

The  
Image  
of  
White—  
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CONTEMPORARY  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
AND RACIALIZATION

# The Image of Whiteness: Contemporary Photography and Racialization

**Featuring** Abdul Abdullah, David Birkin, Sutapa Biswas, Nancy Burson, Broomberg & Chanarin, Libita Clayton, Buck Ellison, Sophie Gabrielle, Ken Gonzales-Day, Yasmin Gunaratnam, Stacy Kranitz, Michelle Dizon & Viet Le, Nate Lewis, Agata Madejska, Richard Misrach, Kajal Nisha Patel, John Lucas & Claudia Rankine, David Roediger, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Hank Willis Thomas, Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, George Yancy

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As long as you think you  
are white, there is no  
hope for you.

—James Baldwin

The death of whiteness  
will mean more abundant  
life not only for Black  
people, but for white  
people as well.

—George Yancy

10	<b>The Image of Whiteness</b> by Daniel C. Blight
29	<b>Plates</b>
141	<b>Works in Context</b>
149	<b>Plate List</b>
158	<b>The Advent of Whiteness</b> Interview with David Roediger
164	<b>The Borders of Whiteness</b> Interview with Yasmin Gunaratnam
172	<b>On Blondness and Whiteness</b> Interview with Claudia Rankine
180	<b>Picturing the Invisible</b> Interview with Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa
190	<b>Symbolic White Death</b> Interview with George Yancy
202	<b>Afterword</b> by Kiera Blakey

# The Image of Whiteness

## by Daniel C. Blight

“Race is fundamentally a regime of looking, although race cannot be reduced to the look.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the most dangerous political and social crises of the 21st century is the global re-emergence of white supremacist thinking and action. Disguised as white ethno-nationalist self-interest and emboldened by false, ultra-nationalist politics, these forms of xenophobia may look new, but they are not, rather seeking to do what chauvinism has always aimed to do: divide groups of people along racial lines. The politicians and right-wing political activists that promote them are recognizable by their populist platitudes. “Globalization has gone wrong,” they’ll say. “There’s no more room for immigrants here,” they’ll moan. “White people,” they will intone with great seriousness, “are under attack.” This current resurgence is, in reality, nothing more than the continuation of “whiteness”: the social, economic, political and legal power structures underpinning “white culture”, a vast system that sits at the heart of “western” culture and spreads through its entirety.

One reason for this new version of old racism is fear. In currently white-majority nations, the demographic dominance of white people is approaching its end, a possibility seen by some as a direct attack on the history and culture of some vague and mythical “White Europe”. According to a particular line of political-science research<sup>2</sup> – from which we should assume philosophical distance on account of its “not-racist”<sup>3</sup> classical liberalism – this will occur in the USA by 2050, and in the rest of Europe and Australia by the close of this century. For certain right-wing

extremists, this prospect has been transformed into a new concept: “white genocide”. (People like the man who on March 15, 2019, shot and killed 51 Muslims praying in a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand.<sup>4</sup>) For the more mainstream agenda, however, “white genocide” is translated and toned down into “taking back control”. This shifts blame for the “problem” onto Black and Brown people rather than addressing the *actual* cause of our current political and environmental meltdown – unbridled neoliberal capitalism. When I look at this likely demographic shift, however, I see not an opportunity to defend the rights of whites, but rather a chance to rid ourselves of something we do not need – the mental, emotional and social constraints of whiteness and its hidden apparatus.<sup>5</sup>

Whiteness is not just on the extremes – it is everywhere. What the white people who run dominant media organizations, occupy positions of political power, head large corporations, control the film and advertising industries, and fill the cultural superstructure of institutions programming exhibitions and projects call “diversity work” actually serves to obscure whiteness rather than attack it head on. All these well-meaning white directors, producers, creatives and curators hold up and sustain the image of a “white world”.

This white world is now also digital as whiteness underpins online spaces with what scholar Safiya Umoja Noble has called the “algorithms of oppression”, created by such gigantic corporations as Google and Facebook.<sup>6</sup> If the borders of our current western world are outlined in part by URLs, then the claim that we still live in a

deeply racist world is not a bold one. In this context, whiteness becomes a form of digital despotism.

*The Image of Whiteness* is about investigating the ways we look at the world around us through photographic images – another world complicit in promoting whiteness and one which we are predominantly being asked to see with what Stuart Hall called a “white eye”.<sup>7</sup> Developments in digital technology have seen photography become a lingua franca, and a cultural shift from social places to social networks is producing new forms of what I call “white scopophilia”, a way of seeing white. Images possess the power to subvert and obstruct for better, as well as ideologically manipulate for worse, and this book is a rebuttal to white visual culture, that space of human and algorithmic “white sight”. *The Image of Whiteness* is an object that promotes the intellectual work of Black, Brown and white anti-racists in the hope that their expertise and personal experiences – far richer than my own – might be heard with thoughtful and close attention.

### **The invention of whiteness**

To some people, racial difference – much like gender difference – is understood as a fact of human life, biological and not social. This logic goes: you are born white and that’s the end of it; you are born a man or a woman and that’s the end of it. However, as research – such as Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Theodore W. Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race*, or Nell Irvin Painter’s *The History of White People* – has shown, these identities were *developed* over time.

They are the product of cultures inventing new ways to create great inequality and oppression. They are social hierarchies formed along white supremacist or male-dominant lines, normative definitions of human identity that deny us all – Black, Brown, or white – the space necessary to eradicate seemingly inexorable, unconscious and invisible social forces such as whiteness (and machismo) from our daily thoughts, actions and institutions.

From the earliest New World colonization to the present day, white people have collectively constructed a reality that benefits their own epidermal kind. Normalized, whiteness has crept into every aspect of daily life making any attempt to construct an explicit, clear-cut definition of it a contradiction of its dissimulating nature. It is everywhere present, in the social, cultural, psychological, political, legal, linguistic, and technological, hidden in plain sight.

This partly explains why discussions of whiteness today are often met with two types of response. There is White Denial in which certain white people won't acknowledge whiteness at all, it being more conspiracy than concept to them, a mere apparition. To these people, it's OK to identify unapologetically as white – and there's nothing that can be done about it. Some are even proud of being white, attributing all the major achievements of humankind to white folk (American neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, for example, thinks white people built the pyramids<sup>8</sup>). Then there is Relative White Silence – so-called because white people can never be truly silent, finding it necessary to recapitulate

their subjectivity at every turn – a form of taciturn behaviour in which they simply won't engage either positively or negatively, preferring to be silent so as to remain “moderate”.

Neither reaction is enough, because as history shows, there is no “good” form of whiteness and no white person is absolved. We benefit from having white skin whether we are aware of this privilege or not, which means white people must work to accept that they are sutured to whiteness and that removing those stitches is a lifelong pursuit rather than a single, narcissistic point of arrival. This requires perpetual vigilance or, as George Yancy has written, a “continuous effort on the part of whites to forge new ways of seeing, knowing, and being”.<sup>9</sup>

### **White problems, white questions**

While working on this book, white people have often asked me, “You're white. Why are you doing this?” But whiteness is not about skin, and not to make this difference is to concentrate on the way we white people appear physically at the expense of how we think or behave, consciously or unconsciously. Our skin wraps around us, it is biological; whereas our whiteness lies within us, it is a way of being in the world psychologically, behaviourally. We live whiteness because we have been invited to participate unconsciously in certain social structures, and we have grown comfortable in doing so. In reducing whiteness to skin, my baffled white questioners ask me to reaffirm my own whiteness in solidarity with theirs, to make them comfortable again.

To deny them that assurance places their own fragile white identity on unfamiliar ground: if I am willing to criticize my own identity as white, it suggests they might do the same.

Over the past 400 years since its approximate foundation in the early 17th century, whiteness as an ideology has given birth to a series of white cultures, all of which have their unique geographical differences, but which are simultaneously all controlled by a strange global superstructure of whiteness. Over time whiteness has built its own white psychic life, an existence to which some white people are both consciously and unconsciously loyal.<sup>10</sup> When this form of whiteness is revealed to white people, they often enter into a kind of withdrawal, a state of umbrageous denial. Whiteness, working away inside us, likes to say, “How dare you notice me, I am not here”, while wielding a broader, surreptitious form of psycho-social control. In this sense, whiteness does not just falsely promote itself as a “natural identity”, which many subscribe to, but additionally as a stubborn and often invisible power structure accompanied by, as this book urges, an image *looked at but rarely seen*.

I am obliged to state clearly and unequivocally that as a white man, I am implicated by and in my own arguments. This is my own Gordian knot, one that sees me faced with a necessary psychological crisis related to my subjectivity. Untying this knot – rather than violently cutting it – is the work I must do, and by extension, the work I want to suggest all white people do, especially those who consider themselves “not racist”.

The closer I have come to understanding what my whiteness means in terms of my identity, the more I have realized that I must stay in this space of crisis. I have white skin, *and* there is something else going on inside me that relates to the way I have been raised as a white subject, in a white world.

Out of these problems comes a need for action and a series of further questions. Why aren't more white people willing to become vulnerable to this process of untying the knot of whiteness? Why don't more white people take action? Why do white people, despite often placing themselves at the centre of knowledge and power (what Martin Bernal called the racist and chauvinist “fabrication”<sup>11</sup> of “Western Civilization”), tend to enact a strange kind of dialogic non-participation on the subject of race? Might it be the case that race is the *only* subject white people claim to know nothing about? Is whiteness the one thing we actually did invent but do not wish to publicize?

White responses to race are often comprised of personal distance and denial, but rarely more general, or structural, understandings of whiteness as a social phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> This raises the questions: what is it to be a white subject, and to what extent do we have a full internal understanding of our own white subjectivities? It is worth recalling the double significance of the word “subject”, which as Asad Haider has written, “means having agency, being able to exert power, but also being subordinated, under the control of an external power”.<sup>13</sup> Whiteness as a form of power works both within and without us.

If we white people are intrinsically racist, does that mean that our white subjectivity was invented precisely to oppress Black and Brown people, but that we are generally unaware of it? If this is the case – and I believe unequivocally that it is – our concerns shift rather quickly from our personal interpretations of whether we are individually racist, to what commonalities white people share within “western cultures”: our ethics, politics, laws and institutions, and how they are structured around the largely hidden ideology of whiteness and its power and privilege.

So what would the world be like without whiteness? Like Copernicus who correctly theorized that the Earth was not at the centre of the universe, white people must remove whiteness from the centre of humanity. We must stand before the challenge of untying the knot of whiteness until our work is done (and when that is, is for people of colour to decide). “It would be remarkable to witness a collective public ritual of white death, of whites dying to white toxic power, white hegemony, white lies, white pretensions, white ways of being-in-the-world,” George Yancy wrote to me recently. “If whiteness is, in the end, a lie, an empty hope, an expression of anti-Blackness with all of its necropolitical implications for Black bodies, then the death of whiteness will mean more abundant life not only for Black people, but for white people as well.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, whiteness must die, in order for white people to live.<sup>15</sup>

This is not a simple opportunity to become an “enlightened white person”, simply to give up our whiteness

in a single pronouncement of colour blindness and go join a woke revolution. We are not allowed to let ourselves off the hook that easily. We must continue to identify as white – to announce ourselves to people of colour as white anti-racists, apostates to our own race – and we must do so in the form of a continual, symbolic suicide. This is the occasion for us to humble ourselves and accept that we have no legitimate basis to exist as we currently are. In order to move into a white self-critical space beyond anti-racism,<sup>16</sup> whiteness must do more than make liberal gestures in the form of pro-diversity or pro-equality work. We must transform our comfortable denial and our unwitting ignorance into something that is, in essence, new. White people, writes Rebecca Aanerud, must “interrupt” their whiteness by submitting themselves to a “pedagogy of humility”,<sup>17</sup> a move that, as Claudia Rankine suggests, will not be easy. “No change,” she told me, “can happen without sacrifice.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Seeing whiteness photographically**

In October 2018, I visited the Victoria & Albert Museum’s new Photography Centre in London. Once the institutional awe had subsided – it is a place filled with highly interesting objects, many of which should be returned to their owners – I found myself looking at a vitrine occupied by a mid-19th-century photograph showing models of the “different human races”. As I looked at the farcical image separating humans into “types”, I glanced at the image’s caption expecting to see some to-the-point curatorial interpretation.

What I found was a disappointingly moderate response to overtly racist, colonial imagery. The caption read: “Today, this form of classifying and comparing people has troubling connotations of racism.” According to the curators, it is still up for debate whether this imagery is actually racist – as if to suggest the jury is still out with respect to the “scientific” recording methods of physical anthropology and scientific racism.

These types of early images testify to how quickly photography became the social and technological record of “seeing white”.<sup>19</sup> Thanks to its supposed objectivity, photography rapidly became complicit in the imperialist project, a visual tool of racist pseudoscience, power, and colonization. From the mid-1850s, wealthy or patronized white men rapidly set out to photograph the world around them, including the “dark” things they found outside their centres of whiteness, documenting Africa, the “Orient”, the “Middle East”, and other faraway places, historically overshadowing the work of local and resident photographers and eventually, the growing number of indigenous photography archives seldom subject to detailed study in western photography textbooks.<sup>20</sup>

At that point in the mid-19th century, after hundreds of years of colonial slavery, during a period of supposed modernity and progress, colonial “scientists” and photographers helped revitalize the kind of violent race thinking that underpinned slavery and had been pioneered by earlier “physical anthropologists” such as Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. “Researchers” like French ethnologist Arthur de Gobineau, who between 1853-55,

published a four-volume essay called *L'inégalité des races humaines* (The Inequality of the Human Races), and photographers such as James Waterhouse, Felice Beato and Alfred Burton all contributed to the legacy of whiteness. One of empire’s most powerful weapons, this kind of photography (literally) framed the colonialist project, visually buttressing the wider logic of European colonial rule.<sup>21</sup>

This photographic whiteness continued into the 20th century as numerous photographers cast their white gaze onto, or conversely entirely avoided, people of colour in the name of documentary objectivity. Photographs such as Marc Garanger’s early 1960s portraits of violently unveiled Muslim women in Algeria, or the images taken in August 1944 at the liberation of Paris, when, despite the Free French Army being made up of a majority of colonial troops, photographers showed only white troops playing the role of “hero in the city”.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, whiteness exists both in photography’s practices and its technologies. It is a bias that extends to the very materials used to make the pictures. In “Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm”, Lorna Roth meticulously traces colour developments in the history of photographic film and digital image-making and concludes that “in photographic industries of visual representation, a White, gendered reference point has been central to the thinking and decision-making about film design and practice”.<sup>23</sup> This continues in contemporary documentary photography and photojournalism in awards such as World Press Photo, which in 2019 includes Brent Stirton’s “exotic” photograph

of Zimbabwean anti-poaching ranger Petronella Chigumbura, or the 2018 Taylor Wessing Prize, in which all four winners were white photographers taking pictures of Black or Brown people. They reveal an abundance of portraits that promulgate the othering of people of colour through an unacknowledged white gaze.

The technology of the camera has never been innocent or neutral – photography both constructs and images whiteness. *The Image of Whiteness* is an attempt to counter this white racist canonical history and current photography practice by considering how contemporary photographic art on the subject of whiteness – in its varying subtleties and guises – can be put to use as a form of subversion, or disruption. How can photographic images, in Yasmin Gunaratnam’s term, “detain” or reveal whiteness?<sup>24</sup> How might photography be reclaimed from its own history in order to help white people see anew?

### **Whiteness is often looked at, but seldom seen**

Whiteness’s social construction – a “visual dynamic the eye cannot see”<sup>25</sup> – is intimately linked to our “optical unconscious”, to use Walter Benjamin’s term.<sup>26</sup> Brain research has shown that the human eye only partially captures the visual world, leaving much of “reality” to be filled in by our brains. According to cognitive psychologist Donald Hoffman, reality itself is mentally constructed in what he calls a “reality engine” much like the digital icons on a computer desktop.<sup>27</sup> So just as it is unnecessary for computer users to see the code that constitutes the visual symbol of the icon, so the human

eye does not need to see all the physical properties of the world around us. Both the icon and our essential visual perception show us only what we need to know in order to survive, an idea referred to as the “truth vs. fitness theorem”.<sup>28</sup> Its logic forces us to ask interesting questions about the extent to which photography can be a form of image-making that shows us the truth. After all, if a part of what we see is unconsciously processed by our minds and so subject to the various processes of the unconscious – which, as Jacques Lacan famously wrote, is “structured like a language”, which is itself, as Noam Chomsky has shown, ideological – then what role do visual perception and the biology of the eye play in the unconscious and ideological construction of the image of whiteness?

The “mind/brain responds to biological and social vectors and is jointly constructed by both”, as Leon Eisenberg has written,<sup>29</sup> which makes human vision subject to ideology, and predicated upon socially constructed forms of fitness. Whiteness becomes one cog in a larger “reality engine”, one built to suit white worldviews committed to the supremacy of whiteness and the dehumanizing of Black and Brown people. If you are socialized white, if your “reality engine” is geared towards whiteness, your unconscious mind determines the extent to which you “see white”. In short, the white eye is structured around an anti-Black optical unconscious.<sup>30</sup>

The possibility of visual difference – who can see, who can be seen, and who is invisible – is made dependent on visual power relations. “The black man has no

ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man,” wrote Frantz Fanon in 1952.<sup>31</sup> The image of whiteness, which is the visuality of the white imaginary, undergirded by a white gaze, casts people of colour as a permanent threat; it denies them humanness, refusing their subjectivity any possibility of becoming in a hege- monically white world. Fanon’s Black man is gazed at by a white child who shouts “Look, a Negro!”; he is touched and consumed by this white gaze, which George Yancy described as “a beam of light that moves across or through a whitely saturated space and attempts to fix the Black body, attempts to confiscate the meaning of the Black body’s agency”.

The image of whiteness works at two levels: the imagining of whiteness as a structure that continually immortalizes white supremacy (consciously and uncon- sciously), and the picturing of whiteness in photogra- phy. Although whiteness is often something we cannot see, photography is a medium – a connection between images and imaginations – that helps us to picture whiteness for the set of representational fictions that it is. Photography, the medium of light, becomes one form of Yancy’s beam.<sup>32</sup>

The photographs in *The Image of Whiteness* are arranged into four key themes: fragments of the white body; the white gaze; the borders of whiteness; and symbols of whiteness. The themes are offered as a means to consider whiteness both as a form of imag- ination and a literal picture. “Fragments of the white body” tell stories of white bodily power and the extent to which white bodies consume Black and Brown bodies

in order to survive. “The white gaze” speaks to a form of desire, as at the centre of the notion of desiring whiteness has been, for the past 180 years, its sovereign photographic image. “The borders of whiteness” evokes whiteness through the frontier logic of white suprem- acy. They are the largest and most visible signs of white protectionist attitudes within imperialist nation states: places such as the UK and the USA see little contra- diction between their colonial manipulation of borders the world over and their racist and militaristic rejection of any changes to their own borders today. “Symbols of whiteness” are both subtle and crude, ranging from the “white” sculptures of classical antiquity, statuesque and normative white body types, blond hair, the swas- tika (appropriated by the Nazis from its Asian roots), a British colonial merchant barque, to bourgeois domes- tic interiors.

After reading and looking at this book, I hope its pages may initiate a life-long challenge for whites: a challenge in which we turn to look inside ourselves in order to come to terms with our own whiteness and commence the process of untying its knot. It also con- tains a call to look outside ourselves – to our places of work, our friendship groups and our communities – and set about questioning and working against struc- tures of white supremacy. Before you decline to take up this call, scream “Nonsense!” and throw this book aside, let me tell you: I am white, and I have increas- ingly come to see myself as a violent person. I’m not talking about the sort of verbal or physical racist vio- lence one might associate with fascism or Nazism.

Rather I am suggesting that to be white is to engage in a much quieter kind of violence, one that remains invisible, unseen, internalized. It exists today in part because moderate, reasonable, sensible, educated, prudent, judicious whites remain inactively complicit in Relative White Silence. If you cannot accept that your “not racist” whiteness sustains your social status, at least consider how every day, whiteness eats away at your own consciousness.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*, New York: Routledge, 2000.
- 2 Eric Kaufmann, *Whiteshift*, London: Allen Lane, 2018.
- 3 Alana Lentin, “Beyond denial: ‘not racism’ as racist violence”, *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 32(4), 2018, pp.400–414.
- 4 A. Dirk Moses, “‘White Genocide’ and the Ethics of Public Analysis”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 21(2), 2019, pp.201–213.
- 5 Not to mention the capitalism and the class divisions integral to it. For a discussion of the relationship between race, class and capitalism see “The Advent of Whiteness”, the interview with David R. Roediger in this book.
- 6 Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, New York: NYU Press, 2018.
- 7 Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media” in *The Media Reader*, eds. Manuel Alvarado and John O. Thompson, London: British Film Institute, 1990, pp.7–23.
- 8 Gary Younge, *Angry, White and American* (documentary), BBC, 2018.
- 9 George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.
- 10 *Desiring Whiteness*.
- 11 Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Western Civilization*, London: Vintage Books, 1991.
- 12 There are a number of publications relating to these ideas, including Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, and Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard For White People to Talk About Racism*, New York: Allen Lane, 2018.
- 13 Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*, London: Verso, 2018.
- 14 See “Symbolic White Death”, the interview with George Yancy in this book.
- 15 This can be understood both as the necessity for whiteness as oppression to die and in the more literal sense. As Jonathan M. Metz states in his book *Dying of Whiteness* (2019), white people in America are dying precisely because they are voting for policies that undermine their own health and “status”.
- 16 George Yancy (ed.), *White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?*, New York: Lexington Books, 2014.
- 17 Rebecca Aanerud, “Humility and Whiteness: ‘How Did I Look without Seeing, Hear without Listening?’” in *White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-racism*.
- 18 Conversation with Claudia Rankine, London, UK, June 14, 2019.
- 19 I take the phrase “seeing white” from Jean Halley, Amy Eshleman and Ramya Mahadevan Vijaya, *Seeing White: An Introduction to White Privilege and Race*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.
- 20 See Stephen F. Sprague, “Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves”, *African Arts*, 12(1), 1978, pp.52–107.
- 21 Works that trace the racist and race-making legacies of colonialist photography include Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan’s *Photography’s Orientalism*, Jane Lydon’s *Photography, Humanitarianism, Empire*, and Amos Morris-Reich’s *Race and Photography*.
- 22 Cécile Bishop, “Photography, Race and Invisibility”, *Photographies*, 11(2–3), 2018, pp.193–213.
- 23 Lorna Roth, “Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies and Cognitive Equity”, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 34(1), 2009, pp.111–136.
- 24 In a paper presented at the symposium *What Should White Culture Do? Art, Politics, Race* in November 2017 at the Royal College of Art, Gunaratnam used this term to describe the way in which whiteness might be kept withheld or in custody.
- 25 Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.
- 26 Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography” (1931), trans. Stanley Mitchell, *Screen*, 13(1), 1 March 1972.
- 27 Donald Hoffman, *The Case Against Reality: How Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes*, London: Allen Lane, 2019.
- 28 Jacob Feldman, “Bayesian inference and ‘truth’: a comment on Hoffman, Singh and Prakash”, *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*, 22(6), 2015, pp.1523–1525.
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- 30 For more on this idea from a psychoanalytic perspective, see the chapters “Racial identification and imaginary ideology” and “The body image and the raced body” in *Desiring Whiteness*.
- 31 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, New York: Grove Press, 2007.
- 32 Jean Baudrillard, “Photography or Light Writing: Literalness of the Image” in *Impossible Exchange*, trans. Chris Turner, London: Verso, 2001.