

.....

PROLOGUE

The “darkening mirrors” of the title derives from a memory, a personal experience of the uncanny. One summer at the amusement park at the county fair, I unwittingly followed my sister into a cruel maze of tall cubicles with mirrors covering every side, a House of Mirrors. Each closed room provided endless reflections of the self. I saw my clothes, my face, the skin on my hand repeated over and over again in the walls around me. When I touched the mirror, my fingerprint was invisible directly behind my hand but discernable in smaller and smaller versions behind itself a million miles deep into the two-dimensional surface in front of me, behind me, and at my sides. And again and again in each succeeding room. Looking farther into the mirror showed more of the same and the same with a difference, as refracted images from other mirrors volleyed my lanky body back and forth in a different pose from an opposing angle — my arm in the way of my shirt here, but not there — over and over again, faster into forever. It took more pressure than my eight-year-old body could apply to move the one secret wall in each cubicle that would deposit you into the next mirrored room in the maze. In a tired moment I slumped and lifted my chin toward the ceiling, noticed the bright bare bulb high above my head, and immediately became aware of the impact should that light go out. Those glimmering mirrors that seemed filled with endless images would go black, empty. The perplexing, ungraspable infinity would vanish. The possibility was both terrifying and comforting. I could be stuck in the darkness, taunted by reflections of myself all around that I couldn’t even see, but then at least I wouldn’t have to look at them anymore. I peered harder, farther back

into the most distant image I could perceive in this visual echo of myself, trying to determine if there was ever a point where I disappeared, if at some point deep within that chasm of myself everything went black. The mirrors seemed less powerful, more controllable when their fullness also carried the potential of an ultimate emptiness-darkness or disappearance. Despite the staring and searching, I still wanted to get the hell out of there. I ran into my sister in one of those glass boxes, and together we pushed our way out into the welcome dull heat of the broad afternoon.

xii

“Darkening mirrors” act as both a conceptual and a metaphorical framework for this study and its implications. The little girl, the subject/agent (and, in some sense, the object, a cultural product herself) in the House of Mirrors operates in my study as a metaphor for the African American performers and performances of the 1930s. The girl seems stuck in an endless process of looking that is both chosen and accidental. The possibility of changing rooms provides a sense of escape, though the shift primarily offers a repetition of the previous experience with a change. More effective in achieving a sense of agency is her awareness of the process and investigation of its operation — her realization of its bottomless, receding, pyrrhic depth and her contact with the mirrors’ flatness, falsity, and inscrutability. The receding images really go no farther than their distance from the opposing mirror, even as the mirrors’ tiniest representation is not visible owing to its extreme distance. Even when lit the mirrors reflect invisibility in their apparent fullness. Rejection of the images and the process invoked by the mirrors might occur if the light, the mechanism of their propagation, were extinguished, affecting a cessation of looking and, further, of the possibility of reflection. Yet within the desire to extinguish the look is a sense of loss of self that is accompanied by a sinking awareness of the possibility that the image does not really disappear, but merely waits for the application of more light — that is, a promise of more looking and more production of images to be seen. The proliferation of images’ contradictory reflections that shift with the physical and looking position of the subject fail to offer truth or clarity. Inescapable and unreal, reflection becomes an absorbing, dizzying trap affected only by the movement, awareness, and sometimes collective pushing by the subjects. Looking, shifting, changing, examining, redirecting, refusing, collective pushing — all become modes of repeating and resisting imperial structures of representation.

My sense of darkening mirrors as a conceptual model is grounded

in postcolonial race theory. The metaphorical and historical weight of the black Atlantic has impacted the theory and methodology of this study in profound ways through its particular contemplation of black identity in the West. Paul Gilroy poses the question of black peoples' problematical relationship to Western epistemologies of identity and knowledge, global capitalism, the substance of white supremacy, and forms of "democratic" power.¹ The black Atlantic describes the trade of bodies, goods, and ideologies that fueled the engines of modernism and modernity and created "blackness" as a capitalist and democratic cipher of otherness. As was the concept of blackness itself, so were diasporic populations' identities born out of this matrix of industry, capital, commerce, white supremacy, exploitation, hatred, and abuse, so thickly (step)child to this matrix that it seems impossible to imagine a material blackness as *in but not of* the imperial operations that brought it into being. This book addresses the substance and consequences of that inheritance by pinpointing black peoples' use of representational structures that sustained the imperial project, and how black people changed those structures. New generations of black people in new places inherit, adopt, assimilate, and act out new ways of being from ancestral, colonial, and indigenous forces as well as the bubbling circumstances of history. Cultures of those "traded" bodies repeat and reinvent old ways, forging new expressions encompassed within new national boundaries and traditions.

I focus on performance in the United States as a cultural node of the black Atlantic. Performances, like music and literature, are a production of identities and desires resulting from the complex process of history. Outside of a purely historical process, diaspora operates as a kind of vision and materializes as an activity of intercultural recognition and exchange. Blacks' American identity is an insular national articulation of the black Atlantic. Black performance serves as evidence of Fanon's vision of national culture as a local push for black freedom. These performances predate Senghor's philosophy of Negritude, which promoted the hope that even a local push for black freedom might loosen the bonds of oppression everywhere. Thus this insularity that seems to reify national boundaries can serve as one step in developing transnational black identities.

I am particularly interested in the specific metaphorical quality of dark water. I imagine the deep powerful force that moved ships across

space as a reflective substance that traps, reflects, and refracts light — images, ideologies, sensibilities, a dynamic mirror grasping and returning distorted images of the cargo on its surface. Gilroy's image of the black Atlantic became powerfully trapped in my imagination because of its resonance with the memory of standing enclosed in that succession of small, mirrored rooms. The "black Atlantic" serves not merely to name a literal means of transportation, the bodies it transported, their movement, their conditions, and its justifications, but also as a symbolic purveyor of ideology, culture, and knowledge. This diasporic Atlantic is easily analogized to waters of the Caribbean and Pacific in their contiguous relationships to an imperial United States. Notions of dark and deep reflection serve as a corrective. They acknowledge and redress the ways "seeing" as a means to access knowledge fails to recognize "meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context," meanings that are in motion and invisible, like deep currents in dark water.²

The performances and performers in my study activate and appropriate representations that articulate power. They are bodies actively reflecting, reflecting upon, and enacting both dominant and alternative cultural ideologies. Their images and activities provide insight into, perhaps reflections of the many locations and inflections of black subjectivity and national identity. In these representations black cultural producers depict black and other nonwhite cultures and spaces. The multiple reflections of self in the face of the "other," and vice versa (as the other seems to peer out of one's own skin), in the deployment of representations of cultural power create a palimpsest of identities, dis-identifications, and activism that demonstrates the deep complexity of black Americans' national identities. In fact what is signified by notions of "other" and "self," theoretical and material locations central to post-colonial studies, becomes unstable as the conditions of nation and race force complicated and conflicting allegiances across both categories. The performances are creations, reflections, projections, desires, and protests that signal the texture of the subjects' racial, cultural, and national visions of self. The metaphor of darkening mirrors refers to these ever-deepening creations and reflections of black identity, particularly given their manifestation of the often racist and damaging terms by which dominant and colonial national identities get established. As certain national and racial identities become clear, others cloud; new identities get

created that incorporate, use, and change previous ones, all in relationship to one another. “Darkening” refers to the participation of people traditionally understood as “dark” in the formation of their own identities through imagination of internal belonging and oceanic crossing. It invokes a process or sense of envelopment, if not doom, in the ubiquitous effects of power, and simultaneously a sense of hope for a future where such thick, instrumental, and infinite reflection becomes so full as to become ineffectual—the mirrors darkened, possibility reborn. The performative sites of endless reflection, the darkening mirrors of this study, are many: the entrapping discourses themselves—primitivism, expansion and its very *westerliness*, orientalism, and ethnographic representation; the imaginative process of representation within racialized and racist discourses; and the media that transmit the image and image making, the stage, the screen, and the performing body. Performative systems act as a house of mirrors, a visual sound chamber, as it were, where bodies, performances, discourses, and the technologies involved volley meaning in endless reverberations of images.

What emerges through the symbolics of the mirror and blackness is a story about a particular kind of awareness or desire in African American artists for a dizzying, recursive (and quite paradoxical) form of participation in history, modernity, and the promise and failures of American national identity. “Darkening mirrors” as a conceptual apparatus derives from the complexity of the materials themselves and the way they negotiate identity. These are specific performances by African American historical actors (directors, filmmakers, writers, performers) who cannot avoid being swept up into the larger cultural currents that surround them, currents such as modernism, primitivism, imperialism, nationalism (diasporic and otherwise), individualism, and expansionism. African Americans were very much implicated in the articulation of such various powerful cultural categories as, say, nationalism, yet in mobilizing these discourses and their signifying rubrics, they reveal how spiraling and complex this sort of implication is. The metaphor of the darkening mirror helps us see how African American culture in the 1930s and beyond is (a) reflective in some sense, mimetic of the conflicts and conjunctures around it; (b) organic as it performs its own inherited and developed sense of itself; (c) appropriative, stealing, almost, some of the privileged tropes of imperial domination and in doing so folding over the discourse of imperialism and in the process turning up some new,

unacknowledged seams; (d) kinetic in the sense of an active response to stimuli and stimulation of further response; and (e) recursive, turning over again and again in a process of cultural exchange which makes its initial object disappear. African American cultural aspirations exuded a sense of darkening reflection, a sense of the potential fullness of reflection that creates an almost sublime abyss, perhaps the abyss of freedom or solitude or emptiness.

In these various texts and performances, cultural producers with *multiple* forms of agency (some compromised, some not) try to grasp the importance of their own artistic, cultural, and perhaps social powers. The texts are forms of self-reflection and self-definition, while at the same time they are points of mirroring where the concerns and dynamics of the larger culture, which happens also to be their own, act as a starting point for improvisation. The processes of cultural transformation are complex and elusive, and always will be. But the larger hopes and desires that inform this process—the seductions of the mirror and the tain that marks its reflections as unreal—are vivid and concrete.³ In *Darkening Mirrors* I ask how a specifically African American perspective on mirroring participates in and contests more traditional notions of fictional representation and aesthetics.⁴ One answer is that it leads us toward performativity of a particularly complicated sort because of the simultaneous enactment and acting out, manifestation and production of malleable categories of race, nation, and subjectivity through (and as) fictional representation. As black performance invokes the postcolonial and aesthetic concepts of mirroring, mimesis, and mimicry,⁵ it also reveals the shortcomings of these models, particularly the hamstrung agency and two-dimensional subjectivity they suggest. These three-dimensional darkening mirrors of representation and performance specifically *produce* culture and identity, an imagined future, at least in part through an evaluative and instrumental positioning of the act (as in activity and also pretense) of reflection and the contents of the repeated image as tools of analysis and innovation. Performativity in this context posits the act of imagination as agentive behavior, especially in its capacity as an enactment of certain desires.⁶

In this book I connect performativity and embodiment to empathy and desire and explore how these create the possibility of change. The performance acts as an embodied commitment to a hypothetical present and a possible future. Take the example of ritual communion,

the performers' embodied committing of a symbolic act that affirms faith and articulates hope. Participants repeat the act, like a rehearsal, in the continual approaching of abstract perfection. The repetition suggests a persistent hope in the possibility of change achieved through the repeated playing out of the desired state, in its eventual achievement. In the performances I analyze, actors commit to certain embodied repetitions of experiences and ideas. In their performative acts they take on and convey an empathy with their subjects, whether that empathy is sympathetic or antagonistic. In some instances that imagined connection seems to be about a desire for one's own existence as much as or more than about the other. In the system of acts that constitute these plays, dances, and films, performers reflect a broad desire for the conceptual and material possibilities narrated by the texts, often something slightly, or very, different from their current conditions.

In performance emotion is a key product, part of the aesthetic excess of drama. Part of the production of careful performance is the response elicited in the viewer. Performance space acts as a venue for transformation because of this dynamic characteristic, this transmission of the performative excess of emotion through the performative space.⁷ I explore the coexistence of conflicting and competing desires in form, its impact on viewers and participants, and thus its possible effects on the public. The impact of black cultural and artistic performance encompasses the emotional, psychic, and kinetic. Perhaps in this way performance allows us to get at the contours of political significance in black art, seeing its processes as personal, communal, and something other than and in addition to activism.

Participants in performances I analyze, particularly the performers but also the cultures that produce them, imagine and enact, for themselves and their audience members, the performed nature of race and the possibility of power, and sometimes, in the same gesture, the dismantling of structures of power. Stage and screen become metaphors for the condition of race, its very performativity, for blacks in the everyday. The ephemeral nature and repetition of performance operate like memory or fantasy, a repeated enacting of a past and hypothesizing of a future. As a temporary space for imagining past, present, and future the stage and screen provide a moment when audience, performers, and producers can experience pleasure or pain in the transformative and temporarily transformed reality of that reimagined space, with its re-

imagined conditions of living and artistic hyperboles of emotion and experience. These performers deploy performance space and performative opportunity to reimagine themselves and the world they inherited. One of the primary elements of the aesthetic, racial, and performative excess in *Darkening Mirrors* is a negotiation of power and, certainly, its lack. In the trajectories of time the performances in this study capture for us moments, frames of a people in the process of apprehending racial, political, and national freedom — not necessarily in some progressive or easily observable way but in the uneven, uncontained, messy manner in which competing performances vie for dominance.

xviii
.....