownership of and access to one’s own body data and other intellectual property that is generated from one’s body data must be understood as a right. A critical biometric consciousness must also factor in the effects of the supply chain, production, and disposal of the hardware of these technologies, whether that be the mining of conflict minerals, like coltan, or where the assembly of the devices is tied to sweatshop labor.⁹⁵ A critical biometric consciousness could be engendered by the type of learning that takes places with, for example, the Keeper of Keys machine (κκ) developed by Marc Böhlen (aka RealTechSupport) in the context of the Open Biometrics Initiative (figure 3.7). The Open Biometrics Initiative argues:

Formerly a domain reserved for human forensics experts, minutiae extraction can now be translated into executable computer code. In the machine, both minutiae map and minutiae matching are found within degrees of error and translated into probabilities. However, the results of these mathematical operations generate information that is valid within certain limits and under certain assumptions. The rules of probability theory ensure that the assumptions are computationally tractable. Error is translated into a fraction of unity.⁹⁶

The “Open Biometrics idea,” as Böhlen names it, understands all body data as probabilistic.⁹⁷ By taking seriously the idea that identification and verification of fingerprint biometric data through computational means relies on probability—that a match is more akin to an approximation than a confirmation—the Open Biometrics Initiative designed the κκ to subvert the notion that biometric identification technology is infallible. The κκ is “designed to re-imagine, beyond the confines of security and repression, notions of machinic identity control and biometric validation.”⁹⁸

The κκ is a fingerprint analysis application that takes an image of the user’s fingerprint. Rather than reducing this fingerprint data to a represen-



FIGURE 3.7.
The Keeper of Keys
Machine. Courtesy
of Marc Böhlen (aka
RealTechSupport).

tative subset, the results of the finger scan that the κκ provides is a “mathematically precise but open list of probable results” allowing “the user insight into the internals of an otherwise hidden process.”⁹⁹ This information is printed out for the user as a set of minutiae or characteristic points and probabilities, what the Open Biometrics Initiative calls a “probabilistic IDcard” (figure 3.8) that details “all characteristic points of a finger scan together with class (ridge ending or bifurcation) and most importantly likelihood” rather than assigning some infallibility to the data.¹⁰⁰ In this way, the probabilistic IDcard identifies characteristic points of the user’s fingerprint that could come under dispute by a fingerprint examiner using standard finger scan technology. The user’s fingerprint data is not retained by the κκ. In this way, the user’s digitized body data remains the property of the user, not that of state actors or a private organization or some other governmental body. Given this, the κκ is a way of critiquing the idea that the state, the private sector, or other nongovernmental institutions should hold biometric information about users that users themselves cannot hold or

FIGURE 3.8. Keeper of Keys Certified Good Scan. Courtesy of Marc Böhlen (aka RealTechSupport).



even have access to. As well, it forces us to ask: if you would not surrender your biometric data to a machine like the KK that provides some transparency regarding the data capture process, then why would you surrender such data at a bank or at a border or to your employer or your iPhone, often without user agreements or questions about how the data will be stored or transmitted, what it will be used for, or whether or not it will be shared, sold, rented, or traded? These are some of the questions that should inform a critical biometric consciousness.

Importantly, a critical biometric consciousness must acknowledge the connections between contemporary biometric information technologies and their historical antecedents. Meaning here that this critical biometric consciousness must contend with the ways that branding, particularly within racial slavery, was instituted as a means of population management that rendered whiteness prototypical through its making, marking, and marketing of blackness as visible and as commodity. As well, it must contend with the ways in which branding was a form of punishment and racial profiling (every body branded *SOCIETY*, or *F* for fugitive—or perhaps that *F* stood for freedom, and *R* for revolt rather than runaway). As demonstrated above, much of how biometrics are described in recent R&D derives from the racial thinking and assumptions around gender that were used to falsify evolutionary trajectories and rationalize the violence of transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. The absence of a nuanced discussion of how such racial thinking shapes the research and development of con-

temporary biometric information technology is itself constitutive of power relations existing in that very technology, where the idea of blackness is invoked (think actor Will Smith) to reproduce power relations, even sometimes in the physical absence of actual black people.

Blackness B®anded

I want to return to Will Smith for a moment to question what his image is doing in a biometric technology industry publication on new research and development. What kind of work is his picture doing here? Smith is the star of at least three Hollywood blockbuster action movies in which surveillance technology plays a role: *Enemy of the State* (1998), *I, Robot* (2004), and to a lesser extent *Men in Black* (1997). Seeing how surveillance is displayed, discussed, and depicted in and through Smith's films is important for an understanding of the various ways that contemporary surveillance technologies, from CCTV to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones) to facial recognition technology, are marketed through popular entertainment. *I, Robot* is set in Chicago in the year 2035, where robotic workers, seemingly replicas of each other, act as servants (sometimes referred to in the film as slaves), are stored in stacked shipping containers when decommissioned, and eventually plot a nationwide revolt and imprison their human owners. We learn that Smith's character, police detective Del Spooner, was injured in a car accident and became an involuntary subject in a cybernetics program for wounded police officers. This left him with a prosthetic left arm built by the same company that created the robot servants, U.S. Robotics. Spooner uses biometric information technology, namely hand geometry access and voice pattern recognition, in the film, but he is antirobot. As the *New York Times*' film critic A. O. Scott put it: Spooner is "a raging anti-robot bigot, harboring a grudge against the helpful, polite machines that shuffle around the city running errands and doing menial work."¹⁰¹ According to Scott, Spooner's grudge causes him to commit "technological profiling," revealing the film's "undercurrent of racial irony."¹⁰² Seemingly a commentary on the dystopic potential of unregulated androids or a comment on enslavement, perhaps *I, Robot* animates concerns around such imaginings of artificial intelligence. In *I, Robot*, biometric information technology is a mere backdrop to a slave revolt; a palm scanner here, some voice

recognition there. In this way, *I, Robot* depicts a society where biometrics are integrated into the everyday for the purposes of identification, verification, automation, and convenience.

In the comedy *Men in Black*, however, biometrics is that which can tether one to a fixed identity. Smith's character in *Men in Black*, James Darrell Edwards III, has his dental records, Social Security number, and even his Gold's Gym membership deleted from various databases, and his fingerprints are permanently erased from his body, leaving him without identifying marks and documents, rendering him anonymous. He becomes simply Agent J of the secret agency Men in Black (MIB). During this process of anonymization, a voice-over tells viewers of the film,

You'll dress only in attire specially sanctioned by MIB Special Services. You'll conform to the identity we give you, eat where we tell you, live where we tell you. From now on you will have no identifying marks of any kind. You'll not stand out in any way. Your entire image is crafted to leave no lasting memory with anyone you encounter. You are a rumor, recognizable only as déjà vu and dismissed just as quickly. You don't exist. You were never even born. Anonymity is your name. Silence, your native tongue. You are no longer part of "the system." You are above "the system." Over it. Beyond it. We're "them." We're "they." We are the Men in Black.

This scene from *Men in Black* offers its viewers an understanding of the reach of the surveillance state, where documents and identifying marks are stored in interconnected databases. In this fictional world where "aliens" are among us, everyone is watched and our transactions are monitored. *Enemy of the State* is a panoply of surveillance. Set in Washington, DC, the film's plot revolves around Smith as labor attorney Robert Clayton Dean as he gets caught up with the National Security Agency (NSA), an assassination plot, and pending legislation that would increase domestic spying capabilities by way of a "Telecommunication, Security and Privacy Act," a bill that, as one character puts it, "is not the first step to the surveillance society, it is the surveillance society."¹⁰³ Throughout the film, Dean, and by extension the viewing audience, is given a primer on pre-9/11 surveillance technologies, their histories and capabilities, and the reach of the NSA by retired NSA agent Edward "Brill" Lyle, played by Gene Hackman, as both Brill and Dean become targets of the NSA.¹⁰⁴ In one scene Brill tells Dean, "Every wire, every airwave. The more technology you use, the easier it is

for them to keep tabs on you. A brave new world out there. At least it better be.” Thus, surveillance is wielded in a rather conspiratorial manner against Dean and Brill: facial recognition and fingerprint template technology, GPS tracking, databases, CCTV feeds, audio surveillance, beacon transmitters, satellite imagery, and even ominous black helicopters hover above them. It could be argued that in *Enemy of the State* surveillance technologies operate by way of product placement and that through such brand integration—to use ad industry terms—the film’s viewers come to understand surveillance technologies. Fictional narratives such as *Enemy of the State*, and also television programming, shape public conceptions of surveillance technologies and are one of the ways that the public comes to develop a popular biometric consciousness. David Lyon argues that what such a display of technology does is suggest that the mere “presence of high technology speaks for itself, somehow guaranteeing its own effectiveness.”¹⁰⁵ Lyon names this an apparent “sociological shallowness” of *Enemy of the State*, but also notes that this attitude is significant “especially in the American context where belief in the efficacy of technological ‘solutions’ far outstrips any evidence that technical devices can be relied upon to provide ‘security.’”¹⁰⁶

Enemy of the State closes with Dean and Brill turning the tables on the NSA agents and analysts that have tracked them throughout the film. Answering Jeremy Bentham’s question of “quis custodiet ipsos custodes?” (who watches the watchers?), Dean and Brill surveil their surveillers; they watch the watchers. In this way, the film offers a “neutrality thesis” regarding surveillance technology which suggests that if placed in the right hands surveillance loses its negative valence and it need not be feared or a cause for worry.¹⁰⁷ However, these “right hands,” in this case, are gendered in a particular way. As Balsamo argues in her discussion of “the dominant myth of gender and technology,” such depictions ultimately leave intact dominant representations of men as the “idealized and most important agents of technological development.”¹⁰⁸ Popular culture representations of surveillance are some of the ways that the public comes to know these technologies and also how ideas about certain technologies as necessary surveillance and security measures get rationalized and sold to the general public. In other words, “our experience of surveillance is itself shaped by popular culture.”¹⁰⁹ As a pitchman, it does not get much better than Will Smith, whom *Forbes* magazine named as the highest-paid actor for 2008. Interestingly, when promoting *I, Robot* in 2004, Smith was asked by the German press about some earlier comments that were attributed to him, in which

Smith reportedly claimed that he could one day hold the office of president of the United States. Smith replied that he envisioned the possibility of a black president, suggesting that a “young black man from Chicago, Barack Obama,” would probably run for that office sooner or later. Asked about the effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Smith reportedly answered,

If you grow up as a black person in America, you get a completely different view of the world than white Americans. We blacks live with a constant feeling of discomfort. Whether you're attacked and wounded by a racist cop or attacked by terrorists, excuse me, it makes no difference. In the sixties, blacks were continuously the target of terrorist attacks. Although it was domestic terrorism, terrorism is terrorism. We are used to being attacked. As for a permanent alert, a defensive attitude with which one lives anyway—it has not changed since. No, for me personally, as to my everyday life, the tragedy of September 11 changed nothing. I live always a hundred percent alert. I was not even nervous, anxious, or cautious after 9/11.¹¹⁰

Articulating here the racial terror imposed on black life in America by an overseeing surveillance apparatus in effect on September 10, 2001, and long before, Smith received criticism for his comments, and some called for a boycott of his films. *I, Robot* grossed over \$345 million in box office sales that year.

Many criticize Smith for playing only “safe” roles, and although a “bad boy” (he played Detective Mike Lowrey in the 1995 film *Bad Boys* and the 2003 sequel), he has never really portrayed a “bad guy.” Being a star of blockbuster films means that the movie-watching audience is constantly subjected to Smith’s always heroic exploits, particularly for films that are in syndication on network television. So these lessons on surveillance technologies and practices are regularly broadcast in which Smith is often seen saving America, and by extension the planet, from alien Others (*Independence Day*, the *Men in Black* franchise, *Wild Wild West*, *I Am Legend*, *Hancock*, *I, Robot*, and *After Earth*), or cast in some policing role (the *Bad Boys* franchise). It should not go without notice here that the image of the prototypical white man featured in Gao and Ai’s article on their biometric gender classification system is that of Tom Cruise, the star of *Minority Report* and the *Mission Impossible* franchise, standing alongside his then-wife Katie Holmes (figure 3.9). Biometric information technology play an important yet commonplace role in those films. For example, one scene

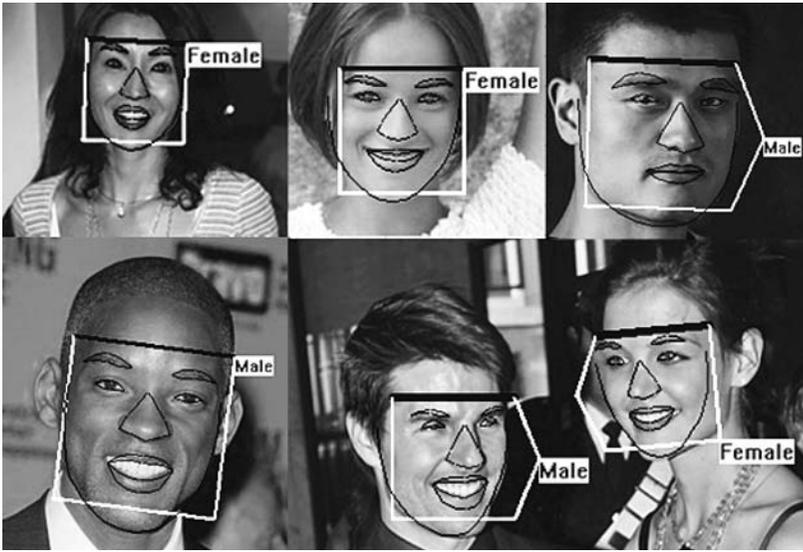


FIGURE 3.9. Photos of Will Smith, Tom Cruise, and Katie Holmes among facial images classified by gender using biometric analysis. From Gao and Ai, “Face Gender Classification on Consumer Images in a Multiethnic Environment.” Courtesy of Haizhou Ai and with kind permission from Springer Science and Business Media.

in *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol* (2011) features a contact “lens cam” that when worn is capable of drawing a match from faces scanned in a crowd and could then trigger an alert to an iPhone of a match of a possible target for assassination. Such product placement was not so far off at the time of that film’s release. In 2013, Google filed patent applications with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office for contact lenses that integrate cameras and other sensors. This patent-pending lens cam could capture and record images when the wearer uses a specific blink pattern, or could use motion detection to alert blind wearers to oncoming vehicles at crosswalks.¹¹¹ The “social optics of race” in *Minority Report* has been theorized by Lisa Nakamura, who argues that in that film, “the act of seeing itself has become inseparable from the political economies of race, retailing, crime and surveillance.”¹¹² So commerce, in *Minority Report*, is readily enabled by technologies of surveillance (like retinal scans) that link identity, and by extension race, to product placement and marketing.

Priceless #1 (2004) is part of Hank Willis Thomas’s *B@anded* series, in which the artist questions “how black bodies were branded as a sign of

ownership during slavery, and how their descendants' bodies are branded today through corporate advertising."¹¹³ As such, the meaning of branding for Thomas is not only about the violence inflicted on black skin, but also about how blackness brands certain consumable goods. The series is part of Thomas's creative response to the fatal shooting of his twenty-seven-year-old cousin Songha Willis during a mugging for a gold chain in Philadelphia that took place in February 2000. *Priceless #1* (figure 3.10) is a photograph of mourners at Songha Willis's funeral with the MasterCard logo superimposed on the bottom left corner. When MasterCard financial services first began running its trademarked Priceless campaign in 1997, each commercial spot would list the price for different products or services and would end with that one unfigurative thing that no amount of money could buy ("the way music makes you feel: priceless") and a voice-over of the slogan "there are some things money can't buy; for everything else there's MasterCard." With Thomas's *Priceless #1*, the phrases "3-piece suit: \$250," "gold chain: \$400," "new socks: \$2," "9mm Pistol: \$80," and "Bullet: \$60" are overlaid on the image of this moment of trauma along with a play on the MasterCard tagline: "Picking the perfect casket for your son: priceless." The words "Pistol," "Bullet," and "Picking" are the only ones that are capitalized in this image, signaling the link between the labor of slavery (picking cotton) and its violent aftermath (firearm-related homicide), and the ways in which black death is capitalized upon (picking caskets). Debt (reparations for slavery, credit card debt) underwrites Thomas's remaking of MasterCard's Priceless campaign. With *B®anded* comes Thomas's interrogation of advertising and the commodification of blackness, urban violence, and the transatlantic slave trade. In its appropriation of the signs and language of the popular MasterCard campaign, *Priceless #1* instead gives us an image of a community in grief, one that is replayed and recounted over and over again as young black men ages twenty to twenty-four and twenty-five to twenty-nine formed the groups with the highest and second-highest homicide victim rates in the United States in 2013.¹¹⁴ Thus *Priceless #1* is a mash-up of premature death, grief, black city life, and commodity packaging.¹¹⁵

The brand logos of the National Basketball Association, outdoor wear manufacturer Timberland, Johnnie Walker scotch, American Express credit services, and others are remade in Thomas's *B®anded* series, which sees both the stowage plan of the slave ship *Brooks* and the Door of No Return as mash-ups with the Absolut Vodka campaign. By "mash-ups," what I



FIGURE 3.10. Hank Willis Thomas, *Priceless #1* (2004). Lambda photograph. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

mean here is that these photographs combine brand logos with the difficult archive of transatlantic slavery to create new meanings and commentary other than what the original commodity packaging was meant to signify. For example, the Absolut Vodka bottle peopled with tiny figures in planked position similar to the stowage plan of the slave ship *Brooks* in *Absolut Power* (2003), or shaped into a door frame with the view from the Door of No Return on Gorée Island in *Absolut No Return* (2010). *Priceless*. When asked about the intent behind his *B@anded* series, Thomas has said that he was “interested in the way that black men are the most feared and revered bodies in the world in this weird way” and that he was “trying to figure out why that was and what that was about, and the relationship to slavery and commodity, which is commerce, culture, cotton, and that body type.”¹¹⁶ With this series we see Thomas uncover the moments in advertising when blackness is pitched “as a way to cash in on street cool or urban icon.”¹¹⁷ One such icon of street cool is Nike’s brand logo known as the Swoosh that

adorns the company's shoes, clothes, and other sporting apparel. In the *B®anded* series, however, the Swoosh is instead branded on the male black body, first as a large scar on the side of a bald head in *Branded Head* (2003), and also in a series of nine raised keloid-appearing scars on the upper torso in *Scarred Chest* (2004). *Branded Head* gives viewers a profile view, but the image is cropped in such a way that we do not see the face of the branded subject, while *Scarred Chest* is cropped at the neck and the genitals. Keloid scars have been known to grow, itch, and remain painful posthealing, and are said to occur more often within black populations. *Branded Head* and *Scarred Chest* are photographic reckonings with the trauma of racial injury, traumatic head injuries, raised keloid scars that grow beyond the boundary of the seemingly healed original wound, commercial branding, and the power of advertising to crop and frame the black body, and the power of the artist to counterframe.¹¹⁸

In 2004 *Branded Head* was part of the public space art installation *Jamaica Flux: Workspaces and Windows* and was placed in the ad space adjacent to a telephone booth at the corner of Union Hall Street and Jamaica Avenue in Queens, New York (figure 3.11). The telephone booth was neatly embedded in this site of commerce as it sits directly in front of a Chase Bank and was located close to a food vending cart in this busy shopping district. JPMorgan Chase, the parent company of Chase Bank, is “one of the oldest financial institutions in the United States. With a history dating back over 200 years,” according to its website.¹¹⁹ The Merchant Bank and the Leather Manufacturers Bank both merged in the 1920s with what would later become Chase Bank, and they both had provided insurance policies on the lives of enslaved laborers.¹²⁰ On a nearby building at the time of this installation was a billboard ad for Nike footwear featuring National Football League (NFL) quarterback Michael Vick, then signed to the Atlanta Falcons.¹²¹ The tagline of the ad was “to fly, your head must reach the . . . Air Zoom Vick II.” The NFL suspended Vick in 2007 for violating its player conduct policy due to his involvement in unlawful dogfighting and gambling. Criminal charges led to the loss of Vick's lucrative Nike endorsement contract and an eventual conviction, followed by a twenty-month incarceration, with house arrest by way of an electronic ankle monitor and travel restrictions imposed after his release from prison. Vick signed with the Philadelphia Eagles in 2009 and was named 2010 NFL Comeback Player of the Year. Nike re-signed Vick in 2011, stating that it supports Vick's efforts



FIGURE 3.11. Hank Willis Thomas, *Branded Head* (2003). Installation view at 125th Street, Harlem, NY. Lambda photograph. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

at reforming his public image. This re-signing, then, marks Vick's rebranding; the first professional athlete in the United States to lose and then regain a major endorsement deal.¹²²

Conclusion

This chapter began by offering a longer history of biometric information technology and the ways that this history is in close alignment with the commodification of blackness. Current biometric technologies and slave branding, of course, are not one and the same; however, when we think of our contemporary moment when "suspect" citizens, trusted travelers, prisoners, welfare recipients, and others are having their bodies informationalized by way of biometric surveillance, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes without consent or awareness, and then stored in large-scale, automated databases, some managed by the state and some owned by private interests, we can find histories of these accountings of the body in, for example, the inventory that is the *Book of Negroes*, slave ship manifests that served maritime insurance purposes, banks that issued insurance policies to slave owners against the loss of enslaved laborers, and branding as a technology of tracking blackness that sought to make certain bodies legible as property. My suggestion here is that questioning the historically present workings of branding and racializing surveillance, particularly in regard to biometrics, allows for a critical rethinking of punishment, torture, and our moments of contact with our increasingly technological borders. This is especially important given the capabilities of noncooperative biometric tagging by way of wearable computing, such as Google Glass, or through UAVs, drones, or other flying objects employed in U.S. counterinsurgency measures and other military applications, for example targeted killings or search-and-rescue missions.

Understanding how biometric information technologies are rationalized through industry specification and popular entertainment provides a means to falsify the idea that certain surveillance technologies and their application are always neutral regarding race, gender, disability, and other categories of determination and their intersections. Examining biometric practices and surveillance in this way is instructive. It invites us to understand the histories and the social relations that form part of the very conditions that enable these technologies. When surveillance systems that rely

on visualization as a way of classification are, as Sylvia Wynter aptly puts it, “increasingly becoming automated,” allowing for “the great masses of people who have to be cast out,”¹²³ such casting out, or failure to enroll, must be attended to critically, given the privacy concerns surrounding file sharing and the current extraconstitutional treatment of those who are deemed by the state to be “risks.” It is at the border—territorial, epidermal, and digital—a site where certain bodies are cast out and made out of place, that a critical biometric consciousness and the possibilities suggested by what Gilroy terms an “alternative, metaphysical humanism premised on face-to-face relations between different actors—being of equal worth—as preferable to the problems of inhumanity that raciology creates” can be realized.¹²⁴ It is precisely this casting out that incites such a critical biometric consciousness and rethinking that seeks our linked subjectivity as no alternative, but, as Fanon puts it, “the right to demand human behavior from the other.”¹²⁵