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# Are You as Colored as That Negro?: The Politics of Being Seen in Julie Dash's *Illusions*

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S. V. Hartman and Farah Jasmine Griffin

I took myself far from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that splattered my whole body with black blood.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Sktn, White Masks*

I am invisible . . . simply because people refuse to see me.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

They made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him. . . . He was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. He felt transparent.

—Richard Wright, *Native Son*

" . . . Ah didn't know Ah wazn't white till Ah was round six years old. . . . when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair . . . . Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. . . . Everybody laughed . . . . Miss Nellie . . . pointed to de dark one and said, 'Dat's you' . . . . before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest."

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

They see me, but they cannot recognize me.

—Julie Dash, *Illusions*

It's a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

It seems, Fanon remarked, that, if we must be black, "we must be so in relation to the white man" (110). Through the classic figures of blackness, we see ourselves seeing ourselves. The ex-

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colored men, the tragic and passing mulattos, the invisible ones, and the Biggers, whether affirming or resisting the social order, are made subjects as visual objects of the racist gaze. Blackness—explicated, defined, and constructed in relation to the gaze, the articulation of the dominant symbolic order—designates a relation between the seer and the seen, where we are usually the object of the gaze. The gaze disciplines us. It constitutes us.

Look, a Negro! The flesh burns. The palms begin to sweat. We see ourselves as objects and as Others. We become the agents of our own subjection.

Look, a Negro! The body exposes us. It is a site of shame. The “truth” of the body becomes evidence used against us.

Fragmented, de-formed, and organ-ized—breasts, dicks, backs, hands, buttocks, and pussies are in circulation. The organization of the body yields profits. The body becomes black emblazoned with the desires and truths of racist discourse. “. . . put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up,” says schoolteacher of *Sethe* (Morrison 193). The anatomopolitics of the black body: madness, hypertrophied genitalia, steatopygia, lack, atrophied brains, genetic inferiority, a dark and diseased sexuality.

Through the organization, investment, and (e)valuation of the body, we come to know the subject. One wonders, “Could this be me?”

### The Truth of the Gaze

The climax of Julie Dash’s *Illusions* occurs when the white Lt. Bedford exposes the racial identity of the beautiful passing heroine Mignon. Searching through Mignon’s desk, he finds a photograph of her lover Julius, whose black body is the irrefutable proof which enables the lieutenant to expose and name her. The lieutenant’s gaze establishes Mignon’s “real” black identity.

The lieutenant consumes Julius’s body, objectified as image, and finds “truth” there: the threat of black sexuality. Assailed by the gaze and enframed by the lieutenant’s racial schema, Julius becomes the clue which explains the elusive Mignon. Finally the lieutenant understands the mystery he has detected in her eyes. He never assumes that Mignon, despite her white appearance, could be a white woman with a black lover, because to be entangled in black sexuality is to be black. Still, he can only fix her blackness by acknowledging her sameness and difference from the black body of the Negro. An equation, a correlative construc-



**Fig. 1. Mignon Dupree (Lorette McKee) in *Illusions*. © 1982 Julie Dash. Reproduced courtesy of Third World Newsreel.**

tion is required in order to stabilize Mignon's identity and construct an absolute difference between himself and her. Julius's Negro body provides that correlative. Mignon must be made as colored as any Negro. The lieutenant confronts her, not by calling her a Negro, but by equating her with one. Ironically, in his effort to situate her on the Other side, he's forced to admit her difference from other Negroes. Are they the same? Or are they different?

The film's narrative, set in the 1940s, focuses on Mignon, a beautiful, fair-skinned movie executive who is passing for white. Mignon has come to Hollywood to "make the world of moving shadows work for" her. However, she winds up developing escapist entertainment fare. In the course of her duties at National Studio, she befriends a dark-skinned singer, Esther Geeter, who has been hired to dub the voice of white film star Leila Grant and thereby save the studio's Christmas blockbuster. Esther's presence makes Mignon realize that she has become "an illusion just like the stories here. They see me, but they can't recognize me."

As a result of her brief encounter with Esther, Mignon recognizes that she has not been able to make films about real people. After Lt. Bedford uncovers her for "who she really is," Mignon confirms her desire to work within the film industry so that she

can tell real stories about real Negroes, and use the power of the film industry to present honest representations of Negro life instead of the singing-and-dancing-darkey fare which Hollywood produces. However, the lieutenant's discovery imperils all that she has hoped to accomplish.

*Illusions* explores questions of race, representation, and gender in Hollywood cinema—in particular, the absence of “meaningful” and “realistic” images of our lives. It is a film about images and misapprehension: the black image before the eyes of the Other. In discussing the black image in terms of true and false beliefs and representations, the film posits “the truth of blackness.” Faithful to its title, the misperception of the real grounds the film's discussion of the black in cinema.

The film opens with the revolving figure of the Oscar and a voice-over: “To direct an attack upon Hollywood would indeed be to confuse portrayal with action, image with reality. In the beginning was not the shadow, but the act, and the province of Hollywood is not action, but illusion.” This quotation from Ellison's essay “The Shadow and the Act” (267), in which he discusses the image of the black in Hollywood films of the 1940s, suggests that a direct attack on Hollywood's racist images confuses the issues by shifting the focus of blame from society to the movies. He argues that Hollywood doesn't create anti-Negro images; it only manipulates and replicates them. Hollywood reproduces existing social codes.

If movies only mirror society, then the efficacy of representational practices is greatly circumscribed. *Illusions* borrows Ellison's language of *shadow* and *act*, yet attempts to address the importance of the cinema in determining our relation to the world. However, *shadow* and *act* reduce questions of representation to considerations of accurate or distorted reflections. Images do not simply fulfill desires; they create desires and identities.

*Shadow* and *act* are tropes which undergird the film's polemic on cinema as well as terms that chronicle Mignon's journey. The film opens on shadow and closes on act. Yet Mignon's precarious existence defies the rigidity of these categories. She occupies the neither/nor and both/and categories, and lives the opposition between the shadow and the act. She wants to make images, but she cannot because she is an image. How can she act if she is all shadow? Mignon acts so that she can appear to be what she is not. But what is she? What true identity is disguised by the fair flesh? And what is a true identity?

The conflicts between shadow and act, essence and appearance, I am and I am not, same and Other, black and white, and

interior and exterior are articulated in the relation between the visual and auditory registers in the film. The problem of synchronization in the film-within-the-film demonstrates how racial and sexual differences are produced. In order to explore the antinomies which structure the film, and the relation of *Illusions* to the dominant cinema, an examination of the projection room sequence is required. The projection room scene unveils the role of the cinema's technological mastery in creating identities; and, in doing so, the film foregrounds the role of the gaze and the voice in producing subjects.

### **Imagine How Differences Sound**

The projection room scene provides a map for dismantling the construction of racial and sexual difference in the cinema. Mignon, her boss, and two white male technicians are positioned in the sound booth. The objects of their gaze, Esther and footage of film star Leila Grant, are on the stage. The glass of the booth divides the products of the cinema from the locus of its enunciation. The image of a white male technician looms on the glass separating the producers from the commodified women.

The sequence opens with footage of Leila Grant singing a swing number with two male dancers. The technicians in the sound booth explain to Mignon and her boss that the following portion of the film has lost sync. National Studio has hired a "Negro gal," Esther Geeter, to help them out. Watching the out-of-sync footage of Leila Grant, Esther coordinates her singing with the movement of Leila's lips. Not only are Esther's voice coordinates appropriated, but the violence of the appropriation is heightened by the fact that Esther must lip sync the garbled movements of Leila—a reversal of the typical lip-syncing situation, in which the non-singer matches his or her voice movements to the singer's voice. In this case, Esther's live voice is being excised and reproduced, although she must mime the dumb star. Esther is both ventriloquist and dummy.

Leila Grant's continued stardom is made possible by Esther's labor, yet it must be hidden in order that the white woman's status be maintained. Like capital feeding off the body of labor, Leila's corpse is resuscitated by Esther's voice. The live body becomes deposited in the ghostly image so that it can carry out its seduction (Lieberman). Leila's image, the desired body, is mortified without the animating voice required to make her a desirable woman. Acting as cosmetic surgeons, the studio technicians construct Hollywood's ideal woman from composite

parts. Leila becomes the desired female after being the object of technological dissection. In fact, Esther and Leila are both objects of the technological apparatus. Esther's voice is in circulation, but her body must be banished to the dark zones off-screen. (This convention has, of course, guided Hollywood's utilization of black voices since the advent of sound: The "better voices" of Negroes were used to enhance the entertainment value of Hollywood fare, thus providing the industry with greater profits. Yet, within these films, blacks existed in segregated musical zones. Their voices were employed, yet the boundary between the black and white worlds was maintained vigilantly.)

Esther's voice is excised from her body so that the black body can be contained and the white body animated. After being consumed, Esther's body is cast away, like the utterly depleted body of the whore and the desexualized and devoured body of the nanny once her breasts are no longer in use. Esther must remain off-screen in the hinterlands of unrepresentability. Within the dominant conventions of representation, the black woman has been a passageway between the sexual and the pornographic. Like the lesbian and the prostitute, the black woman inhabits a sexual realm overcoded by the language of disease, pathology, and perversion.

### **The Darkest Continent**

Leila Grant is the object of desire: "the true woman of the discourse of femininity," an object of the gaze and the editor's cut. She does not *have* desire; she *is* desire. She does not have voice; she embodies it. Stranded on the dark continent, Esther looks at Leila and desires to be desired. Esther mimics for work and pleasure. She must simulate Leila's position in order to do her job and experience any pleasure as a black woman viewer in the cinema. "Sometimes, when I go to the theater, I sit and listen to my voice coming out of those movie stars. I close my eyes and pretend it's me up there in a satin gown. It's a funny situation, 'cause I know how to sing that sad song." Rather than witness the violence of the cinema, which exploits her as a laborer and exiles her to the hinterlands of the unseen and the unspoken, Esther opts for fantasy and identification. As a viewer, she desires to be in the position of the starlet, a position which is rightly hers by virtue of her labor and would enable her to recover her disembodied voice. Implicitly, Esther desires the embodiment of a black voice in a black body which can be represented and desired.



In the projection room, where female images and voices are in circulation, we observe Mignon seeing herself. Literally, she looks at her reflection in the glass of the sound booth; figuratively, she sees herself not in the images on the screen but in the off-screen space where no one else looks. She gazes longingly at Esther. After listening to Esther sing, Mignon immediately decides to call her mother. Esther's song guides Mignon's return to the maternal body, her desire for grounding and for home. The return to the maternal provides an escape and reprieve from Mignon's charade, and within the locus of this desire, she comes to know Esther.

Conventionally, in the passing narrative, it is via the black mother that one returns home. The black mother is of pivotal importance not only because she is the site of racial origin, but because she would induce the white daughter to give up the passing charade, return home, and accept the limits of Negro life. The black mother binds the daughter to blackness. In the 1934 version of *Imitation of Life*, Delilah's visit to the shop where her passing daughter works threatens to expose Pecola's identity and cost Pecola her job. In the 1959 version, Sarah Jane is beaten by her white lover when he discovers who her mother is and that Sarah Jane, therefore, must be black. Similarly, Mignon's voiceless mother wants her to accept the strictures of Negro life—being the black wife of a black man.

"I just wanted to hear your voice," Mignon tells her mother. Engulfed in the darkness of the phone booth, she wants to be assured and coaxed by the soothing sound of her mother's voice. The mother, a Delilah to Mignon's Pecola, comforts her but lacks an understanding of her daughter's ambitions and her position in the white world. Like Esther and Julius, the mother links Mignon to blackness, and ultimately to subordination, since blackness is repeatedly figured in terms of discursive impotence.

Julius, Esther, and the mother are all situated in positions of vulnerability and passivity in relation to the gaze and the voice. Julius is absolute image and bereft of voice. Curiously, in the scene in which Mignon reads his letter, the contents are revealed through her voice, not the voice of Julius, the writer, as would usually be the case. Esther's voice literally becomes the possession of others. Muted, excised, and interior, the black voices can only be described as symbolically unempowered, constrained, and impotent. This encoding of blackness culminates in the mother, who is neither seen nor heard. According to Kaja Silverman, inferiority in the dominant cinema "implies linguistic constraint and physical confinement—confinement to the body, to



claustral spaces, and to inner narratives" (45). Given the association of blackness and inferiority, Mignon's dark natality and sexuality are characterized by confinement, passivity, and subordination.

Although Mignon speaks publicly with limited authority as a white woman in a white world, her interior voice—her private, true, black voice—is as disembodied as Esther's. In the course of their work, their voices become unanchored from their black bodies and harbored within white female bodies. In fact, their work requires the decorporealization of the black female voice, which must be transplanted elsewhere in order to contain, to render docile, the threat of the black body. Like the excess of the clitoris in a reproductive heterosexist economy, the excess of the black body must be regulated. The excision of the voice imperiously organizes the black body.

The opening voice-over delivered in confidential tones becomes quickly identified with Mignon's secret. It hints at her mystery. Her voice, looming in dark space, asserts the power of cinema to produce images and illusions. At the film's conclusion, where the viewer is presumably to believe that Mignon is empowered, once again a voice-over narrative turns her "inside out" so that the black truth of the interior can be penetrated.

Blackness lurks in the dark zones. It is a secret that the domineering gaze brings to light. Mignon is an illusion, seen but not recognized, until the lieutenant names her and brings her masquerade to an end. Her blackness becomes public only when ascertained by the lieutenant. Esther knows her secret and has helped her maintain it. Although we are asked to believe that Esther has helped Mignon to "act without fear," it is difficult to believe this. Esther does question her, "Do you pretend when you're with them, or can you be yourself?" Mignon, however, refuses to address her subterfuge and only laments her illusory status: "They see me, but they cannot recognize me."

Upon returning to her office after her conversation with Esther, Mignon is confronted by the lieutenant. "You sure had me fooled," he quips. "You are as colored as that Negro singer." Mignon attempts to explain herself, but much of what she says to him during this encounter is difficult to understand because of poor sound quality. Her reply is elliptical, an affirmation and a negation. "I am not ashamed of what I am." Shame enmeshes her existence and non-being. Are you ashamed? "I am." "I am not." The self is (un)named under the violating scrutiny of the racist gaze. In this reenactment of America's racial melodrama, Mignon's image is subordinated to the truth of her identity. The

film inadvertently reaffirms the power of the racist gaze insofar as the dramatic climax turns on Mignon's unveiling.

The scene concludes with Mignon determined to stay on at National Studio, learning the tricks of the trade so that she can make movies about her boys overseas. The conclusion is ambiguous. It is highly implausible that Mignon could remain at National Studio and, as a black woman in Jim Crow America, accomplish what she couldn't as a white woman. If this were the case, then the film denies its premise that she needed to pass in the first place. Or does the film close with Mignon's greatest illusion? If so, then her interior voice no longer has the status of truth. The boundary between the interior and the exterior, the true and the false, has been abrogated. The interior recesses are infected by illusions too.

Interiority and exteriority, as defined in the narrative, belie the division between the diegetic narrative and the locus of production. In unveiling the mechanisms of synchronization in the film-within-the-film, the construction of sexual and racial differences becomes visible. Yet, *Illusions'* own operation remains transparent. Ironically, in the projection scene, the diegetic and extra-diegetic levels collapse; all the female voices in this sequence are post-dubbed. Both Esther and Leila lip-sync Ella Fitzgerald. The narrative's focus on synchronization—the corporealization of the female voice—shifts attention away from the film's orchestration of image and sound so that Leila's voice, in fact, is no more or less true than Esther's.

The focus on better representations and truer stories supercedes questions regarding cinematic practice. As a result, *Illusions'* critique of Hollywood reinscribes its conventions. The film endeavors “to tell real stories” about black women by employing the narrative conventions of the dominant cinema and the passing tale. In the effort to make black women visible, *Illusions* does not consider the context or the terms of visibility, or the immanence of power, in its cinematic practice.

The employment of the passing tale, which defines blackness as it is seen and bounded by the white world, forecloses the possibility of representing black women who are not made subject, first and foremost, by the gaze of the Other. At best, passing and mulatta characters are “narrative device[s] of mediation” that serve as vehicles for “a fictional exploration of the relationship between the races” (Carby 171). The wretched conditions of Negro life and the goodness of the black mother/mammy help document the injustices of racism through a dialogue about blackness with and for the Other. As Ellison points out, passing

films “are not *about* Negroes . . . ; they are about what whites think and feel about Negroes” (268). These films enable whites to identify with the plight of the Negro, for “. . . in the eyes of Hollywood, it is only ‘white’ Negroes who suffer . . .” (269).

Blacks occupy subordinate and supplemental positions in the passing tale. Utilized as evidence in the case against racism, they are vehicles for exploring racism and subordination, foreclosing a discussion of black lives outside these confines. In passing for white, Mignon exemplifies the making of racial difference. Worn as a disguise, whiteness becomes denaturalized as a category. Yet an essential idea of blackness persists in the film and acts as a force of closure. A natural body (the body inscribed as nature), subordination, and interiority define blackness.

Mignon desires a true seduction by real images because “there’s no joy in the seduction of images if they are false.” *Illusions* resonates with this desire. Its discourse on true and false images allies black bodies with truth in the hope of achieving a joyful seduction. Black bodies are indices of the real, of what lies beyond the shadows, and of the deception of appearances. Both Esther and Julius are utilized as evidence in establishing Mignon’s identity. They represent the facts of blackness for the lieutenant and are utilized as evidence within the narrative of the film. The lieutenant’s indexical use of Julius’s photograph to decipher the mystery of Mignon resembles the use of criminal evidence by the police. The viewer is shown the photo before the lieutenant’s discovery, but only after we are Mignon’s co-conspirators in her passing charade. We see the image of Julius after Mignon’s conversation with Esther.

For the lieutenant, the photo documents the fact of blackness—the body as aberrant nature. *Illusions* uses the photo to reveal Mignon’s secret; it employs one image to unlock another. The image is simply raw data without need of explanation or interpretation. The facts of blackness (don’t) speak for themselves. Not only in employing the codes of the dominant cinema, but also by utilizing the representational practices which fix the facts of blackness—i.e., science, sociology, criminology, etc.—, *Illusions* attempts the impossible: to decenter the dominant images of blacks and to provide a cinematic pleasure, a spectacle of seduction, based on truth. How can *Illusions* joyfully seduce when its truths are enmeshed with the very codes it seeks to displace?

To the extent that she is able, Dash successfully challenges the conventions of the traditional mulatta melodramas. In conventional tales, mulattas are punished for desiring to be white.

Dash's passing heroine realizes the possibilities of some of her desires, and if we are to believe the narrative, Mignon will continue to do so without retribution. Ultimately, unlike Pecola, Mignon does not reject the black mother; nor does she cease to aspire towards power and authority in the white man's world, as does the title character of the 1949 film *Pinky*. Mignon maintains a relationship to, and a sense of responsibility for, her people.

Dash is to be commended for exploring the conventions of the mulatta tale. As much as is possible she subverts the passing tale, and in owning it, she is able to exploit its oppositional possibilities. However, unless the form as well as the content of the passing tale is challenged, these possibilities remain severely limited.

The traditional mulatta is a character for white audiences, created to bring whites to an understanding of the effects of racism and, in so doing, encourage both their sympathy and empathy. The passing tale calls for agency on the part of the white viewer. Dash attempts to make Mignon a figure with whom black viewers identify, but to do so we would have to perform the trick of mimicry employed by Esther. We would have to close our eyes and pretend it's us up there. Under what conditions can we identify with a heroine of the passing melodrama, particularly when her mulatta visibility depends upon the erasure or marginalization of black women? Ultimately there are no true stories, only differing conditions of visibility determined and exacerbated by race, gender, and the politics of color.

Before Esther appears on the scene, we share Mignon's secret; we empathize with the masquerade. We know; we participate in the lie. We are silent. Esther's entry precipitates our rebellion, our mutiny. When she appears, our identification with Mignon is ruptured. The violence perpetrated against her body by the cinematic apparatus and the contradictory impulses of a black womanist identity politics begin to trouble us. At the moment of rupture, we reclaim ourselves; we break the confines of representation and no longer comply to the violating conditions of our representability. Anger and resentment are the afterthoughts of this rupture.

Mignon facilitates Esther's consumption by the cinematic apparatus; Mignon is literally the masquerading subject of mediation. The theft of Esther's voice leaves her a sweet, smiling Negro girl who consents to the symbolic circumcision of the excess of the black voice—the threatening excess, that which might destroy the imperial organ(ization) of vision and voice in the cinema. Esther's discarded body, like that of Bessie Mears, is evidence of the act of violence. Yet her body merely supplements

the grander violence of the mulatta tragedy, the inability to be seen. Just as Bessie's body is wheeled into the courtroom in *Native Son* as the evidence which indicts Bigger for the violation of Mary Dalton's body, Esther's body becomes the example of the cinema's terror and racism.

Mignon, not Esther, confronts and triumphs over this terror and racism, or so we are to believe. Esther is the evidence, and Mignon is the agent. Esther's body serves as the vehicle for Mignon's infantile and narcissistic desires, the context in which Mignon sees and does not see herself. Mignon's identification with Esther is both ambivalent and narcissistic: She sees Esther as both sister and mother, yet she is cognizant of herself as different—as a fair, virtually white, black woman. The encounter of Esther as mirror of Mignon's sameness and difference catalyzes Mignon's agency. Esther's own agency seems confined to witnessing and pretending.

In closing her eyes and pretending to be on the screen, Esther must first repress the violence which has resulted in the dissociation of voice and body. In order to succumb to the fantasy, she must comply with the agent responsible for the violence. However, her pleasure is premised on the denial of the violence. Unlike Esther, we cannot deny the violence done to the black female body in order to maintain our identification and our pleasure. To identify with Mignon would be to accept our position as subordinate to her, to engage in an act of self-hatred. Though Dash attempts to establish a relationship of equality between Esther and Mignon, between the black woman viewer and Mignon, that relationship is a farce. Mignon occupies a space of privilege denied black women. Our only healthy response to her is ultimately one of *rejection*.

It is important to consider the dynamics of spectatorship, because the film raises questions concerning our identities as black women and problematizes the meaning of sisterhood. *Illusions* exemplifies the difficulty of representing anything as grand or as totalizing as a black female subject, and its problematic lies in its utopian longing to present a unified black female perspective. Can we assume a position of the black female viewer or subject? The varieties of black women's experience determine our viewing relationship. What we see is informed by our differences: our color, class background, education, politics, and sexuality. Black women have been made visible in Hollywood film only as they are subject to the cinema's violence. Dehumanized by the gaze, our screeches, our screams, our rolling eyes, our extended bosoms, and our infernal heat have been the guaran-

tors of Others' pleasure. How does one represent she who has been made visible only in order to insure her abjection and subordination? How does one represent she who is seen only so that she may feel the play of power on her body? "Unseen, unspoken, and awaiting her verb," writes Hortense Spillers (76). Can black women be represented as subjects within a visual economy organized by a hierarchical regime of difference? At what costs and to what ends?

*Illusions* raises the difficult question "How can blackness be truly represented, if at all?" It decodes the conventions of the dominant cinematic and representational practices. In employing the conventions of the mulatta tale, Dash problematizes the meaning of sisterhood in the confines of domination and affords us a way to talk about differences among ourselves, rather than solely in relation to whiteness. This leads us to question the necessary fiction of the black female subject. As resisting spectators who refuse to identify with the heroine or to suspend disbelief, our contradictory position as spectators is foregrounded. The dynamics of color and privilege in the film unveil the fiction of an essential black female subject, while the film utilizes strategic essentialism in its critique of Hollywood's racism. Spectatorship is determined not only by issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class, but also by issues of caste and color and aesthetic predisposition.

Once we have rejected opting for a passive pleasure, rejected closing our eyes and pretending it's us, rejected assisting one another in masquerades that render us invisible, we come to realize that the possibility of our pleasure lies in defiance—the rapturous rupture, the unleashing of aggression against the cinematic apparatus and disrupting the terms of our (in)visibility.

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