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## **Searching for Color in Black & White: Epistemic Closure, the RIT Archives, and the Colonial Roots of White Invisibility**

Andrew James

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Rochester Institute of Technology

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Searching for Color in Black & White:

Epistemic Closure, the RIT Archives, and the Colonial Roots of White Invisibility

by

Andrew James

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in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of  
Andrew James presented on August 3, 2017.

---

Andrea Hickerson, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor and Director  
School of Communication

---

Grant Cos, Ph.D.  
Professor and  
Director for Graduate Programs  
School of Communication

---

Jonathan Schroeder, Ph.D.  
William A. Kern Professor of Communications  
School of Communication  
Thesis Advisor

---

H. Rika Houston, Ph.D.  
Professor of Marketing  
California State University Los Angeles  
Thesis Advisor

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## Searching for Color in Black &amp; White:

Epistemic Closure, the RIT Archives, and the Colonial Roots of White Invisibility

Andrew James

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Master of Science in Communication & Media Technologies

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## Abstract

When examining an image, a viewer often focuses on what they see and less often on what they are able to see. Nowhere is this as true, and as problematic, as it is with the visual representation of persons of African descent. This study describes how problematic photographic representation was used as a powerful semiotic tool in the Victorian age conquest of the *other*, was exported to early Hollywood (creating a lucrative hate-based industry), and was then pushed back into the cultural recesses, settling finally into systemic forms of modern oppression, empowered by the invisibility of whiteness. Images from the RIT archives serve as the text, multiple theories serve as the framework, and Barthes' cultural semiotic contextual method of analysis serves as the tool with which to understand the images, revealing a complex portrait of power and privilege.

*Keywords:* visual communication, race, representation, Barthes, epistemic closure

### Searching for Color in Black & White:

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“Far from ignoring peoples of color, the white gaze renders them invisible”

(Rogin, 1996, p. 27).

In this study, we will view several images. We will examine what they are describing, what we are being primed to see, and what we as individuals existing within our own milieus are *able* to see. As you examine these images, try to understand the photographer’s milieu, the period and social setting the image encapsulates and is informed by, and, perhaps most importantly, consider your own milieu. What are your biases - if any? How does your environment, upbringing, and belief system influence what you see – or, more importantly, what you are able to see?

This paper argues that a history of prejudice and systemic racism have laid the foundation for the signifiers of the visual epistemic closure of black persons present within the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) photo collection. A practice still in existence but now housed in the invisibility of whiteness. This paper will define and discuss epistemic closure and then (through this lens) examine several photographs from the collection.

### Literature Review

Even in the age of digital editing, photographs possess a high level of authenticity (Wells, 2010). A viewer of a photograph can tell they are looking at a reproduction of an event that actually occurred. This ability to represent what is real lends photography a higher level of authenticity over other forms of representation such as drawing or storytelling. Photographs represent what is real in such a convincing manner that viewers sometimes have difficulty separating the reality of what is from what is represented. René Magritte’s brilliant

“Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (translated: “this is not a pipe”) is a wonderful example of an attempt to address this paradox.



*Figure 1.* Magritte’s Pipe, 1929

Though not a photograph, Magritte’s reminder that his image is a depiction of a pipe (and not an actual pipe) is a key distinction necessary when attempting to understand the visual.

Wells (2010) breaks down the more technical factors of authenticity explaining that the, “subject-matter, framing, light, characteristics of the lens, chemical properties and darkroom decisions,” are the building blocks of representation (p. 18). Framing, as Wells describes it, refers to the way photographers frame a shot, but a substitution of Entman’s definition can add value to our understanding of image making (Entman, 2007). One need only view the work of Victorian age photographers like Johannes Lindt or William Thomas to see how powerful an effect the framing of the subject matter can have on what is *believed* about the subject matter.

In this vein, Wells (2010) submits that photography does not always record reality but instead has the power to signify and construct it. Wagner (2002) adds that, “...visual data should be thought of not in terms of what the camera can record but of what the eye can see,” (p. 166). Wagner is pointing out the existence of the multiple milieus that create polysemic meaning. The

photographer exists in their own genetic and social upbringing, which can paint certain perceptions and beliefs that determine what and how images are captured on film. In addition, the photographer may have editors or institutions that have hired him or her to capture certain images. In this case, the political, social, and belief systems of the institution(s) come together with the photographer's ability to see and thus inform what is captured. Similarly, each person that views a photograph arrives with their own unique genetic and social upbringing, which informs their abilities to perceive as well as their belief systems. As a person views an image they are not only working through their own milieu, they are being exposed to the milieu of the photographer and any other institutions that commissioned the image. Thus, as Wagner states, images derive meaning from the intersection of the photographer and viewer's unique approach to "seeing" (2002). Further muddying the water, a viewer's ability to distinguish the difference between reality and representation (à la Magritte) reveals why images are given the power to shape perception.

For these reasons, discussions of representation in photography can be met with cynicism by a viewing public accepting a photograph as fact rather than as a representation of a sometimes constructed reality. Although a viewer of a photograph is led to believe they are seeing reality, they are instead viewing a reality captured by the lens and intentions of the photographer. Meaning and bias are still present in this process. The challenge of this paper (and the literature before it) is to highlight that capturing what is real is not the same as capturing reality. Unreal cannot be made real whereas reality can be staged, framed, and contrived. In an effort to demonstrate some of the ways in which the real and reality differ, we will now consider an everyday example of how photography can create, rather than depict, reality:

An American photographer travels to a Sumo tournament in Tokyo. The photographer arrives and discovers that he or she can only gain admittance to the low ranking lightweight matches. Given this limitation, his or her photographs will only capture the smaller, less skilled wrestlers. Without proper context, which (right or wrong) in documentary photography is not the responsibility of the photographer, persons that are unfamiliar with Sumo within the larger American viewing public might believe all Sumo wrestlers are small. Simple issues of framing can be as unintended (as this example), or occur subconsciously, and reveal cultural or selectivity bias within the mind of the photographer, the society the photographer comes from, or is capturing images for.

Imagine the same Sumo scenario. In this scenario, however, the photographer believes the American viewing public will be interested only in images depicting the most physically imposing and skilled wrestlers. Given this editorial bias, the opposite sort of limited representation as the first example would occur. An American viewer unfamiliar with Sumo would believe all Sumo wrestlers are massive. Like boxing, Sumo is a sport, not a body type. However, limited representation and unfamiliarity within the American viewing public of the subject matter have the ability to create a wide spread belief that Sumo is a body type *and* a sport. These processes occur because the viewer attaches value to their own ability to verify an image's reality based on their own inspection. If a writer tells a story about Sumo, you can decide whether, or not, to believe him or her. Hold a photograph in your hand, however, and you become the *decider*; you write the story and you are much more likely to believe your own story.

If the viewer from the Sumo example does not possess enough information to know Sumo wrestlers vary in size, the viewer may infer all Sumo wrestlers look like what the

photographer decides to capture. This can have broad implications for what the viewer *believes* about Sumo as well as the athletes and culture.

In the United States, the lack of social and historical credence given to black persons in education and mass media has created an environment where representations of black persons are often constructed by photographers and institutions possessing a similar lack of information about black persons as the average non-black citizen (Dixon, 2008). These representations then serve to confirm limited views of black persons and of what black culture is, furthering the likelihood of stereotype and the continuation of negative tropes in representation (Dixon, 2008).

For example, the photographer from our earlier Sumo scenario is now sent to a major U.S. city and tasked with photographing young black males. If the photographer's understanding of what it is to be a young black male is based on what appears on the evening news, the photographer may assume the best place to encounter groups of young black males is on the steps of a boarded-up crack house on a decrepit inner-city street (Dixon, 2008). The images captured by the photographer would confirm the portrayal of young black males as criminals made salient on the evening news and would be more likely to be trusted as "authentic" by the larger American viewing public exposed to this same trope (Dixon, 2008). If the photographer possessed more information, he or she may visit an environment that reflects the reality that young black males engage in all sorts of activities and interests - the same as any other demographic - rather than relying on a non-contextual representation of inner city drug culture made ubiquitous through overrepresentation in the news and pop culture.

Thurlow and Gendelman (2007) point out that, "...all texts, however innocent or harmless they may appear, are inherently ideological in that they represent systems of belief and power, actively construe identities and relationships, and help establish and maintain structures

of social inequality” (p. 2). The text in this study are a selection of photographs from the Rochester Institute of Technology’s archive. Thurlow and Gendelman’s warning is an important reminder that, though photographs are often thought of as inane documentary devices, they are also important signifiers of the value system in play by society-at-large and, under careful analysis, can elicit tremendous insight into the notions of constructed identity and social equality. These are important points to consider when examining the power images have to reflect, reinforce, or even create realities.

### **Epistemic Closure**

Epistemic closure (in visual communication) is a reductive assembling of contextual devices through which it is made clear what it is to be an “authentic member” of a marginalized group (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2008). This constructed authenticity relies on what is ascribed as “typical” by members of the dominant group rather than what is made authentic by members of the marginalized group (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2008). Defined literally, epistemic closure translates to the closing off of what can be known - a refusal to accept empirical evidence, instead relying on flawed and uninformed opinion. A person suffering from epistemic closure is said to have closed him or herself off from information contradictory to their flawed belief system.

Epistemic closure was utilized at the onset of the age of imperialism as a tool to forever make foreign those that are, by birth, quite native. Though the contextual devices present in the Victorian age will be shown to evolve, the practice of *othering* remains. In each of the images we will see in this study, an *anonymizing* of blackness will occur:

Anonymity literally means to be nameless. In this context, however, I will use anonymity to mean a point of epistemic limitation that affords certain levels of generalization. For

instance, when one encounters a student in an ordinary context, one admits a certain level of epistemic limitation. The definite article ‘a’ affords the student to be part of the type, ‘students’. But the type ‘students’ is insufficient for a complete judgment of the student beyond the reality of his or her social role as a student. To know more about the student, information that would transform the student from a type into a unique individual requires interrogation, which, again, concedes epistemic limitation. Indigenous people’s invisibility emerges from the force of being a people whose borders are temporal; since the presumption is that indigenous peoples should not have been here to begin with, their emergence is one of questioned or problematized existence—in other words: ‘You should not still be here.’ (Gordon, 2000, p. 381)

It is important to understand that the dominant group often knows little to nothing about the marginalized group, often by choice (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2008). To simplify, let’s return to our Sumo scenario: the photographer and their institutions have decided that the American viewing public would more readily accept images of massive Sumo wrestlers rather than the diversity of weight classes that exist. Because of this editorial choice, many Americans viewing the images that are unfamiliar with Sumo will assume all wrestlers are massive. This editorial decision makes it so that any image that reinforces this is accepted whereas images that do not reinforce the constructed reality are challenged or rejected outright as inauthentic.

In the United States, the dominant group refers to white males and the marginalized group referred to in this paper are black persons of any gender (Dixon, 2008). Attributional elements of blackness have been imaginatively collected and curated by white persons without the benefit of understanding black history, white history, and, critically, the intersection of the two. Representations born this way are dangerous beyond the polite concern of offending black

persons (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2008). Harmful representation, when made ubiquitous, has the ability to classically condition societies and persons to mistreat and diminish the value of members of those harmfully depicted. Epistemic closure has the power, not just to offend, but also to limit opportunity (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2008; Gordon, 2000). By means of literature review, it is argued here that representations of black persons relying on tropes demonstrating epistemic closure have been made culturally ubiquitous by the passing down of nuanced meaning through the generations. These tropes have become a photographic lexicon for travelers of the imaginative wilds of the “other” and of indigenous lands. This is not to say explicit bias, racism, or prejudice are present within the RIT collection (or need proving) rather, a pernicious and implicit construction of what it is to be black formed hundreds of years ago by European colonizers is still visibly woven into the fabric of American culture and thus incidentally present within these photographs.

Epistemic closure can be seen as a static concept, existing as a corollary to representation of non-male, non-white persons. In this paper, however, I present it as a dynamic form of implicit dominance, evading recognition by settling into the unexplored recesses of cultural consciousness. Throughout American history, some of the more overt forms of epistemic closure (e.g., blackface, caricatures, etc.) have been addressed and made socially undesirable. Rather than eliminating epistemic closure outright, though, these subtle cultural shifts have allowed less overt forms of epistemic closure to retreat into unexamined areas of the cultural consciousness. These less overt forms of epistemic closure become most harmful when aligned with subtle references to the supposedly extinct stereotypes formed during the Victorian age, such as the presumed subordinate role of black persons within the United States. This is not to say, though, that persons engaging in epistemic closure are bad people. Epistemic closure is

instead the result of a generational transmission of misinformation enhanced and reinforced by systems of power with visual media as a primary educator and enforcer. Whereas in the past, epistemic closure manifested itself in lynching and blackface, it has now retreated back into the notion of the invisibility of whiteness. This invisibility has caused some to presume destructive representation to have been stamped out of existence, but this is a misnomer. Modern representations of whiteness demonstrate the kind of *othering* so famously demonstrable in earlier periods. In this case, however, the “other” is marked through whiteness being made invisible. To quickly understand what is meant by the invisibility of whiteness, imagine a panel discussion on race in America. How much time do you think would be devoted to discuss the impact of white culture on American life? Such a question has never been asked and, were it asked, most in the room might scratch their heads at such a preposterous assembling of words. This paradox allows whiteness to continue to evade examination, remain normative, and reinforces its ability to exist invisibly. This invisibility foments an environment where all other groups are marked as foreign. This environment creates a scenario where, to be a non-white person living within the United States, you not only need to be an expert on your own culture but, crucially, also of the dominant:

Social identities are relational, contextual, and fundamental. White persons come to know about themselves through the media and social milieu and come to know about persons of color through the media. White experience with blackness, however, is often the product of a media-borne social learning that foments a pre-cognitive response in the white *experiencer*. Marginalized persons are not only experts of their own experience, ontology, and axiomatic paradigms, but also expert on the same of the dominant group. The

dominant group, however, is expert only of its own ontological and axiomatic paradigm and sees all others as foreign and of lesser value. (Alcoff, 2006, p. 90)

### **RIT (the archive)**

RIT houses a substantial collection of black and white photographs documenting the campus as a living and learning space. All told, some 200,000 photographs are contained within the collection. Dates for the images are exact for some, guesstimates in some cases, and unknown for a few. Encompassing over one hundred years of photographic history, the oldest image is believed to have been captured in 1891, the most recent: 2005.

Documentary photography, like what is contained within the RIT collection, places the dominance on denotative elements (Lester, 1995; Neiva, 2007). The photographs contained within this paper were consciously captured to demonstrate some aspect, or aspects, of life at RIT. From this we assume attention has been paid to not only the persons or buildings in the photograph, but also to the items within the image. We will examine these denotative elements but also consider how their use contributes to connotative elements such as tone and meaning. Similar to advertising images, these posed, semi-posed, and snapshot photographs seek to communicate a sometimes specific, sometimes polysemic message to impart elements of RIT as an academic and material culture. As we examine these images, we consider their meaning.

### **Rationale**

This study offers the opportunity to examine epistemic closure as an evolving database of signification made salient through depiction and repetition. Also of note is the attempt to describe Victorian age photographic representation as a contributing factor to the invisibility of whiteness in contemporary American life.

The use of this study is enlightenment and engagement. The goal is to contribute additional insight to the evolving understanding of the construction of representation within the United States. The photographs selected in this examination serve primarily as instruments with which to illuminate what is discovered when the visual analysis of images containing Black faces existing within (traditionally) white spaces is undertaken.

### **Method**

This study breaks down the representation of black persons in photography across three swaths of time. The first period examines the parallel birth of photography and modern European imperialism/colonialism as the structural foundation for the harmful prejudices visible in the latter two periods. There will be an analysis of one image in this section. The selected image highlights some of the tropes created during this period and echoed in various forms in the latter two periods. The second period examines the ways in which the imperialist eye was perhaps exported to the Americas and affixed itself to early American representations of blackness. As mass media began to take shape in the United States, representations of blackness from this period are perhaps an indicator of latent ties to imperial European values. An image of RIT students in blackface will be analyzed in this section. This section will also introduce Smith's (2004) three devices of American mythology in order to demonstrate how actual black Americans were consigned to subordinate roles. Through this lens, images of RIT students in classroom settings will be analyzed. The third, and final, period is an examination of how the first two periods fomented the power, and the power of invisibility, that white privilege holds within the United States. This period details how ignoring the influence the two preceding periods has had on modern representation has created an unexamined space and an implied

permanent white supremacy. Two images will be analyzed with the notion of the invisibility of whiteness as the frame for study.

Undergirding each of the three sections is an ongoing discussion regarding whether epistemic closure is present within the selected images. While this can be accomplished several ways, this study primarily examines images in which black faces appear, as this is the most direct means of examining how blackness is captured and semiotically represented. When studying blackness, the researcher must step outside of the normative culture and assumptions and, instead, regard the socio-historical context of Blackness:

Blackness, particularly in racist contexts, carries basic ontological and epistemological assumptions, for example, who certain people are and what is known about them – and thus entails racist forms of ontological and epistemological closures. As philosopher Lewis Gordon puts it, ‘blackness and whiteness take on certain meanings that apply to certain groups of people in such a way that makes it difficult not to think of those people without certain affectivity charged associations. Their blackness and their whiteness become regarded, by people who take their associations too seriously, as their essential features – as, in fact, material features of their being. (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2016, p. 1)

Given the tremendous number of photographs within the collection, two series of photographs were pulled at random from the collection. Several hundred images were present within each of these two randomly selected series. A stratified method was then used to gather all of the images in which black faces appeared. Of the several hundred images, thirty-four contained black faces (or white persons in blackface). Of these, eight were selected. The selected images were deemed to most accurately represent what was common amongst the thirty-

four: casual campus settings, differences in social proxemics between white and black persons, and the signifiers of elements of what will be discussed within this paper.

The selected images have been analyzed using Barthes' cultural semiotic contextual method of analysis (which is to say an analysis of an image to identify the denotative and connotative messages therein). Each image was first analyzed for its denotative message(s) - the literal reality present within the photograph and then analyzed for its connotative message; the semiotic use of social and cultural references. These analyses are embedded within a historical and cultural contextual discussion of the issues relevant to the connotative messages of the images. Barthes' method allows for both rigor and expression. The analysis of each image will be grounded in the relevant historical and social context, supported by relevant theory, and then followed by an interpretive description of the semiotic meaning of the image.

“The photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the *possibility* of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome” (Duganne, 2010, p. 5).

### **Hypothesis and Research Question**

The hypothesis is that, under analysis, the photographs will reveal evidence of epistemic closure in both the composition of the shot as well as the physical arrangement and/or affect of the person(s) within the images. Thus, the research question is this: Is epistemic closure present within the images from the RIT archive given an application of Barthes' method of cultural semiotic contextual analysis?

### **Discussion**

#### **The First Period: Europe Conquers the Frame (1830s-1900)**

Photography's relationship with power and oppression began in the Victorian age and, as Quartermaine argues, was not an incidental accompaniment to colonialism but instead, "a shaping dimension of it" (Gidley, 1992, p. 85). Photographers in the Victorian age were codifying the "imaginative geographies of Empire" and further reinforcing their tainted ontology (Wells, 2010, p. 82).

These people were photographed as 'other': the white settler population was interested in learning about them, a quasi-scientific attitude, which presupposed a controlling, position...although reflecting their own aesthetic (natives clothed and posed with decorative artefacts [sic]), they also supposedly granted direct access to the culture depicted; their use as raw evidence by anthropologists and ethnographers certainly assumed this. (Gidley, 1992, p. 85)

At the birth of the age, early expeditionary photographers like Roger Fenton began to document a markedly different reality from the romanticized version crafted for centuries by painters and poets (Thomas, 1978). Fenton, in particular, sent back images of the British war-making machine in the Crimean in its chaotic and encumbered mess for all to see (Thomas, 1978). As appalling as it was enthralling to the Victorian viewer, the material cost of the preparations for battle at Balaclava Harbor were a wild departure from previous accounts (Thomas, 1978). Where newspapers ran heavily filtered accounts, musicians composed heroic dirges, and the public was made to cherish the heroism and valor of war, the work of Fenton and his contemporaries was a direct challenge to the constructed romance of war (Thomas, 1978). Photography was instead presenting an unfiltered look at *exactly* what was happening on the battlefield. In so doing, viewers were made to see that war was some parts triumph, some parts tragedy and that there was a human and material cost to military conflict. Soon, images from the

front lines began to weave their own heroic tales for viewers to construct and interpret (Thomas, 1978). This new technology fomented an insatiable public appetite for photographs from the frontiers of earth and imagination. Craving the distance but not the danger, the viewing public soon began to ravenously devour images depicting tranquil scenes (often staged) from places even more remote than the Crimean (Thomas, 1978). Exotic landscapes and portraiture of the indigenous peoples of many lands dressed in ceremonial garb, absent the context of the ceremony, became the norm and began to frame perspectives that would become troublesome for these unwitting subjects of the white European gaze (Thomas, 1978).

Photography was freeing the 19<sup>th</sup> century European from the crowded lanes, smoke filled skies, and brick laden skylines of their homeland and allowing them to imaginatively wander the globe as a conqueror of Columbian magnitude (Thomas, 1978). As industrialization took hold time became more regimented, and with claustrophobically crowded worker towns beginning to take shape around major industrial centers, photography offered the viewing public the opportunity to hang on to a version of the world where there were no factories, no bosses - no permanent aristocracy to acquiesce to. These exotic landscapes offered the Victorian mind the opportunity to run free and imagine themselves master of all the photograph captured. In a way, the runaway popularity of expeditionary photography helped further the growth of the industrial age (Thomas, 1978). Workers were able to escape the horrors of early factory life and tenement living by holding a small photograph in their hand and “touring” the imaginative landscapes of Africa or (what was then popularly known as) the Orient (Thomas, 1978). Industrial barons were more easily able to maintain deplorable conditions by allowing workers to hold on to some vestige of power over something in the form of tiny pictures of impossible lands. Those moneyed enough to actually travel to these far off lands demonstrated more socially estimable

qualities than that of the lesser classes for whom those lands were only fantasies, further entrenching the power of the aristocracy (Alley-Young, 2008).

Photography thus became a means of not only acquainting Victorians with the exotic, but also allowed them to “symbolically travel through, explore and even possess those spaces” (Ryan, 1997, p. 214). Moneyed Victorians photographed in these exotic locales were encoded as “mobile” whereas natives were encoded as “fixed” to a physical place (Alley-Young, 2008). Representations of natives as fixed marked them permanently as physical bodies trapped in a physical space – the wild. Alley-Young (2008) proposes that Descartes’ mind-body dichotomy can be adapted to examine this notion, seeing whiteness represented as mind and logic while natives represent “physical and illogical bodies requiring domination and control” (p. 309). Colonization, through photography, thus became a justifiable endeavor to bestow logic and order unto otherwise mindless and backward peoples (Alley-Young, 2008). This endeavor is described by Bonsu (2009) as the “expression of the West’s will and right...which achievement required dehumanization of the ‘other’” (p. 4). The colonial dehumanization initiative found, in photography, a semiotic tool whereby, “formal imperial power structures institutionalized the attitudes and assumptions necessarily entailed in viewing another individual as a subject for photography” (Gidley, 1992, p, 85). Once this connection was made salient, the colonial age was able to flourish without remorse:

Yet, to examine the conceptions of race in photographs of colonized peoples is to recognize that the images played a certain role in the development of racial theories and prejudices by Americans and Europeans. Hence the photographs could be used in the dehumanizing practices of isolating allegedly degenerate groups, while they could also serve to identify others for their suitability for service. (Ryan, 1997, p. 2)

Photography thus played an integral role in the European push toward physical and psychological expansion (Colley, 2002; Hight & Sampson, 2002; Ryan, 1998). Blessed with technologies like the steamship that allowed great distances to be covered safely, and at a speed never before possible, Europeans set out to colonize the world (Headrick, 2010). Some of the colonizers sought to spread Christianity and western ethics, law, and culture. Others ventured out in search of valuable commodities and markets for these goods as well as opportunities for further investment. While yet others viewed imperial expansion as an opportunity to achieve personal glory, rise within the European aristocracy, and obtain strategic advantage over others (Headrick, 2010). These endeavors, whatever their motivation, proved incredibly successful (Headrick, 2010). In 1800, Europeans controlled 35% of the land on earth; by 1914, they gained control of an astounding 84.4% (Headrick, 2010). As this rapid territorial expansion took shape, Europeans felt the need to understand the new peoples and places they held dominion over.

Once available in the mid-nineteenth century, photography was used extensively to create ‘type’ or specimen photographs in the newly developing science of biological or physical anthropology. In these photographs, a non-European person under colonial scrutiny was posed partially or even totally unclothed against a plain or calibrated backdrop to create a profile, frontal, or posterior view. From these photographs physical traits were gleaned and ordered so that different ethnic groups could be classified according to common characteristics. Based on the published studies in physical anthropology, in which races were defined and placed in a social hierarchy, racist or racialized theories developed. (Hight & Sampson, 2002, p. 3)

Nearly from the outset, Europeans used photography and artistic representation to depict an inferiority of all non-European peoples. The peoples and places Europeans encountered were

simultaneously revered as fascinating and dismissed as inferior. Photography offered data that, under misguided use and construction, provided racist anthropologists with what they would report as the empirical evidence of white supremacy (Hight & Sampson, 2002). The construction of this form of social evolution borrowed heavily from Darwinian concepts becoming popular at the time (Hight & Sampson, 2002). Unindustrialized cultures were viewed as less evolved and in desperate need of the assistance of the evolved European to assist (or even force) their shift into more familiar forms of economic, political, social, and religious institutions (Hight & Sampson, 2002). Where the European found spaces of curiosity in custom, he extrapolated these so as to create an image of natives as uniformly savage and *unevolved* (Hight & Sampson, 2002). Often this required careful posing of studio shots and the removal (or addition) of certain types of clothing and accessories to denote savagery and titillate interest in the European image purchasing public (Headrick, 2010; Hight & Sampson, 2002; Ryan, 1998).

In describing the phenomena of colonial image making, Mitchell contends that the problem was in the purpose, which, “was not just to make a picture of the East but to set up the East as a picture” (Hight & Sampson, 2002, p. 5). Mitchell fixes our understanding of colonialism on places as pictures and not pictures as depicting place. Echoes of this can be seen in the work of Thackeray, Kipling, Conrad, and others (Hight & Sampson, 2002).

...a man sets out on an eventful trading voyage, and is ultimately shipwrecked. He finds himself the lone survivor on a desert island, but despair soon gives way to resolution, Protestant faith, and busy ingenuity. By becoming ‘an architect, a carpenter, a knife grinder, an astronomer, a baker, a shipwright, a potter, a saddler, a farmer, a tailor’, and even ‘an umbrella-maker, and a clergyman’ he subdues his unpromising environment and renders it fruitful. He encounters a black, and promptly names him and makes him a

servant. He uses force and guile to defeat incomers who are hostile, while firmly organising those who defer to his authority: ‘How like a king I look’d...the whole country was my own mere property...[and] my people were perfectly subjected.’ This is Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). This is also how the British empire is commonly envisioned. (Colley, 2002, p. 1)

Colonial rhetoric couched in this manner soon came to influence nearly all aspects of Victorian culture and see to it that these same representations of distant peoples and places made their way into popular film (Hight & Sampson, 2002). These representations essentialized groups of people to empirically demonstrate either their degenerative nature or their suitedness for service: “as a form of representation, photographs can be seen as substantiating imperialist rhetoric that essentialized both peoples and places; while they perpetuated the myths of other races and their native environments” (Hight & Sampson, 2002). In this we see the roots of what would become the epistemic closure of what it was to be African – an essentialized identity falsely forged; then imperceptibly transmitted across oceans, eventually becoming the burden of Americans of African descent.

Photography, particularly during the Victorian age, had the power to present a view as fact (Hight & Sampson, 2002). These collected views of a place or of a people distorted what was true, supplanting fact with a flawed interpretation presented by a white supremacist individual or institution capturing the image (Hight & Sampson, 2002). Tagg explains that photography “has no identity itself, but yields to the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantees the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence or register truth” (Hight & Sampson, 2002, p. 8). Never before had individuals been able to capture an image of a scene as it looked to the human eye. The advent of photography was a

technological evolution from artistic interpretation that ushered in the seeming factual nature of the captured image. To make sense of an image, however, the cultural context the image maker and image viewer exist in must be seen as fundamental components of meaning making. Barthes tells us that a photograph is a “message without a code; its message is connotative, rather than denotative, and is determined by the text that surrounds it” (Hight & Sampson, 2002, p. 10). Stated another way, like the falling tree in the woods, the photograph itself has no meaning unless it is viewed. As a viewer happens upon an image, he or she confronts the “hidden corpus of knowledge that is called on through the signifiers of the image” (Hight & Sampson, 2002, p. 10). Consider then the implications of the repetitive removal of the indigenous person from their own culture, history, and geography:

In all such projects, the photographs function as semiotic indices abetting the affairs of the privileged state over its possessions. Colonial photographs nonetheless often engender ambiguous and fluctuating relationships between the photographer/observer and the subject peoples and terrains. In doing so, they serve the former to gain psychological and administrative order over the unfamiliar and sometimes threatening geopolitical disarray of the colonized. One cannot pretend to impartiality in attempting to discern with a post-colonial eye these interrelated structures of imagining and imaging the peoples and places under colonial control. (Hight & Sampson, 2002, p. 15)

I now introduce the first RIT image within this study. We have discussed how images were crafted in an attempt to classify and typify black persons as a subspecies of white humanity. The image below perhaps offers an opportunity to see just such a staging.



*Figure 2.* RIT art class model, year unknown

**Denotative.** A black person of indistinguishable gender, head on a platter, wrapped in patterned cloth. Feathers and perhaps a boa surround the head and lay on the table beneath the tray. The background is bare with perhaps a curtain or Greek column serving as the only visible element against an otherwise plain wall.

**Connotative.** The scene is shocking. Are we looking at a disembodied head? Surely, a disembodied head would not appear within the RIT collection so it seems relatively safe to assume we are looking at a black art-class model that has been instructed to rest his or her head on a tray. What was the purpose for this pose? Was it to present art students with the opportunity to depict a disembodied black person in feathers and patterned cloths? This scene seems eerily reminiscent of the staging and dehumanizing white gaze developed during the

colonial period. The head is displayed in much the same way one would display a holiday turkey. The eyes are closed, lips gently pursed, and neck relaxed so that the head can fall naturally forward of its own weight; this is meant to portray a dead person. The face is not contorted to denote a struggle, the scene not decorated to denote conflict, this was a peaceful passing. This person accepted their fate, accepted their death. Made to twist and stretch while simultaneously relax, this black model is performing the most demeaning function of the colonized: bowing and acquiescing to one's genetic fate. This image is disturbing. This image demonstrates white fascination with black faces while simultaneously presenting a safe (read: dead) black face and ethereal backdrop to focus their fascination on. All the while, the setting lacks any religious ornament that one would assume would accompany a staged passing of a white subject. Absent this, it becomes the scene of a cultural crime and anthropological experiment. The scene is carefully manufactured to remain sterile and safe. The black face provides the shock but the serenity behind and around softens the fearful encounter. All of this harkens back to colonial imagery:

It was neither aesthetically appealing nor economically or politically prudent for a place to look too strange...selected native locales could be made to conform to European standards of taste, with appropriate accommodations, by creating and depicting such comforting markers as grand civic architecture...symbolically catered to the desire for exotic encounter on one hand, and for distancing the viewer from the threat of indigenous violence on the other by creating a safe space for the British colonialist. (Hight & Sampson, 2002, pp. 12-13)

Any person present at the time this image was captured is being exposed to the idea of the privileged state (whiteness) over its possessions (blackness). It is entirely likely that the

white students in this class were kind to the model but it is also likely that, because of experiences like what is depicted here, they have come to see blackness as having a natural subordinate role to favored whiteness within the United States. This scene is not set with a human as the subject of the image. This scene instead demonstrates an opportunity to celebrate the colonizing might of whiteness. A sullen (or in this case deceased) black face strewn about the emblems of western culture is a powerful symbol to white audiences as to their collective might and right to dominate. In contrast, it is a powerful propagandizing agent to non-white audiences as it implicitly reinforces their diminished place amongst the colonial power structure. The place, status, and identity of this model cannot be known – even by those in the room as the requirements for the pose have rendered the model voiceless. Even within the space where the image was captured, the model represents an epistemic limitation. Epistemic closure is present for the viewers of this image in that the model has no identity; the model's skin is the identity. The broadness of the model's hair is the identity. This model is a stand-in for Blackness and the *dead-ness* of Blackness as a means of comfort to a curious whiteness – in much the same way a scientist would first incapacitate a rhino before studying it.

### **The Second Period: Black on White Faces in White Places (1900-1940s)**

The spirit of colonial representation of “other” was not lost in the Atlantic slave trade: Blackface is a product of European imperialism, the material and psychological investment in the peoples being incorporated into the capitalist world system of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Curiosity about these new peoples, the trying on of their identities as Europeans imagined them, was part of the exploitive interaction between Europeans, Africans, and inhabitants of the New World. African slavery is the material base of blackface. (Rogin, 1998, p. 27)

Blackface offers white Europeans and white European-Americans the opportunity to experience blackness without coming into contact with actual blackness, an extension of the previously discussed notion of simultaneously revering black places and faces as fascinating while still dismissing them as inferior. Further, this mirrors the earlier endeavor of colonial photography by allowing white persons to “travel through, explore, and even possess” blackness (Ryan, 1997, p. 214). Counter intuitively, instead of being an expression of blackness, blackface illuminates what it means to be white (Rogin, 1996). Blackface as an institution has “historically represented domination over the caricatured person or group” (Nicola, 2010, p. 297). White persons engaging in blackface demonstrate that, to them, white culture and practices are culture, whereas black culture is merely a grab bag of stereotypes to reach into and try on at will (Nicola, 2010). Blackface became a way for white persons to codify race so that all characteristics with a positive valence were white and all characteristics with a negative valence were black (Nicola, 2010). Blackface is most commonly associated with minstrel shows but still controversially practiced by ill-informed Halloween partiers and the occasional celebrity (Nicola, 2010; Rogin, 1996).

Minstrel shows were the first and most popular form of mass culture in nineteenth century United States (Rogin, 1996). This tremendous reach played a large part in the formation of identities about blackness but also whiteness (Nicola, 2010; Rogin, 1996; Smith, 1997). There were five basic representations present within minstrel shows: Tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the brutal black buck (Nicola, 2010; Rogin, 1996; Smith, 1997). Each of the five figures represented a particular element of essentialized blackness (epistemic closure) white persons wanted to try on. With Tom, a docile and loyal black character was created (Smith, 1997). No matter how many times he was whipped, chased, or harassed he never turned

against his white master, making this the most endearing of the male characters to white audiences (Smith, 1997). The coon served as comic relief, in the manner of a keystone cop (Smith, 1997). The coon was the object of white amusement - never running out of ways to play the buffoon (Smith, 1997). The tragic mulatto served as a moralizing agent against the dividing of racial inheritance (Smith, 1997). The mammy character was originally established to represent a heavy, moody, and physically imposing black female (Smith, 1997). As time progressed, the sharper edges of the mammy character were refined to become less threatening and more agreeable within polite white society (Smith, 1997). The last of the five caricatures, the brutal black buck served as the embodiment of white fear: a violent and sexually starved black male (Smith, 1997). Some of these characters are still visible in everyday life. The Tom character is reflected in the marketing of Uncle Ben's rice, while Mammy is still employed as Aunt Jemima and, more recently, the actresses in the film *The Help* (Smith, 1997).

Images of blackness that ran contrary to these five characters were either invisible or made invisible (Leab, 1975). Jack Johnson was a powerful black boxer at a time when the combination of those things scared the average American (Leab, 1975). He soundly beat the original "great white hope" Jim Jeffries to a pulp and became the world heavyweight champion in 1910 (Leab, 1975). Film reels and images were sent around the country and were begun to be shown to audiences of all composition (Leab, 1975). Fearing the impact of seeing "white hope" struck down by capable black hands, Congress banned footage of the fight within the United States (Leab, 1975). Then, as now, "The presence of an African American entertainer or athlete was only acceptable in mainstream discourses so long as this presence did not violate the expectations of black celebrities to operate as spectacle and the subject of the dominant gaze" (Jackson, 2010, p. 277).

The American public craved blackness as they sought to consume it, not as it was, a pattern that continues today: “Black characters are usually shown in the context of their relationships with whiteness rather than with each other” (Larson, 2006, p. 25). Verification of this consumptive need can be found in the ticket sales for the film *Birth of a Nation* (essentially a Ku Klux Klan manifesto; Smith, 1997). The film was such an overwhelming windfall for its investors that Hollywood began to mass-produce anti-black themed films (Smith, 1997). As the genre developed, it paired racist relics of slavery and colonialism, “chicken stealing, crap shooting, watermelon eating, laziness, and subservience to whiteness...,” in addition to the aforementioned five black caricatures (Sampson, 1995, p. 24). If these were the ways in which black persons were represented, then this next quote is startling: “Whites in many small communities throughout the United States who had never seen black people on or off the stage gained their first impression of them from viewing flickering images projected on the silent screen” (Sampson, 1995, p. 26).

Media, particularly films, act as a socializing agent: “everyone who has seen more than half a dozen films with his eyes open knows that if the cinema does not create the significant social movements of our time, it intimately reflects them” (Leab, 1975, p. 2). What influence did the repetitive representation of black persons as discussed above have on white persons? An interesting story is recounted in Gordon’s (1982) history of the Rochester Institute of Technology: “Another matter that stirred up some half-serious excitement was the cake walk, a southern dance in which those who performed the most intricate steps were awarded a cake as a prize” (p. 80). What Gordon omits is that, by this point in the early teens of the twentieth century, the cakewalk had become a dance exclusively performed by whites in blackface as part of a minstrel show. This was white America’s way, as is the case with minstrel shows in

general, of appropriating constructed black culture and identity so as to mock and demean while in some ways displaying a guilty reverence to these same targets of derision (Nicola, 2010; Smith, 2004). The students at RIT performing in this competition were doing so at the peak of Hollywood's destructive and racist depictions of black persons. To examine these issues in the abstract is one thing but here we have material proof that actual racist events were occurring on the campus of RIT. Where else could these students have learned to perform in this manner were it not for the harmful depictions on the screen and stage? I would now like to introduce an image from the archive depicting RIT student actors in blackface.



*Figure 3.* RIT students in black face, 1914

**Denotative.** Twenty-seven students appear, two are in black face, and one appears in a costume with horns on the head. The picture is of the cast of a school production not named in the archive. The year is 1914. The cast is dressed in different types of clothing, which may indicate characters occupying different social standing and certainly different racial groups.

**Connotative.** Of particular interest in this image are the two individuals in blackface. Having already discussed how Victorian society had marked Africans as savage primitives (a trait made synonymous with complexion and, thus, transferred onto black Americans as well) this scene evokes the all too common endeavor of white artists and audiences to explore race in the most damaging and demeaning ways possible. While in blackface, white actors were able to “cut loose” and engage in behaviors reviled by polite white society. Blackface also allowed white actors to embody the very worst of human behavior and transmit it safely to white audiences through inferior black skin, further entrenching the notion of white supremacy. The Victorian photographers, historians, anthropologists, and biologists had labored to encode black skin as the repository for all that was evil in the world. Thus, but much less explicitly, simultaneously encoding white skin as the repository for all that was right, pure, and civil in the world. In much the same way Disney uses mustaches and non-Midwest American accents as shorthand for bad intentions and danger, minstrel shows and characters like those in this image were used to convey bad intention and danger. A common theme in shows like this was to embody these themes in hedonistic dance, lascivious behavior, and temptation carried out by those in blackface. The white lead actors (most often young women) were tempted by these nefarious savages to engage in uncouth behavior but were often saved at the last moment by the heroic, stoic white male. The character of the devil was perhaps shown as pulling the strings behind the actions of the characters in blackface – creating the notion that black persons were the

devil's instruments placed on earth to tempt proper white Christian souls. Repeating these themes over time further entrenched the trope of the black person as the devil's instrument. Of additional note in the image are the clothes of the two students in blackface. Heightening the ridiculousness of the scene, the actors in blackface wear the clothes of servants and those without the means to afford the more fine garments worn by the white male actors pictured above. The connotation therein is that evil (embodied by blackness) will be recognizable by its attempt at dressing in the garments of the righteous but, key to this, is the obviousness of the shabbiness or clownish nature of the outdated garments worn by the evil characters. The wardrobe conveys the important idea of social class and moral class as being interchangeably discussed and viewed; that purity is as much demonstrated by the state of one's clothes as it is in their race and social class. In plays and movies where characters in blackface were used, there was no greater personification of purity than the white maiden. We see in this image several young women. Perhaps in this show, as was common, they performed various acts demonstrating their purity only to be juxtaposed with the impure acts and intentions of the actors in blackface.

It is important to draw a distinction. A great number of artistic works have been created to deal with the theme of temptation. It is a common theme and relevant to each of our lives. The problem with the use of blackface as a means to discuss temptation is that it harnesses very real things (evil, debauchery, prurient interests, etc.) and projects them onto black skin – marking black and evil as interchangeable while simultaneously affirming white supremacy. These stories attempt to describe the nature of sin but, by embodying it with black skin, forever mark blackness as the sin of nature, politicizing in the most destructive of ways what would otherwise be a universal human story. The repetitive nature of this method of embodiment has marked

black skin as equal in nature to our basest desires and darkest urges. Audiences of all composition (even black) are made to implicitly understand this as true:

As the indigenous American represents the reality of conquest and unjust acquisition of land, the black in the US context represents the nadir world of racial dilution. One is white to the extent that one is not black, which enables whiteness to re-emerge from many other mixtures, but rarely ever with blackness. Blackness is the primary racial marker; it has categorical implications. (Gordon, 2000, p. 382)

Looking again at the image but now delving into the narrative that can be written from the semiotic cues encoded within: These actors stare out at us with a look of disaffection perhaps common for cast photographs of the era but, nonetheless, much different than any cast photo you would see today. Theirs is a collective scene of formality and rigidity. These are not the roles they wear in their own lives; this is a contrivance of personage. We might expect to see the devil posing with a sinister look, the characters in blackface caught in a dancing pose, or the lady coquettes winking to the camera and thus to us, their audience. Instead, we see stern faces and a general look of discomfort. Were the costumes uncomfortable? Were the roles too heavy to bear? Was it warm in front of the lights? Had they been rehearsing long and were now tired? It can never be known. Whatever the reason, the scene feels heavy. Despite being a play, it feels that no one has adopted any mannerism one might expect the clothes and role to manifest. They are each simply people in clothes sitting on a stage. When we consider the meaning of blackface, it almost seems that this is an assembling of persons wearing whiteface – acting out a role – sitting still and allowing their image to be captured, though it seems they would rather be anywhere else but here.

In blackface, we see how white society appropriates black culture and black faces to edify their own ideas about what authentic blackness is: something that can be washed off when the role play is complete and one wishes to return to “normal” (Nicola, 2010). As was the case during the Victorian age, black persons had little control over the mass manufacture of their image (Smith, 2004). Fuss explains: “Forced to occupy, in a white racial phantasm, the static ontological space of the timeless ‘primitive,’ the black man is disenfranchised of his very subjectivity” (Smith, 2004, p. 34). Bemused by the rampant misrepresentation of blackness, W. E. B. Du Bois set about to offer a more complete portrait (Smith, 2004). The Paris Exposition of 1900 offered the perfect, safe, environment for Du Bois to curate a collection of 363 portraits of black families of nearly every complexion and class (Smith, 2004). Du Bois had hoped to show that not only can black persons in the United States be wealthy, as many of the subjects were, they can also fit anywhere on a continuum from the darkest skin to that which would be confused for white (Smith, 2004). One such portrait (plate 5 in the collection) showed a blue eyed and blonde haired girl whom, according to U.S. law and custom, was black by virtue of hypodescent (Smith, 2004). Du Bois was fighting back against the damming five characters exclusively comprising blackness in America to bring forward “the human face of blackness,” but simultaneously offering a glimpse into the more complex, heterogeneous nature of all peoples (Smith, 2004, p. 41). The exhibition was wildly popular and thrust Du Bois, and his work, into the spotlight (Smith, 2004).

Visual scholars can gain insight from Du Bois’ exhibition by recognizing that it highlights how race and identity are “effects and cornerstones of visual processes, as both products and producers of visual culture” (Smith, 2004, p. 25). Du Bois saw this process as having created a “double-consciousness” within the black mind: in order to see themselves they

must always do so through the eyes of others (Smith, 2004). My Father, a black man born in 1927, recalls what it was like, “I remember seeing white people in blackface. You couldn’t do anything about it. You couldn’t stop it. You couldn’t even talk about it. It was terrible” (D. L. James, personal communication, November 27, 2011). Du Bois’ work used visual images to illuminate racial constructs to demonstrate that the color line codified by jim crow *was* visual culture (Smith, 2004). Du Bois discovered that the Jamesian notion of the social self did not apply to persons of color (Smith, 2004). Du Bois attributed this to the violently negative images of blackness, “aimed to obliterate the black self, as well as any claims to interracial social bonds” (Smith, 2004, p. 33). Du Bois once asked rhetorically, “Suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written” (Smith, 2004, p. 41).

It seems clear that the media were relying on harmful constructions of race to describe the world as they saw it. These cross-media constructions gave birth to the modern American mythology (Smith, 2004). Levi-Strauss posited that mythologies have a way of unifying communities by vicariously examining contradictions within them (Smith, 2004). Smith (2004) challenges this notion under the American context by explaining that American mythology exposes social divisions and in the process reveals audience fantasies that are not communally shared (Smith, 2004). In a country where the mythology enforces a subservient role upon an entire race, there can be no reconciliation between contradictions (Smith, 2004).

Under this context, Smith (2004) describes three devices used in American mythology to consign black persons to subordinate roles: mythification, marking, and omission. Mythification relies on the interrelationship between the lone white hero and the subservient black character (Smith, 2004). When imagery pairs any of the aforementioned five black

caricatures with an independent and multifaceted white male, the mythification of racial and gender ranking occurs (Smith, 2004). Over time, mythification soon becomes cultural shorthand for the dominance of white males over women and black persons (Smith, 2004). As an example, the Tom character has been used to demonstrate the power his white employers have over him (Smith, 2004). In situations where a Tom character and a Mammy character are present on screen or stage, the dynamics of gender and race are dually *mythified* as such that the Mammy figure will always defer to the dominant male Tom, who must in turn defer to the white female who must then defer to the white male head of household (Smith, 2004).

Marking is the highlighting of the contrast between black and white (Smith, 2004). Black and white film relied on these notions of contrast but Hollywood soon found tremendous rhetorical value in marking ideas of blackness to an extreme (Smith, 2004). Black characters on screen were almost exclusively shown as servants of some order and in costumes where the “aprons, gloves, dresses, scarves, headbands, and even white teeth and eyes are all signifiers of a certain coding of race in Hollywood films that audiences soon came to recognize” (Smith, 2004). Smith (2004) points out that even when white characters were outfitted in these same materials the encoded messages were not similar. White servants wearing white gloves were encoded to be efficient and dignified, whereas black servants were encoded as demonstrating racial inferiority (Smith, 2004). A second possible reading of the encoding of white gloves is that black is considered unclean, requiring a sterilizing layer of white before coming in to contact with white material culture or persons.

The last of the three devices is omission (Smith, 2004). Omission is the most widespread of the three devices (Smith, 2004). “The repetition of black absence from locations of autonomy and importance creates the presence of the idea that blacks belong in positions of obscurity and

dependence” (Smith, 2004, p. 29). Hollywood’s persistent portrayal of black persons in subservient roles omits the possibility (and reality) that black persons can and do hold positions of power and influence (Smith, 2004). Du Bois’ exhibition sought to challenge omission by providing material proof of wealthy black persons living and thriving within the United States (Smith, 2004). Banning footage of Jack Johnson’s victory is another example of omission. Even when black actors began to portray lawyers and doctors, they did so at the edification of white persons, their private lives and personal motivations never given screen time (Smith, 2004). The RIT archive is replete with signs of omission. Of the several hundred photographs within the sample pulled from the archive, only a handful of photographs have black persons present within the image. Within this handful of photographs, (in which black persons are visible) there are no signs of a private life, friends, family, or social setting - no autonomy, no signs of the meaningful possession of power. There are many examples in which we see white students at dances, cafeterias, sporting events, spending the holidays with friends and family, and white faculty holding positions of power - yet no representation of black students or faculty doing the same. The reasons for this can be manifold: segregation, self-segregation, and the choices made by those giving assignments to campus photographers.



*Figure 4.* RIT faculty meeting, year unknown

**Denotative.** We see a meeting of individuals taking place somewhere on the RIT campus. The group members are seated around a table. Each of them seems to be a white male. Each is wearing a suit. In front of them are cups of coffee and two trays of donuts. They have perhaps just finished their meal (coffee is customary in the United States after dinner), or the gentlemen are less formally being served only coffee and donuts. The room is relatively nondescript. A desk or cabinet is pushed up against the wall behind the table the gentlemen are seated around. A podium, a tray of either more donuts or bagels, a jacket, and some additional cups sit on top of that desk. Tucked against the wall are extra chairs, or perhaps they are instead serving trays. It is too hard to tell what the taller objects leaning against the wall are. Perhaps they are flag poles? Coming back to the table, each of the gentlemen is in some way engaged in conversation. To the far left, two gentlemen gaze toward the gentleman in the center of the image. As his is the only mouth open, those two gentlemen, and the two seated on either side of

him, are seemingly listening to what he is saying. Two gentlemen sit to the far right of the image and lean in closely to each other, seemingly disengaged from the larger group. The gentleman nearest the photographer seems to be covering his mouth as if to shield the volume or content of what he is saying to the gentleman to his right. Standing to the right of the entire group is a black woman. She appears to be dressed in clothing denoting her employment as a server. Her posture is different from each of the men in the room. Each man in the group sits with his arms in varying positions of comfort or expression while the woman to the right stands in a formal posture. Of the visible faces within the group of the men, they seem involved and intent on what is being said by the man in the center. The woman to the right wears a disinterested facial expression, demonstrating no familiarity or comfort with any of the men in the room. Given the informality of the additional objects stored in plain sight, the humble nature of the table, and the lack of decorative elements, it seems likely this is a staff meeting room and not a grand ballroom. This seems to be an informal meeting between colleagues perhaps discussing university business and processes. The woman to the right stands at the ready to provide whatever the gentlemen will need while at this meeting.

**Connotative.** Smith's (2004) three devices fit well as connotative descriptors of what we see in this image. Mythification is personified in the presence of a black woman in a role similar to that of Mammy - providing food and drink for a group of official looking white men. Her seeming disinterest and emotional distance from the task at hand makes it easy to imagine she is daydreaming about the end of her shift and of the people and responsibilities she has beyond this room. Smith's second device, marking, is present within the image as well. The woman to the right is dressed in all white. As was described above, black servants were made to wear white as it provided a sterilizing layer of white between their black skin and their master or employer's

food and drink. The wearing of white by a black server perpetuates the mythification and marking of the racial inferiority of blackness. Smith's final device, omission, is also present within this image. "The repetition of black absence from locations of autonomy and importance creates the presence of the idea that blacks belong in positions of obscurity and dependence" (Smith, 2004, p. 29). Here we have a black woman in a role of dependence and obscurity. She wears a generic, sterile uniform chosen for her while everyone else in the room has dressed himself. She stands at attention while all those around her engage in conversation. She is the only person no one is looking at. She is as close to invisible as one can get. She becomes present, one presumes, only when the coffee needs to be topped off or more sugar is required. In sum, we have an image demonstrating the mythified role of "black" and "female" as subordinate and invisible - assigned the role of the help.

Looking again at the image but now delving into the narrative that can be written from the semiotic cues encoded within: She stands in a room where the only similarly posed item are the walls around her. Her body forms a cage like the walls around this room; keeping her constrained to a job where who you are and what you do are synonymous. The walls around her life constrain her as a woman, and even more so as a black woman, to forever wear the garments most closely associated with Mammy – and to accept that with the kind of solemn detachment we see visible on her face. She is unhappy and no one knows it. She is unhappy because no one knows it. Perhaps the only comfort she can feel is when around her coworkers, themselves confined within the walls of black womanhood.



*Figure 5.* RIT kitchen staff, year unknown

**Denotative.** We have a kitchen scene. Three women in uniforms. To the left is a white woman wearing a white uniform with a pin and something appearing to be a nametag. To her right are two black women wearing darker uniforms. The contrast between the uniforms is stark. The white uniform is clean, pressed, and closed in the front. The uniform the two black women wear is not pressed, does not fit as if made for them, and bears no pin or nametag. The room is filled with trays, plates, and cups – items one would expect in a kitchen.

**Connotative.** This image presents an opportunity to see Smith's device of mythification demonstrated in a scene common to American posterity. We have a white overseer and two mummies. These two women stand passively by, awaiting the orders from their younger supervisor. We see Smith's device of marking present in the uniforms they each wear. The white woman wears a white outfit that accentuates her femininity while doing so in the purifying color of white. As described above, white clothing on a white server denotes efficiency and a

dignified nature. The two black women are marked by the absence of that white uniform. Theirs is a shabby version of a kitchen worker's uniform: buttons haphazardly holding the front of the uniform closed and in a color several shades darker than white. Smith's notion of omission is present in that we again see the role of Mammy personified by these kitchen workers. They have no power, wear no emotion on their faces, and seem to be attempting to shrink off of the image rather than be seen on it. They are trying to make themselves invisible – mirroring the way that omission makes power and authority invisible concepts with regard to black persons within American imagery.

Looking again at the image but now delving into the narrative that can be written from the semiotic cues encoded within: The two black women in the image, like the white woman, have their eyes down but, unlike the white woman, wear no emotion on their face. There is no life in their expressions. They are here but not here. Like the woman to the right in the image before, they are both perhaps lost in the thought of the persons and responsibilities beyond this room – beyond this glass ceiling. Perhaps it is the thoughts of those persons that makes the shift easier to pass, the demands easier to comply with, and the diminishing feeling of being made to wear a uniform clearly made subpar to the white woman's lily white, tailored uniform. The white woman wears a pin and a nametag. She has rank and recognition. The two black women in the image have no pin and no name. They are interchangeable. Their personhood is immaterial. In fitting with that understanding, neither of them emotes in a way that would betray their humanity. They are the task and the task is them. The white woman holds a slip in her hand. It is perhaps the ticket for what was ordered at the table. It could perhaps also be a schedule or set of instructions for her staff to follow. The possession of this document further signifies the gap in rank between the white woman and the two black subordinates in the image

with her. The white woman holds something that ties her to a world larger than the tray. The two black women have no ticket, and no instructions to delegate; they merely hold the ornaments of their station. The white woman wears a gentle smile for the taking of this image while the two black women make no attempt at displaying emotion. In a posed shot (such as this seems to be) it is most common for a person to look into the camera lens and wear some kind of emotion on their face. In this image, however, the only person doing that is the white woman. The two black women make no attempt to lift their heads to be seen and certainly do not attempt to convey any emotion beyond perhaps bemusement or a sullen approach to their work. They are as much the tray and cups as the tray and cups are. The only person being a person in this image is the white woman – furthering the notion of omission present within this image. The two women's very personage is self-omitted. The black woman in the center of the image betrays no emotion, makes no eye contact, and simply stands over the tray in a manner that seems to convey her attempt to be as little present in this image as possible. It was not her idea or preference to be in this image. She seems to be significantly older than the white woman giving her orders. Perhaps she feels resentment toward an inexperienced young white woman being given the authority to tell her what to do despite her being (perhaps) capable of running the kitchen alone? The black woman to the right of center seems to be younger and could have had her back to the photographer but has turned out, so as to be seen. Was this at the request of the photographer? Or is she turning out to be seen? The flat and non-emotive nature of her facial expression betrays that she was perhaps beckoned to turn out rather than turning to face the camera by choice.



*Figure 6.* RIT students in class, year unknown

**Denotative.** In the immediate background, a black male leans over a white surface. I say the background because of all the subjects in the image his is the only presence out of focus. With regard to perspective, it is typical that the person nearest and centered on an image is the subject; in this case, the blurring of this person renders him merely present. His right arm and hand are outstretched over the white surface in front of him. We can assume he is working on this surface. It is unclear what he holds in his hand or what he has created on the surface. He is wearing a t-shirt. His pants or shorts are obscured by the darkness under the table in front of him. He appears to be physically fit and wears a neatly groomed natural hairstyle. In front of him, and beyond the surface he works on, we see other art-making materials in addition to what may be a purse. It is possible that the purse-like object may in fact be a bag meant to carry

brushes and other instruments. It is unclear if the object belongs to the black male, any of the persons pictured further away, or if there is another individual sitting just beyond the range of the lens. Looking further into the room, we see a smattering of art-making materials necessarily strewn on the tables near the others in the classroom. These persons are in focus. These persons are the subject. Standing toward the front most part of the classroom is a male with a tucked in shirt, tie, pants, and watch. His right hand braces lightly against the table he is near and his right leg appears to be slightly forward his left. His head is cocked and lowered in a manner that seems to indicate he is looking at the work of the person seated to his front left. His posture and stance of authority seem to denote that he is an instructor. Following his line of sight, we see a female in a light or white blouse gently opened near the collar. Her hair is swept back but forward at the bangs indicating this individual may be wearing a headband. No other elements of her position are visible save for the bent head position with eyes focused on the work below. Drawing back toward the photographer's position, in the near center of the image, we have another female. She sits with her left arm folded in her lap and tucked under the table. Her right hand is outstretched and carefully holding a drawing implement while also gently balancing itself on the table below. She wears a patterned, knee-length dress, her hair above her shoulders, and glasses. Like the others, her head is angled toward the work directly beneath her line of sight. To her left sits a purse left on the table. This may be her purse or the purse of a person not captured in the image. Behind this person sits another female. She wears a vest and button shirt, which appears to be buttoned to the collar. In her right hand, we see a brush and a careful grip; her left sits below the sight of the lens. Like the others, her head is angled to allow her to focus on her work below. Her hair is worn up.

**Connotative.** This image presents an opportunity to examine Smith's devices of marking and omission. The black student incidentally wears a white t-shirt, further marking his blackness. In this shirt, we realize he is the least formally dressed of all the persons in the image. Perhaps he was at first wearing a formal shirt and took it off in order to work, revealing his undershirt? Whatever the case, his informality further marks him as not of this room. The others wear clothes that have a connotation of a station in life above working class whereas the black male in the image wears a working man's shirt. Perhaps it was his informal dress (and implied social class) that caused the others to sit so far removed from him? Additionally, his body is positioned in a manner that juts into the photo. The others are seated in a north-south orientation to the image whereas the black male is seated in a west-east orientation. His body abruptly enters the frame in a manner of dress below the others, oriented differently, alone, and out of focus. These semiotic cues can be seen as a parallel to the experience of black persons in America living during this period. They fought (not alone) for rights and had recently won (as of the taking of this picture) several crucial legal battles regarding integration. Here, amongst all of that civic turnover, we see a young black male in a collegial setting dressed out of turn, alone, and out of focus. His presence at the bottom left corner of the image almost seems to be weighing the image down, as if his presence might disrupt an otherwise tranquil scene and spoil the room – such is the imbalance of his appearance in the corner of the image.



*Figure 7.* RIT students in class, year unknown

**Denotative.** We see another classroom setting. This room appears to be either an art or newspaper production classroom. The persons are all working on what appears to be the content of a newspaper. There are three persons: two are white females, one is a black male. Objects meant for the task at hand fill the room. The female to the far right leans over a table top and works with what appears to be a paper cutter or guide board. The female in the center stands on several sheets of newspaper. The male to the far left is seated and leans into his work, pencil in hand. The woman to the far right is dressed in a lightly colored blouse and dark pants. She seems to be older than the other two in the room. Her more formal clothing may denote a higher station in life. She may perhaps be the instructor. The female in the center stands back from the instructor and wears a shirt and dark pants both obscured by a messy lab coat. The black male to the far left is distant and turned away from the other two women. The women are oriented

south-north in the image while he is oriented east-west (similar to the previous classroom image above). His short sleeve flannel shirt is neatly tucked into his dark pants. He sits on a stool. He is the only person seated. His face is drawn into the board or surface he is working on. The two women are postured in a way that allows the camera in whereas the black male is turned perpendicular to the camera. The cabinets and items under the tables are all opened and turned out toward the room. Their state of unrest denotes that this image was not staged but rather a semi-formal documentary photograph.

**Connotative.** We see another example of Smith's device of omission. Yet again, a black person is captured on the outer fringes of an image rather than seeming to be a central figure within it. The woman in the center has her hands tucked up and into her lab coat. It is not a pose she could comfortably maintain for long. Combined with her glasses and serious facial expression, it seems she is trying to convey a sense of importance and deep thought. The same is true of the woman to the right. Her body is leaning over the table and her hand is drawn above it as if to manipulate some part of it. She could not comfortably maintain this position for long. Contrast that with the black male to the left. His body rests upon a stool. His posture is engaged but comfortably so. His arms support the weight of his upper body and his shoulders allow his head to focus on the work at hand. He could maintain this position for hours. Like the notion brought up by Alley-Young of the fixed nature of natives in colonial imagery, this black male is the only fixed object we see, thereby omitting him from being mobile and important like the two women to his right. Crucial to the scene is the repeated image of a black student in a classroom with other persons yet separated by a great distance. As was stated before, the distance could be the result of personal choice, the nature of the work, or could stem from stereotype. The true cause can never be known but it remains interesting to see this social proxemic repeated.

Looking again at the image but now delving into the narrative that can be written from the semiotic cues encoded within: He, like the young male in the prior image, the two kitchen workers, and the server, all exist coldly in these images. None of them emote or bring life to their presence. The stereotypes placed upon black Americans requires a natural subservience to white interests. This seems to be a semiotic narrative we see repeated in each image. This young man makes no claim to his right to be in the image, in the room, or at the university. He seems content to instead hold the tools of his trade and continue silently working – just as the other student hovered over his project, the kitchen worker hovered over her tray, and the server hovered in front of the wall. There is a quiet invisibility to the presence of black persons within the images we have seen. There is a bit of the Uncle Tom on display in the docile nature of the black persons in these images. The quiet and unassuming way they each continue their work while the white persons in the image pose and emote for the benefit of the photographer.

### **The Third Period: White Privilege, White Invisibility (1950s-Present)**

“Whiteness reproduces its power in normative terms by being diffuse, by being invisible, by being everywhere and nowhere, and by making blackness bear the burden of visibility and embodiedness” (Smith, 2004, p. 138).

This section will present information under several subheadings, each of which contributes to an examination of whiteness.

The framing of racial discourse in America is indicative of the problems the discourse seeks to address (Bowser & Hunt, 1996). “As Whites tend not to see themselves as racial beings, they are also often not cognizant of the systematic privileges they enjoy” (Miller & Harris, 2005, p. 224). Often framed as “the black problem” or “the race problem,” meaningful discourse is challenged by the misnomer that race is a problem related to the presence of black people as

opposed to an issue related to the integration of persons of all walks of life (Bowser & Hunt, 1996). Race itself is an interesting construct:

History, not biology, distinguishes ethnicity from race, making the former groups (in the American usage) distinctive but assimilable, walling off the latter, legally, socially, and ideologically, to benefit those within the magic circle and protect the national body from contamination. (Rogin, 1996, p. 12)

Whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity. (Endres & Gould, 2009, p. 2)

Prior to the forced arrival of Africans to the Americas, nationality was the means with which to distinguish one group from another. With the introduction of stratified notions of freedom and humanity, however, it became imperative for white members of society to distinguish themselves as different from the slave class. This necessity was born of two purposes: to ensure the treatment of white persons would be superior to the treatment of black persons, and to mollify the guilt associated with marking an entire race as slave. Black skin became the de facto indicator of different, while white skin became the invisible indicator of normal (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). As the United States continued to welcome immigrants from the furthest reaches of Europe, the process of putting nationality aside and embracing an American identity became easier for Europeans as they could invisibly dissolve into dominant white society, further strengthening the notion of black skin as “raced” (Bowser & Hunt, 1996; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

Much of what is encoded in to the ontological perspective of life in the US stems from the work of classical scholars Plato and Aristotle (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). This foundation creates an imbalance when we consider that the “classical” school of western thought did not concern itself with theorizing about or empowering women, slaves, or other marginalized groups (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). American education and culture thus relies on this highly privileged male normative perspective to the detriment of the aforementioned groups. This perspective has remained unchallenged, allowing whiteness to remain an unchallenged space (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). The consequence of this system is that whiteness is simultaneously visible and invisible; eluding analysis and yet exerting influence over everyday life (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Whiteness (in America) has never faced a challenged to its place in the world, particularly in the ways in which all other groups have (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Whiteness is acculturated as synonymous for normal through the system of education, law enforcement, advertising, consumption, and high culture (Bowser & Hunt, 1996; Endres & Gould, 2009; Mercer, 1991; Miller & Harris, 2005; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Smith, 2004).

Whiteness has a cash value: it accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educational opportunities available to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations. I argue that white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity. This whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that

like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity. (Lipsitz, 2006, p. vii)

Race is a nuanced and incredibly divisive topic. Racial discourse in nearly all arenas can lead to hostility, resentment, and feelings of generational guilt. Particularly challenging are the experiences of white students facing their whiteness for the first time:

Students who accept the reality of white privilege frequently struggle with individual and collective guilt. If they are given no positive guidance on constructive actions to take, students may attempt to assuage their extreme discomfort by completely denying their race and immersing themselves in black or other oppressed cultures. Alternatively, they may become so concerned with not appearing racist that they shun interracial interaction all together. Or, tired of being labeled ‘the oppressor,’ they may resist learning about race and racism and actually become more prejudiced. As Tatum has observed, feeling responsible for generations of one’s race is a burden no one can carry for long. (Miller & Harris, 2005, p. 225)

Scholars have attempted to defuse the explosiveness of the issue by offering a more nuanced understanding of racism and of its sometimes unintended existence: “Racism results from the transformation of race prejudice and/or ethnocentrism through the exercise of power against a racial group defined as inferior, by individuals and institutions with the intentional or unintentional support of the entire (race or) culture” (Jones, 1972, p. 172). An important aspect to understand is the role institutions play in upholding systemic racism. As has been described above, racism (as relates to photographic representation) began with the advent of colonialism. From these first tainted experiences, the meaning of blackness within the mind of the European

was codified. This definition was made salient by the institutional use of Africans as slaves across the New World. Because an entire race was made to be slaves, white Europeans and white Americans began to see themselves as superior. These racial stratifications, buoyed by institutional support, have invisibly, but nearly intractably, been made a central tenet of life in the United States. In order to examine this structure, scholars have had to rely on new theories and methods. Traditional examinations of racism have relied on an examination of prejudice (Bowser & Hunt, 1996). The examination of prejudice, though, only reveals, “how individuals of any race feel about others, not about themselves” (Bowser & Hunt, 1996).

Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use *I* only when I am speaking to someone who will be *you* in my address. It is this condition of dialogue which is constitutive of *person*, for it implies that reciprocally I becomes *you* in the address of the one who in turn designates himself as *I*. (Duganne, 2010, pp. 5-6)



*Figure 8.* RIT dorm room, year unknown

**Denotative.** The scene is a dorm room on the RIT campus. Throughout the room are symbols of young maleness: bunk beds, posters, weights strewn across the floor, a dartboard, unmade beds, items scattered on desks and dressers, clothes thrown on chairs, and a large bottle of (perhaps) alcohol. On top of one of the bunks is a fully dressed young male seeming to be reading a book.

**Connotative.** As far as inviting environments are concerned, this is not a scene that would attract many students of color to the campus of RIT. Of particular curiosity is the presence of a Confederate flag in a dorm room in Upstate New York. Absent the flag, the scene is familiar for nearly any young male attending college. The nearness of the flag to the white sheets coincidentally conjures an image of the Ku Klux Klan. The nearness of the weightlifting

equipment to both of those adds the threat of physical harm by a young male with the capability to do so. The absence of the owner of the flag, sheets, and weights further heightens the sense of foreboding the absent figure casts on this image. The scariest films are the films where the creature, ghoul, or ghost's likeness is not revealed until the end. In the absence of the creature, the audience is left to conjure up whichever image is scariest to them - a phenomenon Barthes acknowledges as a process of self-revelation, "to give examples of punctum is, in a certain fashion, to give myself up" (Barthes, 1995, p.43). Like the director of a scary film, the image-maker has created a scene where, by acknowledging the punctum, we reveal our milieu. We are arrested by the object that arrests us. To some, the presence of a Confederate flag would hold a similar connotation to that of any household object, to others it is a symbol to revere, to others a symbol of injustice, and to yet others a repressive symbol of a holocaust only recently survived. One thing is for certain, were an image maker to create a scene of physicians operating on a patient in a thoroughly modern operating room filled with the latest technologies, we would be struck by the presence of a Confederate flag on a wall in that room. The object itself carries weight. In that same way, the assemblage of serenity and *everyday-ness* around it reveals an intentional ignorance or lack of information toward the weight of the flag and reveals the ability for whiteness and white supremacy to remain mostly unexamined. Surely, a Nazi flag would not be permitted into a dorm. Yet, even if the Nazi flag was not explicitly prohibited, it would most certainly not appear in a photograph meant to capture a typical day in the dorms at RIT.

Peggy McIntosh, while studying the effect patriarchy has on society, inadvertently came to see this same invisible power of whiteness operating within the United States:

I've come to see [white privilege] as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in on each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious. In

fact, White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, code books, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks. My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfriendly, unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. At school we were not taught about slavery in any depth; we were not taught to see slave holders as damaged people; slaves were seen as the only group at risk for being dehumanized...whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow them to be more like us. (Bowser, 1996, p. 20)

Her thoughts would come to be known as the invisible knapsack and would inspire her to expand her work to include racial equity within the United States (Bowser, 1996). Dr. McIntosh's epiphany is important because it demonstrates the mental steps necessary for a person born into the dominant culture to become aware of the benefits they enjoy, develop an understanding of the marginalized, work toward lessening the systemic impediments, and yet maintain a love for one's own culture.

### **An Epilogue**



*Figure 9.* RIT freshman orientation, year unknown

**Denotative.** The RIT archives describe the scene: Dozens of students line up for freshman orientation. The line remains more or less orderly. The attention of the students is drawn toward the front of the line. To the right of the line we see individuals perhaps not part of that line walking past, headed toward a different destination. We see a white male in the center of the frame in jeans and a t-shirt standing outside the confines of the line yet looking in the same direction as the group. Closer to the image maker we see a black female turned in the opposite direction of every other person in line. She leans out from her position, bent at the waist, arms extended, with her mouth open to form either a smile or a collection of words aimed at the image maker. All of the symbols of RIT are present. The bricks surround the scene, frame the students, and direct the focus of the camera, but perhaps also the campus, forward.

**Connotative.** Again, we see an image where a white student occupies the center of the image yet, as is the case in many of the images we considered earlier, the black female becomes

the punctum. Barthes describes that, “while remaining a detail, it [the punctum] fills the whole picture” (Barthes, 1995, p. 45). We have a scene of compliance and order – bricks and mortar – and yet there puncturing the otherwise banal scene is a vibrant young black female. Unlike in the earlier photographs, though, she is not the help. She is a freshman registering for classes. Unlike the black women that predated her on the RIT campus, her face is expressive, engaged, and full of life. Her presence and body orientation defy what surrounds her. She is not shrinking into invisibility like the black women from the earlier images but is instead demanding to be seen. Though ignored and unseen by all those within the image, the camera cannot help but see her. This is a scene of a black woman perhaps coming of age in her own life, a coming of age for the RIT campus, and perhaps even a coming of age within society. Though those around her have not noticed her display of autonomy, she seems unconcerned and instead focused on the camera. The camera, an object capturing images for posterity. She stares into the camera because, perhaps, it offers her an opportunity to comingle with a future world. A future world where she will no longer be the punctum but instead part of the banality of inclusion. She seems transported from the moment. She seems to be operating on a different plane as the others in line. Her body angle is in such juxtaposition with the others that it seems as if she is reorienting our eye and analysis away from seeing her as the punctum and instead inferring that the others in the line (and perhaps society at large) are the punctum. She is the new normal. Perhaps her posture is indicative of a moment beckoning us to see her presence as a reminder that the system (symbolized by the institution the image takes place at as well as by the relatively ordered line all around her) is what is off its axis. She leans out to make us aware that our view should shift to experience her presence as parallel with the ground and, thus reality.

### **Limitations**

One immediate challenge to this study becomes apparent when examining Slater's critique of Barthes' work. Slater believed Barthes' process was inherently limited because the semiotic analysis relied solely on the image and its contents (Wells, 2010). Slater argued that accounting for context is paramount (Wells, 2010). As an example, Slater explains that understanding where the image first appeared adds tremendous depth to the analysis (Wells, 2010). Slater's belief is that the final purpose of an image ultimately defines, most often, what is undertaken (Wells, 2010). Because the photographs in the RIT collection do not state where and for what purpose they were originally created, the problem highlighted by Slater presents a challenge. In order to offset this challenge, Fenner's (2003) work on social contexts will be considered during analysis. Fenner (2003) outlines several contexts but, for the purposes of this study, his description of racial, class, gender, cultural, and national contexts will be evaluated as a supplement to Barthes' notions of the denoted and connoted (Wells, 2010). Fenner's (2003) contexts were originally created for his study on aesthetic analysis but seem fit to be applied to a semiotic analysis of documentary photographs of posed and snapshot nature. Little is offered by Fenner (2003) in the way of formal definition for the contexts, but much can be gathered from the examples he cites to elaborate how each context can be understood as a means of analysis.

This then raises the point, as is true of any subjective interpretation, that when taken out of context (social, cultural, temporal, etc) connoted meanings may be missed, misunderstood, or altogether ignored by a viewer such as myself with a different perspective. This harkens back to the earlier objection brought forward by Slater of analyzing semiotic meanings outside of context. Even with these objections in mind, however, there is tremendous value to

examinations of the sort undertaken in this paper. The proviso of course being that the limitations of such study are understood.

Future study could apply the method of visual analysis applied here to images from another campus, government, society, or institution.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined eight images from the RIT photographic archive. Across the study of these eight images we have seen a creeping presence of Blackness – creeping in the sense that the black individuals seem to gain incremental admittance over time yet remain peripheral. In the first image, we saw a black person staged to look decapitated and ‘wild’ – all that can be known is epistemically closed and left to the students within the class to define rather than the subject. In the second image, we saw white students donning blackface to perform a rendition of blackness that, again, epistemically closes off what can be known about actual blackness. In the next two images, we saw black dining/kitchen staff depicted as either invisible or in a subjugated role to a junior white superior – effectively closing off their identities and instead encoding them as ‘the help’. In the next two images, we saw two classroom settings where black students were not the focus of the image nor of the classroom itself. Given the quite obvious distance between the black students and their white classmates and faculty we see a closing off of the identity of the black student as ‘accepted’ and ‘participatory’. Their presence is physical but still ancillary. In the next image, we saw a white student’s dorm room and the decorative element of a confederate flag. The symbolism of the flag provides a strong and chilling effect against any hope for an epistemically open portrayal or understanding of blackness to occur or even be welcome. In the last image, we saw a young, black female student in line for freshman orientation. Again, included but alone, the young lady’s body and affect are in steep

contrast to all around her; she is the punctum. The connotative takeaway from that image is that of a young lady fighting to become known – to be seen and not epistemically closed. In doing so, she reveals that epistemic closure is still a reality within her immediate environment.

Though a tightly controlled and managed measure, visual analysis is inevitably a subjective measure. Even with this knowledge, the argument can be made that the hypothesis is proven. Epistemic closure is present within the images retrieved from the RIT photographic archives. For as long as black persons are unable to determine the ways in which they are represented, are made equal within the images, are shown in diverse roles and settings, and given the opportunity to craft their own images, epistemic closure will continue.

Nederveen Pieterse (1992) draws our attention to a strong declaration, “Probably the single most important feature of representations of otherness is the role they play in establishing and maintaining social inequality.” As has been the intent of this paper, the argument put forward is the very material consequences of the epistemically closed depictions of black personage through the white lens of time and technology. This paper has used Barthes’ method in the hope of unlocking the more visceral impact of oppression felt when confronting images that fit the historical context of that very same oppression. This visceral impact, bolstered by the visual, is perhaps best expressed by Fanon (1967) when he says:

‘Dirty Nigger!’ Or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing, endowing me once

more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it. But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. (p. 109)

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