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Representation and self-representation of blackness: the case of Rachel Dolezal

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the centuries, the experience of race has profoundly marked the history of Europe and the United States and has played a fundamental role in the very definition of the Western world's identity. Race is a complex, malleable concept that has been conceived and interpreted in different ways according to different historical, cultural and social contexts. Originally theorized as a biological justification for European imperialism and the institution of the Atlantic slave trade, its definition has changed over time and it is now generally accepted that race, rather than a reality grounded in biology, is an inherently social construct. It is worth noting, however, that being socially constructed does not imply that it does not exist; indeed, the concepts of race and racism are far from being eradicated, as they still have a strong influence over individuals' lives, as well as on the organization of society as a whole.

In this work I have focused on the issue of race in the context of the United States and more specifically on how this concept has been created and deployed, from plantation slavery onward, to construct and maintain unequal relationships of power. My study is concerned in particular with the analysis of the field of representation both as a site in which the racialized order is constantly produced and reproduced, and as a potential site of resistance that holds revolutionary possibilities. The choice of the topics derives from a personal interest in the themes related to race and the experience of racism, which are increasingly debated topics not only in the United States but also in Europe, where the growing number of immigrants mainly coming from Africa forces many European countries to critically interrogate their colonialist past.

The first chapter deals with the representation of blackness and the fundamental role played by visuality in the construction of the black subject as less than human. The first part of the chapter serves as an introduction for the main theme and addresses various theoretical concepts regarding the concept of race itself and the debate on the opportunity to use it as an analytical category for the study of contemporary US society.

Then the focus shifts to the analysis of the inextricable link between visuality and race, as the visual field and the way we are taught to look are crucial for the production and the reproduction of racial blackness. The main argument is that the visual field, by means of the racial imagery composed by stereotypical and degrading images of the racialized Other, is the privileged site where meanings about race are constructed. The scopic regime of race, which refers to all the visual systems, either cultural, political, or technological, deployed by the dominant group to maintain power relations, has not only naturalized the decoding of human differentiation according to racial features, but it has also supported the US racial hierarchy that has posited whiteness, perceived as the unmarked human norm, at the top of the social order and blackness, conceived as an inherently degraded and abject condition, at the bottom.

The final part of the chapter is devoted to the analysis of the stereotypical images of blackness that have been constructed throughout the centuries to justify the oppression and the violence perpetrated against black people. The analysis of the racist archive starts from the Enlightenment period as a crucial time in which elaborated concepts of race began to be developed and the inherent difference between "human species" started to be perceived as an incontrovertible scientific truth. The concept of race theorized in the eighteenth century became even more grounded in supposed scientific evidence with nineteenth-century scientific racism, which attempted to explain biological racial differences in visual and measurable terms. In the context of the United States, during the period of plantation slavery, a new set of stereotypical images of blackness emerged. The main feature of the racialized regime of representation that was constructed during slavery was its effort to depict the subordinate status of black as a natural condition that derived from innate and unmodifiable characteristics. Stereotypical images differed between black men and black women, as they were subjected to different kinds of oppression. In general, while controlling images of men aimed at the infantilization of the black male slave, who was deprived of his masculine attributes and authority, the representation of black women was entirely centered around their sexuality and the need to control their fertility, since women were the means through which slavery itself was reproduced, thus making their body a crucial site of control. The images of black manhood and womanhood produced during slavery, such as the Mammy, the Jezebel, the Tom and the Sambo stereotypes, became the basic "grammar of race" through which the white pubic

learned to see blackness as degraded. Finally, the last paragraphs retrace the evolutions of the traditional stereotypical images of blackness after Emancipation and in contemporary US society following changing patterns of oppression, in order to underline the "tragic continuities" that can be identified in the constitution of blackness as an abject and threatening condition. Therefore, although the representations of blackness have changed over the centuries, they all contributed to the constant devaluation of black bodies which resurfaces continuously in today's society, as the frequent murders of black people by the police tragically testify.

The second chapter focuses on the possibility of agency and resistance deployed by black people within the field of visuality and on the ways in which they have challenged and contested the dominant regime of representation by employing a wide range of counterstrategies. The overall idea is that in the history of the United States, black people have always been the social group whose "right to look," to quote Nicholas Mirzoeff, has constantly been denied and repressed, but this condition did not prevented blacks from engaging in a longstanding fight to regain power over the hostile field of visuality that has created the inherent association between blackness and abjection. In this resistance struggle, the power of the dominated lies in the possibility to speak against the hegemonic representation of blackness not only by pointing to and questioning the racist stereotypical archive through which blackness is perceived, but also in the creation of alternative and counterhegemonic images in order to challenge the scopic regime of race. In order to produce an alternative visuality able to challenge the degrading archive of blackness, black people have been both the producers of images and the object of those images; in this last case, however, differently from racist representations, they were not passive objects, but they managed to control and manipulate their own images for artistic or political purposes and to support their claims.

The next section of the chapter presents two crucial figures that engaged in the visual struggle for blacks' self-representation between the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, namely Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. Douglass and Truth were both former slaves that, through an extensive use of photography, produced and disseminated their own self-representations and asserted their total control over their own images and the meanings that were attached to them. Indeed, they were both able to subvert

photography's repressive functions and crucially contributed to the deconstruction of hegemonic representations of black masculine and feminine subjectivities.

After an analysis of early attempts to challenge the racist archive of blackness, the chapter provides a theoretical introduction concerning the important role of realism and authenticity as representational counterstrategies adopted by black Americans, as well as an overview of the debate over positive and negative images which also addresses critiques highlighting the limitations of these approaches. Then, the focus shifts to the three main strategies adopted by black Americans to confront hegemonic culture: the first one is the acceptance of the stereotype and has been of particular importance for black women, who have adopted the politics of respectability as a way to resist racist depictions; the second strategy is negotiation, which has been used to adapt the stereotypes for personal benefit especially by black cultural producers and performers; the third approach is ironic appropriation and it involves the opposition of the stereotype by means of parody and irony. Finally, the last part of the chapter is concerned with the ways in which black Americans, rather than providing alternative self-representation, have directly challenged the realm of visuality itself, especially in contemporary times. The overall idea is to challenge the scopic regime of race itself by showing and uncovering the visual mechanisms through which human differentiation, racialized subjects and the black/white polar opposition are constructed by interrogating the act of seeing itself.

The third chapter deals with the case of Rachel Dolezal, an American woman whose "racial fakery" gained worldwide attention in 2015 and has caused a heated debate in the United States about the nature of race, the concepts of blackness and whiteness and more general issues regarding representation, visuality and the very history of racial identity in the country. The first part of the chapter retraces this case of racial performativity and its background. In 2015, Rachel Dolezal, a woman who had presented herself as black for a number of years was accused of having lied about her identity and "outed" as white on the media. The accusation was based on the comparison between the photographs of a teenage Dolezal with blond hair and pale skin and the current appearance of the woman who has a darker complexion and typically black hairstyles. Dolezal has responded to the allegation of racial fakery by claiming that she identified as black despite her parentage

and by showing her actual connection with black contexts both on the public and on the personal level.

The chapter then moves on to an in-depth analysis of the reactions caused by the Dolezal case and her identity claims with a specific focus on the allegations of blackface, cultural appropriation and "reverse passing." The analysis of the debate shows that most of the reactions to Dolezal's claim of blackness have been negative and that only a few commentators have perceived her claims as legitimate. However, in some cases, the negative reactions turn out to be problematic, in that they rely on essentialist conceptions of race that are based either on a supposed biological reality of race based on ancestry and lineage or the existence of an authentic and monolithic experience of blackness. In the last section, the chapter addresses the debate concerning the connection between transgender and transracial identities that emerged from the comparison of Rachel Dolezal's and Caitlyn Jenner's identity claims. After the analysis of the two categories and the ways in which they have both changed over time to include new identity claims the focus is on the debate generated by the juxtaposition of Jenner's and Dolezal's cases and the arguments for and against the legitimacy of "transracial" identities.

CHAPTER 1
THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACKNESS

Throughout the history of the Western world, and more specifically starting from the modern period, race has been a fundamental issue that has become inextricably linked to the concept of modernity itself. Race, as an object of study and analysis, has been addressed from different perspectives; indeed, race has been conceived as either a social construct, a scientific and empirical reality, a political strategy of control and power over a specific group or simply dismissed as non existent. Defining what race actually is, is a rather hard task and over the centuries the definition has changed according to different cultural, social and historical conditions.

However, it is undeniable that the experience of race has been and still is fundamental for the Western world's identity and that has profoundly marked the history of Europe and the United States and the development of Western modern capitalism in general. It is an issue that not only influences peoples' everyday life but that also persists at the academic level and that has troubled many scholars that have dealt with race, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Franz Fanon, bell hooks, Edward Said, and Paul Gilroy just to name a few.

Race and the consequent conceptualization of racism are complex but rather flexible concepts that have influenced individuals and society as a whole on many different levels and it seems that their importance is not going to diminish anytime soon; as Howard Winant puts it: "[…] the concept persists, as idea, as practice, as identity, and as social structure. Racism perseveres in these same ways."[1] It is therefore important to understand why race and racism are still so important in today's society by focusing on the construction and the changes of these concepts throughout history. In other words, it is necessary "to dig into the archaeology of a racial present, to know more about the

[1] Howard Winant, "Race and Racism: Towards a Global Future," *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 29*(5), 2006, p. 986.

historical dynamic of race […]" as a response to "[…] a need to make sense of the current racial present in the West […]."[2]

While the experiences of race and racism are common to humankind itself, in this dissertation the focus will be on race and racism in the context of the United States and more specifically on the construction and representation of blackness. The main goal is to better understand how black people became the epitome of racialized bodies throughout the centuries. In order to construct the racialization of black people, the issue of representation has always been fundamental. It is clear that representations of blackness changed throughout the centuries, starting from the Atlantic slave trade, the period of plantation slavery, as well as after the emancipation. However, it is worth highlighting that they all contributed to the negative value and meaning attached to black bodies that still in today's society haunt the lives of black people, as also testified by the recent murders of black people in the US by the police. Indeed, the constant devaluation of blackness has led to the creation of a system of unequal power relationships, as well as a society where racism is institutionalized and that is based on whiteness as the norm[3].

1. The concept of race

As already noted, either in the cultural and political discourse and in the academic field, the category of race itself is difficult to define and its boundaries are blurred and not fixed. While race is almost universally acknowledged as a social construction and not a physical reality, there is no such agreement on how the concept of race should inform and influence the political, social, and cultural debate. In particular, because it is not an actual reality, there has been the claim that the concept and even the word "race" should be abandoned, placing on it what W.J.T. Mitchell defines "a veil of disavowal"[4]. The progressive negation of race and the idea that race itself is insignificant has led to two different theories, namely the idea that we now live in a "post-racial era" and that of colorblind universalism. While these two arguments have entirely different implications, they share the assumption that, given its fictional nature, the traditional concept of race should not be used as an analytical tool for the study of contemporary society.

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[2] Ash Amin, "The Reminder of Race," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 27, 2010, pp. 2-3.
[3] Carolyn Finney, "Brave New World? Ruminations on Race in the Twenty-first Century," *Antipode*, XLVI, 5, 2014, p. 1278.
[4] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 10.

1.1. Post-racial theory and colorblindness

The first argument is based on the belief that US society has reached what has been defined a "post-racial era". The idea is that society as a whole has moved beyond traditional racial categories and that race is a discredited concept that entirely belongs to the past. In general, post-racial theorists[5], while they acknowledge the foundational importance of race for US society in the past, believe that today's society is finally free from this heavy burden and from the need to use the idea of race as an analytic concept, as it has been thoroughly deconstructed.[6] Using it, they maintain, is dangerous as it may substantiate what is merely a fiction.

Many believe that the post-racial era was inaugurated by Anthony Appiah's famous statement that "the truth is that there are no races."[7] Appiah's work builds on classical race theorist W.E.B. Du Bois who, at the end of the nineteenth century, was the first one to theorize race as a product of power and resistance rather than a biological inheritance in his seminal study regarding "the Negro problem."[8] Appiah attempted to complete what he considered DuBois' "incomplete argument" to "assimilate the unbiological nature of races" and to articulate a positive concept of race.[9] With regards to the heavy burden of race mentioned above, his main claim is that the abandonment of race as a concept would mean that society would be liberated from illogical thinking and the mystification of pseudoscience and that the periodical reemergence of presumed biological notions of race would be prevented.

Another cultural and social theorist that supports the necessity of a society that is liberated from race as a code of human categorization is Paul Gilroy. In contrast with post-racial theorists, however, he acknowledges the utopian nature of his project calling for the renunciation of race. In his essay *Against Race*, Gilroy states that identity and belonging must be reconfigured around post-racial thinking and therefore he champions a new "planetary humanism" based on a consciousness of shared values that do not belong

[5] See, for example, the work of the Marxist sociologist Robert Miles.

[6] Finney, "Brave New World?," p. 1279.

[7] Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 45.

[8] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Study of the Negro Problems," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 11, 1898, pp. 1–23.

[9] Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1), 1985, p. 22.

to racial categorizations.[10] Rather, this consciousness emerges in the context of a transnational identity that can be found at the crossroad of what he calls "the Black Atlantic" and that is a characteristic of all the people who have a diasporic past.[11]

On the other hand, the second argument that derives from the disavowal of race as an analytical category for the study of today's society is the so-called "color blindness". This idea is rooted in the belief that racial group membership and race-based differences should not be taken into account; it is especially important for current political discourse in the US when it comes to calculate the impact of race on either policy decisions, legislation, and programs. While the ideology of color blindness might seem a positive way to tackle the complex issue of race by erasing the color line, it has been proven that most of the time the consequences are entirely counterproductive.[12] Indeed, the colorblind approach, in contrast with its original intentions, results in the "silencing" of race at the public level. According to Harries, colorblindness implies the public disavowal of race and the consequence is "[…] the denial of the meanings and effects of race."[13] Therefore, rather than an empowering concept that neutralizes racism in the public space, colorblindness hides racial dynamics and contributes to maintaining white privilege by silencing the word race itself.

The silencing of race as a category has also other negative implications: first of all, it fails to recognize any real relationships between the historical construction of race and racism and the current manifestations of these social constructions in US society.[14] Secondly, it is entirely counterproductive for those who fight for racial equality, as it denies the possibility to name race and consequently to bring to light white privilege and challenge everyday racism. Finally, it is worth noting that the colorblind approach has been used with malicious intents, especially within recent political discourse. More specifically, as it has been poignantly argued by black feminist scholars in particular, colorblindness serves to hide the institutional nature of racism and to place the

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[10] Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2002.

[11] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993.

[12] See, for example Finney, "Brave New World?"; Amin, "The Reminder of Race"; Bethan Harries, "We Need to Talk about Race," *Sociology*, XLVIII, 6, 2014, pp. 1107-1122; Cornel West, *Race Matters,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1993; InteRGRace, *Visualità e (anti)razzismo*, Padova: Padova University Press, 2018.

[13] Harries, "We Need to Talk about Race," p. 1108.

[14] Finney, "Brave New World?," p. 1279.

responsibilities for conditions of extreme poverty, homelessness, unemployment that mainly affect African Americans on individuals rather than on the relationships of unequal power constructed throughout the centuries.[15]

1.2. The paradox of race

The previous paragraph has briefly showed that the idea of relegating the category of race to the past seems to be totally ineffective to recognize, address and challenge present racism. It has also showed what has been defined "the paradox of race", namely the fact that even though the concept has been exposed as entirely false and a myth, race thinking and racism persist and resurface continuously. The idea on which many anti-racist arguments are based, that race and racism are completely irrational and that "[i]f we can just stop talking about race […] then maybe racism will disappear […] has been proven wrong."[16]

Indeed, far from having moved beyond traditional racial categories, it actually seems that race still plays a fundamental role in many aspects of today's US society. As Cornel West argues in his most famous (and self-explanatory) work *Race Matters*, "[t]he astonishing disappearance of the event from public dialogue is testimony to just how painful and distressing a serious engagement with race is."[17]

In other words, while race is fiction, it is a fiction with great power on the lives of racialized people; it

> […] is indeed a myth but one that, like all myths, has a powerful afterlife that continues to structure perception, experience, and thought and to play a real role in history. […] A myth is not simply a false belief, an epistemological mistake. It is a powerful story that endures over many generations, subject to endless reinterpretation and reenactment for new historical situations.[18]

Given the fictional but powerful nature of race, within the academic field, there is no general agreement on if and how to use this analytical category. For example, for Gilroy, there is no recuperating or redeeming, no readily de- or re-signifying the concept of race, while other scholars believe that the concept of race itself carries revolutionary possibilities. These possibilities can be used as tools for the rise of a counterculture, to

[15] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston: South End Press, 1992.
[16] Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, p. XII.
[17] West, *Race Matters*, p. 262.
[18] Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, p. 22.

engage systemic and structural processes of racialization and ultimately for another "doing" of race.[19] In order to recognize and challenge the various types of racism that permeate current society and to move beyond the "cul-de-sac of the post-racial era"[20], it is necessary to uncover, discover, and name race as a cultural device to create a hierarchical order of power relationships.[21]

It is therefore clear that a post-racial or colorblind society is far from being reached and that race still influences many aspects of everyday life, making present society intensely marked by racial categories. As Amin puts it:

> [i]f race thinking and acting, depressingly, has become ingrained in vernacular and institutional practice due to the force of stacked legacies of reading human difference and worth in racial terms, the journey to a non-racial future may prove to be one of misplaced hope and disappointment, and certainly a very long and arduous one.[22]

In the next paragraphs, specific attention will be devoted to the creation of the concept of race, and in particular of racial blackness in the United States. The focus will be on the importance of representation and the visual field for the construction of the racialized Other starting from the period of colonialism and the slave trade.

2. Visuality and race

Race has been proven to be an illusion; it is inconsistent at the biological level, since there are no valid scientific definitions or the evidence that humankind can be divided according to specific phenotypical characteristics; what is more, it is an entirely illogical concept at the ethics level, as there is no correlation between physical characteristics and one's inclinations or behavior.[23] Yet, in every aspect of US society race is pervasive and persists as a longstanding and mutable construction; as Richard Dyer puts it: "[r]ace is not the only factor […], but it is never not a factor, never not in play."[24] In other words, notwithstanding the fictional nature of race, it is almost impossible not to read reality according to racial traits. It has been almost universally acknowledged that the fact that race still plays a fundamental role in everyday experience, and especially for

[19] Finney, "Brave New World?," p. 1277.
[20] Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, p. XII.
[21] Annalisa Frisina, "Introduzione", in InteRGRace, *Visualità e (anti)razzismo*, p. 3.
[22] Amin, "The Reminder of Race," p. 13.
[23] Anna Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," in Bordin E. and Bosco S., *A Fior di Pelle: Bianchezza, Nerezza, Visualità*, Verona: ombre corte, 2017, p. 18.
[24] Richard Dyer, *White*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 1.

the lives of racialized people, derives from the fact that it is a powerful and continuously self-repeating social construction.

The creation and the ceaseless reproduction of the concept of race began during the colonialist period and the Atlantic slave trade and its main aim was to justify the violent brutalization of black bodies by making them seem less than human, according to specific physical traits.[25] As already stated, the legacy of this imposed racialization still haunts the lives of black people. It is therefore clear that racial imagery has been purported and maintained by strong power relationships that support the hierarchy created between the different races, even after the concept of race itself has been dismantled.

One of the factors that make race so difficult to erase from social and political discourse and everyday practice is the fact that, differently from other sources of discrimination, such as sexual orientation, it is a visual marker, something that can be identified by using sight. This idea, however, could imply that we are able to identify physical characteristics, such as hair, the shape of the nose and the lips, etc. that are specific of a particular group of people, something that is in fact not possible. As a matter of fact, we are able to 'see' race because the way we look at thing is not neutral but is itself informed by the racial imagery that society supports and perpetuates.[26] It is therefore clear that there is an inextricable link between visuality and race and that "there is power in looking."[27]

2.1. Critical studies of race and visual culture studies

In the last decades, it has been poignantly argued by many theorist and scholars that the visual field and the way we look are crucial for the production and the reproduction of race.[28] The first statement made by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright in their work about visual culture is that "[e]very day we engage in practices of looking to make sense

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[25] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 2011, p. 63.

[26] Judith Butler, "Endangered/endangering: schematic racism and white paranoia," in Robert Gooding-Williams (ed.), *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 18.

[27] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, p. 115.

[28] See for example Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, New York-London: Routledge, 1999; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*; Dyer, *White*; W.J.T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," *Journal of Visual Culture*, I, 2, 2002, pp. 165-181; Michelle Shawn Smith, "Visual Culture and Race," *MELUS*, XXXIX, 2, 2014 pp. 1-11; Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

of the word."[29] While it might seem a rather obvious assertion, its implications are far more complex. In particular, it implies that it is through the inherently *social* practice of looking that we negotiate social relationships, as well as the meaning and the value attached to what we see.

Within the academic field, the link between visuality and race has been tackled from different points of view. The most traditional perspective focuses on the study of "the spectacle of racism" and the history of racist representations that range from artwork to images and texts that normalize and perpetrate human hierarchy into different races. On the other hand, however, the most interesting and innovative theories regarding visuality and race are the result of an interdisciplinary effort shared by two distinct field, namely critical studies of race and visual culture studies.[30] The main focus of the two fields is different, as critical race studies are concerned with the social construction of race throughout the centuries and in contemporary society, while visual culture interrogates the act of seeing and what it means to perform this act. Hal Foster, in the introduction of a seminal collection of essays about visual culture, differentiates between vision, i.e. sight as a physical operation, and visuality, i.e. sight as a social fact that is constructed by social, cultural and historical factors, what he defines "its discursive determinations."[31]

The fruitful encounter of these two fields of study, therefore, brings together the question of visuality and race, arguing that since sight is a social practice, it is also a racialized practice; in a nutshell, they try to move beyond an analysis of racial representation *per se*, and instead to investigate "how subjects adopt racial positions as they learn how to look."[32] Racialization, therefore acts not only upon the object of view but also on the viewer, as she/he adopts cultural and historical racial codes to interpret reality. Indeed, seeing cannot be considered just a passive action and reception performed by our eyes, but most importantly seeing implies interpreting what is in front of us through specific social, cultural, and historical codes and assigning a certain value to the subject of our looking.[33] In the words of the feminist scholar Judith Butler, there is at play "a racial schematization of the visible field" that makes seeing not an unmediated or neutral

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[29] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction of Visual Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 9.

[30] Smith, "Visual Culture and Race," p. 1.

[31] Hal Foster, "Preface," in *Vision and Visuality*, Washington: Bay Press, 1988, p. IX.

[32] Smith, "Visual Culture and Race," p. 2.

[33] Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, p. 13.

action, not "[…] an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible, the workings of racial constraints on what it means to see."[34]

2.2. Race as medium

The connection between race and visuality is best explained by Nicole Fleetwood when she asserts the performative nature of the visual sphere, since seeing race, as already noted, is not a transparent act, but rather "it is itself a 'doing.'"[35] Following the same logic, W.J.T. Mitchell, one of the most important scholars of visual studies, proposes to see race as a *medium*, a filter through which we interpret and classify humanity according to supposed racial differences.[36] The general aim of Mitchell's work is to reveal and de-naturalize the act of seeing itself, claiming for the need to "show seeing", that is to say "[…] to overcome the veil of familiarity and self-evidence that surrounds the experience of seeing[…]"; to show that our vision is informed by social and cultural constructions that we apply and reproduce in our everyday practice of seeing. In other words, seeing is not natural and objective, rather it is a mediated activity that it is "learned and cultivated" in a specific cultural, social, aesthetic and political context.[37] Therefore, race can be understood as a lens through which we make sense of human differences and that creates power relationships of hierarchy; the visual field, is itself a hegemonic racial formation[38] that constructs the racialized Other through

> stereotypes, caricatures, classificatory figures, search images, mappings of the visible body, of the social spaces in which it appears […]. These images are the filters through which we recognize and of course misrecognize other people.[39]

In the context of the United States, these images have become part of the collective imagination, starting from the period of plantation slavery and their target was usually the epitome of the racialized Other, that is to say the black person. These "controlling images"[40] contributed to the construction of a specific idea of what blackness and being black means and implies; it is worth noting that the meaning attached to blackness, as

[34] Butler, "Endangered/endangering," p. 16.
[35] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 7.
[36] Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*.
[37] Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," p. 166.
[38] Butler, "Endangered/endangering," p. 17.
[39] Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," p. 175.
[40] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 2000.

well as the representations of black people, changed continuously throughout the centuries, according to the social and political situation. In addition, images of blackness were, and still are, different depending on gender, as within US society the controlling images of black men and women served to justify different kinds of subjugation and violence.[41] Therefore, as Herman Gray states, blackness is not a monolithic concept but it is a "[…] cultural signifier that […] remains open to multiple and competing claims", since it refers "to the constellation of productions, histories, images, representations, and meanings associated with black presence in the United States."[42]

In the next paragraphs, these images and the ways in which they have changed over time will be analyzed, while the next chapter will address the way in which racial images and representations can be used to subvert the dominant and controlling gaze. However, before moving on to the analysis of stereotyped images, it is worth tackling some theoretical issues regarding the ways in which the hegemonic white gaze creates a regime that naturalizes human differences, namely the scopic regime of race.[43]

3. The scopic regime of race

W.J.T. Mitchell in his attempt to "show seeing", points to the importance to acknowledge that, as already stated, the visual field is a social construction but that the opposite is also true, namely the importance of the visual construction of the social field; the fact that "[i]t is not just that we see the way we do because we are social animals, but also that our social arrangements take the forms they do because we are seeing animals."[44]

In the same way, it is possible to claim that we see races because, as humans, we organize the reality in visual terms and vision is naturalized as "a primordial tool of human perception and thus differentiation."[45] Indeed, notwithstanding its inconsistence, we see and define race primarily by specific physical traits, such as the shape of the nose, the lips and in particular the color of the skin. In creating the black subject, therefore, the

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[41] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[42] Herman Gray, "Black Cultural Politics and Commercial Culture," in Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p. 12.

[43] Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in Hal Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, Washington: Bay Press, pp. 3-23.

[44] Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," p. 171.

[45] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 95.

visual field is crucial; from the very beginning of the racial thinking that started with European colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade, bodily characteristics and the color of the skin played a fundamental role, as they soon became the exterior evidence of an internal difference.[46]

The creation, theorization, and perpetration of racial blackness as an inescapable visual marking[47] is best understood by using the notion of "scopic regime", which was first theorized by film theorist Christian Metz, later expanded by cultural theorist Martin Jay and finally used in the field of black and critical race studies.[48] In general, the concept of scopic regime is a theoretical framework to discuss "the power of looking and optical tools to assess, surveil, and represent the visual world."[49] The scopic regime, in other words, places the visual field and the gaze at the center of dynamics of power and hegemony. This notion turns out to be extremely useful when discussing issues of race and the creation of hierarchies based on racial differences. Indeed, theorists that discuss the issue of blackness and the visual field have created the concept of the scopic regime of race, which refers to all the visual systems, either cultural, political, or technological deployed by the dominant group to maintain power relations and make not only possible, but also natural the decoding of human differentiation according to racial features.[50] The importance of the technological apparatus should not be underestimated; it is worth noting, however, that many scholars have focused on how optical technologies, especially photography, have been used to define and discipline racialized bodies.[51] As Fleetwood puts it,

> [v]ision and visual technologies, in this context, are seen as hostile and violent forces that render blackness as aberration, given the long and brutal history of black subjugation through various technologies, visual apparatus among them.[52]

As already noted, the archive of images and representations on which a specific scopic regime is based may change considerably over time. However, there are dynamics of

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[46] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," p. 21.

[47] Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 215.

[48] Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity."

[49] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 17.

[50] Lindon Barrett, *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

[51] See for example Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York: Routledge, 1995.

[52] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 17.

power that can be retraced in every visual regime and, with regards to the construction of blackness, it is worth highlighting that there are common features that can be retraced in the visual archive.

3.1. Naturalization

The scopic regime of race in the United States creates a reality that is undeniably organized according to racial codes. However, this state of things can only be maintained and reproduced by hiding the carefully arranged hierarchy between racialized groups of people, as well as the dominant structuring principles that underline this imposed hierarchy.[53] In other words, the practices of looking and interpreting reality through an inherently racist ideology are made to seem natural and inevitable.[54] In this way, racial hierarchies are not questioned because the way in which they are constructed and maintained are hidden under the veil of the naturalization of human difference.[55]

As Ash states, "[t]he details of colour, shape, smell, behaviour, disposition, intent, picked out by racial scopic regimes as tellers of human grouping and social standing – etched over a long historical period across a spectrum of communication media" become progressively natural and given.[56] Therefore, within the visual field, race is constructed as something given and it is "made to appear as if it has always existed, thereby denying [its] coerced and cultivated production."[57] Through the naturalization of the differences the cultural hegemony maintains its power while keeping hidden the strategies that underline the visual system of racial marking.

In order to make the scopic regime of race visible, it is necessary to question the supposed natural hierarchy of sight by historicizing vision and specifying its dominant practices. According to Foster, the strategies deployed by the racial scopic regime can only be uncovered and questioned through "the recognition that vision *has* a history" [58] and that the each scopic regime, far from being given or natural, has always been contested by alternative visual regimes that were constructed on a critical and oppositional gaze. The ways in which the racialized field of vision has been questioned

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[53] Barrett, *Blackness and Value*.
[54] Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, p. 23.
[55] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, p. 6.
[56] Amin, "The Reminder of Race," p. 8.
[57] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 67.
[58] Foster, "Preface," in *Vision and Visuality*, p. IX.

and challenged and how black people have always been struggling not only for more realistic representations, but also for their own "right to look"[59] will be the main themes of the next chapter.

3.2. Hypervisibility

It has been argued that, in US visual culture, African Americans are simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible.[60] This paradox is the direct consequence of the ways in which the racial scopic regime constructs black subjectivity and subjugates blacks through visual coding. Indeed, on the one hand black subjects are a visible and troubling presence, as they are defined by their inescapable racial markings.[61] On the other hand, in order to maintain power relations, their presence is constantly denied at every level of society. This longstanding paradox is best described by the notion of hypervisibility that is frequently used in black cultural studies to

> […] describe processes that produce the overrepresentation of certain images of blacks and the visual currency of these images in public culture. It simultaneously announces the continual invisibility of ethical and enfleshed subjects in various realms of polity, economies, and discourse, so that blackness remains aligned with negation and decay.[62]

Therefore, black people are always exposed and almost impossible not to see, as "the very markers that reveal you to the rest of the world, your dark skin and your kinky/curly hair, are visual."[63] At the same time, they are underexposed and marginalized and black experience is constantly excluded from political and ethical life, making them invisible in the history of the United States, as well as in current public discourse and representations.[64]

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[59] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*.

[60] See for example David Marriot, *Hunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007; Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*; Smith, "Visual Culture and Race;" bell hooks, *Black Looks*.

[61] Barrett, *Blackness and Value*.

[62] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 16.

[63] Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," cited in Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 15.

[64] Marriot, *Hunted Life*, p. XX.

3.3.Whiteness as the norm and white privilege

The scopic regime of race makes it natural to see and interpret human differentiation in racial terms. In particular, in the context of the United States, but not exclusively, the concept of race is articulated in the visual field around the binary opposition of black and white. It is worth noting that this optical paradigm is organized around two colors that are entirely abstract; indeed, the black/white opposition is the extreme simplification of a spectrum of colors in which the two opposite poles do not even exist.[65] Nonetheless, racialized visuality acts as if black and white and the meanings that they carry are real.

As seen in the previous section, the scopic regime of race, in this polar opposition, constructs black skin as hypervisible, but what is important to highlight is that, consequently, whiteness is perceived as the unmarked norm, the ordinary, the standard. In other words, hypervisibility is a condition that only affects black people exactly because they are the ones who are 'read' in racial terms, while "[…] white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people."[66]

In his pioneering work about the history and the meanings attached to whiteness, Richard Dyer explains that in a visual culture that is based on the visual field as source of knowledge and power, "[t]here is no more powerful position than being 'just' human"[67] and therefore being visible as white means being in a position of privilege. In a certain way, it could be argued that also whiteness is both visible and invisible: on the one hand, being visible as white is itself a "passport to privilege"; on the other hand, being perceived as the human norm implies that racial superiority resides in that which cannot be seen. In other words, it is in unseen whiteness that resides power and there is no stronger and more secure position of power than that of the watcher.[68] As a consequence, according to Dyer, in order to reveal and challenge the racial hierarchy, it is not enough to analyze and question the stereotypes around which blackness has been constructed, but it is also imperative to make whiteness "strange," to identify white people as racialized subjects

[65] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," p. 19.
[66] Dyer, *White*, p. 1.
[67] Ivi, p. 2.
[68] Ivi, p. 44; bell hooks, *Black Looks*, p. 117.

and ultimately, "to make visible what is rendered invisible when viewed as the normative state of existence […]."[69]

Dyer, in his project to make whiteness strange, takes inspiration from the short essay *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack* written by Peggy McIntosh in 1989, in which she draws a list of everyday situations that show how being white gives her access to a series of unearned advantages that only derive from being identified as white.[70] More importantly, she argues that white people are taught not to see these assets and are made to believe that their accomplishments depend on their individual characteristics only. Because white people seem unable to see their white privilege it is necessary to unpack this "invisible weightless knapsack" and to show whiteness not only as a privilege but also as a position of power that reproduces the racial hierarchy.[71]

4. The construction of the Other

> [M]y experience of being a young black girl was one of living in relationship to images of blackness and black subjects that circulated broadly in the public sphere. As a child, I knew that I had no control over these images and how they were disseminated, but that many of my interactions in public spaces, with blacks and non-blacks, would be in conversation with these images. I also knew that those images, more often than not, presented a challenge to my existence […][72]

This quote taken from Nicole Fleetwood's work about the iconicity of blackness, shows how blackness is an inherently social and cultural production; race is perpetually reproduced and naturalized through a longstanding and complex visual archive that translates in visual terms the racial ordering of reality.[73] Indeed, the hierarchical definition of human differentiation relies on a set of images that can be 'read' in the black skin. The hegemonic white gaze, therefore, by using the filter of race produces and reproduces blackness as an actual "epidermal scheme."

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[69] Hazel Carby, "The multicultural wars," cited in Dyer R., *White*, p. 3.

[70] Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack," *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, July/August 1989, pp. 10-12.

[71] Outside the academia, the project of making whiteness strange and to challenge the equation of being white with being human can be retraced in the recent campaigns for inclusive make-up. Indeed, most of the colors and shades are tested and created for a 'standard' white audience and cannot be used by people with darker skin in the same ways. However, in the last years, also thanks to the influence of pop stars, such as Rihanna or Beyoncé, there has been a huge movement for the production of make-up that takes into account all shades of skin colors.

[72] Nicole Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*, New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers University Press, 2015, p. 1.

[73] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," p. 27.

4.1. The Fanonian moment and double consciousness

The power of the hegemonic white gaze, that is the power of the spectator[74], fixes the meanings and values attached to blackness in the hyper visible sign of the black skin. In order to explain the mechanisms that inscribe the race on the skin of black people, many studies of black visuality and race take as their starting point *Black Skin, White Masks* by the French intellectual Franz Fanon written in 1952, and in particular an anecdote that is considered an actual racial primal scene. In this scene, that Fleetwood calls "the Fanonian moment,"[75] the black body is imprisoned by the gaze of a white child:

> "Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.
> "Look, a Negro!" It was true. It amused me.
> "Look, a Negro!" The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.
> "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.
> I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity* […]. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema.
> I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships […][76]

In this anecdote, there are several aspects that have become fundamental for both race and visual studies. Fanon exemplifies the huge power of the white gaze to imprison the black body in the hyper visible sign of the skin[77]. Through the hegemonic gaze, the black subject is deprived of his/her individuality in the process of epidermalization, which Stuart Hall defines as the literal "inscription of race in the skin."[78] Race is therefore not only the object of a gaze, but it is produced by the gaze itself.

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[74] bell hooks, *Black Looks*, p. 117.

[75] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 21.

[76] Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press, 1967 [1952], p. 84-85.

[77] Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value*, Hanover (NH): Dartmouth College Press, 2013.

[78] Stuart Hall, "The After-Life of Franz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks*?," in Alan Read, (ed.), *The Fact of Blackness: Franz Fanon and Visual Representation*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1996, p. 16.

Racial recognition, that is the process of recognition of the black subject as such, therefore, can only be painful, as it is mediated by the gaze of the white person that has constructed the concept of blackness through the visual archive of degrading racial images. The black subject comes to self-knowledge and discovers his/her blackness by being identified as black by an external gaze ("Look, a Negro!") and by the perpetual production and circulation of a visual narrative that sketches an "historical-racial schema" on the black body.

The skin and the body, therefore, carry the cultural meaning of blackness as a denigrated position, but the elements that constitute this racial schema, as Fanon states, "had been provided for me […] by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories."[79] Within these dynamics of seeing and being seen, emerges one of the foundational features of African American identity, namely the concept of "double-consciousness." It was first used by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* to explain this "sense to see oneself through the eyes of others"[80] that permeates so clearly Fanon's racial primal scene and that he calls a "third-person consciousness."[81] Double-consciousness, though painful, is an inescapable condition for black people that are forced to internalize the codes and meanings of the process of racial recognition imposed by the white gaze. As Hall puts it, "[t]hey had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as 'Other'."[82] However, as it will be argued more in detail in chapter two, it is worth noting that black subjects, throughout US history, have always challenged the authority of the gaze and have claimed for themselves the position of a seeing subject that creates meanings in the visual field through their oppositional gaze.[83]

4.2. Stereotyping and the representation of Otherness

Race, in order to maintain its power, must be continuously reproduced so that it is perceived as natural, as something given that cannot be questioned. The reproduction of race, as already stated, relies mainly on the visual field as the privileged site where meanings about race are constructed and racial hierarchies and classifications are

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[79] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 84.

[80] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 1903. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp.

[81] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 83.

[82] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," cited in bell hooks, *Black Looks*, p. 3.

[83] bell hooks, *Black Looks*; Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*.

imposed.[84] The US racial order relies on the representation of the black subject through a set of stereotypical images that have been produced throughout the centuries starting from the period of plantation slavery. There is, therefore, a strong connection between dynamics of domination and representation; as bell hooks states: "[f]rom slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central in the maintenance of any system of racial dominion."[85]

The major strategy for the ideological and social construction of the black subject as completely Other is stereotyping. The philosopher Homi Bhabha, in his famous essay "The Other Question", states that stereotyping is a mode of representation that is based on the concept of fixity: the Other is constructed as a fixed and unchanging reality that only carries a specific meaning (e.g., bestiality, sexual depravation, primitivity, etc.). What it is important to highlight, however, is the fact that the power of stereotypical discourse resides in the ambivalent way in which it works. On the one hand, the fixed reality of the other is presented as given and natural, thus constructing a "regime of truth;"[86] on the other hand, stereotype is a form of knowledge that must be anxiously repeated in order to be perceived as real and to have the power to create and maintain racial hierarchies.

It is clear that stereotyping is a crucial element in the exercise of symbolic power, as it reduces the subordinated social groups to a few, simple, and essential characteristics, which are presented as fixed by nature. Moreover, it contributes to the maintenance of the racialized order by setting symbolic boundaries between "[…] the 'normal' and the 'deviant', […] the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable', what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other', between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them."[87] Within the scopic regime of race that prioritizes the visual field as creator of meanings, it is obvious that the key signifier of racial difference in the stereotype is also the most visible, namely skin. As the "Fanonian moment" already showed, skin becomes the epidermal scheme, a visible sign of the Other's inferiority and degeneracy.[88]

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[84] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Stuart Hall et al. (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson, p. 511.

[85] bell hooks, *Black Looks*, p. 3.

[86] Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture,* London: Routledge, 2001.

[87] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997, p. 258.

[88] Bhabha, "The Other Question."

Degrading images of Otherness, and in particular of blackness, have always been used as one of the main justifications for the oppression and the exploitation of black people in the United States.[89] Moreover, the social construction of this inherent opposition is also crucial for the creation of whiteness; indeed, it could be argued that whiteness exists and has a specific meaning only when it is set against the racialized black Other.[90] The centrality of blackness to the construction of whiteness mirrors the concept of "Orientalism" theorized by Edward Said; he believed that Europe constituted "the Orient" as a fixed and unified racial, geographical and political reality as a means through which to make sense of itself.[91]

In the same way, in the US context, "African Americans […] remain the negative resource of valuable white Americans,"[92] meaning that whiteness has been constructed through a process of negative recognition: while blackness carries fixed and, most of the time, degrading meanings, white people are given the privilege to see themselves in "their own infinite variety."[93] Being imprisoned in a stereotype, that is being defined by a limited range of images, means to be denied any form of subjectivity and as a consequence to carry "the burden of representation," as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam call it in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*.[94] Albert Memmi, to refer to the same idea, theorized the concept of the "mark of the plural" to explain that the racialized subject is denied the possibility to establish his/her own identity and can only be seen as one of the stereotypical images that is part of the visual archive of race; the white gaze reifies the black body as site of projection, as the very image of Otherness.[95]

As previously noted, the stereotype, for its message to be successful, requires that it is repeated and reproduced incessantly. Moreover, the visuality of race includes a wide range of images that are not produced in a semiotic void, but they gain meaning when they are read in context. In other words, all the images through which difference and Otherness are represented are in an intertextual relationship; as Hall argues, "they do not

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[89] Ivi

[90] Dyer, *White*, p. 13.

[91] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987.

[92] Barret, *Blackness and Value*, p. 31.

[93] Dyer, *White*, p. 12.

[94] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 183.

[95] Anna Scacchi, "Mettere in scena la razza. Visualità, autenticità e performance razziale," in InteRGRace, *Visualità e (anti)razzismo*, p. 48.

carry meaning or 'signify' on their own" but they are inextricably linked as they "gain in meaning when they are read in context, against or in connection with one another."[96]

It is worth noting that this longstanding and complex visual archive continues to play a crucial role in today's US society and it is a kind of memory of the past that is often in contrast with the official narrative of the nation. As Scacchi argues, in US public discourse and in the "official" narration of the nation the most shameful aspects, i.e. slavery, segregation, and institutionalized racism, tend to be disavowed or censured, notwithstanding the fact that they actually represent the very foundation of the economic and political power of the United States. In the visual archive, however, this 'invisible' past is still alive and resurfaces continuously in current representations even without the awareness of the racial history of these images; in other words, these images still hold a strong power in today's society, as they function as a framework through which reality is perceived, and they influence society as a whole, both at the popular and at the institutional level.[97]

The next paragraph will be devoted to the analysis of the stereotypical images of blackness that have been constructed throughout the centuries to justify the oppression and the violence perpetrated against black people. However, before moving to the actual analysis of what the black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins calls "controlling images," it is important to address two theoretical issues that must be taken into account in the subsequent analysis.

First, as Shohat and Stam have argued, while it is crucial to challenge and question the stereotypical representation of blackness as a carrier of negative and degrading meanings only, the opposite movement towards the creation of "authentic" images of blackness might turn out to be problematic. Indeed, the concepts of realism and authenticity imply that there is a neutral truth, a kind of "essentially descriptive"[98] truth that could replace the stereotypical representation of blackness.[99] As a matter of fact, an ideologically neutral representation is impossible, as the "the conceptual filters through

[96] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 232.
[97] Scacchi, "Mettere in scena la razza," pp. 48-49.
[98] Barret, *Blackness and Value*, p. 43.
[99] Shohat and Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," pp. 178-182.

which forms of human otherness are mediated"[100] precede any 'authentic' or 'realistic' representation.

The second theoretical aspect has to do with the limitations of the stereotype approach to tackle the issue of the representation of blackness in the United States. On the one hand, the study of stereotypes in popular culture is extremely important to reveal the oppressive patterns of discrimination that these negative portrayals carry with themselves and the fact that they function as a form of actual social control. At the same time, however, the stereotype-centered approach should not be concerned with the images alone, but also with the historical and social context from which they emerged, as well as the development that a single stereotypical image and its cultural meanings have undergone over time. Moreover, the focus on individual images might be useful to identify explicit racism but, at the same time, there is the risk that institutionally structured racism may not emerge. Therefore, while the stereotype approach remains important for the analysis of the representation of blackness, it is also crucial to take into account the broader context and focus on the role of the stereotypes within the larger configurations of power.[101]

5. Representations of blackness

The process of subjectification of black people and the construction of blackness as an abject condition is based on the visual representation of human difference. As seen in the previous sections, the scopic regime of race is based on stereotypical images that construct the racialized subject as something inherently Other from the Self; as a consequence, the racialized subject is perceived as something less than the human (white) norm and the hierarchical classification of humanity appears to be natural, the discursive translation of the actual ordering of the world.[102]

The creation of racial blackness and its negative connotations inscribed on the skin has played a crucial role in the construction of Western modernity and represents the very basis of the United States as a nation. The production and reproduction of classificatory and stereotypical figures have a long history with roots in the European imperialist project

[100] Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, p. XII.
[101] Shohat and Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," pp. 198-204.
[102] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," p. 20.

and the Atlantic slave trade. The visual representation of black subjects as degraded human beings had a fundamental role in maintaining power relationship; as Barret states, "[…] the scopic is a preeminent cultural matrix of power and order."[103] Throughout the centuries, the stereotypical images and their related meanings developed, according to the changing social order that needed to be maintained; however, as Hartman argues, there is an "amazing continuity" in the "injurious constitution of blackness,"[104] whose aim is to give a supposedly rational explanation to racism and subjugation, both in the past and in today's US society.

The final part of the chapter will address the historical construction of the visual archive of race, starting from the Enlightenment period and with a specific focus on the stereotypes of blackness that originated during slavery and the ways in which they survived and developed after emancipation.

5.1. Enlightenment and scientific racism

The visual representation of human difference and the idea of an existing racial hierarchy becomes popular and widely accepted starting from the Enlightenment era. In their effort to classify human knowledge according to supposedly 'rational' principles, Enlightenment thinkers were the first to organize human diversity systematically in hierarchical terms. In order to do so, they applied the new paradigm of natural history, that was first conceived for the classification of plants and animals, to humankind itself. Therefore, during the Enlightenment period, elaborated concepts of race began to be developed and the inherent difference among 'human species' started to be perceived as an incontrovertible scientific truth that was mainly based on visual evidence.[105] It is in this period that the Enlightenment thought about the hierarchical order of races based on a supposed purity, replaces previous notions that served to justify the oppression and enslavement of black people, such as Boemus' biblical theory of the curse of Ham.[106]

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[103] Barret, *Blackness and Value*, p. 216.
[104] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, pp. 8-9.
[105] Dyer, *White*, p. 17.
[106] According to this theory, that goes back to the sixteenth century, all humans were descendants from the sons of Noah: Ham, Shem and Japhet. However, as a punishment for Ham looking at Noah's nakedness, Ham's descendants degenerated into blackness, whereas the civilized, who remained white, descended from Shem and Japhet.

These ideas about racial purity based on a new kind of scientific evidence were also perceived as aesthetic criteria that linked the superiority of the white race to the standards of beauty of classical art. While white people were perceived as the pinnacle of the human race that carried a symbolic sense of aesthetic superiority, other races were often compared to animals and reduced to inherent inferiority and bestiality. At the mundane level, in popular representations, ideas about the racial superiority of white people were supported by images that created the association between white skin and purity, cleanness, civilization and beauty; in the same way, dark skin was linked to dirtiness, primitivity and barbarism.[107]

The concept of race developed in the eighteenth century took hold in the nineteenth century in the theorization of scientific racism, a field of study that was inextricably

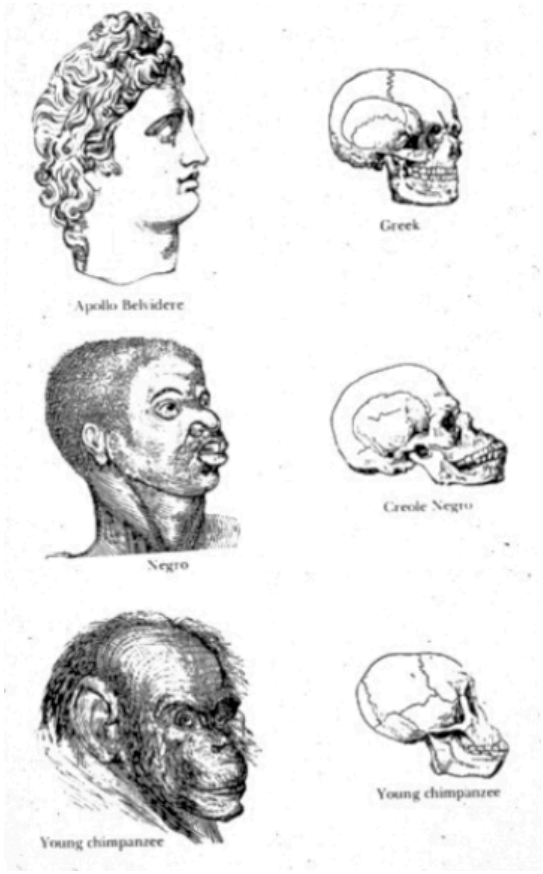

Figure 1: Apollo Belvedere, Negro, Young Chimpanzee. From Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researches (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1855). Widener Library, Harvard University.

[107] McClintock, *Imperial Leather*; Anna Scacchi, "Le figlie di Hagar: la rappresentazione del corpo femminile nero negli Stati Uniti," in Camilla Cattarulla (ed.), *Identità americane: corpo e nazione*, Roma: Cooper, 2006, pp. 21-22.

bound to the technological innovations that characterized this century. Nineteenth-century racist thought, though it continued the tradition intertwining science and aesthetics to explain racial superiority, was more concerned with proving the inherent biological difference through measurable distinctions (Fig. 1). Scientific racism included a wide range of disciplines, such as phrenology, craniology, anthropometry and genetics whose goal was to provide scientific ground to the visual evidence of the racial moral inferiority of blacks, that was inscribed in their body, in their very physical characteristics.[108]

Integral to the project of scientific racism to explain racial difference in visual terms, is the exhibition of real black people, who were presented as the embodiment of Otherness and difference. The most famous case is that of the African woman Saartje Baartman, who was also ironically known as "The Hottentot Venus" (Fig. 2). This exhibition of the racialized body was perceived at the popular level as an actual "racial spectacle", reproduced in cartoons and illustrations, but gave also the possibility to the proponents of scientific racism to demonstrate her racial inferiority by measuring and

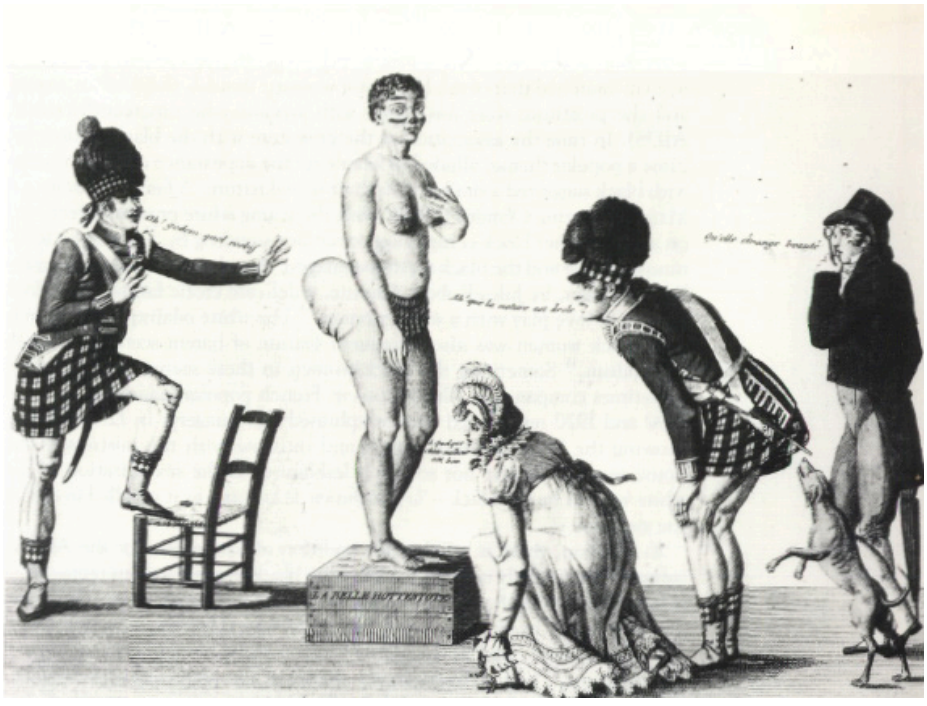

Figure 2: 19th century French print "La Belle Hottentot" of Saartjie Baartman

[108] William Fitzhugh Brundage, *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*, University of North Carolina Press, 2011, pp. 70-71.

scrutinizing every detail of her body, which came to represent the proof of her absolute otherness as well as the indisputable separation of races.[109]

As already noted, scientific racism relied heavily on technological innovations, and especially photography played a crucial role in creating and disseminating the visuality of racial differentiation. The power of photography resides in the fact that it was perceived as a "neutral" instrument that only registers how reality actually is. As McClintock argues: "[w]ith photography, Western knowledge and Western authority became synonymous with the real."[110] As matter of fact, photography has been used as a way to subjugate the black body and reduce the subject to a mere object and victim of the dominant white gaze. Fleetwood emphasizes how photographic technologies were crucial to "[…] assign racial categories and validate racist discourse about difference and biology. The indexing of racial subject through the photographic lens" was indeed a "method of enforcing violence and subjugation of certain groups".[111]

From this first analysis of the creation of the concept of race as something visible and natural, it should be clear that racism precedes the conceptualization of race. In other words, it is not because races exist that racism was possible, but the exact opposite. As Mitchell explains:

> [r]acism is the brute fact, the bodily reality, and race is the derivative term, devised either as an imaginary cause for the effects of racism or as an attempt to provide a rational explanation, a "realistic picture" and diagnosis of this mysterious syndrome known as racism. Race is not the cause of racism but its excuse, alibi, explanation, or reaction formation.[112]

5.2. Plantation slavery

While racialized ideologies based on scientific racism were mainly developed in Europe, they also played an important role for US society and the ways in which race was conceived and portrayed. The binary oppositions created within the colonialist and imperialist discourse served to justify the enslavement of millions of Africans, the Atlantic slave trade, as well as the institution of plantation slavery.

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[109] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 264-265; Scacchi, "Le figlie di Hagar," p. 17.

[110] McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 135.

[111] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 57.

[112] Mitchell, *Seeing through Race* p. 19.

The basic and more powerful opposition was that between 'Culture' and 'Nature', which was visually inscribed in the color of the skin: white stands for superior intellectual development and civilization, whereas black is the mark of primitivism and savagery. It is therefore clear how visual discourse is inextricably linked to the production of racialized knowledge: the body itself became the "totemic object,"[113] the visible symbol of difference and otherness and provided the evidence for the naturalization of racial differences. In other words, racialized knowledge is produced through the representation of difference that is inscribed on the real bodies of black people.[114]

During slavery, at popular level, the naturalization of the racial hierarchy and the reproduction of racialized knowledge relied on the representation of blackness through a set of stereotypical images. The main feature of the racialized regime of representation that was constructed during slavery was its effort to depict the subordinate status of blacks as a natural condition that derived from innate and unmodifiable characteristics. According to Hall,

> [t]he logic behind naturalization is simple. If the differences between black and white people are cultural, then they are open to modification and change. But if they are natural - as the slaveholders believed - then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. 'Naturalization' is therefore a representational strategy designed to *fix* difference, and thus *secure it forever*.[115]

Therefore, the main aim of stereotypical representations of black people was to secure and maintain relationships of power and dominion and justify the violence and oppression by making slavery appear as natural and inevitable.[116]

Before moving to the analysis of these stereotypical representations, it is worth noting that stereotypes depicting black women differed from those created to subjugate black men. In general, controlling images of men aimed at the infantilization of the black male slave, who was deprived of his masculine attributes and authority. This portrayal was an integral part of the depiction of slavery as a patriarchal institution dominated by the white male slaveholder; as a consequence, black men were to be deprived of any form of authority or familial responsibility.[117] As regards black women, their representations

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[113] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 244.
[114] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," pp. 23-24.
[115] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 245.
[116] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 69.
[117] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 262.

were entirely centered around their sexuality and the need to control their fertility. According to the *partus sequitur ventrem* rule enforced under slavery, which assigned to the offspring the condition of the mother, women were the means through which slavery itself was reproduced, making the body of black women a crucial site of oppression based on both race and gender.

Sambo

The first and most enduring stereotype of the black man is the Sambo type, the docile, simple-minded, and childish black slave (Fig. 3). The Sambo stereotype was created as a

Figure 3: The Sambo caricature

defense for slavery, as it was the epitome of the "happy slave", a jolly overgrown child who was happy to serve his master. The Sambo embodied the innate laziness of black slaves as well as their natural attitude to subordination and acceptance of dependency from the white master. As noted above, infantilization was a common and widespread representational strategy during slavery, because it helped to secure the position of the white male slaveowner as the only patriarchal authority.[118]

Tom

The Tom caricature, just as the Sambo stereotype, was born before the Civil War as a defense of slavery and contributed to an idealized and sentimentalized depiction of the life of the slaves. Tom represents the good, Christian and happily submissive house slave; he is happy to take care of his white masters and he is eager to serve. He was usually

[118] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 262.

portrayed as an old man, physically weak, psychologically dependent on whites for approval. Tom's submissive nature and loyalty to the white master is indefectible: even if he is "[…] chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, [he] keeps the faith, n'er turn against his white massas, and remains hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind."[119] Tom is indeed the model slave, a non-threatening and reassuring image created for the white audience and that helped the establishment and maintaining of white supremacy.

Mammy

Mammy is the first controlling image created to enforce and maintain black women's subordination under slavery. The mammy, a nurturing and loyal figure, is the female counterpart of the Tom, she is the faithful and obedient domestic servant (Fig. 4). Her depiction suggest that she loves her masters' children and family even more than their own. According to Collins, the mammy is the symbol of the ideal black female relationship to dominant white male power; "[e]ven though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White family, the mammy still knows her 'place'

Figure 4: The Mammy stereotype

as obedient servant. She accepted her subordination."[120] As noted above, control of sexuality played an important role in the creation of stereotypes of black women. The Mammy is the antithesis of the white standards of beauty, she is depicted as an

[119] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films*, New York-London: Continuum, 1973, pp. 4-6.

[120] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 72-73.

unattractive matronly figure whose sexuality is simply nonexistent. Because she was not seen as a sexual being, she could never represent a threat to the white woman; the Mammy was a surrogate image to contain all the fears of the white word related to black female sexuality.

Jezebel

The controlling power of the figure of the Jezebel works in opposition to the figure of the Mammy. While the Mammy is a decidedly asexual figure, the Jezebel is the portrayal of the hyper-sexualized and sexually aggressive black woman, who is perceived as if she is governed almost entirely by her libido.[121] Under slavery, this kind of depiction mainly served to provide a justification for the widespread sexual abuses perpetrated by white males on black female slaves. The Jezebel's excessive appetites were also a rationale for controlling black women's fertility and depicting black female slaves as breeders, rather than mothers, by claiming that black women were able to produce children "as easily as animals".[122] The opposition between the Mammy and the Jezebel is the clear exemplification of the power that stereotypical representations have on the lives of the people that they pretend to portray. Black women are thus trapped within an inescapable binary opposition; the racialized regime of representation subjected black women to an extreme form of reductionism and depicts them as either oversexualized or asexual beings.[123]

Starting from the early nineteenth century, these stereotypical images were brought to the white public, especially in the North, with the blackface minstrel shows that became increasingly popular over time and were still performed at the turn of the nineteenth century. In these shows, white performers darkened their faces with burnt cork and painted exaggerated white mouths over their own to create grotesque caricatures of black people.[124] The stereotypical figures of the Sambo, the Mammy, the Tom, etc. were the main characters of minstrel shows and ultimately the images through which white

[121] Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, p. 119.
[122] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 78.
[123] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 266.
[124] Leonardo De Franceschi, "Spaghetti blackface: pratiche performative al di là della linea del colore," in Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh (ed.), *La realtà transnazionale della razza. Dinamiche di razzializzazione in prospettiva comparata*, special issue of *Iperstoria*, 6, 2015, pp. 77-79.

Americans learned how to see black people and the values attached to the idea of blackness itself. Minstrel shows were crucial in the creation and spreading of controlling images that were used first to obscure the oppressive relationship of power in the plantations, "[…] by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural"[125] and, after emancipation, to support the exclusion of black people from citizenship. What is more, the racist and oppressive practice of blackface became the visual repertoire through which white people learned how to see black people as inherently inferior, trapped in a few and essential traits. These controlling stereotypical images were also found on a myriad of everyday objects, as well as magazine illustrations, advertising campaigns, books, etc. Ultimately, white Americans learned how to see race itself through these stereotypes, thus building a highly racialized knowledge that defined not only the rules and boundaries of a degraded blackness, but that, at the same time, created a common sense of whiteness as superior.[126]

5.3. Anti-slavery racial imagery

While the basic "grammar of race" was learned at the popular level through the stereotypes constructed under slavery, it is worth noting that, in the same period, anti-

Figure 5: Josiah Wedgwood, "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" (1787)

Figure 6: McPherson & Oliver, "The Scourged Back" (1863)

[125] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 2.

[126] Scacchi, "Mettere in scena la razza," p. 51-52; Hartman S., *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 29.

slavery campaigns offered a different representation of black people, though not less problematic. Indeed, the visual culture of the abolitionist movement confirmed in a paradoxical way the representations of black people produced to justify slavery about their innate submissive nature and their lack of independence. [127]

According to Trodd, the main characteristic of the visual culture of the abolitionist movement were paternalism, dehumanization, depersonalization and sensationalism; ultimately an iconography "[…] that heroizes the abolitionist liberator, minimizes slave agency, pornifies violence and indulges in voyeurism."[128] Anti-slavery visual culture, therefore relied on a sentimentalized version of the stereotyping that was centered around two main images, namely the supplicant slave and the scourged back.

The supplicant slave (Fig. 5) with the famous 'am I not a man and a brother' slogan was a hugely popular symbol created by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. It was reproduced on every kind of object as a decorative feature. The figure reproduced is a passive black man kneeling and pleading for pity and compassion with his hands raised. It is the image of a non-threatening slave that suffers passively in chains and waits to receive his liberation, which will be generously bestowed by enlightened white men. The agency of the slave is completely denied and ultimately "[t]he image invites not solidarity with the enslaved but paternalistic association with the morally righteous abolitionists who will answer the helpless captive's question by releasing his chains."[129]

A similar passivity can be found also in the second most common trope of antislavery visual culture, that is the image of the scourged back. Most famously, this image circulated in the nineteenth century as a daguerreotype which showed a slave, identified only by his name Gordon, with his back scarred from whippings (Fig. 6). In this photo, Gordon is not seen as an individual, but he is reduced to his tortured back that becomes the symbol of slavery's violence inscribed in the slave's body. The image is part of what has been called the abolitionist "pornography of pain," where the black wounded body is a spectacle enabling the white viewer to show empathy and benevolence.[130]

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[127] Anna Scacchi, "Da Gordon a Django. Figurazioni dell'eroismo e memoria della schiavitù negli Stati Uniti," in Petrovich N., *La "realtà" transnazionale della razza*, p. 18.

[128] Zoe Trodd, "Am I Still Not a Man and a Brother? Protest Memory in Contemporary Anti-slavery Visual Culture," *Slavery & Abolition*, XXXIV, 2, 2013, p. 339.

[129] Trodd, "Am I Still Not a Man and a Brother?," p. 340.

[130] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 22.

5.4. After emancipation

After the emancipation of the slaves in the United States in 1863, the most violent forms of physical exploitation and degradation were replaced by a different system of racial segregation, in which the problem of the color line and "the Negro question" remained central. Therefore, the stereotypical regime of representation that constructed the image of black people in the white imaginary, far from disappearing, persisted through representations of blackness that emerged from the basic stereotypes created during slavery[131]. As Hartman states, "tragic continuities" can be retraced in antebellum and postbellum constitutions of blackness as an abject and threatening condition, as

> [t]he abolition of slavery presumably announced the end of subjugation based on race or servitude, but the ascendancy of formal race - that is, immutable, inherent, and naturalized racial differences - perpetuated the stigma of inferiority based on race […][132]

Controlling the freed population, therefore, remained a crucial issue in the new US society. Representations of black womanhood still trapped black women in the binary opposition between the hyper-sexualized Jezebel and the asexual servant. It could be argued that the Mammy stereotype changed slightly after emancipation and was transfigured in the widespread figure of Aunt Jemima, who first became a character of minstrel shows and, at the end of the nineteenth century, helped market a real brand, which could be found in every American home, represented on every kitchen tool.[133] Her iconography, although it changed over time, is entirely based on the attire and physical features of the Mammy; moreover, her strong link to the slavery period is marked by the term "aunt", which had been a southern way to address older enslaved people. Just as the Mammy, Aunt Jemima is a loyal servant that is happy to cook for her white "family", and it was through this stereotype that the association of the black woman with domestic work, especially cooking, became fixed in the American mainstream.

While images of black womanhood varied only slightly, a new powerful image of the black man appeared after the emancipation, namely that of the savage brute. During slavery, the depiction of black men mainly focused on their need for guidance and simple

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[131] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 250.
[132] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, pp. 162-163.
[133] Scacchi, "Le figlie di Hagar."

mindedness to portray slavery itself as a patriarchal institution; in fact, the depiction of the black male as a brute would have been counterproductive for maintaining the social order. During the Reconstruction period, however, the idea that without the patriarchal control of slaveholders black men would resort to criminal savagery and violence, gained increasing popularity. The belief that the newly-emancipated blacks were a "black peril" continued into the early 1900s and, though it changed over time, the black male body is still perceived as threatening in contemporary US society. This figure of the black brute was based on imperialist theories about the savage from the Dark Continent and was depicted as a hyper-masculine and sexually insatiable beast. As already happened to black women, black manhood too could then be described in terms of the binary opposition between infantilization and hyper-sexuality. This new image of the black as a brute sexual predator encouraged the acts of racial violence perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan; as Hall argues: "[a]lleged rape was the principal justification advanced for the lynching of black men in the Southern states."[134]

5.5. The legacy of racial stereotypes in contemporary US society

The racial imagery created during slavery continued to hold its power on the lives of black people throughout the twentieth century, even after the period of the Civil Right Movements and the achievement of a supposed equality. Representations of blackness in the new media, especially cinema, remained inextricably tied to preexisting stereotypes and the basic 'grammar of race' established during slavery.[135] Moreover, it should be noted that this kind of racialized knowledge invested not only the representations of blackness, but also technological development itself. Both photography and cinema were not racially neutral, on the contrary, the film stock itself was developed to favor lighter skin tones, as color balance was based on white skin.[136]

With regard to new stereotypes of black people, Collins argues that during the 1960s a new controlling image of black womanhood emerged, namely the matriarch. She

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[134] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 262.

[135] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*.

[136] See for example the study conducted by Lorna Roth about color balance in photography, "Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity," in Hall Ronald (ed.), *The Melanin Millennium: Skin Color as 21st-Century International Discourse*, New York: Springer, 2012; for cinema, see Shohat and Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," p. 186.

is depicted as the "bad" black mother, the antithesis of the archetypal Mammy who was a nurturing and caring figure. Within the context of outspoken black activism that accused institutionalized racism for economic and social inequality, the figure of the matriarch was used by the dominant group to blame black women for their own condition of economic exploitation. Depicted as overly aggressive and unfeminine, the matriarch was indeed a failed mammy, a negative stigma for all the black women that were trying to reject the image of the submissive servant.[137] In order to justify the economic disadvantage of blacks and the enduring racial hierarchy, dominant group created other class-specific controlling images, such as the "welfare mother" and the "black lady"[138]. As for black men, the stereotype that is probably more widespread in contemporary society is that of the "buck", the brutal and hypersexualized man, a menacing figure that derives directly from the post-emancipation savage. In her famous essay about white paranoia, Judith Butler uses the Rodney King case to explain how powerful racial imagery about the inherently violent nature of black men is, as it enabled the defense attorney to use the video of King's brutal beating to support his claim that the policemen were endangered.[139]

In conclusion, what is important to underline and what Butler shows in her essay, is that it is necessary to understand race as a powerful visual cultural dynamic. Therefore, while the analysis of racial imagery is crucial, it is not enough. The focus must be on the act of seeing itself, in order to recognize the visual field as "a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful."[140] What must be identified, are the ways in which the scopic regime of race makes us see human differentiation according to racial traits; while biological notions of race are completely discredited, it is still not possible to claim that race does not exist, as it still is a major component in the everyday life of people. As Barret argues, racial blackness, though biologically non existent, is nonetheless an existential reality.[141]

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[137] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 75-76; Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfaù, "How to get away with stereotypes: Angry Black Women e crossover nella produzione di Shonda Rhimes," in InteRGRace, *Visualità e (anti)razzismo*, pp. 74-75.

[138] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 78-80.

[139] Butler, "Endangered/endangering."

[140] Ivi, p. 17.

[141] Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, p. 227.

CHAPTER 2
SELF-REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACKNESS

As seen in the first chapter, for the enforcement and maintenance of the US system of racial domination, control over representation and images has proven to be fundamental. Indeed, through the scopic regime of race, blackness has been constructed as an abject condition, which is perceived as inherently Other from the white unmarked norm. As already argued, while the analysis of the racial imagery constructed from slavery on is crucial, it is more important to focus on the act of seeing itself as a mediated activity which is informed by social and cultural constructions and that is at the center of dynamics of power and hegemony. Throughout the history of the United States, black people have been constructed as subjects of the white dominant gaze and have been denied the possibility to articulate their own subjectivity. This aspect is especially important with regards to the visual field, as African American have always been "disbarred from meaningful participation in the sense-making activity of vision" and have therefore perceived vision mainly as "a hostile realm of significance".[142]

While this chapter is concerned with "the oppositional gaze" and the ways in which black people have challenged and contested the dominant regime of representation by employing a wide range of counterstrategies, it should be noted that this issue is still highly problematic in today's US society. As bell hook stated in her seminal 1992 essay *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, "[t]hat the field of representation remains a place of struggle is most evident when we critically examine contemporary representations of blackness and black people". [143] In order to exemplify how a representation of blackness that is still informed by hegemonic white values affects the life of black people in the US, the feminist scholar tells an anecdote that "painfully reminded" her of this fact. While she was visiting friends, she realized how their preadolescent daughter, despite being raised in an affirming black context, had internalized the white gaze and its aesthetic, "a way of

[142] Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 217.
[143] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston: South End Press, 1992, p. 3.

looking and seeing the world that negates her value"[144], and how this caused enormous pain and rage in the little girl. Indeed, she had learned to accept hateful images of herself created by the power of the colonizing gaze that constructed and perpetuated black subjectivity from slavery on. This sufferance, the impossibility to control her image and to escape the colonized vision is an instance of W.E.B: Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, that is the fact of seeing oneself through the frame of race constructed by the hegemonic gaze.[145]

1. Regaining power over identity

In previous sections it has been argued that black identity is painfully marked by this inherent double consciousness that is also exemplified in the "Fanonian moment", in which the white gaze petrifies and traps the black subject in an inescapable epidermal schema. However, this condition does not mean that the hegemonic gaze reduces the black subject to a passive victim. As a matter of fact, it is from this very condition that liberatory possibilities and the agency of black people can emerge. [146]

1.1. Second sight

According to Du Bois, though learning to see oneself through the lens of the hegemonic gaze is a rather painful condition, it also enables the emergence of a collateral feature of black identity, what he called "second sight."[147] This concept is an integral part of the identity of blacks not only in the United States but all over the black diaspora in the Americas and also, to some extent, of all the oppressed minorities in the Western world. Even though it might seem contradictory, Du Bois conceived second sight as a kind of privileged position; indeed, the choice to define the concept itself "second sight" refers to the idea of clairvoyance, that is the ability to perceive matters beyond the range of ordinary perception. Therefore, even if it is the consequence of a painful state of things, second sight, i.e. the possibility to see how one is seen, gives black people the possibility

[144] Ivi

[145] Michelle Shawn Smith, "Visual Culture and Race," *MELUS*, XXXIX, 2, 2014, p. 3.

[146] Anna Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," in E. Bordin and S. Bosco, *A Fior di Pelle: Bianchezza, Nerezza, Visualità*, Verona: ombre corte, 2017, p. 29.

[147] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 1903. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp, p. 8.

to gain an improved awareness about the visual construction of blackness as an abject condition.

What is more, learning to see differently with second sight holds the possibility to acknowledge and uncover the power of the dominant white gaze and therefore to challenge and unsettle its authority.[148] In other words, it is precisely because black people learn to see themselves within the scopic regime of race as inherently racialized subjects that they can also gain access to a greater awareness of the mechanisms of dominant visuality and challenge them. On the contrary, as already noted, white people are taught to perceived themselves as the unmarked norm and as the standard of humankind; this privileged condition implies that whites mostly perceive the field of vision as a neutral space in which seeing human differences according to racial traits is naturalized.[149] It is important to highlight that, differently from the concept of double consciousness, which refers more to a condition of impossible unity imposed on the black subject's identity, through the idea of second sight Du Bois claims for himself an active and possibly powerful role, namely the role of the viewer.[150]

1.2. The struggle over the gaze and the right to look

Being in the position of the seeing subject means to be in a position of power that holds in itself the possibility to develop a resistant gaze. According to the Malian cultural theorist Manthia Diawara, "[e]very narration places the spectator in a position of agency", as it is the subject who is asked to make sense of what is seen. It should be noted, however, that being the viewer does not necessarily mean being able to subvert the hegemonic gaze. Rather, as Diawara argues in his essays about black British cinema, being the spectator means that critical and oppositional ways of seeing might emerge in specific moments of "rupture" when the viewer interrogates and resists dominant discourses.[151]

The awareness about the power of looking and of the privileged position of the viewer represent the foundation of the scopic regime of race in the US. As bell hooks poignantly

[148] Smith, "Visual Culture and Race," p. 3.

[149] Richard Dyer, *White*, London: Routledge, 1997; Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack," *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, July/August 1989, pp. 10-12.

[150] Smith, "Visual Culture and Race," p. 3.

[151] Manthia Diawara, "Black British Cinema: Spectatorship and Identity Formation in Territories," in Houston A. Baker Jr., Manthia Diawara and Ruth H. Lindeborg, *Black British Cultural Studies: a Reader*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 293.

argues, under slavery the control of the gaze was one of the major strategies of domination that enabled the maintaining of racialized power relationships; indeed, the slaves were denied their right to the gaze and were punished for the very act of looking, as black looking was perceived as looking back.[152]

Similarly, in his recent book *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality,* Nicholas Mirzoeff states that slavery can also be conceived as "the removal from the right to look". He also recalls how controlling the look of all the people that were classified as "colored" was still crucial under Jim Crow; simply looking at a white person, in particular a white woman or a person in authority, was considered outrageous and was actually forbidden as "reckless eyeballing".[153] According to Mirzoeff, visuality as a strategy of domination is the "exclusive claim to be able to look" that is deployed by authority to justify unequal power relationships and make them seem natural and right. The "monitoring of the look" and the policing of visuality can be retraced throughout the history of the United States and they can be conceived as an integral part of the nation's identity. Indeed, Mirzoeff has identified three complexes of visuality that can be considered the foundation of modernity and that have provided a justification for the economic and cultural hegemony of the Western world: the first modality of visuality is "the plantation complex," which naturalized racialization and human differentiation according to racial traits; the second modality is "the imperialist complex," which organized a strict hierarchy of civilizations and, finally, the most recent is the modality of visuality deployed by "the military-industrial complex". [154]

This concept of visuality as the supplement to authority is entirely comparable to the concept of scopic regime analyzed in the first chapter. However, in this chapter the focus is on how dominant modality of visuality has been contested and how the exclusive claim to make sense and organize reality has been challenged by resistant acts of countervisuality. It is in this sense that Mirzoeff conceptualizes "the right to look": it is the inevitable emergence of claims of autonomy from the authority of the hegemonic

[152] bell hooks, *Black Looks*, p. 115.

[153] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 2011, p. 8.

[154] Ivi, pp. 2-3.

gaze. In other words, it is the attempt to reclaim one's gaze and the power of the viewer that has always been denied this privileged position.[155]

In the history of the United States, black people have always been the social group whose "right to look" has constantly been denied and repressed; however, as already stated, this condition did not prevent blacks from engaging in a longstanding fight to regain power over a hostile field of visuality that has created the inherent association between blackness and abjection.[156] In fact, those who are subordinates in a relationship of power are well aware of the interplay between processes of racialization and the field of visuality and also of the fact that there is the possibility of agency and resistance even in the worst circumstances of domination. Agency and resistance to the hegemonic gaze emerge precisely from the fact that the long history of repression of black peoples' right to look has produced "an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze".[157] For black people, developing an oppositional gaze, means to develop a way of seeing which can subvert the power of the colonizing image of blackness constructed from slavery on. In other words, the oppositional gaze enables to counter the dominant regime of representation that has constructed blackness through degrading stereotypical images and ultimately to resist the violence perpetrated by white representations of the black subject.

In this resistance struggle, the power of the dominated lies in the possibility to speak against the hegemonic representation of blackness not only by pointing to and questioning the racist stereotypical archive through which blackness is perceived, but also by creating alternative and counterhegemonic images in order to challenge the scopic regime of race from *within* the field of vision.[158] As bell hooks puts it,

> […] the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency. […] Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, at one another, naming what we see. The "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally.[159]

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[155] Ivi, pp. 25-30.

[156] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," p. 29.

[157] bell hooks, *Black Looks*, p. 115.

[158] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, 36, 1989, pp. 68-81.

[159] bell hooks, *Black Looks*, p. 116.

1.3. Contesting a racialized regime of representation

Throughout this work, it has been underlined that control over visuality is fundamental in maintaining and justifying unequal relationships of power and racial dominion. This is why the realm of representation has been mainly seen by black Americans as a painful site of oppression; at the same time, however, it is important to highlight that it has always been a crucial site of resistance as well.[160] Indeed, throughout the history of the United States, the fight over the control of visuality has constituted an actual "war of images".[161]

It is worth repeating that, while analyzing and speaking against racist representations of black people is still important nowadays, it is also true that this perspective alone might turn out to be problematic. Indeed, by adopting only this point of view, the black subject appears as just a passive victim of the hegemonic gaze while the longstanding struggle to seize black peoples' right to look remains hidden. This is why a shift of focus towards black counternarratives and representation is equally important, as it enables to acknowledge the fact that black Americans have always resisted the violence of the hegemonic white gaze. In order to fight against the degrading and dehumanizing visual archive of blackness produced within the context of plantation slavery and scientific racism, black people have always reclaimed their own worth and humanity by producing alternative images of blackness. It is therefore clear how the issue of self-representation and the possibility to construct a different kind of visuality have always been crucial to challenging the scopic regime of race and the stereotypical images in which black people were, and still are, inevitably trapped.[162]

The possibility to challenge the degrading archive of blackness relies in the fact that the meanings that these representations claim to carry "can never be finally fixed."[163] Indeed, as seen in the previous chapter, stereotyping is the attempt to create a fixed

[160] Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 5.

[161] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," p. 29.

[162] Herman S. Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*, University of California Press, 2005, p. 25.

[163] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997, p. 270.

association between the image and the degrading meaning that is attached to it. However, as Hall argues, counter-strategies emerge because

> ultimately, meaning begins to slip and slide; it begins to drift, or be wrenched, or inflected into new directions. New meanings are grafted on to old ones. Words and images carry connotations over which no one has complete control, and these marginal or submerged meanings come to the surface, allowing different meanings to be constructed, different things to be shown and said.[164]

In order to challenge the scopic regime of race, blacks in the United States have employed a wide range of strategies and have engaged with dominant culture in different ways, depending on their individual power as well as on the social, cultural and political conditions.[165] In the struggle to produce an alternative visuality, black people have been both the producers of images and the object of those images; in this last case, however, differently from the racist representations, they were not passive objects of the dominant gaze, but they managed to control and manipulate their own images for artistic or political purposes and to support their claims. Agency, therefore, is not only found in the active role of the viewer, but also in those situations in which the black subject is the object of sight.[166]

In the next section I will deal with the strategies through which black people have rejected degrading representations and have reclaimed their right to construct their own identity. The focus will be on three of the most popular cases in the history of the United States between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, namely the strategies adopted by Sojourner Truth and Frederik Douglass to represent themselves and the work of Du Bois for the 1900 "American Negro" exhibition in Paris. After having analyzed these early proponents of alternative representations and self-representations of blackness, the strategies adopted by black Americans to resist stereotypical narratives will be discussed in more detail. Finally, the focus will shift to the ways in which in more recent times the racialized scopic regime has been contested by uncovering how race itself is constructed in the field of visuality; the overall idea, therefore is not to build an alternative archive that substitutes the dominant one, but to interrogate the very visual mechanisms that construct racialized subjects.

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[164] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 270

[165] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Stuart Hall et al. (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson.

[166] bell hooks, *Black Looks*, pp. 116-117.

2. Alternative representations of blackness between the 19th and early 20th century

The visual struggle for black self-representation and the consequent war of images to counter dehumanizing depictions started with two crucial figures in the history of the United States, namely Fredrick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. Both former slaves that had gained freedom before the official abolition of slavery, they soon became two of the most known abolitionists and later activists for racial equality. They both came to be widely popular figures thanks to their political activity and their struggle to shape a different representation of blackness through their publications, especially through their autobiographies and their speeches. However, the element that characterized both Truth and Douglass that is most relevant for the present discussion is the way in which they engaged with the visual culture of their time. Through an extensive use of photography, they produced and promulgated their own self-representations and asserted their total control over their own images and the meanings that were attached to them. Indeed, the photographs portraying them contributed to the deconstruction of hegemonic representations of black masculine and feminine subjectivities.[167]

As seen in the first chapter, photography was a fundamental tool for providing a "rational" basis to the emerging scientific racism and many studies have analyzed photography's repressive function and the role it played in the depiction of blackness as an abject condition.[168] However, photography, both in antebellum and postbellum America was also used by black people as a means of self-representation, as well as a political tool and a way to support emerging social and legal claims. As Maurice Wallace and Michelle Shawn Smith argue in the introduction of their collection of essays *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, photography from very early on has played a crucial role for African American cultural and political life and black people engaged with "this new technology of representation

[167] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," p. 29.

[168] An example of scientific photographs of African Americans is represented by the series of images of black slaves taken by Joseph T. Zealy and commissioned by the biologist Louis Agassiz to support the thesis of polygenism, a theory according to which human races do not share a common origin and descend from different acestors.

to perform identities and to shape a dynamic visual culture." [169] Therefore, for black Americans, photography was a way to produce an alternative visual archive and throughout the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the use of photography as a mode of self-determination and self-representation grew steadily. As Fleetwood puts it in her study about racial icons,

> many black Americans […] saw promise in photography to produce a visual record of humanity that had been denied them in most spheres of American life. The medium also served as an important counterpoint for the dehumanizing imagery of slaves and black citizens that had been used to reinforce the racial state.[170]

2.1. Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth was a former slave who became an abolitionist and a women's right activist and whose image in the nineteenth century was a familiar presence to millions of viewers throughout the United States. It has been thoroughly argued that a huge part of her power and her popularity as a spokesperson for emancipation and racial

Figure 7: Unidentified photographer, Sojourner Truth's carte de visite, ca. 1860, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

[169] Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds., *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012, p. 3.

[170] Nicole Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*, New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers University Press, 2015, p. 37.

equality was to be found in her visual presence and in the ways in which she was able to manipulate her image to shape her identity and support her social and political claims.[171]

During her political activism, Truth used to sell her *carte de visite* (Figure 7) which portrayed her as a middle-class matron according to nineteenth century visual parameters of femininity. The image on the cards shows her awareness of the power of photography for representational purposes. On the one hand, through the rhetoric of the pose, the respectable middle-class attire, and the gender-appropriate activity and dress she was able to construct an image of herself that reproduced "all the visual signifiers of nineteenth-century genteel and domestic femininity"[172], thus distancing herself from stereotyped representation of black women constructed and perpetuated by dominant white society. On the other hand, however, other signs do not comply with the canonical visual code, most significantly her own gaze that, far from being submissive, is indeed confrontational and engages the viewer directly, showing her resolution and self-awareness in the struggle for emancipation and equality. As Mirzoeff argues, in these portrayals "Truth rejected the slaver's gaze by claiming the right to be seen as human".[173] Therefore, Truth managed to escape racialized depiction, as she used photography "to embody and empower herself, to present the images of herself that *she* wanted remembered,"[174] and ultimately to assert both her "right to look" and her right to be seen.

The recurring caption "I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance" highlights her condition as a newly emancipated woman; while during her enslavement her real body was an object to be sold and violated, after liberation she not only regained control over her own physical body, but she was also able to consciously objectify it through photography and even sell her image to support her campaigns and political activities.[175] It is therefore clear how deeply Sojourner Truth understood the power of the visual medium and its liberatory and empowering possibilities for black self-representation;

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[171] See for example Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, New York: W.W. Norton &Company, 1996; Teresa Zackodnik, The "Green-Backs of Civilization": Sojourner Truth and Portrait Photography," *American Studies* 46 (2), 2005, pp. 117-143; Augusta Rohrbach, "Shadow and Substance," in Wallace and Smith, *Pictures and Progress*, 2012, pp. 83-100; William Fitzhugh Brundage, *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*, University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

[172] Rohrbach, "Shadow and Substance," pp. 88-89.

[173] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, p. 148.

[174] Nell Irvin Painter, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known," *The Journal of American History,* 81, 1994, p. 462.

[175] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, p. 148.

indeed, through photography Truth resisted racial stereotypes, constructed an alternative image over which she had total control, and conveyed her political and social claims.

2.2. Frederick Douglass

In the same period, also Frederick Douglass, one of the most prominent African American authors and abolitionists of the nineteenth century, understood the great potentiality of photography and made an extensive use of this new technology to create new spaces for his self and the black community in his struggle for emancipation and equality.[176] The figure of Douglass is one of the most analyzed in the context of African American studies, as he was not only an activist and an orator, but he also managed to educate himself after having escaped from slavery and became a full rounded intellectual and writer.

Most notably, he is considered an early visual theorist, as he wrote extensively about the advent and the power of photography for the issue of black representation. He firmly believed that "photography had the potential of humanizing slaves in the eyes of white American public" and that it was crucial "as a mode of self-determination for blacks individually and collectively."[177] According to Douglass, therefore, through photography black people had the possibility to challenge white misrepresentations of blackness; photography enabled to assert black peoples' humanity against dehumanizing caricatures produced by pro-slavery societies, against theories about the "natural" abjection of black bodies claimed by scientific racism, as well as against white abolitionist imagery that paradoxically reinforced ideas about the submissive nature of blacks.[178]

In his theories about the empowering possibilities offered by the new technology[179], Douglass was particularly concerned with its inherent connection to realism; he believed that, through photography, it was possible to achieve "authentic images of blacks, rather than caricatures."[180] Photography, then, could be used as a crucial tool to "unraveling the

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[176] Wallace and Smith, *Pictures and Progress*, pp. 4-9.
[177] Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, pp. 37-38.
[178] Wallace and Smith, *Pictures and Progress*.
[179] His thought about visuality and the power of photography in the fight for racial equality were theorized in four lectures: "The Age of Pictures", "Lecture on Picture", "Picture and Progress", and "Life Pictures".
[180] Brundage, *Beyond Blackface*, p. 68.

problem of racist representation"[181] and to produce an alternative archive of images depicting the reality of authentic black people. Therefore, according to Douglass, the truthfulness of daguerreotype and photography prevented distortions of blacks that came from white representation. Another aspect that Douglass found particularly interesting and empowering about photography was its accessibility to ordinary people, thus making this technology an "ubiquitous and seemingly universal tool of self-representation."[182]

Douglass not only theorized the potential of photography for the empowerment of black people and as a source for racial uplift, but he also put his theoretical work into practice by sitting for dozens of portraits from early 1840s to 1895. These series of portraits represent his struggle over self-determination, as through the photographs he strategically visualizes his journey from slave to orator and political leader.[183] As seen with Sojourner Truth, he used to give away his portraits during the lectures that he held throughout his life as a constant and "material reminder of his presence."[184]

Figure 8: Frederick Douglass in a daguerreotype taken by Samuel J. Miller dated 1847-1852. Cased half-plate daguerreotype, 14x10.6cm. The Art Institute of Chicago.

[181] Ivi.

[182] Wallace and Smith, *Pictures and Progress*, p. 6.

[183] Laura Wexler, "A More Perfect Likeness," in Wallace and Smith, *Pictures and Progress*, 2012, pp. 18-40.

[184] Ginger Hill, "Rightly Viewed," Wallace and Smith, *Pictures and Progress*, 2012, p. 46.

Because Douglass was fully aware that his photographs circulated in a contested visual culture, where blackness was mainly associated to abjection, he carefully crafted his image and as a black abolitionist he sought to objectify himself as a source of power and as an aid in his reform work.[185]

Like Truth, in his portrayals, Douglass conformed to the conventions of nineteenth-century photographic portraiture, namely the formal attire, the three-quarter bust and the austere gaze. His image stands in clear contrast with racist and dehumanizing representations of black people; while racist stereotypes depicted black manhood as a condition of inherent subjugation and lack of independence, Douglass created the image of a black leader, his austere gaze directed toward the viewer and his serious facial expression highlighting his claim for self-possession and rejection of the objectifying gaze. As Fleetwood has argued, by conforming to the convention of the genre and era, Douglass strategically used photography to assert his respectability, which was a crucial demand and a widespread political strategy adopted by black Americans both before and after emancipation.[186]

2.3. W.E.B. Du Bois's photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition

As it has been argued in the first chapter, according to Du Bois, who had theorized the concept of double consciousness, black subjectivity was mainly constructed within the field of visuality. Like Douglass and Truth, also Du Bois was fully aware of the importance of constructing an anti-racist visual archive that could challenge stereotypical and racist representations produced by the hegemonic white American culture. However, differently from the two abolitionists, he used photography not only as a means for combating racism by presenting alternative representations of black Americans, but also as a way to problematize the question of race itself.

For the Universal Exposition that was held in Paris in 1900, Du Bois assembled a collection of more than 300 photographs of black Americans, taken mainly by unknown photographers, for the "American Negro" exhibit. In general, the aim of the collection of photographs was that of combating racism with empirical evidence of the economic, social, and cultural conditions of blacks in the US, by highlighting various aspects of

[185] Brundage, *Beyond Blackface*, p. 67.
[186] Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, pp. 38-39.

African Americans' lives, including business enterprises, social life, and education. Du Bois firmly believed that a clear revelation of the facts of African American life and culture would challenge the claims of scientific racism, which proposed that black people were inherently inferior to whites. Indeed, the photographs of black men and women challenged both the scientific "evidence" and popular racist caricatures of the day that ridiculed and sought to diminish black peoples' social and economic success.[187] Therefore, it might be argued that the collection of photographs had the power to "disrupt the image of African Americans produced 'through the eyes of the others' by simultaneously"[188] providing an alternative and realist archive of blacks in the United States.

However, in her essay about the exhibition, Shawn Michelle Smith points out the fact that part of the photos collected by Du Bois aimed also at "critically engage viewers in the visual and psychological dynamics of 'race' at the turn of the century."[189] In particular,

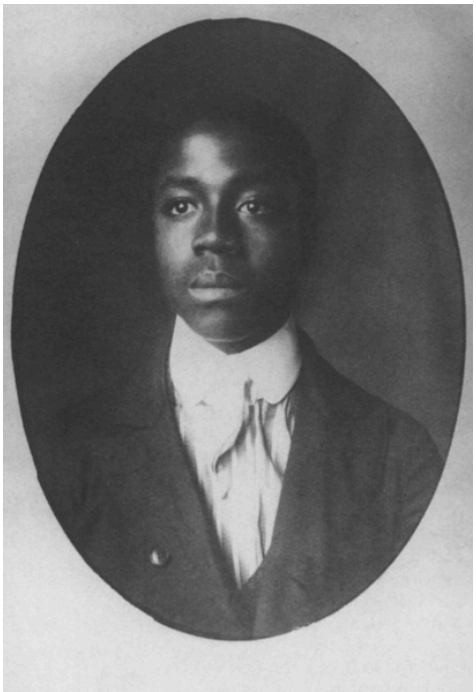

Figure 9: Du Bois, Types of American Negroes, Georgia, U.S.A., 1900, the Daniel Murray Collection, Library of Congress.

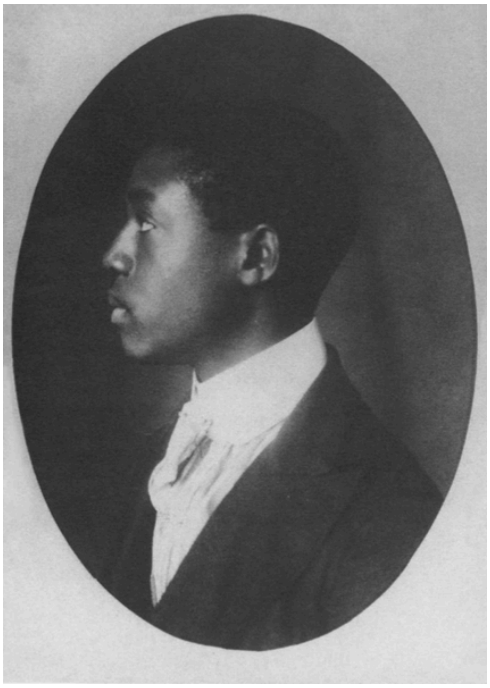

Figure 10: Du Bois, Types of American Negroes, Georgia, U.S.A., 1900, the Daniel Murray Collection, Library of Congress.

[187] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The American Negro at Paris," *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 22.5, 1900, pp. 575-77.

[188] Shawn Michelle Smith, "'Looking at One's Self through the Eyes of Others': W.E.B. Du Bois's photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition," African American Review, 34, 4, 2000, p. 581.

[189] Ivi, pp. 581-582.

she refers to the numerous paired portraits of full-face and profile headshots (Figures 9 and 10) and claims that their aim was to interrogate and challenge dominant white perceptions about "negro criminality" that were indeed widespread in turn-of-the-century US political and social discourses.

Smith argues that these photographs bear a striking resemblance with both criminal mugshot and middle-class portraits, as they replicate their formal style and visual codes. Building on the theory of Signifyin(g)[190] by Henry Louis Gates and adapting it to the domain of visuality, she claims that Du Bois's photographs interrogate directly the white dominant visuality and suggest that "for some white viewers the portrait of an African American is ideologically equivalent to the mugshot of a criminal."[191] Moreover, the photographs implicitly expose the dependence of middle class white identity and cultural legitimacy on the opposite image of the criminal black other. In other words, the photographs signify upon images of both middle-class white subjects and criminal offenders by reproducing the formal characteristics of both criminal mugshot and middle-class portraits "with a difference", thus challenging the white hegemonic gaze and enabling alternative interpretations of the images.[192]

It is worth noting that for Du Bois the issues of representation and photography are highly influenced by the concept of black peoples' double consciousness, that is by the idea that unity for the black subject is impossible to reach, as every black person is taught to see himself/herself through the eyes of the dominant white gaze. On the other hand, Douglass' approach to photography is almost opposite; indeed, the capacity of humans to objectify themselves in images and to see themselves as other see them is conceived in a positive way. As Wallace and Smith argue,

> [w]hereas Du Bois would emphasize the power of racism to distort the self-image of African Americans, Douglass imagined a much more autonomous African American viewer, seeking progress and improvement through a study of the self-objectified as

[190] In his 1988 book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, the scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. theorizes the African American cultural practice of Signifyin(g). The title alludes to the signifying monkey, a character of the African American folklore that derives from a trickster figure of Yoruba mythology. The practice of Signifyin(g) does not refer to something in particular, but rather to a set of practices employed by African Americans that are closely related to the concepts of double-talk and trickery. In general, it can be seen as a form of resistance, a way to take dominant discourses, cultural practices, images and meanings and repeating them "with a difference", that is by implying something else that cannot be understood by those in power.

[191] Smith, "'Looking at One's Self through the Eyes of Others'", p. 587.

[192] Ivi

> image. In Douglass's account, African Americans are the primary and most important viewers of their own images.[193]

3. Counterstrategies and their limitations

Throughout the twentieth century, in the US context, the question of representation gained increasing importance. This was mainly the consequence of the emergence and the fast growth in popularity of new media, like cinema and television as well as of the rapidly changing social condition of black Americans that were struggling to reclaim their right to self-determination, their space in all contexts of US society and to assess their agency over their own lives and the ways in which they wanted to be seen.[194] After the analysis of early attempts to create alternative images of blackness in the previous section, it should be clear how the fight over the realm of visuality and representation lies at the very core of the US national identity. Moreover, it shows how the traditional and hegemonic production of racial blackness has always been contested with alternative representations. As Herman S. Gray argues,

> [g]enerated from within black artistic, intellectual, and popular spheres, these black counternarratives and representations might be seen as a rejoinder to the various conservative attempts to demonize, regulate, define, and contain blackness […].[195]

Of course, the ways in which black Americans have engaged and challenged dominant racialized images have varied widely, since the social, cultural and political contexts have deeply influenced the strategies that have been adopted. It is also worth highlighting that alternative representations are not liberatory *per se* and do not necessary hold counterhegemonic possibilities; in fact, they might share much with discourses of regulation and ultimately turn out to be counterproductive or at least not subversive.[196]

The next sections of this paragraph will provide a theoretical introduction on the importance of realism and authenticity as representational counterstrategies adopted by black Americans and the debate over positive and negative images by also addressing

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[193] Wallace and Smith, *Pictures and Progress*, p. 8.

[194] Herman Gray, "Black Cultural Politics and Commercial Culture," in Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp. 1-13.

[195] Herman S. Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*, University of California Press, 2005, p. 25.

[196] Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice*, 20, 1/2 (51-52), 1993, pp. 104-114.

critiques and highlighting the limitations of these approaches. Then, the focus will shift to the ways in which blacks have engaged and resisted hegemonic culture by either accepting the stereotypes, adapting the stereotype to their own use or opposing the stereotype through parody and irony. Finally, the analysis will move to how contemporary black American artists, rather than providing alternative self-representation have directly challenged the realm of visuality itself.

3.1. Realism and authenticity

One of the most relevant strategies employed by black Americans to combat stereotypical racist images relies on the concepts of realism and truth. The overall idea is that the stereotypes produced by the scopic regime of race through which ideas of blackness are conveyed can be challenged by appealing to an "esthetic of verisimilitude."[197] A realist approach presuppose a vision that comes "from within" the black community and aims at highlighting the untruthful nature of racist caricatures and at substituting them with alternative representations that show the reality of black people and the truth of black experience.[198]

The representational strategy that had as its main focus realism emerged within black people and cultural producers in the United States very early on, even before emancipation. As seen in the previous section, correcting racist images with more accurate ones was indeed the main goal of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and W.E.B. Du Bois; they wanted to show how unreal hegemonic representations were and substitute them with a completely opposite idea of what being black actually meant. As important as this strategy has been in the history of black Americans to challenge the racial order, however, this realistic approach that aims at representing an alleged "black authenticity" carries also huge limitations, as many scholars have shown.

As Shoaht and Stam have argued in their study about black representation in cinema, the concepts of realism and truthfulness of representation are themselves inherently flawed. On the first level of analysis, the appeal to authenticity that lies at the core of the realist approach implies that there is an authentic blackness that should be the object of

[197] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 178.

[198] Gray, "Black Cultural Politics and Commercial Culture."

representations. However, it is clear how this might turn out to be problematic, as blackness is not a monolithic experience and it is impossible for a single representation to claim for "authenticity". In other words, the concept of authenticity "with its implicit appeal to verisimilitude as a kind of 'gold standard'"[199] is exclusionary, as it denies the validity of other kinds of counterhegemonic representations and claims to mirror an unquestionable reality and to get at "*the* truth of black experience."[200]

On a second level of analysis, Shohat and Stam, by taking from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin about artistic representation, question the concepts themselves of "reality" and "truth". According to the two scholars, countering objectifying hegemonic representations with a vision of black reality from within is problematic as "'[r]eality' is not self-evidently given and 'truth' is not immediately 'seizable'"[201] by representation. This means that there is not a transparent connection between reality and representations; indeed, there is no genuine "reality" at all, since we, as humans do not come into contact directly with the real, but "rather through the medium of the surrounding ideological world."[202] In the words of Wahneema Lubiano, "[r]eality, after all, is merely something that resounds in minds already trained to recognize it as such."[203] It is therefore clear how a naïve appeal to realism does not take into account the fact that total realism is a theoretical impossibility, as representation, far from being a transparent mirror of reality, is socially and historically mediated.

3.2. Positive and negative images

In the struggle for the control of visuality, counterhegemonic strategies based on realism and accuracy have mainly lead to the desire to substitute a range of positive images of blackness for the negative racist stereotypes that have dominated US culture. In what has been described as the debate over "negative/positive images", the only way to resist racist degrading depictions is by producing entirely positive images of black people to replace the racist archive.[204]

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[199] Shohat and Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," p. 215.
[200] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 5.
[201] Shohat and Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," p. 180.
[202] Ivi; Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Stuart Hall et al. (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson, p. 511.
[203] Wahneema Lubiano, "'But Compared to What?': Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing* and the Spike Lee Discourse," *Black American Literature Forum*, 25, 2, 1991, p. 264, cited in Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 5.
[204] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying*, pp. 272-274.

This idea of "getting images of blacks 'right'"[205] has been of particular importance in the mobilization against dominant visual representations of blacks throughout the twentieth century. Privileging this corrective strategy based on a sort of "progressive realism" depended hugely on US social context. The causes of the fixation on producing positive images can be traced back to the nineteenth century: in their struggle for freedom and, after emancipation, in their fight to be recognized as equal citizens, black people have always been asked to prove their worth by demonstrating that they could meet the "white standards" imposed by society.[206] By erasing the longstanding history of slavery and institutionalized racism, therefore black people have always been expected "to be better […] in order to be [considered] equal."[207] This condition explains why among the black community there has always been a strong need to construct and present positive images adhering to white middle class codes.

On a more theoretical level, insistence on positive images is also explained by the fact that black people and black cultural producers are well aware of carrying "the mark of the plural"[208], thus making their representation, either positive or negative, charged with collective meaning, as if black Americans could be considered a homogeneous community. This burden of representation is what Michael Rogin calls the "surplus symbolic value of blacks"[209], a condition that is shared by all oppressed social groups and that makes very difficult for black people to escape the dynamics of positive/negative images.

According to Hall, the positive aspect of this strategy lies in the fact that it might contribute to the expansion of the range of racial representations and highlight the complexity of black experience in the US as a way to challenge the reductionism of earlier stereotypes. However, it could be argued that this approach, while it may help to increase diversity of the ways in which blackness is represented, does not actually subvert the field of representation, because

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[205] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 13.

[206] Saidiya Hartman to refer to the condition of black people after the emancipation has indeed created the expression "burdened individuality." See *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[207] Shohat and Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," p. 203.

[208] Ivi, p. 183.

[209] Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice," Critical Inquiry, 18, 3, 1992, p. 417.

> it does not necessarily displace the negative [imagery]. Since the binaries remain in place, meaning continues to be framed by them. The strategy challenges the binaries - but it does not undermine them."[210]

Moreover, positive images are themselves stereotypical representations of blackness that elide the natural differences which are in fact part of any social group. Therefore, this strategy ultimately means to substitute negative stereotypes with more, even if "positive", stereotypical images. In the words of Shohat and Stam, "[a] cinema in which all the Black characters resembled Sydney Poitier might be as much a cause for alarm as one in which they all resemble Step'n'Fetchit."[211]

3.3. Confronting mass culture

The predominance of strategies of self-representation based on progressive realism and on the production of positive stereotypes has acted as a kind of imposed censorship, as it did not allow for the emergence of alternative, and not necessarily positive, images of blackness. However, this does not mean that throughout the history of the United States black people, cultural producers and performers did not engage and confront hegemonic culture in different ways. Hall has indeed identified three ways in which it is possible to engage "the dominant cultural order" and the seemingly natural meanings that it imposes.[212]

Accepting the stereotype

The first possibility, namely "the dominant hegemonic decoding" implies the internalization of the dominant culture's norms and values and therefore the acceptance of the stereotype. To this modality of engaging hegemonic representations can be traced all the strategies focusing on progressive realism and the construction of positive images. Indeed, as already seen, these strategies do not challenge racist representations directly and, ultimately, remain within the binary of dominant white visuality.[213]

Of particular importance for this approach is the politics of respectability, which has been used, and still is, one of the major representational strategy, deployed especially by black women. As seen in the first chapter, dominant representations of black women from slavery on have always revolved around the need to control their body and their sexuality.

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[210] Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying*, p. 274.
[211] Shohat and Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," p. 204.
[212] Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," p. 513.
[213] Ivi, p. 515.

The black female body is a site of extreme racialization and sexualization and it "set[s] the boundaries around which idealized white femininity is understood and visualized."[214] Black women, within the field of visuality, are therefore trapped in the binary opposition that either negates their sexuality in the Mammy stereotype or portrays the excessive sexual appetite of the Jezebel.

In order to resist dominant culture's claims about the visibility and the excessiveness of the black female body, black women have adopted from very early on an aesthetic practice and a representational politics that are based on the concepts of dissemblance and respectability. These kinds of self-representational strategies, which became widespread among black women between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, were based on modesty and the negation of sexuality as a way to claim black female dignity against dominant stereotypes. By employing the politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance black women implicitly accepted negative stereotypes about black womanhood and tried to construct alternative and positive images of themselves that conformed and adhered to white middle-class codes and values.[215] However, it should be noted that it was never a passive acceptance of the white standard of "true womanhood", but a way to take control over their own image and body and to take advantage from their marginal position within US society.[216] As Patricia Hill Collins argues, "silence is not to be interpreted as submission;"[217] indeed, through the politics of respectability, black women managed to transform the visibility imposed on them by hegemonic culture into a self-chosen and conscious invisibility from which they could act also as activists and be part of the social change.[218]

This kind of representational strategy has been of crucial importance well into the period of the civil rights movement and is still today employed by many black women, since negative stereotypes about black womanhood, though they have evolved over time,

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[214] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 111. See also Hazel Carby, "Policing the Black Female Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry*, 18, 1992, pp. 738-755.

[215] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 2000.

[216] Anna Scacchi, "Le figlie di Hagar: la rappresentazione del corpo femminile nero negli Stati Uniti," in Camilla Cattarulla (ed.), *Identità americane: corpo e nazione*, Roma: Cooper, 2006, pp. 29-30.

[217] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 98

[218] Monia Dal Checco, "In piedi in una stanza distorta: le donne afroamericane e la politica della rispettabilità," in InteRGRace, *Visualità e (anti)razzismo*, pp. 60-70.

are still far from being eradicated.[219] It should also be noted, however, that the politics of respectability has also been strongly criticized, as it denies and attempts to censor other forms of black female self-representation. Black scholars such as Evelyn Hammonds, have highlighted how the practices of silence and respectability deployed by black women to counter "the penetrating gaze of dominant visual culture"[220] have also played a crucial role in maintaining black female marginalization. Moreover, in the contemporary context of the protests against police brutality, movements like #BlackLivesMatter have pointed to the unproductivity of these strategies for the current political struggle and have highlighted how, in fact, respectability claims are frequently used as a tool to delegitimize black rage.[221]

Adapting the stereotype

In other circumstances, black Americans, as well as other oppressed groups, have employed the strategy of negotiation. As with the first strategy, hegemonic culture and its codes are acknowledged and not directly questioned; however, negotiation "contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements."[222] Through negotiation it is possible to accept the stereotype and, at the same time, adapt it to one's specific needs. Negotiation is indeed a strategy that has often proved to be crucial for black cultural producers and performers, as it has enabled them to subvert and signify upon the racist caricatural role imposed on them. As Scacchi argues, for example, while the practice of blackface is seen, and indeed is, the epitome of the racist degrading stereotypes of racial blackness and strictly linked to the production of controlling images, it has also enabled many black performers to find their space as artists.[223] In fact, the practice of black blackface was widely popular also among the black public, and, even though black performers were

[219] See for example the analysis of contemporary respectability politics in the comparison between Niki Minaj and Beyonce's performances in Shoniqua Roach, "Black Respectable Currency: Reading Black Feminism and Sexuality in Contemporary Performance," *The Journal of American Culture*, 42, 1, 2019, pp. 10-20.

[220] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 122.

[221] On this topic, see the article written by Michelle Smith, "Affect and Respectability Politics," *Theory & Event*, 17(3), 2014.

[222] Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," p. 516.

[223] Anna Scacchi, "Mettere in scena la razza. Visualità, Autenticità e performance razziale," in InteRGRace, *Visualità e (anti)razzismo*, pp. 51-52.

constricted within specific roles, it was also a way to express their creativity and make a living out of their artistic practice.

Similarly, Donald Bogle in his study about African American performers in cinema has highlighted the agency of black actors in appropriating the performance to their own ends. He claims that, even though early Hollywood cinema has contributed to the perpetration of racist stereotypes, both black performers and the black audience were well aware of the difference between the role played and the actor.[224] As a consequence, black actors and actress managed "to turn demeaning roles into resistant performance."[225] It is within this perspective that even the entirely caricatural and racist role of Mammy performed by Hattie McDaniel in the famous movie *Gone with the Wind* could hold liberatory possibilities: on the one hand, in her stereotypical attitude and in her way of looking Scarlett right in the eye the black audience could read hostility towards the racist US society; on the other hand, McDaniel could perform a racist role and at the same time take advantage from it, as she clearly argued in her well-known statement: "I'd rather make 700 dollars a week playing a maid than earn 7 dollars a day being a maid."

Opposing the stereotype

The third and equally important representational strategy deployed by black people in the United States to resist the hegemonic visuality is opposition.[226] Differently from acceptance and negotiation, adopting this strategy implies the refusal of dominant codes and, mainly through irony and parody, the appropriation of the stereotype to subvert hegemonic visuality and to resist racialized representations. As Gray states, over the centuries, "African Americans [have] continually appropriate[ed] images and representations […] in order to reconstitute themselves and therefore transgress the cultural and social locations that constantly attempt to contain and police them."[227] In particular, the practice of ironic appropriation of the negative stereotype has proven to be crucial, as it has enabled the black performer to point with irreverence to the precarious

[224] David Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films*, New York-London: Continuum, 1973.
[225] Shohat and Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," p. 196.
[226] Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," p. 517.
[227] Gray, "Black Cultural Politics and Commercial Culture," pp. 4-5.

and constructed nature of dominant white representations, especially of the racial stereotype.[228]

Figure 11: Josephine Baker, 1927

Through ironic appropriation black artists, performers, and cultural producers in general have taken stereotypical images constructed by hegemonic visuality and subverted the negative meaning attached to them. This strategy has been used in particular by black female artists who adopted "excessive performance style […] to undercut and parody stereotypical roles"[229] and who did not want to conform to the politics of respectability. Indeed, in total opposition with the widespread cultural imperative in black communities to negate sexuality and de-emphasize the black female body, many black female artists have embraced the extreme sexualization associated with the black body and used it in shocking and unpredictable ways. In particular, black female performers have engaged "the long and often brutal history of visually documenting and framing the black female body"[230] by appropriating the image of "the Hottentot Venus", the icon of the colonialist hegemonic gaze. The most famous black artist that has appropriated the image of the black Venus is probably Josephine Baker (fig. 11), who during the 1920s,

[228] Gray, *Cultural Moves*, pp. 128-129.
[229] Shohat and Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation," p. 190.
[230] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 118.

through her overtly exaggerated and ironic performances, ironized on white fantasies of black female savagery and exoticism projected over her black body.[231]

In contemporary US culture, black female artists are still using irony, overt exaggeration, and parody to subvert and redress dominant representations of the black female body that is still nonetheless strictly associated with racist stereotypes. For example, much of the photographic work of the Jamaican American artist Renée Cox revolves around the idea of the female body as inherently excessive and hypervisible; she uses the image of her overtly exaggerated sexuality and her naked body to reclaim the black woman's subjectivity from the dominant gaze, thus engaging and opposing "the marginalization and objectification of racialized bodies in Western visual culture."[232] The appropriation of stereotypes is also a crucial self-representation strategy for contemporary hip-hop artists, such as Lil' Kim and Niki Minaj to assert their control over their own body and their sexuality and ultimately to transform longstanding images of black female sexual degeneration into subversive and self-empowering tools.[233]

As Scacchi notes, however, the ironic appropriation of racial stereotypes enacted through performance is far from being unproblematic. Indeed, while contemporary debates on these kinds of racial performances focus on the conscious use of racist images for the artists' auto-determination, the actual possibility for black artists to separate themselves from the degrading racial archive through irony and parody is questionable.[234] As a matter of fact, within US society racism is still very much a painful reality and black bodies are still subject to racist depictions, exploited and even killed on a daily basis.

4. Unmasking the scopic regime of race

Within the context of US society, oppressed groups like black Americans throughout the last two centuries have been constantly struggling over the issues of race and representation. Through a wide range of strategies black people have contested the hegemonic white gaze. However, over the last decades there has been a shift of focus on the issues of race and representation from "the war of images" to the field of visuality

[231] Scacchi, "Le figlie di Hagar;" Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, pp. 118-122. The caricatural image performed by Josephine Baker has recently been reproduced by trans actress Laverne Cox, as a way to pay tribute to the longstanding struggle of black women over their self-determination and representation.

[232] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 114.

[233] Roach, "Black Respectable Currency."

[234] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," p. 31.; Scacchi, "Le figlie di Hagar," pp. 39-41.

itself. Indeed, black scholars and cultural producers have claimed for a politics of representation that critically interrogates the realm of white visuality and that moves beyond mere contests over positive/negative images or the displacement of stereotyped depiction of African Americans in visual culture.[235]

4.1. The limits of representation

According to Nicole Fleetwood, despite all the strategies deployed to resist degrading images and the constant struggle to construct empowering self-representations, visuality remains a hostile field for black Americans. This state of things derives from the fact that it is visuality itself, through the scopic regime of race, that has structured blackness and the black body as inherently troubling. As she puts it, "the visual sphere has been understood […] as a punitive field – the scene of punishment – in which the subjugation of blacks continues through the reproduction of denigrating racial stereotypes […]."[236] As a consequence, since seeing blackness is always and already a problem within the field of vision and the black body is always charged with inescapable racial markings, it is not possible to believe that "representation itself will resolve the problem of the black body in the field of vision."[237]

If, on the one hand, visuality has been a way for black people to "enter history without words,"[238] on the other hand the very system of racial inequality has been constructed also through visuality. Therefore, it is clear how positive, realistic, and "authentic" images of blackness, while important, cannot be the solution for the issue of racialized representation, as they do not interrogate the concept of race itself, but rather they can just be used to substitute a racist archive with an alternative one.

It is necessary, then, to shift the focus from the issues of images to the field of visuality as a whole; the idea is to challenge the scopic regime of race itself by showing and uncovering the visual mechanisms through which human differentiation, racialized subjects and the black/white polar opposition are constructed.[239] In other words, because within the scopic regime of race the practices of looking and interpreting reality through an inherently racist ideology are made to seem natural and inevitable, the solution for the

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[235] Gray, *Cultural Moves*, p. 138.

[236] Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 13.

[237] Ivi, p. 5.

[238] Bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," *Art of My Mind: Visual Politics*, New York: The New Press, 1995, cited in Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, p. 54.

[239] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," p. 32.

issue of race and representation would be to interrogate the act of seeing itself and remove the veil of naturalization of human difference.

4.2. Showing seeing

Interrogating the visuality of race and attempting to denaturalize it has been a major concern for many contemporary artists. However, within the academic field, there has also been considerable interest in investigating the ways in which the visually constructed nature of race and "the permeability of the color line"[240] have emerged in the past, too, for example in the practice of blackface. For a very long time, the performative practice of blackface, has been analyzed only as a thoroughly degrading performance that contributed to the diffusion at a popular level of images of abject blackness and ultimately as a way to secure white privilege after emancipation and to reaffirm racial hierarchies. However, as Scacchi argues, blackface has been a complex phenomenon that has been used by both black and white performers in different ways. In particular, from the point of view of the visuality of race, the practice of blackface, especially blackface performed by black actors became paradoxically a way to show the inherently performative nature of race.[241] In other words, blacked-up black artists, through their double blackness, rather than affirming the unescapable distinction between races, which was the original goal of blackface minstrelsy, demonstrated how race itself was in fact a theatrical and entirely visual construction.

Another example of attempts to denaturalize the visuality of race in the past is provided by Smith's reading of W.E.B. Du Bois's photographs for the 1900 "American Negro" exhibit. Not only, as already seen, did the portraits interrogate and challenge dominant white perceptions about "negro criminality", but the collection also had the collateral effect of showing the power of visuality to construct race. Indeed, by collecting images of people of all skin tones, including white, who were nonetheless all labeled as "types of American negroes," Du Bois indirectly pointed to the visual codes of racial distinction "showing a racial taxonomy founded in visual paradigms of recognition to be a fiction, albeit a powerful one." [242]

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[240] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 6.

[241] Scacchi, "Mettere in scena la razza," p. 52.

[242] Smith, "'Looking at One's Self through the Eyes of Others'." p. 590.

In the field of contemporary art, an African American conceptual artist who has explored the visuality of race is Glenn Ligon. In his works he aims at showing "the cognitive and conceptual filters through which forms of human otherness are mediated"[243] and to create new and subversive ways of seeing that take place outside the scopic regime of race. In his 1998 self-portrait (Figure 12), Ligon distances himself from issues of representation, as his goal is not to create an image (either positive or negative) of blackness, but rather to show the visual nature of race against "the viewers' stubborn desire to see race represent difference".[244] Ligon's self-portrait is composed by two identical black and white photographs of his full figure. The caption of the image on the left is "Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features", while the photograph on the right bears the caption "Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features". Because the two images are identical, Ligon invites the viewer to look at the portrait and interpret the same

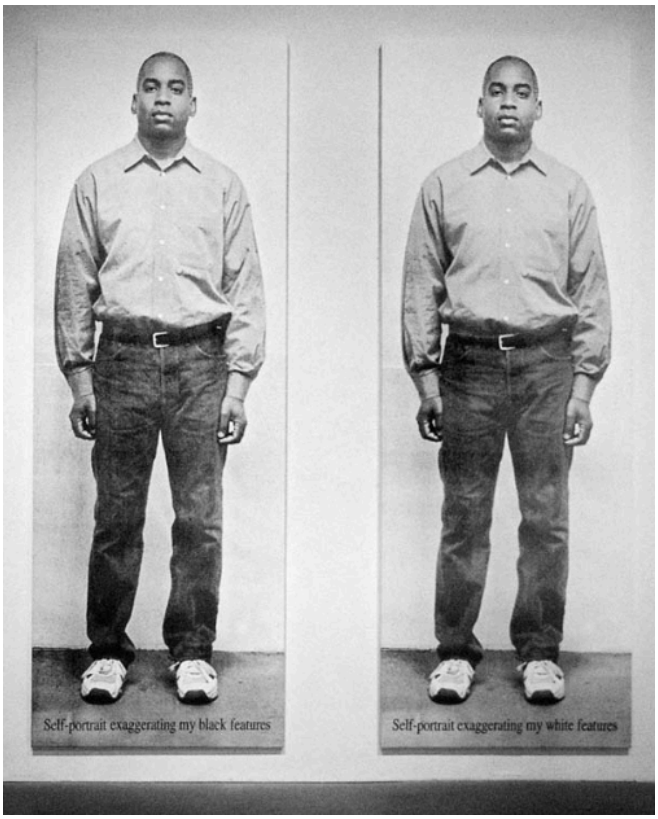

Figure 12: Glenn Ligon, Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features/Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features, 1998.

[243] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2012, p. XII.
[244] Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value*, Hanover (NH): Dartmouth College Press, 2013, p. 10.

features both as the signs of blackness and as the signs of whiteness. However, as Alessandra Raengo states,

> [w]hile Ligon's photographed body does not deliver any recognizable "whiteness," it does deliver a commonsensically recognizable "blackness," thus underscoring the constitutive imbalance between the two in the field of vision: of the two captions, only one appears truthful, plausible, and sensible.[245]

The viewer is therefore forced to realize that his/her looking, far from being neutral or natural, is indeed "trained" to perceive blackness as a visible and perfectly recognizable sign but that, on the contrary, he/she is not able to perceive the visual signs of whiteness.[246] In other words, Ligon in his work is asking to read the two images *against* and *outside* the scopic regime of race, thus "open[ing] a chasm in the visual field"[247] showing the visual dynamics through which race is itself constructed.

Therefore, what it is important to highlight is that, while visuality has been conceived mainly as "a punitive field" where the abjection of blackness is continuously created and reproduced, the visual field can also become a site of resistance that holds liberatory and counterhegemonic possibilities. Indeed, black scholars, intellectuals, performers, artists and cultural producers in general have critically interrogated the field of visuality to bring to light the mechanisms of the scopic regime of race and have powerfully showed that the act of seeing – seeing race in particular – is itself a mediated and learned practice.

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[245] Ivi, p. 3
[246] Scacchi, "Mettere in scena la razza," pp. 49-50.
[247] Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, p. 1.

CHAPTER 3
THE CASE OF RACHEL DOLEZAL

Race is an extremely powerful illusion: discredited at the ethical level, since there is no correlation between one's physical and moral features, as well as at the scientific level, as all humans share most of their genetic heritage, it remains nonetheless perceived as a reality. As already argued, even if race does not exist we are taught to see and decode human differentiation according to racialized traits, thus turning race into a filter through which to look at the world, and making the very act of seeing not "an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible."[248] Many studies have underlined that the realm of visuality is crucial for the production and reproduction of the idea of race itself and that the racial order is maintained by the continuous inscription of racial codes within an optical paradigm. The scopic regime of race works to naturalize the act of seeing race, so as to attribute to physical traits, most notably skin color, specific meanings and values.

The crucial role that visuality plays in the identification and definition of what race is, in particular in the context of the US society, has been expressed very clearly by Toni Morrison in her 1983 short story "Recitatif."[249] The story follows the two main characters, Roberta and Twyla, from their childhood spent in the same orphanage to adulthood. The short story challenges the reader's perceptions of race and identity by leaving the race of the two main characters ambiguous. The only clue provided by the narrator, Twyla, is that Roberta is "a girl from a whole other race" and together they looked "like salt and pepper." Therefore, it is the audience that is left to decide which character is black and which is white.[250] However, the attribution of a certain race to the characters shifts continuously throughout the story, as Morrison describes the appearance and the actions

[248] Judith Butler, "Endangered/endangering: schematic racism and white paranoia," in Robert Gooding-Williams (ed.), *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 16.

[249] Toni Morrison, "Recitatif," in Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*, New York: Morrow, 1983, pp. 243-260.

[250] Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value*, Hanover (NH): Dartmouth College Press, 2013, pp. 6-7.

of Twyla and Roberta in a way that troubles the common "racial knowledge."[251] For example, the reader might initially think that Twyla is black, because of her name, however, later in the story it is Roberta that has "huge hair" and goes to a Jimi Hendrix concert. The contradictory descriptors, that aim at challenging widespread ideas about both blackness and whiteness, show how much race, rather than a physical and biological reality, is in fact a social and cultural construct. Morrison, by not stating clearly who is black and who is white, directly problematizes "the notion of race as a corporeal attribute"[252], as she eliminates the visual markers of race and shows the inherently biased nature of the correlation between skin color and identity. Indeed, without visuality, the details about their lives and appearance become ambiguous, as the reader might attribute them to both characters.

Despite its biological inconsistency, within the context of the US, race remains a crucial feature of one's social and cultural identity and the idea that it is possible to read it on the body and on skin color is still pervasive. However, as already seen, the non-existence of race does not mean that it does not have a real power and influence on the lives of racialized people, in particular of black people. The "paradox of race," which is an integral part of US identity, has been addressed from many points of view depending on the social, cultural and political context. Indeed, discourses concerning the nature of race, its shifting meanings, its representation, as well as the very definition of the concept, are widely debated topics at all levels of US society.

In the next sections I will address the case of Rachel Dolezal,[253] a woman that has been accused of lying for decades about her identity, as she presented herself as a black woman, but she was in fact born to white parents. After the reconstruction of the case and the main reactions that it caused, I will move on to the analysis of the widespread allegations of blackface and "reverse passing" addressed at Dolezal by linking them to questions of representation and self-representation while discussing race-related issues. Finally, I will address the debate concerning the connection between transgender and

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[251] Anna Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," in E. Bordin and S. Bosco, *A Fior di Pelle: Bianchezza, Nerezza, Visualità*, Verona: ombre corte, 2017, p. 16.

[252] Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, p. 9.

[253] In October 2016, Dolezal legally changed her name to Nkechi Amare Diallo. In this work, however, I will use her former name, since it is with this name that her story gained worldwide attention. Moreover, Dolezal herself has clarified that she still intends to use the name Rachel Dolezal when referring to her public persona.

transracial identities that emerged from the comparison of Rachel Dolezal's and Caitlyn Jenner's identity claims.

1. The Rachel Dolezal affair

In June 2015 a single case of what has been mainly perceived as "racial fakery" not only gained the attention of media worldwide, but it also became the site of intersection of a wide range of discourses and debates about race, as the case interrogated the concept and definition of race, issues regarding representation and visuality and even the history of the country's racial identity.

1.1. A case of "racial fakery"

The peculiar story of Rachel Dolezal made headline news on June 11, 2015, when the media revealed that the president of the Spokane, Washington, chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)[254] was a white woman, although she had presented herself as black for a number of years. Dolezal was "outed" by her parents during an investigation carried out by a reporter for a newspaper of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where Dolezal used to live, regarding her many claims to have been the victim of hate crimes and harassment.[255] With this article, however, the story remained mostly a local phenomenon and it was only when the video of an interview to Dolezal by a Spokane television station went online that the case rapidly gained worldwide attention and became a trending topic on social media. During the interview, the reporter asked Dolezal about the hate crimes that she had reported over the years, insinuating that she might have fabricated them and then he interrogated Dolezal's racial and ethnic identity by directly asking if she or her parents were actually African American, a question to which the woman refused to answer.[256]

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[254] The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is one of the largest civil rights organization in the United States. It was founded in 1909 in response to the ongoing violence against black people around the country. Nowadays, its mission is "to secure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights in order to eliminate race-based discrimination and ensure the health and well-being of all persons." See the NAACP website: https://naacp.org/.

[255] See Jeff Selle and Maureen Dolan, "Black Like Me?," *CDAPress*, June 11, 2015, http://www.cdapress.com/news /local_news/article_385adfeb-76f3-5050-98b4-d4bf021c423f.html.

[256] The full interview is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKRj_h7vmMM. See also Spokesman-Review, "Credibility of Local NAACP Leader Rachel Dolezal Questioned," *Spokesman-Review*, June 11, 2015, https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2015/jun/11/board-member-had-longstanding-doubts-about-truthfu/; Jeff Humphrey, "Did NAACP President Lie about her Race? City Investigates," *KXLY.com*, June 12, 2015, https://www.kxly.com/did-naacp-president-lie-about-her-race-

The accusation of "racial fakery" and deception about her identity was mainly based on a set of photographs given to the media by Dolezal's parents that portray Dolezal in

Figure 13: Rachel Dolezal when she was a teenager.

Figure 14: Rachel Dolezal in 2015.

her teenage years: the image is that of a pale girl with blond straight hair. This image stands in stark contrast with the 37-year-old woman that appears in the video of the interview, who has indeed a much darker complexion and dark curly hair (See Figure 13 and Figure 14).

After the photos of teenage Dolezal and her biological family flooded the internet, the issues of her manufactured racial history and the alteration of her appearance to "look black" became a widely discussed topic in the news and on social media. Many questions started to be raised about Dolezal's true identity and many people have attempted to

city-investigates/ Jeff Humphrey, "How the Coeur d'Alene Press Broke the Rachel Dolezal Story," *KXLY.com*, June 15, 2015, https://www.kxly.com/how-the-coeur-dalene-press-broke-the-dolezal-story/.

"make sense"[257] of her seemingly unprecedented racial and ethnic path by investigating Dolezal's past.

Indeed, over time, detailed accounts of her past life that have tried to provide a broader context and possible explanations to this peculiar case have been published.[258] In 2017 a publishing house has also released Dolezal's autobiography in which she addresses most of the questions, doubts and criticisms regarding her identity.[259]

What emerged clearly from the very beginning in the various interviews in which Dolezal participated in the next months after her "outing," however, was her assertion that she identified as black, a claim that she has never abandoned.[260] Indeed, in her 2017 autobiography while attempting to explain the reasons why she was not able to answer the seemingly straightforward question "Are you African American?" that started the Dolezal case, she repeats:

> On the surface it was a simple question, but in reality, it was incredible complex. Yes, my biological parents were both white, but, after a lifetime spent developing my true identity, I knew that nothing about whiteness described who I was. At the same time, I felt it would have been an oversimplification to have simply said yes. After all, I didn't identify as African American; I identified as Black.[261]

Obviously, this statement has given rise to many different reactions, as it addresses a wide range of issues regarding race, namely the meanings attached to the concept itself, its socially constructed or biological nature, and the persistence of racial categories as a common form of identification and self-identification mainly based on physical traits; Dolezal's statement also problematizes the definition of blackness itself and the question of who is entitled to define it and finally it poses questions regarding cultural

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[257] Matthew Pratt Guterl, "Racial Fakery and the Next Postracial: Reconciliation in the Age of Dolezal," Charles Ogletree and Austin Sarat, *Racial Reconciliation and the Healing of a Nation: Beyond Law and Rights*, New York: New York University Press, 2017, p. 28.

[258] See for example Allison Samuels, "Rachel Dolezal's True Lies," *Vanity Fair*, July 19, 2015, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/07/rachel-dolezal-new-interview-pictures-exclusive; Mitchell Sunderland, "In Rachel Dolezal's Skin," *Vice.com*, December 7, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en/article/gvz79j/rachel-dolezal-profile-interview; Chris McGreal, "Rachel Dolezal: 'I Wasn't Identifying as Black to Upset People. I Was Being Me,'" *The Guardian*, December 13, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/13/rachel-dolezal-i-wasnt-identifying-as-black-to-upset-people-i-was-being-me.

[259] Rachel Dolezal, *In Full Color: Finding my Place in a Black and White World*, Dallas TX: BenBella Books, 2017.

[260] The first time that Dolezal asserted that she identified as black was during an interview with Matt Lauer on the *Today Show* that took place on June 16, 2015, only a few days after her case had become a news sensation. The interview is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lG9Q2_Hv83k.

[261] Dolezal, *In Full Color*, p. 1.

appropriation and white privilege.[262] Dolezal's past history provides a useful starting point for the analysis of the debate that this case has generated in the United States, as it can provide a broader context for the accusations of racial imposture by showing her actual position regarding the black community and black culture in general.

1.2. Dolezal's background

Dolezal's parents are fundamentalist evangelical Christians who decided to adopt four black children when she was a teenager. According to her autobiography, she played a significant role in raising and caring for her siblings, who had been also one of the main reasons why she started to be interested in black culture and history, though Dolezal claims that she felt a natural attraction to blackness even before her parents decided to adopt her siblings.[263] Over the years of college and university, Dolezal was immersed in mostly African American networks and institutions, despite not presenting herself as black yet; when she was studying art at Belhaven College in Mississippi she became an active member of the Black Students Association and after her BA she also attended the historically black Howard University in Washington. Moreover, the focus her artwork are mainly African and African American themes and subjects. After having attained her MA,

Figure 15: Rachel Dolezal in 1996 with her parents, her biological brother, and her four adopted siblings.

[262] Rogers Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 3.

[263] Dolezal, *In Full Color*, pp. 63-64.

Dolezal grew closer to black history and culture and she taught for several years in the Africana Studies program of Eastern Washington University as a part-time instructor.

In Spokane she also became a well-known and respected civil rights activist focusing on black issues, as she was not only the president of the local NAACP chapter, but she was also part of the city's police ombudsman commission as an advocate for black interests and organized many Black Lives Matter protests. As for her private life, she was married for some years to a black man and had one child with him and later she became the legal guardian of one of her adopted siblings; she also identified an African American man as her father.[264] Dolezal started to alter her appearance, present herself and be perceived as a black woman after the divorce, as she began to darken her skin and style her hair in typically black hairstyles, such as braids, weaves and dreadlocks. Both her colleagues and her students did not have doubts about her identity, as her appearance was perfectly in line with her network of relationships, her political interest, her commitment in the black community and her cultural knowledge, as well as with racialization in the U.S., which due to the one drop rule and its consequences is based as much on ancestry as on the phenotype.

This general background of Dolezal's life and experiences clearly shows how a clear-cut judgment of her case as "racial deception" might turn out to be problematic; as a matter of fact, if one the one hand the ways in which she has altered her appearance and biography might be easily seen as instances of cultural appropriation and, for some commentators, even of blackface, on the other hand, it is impossible not to acknowledge the fact that Dolezal did not appropriate only the specific aspects of blackness which are considered "cool," nor she did it for some kind of personal interest, rather she was actually deeply immersed in African American contexts, both on the private an on the public level.[265]

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[264] In her autobiography, as well as in various interviews, she explains the identification of a black man as her father by stating that he had been indeed a fatherly figure for her and that they would normally refer to each other as father and daughter despite not being biologically related. See Dolezal, *In Full Color*, pp. 153-154.

[265] Camille Gear Rich, "Rachel Dolezal Has a Right to Be Black." *CNN.com*, June 16, 2015, https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/15/opinions/rich-rachel-dolezal/.

2. Reactions to the Dolezal case

As already stated, the peculiarity of Dolezal's case and her "transgression of the race line"[266] generated a huge debate and fueled new and often contrasting discourses and reflections on the topic of racial identity. The overwhelming majority of the reactions have been entirely negative and, almost paradoxically, her case soon became the target of harsh criticism that was coming from groups of people that on a general level have quite opposite points of view on racial issues. As a matter of fact, Dolezal's "racial fakery" has been thoroughly condemned and, in some cases, ridiculed both by deeply conservative and racist commentators and by many antiracist websites, scholars and journalists, obviously for very different reasons.

Indeed, while for racists and white supremacists Dolezal's path towards blackness has been seen as a clear sign of mental instability, as "no normal white person would choose to call themselves black,"[267] antiracist commentators have condemned Dolezal's physical alterations by accusing her of cultural appropriation and racial "masquerade,"[268] thus referring to a modern version of blackface as well as to the idea of "reverse passing," that will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Only a small minority of voices has judged the case of Rachel Dolezal in a positive way and has supported her claim to self-identification as a black woman not only by underlining her actual connections with black contexts and culture and her longstanding commitment to racial justice, but also by pointing to the fictitious and socially constructed nature of race.

In the next sections of this paragraph, these contrasting ideas will be analyzed more in detail, by focusing in particular on the intertwined issues of blackface, passing and cultural appropriation and how they have been used to either support or contrast Dolezal's identity claims.

2.1. Blackface and cultural appropriation

One of the main criticisms addressed at Dolezal when her story boomed on the news and on social media was based on the fact that she had profoundly altered her "true"

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[266] Charles Ogletree and Austin Sarat, *Racial Reconciliation and the Healing of a Nation: Beyond Law and Rights*, New York: New York University Press, 2017, p. 10.

[267] Chris McGreal, "Rachel Dolezal: 'I Wasn't Identifying as Black to Upset People. I Was Being Me,'" *Guardian*, December 13, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/13/rachel-dolezal-i-wasnt-identifying-as-black-to-upset-people-i-was-being-me.

[268] Guterl, "Racial Fakery and the Next Postracial," p. 34.

aspect over the years by adopting black hairstyles and darkening her skin. Indeed, many black commentators have accused Dolezal of enacting a modern form of blackface, thus implying that her claim to blackness was in fact just a spectacle that she had enacted by putting a mask on her face and through the performance of an identity to which she has no legitimate claim.[269] In an article written a few days after the photos of teenage Dolezal appeared online, the cultural black critic Zeba Blay directly referred to Dolezal's racial act as a "costume she can put on – and take off – as she pleases" and that ultimately she was enacting an impersonation of a black woman and "merely indulging in the fantasy of being 'other'."[270] The connection that Blay and other commentators[271] have drawn between the degrading practice of blackface minstrelsy and Dolezal's performance of blackness is clear. The blackface accusation in this case does not only refer to the offensive practice of darkening one's skin and acting out stereotypes, but, in a broader sense, it also includes the appropriation of aspects of black culture by white people for their own benefit.

Indeed, this kind of criticism inscribes Dolezal's "imitation of blackness"[272] within the many episodes of cultural appropriation through which white people have exploited and adapted to their own needs "cool" aspects of blackness while, at the same time, not having to be subjected to institutionalized racism and to the stigma of actually being black. In an article on *The New Yorker*, Jelani Cobb, who in fact was mostly supportive of Dolezal's identity claims, also acknowledged and explained the anger expressed by black commentators regarding what they considered an act of cultural appropriation and blackface. By referring to the concept of "white Negroes"[273] he explains that they

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[269] See for example Khadijah White, "Blackness Isn't Something That Can Be Acquired with a Little Bronzer," *Quartz*, June 13, 2015, https://qz.com/427519/rachel-dolezal-is-not-transracial/; Natasha Noman, "One Tweet Perfectly Shows Everything Wrong with What Rachel Dolezal Did," *Identities.mic*, June 12, 2015, https://www.mic.com/articles/120609/one-tweet-exposes-the-hypocrisy-of-rachel-dolezal-s-views-on-race; Kirabo Sincere, "The Myth of Transracial Identity," April 18, 2016, https://thehumanist.com/commentary/myth-transracial-identity.

[270] Zeba Blay, "Why Comparing Rachel Dolezal to Caitlyn Jenner Is Detrimental to Both Trans and Racial Progress," *Huffington Post*, June 12, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rachel-dolezal-caitlyn-jenner_n_7569160?ncid=fcbklnkushpmg00000047.

[271] For example, the opinion expressed by Jenn Fang, an Asian American race and feminist blogger, on the Dolezal case is that Dolezal "dehumanized Black people by treating their race as if it were a costume she could put on and take off at will — an act that inescapably invokes the history of Blackface and Brownface that has served as a centuries-old tool of White supremacy." The article is available at http://reappropriate.co/2015/06/race-transracialization-and-other-thoughts-on-rachel-dolezal/.

[272] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, p. 8.

[273] The expression "white Negro" is the title of a short essay written in 1957 by writer Norman Mailer.

> share the luxury of being able to slough off blackness the moment it becomes disadvantageous, cumbersome, or dangerous. It is an identity as impermanent as burnt cork, whose profitability rests upon an unspoken suggestion that the surest evidence of white superiority is the capacity to exceed blacks even at being black.[274]

The idea of "white Negroes" is similar to what has been defined the phenomenon of "wiggerism" which involves appropriation and stereotyping, as it refers to a practice enacted by white young people, called "wiggers," to adopt cultural repertoires and behavioral styles, mainly taken from the domain of music, language, and dress that are generally coded and readable as black.[275]

However, later in the article, Cobb states that, while the anger expressed by the black community is indeed understandable, he does not believe that Dolezal's case should be inscribed within the phenomenon of "wiggerism", as Dolezal did not just benefit from being perceived as a black woman, but she was also subjected to "the inglorious, frustrating parts of that identity."[276] Following the same reasoning, the academic Damon Sajnani, while acknowledging that Dolezal has surely appropriated black culture, also points to the fact that, at the same time, it is not possible to "reduc[e] Rachel's 'performance' to Black-face minstrelsy."[277] Indeed, according to Sajnani, not all cases of appropriation necessarily involve some kind of cultural theft; while Dolezal's appropriation of black culture seem not to be motivated by self-interest, since she embraced all aspects, both positive and negative, of being black, it is clear that "[t]his cultural appropriation is qualitatively distinct from all the instances we know so well, from Minstrelsy to Presley and beyond,"[278] which instead aimed at exploiting specific aspects of black culture for economic reasons.

It is therefore clear how allegations of blackface and cultural appropriation might in fact be not very pertinent in the case of Rachel Dolezal, as it seems that, instead of adopting blackness as a temporary performance, Dolezal has altered her appearance and her biography and has adopted aspects of black culture to achieve a realistic and

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[274] Jelani Cobb, "Black Like Her," The New Yorker, June 15, 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/rachel-dolezal-black-like-her.

[275] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, p. 111.

[276] Cobb, "Black Like Her."

[277] Damon Sajnani, "Rachel/Racial Theory: Reverse Passing in the Curious Case of Rachel Dolezal," *Transition Magazine* June 13, 2015, http://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/news/hutchins/rachelracial-theory-reverse-passing-curious-case-rachel-dolezal

[278] Ivi.

permanent blackness.[279] In other words, Dolezal did not merely want to adopt blackness as a mask that could be taken off at any moment; on the contrary she was clearly aiming at adopting blackness as her permanent and "true" identity, as it was also the way in which she wanted to be perceived and identified by others. It is Dolezal herself that, while addressing the accusations of treating blackness as a masquerade, during an interview for *Vanity Fair* stated: "[My identity is] not a costume. […] It's not something that I can put on and take off anymore,"[280] and in a later interview she also responded to criticism and claimed that

> [blackface is] made to be a mockery. Blackface is not pro-black. Blackface is not working for racial justice. Blackface is not trying to undo white supremacy. I would never make a mockery of the very things I take the most seriously.[281]

Because Dolezal's adoption of a black identity seems not to have been driven by the desire to enact stereotypes or to appropriate only specific aspects of blackness, some commentators have argued that Dolezal's case can be seen as a rare instance of "reverse passing" from whiteness into blackness.[282]

2.2. A case of "reverse passing"

The concept of passing is an integral part of the US debate about race. Over time, the topic has been studied from many different perspectives and has also been the main subject of a huge number of movies and books. The fact that passing is still nowadays a widely discussed topic when addressing race related issues, derives directly from US past history of chattel slavery, segregation under Jim Crow and a generalized white paranoia over racial purity, the maintaining of the racial hierarchies, and the possible transgression of the color line due to the peculiarity of US racialization.[283]

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[279] Anna Scacchi, "Mettere in scena la razza. Visualità, autenticità e performance razziale," in InteRGRace, *Visualità e (anti)razzismo*, p. 56.

[280] Allison Samuels, "Rachel Dolezal's True Lies.," *Vanity Fair*, July 19, 2015, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/07/rachel-dolezal-new-interview-pictures-exclusive

[281] Chris McGreal, "Rachel Dolezal: 'I Wasn't Identifying as Black to Upset People. I Was Being Me,'" *Guardian*, December 13, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/13/rachel-dolezal-i-wasnt-identifying-as-black-to-upset-people-i-was-being-me.

[282] See for example the conversation between the journalist Melissa Harris-Perry and academic and author Allyson Hobbs available at https://www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/watch/rachel-dolezal-and-the--politics-of-passing--463796291727.

[283] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, pp. 47-48.

The creation of an extremely rigid system of racial classification aimed at policing the boundaries of whiteness has been a major concern from slavery onward, and its legacy, as the case of Rachel Dolezal has shown, still holds a strong influence on today's US society. The system of racial categorization was based on the one drop rule, a social and legal norm according to which any person with any known African ancestry, no matter how small the trace (just "one drop" of black blood) was automatically identified as black. The one drop rule became a common practice starting from the eighteenth century to enforce and maintain the system of racial domination by policing what was considered "miscegenation" [284] between blacks and whites. During segregation, many Southern states adopted legal definitions of blackness to preserve racial integrity using variation of the original one drop rule, which was deemed illegal by the US Supreme Court only in 1986.[285]

It should be noted that if on the one hand, the one drop rule has created a sharp and rigidly policed color line between different racial classifications, on the other hand the fact that a single drop of "black blood" was enough to be considered black, enabled the emergence of the phenomenon of passing, as many light-skinned people who were legally considered black, could easily be taken for white.[286]

Throughout the history of the United States, stories of "racial migration," that is the movement from one racial identity to another, have overwhelmingly been about people passing from the less privileged to the more privileged category, i.e. from blackness to whiteness, in order to enjoy the opportunities than derive from being socially defined as white. Movements from blackness to whiteness have always been quite common within US society, given the great number of people whose physical characteristics were readable as white.[287] Paradoxically, it was precisely when the boundaries between races were more rigidly policed that more mixed-race people attempted to pass as white in order

[284] The policing of "miscegenation" was based on the principle of "hypodescent", that is the fact of assigning children of unions socially understood as mixed to the subordinate group, which was already applied during slavery and it became consolidated in the early twentieth century.

[285] Scacchi, "Vedere la razza/fare la razza," p. 18.

[286] Paul Spickard, "Shape Shifting: Reflections on Racial Plasticity," in Anne Tamai, Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, et al., *Shape Shifter: Journeys across Terrains of Race and Identity*, University of Nebraska Press, 2020, pp. 3-4.

[287] Daniel J. Sharfstein, 2007. "Crossing the Color Line: Racial Migration and the One-Drop Rule, 1600–1860," *Minnesota Law Review*, 91, 2007, cited in Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, p. 82.

to escape degrading situations; as Rogers Burbakers has argued, "[t]he color line, sharp and rigidly policed in theory, was blurred and porous in practice."[288]

The peculiarity of the Dolezal case therefore, resides in the fact that hers was a rare instance of a person that was born with white privilege and decided to alter her appearance and social relationships to be perceived as belonging to an inferior group. The permanent nature of her transformation, however, while making charges of cultural appropriation incongruous, enabled the association with historical instances of passing as white, as "[s]he appears to have been living her life as a Black person, living and working within the Black community, and there is no reason to believe she had any intention of reverting."[289]

As rare as this phenomenon is, however, there have been other cases of "reverse passing" in the history of the United States.[290] For example, white people have decided to adopt black identities to circumvent legal or social prohibitions of interracial unions, such as in the case of Clarence King, a white man who, at the end of the nineteenth century, passed as black to marry a woman who was born a slave.[291] Other cases of self-identifications as black were purely instrumental and temporary, such as that of the journalist John Howard Griffin who, at the end of the 1950s, darkened his skin and traveled through the Deep South to recount the experience of segregation from the point of view of a "real" black person, or the various instances of reverse passing to gain access to affirmative action benefits.[292]

What is most striking about Dolezal's reverse passing, and what ultimately left many commentators puzzled by her case is not only that she consciously decided to identify with blackness, that is a much less privileged condition within US society, but also that her choice seem not to have been motivated by any kind of self-interest like in the cases of reverse passing seen above.

As a matter of fact, it is worth noting that on this issue there is no agreement, since, when the Dolezal case exploded, there has also been a share of commentators that did in

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[288] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, p. 83.
[289] Sajnani, "Rachel/Racial Theory."
[290] Spickard, "Shape Shifting: Reflections on Racial Plasticity."
[291] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, pp. 86-87.
[292] Regarding cases of reverse passing to reap affirmative action benefits see for example, Matt Pearce, "Decades before Rachel Dolezal, There Was Mark Stebbins in a Stockton Scandal" *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 2015, http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-stockton-dolezal-20150619-story.html.

fact question the idea that she did not have personal benefits in presenting herself as a black woman and that she actually "profited both personally and professionally from passing as black." [293] The academic Khadijah White, for example, has clearly stated that Dolezal was benefiting from her adoption of a black identity, as she "occupied and dominated spaces ostensibly reserved for people who had life-long experiences of racial marginalization and disenfranchisement,"[294] while Matthew Pratt Guterl has claimed that "her blackness paid the bills" and that "[s]he did what she did, in part, because […] she saw blackness as a route to greater success and fame."[295] On the other hand, however, it is undeniable that the fact of being perceived as black carries an inescapable social stigma; moreover, it seems that most of her activities and the positions that she had achieved were in fact unpaid, thus implying that she did not gain substantial economic benefit from her passing.[296]

Nevertheless, criticism regarding the benefits that she might have gained by adopting a black identity is just one aspect of all the negative reactions that her "outing" caused. As a matter of fact, most of the criticism addressed at Dolezal's identity claims revolved around the idea that she simply could not be black because she had no known African ancestry and that her body, before the alterations, could not be "read" as black.[297] The few commentators that have supported Dolezal's identification with blackness, such as Melissa Harris-Perry and Camille Gear Rich, however, have highlighted how these kinds of assertions are indeed problematic, as they "troublingly mirror the essentialist logic of the one-drop rule"[298] and ultimately fail to recognize the social construction of race and its lack of foundation in concrete identifiers. In other words, underlining the importance of ancestry and phenotype over racial classification means to indirectly subscribe to the

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[293] Michael P. Jeffries, "Rachel Dolezal a lesson in how racism works," *The Boston Globe*, June 13, 2015, https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/06/13/rachel-dolezal-story-lesson-how-racism-works/J8R27qgq2YfDRUuOVhpYGI/story.html.

[294] Khadijah White, "Blackness Isn't Something That Can Be Acquired with a Little Bronzer," *Quartz*, June 13, 2015, https://qz.com/427519/rachel-dolezal-is-not-transracial/.

[295] Guterl, "Racial Fakery and the Next Postracial," p. 35.

[296] Dolezal has repeated multiple times that her position as president of the NAACP chapter in Spokane, as well as her participation in the city's police ombudsman commission as an advocate for black interests were both unpaid. See her interview with Melissa Harris-Perry, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USr_bm39hrU

[297] Zeba Blay, "Why Comparing Rachel Dolezal to Caitlyn Jenner Is Detrimental to Both Trans and Racial Progress," *Huffington Post*, June 12, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rachel-dolezal-caitlyn-jenner_n_7569160?ncid=fcbklnkushpmg00000047.

[298] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, p. 30.

original idea created under slavery and supported by the theories of scientific racism that race is a biological, and therefore immutable, category.[299]

This modern version of race as biologically determined reproduces the rigid and inescapable divisions imposed by the color line. Indeed, the very concept of "passing" is inherently based on the biological conception of races, thus doubling down on the idea that race is natural, real and fixed.[300] The rigidity of racial boundaries in the United States is also proven by the language used to talk about the people that consciously decide to trespass those boundaries, since the term "passing" inherently implies a form of deception and fakery. The language frame, therefore only enables negative interpretations of the crossing of racial boundaries and does not leave space for the idea that, exactly because race is a fiction that does not depend on phenotype and ancestry but is socially constructed, it is possible to legitimately cross the color line and embrace a different racial identity. As Guterl puts it, "[t]he downside of that language [is] that it wants us to believe that race is a hard, material thing, [and] that it conceptualizes all movement across the color line as subterfuge."[301]

It is therefore clear, by analyzing the debate regarding Dolezal's identity claim to blackness, that conceptions about a supposedly biological reality of race are still widespread and still inform the ongoing debate about racial identity, despite having been entirely discredited. The legacy of the one drop rule has created a paradoxical context in which a person that discovers a single black ancestor in the family's past can legitimately claim to be black, even if he/she has been raised as white and has never subjectively identified as such, but that at the same time Dolezal's claims can be rejected despite her actual connections to blackness.[302]

Another widespread accusation addressed ad Dolezal's passing was that, being born and raised in a white family and having lived as white for decades, she could not claim a black identity as she did not live the "black experience" from birth. As White puts it,

> Rachel Dolezal's seeming attempt at "reverse passing" comes with none of this historical baggage, duress, or danger. To put it simply, Rachel Dolezal was a con artist. She was

[299] Sajnani, "Rachel/Racial Theory."
[300] Guterl, "Racial Fakery and the Next Postracial," p. 39
[301] Ivi, p. 45.
[302] Rogers Brubaker, "The Dolezal Affair: Race, Gender, and the Micropolitics of Identity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 2015, p. 19.

> raised with the advantages of being born white in America and can, at any time, return to that identity and privilege.[303]

The overall idea is that racial identity is also based on a shared history of living and being treated as a member of that specific racial category; therefore, Rachel Dolezal could not be considered black, because she lacked the lifelong experience and the often-negative consequences of being socially categorized as a black person. However, as the political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. has argued, this idea is, once again, another instance of the essentialism of discourses about race, even if it is not rooted in biology and it is rather a historical form of essentialism.[304] The problem with these kinds of thoughts is that they imply that an authentic and definitive black experience that is shared by all Americans socially categorized as blacks exists. While this might be true for many people, Reed argues, it should also be highlighted that "being black" and "blackness" include different experiences, social contexts, cultural practices, etc., thus implying that referring to an "authentic" way to be black in the United States is an inherently biased idea.[305]

The troubling implications of essentialist claims about race, both biological and historical are also addressed by the historian Paul Spickard when he uses the examples of two actors, Halle Berry and Vin Diesel, to show how racial identity and self-identification might in fact be more complicated than essentialist discourses would claim. These two examples also challenge the idea that there is an "authentic" blackness and a common experience shared by all those identified and self-identifying as black. Indeed, Halle Berry who is "visually" a light-skinned black and presents herself as a black woman, was born and raised in a white context. Therefore, just like Rachel Dolezal, she did not grow up in an "authentic" black context, but because of her appearance, her identification as black is unquestioned. On the other hand, the actor Vin Diesel, who "looks" white and was raised by his white mother and his black stepfather, has chosen to call himself a person of color, although there is no evidence he has any African American ancestry.[306]

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[303] Khadijah White, "Blackness Isn't Something That Can Be Acquired with a Little Bronzer," *Quartz*, June 13, 2015, https://qz.com/427519/rachel-dolezal-is-not-transracial/.

[304] Adolph Reed Jr., "From Jenner to Dolezal: One Trans Good, the Other Not So Much," *Common Dreams*, June 15, 2015, https://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/06/15/jenner-dolezal-one-trans-good-other-not-so-much.

[305] Ivi; see also Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, pp. 29-30.

[306] Spickard, "Shape Shifting: Reflections on Racial Plasticity," pp. 7-8

From these examples it is clear that, despite the strong ideological rigidity around racial classifications, within US society, racial identities are much more complex and not fixed and that essentialist discourses "routinely fail to recognize that race is a social imposition of perception, rather than a property of individuals or groups."[307]

Therefore, what is worth challenging is the idea of race itself and the ways in which it has shaped current understandings of racial identity and classifications. As Cobb poignantly argued as a conclusion of his commentary on the Dolezal case on *The New Yorker*:

> Rachel Dolezal is not black—by lineage or lifelong experience—yet I find her deceptions less troubling than the vexed criteria being used to exclude her. If blackness is simply a matter of a preponderance of African ancestry, then we should set about the task of excising a great deal of the canon of black history, up to and including the current President. If it is simply a matter of shared experience, we might excommunicate people like Walter White, whose blue eyes were camouflage that could serve both to spare him the direct indignity of racism and enable him to personally investigate and expose lynchings. Dolezal was dishonest about an undertaking rooted in dishonesty, and no matter how absurd her fictional blackness may appear, it is worth recalling that the former lie is far more dangerous than the latter.[308]

3. Trans identities: race and gender

The question of Rachel Dolezal's self-representation and identification as a black woman emerged in the United States within an already heated social and cultural debate about identity-related issues. Indeed, only a few days before Dolezal's story made headline news worldwide, Caitlyn Jenner, the Olympic sports figure and famous television personality formerly known as Bruce Jenner, appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* to announce her identification as a woman and her consequent transition. Jenner's story received massive public attention and, overall, the reactions on the media and on social networks were almost entirely positive, thus marking "a new stage in the mainstreaming of transgender identity."[309] Because of the timing and the fact that both

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[307] Sajnani, "Rachel/Racial Theory."

[308] Jelani Cobb, "Black Like Her," The New Yorker, June 15, 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/rachel-dolezal-black-like-her. When the article was written the president was Obama, whose racial identification had been a widely debated issue throughout his presidency. As for the reference to Walter White, he was a civil rights advocate of the first half of the twentieth century and executive secretary of the NACCP for almost a quarter of a century whose appearance was entirely "readable" as white.

[309] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, p. 3.

Dolezal's and Jenner's stories were related to identity claims, the two cases from the very beginning were intertwined in the public debate.

The transgender phenomenon, and the case of Jenner in particular, soon became the point of reference within the public discourse on the Dolezal case; the main theme of the debate revolved around the possibility to legitimately choose and change one's racial or gender identity. In other words, the core question that started a widely participated public discussion was: if Caitlyn Jenner can identify, and be accepted, as a woman, is it possible for Rachel Dolezal to legitimately identify, and be accepted, as black? If Jenner is generally recognized as a transgender person, is it possible to refer to Dolezal as a "transracial" person?

In the next sections of this paragraph I will address the debate regarding the possibility of pairing transgender and transracial identities. Firstly, the focus will be on the categories themselves, the meanings that they have developed over time, and the ways in which in recent decades both racial and gender identity claims have expanded. Then I will move on to the debate generated by the juxtaposition of Jenner's and Dolezal's cases and the arguments for and against the legitimacy of "transracial" identities.

3.1. Transgender and transracial

Over the last decades, the term "transgender" has gained increasing importance not only within the debate about gender identity, but also at the institutional level, as the possibility to undergo the gender transition is legally regulated and recognized. Both at the popular and at the academic level the existence of transgender identities has been increasingly normalized and nowadays, though transgender people still have to face widespread discrimination, in the United States their identity claims are generally acknowledged and accepted as entirely legitimate.[310] The term "transracial", on the other hand, has a much longer history than "transgender," but, before the Dolezal case, it was mainly used as a specialized term in the field of interracial adoption, which has been and still is a debated and at times controversial issue in the United States.[311]

[310] Rebecca Tuvel, "In Defense of Transracialism," *Hypatia, 32*(2), 2017, pp. 263-278.

[311] Angela Jones, "Rachel Dolezal Is Really Queer: Transracial Politics and Queer Futurity," *Social (In)Queery*, June 17, 2015, https://socialinqueery.com/2015/06/17/rachel-dolezal-is-really-queer-transracial-politics-and-queer-futurity/.

As Rogers Brubaker has argued, the prefix "trans" in the two terms carries very different meanings: while in "transgender" it signals a new opportunity for transgender people to be recognized and accepted, the "trans" in "transracial" points to the possible difficulties that adoptees and adoptive families might face because of racial differences. Despite the common idea of crossing previously established boundaries, then, the implications of the two terms are indeed opposite: crossing gender boundaries enables people to claim the gender they feel true to their identity, while crossing racial boundaries might threaten the adoptees' "authentic" racial identity.[312] Therefore, when the term "transracial" started to be used in relation to Rachel Dolezal's identity claim to identify as black, it immediately framed the consequent debate within a negative perspective and an implicit reference to the dangers deriving from crossing racial boundaries.[313]

Even if the two terms have emerged in different contexts and with nearly opposite implications, however, it is worth noting that the success that both have gained mirrors the increasing complexity that surrounds the debate about identity. Indeed, basic categorizations, both in the field of gender and race, have progressively been perceived as more fragmented and fluid and therefore more open to choice and self-determination, rather than natural and given categories that cannot be questioned. In the context of gender identity, for example, not only has gender transition been normalized and recognized, but also more fluid and "queer" gender categories that unsettle the traditional binary system have emerged and are gaining importance in many contexts.[314]

In a similar way, in the domain of race, the traditional categorical and binary framework has been challenged. Indeed, within the United States, racial identities are increasingly more complex and less stable as a consequence of different immigration

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[312] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, pp. 17-21.

[313] Indeed, on a general level, the transracial adoption community has strenuously opposed the definition (and self-definition) of Dolezal's identity as "transracial" in the same sense in which a person can be transgender, which would imply that she could actually change her race. See Kimberly McKee, et al., "An Open Letter: Why Co-opting 'Transracial' in the Case of Rachel Dolezal Is Problematic," *Medium*, June 16, 2015, https://medium.com/@Andy_Marra/an-open-letter-why-co-opting-transracial-in-the-case-of-rachel-dolezal-is-problematic-249f79f6d83c#.eo89u8p3v. In contrast with this position, John Raible, an activist in the transracial adoption field has expressed a more positive opinion about Dolezal's process of "transracialization," but still claimed that it was a question of identification *with* black people and culture, rather than *as* a black person. See John Raible, "What Is Transracialization?" *John Raible Online* (blog), https://johnraible.wordpress.com/about-john-w-raible/what-is-transracialization/.

[314] Various universities and institution have hugely expanded the range of possible gender self-identifications, by allowing people to choose their preferred pronoun and by recognizing third-gender nonbinary options. See Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, pp. 41-46.

patterns and the constant rise of intermarriage rates. The changing racial landscape is most evident when one analyzes the ways in which censuses have been carried out by the US Census Bureau has addressed the issue over the last decades, as well as the ways in which people have responded to the census questions concerning racial identity. Indeed, major changes started to occur in the 1970s, when it was established that the questions about racial identity were to be answered by respondents themselves rather than by census personnel based on their own perception. Moreover, over time, the range of options has expanded widely, and in 2000 the possibility to choose multiple races was also introduced. Reports conducted by the Census Bureau have shown that the number of people that self-identifies with more than one race has increasingly grown over the last twenty years; interestingly the research has also underlined the fact that there is a huge number of Americans that change their racial identification from one census to the other.[315]

It is clear, therefore, that, as a consequence of changing paradigms and the blurring of the boundaries between traditional categories, both the field of gender and the field of race have experienced enlargement in the scope of choice and self-identification. However, for a number of different reasons, while gender transition is almost universally recognized as legitimate, the same cannot be said for changing one's race. As the debate emerged after the pairing of Jenner's transgender identity and Dolezal's transracial identity has showed, "prevailing public understandings cast gender and race as radically different forms of embodied identities."[316]

3.2. Comparing trans identities

When Rachel Dolezal was "outed" as a white woman who was trying to pass as black by her parents, her immediate response to this accusation, as already seen, was that, while she was indeed born to white parents she identified as black. From the very beginning, Dolezal herself has implicitly drawn a parallelism between her peculiar situation and the transgender experience; in various interviews she has stated that the term

[315] The data concerning changing patterns of racial identification in the United States are available on the US Census Bureau website. See for example the description of racial categories: https://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html; measuring race and ethnicity across the decades: https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2015/11/measuring-race-and-ethnicity-across-the-decades-1790-2010.html.

[316] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, p. 132.

"transracial" could indeed capture her unusual racial path and the fluidity of her identity.[317] Moreover, in her autobiography, the language of transness emerges very frequently throughout the book as a way to explain her journey towards her true identity. For example, when Dolezal addresses the accusation of passing, she states:

> My situation was different. Just as a transgender person might be born male but identify as female, I wasn't pretending to be something I wasn't but expressing something I already was. I wasn't passing as Black; I *was* Black, and there was no going back.[318]

The juxtaposition of transgender and transracial identities has generated a heated debate about the freedom to legitimately change one's racial categorization in the same way in which a transgender person can change her/his biologically assigned sex at birth. Within the public debate different and often contrasting opinion have emerged, but, on a general level, the idea that Jenner's and Dolezal's cases could not be compared as they referred to entirely different experiences and that transracial identity simply "is not a thing"[319] has been the most widespread.

While most of the commentators have recognized Jenner's identity claim and rejected Dolezal's, it is worth noting that there have also been specific groups that have turned to their advantage Dolezal's case in order to delegitimize both the concepts of transgender and transracial identities. Indeed, conservatives and Christian fundamentalists, in a strenuous attempt to preserve both gender and racial boundaries, have pointed to the absurdity of Dolezal's claim to subvert racial categorization to imply that Jenner's claims were by no means different.[320] Paradoxically, a similar opinion has been expressed also by some radical feminists, who have highlighted the fact that many arguments used to reject Dolezal's claim could indeed be applied to Jenner's transition. For example, they have highlighted that, if it was possible to appeal at Dolezal's lack of a lifelong and "authentic" history as a black woman to dismiss her claims, the same reasoning could be valid for Jenner, as she had decided to transition only later in life.[321]

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[317] See for example Chris McGreal, "Rachel Dolezal: 'I Wasn't Identifying as Black to Upset People. I Was Being Me,'" *The Guardian*, December 13, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/13/rachel-dolezal-i-wasnt-identifying-as-black-to-upset-people-i-was-being-me.

[318] Dolezal, *In Full Color*, p. 148.

[319] Kirabo Sincere, "The Myth of Transracial Identity," April 18, 2016, https://thehumanist.com/commentary/myth-transracial-identity.

[320] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, pp. 22-26.

[321] See for example Burkett, Elinor, "What Makes a Woman?" *New York Times*, June 6, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/opinion/sunday/what-makes-a-woman.html; Meghan Murphy, "You Can't 'Feel' Race, but Can You 'Feel' Female? On Rachel Dolezal, Caitlyn Jenner, and Unspeakable

As already stated, however, the position shared by the overwhelming majority of commentators has been that of rejecting any kind of equivalence between Jenner and Dolezal by underlining the fundamental difference between "transgender" and "transracial". Indeed, the overall idea is that gender identity is a subjective individual property that is uncoupled from the body, whereas racial identity not only is tightly coupled to the body, most notably to skin color, but also grounded in social relations, specifically in family and ancestry. Therefore, while changing one's gender is seen as a legitimate and accepted possibility, changing one's race is perceived as completely illegitimate. From this perspective, Dolezal's identity claims have been accused of being detrimental and potentially threatening both for the anti-racist discourse and for transgender activism. As Blay has put it: "comparing Dolezal's behavior to the real struggles of black and trans people is dangerous, irresponsible, and sets back the progress we've made in discourse on race and gender."[322]

From the point of view of those who fight for the social progress of transgender people, therefore, Dolezal's case was seen as a threat to the still-fragile legitimacy of transgender claims, which were gaining importance in the public debate after Jenner's story. The overall idea is that, by appropriating the rhetoric and recognizable language of transgender people, Dolezal was giving credence "to the deepest, most malicious lie there is about transgender identity and queer sexuality—that they are deceitful."[323] From this perspective, therefore, while being transgender is an objective, unchosen condition, proven by the fact that it is legally recognized and that transgender people can undergo hormonal and surgical treatments, being transracial is simply a choice that has no objective basis, thus implying that "Dolezal cannot become black in any meaningful sense."[324] As the writer and trans activist Meredith Talusan stated:

> The fundamental difference between Dolezal's actions and trans people's is that her decision to identify as black was an active choice, whereas transgender people's decision

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Questions," *Feminist Current*, June 17, 2015, https://www.feministcurrent.com/2015/06/17/you-cant-feel-race-but-can-you-feel-female-on-rachel-dolezal-caitlyn-jenner-and-unspeakable-questions/

[322] Zeba Blay, "Why Comparing Rachel Dolezal to Caitlyn Jenner Is Detrimental to Both Trans and Racial Progress," *Huffington Post*, June 12, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rachel-dolezal-caitlyn-jenner_n_7569160?ncid=fcbklnkushpmg00000047.

[323] Khadijah White, "Blackness Isn't Something That Can Be Acquired with a Little Bronzer," *Quartz*, June 13, 2015, https://qz.com/427519/rachel-dolezal-is-not-transracial/.

[324] Samantha Allen, "Dolezal's Damaging 'Transracial' Game," *Daily Beast*, June 16, 2015, https://www.thedailybeast.com/dolezals-damaging-transracial-game.

> to transition is almost always involuntary. […] Dolezal identified as black, but I *am* a woman, and other trans people *are* the gender they feel themselves to be.[325]

For similar reasons Dolezal's identity claims have been rejected by anti-racists as threatening for the ongoing struggle for racial equality. The main argument was, again, that while Jenner was expressing her true inner self, Dolezal was simply performing an identity that did not legitimately belong to her. The underlying reasons to support the claim that race cannot be legitimately changed or chosen, which have been already analyzed in the previous sections, point to Dolezal's lack of any known African American ancestor, a lifelong black experience and a shared history of living and being treated as a member of the black community.[326] Therefore, even if Dolezal has successfully presented herself as a black woman and has been immersed in black contexts for a long time, this does not mean that she actually "became" black; indeed, she only passed as black and the concept of passing, no matter the reason to do it, "intrinsically involves deception."[327] From this perspective, then, accepting that Dolezal is actually black, could turn out to be threatening for the fight against racism, as it might encourage other opportunistic, or at least fraudulent, racial identity claims.

Finally, there have been a few commentators who have interpreted the "if Jenner, then Dolezal" syllogism in a positive way, meaning that it is in fact possible to compare Jenner and Dolezal's identity claims. Starting from the widespread opinion that Jenner *was* indeed a woman, they stated that, following a similar reasoning, it was possible to acknowledge, or at least consider, Dolezal's identification as black. Just a few days after the Dolezal case made headline news, MSNBC's Melissa Harris-Perry directly referred to the pairing of transgender and transracial identities when discussing with the historian Allyson Hobbs about the possibility, by analogy to the transgender experience, that there might be "a different category of blackness, that is about the *achievement* of blackness,

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[325] Meredith Talusan, "There Is No Comparison between Transgender People and Rachel Dolezal." *The Guardian*, June 13, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/12/comparison-transgender-people-rachel-dolezal.

[326] Michael P. Jeffries, "Rachel Dolezal a lesson in how racism works," The Boston Globe, June 13, 2015, https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/06/13/rachel-dolezal-story-lesson-how-racism-works/J8R27qgq2YfDRUuOVhpYGI/story.html.

[327] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, p. 38.

despite one's parentage."[328] Other commentators, such as the sociologist Ann Morning, have also stressed the similarities between transgender and transracial claims and have supported the idea that the boundaries of racial categories, just as those of gender categories, are increasingly blurred; therefore, challenging the accusation of deception addressed at Dolezal, she argues that people's racial affiliation and identity might indeed change.[329] As the legal scholar Camille Gear Rich has put it,

> Dolezal is disturbing for many people because she marks a cultural fault line. Like it or not, we have entered into an era of elective race - a time when people expect that one has a right and dignity to claim the identity of one's choice.[330]

In general, the arguments in support of Dolezal's identity claims and the pairing with the transgender experience are based on constructivist theories of race and in particular on the idea that, like gender, race is increasingly understood "as something that we *do*, not something that we *have* – as a matter of reiterated doing rather than a stable being."[331] In contrast with essentialist views of race that stress the importance of ancestry, genetic heritage, lifelong experience and supposed "authenticity," therefore, according to this perspective, legitimately achieving and changing one's racial category is indeed possible. However, because widespread ideas about race are still rooted in biology, this theoretical possibility "will depend on a society's willingness to adjust its rules for racial categorization to better accommodate individual self-identification."[332]

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[328] The full interview is available at https://www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/watch/rachel-dolezal-and-the--politics-of-passing--463796291727

[329] Ann Morning, "It's Impossible to Lie about Your Race," *Huffington Post*, July 1, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/its-impossible-to-lie-about-your-race_b_7708598.

[330] Camille Gear Rich, "Rachel Dolezal Has a Right to Be Black," *CNN.com*, June 16, 2015, https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/15/opinions/rich-rachel-dolezal/.

[331] Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, p. 143.

[332] Rebecca Tuvel, "In Defense of Transracialism," *Hypatia, 32*(2), 2017, pp. 267.

CONCLUSIONS

The brutal murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police on May 25, 2020 has brought racial injustice into sharp focus, fueled global protests and reinforced the #BlackLivesMatter movement in United States. The viral video depicting a white Minneapolis police officer kneeling on Floyd's neck until he died has become almost immediately a shocking reminder of what it still means to be black in America. Throughout the centuries, the construction of racial blackness as a degraded and abject condition has justified the exploitation and oppression of black people and its legacy is indeed still present in today's US society. The murder of Floyd, therefore, is only one of the most recent acts of the violence perpetrated against black bodies in the United States that started with the brutalization and the enslavement of millions of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade.

As this research work has thoroughly argued, the concept of race in the Unites States still plays a crucial role in the lives of individuals and in society as a whole. Despite having been recognized as a social construct and not a biological reality, it is painfully clear that the concept of race is far from being eradicated, as shown by the persistence of racism and racial thinking at all levels of society. The creation and the ceaseless reproduction of the concept of race began during the colonialist period and the Atlantic slave trade and its main aim was to justify the violent brutalization of black bodies by making them seem less than human, according to specific physical traits.

As has been demonstrated by generations of scholars, intellectuals and academics, for the production and reproduction of race visuality and the field of representation have been fundamental, as there is a strong connection between dynamics of domination and representation. In particular, the production of controlling stereotypical images of black people throughout the centuries has contributed to the naturalization of the link between blackness and degradation, an idea that still persists today. Indeed, the visual archive of blackness constructed from slavery onward still holds a strong power in today's society, as it functions as a framework through which reality is perceived, and it influences society at the popular and at the institutional level.

Racialized depictions of black people have been here analyzed to show not only the power of representation for the maintaining of racial hierarchy, but also the ways in which the racist archive has changed throughout the centuries to adapt to different patterns of oppression. Therefore, while before Emancipation stereotypes were mainly concerned with black people's innate submissive nature and lack of independence so as to justify their enslavement and represent them happy in it, in the postbellum period the stereotypes were constructed to highlight the savage and violent nature of black people as a response to the need to control the freed black population.

Throughout the centuries, therefore, black people have been forced to see themselves through the white dominant gaze and have been constantly denied the possibility to articulate their own subjectivity. However, this condition has not reduced the black subject to a passive victim; as a matter of fact, black people have developed their own "oppositional gaze" to challenge and contest the dominant regime of representation that has created the inherent association between blackness and abjection. Through a wide range of counterstrategies and resistant acts of countervisuality, blacks have contested the dominant modality of visuality as well as its exclusive claim to make sense and organize reality in a longstanding struggle to regain power over their self-representation. In this resistance struggle, black people have not only questioned the truthfulness of the racist archive, but they have also created alternative and counterhegemonic images to reclaim their own worth and humanity and have interrogated the act of seeing itself.

The fight over the control of visuality, which has constituted an actual "war of images," started even before the end of slavery, as the examples of Fredrick Douglass and Sojourner Truth have demonstrated. The revolutionary ways in which they engaged the visual culture of their time is a powerful demonstration of agency and of the possibilities to resist stereotypical narratives even in the worst conditions of domination. Another fundamental example of resistance to the dominant gaze is represented by W.E.B. Du Bois's collection of photographs assembled for the 1900 Paris Exposition, which did not only provide an alternative visual archive of blackness but it also, most importantly, problematized the question on race itself through the practice of signifying.

After Emancipation and throughout the twentieth century, the fight over the realm of visuality has gained increasing importance as a consequence of the emergence and the

fast growth in popularity of new media, like cinema and television, as well as of the rapidly changing social condition of black Americans. Indeed, over time African Americans have deployed a number of different strategies to engage hegemonic representations. The major representational strategy they have used is based on the concepts of realism and authenticity and aims at highlighting the untruthful nature of racist caricatures and at substituting them with alternative representations that show the reality of black people and the truth of black experience. As important as this strategy has been in the history of black Americans to challenge the racial order, however, this realistic approach carries also huge limitations, as it postulates the existence of a single true and authentic black experience, which is in fact far more complex and varied. In other cases, however, black people have challenged the dominant cultural order and the seemingly natural meanings that it imposes by means of non-mimetic strategies, such as negotiation and the appropriation of stereotypes through irony and parody.

As for the issues of race and representation, an important change that has taken place over the last decades is the shift of focus from the war of images to the field of visuality itself. Indeed, black scholars and cultural producers have claimed for a politics of representation that critically interrogates the realm of white visuality and that moves beyond mere contests over positive/negative images. The overall idea is that by showing and uncovering the visual mechanisms through which human differentiation, racialized subjects and the black/white polar opposition are constructed, it is possible to effectively challenge and denaturalize the concept of race itself and demonstrate its fictitious and socially constructed nature.

Bringing together various issues regarding race and representation, the case of Rachel Dolezal, the woman accused of racial fakery and outed as white by her parents, is the evidence of the strong power that the concept of race and race thinking still hold on today's US society. The photographs showing the stark contrast between her skin and hair during her teenage years and her current appearance flooded the internet in the summer of 2015 causing a heated debate about the legitimacy of Dolezal's identity claim to "identify as black," despite being born to white parents.

The overwhelming majority of commentators has thoroughly rejected Dolezal's assertions and has condemned her attempt at transgressing the color line with allegations of blackface and cultural appropriation. Her altered appearance has been seen as the

ultimate proof of white privilege, as a mask or a costume that Dolezal could always take off at will, while black people cannot escape the racialization inscribed on their real bodies. Dolezal has also been seen as a rare case of "reverse passing" from whiteness into blackness, that is from the more privileged to the less privileged category. The accusations addressed at Dolezal have shown how much the concept of race in the US is still influenced by the rigid system of racial classification constructed and enforced from slavery onward. Indeed, the few commentators that have supported Dolezal's identity claims have highlighted that the persistence of racial categories as a common form of identification and self-identification mainly based on physical traits and ancestry mirrors the racial thinking that conceives race as natural, given and immutable. The Dolezal case has therefore demonstrated how frequently essentialist discourses about race might reemerge in the context of the United States, where the crossing of racial boundaries directly interrogates the very core of the country's national identity. Those who have supported Dolezal's identification with blackness have, on the contrary, adopted a constructivist perspective about race, claiming that racial boundaries are in fact increasingly blurred and that, in the future, the idea that one might legitimately achieve and change his/her racial category is indeed possible.

While it is true that racial categorizations are changing, and racial boundaries are not as fixed as they used to be, however, in the United States a future where race becomes elective is still far away. As the murder of George Floyd and many others have painfully shown, being black in the United States still means to be the carrier of all the negative meanings associated with blackness throughout the centuries.

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SUMMARY

Nel corso deli secoli, e in particolare a partire dall'età moderna, l'esperienza della razza ha lasciato un segno indelebile nella storia dell'Europa e degli Stati Uniti ed ha contribuito in maniera sostanziale alla costruzione e alla definizione dell'identità stessa del mondo occidentale. La categoria della razza è stata, ed è tuttora, oggetto di studio e analisi, in ragione del fatto che essa continua ad influire sulla strutturazione del reale e sulla vita dei singoli, in special modo su quella dei soggetti razzializzati. Nel tempo, il concetto di razza ha assunto significati mutevoli ed è importante, per affrontare in maniera consapevole i razzismi presenti, comprendere come si sia evoluto e adattato ai diversi contesti economici, sociali e culturali. In effetti, il persistere del razzismo e, di conseguenza della razza come idea, pratica e segno identitario dimostra l'adattabilità del concetto stesso e la sua capacità di riprodursi incessantemente nel corso dei secoli.

Nonostante l'esperienza della razza e del razzismo siano comuni all'umanità nel suo complesso, questo lavoro di ricerca si concentra sul contesto statunitense e, nello specifico, analizza la questione della costruzione e della rappresentazione della nerezza a partire dall'istituzione della tratta atlantica e del sistema schiavistico. L'obiettivo principale è quello di indagare la rappresentazione della nerezza nel corso dei secoli per comprendere come il corpo nero sia diventato l'emblema del soggetto razzializzato. Il potere della rappresentazione come pratica di dominio e di gerarchizzazione razziale della società rimane oggi più che evidente; in effetti il corpo nero, nell'immaginario comune continua ad essere associato a significati negativi e degradanti e spesso ad essere percepito come una minaccia, come dimostrano i frequenti omicidi di persone nere da parte della polizia negli Stati Uniti. Il campo del visuale, tuttavia, non viene inteso solo come il luogo in cui l'ordine razziale della società viene costantemente prodotto e riprodotto, ma anche come un possibile luogo di resistenza che può essere sfruttato dal soggetto nero per contestare la rappresentazione dominante della nerezza e sovvertire la gerarchia razziale della società.

Il primo capitolo analizza la rappresentazione della razza e il ruolo fondamentale che ha svolto la visualità per la costruzione del soggetto nero nel corso dei secoli. Il capitolo inizia interrogandosi sul concetto stesso di razza e sulle diverse posizioni rispetto a come questo dovrebbe essere utilizzato nel dibattito politico, sociale e culturale. Infatti, poiché è stato ampiamente dimostrato come la razza non abbia alcun base biologica o scientifica, ma sia invece una costruzione sociale e culturale, alcuni studiosi hanno proposto di abbandonare il concetto di razza come strumento di analisi della società contemporanea, sposando così l'idea di una società "post-razziale" basata sulla *colorblindness*. D'altra parte, altri studiosi hanno messo in luce come l'idea di abbandonare il concetto di razza risulterebbe in realtà controproducente, poiché non permetterebbe di riconoscere lo stretto legame tra la costruzione storica della razza e il razzismo istituzionalizzato presente nella società contemporanea. Questa condizione viene definita il "paradosso della razza", ossia il fatto che, sebbene sia stata riconosciuta come una finzione, questa continui ad avere un potere reale nell'organizzazione della società e sulla vita degli individui.

Nonostante l'inconsistenza a livello biologico ed etico, quindi, la razza continua a funzionare come dispositivo culturale di gerarchizzazione dell'umanità e, soprattutto, nella pratica quotidiana, continua ad essere una realtà visibile con cui dare senso e classificare la diversità umana. Risulta quindi chiaro come ci sia un legame inscindibile tra visualità e razza, come dimostra il fatto che, anche se non esiste una definizione valida di razza, continuiamo a vederla e a percepire la realtà in termini razziali. A livello accademico, è stato lo sforzo congiunto di due discipline, (*critical studies of race* e *visual culture studies*) che hanno analizzato più a fondo l'intreccio tra razza e visualità e hanno permesso di indagare la visione stessa come atto sociale, in cui vedere la razza non è un atto percettivo diretto e senza mediazione. Al contrario, l'atto del guardare implica l'interpretazione attiva dei dati visuali e l'attribuzione di significati e valori ad essi. Vedere la razza è dunque un atto performativo con il quale viene costruita l'immagine dell'Altro; in questo senso la razza è intesa come un filtro attraverso cui interpretare la diversità umana secondo criteri razziali.

Il regime scopico della razza, ossia all'insieme dei sistemi visuali costruiti da chi detiene l'egemonia interpretativa, ha fatto sì che la classificazione della diversità umana in termini razziali fosse non solo possibile, ma anche percepita come naturale. Inoltre, ha creato un sistema in cui la razza, nella sfera visuale, è articolata all'interno di un

paradigma ottico all'interno del quale la pelle nera è un segno ipervisibile, mentre la bianchezza viene percepita come la norma non marcata; essere nero, dunque, significa occupare una posizione razzializzata mentre essere bianco significa rappresentare l'umano in generale e di conseguenza una posizione di potere.

La produzione di immagini stereotipate dell'Altro, ovvero del soggetto nero, è la strategia adottata dal regime scopico della razza per mantenere la gerarchia razziale della società e giustificare il regime di oppressione e violenza imposto ai corpi neri. La potenza dello stereotipo risiede nella sua capacità di ridurre l'Altro ad una singola caratteristica (ad esempio la bestialità, la depravazione sessuale, etc.) che viene presentata come una condizione fissa e naturale. Nel contesto statunitense, tuttavia, gli stereotipi della nerezza costruiti nel tempo, non sono solo la lente attraverso cui i bianchi hanno imparato a conoscere i neri; gli afroamericani stessi sono stati costretti a guardare loro stessi attraverso lo sguardo dell'altro. Questa dolorosa condizione è stata definita "doppia coscienza", ossia il dover interpretare la propria nerezza utilizzando i codici sociali dello sguardo egemone che sono stati interiorizzati dal soggetto nero. La rappresentazione della nerezza gioca quindi un ruolo fondamentale nelle dinamiche di potere. Nel corso dei secoli, la visualità della razza ha creato un gran numero di immagini stereotipate della soggettività nera che continuano, spesso anche inconsapevolmente, a strutturare la percezione della realtà.

L'esame degli stereotipi della nerezza nella cultura visuale e di come si sono modificati nel corso dei secoli è il tema principale dell'ultima parte del primo capitolo. Il sistema di rappresentazione visuale della diversità umana ha inizio durante l'Illuminismo, in cui furono applicati i principi di classificazione utilizzati per piante e animali anche alla diversità umana, rendendo l'idea che l'umanità fosse divisa in diverse specie organizzate in maniera gerarchica una verità scientifica incontrovertibile. La gerarchia razziale veniva giustificata a livello visuale secondo parametri estetici che sottolineavano, da una parte, il legame tra la bianchezza e gli ideali di bellezza dell'arte classica e l'associazione tra pelle bianca e pulizia, progresso e civiltà e, dall'altra, la somiglianza dei neri con gli animali e il legame tra pelle nera e sporcizia e barbarie. Questo concetto di razza diventò ancora più diffuso nell'Ottocento con le teorie del razzismo scientifico, che, anche grazie all'utilizzo delle nuove tecnologie si proponeva di fornire una base scientifica e misurabile per spiegare l'inferiorità dei neri. È bene notare il ruolo

fondamentale che ebbe la fotografia nella creazione e diffusione delle immagini della differenza tra razze, grazie anche al fatto che era percepita come la riproduzione del reale oggettiva e senza mediazioni.

La produzione visuale della nerezza basata anche sulle classificazioni prodotte dal razzismo scientifico risultò fondamentale per l'istituzione dello schiavismo negli Stati Uniti. A livello popolare, la naturalizzazione della gerarchia tra razze e la riproduzione del sapere razziale era fondata su una serie di immagini stereotipate che dipingevano la subordinazione dei neri come una condizione naturale che derivava da caratteristiche innate e immodificabili. Le immagini di controllo prodotte durante lo schiavismo erano diverse per uomini e donne, poiché dovevano giustificare regimi di oppressione distinti: le immagini della soggettività maschile nera, puntavano a sottolineare la loro natura infantile, ingenua e tendente alla sottomissione, per legittimare la schiavitù come un'istituzione patriarcale, naturale ed inevitabile; d'altra parte, la rappresentazione delle donne nere si basava sulla necessità di controllo del loro corpo e della loro sessualità, poiché le donne erano il mezzo di riproduzione della schiavitù stessa. Gli stereotipi della nerezza maschile, come *Sambo*, il nero infantile e sempliciotto o *Tom*, lo schiavo di casa felice di servire, e della nerezza femminile, come *Mammy*, la schiava devota alla famiglia bianca o *Jezebel*, la donna nera dalla sessualità aggressiva, diventarono, a livello popolare, la "grammatica di base della razza", attraverso la quale il pubblico bianco americano ha imparato a vedere la nerezza.

Dopo l'emancipazione, le immagini stereotipate dei neri prodotte durante lo schiavismo si modificarono per giustificare la necessità di controllo sociale della popolazione nera e il la costruzione di un sistema di segregazione razziale. In questo contesto, subirono una modificazione più profonda gli stereotipi della soggettività maschile nera, che si allontanarono dall'idea di sottomissione e ingenuità e che, al contrario rappresentavano l'uomo nero come un selvaggio violento e iper-sessualizzato. Nel corso del tempo, gli stereotipi hanno continuato a modificarsi per adattarsi a nuovi contesti, tuttavia essi hanno tutti contribuito alla costruzione di un diffuso "sapere razziale" che associa la nerezza ad una serie di valori e significati negativi. Anche nella società statunitense contemporanea questa associazione continua ad essere percepita come reale, rendendo la razza una categoria che influisce sulla vita quotidiana delle

persone; a dispetto dell'inconsistenza biologica, infatti la razza continua ad avere una dimensione sociale e fenomenologica.

Il secondo capitolo analizza il modo in cui, nel corso dei secoli, i neri hanno resistito alle rappresentazioni razziste e degradanti prodotte dallo sguardo egemonico bianco e hanno rivendicato il loro "diritto di guardare". Il controllo sullo sguardo, infatti, non ha solo ridotto i neri a vittima passiva ma ha anche dato vita, nella sfera visuale, ad una vera e propria lotta per il riconoscimento della propria umanità, della propria soggettività e del proprio valore in opposizione agli stereotipi e alle caricature della nerezza. Il potere degli oppressi di resistere allo sguardo e alla rappresentazione egemone passa non solo dalla denuncia degli stereotipi come immagini false e disumanizzanti, ma anche dalla costruzione di una visualità alternativa con cui è possibile sostituire l'archivio della razza, dando vita a quella che è stata definita una "guerra delle immagini". Per contestare il regime scopico della razza e rivendicare il loro diritto a costruire la propria identità, i neri negli Stati Uniti hanno adottato varie strategie, a seconda del loro potere individuale e delle condizioni sociali, culturali e politiche. Nella lotta per la riappropriazione della rappresentazione, i neri sono stati sia i produttori di immagini che l'oggetto delle immagini; in quest'ultimo caso, tuttavia, a differenza delle rappresentazioni razziste, non sono stati oggetti passivi dello sguardo dominante, ma sono riusciti a controllare e manipolare le proprie immagini per scopi artistici o politici e per sostenere le loro rivendicazioni.

Il capitolo si concentra poi su alcuni degli esempi più celebri di rappresentazioni alternative della nerezza tra la fine dell'Ottocento e l'inizio del Novecento. Prima di tutto vengono presi in considerazione le autorappresentazioni di due figure cruciali della cultura statunitense, ovvero Frederick Douglass e Sojourner Truth. Entrambi ex schiavi, furono in grado di utilizzare la fotografia per produrre immagini di loro stessi che erano decisamente in contrasto con quelle proposte dalla visualità dominante, dando prova del controllo che esercitavano sulla loro immagine e sui significati ad essa associati. Infatti, utilizzando i canoni della fotografia della classe borghese dell'epoca costruirono un'immagine della nerezza maschile e femminile legate all'idea di rispettabilità e che utilizzarono per dare maggiore forza alle loro rivendicazioni politiche. Un altro noto caso di decostruzione della rappresentazione dominante fu quello di W.E.B. Du Bois, che,

come Douglass e Truth, era più che consapevole dell'importanza di proporre un diverso archivio della razza che rispecchiasse la realtà dei soggetti neri. Du Bois, all'esposizione universale di Parigi nel 1900 per la mostra sul "Negro americano" creò una raccolta di fotografie che ritraevano in maniera accurata le reali condizioni sociali, economiche e culturali degli afroamericani, oltre ad una serie di ritratti che mettevano in luce quanto l'idea della nerezza diffusa dagli stereotipi fosse ben lontana dalla realtà.

Nel corso del Novecento, la questione della rappresentazione continuò a ricoprire un'importanza cruciale nella cultura americana, in particolar modo in seguito alla nascita e allo sviluppo del cinema e della televisione. La strategia di autorappresentazione più diffusa e maggiormente adottata dagli afroamericani per resistere alla violenza dello stereotipo fu quella basata sul realismo e l'autenticità e sulla sostituzione delle immagini razziste con una visualità composta di immagini interamente positive. È stato tuttavia sottolineato come questo tipo di approccio sia problematico e abbia avuto anche delle ricadute negative, poiché ha spesso marginalizzato altri tipi di rappresentazione. Infatti, l'idea di poter rappresentare la realtà della nerezza presuppone da un lato che esista un modo unico e autentico di essere neri, escludendo così chi non rientra in questo, e dall'altro lato che la rappresentazione sia specchio della realtà e che non sia, invece, per sua natura, mediata. Inoltre, l'enfasi sulla produzione di immagini esclusivamente positive ha l'effetto paradossale di rinchiudere la nerezza, ancora una volta in una serie di stereotipi. Questo tipo di strategia, basata su un'ottica correttiva, non ha il potenziale di mettere in discussione lo sguardo egemone e, in definitiva, implica l'accettazione dello stereotipo e l'internalizzazione delle norme e dei codici della cultura dominante. Di particolare importanza per questo approccio è stata, e spesso continua ad essere, la politica della rispettabilità utilizzata in special modo dalle donne nere per resistere agli stereotipi diffusi riguardo alla loro sessualità "eccessiva". In altre circostanze, tuttavia, i neri hanno utilizzato approcci diversi per rapportarsi alla cultura egemone, ad esempio adattando lo stereotipo alle proprie necessità, e mettendo in campo quindi una strategia di negoziazione. Questo approccio risultò particolarmente importante per artisti, performers e attori neri che, costretti a impersonare gli stereotipi della nerezza, trovarono anche il modo di rendere potenzialmente sovversivi i ruoli a loro imposti. Un'ultima strategia di resistenza alla rappresentazione egemone si basa invece sul rifiuto dei codici dominanti e, tramite l'ironia e la parodia, sull'appropriazione dello stereotipo.

L'appropriazione ironica dello stereotipo ha permesso agli artisti neri non solo di utilizzare le rappresentazioni razziste a proprio vantaggio ma anche di sottolineare con indirettamente come la natura precaria e socialmente costruita dello stereotipo razziale. Anche questo approccio è stato spesso utilizzato dalle artiste nere che hanno rifiutato di conformarsi alla politica della rispettabilità decidendo invece di adottare stili eccessivi e di utilizzare l'ironia e la parodia per mettere in discussione le rappresentazioni dominanti del corpo femminile nero.

L'ultima parte del capitolo prende in esame il cambio di prospettiva avvenuto negli ultimi decenni rispetto alla questione della rappresentazione della razza, che dalla "guerra delle immagini" è passato invece alla messa in discussione della sfera visuale stessa. Molti studiosi hanno infatti sottolineato come la produzione di immagini alternative, autentiche o positive della nerezza, per quanto importante, non possa risolvere il problema della rappresentazione. Per opporsi al regime scopico della razza è necessario, infatti, mettere in luce i meccanismi visuali attraverso i quali la razza stessa viene costruita e mostrare come l'atto di vedere la diversità umana in termini razziali non sia affatto naturale ma una pratica acquisita.

Infine, il terzo capitolo prende in esame il caso di Rachel Dolezal, una donna americana che è stata accusata di aver mentito sulla propria identità, poiché si è presentata per svariati anni come donna nera nonostante i suoi genitori fossero entrambi bianchi. Nel giugno 2015 la storia della "falsificazione razziale" di Dolezal è diventata un caso a livello nazionale e internazionale, attirando l'attenzione dei media di tutto il mondo, e trasformandosi in brevissimo tempo in una discussione non tanto sulla storia in sé, ma sui concetti di razza e identità in una nazione come gli Stati Uniti in cui questi temi sono sempre più al centro del dibattito pubblico. Nella prima parte del capitolo viene ricostruito il caso in maniera più dettagliata mettendo in luce come le accuse di falsificazione razziale si basassero principalmente sul confronto tra le foto di Dolezal da adolescente, con la pelle chiara e i capelli lunghi e lisci, e il proprio aspetto da adulta dall'incarnato decisamente più scuro e con acconciature utilizzate tipicamente dalle donne afroamericane. Fin dall'inizio, Dolezal ha risposto alle accuse che le venivano mosse dichiarando di identificarsi come nera a dispetto dei propri genitori e tentando di dimostrare il suo legame con contesti sociali, culturali e familiari neri. Dolezal, infatti,

non solo ha quattro fratelli neri adottati ed è stata sposata con un nero con cui ha avuto un figlio, ma, a livello professionale e pubblico ha anche lavorato come docente di vari corsi relativi alla cultura afroamericana ed è un membro attivo di diverse realtà che si battono per la giustizia e l'uguaglianza razziale.

Il capitolo analizza poi le principali reazioni al caso, concentrandosi nello specifico sulle accuse di *blackface* e appropriazione culturale mosse a Dolezal. Nella maggior parte dei casi, le reazioni sono state interamente negative: da un lato, la pretesa di Dolezal di identificarsi come nera è stata vista dai commentatori razzisti e conservatori come un chiaro segno di instabilità mentale; dall'altro lato tuttavia, anche molte voci dell'antirazzismo hanno condannato le azioni di Dolezal accusandola di mettere in atto una forma contemporanea di *blackface* e di utilizzare quindi la nerezza come una maschera, un costume da poter inossare e togliere a piacimento per motivi opportunistici. Questo tipo di accusa fa rientrare l'imitazione della nerezza messa in atto da Dolezal in uno dei frequenti casi di appropriazione culturale attraverso cui i bianchi hanno sfruttato e utilizzato per profitto aspetti specifici della cultura nera, senza tuttavia dover essere soggetti al razzismo e alla violenza istituzionalizzati e allo stigma di essere neri. A difesa di Dolezal, però, è stato fatto notare come la sua adozione di un'identità nera non si limitasse all'appropriazione di aspetti positivi della cultura nera, ma abbracciasse anche tutti gli aspetti negativi di essere socialmente identificato come nero negli Stati Uniti.

Poiché l'alterazione del proprio aspetto e della propria biografia da parte di Dolezal sembra essere stato non tanto una performance temporanea ma il tentativo di essere percepita come nera in maniera realistica e permanente, il percorso intrapreso da Rachel Dolezal è stato visto come un raro caso di *passing* da un'identità razziale bianca ad una nera. Il concetto di *passing* è stato, e continua ad essere, una parte fondamentale del dibattito sulla razza negli Stati Uniti. Questa pratica di simulazione identitaria è emersa in risposta alla creazione di un sistema estremamente rigido di classificazione razziale durante il periodo schiavista basato sulla *one drop rule*, una norma sociale e legale secondo la quale chiunque avesse anche solo un antenato nero veniva identificato come tale. Tuttavia, nella storia degli Stati Uniti, la pratica del *passing* è stata utilizzata quasi esclusivamente per passare da una categorizzazione razziale ritenuta subalterna a quella egemone, per poter godere dei diritti e dei privilegi ad essa connessi; la scelta di Dolezal di identificarsi come nera, quindi, è in decisa controtendenza nel panorama statunitense.

L'aspetto problematico dell'accusa di *passing* rivolta a Dolezal, tuttavia, è che spesso, per sostenerla sono stati utilizzati argomenti che richiamano la logica essenzialista del concetto di razza basata sulla *one drop rule*; la rivendicazione identitaria di Dolezal, infatti, è stata spesso rifiutata sulla base della sua mancanza di antenati neri, rimettendo quindi in campo un'idea di razza basata sulla biologia. Un'altra accusa molto diffusa nei confronti di Dolezal è stata quella di non aver vissuto da nera, e di conseguenza di non essere stata percepita e trattata come tale, per tutta la vita e quindi di non aver avuto un'esperienza nera "autentica". Anche in questo caso, tuttavia, coloro che hanno difeso la legittimità del percorso di Dolezal hanno fatto notare come anche questo sia un discorso di stampo essenzialista che propone l'esistenza di un modo unico e autentico di essere neri, quando nella realtà la nerezza si compone di diverse esperienze, contesti, pratiche sociali, quotidiane e culturali.

In ultimo, il capitolo prende in considerazione il paragone tra le rivendicazioni identitarie di Dolezal e quelle di Caitlyn Jenner di identificarsi come donna e analizza il dibattito pubblico relativo alla possibilità di cambiare legittimamente categorizzazione razziale così come è possibile per l'identità di genere per le persone transgender. Viene prima di tutto messo in luce come entrambe le categorie di razza e genere, nel corso degli ultimi decenni, si siano allargate in maniera considerevole per accogliere rivendicazioni identitarie complesse e non per forza rispettose del sistema tradizionale di tipo binario uomo/donna e bianco/nero, lasciando quindi più spazio alla scelta e all'autodeterminazione individuale. Tuttavia, quando Dolezal stessa, utilizzando il termine "transrazziale" ha paragonato la sua autoidentificazione come donna nera con il percorso di transizione di genere di Jenner la maggior parte dei commentatori hanno rifiutato il confronto tra le due rivendicazioni, considerando legittima l'identità transgender ma non quella transrazziale. Secondo chi ha sostenuto questa posizione, infatti, mentre essere transgender è una condizione non scelta e oggettiva, come dimostrano il riconoscimento legale e la possibilità di sottoporsi ad interventi ormonali e chirurgici, cambiare razza è una scelta individuale non supportata da basi oggettive. Quindi, il fatto che Dolezal si sia presentata come nera e sia stata riconosciuta come tale per un certo periodo di tempo non significa che sia effettivamente *diventata* nera, ma che abbia solo finto di esserlo. In contrapposizione a questo pensiero diffuso, tuttavia, altri hanno considerato più che plausibile l'identificazione di Dolezal, ritenendo che

l'identificazione razziale si possa legittimamente cambiare in ragione del fatto che la razza, così come il genere, è sempre meno una categoria dai confini stabiliti e sempre più intesa come qualcosa che "si fa" nelle pratiche sociali e quotidiane. Tuttavia, poiché le idee diffuse sulla razza sono ancora radicate nella biologia, la possibilità di riconoscere le identità transrazziali dipenderà dalla volontà della società di adeguare le proprie regole di categorizzazione razziale per meglio adattarsi all'autoidentificazione individuale.