Oyster. Feminist and Queer Approaches to Arts, Cultures, and Genders

UNDER CONSTRUCTION
Kunst, Männlichkeiten und Queerness seit 1970

Änne Söll, Maike Wagner,
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Ayelet Carmi

Wounded Men

Sally Mann's Photographs of Black Masculinity

In face of the recent deadly consequences of systemic racism and police brutality in the US, there is an urgent need for addressing the representation of Black men's bodies in American photography. Many scholars have discussed the problematic history of the photographic representation of Black men's bodies, its ethical complexity and political implications.[1] A recent series of photographs by the renowned photographer Sally Mann, titled *Men* (2004–2015), contributes to this critical discourse by highlighting the relationship between photography, Black masculinity, and vulnerability. The 56 images in the series depict twenty Black men largely from Mann's hometown, Lexington, Virginia. While modeling for the photographs, the men—law students, kitchen workers, laborers—were mostly in their twenties or thirties. Either strangers or men whom Mann knew only distantly, she met each of them for a one-hour session.[2] In some photographs the men appear alone, sitting, standing, or lying down; in others, Mann represents just fragments of their bodies—a back, a shoulder, a knee. Most of them include only the model's first name in the title; a handful remain unidentified, distinguished only by numbers. The exception is a portrait of the dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones (fig. 1), discussed below. All the images contain ›flaws‹ in the negatives—blurred backgrounds, burned edges, and shape-shifting shadows, resulting from Mann's use of the wet collodion technique. This technique, which requires the base material to be coated with collodion, sensitized in silver nitrate, exposed, and developed immediately, can, with casual handling, or contaminated chemicals, result in multiple forms of distress and unique flaws.[3]

1 Nicholas Mirzoeff, »The Shadow and the Substance: Photography and Indexicality in American Photography,« in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, eds. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: Abrams, 2003), pp. 111–128 is a good starting point for the subject.

2 Sarah Greenough, »Writing with Photographs: Sally Mann's Ode to the South, 1969–2017,« in *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings* (New York: Abrams, 2018), p. 51. Mann stated that her relationship with her models continued beyond this time frame and the photographic project. Sally Mann, interviewed by author during in-person visits to her home and studio in Lexington, VA, in July and August, 2018.

3 Throughout our conversations, Mann insisted that with a few exceptions the flaws were unintentional and serendipitous and that she welcomed and even encouraged them. Yet, her mastery of the collodion technique, and the way these flaws appear in the picture, deserve to be carefully considered.

1 *Sally Mann, Men, Bill T. Jones, gelatin silver print, 2018, 50×40 inches (127×101.6 cm),* © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian

Previous interpretations read the few exhibited images of this series as dealing with »the legacy of slavery and racism in the American South.«[4] Hilton Als, *The New Yorker's* art critic, for example, praises them as openly engaging with the region's racist history and evoking the question: »When will the South stop being the South? Stop being a place of blood ties, spilled blood, black and white blood, blood money, blood earth?«[5]

I propose an alternative interpretation, broadening the perspective of the series in two respects: First, it deals with the ethical complexity of Mann's *Men*, stemming from the images' ambiguity, the unequal power dynamics embedded in photography, and from the history of interracial and inter-gendered relations in the South. Second, while situating the *Men* portraits within the context of the visual history of the South, I suggest a broader reading of them beyond regionalism, Southern exceptionalism,[6] or ›syn-

4 Sarah Greenough and Sarah Kennel, Preface, in *Sally Mann: Thousand Crossings* (New York: Abrams, 2018), p. 14.

5 Hilton Als, »Abide with Me: The Color of Humanity in Sally Mann's World,« in *Sally Mann: Thousand Crossings* (New York: Abrams, 2018), p. 17.

6 For further discussion of this perception of the South as the embodiment of America's racism see Ayelet Carmi, »Sally Mann's American Vision of the Land,« *Journal of Art Historiography* 17 (2017), https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/carmi.pdf (last accessed April 29, 2023).

ecdochic nationalism,‹[7] to use Angela Miller's concept. Instead, I look at the intervention that Mann's *Men* produces within photography's critical discourse of black masculinity from a nationwide perspective. I argue that the *Men* series sheds light on the intersection of masculinity, Blackness, and vulnerability, and exposes photography as a fragile, constructed medium, disguised as pure replication of the visual ›reality‹ of difference. By emphasizing the act of photographing—with its histories, visual codes of representation, and material manufacture—*Men* questions the assumed naturalness of the social construction of Black masculinity, disclosing it as an unstable relational structure.

The Black Male Body in American Homoerotic Photographic Tradition

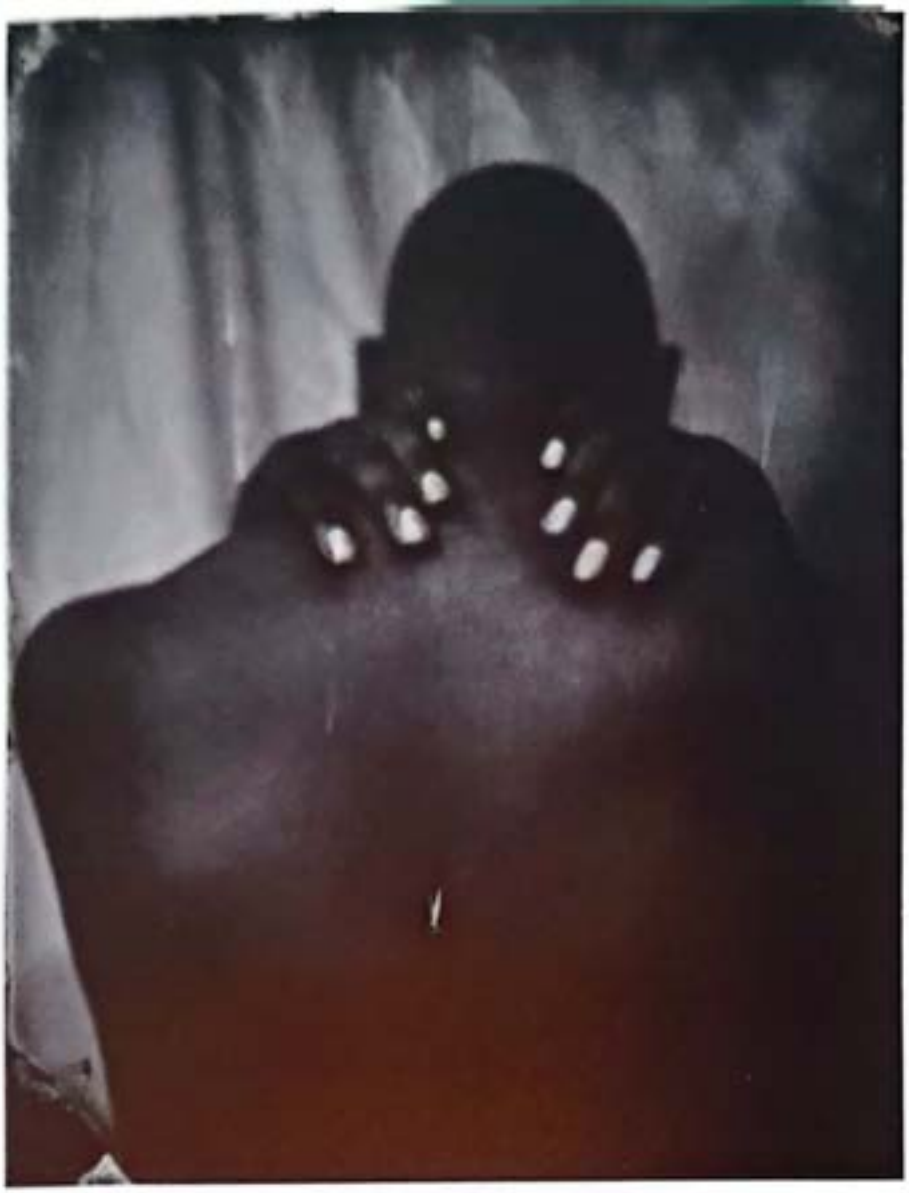
The *Men* series explicitly refers to the imagery of the Black male body in the homoerotic photographic tradition that emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of the body. As with her Southern landscapes, Mann combined the effect of the wet-collodion technique with an ancient brass lens open to its widest aperture, low-contrast tonality, and surface flaws, to evoke the imagery of Pictorialist aesthetic from the end of the nineteenth century, which emphasized atmospheric qualities of beauty, mystery, and uncertainty. By returning to a dominant (mostly white) aesthetic movement, and a historical technique widely known for its use during the Civil War, Mann draws attention to the history of race in American photography, and its roles in shaping Black masculinity. Explicitly, Mann evokes the erotic male nude study of F. Holland Day, *Ebony and Ivory* (1897)[8]. The image shows a young, naked, black man, his face turned away, holding a small, white, classical statue. He is sitting on a platform covered with a stereotypical African cloth with an animal print, against a matte black background. The play of light on the model's muscular body against the matte background provides a mix of textures that speaks directly to the implied hardness of the classical figurine in his hand. The emphasis on the body texture and the semi-remote vantage point expose the model's body to an erotic gaze. An influential figure in photography in the US and internationally, and a vocal advocate of Pictorialism, Day's work played an important part in forming images of the erotic and the exotic Black man for over a hundred years.[9]

Mann's *Men* disrupts this form of representation, rejecting the body's erotic potential. Instead, it explores the emotional expressiveness of the Black male body in per-

7 Miller uses this concept to clarify the cultural process in which some parts (North-eastern scenery) became representative of the whole (the American nation), while others (Southern scenery) are unable to. Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 17

8 F. Holland Day: *Ebony and Ivory* (ca. 1897), The Met, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/267567 (last accessed April 29, 2023).

9 C. J. Summers, *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004), pp. 93–95.



2 *Sally Mann, Men, Janssen, gelatin silver print, 2006–2015, 127 × 101.6 cm (50 × 40 inches).* © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian

forming loss, trauma, and fragility. See for example, *Men, Janssen, 07* (fig. 2), which depicts Janssen Evelyn, a twenty-five-year-old law graduate, grasping his shoulders as if seeking consolation, or immersed in despair, against a white, empty, unrecognizable background. The wet-collodion technique enhances the sense of vulnerability. The subject's back, head and hands are darkened by shadows. It seems as if the photographic process almost threatens to consume the body, dooming it to a mere shadow of itself. The chemical flaws in the negative frame and the pockmark in the center of his back that resembles a bullet wound, intensify the atmosphere of danger and threat. In contrast to Day's theatrically classicized *Ebony and Ivory*, *Men, Janssen, 07* is characterized by a close vantage point that hinders the visual perspective of the whole body. It creates an illusion of intimacy, as if the viewers were standing so close to the model, they could embrace his back and offer consolation. These formal characteristics create different relationships between photographer and subject, viewer, and model than Day's Pictorialist work.

By focusing on fragmented body parts, and depicting nude Black men in a studio setting, Mann's work also recalls the erotic works of Robert Mapplethorpe, which exhibit phallic masculinity and a healthy virile body. Mapplethorpe's work, characterized by sharp focus, studio lighting, polished surface, a remote vantage point, and stylized composition, has gained canonical status. His images, the subject of extensive controversy in the 1980s and 1990s,[10] are still the starting point for discussions of the Black male nude in American photography. In 1985 and 2017 respectively, Mapplethorpe and Mann each undertook a black-and-white portrait of Bill T. Jones, whose dance performance *Fondly Do We Hope...Fervently Do We Pray*, (2010) was important to the creation of Mann's series (fig. 1).[11] Mann's image shows a close-up portrait framed by the bare twigs of a tree outside her studio. Unlike Mann's image, which kept the focus on Jones' face, Mapplethorpe's photograph provides a full view of his body as he dances shirtless. The dynamic, graceful, athletic, and virile body in Mapplethorpe's portrait is replaced in Mann's image with a static figure, resulting from the need to remain still during the long exposure of the wet-collodion plate, and a haunting atmosphere of threat. The light illuminates the harsh angles of Jones' cheekbones, giving him the appearance of a skull that stands out from the blurred landscape in the background. His swollen, puffy eyelids imply he has been beaten, either metaphorically by life or literally; the bare thorny tree encircling his profile further evokes a deep sense of insecurity. This is a unique image. Presenting Jones as a man who has suffered, rather than a graceful dancer, it is the only one in the entire series that depicts a well-known influential figure. More than a mere image, it is an artistic collaboration: A six-minute video made in conjunction with the exhibition *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings* (2018) documents a two-day encounter between Jones and Mann, and their reciprocal creative processes.[12] In the video, Jones implicitly referred to his different experiences modeling for Mann and Mapplethorpe, expressing relief at being freed from the eroticized, objectifying gaze often imposed on Black men's bodies.[13] He responds to his portrait with a dance he performed on Virginia's autumnal hills, saying: »Sally didn't ask me to take my shirt off. I don't need to seduce Sally's camera.« The grainy tactility of Mann's portrait stands in opposition to the erotic potential of the body aroused by perceptual qualities, such as the smooth,

10 Kobena Mercer, »Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imagination,« *New Formations* 24 (1992), pp. 1–23, and »Reading Racial Fetishism,« pp.174–219.

11 Robert Mapplethorpe: *Bill T. Jones* (1985), National Portrait Gallery, https://hog.uiowa.edu/files/image/bill-t-jonespress.jpg-0 (last accessed April 29, 2023).

12 Sally Mann and Bill T. Jones, a video accompanied the exhibition *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*, 2018, 06:25, https://www.nga.gov/audio-video/video/mann-btjones.html (last accessed April 29, 2023).

13 Scholars have argued that this gaze is dehumanizing Black men through the fetishization and commodification of their bodies. Kobena Mercer, »Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,« in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 171–219; bell hooks, »Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic,« in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), p. 131.

the shiny, and the glamorous, in Mapplethorpe's work. Mann herself stated: »No, not like Mapplethorpe. Not at all like Mapplethorpe.«[14]

By referencing both Day's and Mapplethorpe's work, separated by time, style, and technique, Mann's series highlights their connection, and exposes the continuity of racial hierarchy embedded in this photographic tradition, underlining the persistence of its eroticism and exoticism. Incorporating hints of pain and danger, *Men* emphasizes the sitters' vulnerability in the previous power relations between a white photographer and Black models. Referencing historic genres and canonical photographs to explore their function as visual constructs within the history of photography is Mann's recurring strategy. Just as this strategy highlights the role of photography in constructing notions of childhood[15] and history,[16] Mann's *Men* reshapes the representational conventions of the Black male nude, offering instead intimate, sensual, and traumatic portraits.

The Black Male Body in the Representational Tradition of Black Pain and Trauma

Mann's *Men* also explicitly refers to the imagery of the wounded and tortured Black male body, associated with discourses of slavery, lynching, and police brutality.[17] Let us re-examine *Men, Janssen, 07*. His posture calls attention to the collodion dripping on his left shoulder blade, framed by rays of light, and to the pockmark that resembles a bullet wound in the center of his back. These subtle signs of a wounded body, the pose, and the composition, situate the image in the representational tradition of pain (both physical and emotional) in black history. Specifically, it recalls McPherson and Oliver's famous photograph *The Scourged Back*,[18] the *carte-de-visite* portrait of Gordon, a slave who escaped his master in Mississippi in 1863 and took refuge with the Union Army at Baton Rouge. The way Janssen's hands self-reflexively grasp his shoulders and expose his back is in dialogue with Gordon's hands; the gesture calls visual attention to the whippings that created the extensive scarring of his back.

Considering the resemblance in age, race, gender, and the context of violence, it is hard to look at this photograph without recalling the many recent images of black men,

14 Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), p. 289.
15 Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), p. 173.
16 D. G. Faust, »The Earth Remembers: Landscape and History in the Work of Sally Mann,« in *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings* (New York: Abrams, 2018), pp. 124–139.
17 For example, the chapter that discusses the few *Men* portraits in her memoir is tellingly titled: »Who Wants to Talk about Slavery.« Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), pp. 279–98.
18 McPherson & Oliver (attributed to): *The Scourged Back* (1863), The Met, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/302544#:~:text=Perhaps%20the%20most%20famous%20of,on%20a%20nearby%20Mississippi%20plantation (last accessed April 29, 2023).

such as Eric Garner, George Floyd, and others, being beaten or killed by the police across the US. These images raised an intense public debate over racial violence and racial profiling of young Black males by the criminal justice system. Emphasizing the ongoing vulnerability of Black men in the nation's history, and connecting slavery to police brutality, the *Men* series echoes the arguments of Black activists and academics. In the words of Angela Davis: »There is an unbroken line of police violence in the United States that takes us all the way back to the days of slavery, the aftermath of slavery, the development of the Ku Klux Klan.«[19] However, portraits of individuals' wounded bodies like Garner, and Floyd were used in campaigns of the *Black Lives Matter* group to stress Blacks' subjectivity, agency, and the singularity of each of their lives. By contrast, Mann's photographs challenge the conventions of portraiture as the representation of an individual. Most of the models do not stare back at the viewer. Their surnames are absent from the titles, and there are no other signs of individuality, which might reveal their occupation, interests, social, and emotional worlds. Furthermore, the reference to contemporary imagery in conjunction with the nineteenth century wet-collodion process affords the series a complicated temporality. Mann's photographs are both evocative of a time past and products of the present. The eleven-year span of their making, which included the development of relationships between the photographer and her models,[20] further troubles our sense of the images' temporality. These differences situate Mann's work far from the activists' imagery that relays a sense of urgency to the political demands for racial equality.

Contemporary Black artists have addressed the visual imagery of police brutality, pointing out its voyeuristic dimension. One thinks of Lorna Simpson's *Gestures/Re-enactments* or Carrie Mae Weems's *The Usual Suspects*. Similarly to these works, *Men* portrays the white American space as hostile and dangerous, engendering the devastation of Black men's bodies. For example, *Men, Matt 02* (fig. 3) depicts a man standing on a stool; the only visible parts of his body are the backs of his legs, from ankles to calves. The sharper focus and bright lighting in the area around the ankles draw attention to the too-small, unsteady, thin-legged stool, adding a sense of instability to the photograph. A closer look highlights the presence of a white mist or fog resembling a cloth, partly covering his legs. This is most visible at the top of the frame, where technical flaws in developing the negative and printing the image create the illusion of a fold and knot, and to the left, where they resemble metal rings, and a long vertical fold falling parallel to the standing left leg. In other areas of the photograph, the thick mist loses

19 Stuart Jeffries, »Angela Davis: ›There is an unbroken line of police violence in the US that takes us all the way back to the days of slavery‹«, *The Guardian*, December 14, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/global/2014/dec/14/angela-davis-there-is-an-unbroken-line-of-police-violence-in-the-us-that-takes-us-all-the-way-back-to-the-days-of-slavery.

20 Sally Mann, interviewed by author during in-person visits to her home and studio in Lexington, VA, in July and August, 2018.

3 *Sally Mann, Men, Matt 02, gelatin silver print, 2006–2015, 127×101.6 cm (50×40 inches),* © Sally Mann. Courtesy Gagosian

its density, leaving a clear view of the left leg and creating an impression of the ›cloth‹ losing its distinctiveness. An optical phenomenon is created that contradicts elementary physics: The left leg appears to be in front of the imaginary cloth, while the right one appears to be hidden by it. It remains unclear whether the legs are positioned in the photographic space in front or behind the mist/cloth. Was the body photographed before or after the mist? Does the mist conceal the ›real‹ image of the body, or does the body materialize out of the mist, thus constituted by it? The white mist that obstructs our vision and troubles our perceptions of space and time can be seen as representing the white American cultural space. It disrupts the figure, providing only a faint, partial, and distorted image of Black masculinity. Preventing visual access to Matt's figure, this mist visualizes the process whereby the Black male body loses its ontic meaning as body, its identifiability and distinction as a living individual.

Contemporary debates about white artists depicting Black bodies and history[21] raise ethical difficulties and complicate the viewing experience of Mann's work. Als addresses this issue by asking, »[w]ho gets to speak for blackness?«[22] While agreeing this question has a segregationist tone, and accepting Als' offer to replace it with the more general, »[w]ho gets to speak for Americanness,« I believe a more thorough consideration of the photographs' ethics of representation is needed. Als argues that Mann, as a white woman, does not take an imperialist stance in portraying Black suffering because she does not »assume that she is speaking about *the* black experience but *a* black experience«[23]—one that is linked to her unconventional Southern life-experiences, her close relationship with Virginia Carter—also known as Gee-Gee—who was her Black nanny, and her critical self-reflection and historical awareness.

In light of the visual analysis above, the claim of specificity appears debatable. Though the titles may guide our interpretation of these images as representing individuals, these are not portraits in the traditional sense. The images' complicated temporality and dreamy atmosphere, the fragmented bodies, lack of surnames and context, and the fact that most of the figures do not look back at the viewer—all might risk reducing the specificity of the individual to the anonymity of the group. Debates over who gets to talk about the suffering of others became common in photography discourse from the 1980s onwards.[24] Central to these discussions is the question, to what extent does the photographic portrait humanize the other, represent his/her suffering, and activate our moral responsibility towards him/her.[25] Current scholarship privileges the role of the discursive context,[26] institutional framing,[27] performative uses,[28] and circulation[29] over the photographer's intentions in mediating photography's meaning. Yet, the ethical distinction between portrayal of self (or one's identity group) and depicting members

21 See for example Aruna D'Souza, *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* (Badlands Unlimited, 2018), pp. 15–64; Coco Fusco, »Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till,« *Hyperallergic*, March 27, 2017, https://hyperallergic.com/368290/censorship-not-the-painting-must-go-on-dana-schutzs-image-of-emmett-till/; Lynell George, »The ›Black Male‹ Debate: Controversy Over the Whitney Show Has Arrived Ahead of Its L.A. Outing–Alternative Exhibitions Are Planned,« *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1995, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-02-22/entertainment/ca-34639_1_black-male.

22 Als, »Abide with Me,« p. 167.

23 Ibid., p. 168.

24 Martha Rosler, »In, Around and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)«, in *3 Works: Critical Essays on Photography and Photographs* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981), pp. 61–93.

25 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008), pp. 10–35.

26 R. Hariman and J.L. Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), pp. 1–49; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

27 John Tagg, *Burden Of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 244–273.

28 Vered Maimon, »Surviving Images and Images of Survival: On Activestills' Photographs of Protest,« in *Activestills: Photography as Protest in Palestine/Israel*, eds. Vered Maimon and Shiraz Grinbaum (London: Pluto Press, 2016), pp. 182–195.

29 Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011).

from other (social) groups remains. It remains despite the contribution of this scholarship, as well as the understanding that sharing a racial identity does not in and of itself guarantee humanization, or untangle the complex web of power relations between photographer-subject-viewers, mediated by other social hierarchies of gender, class, status, sexuality, and so on.[30]

The debate around the ethics of representing suffering becomes far more complicated when considering photography's historical role in both promoting and resisting racial violence,[31] and the history of the relationship between white women and Black men in the South. As is well documented, Black men were regularly tortured and lynched throughout the nineteenth and into the late twentieth century for ostensibly associating with white women—a fantasy fueled by white fears and rape fantasies that constructed the black male body as dangerous to white women.[32] These historical conditions are further complicated by the unequal power relations between the photographer and her models. Lastly, the sensual tactility of the silver gelatin prints, and the beauty of the images further run the risk of aestheticizing racial violence, turning it into a source of visual pleasure. The question of the aestheticization of violence, closely connected to its spectacularization, is intensified by the long-running critique of the (white) media's exploitation of Black suffering, as summarized by Elizabeth Alexander, »Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries.«[33]

Rethinking Mann's *Men*'s Ethics of Representation: A Relational Conception

By emphasizing the photographs' ethical complexity I do not intend to condemn Mann's project as inherently flawed. Instead, I explore the series' ambiguity as constructing a new relational conception of the ethics of representation of Black men's bodies.[34] Art historian Jennifer Greenhill offers a methodology for writing about race in American art, understanding the visual »as a site of relation instead of mere representation.«[35] Greenhill's suggestion enables considering Mann's strategy of representation as

30 Thomas Keenan, »Mobilizing Shame,« *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004), pp. 437–439; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London/New York: Verso, 2004), p. 140.

31 S.M. Smith, »The Evidence of Lynching Photographs,« in *Lynching Photographs*, eds. D. Apel and S.M. Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 10–41.

32 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 120.

33 Elizabeth Alexander, »Can You Be Black and Look at This: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),« *Public Culture*, 7, no.1 (1994), p. 78.

34 Specifically, I will use Judith Butler's reading of Levinas' ethics of otherness for further develop this argument.

35 Jennifer Greenhill, »Look Away,« in *A Companion to American Art*, (Malden, MA: Wiley- Blackwell, 2015), p. 140.

a way to highlight connections between different historical periods, forms of representations, uses, and visual codes, which constitute race and masculinity in American culture; and to explore the complex web of power relations and vulnerabilities between photographer-subject-viewers, white women, and Black men.

Complex intimate relationships that involve ethical ambivalence, vulnerability and power (such as between parents and children, husbands and wives, the living and the dead) are at the core of Mann's oeuvre. Often, this ambivalence provokes questions about Mann's ethics, as can be seen in the controversy surrounding her family pictures during the 1990s.[36] Mann does not conceal the ethical complexity and power relations embodied in her work, and recognizes her privileged position compared with that of her models: »Our different ages and gender deepen the transaction, but the social constructs of race, culture, age, background and life experience contribute to the Gordian nature of the knotty moment.«[37] She also openly describes in her memoir her blind spots and struggles to fully comprehend the threat she, as a white woman, posed to Black men in the South.[38] Like her previous works (such as the Civil War battlefields, and *Untitled #34, Emmett Till Riverbank*, depicting where Emmett Till's lynched body was thrown), *Men* is part of Mann's long critical examination of her family's involvement in the racial discrimination of the Jim Crow South.

Returning to *Men, Matt 02* (fig. 3), the formal characteristics of the photograph manifest these ethical complexities and power relation differentials. The dominating feature of the white mist/cloth that, as previously argued represents the white American cultural space, becomes the focus of the viewer's attention. With this close attention, the initially homogeneous whiteness is now replaced with a new awareness of the nuanced shades of white within the background and its loss of density and distinctiveness, resulting from gaps in the initial coverage by the collodion. These production flaws also symbolize the touch of the artist's hand and (white) gaze, for she is present in the image no less than the man. Revealing the marks of the developing processes connects the image to its material manufacture and troubles the assumed naturalness of photographic representation.[39] This technique exposes the medium as a constructed product disguised as pure replication of the visual ›reality‹ of difference. *Men, Matt 02* is, thus, revealed not as the remote, clinical depiction of a transparent artist. Rather, exposing the process of representation and signification that construct gendered and racial pow-

36 Sarah Parsons, »Public/Private Tensions in the Photography of Sally Mann,« *History of Photography* 32, no. 2 (2008), pp. 123–136; Anne Higonnet, »Sally Mann: The Price of Success,« in *Women Artists At The Millennium*, eds. Carol Armstrong and Catherine De Zegher (Cambridge/London: October Books, The MIT Press, 2006), pp. 403–426.

37 Mann, *Hold Still*, p. 289.

38 Ibid., p. 278.

39 J. M. Saggese, »The Myth of Neutrality: Re-Considering Conceptual Art Photography,« *Exposure: The Journal of the Society for Photographic Education* 40, no. 1 (2007), pp. 33–42.

er dynamics, this image of black and white violent encounter draws attention to the broader issue of the ethical relationship between self and other.

One of the most profound theories of power dynamics between the self and other is Levinas' ethics of otherness. In his critique of Western philosophy, Levinas sees its main fault as positing knowledge as the fundamental relationship between the subject and the world. He sees the wish to understand the other as an act of violence. By approaching the other as an object to be known, the ›I‹ tries to »grasp, contain and hold the other within my [the ›I‹'s own] conceptual categories.«[40] The ›I‹ thus masters the other, possesses it by bringing it into alignment with the ›I‹'s own self. As a result, the other is annihilated, reduced to a set of knowable categories such as race, gender, or other fixed identity. The other's alterity, claims Levinas, is irreducible to a theme of my consciousness.[41] Ethical, non-violent relations, according to Levinas, involve the notion of the ›face,‹ by which Levinas means a direct relationship between the other's moral demands upon me, and my ethical responsibility toward him/her. It is the cry of human suffering to which we are bound to respond. According to Butler's reading of Levinas, the human is not represented by the face: »Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation.«[42] For the representation to convey the human, it must not only fail, but must also show its failure.[43]

Following Levinas' ethical theory, I argue that the *Men* series deliberately embodies the failure of representation, stressing Mann's own limitations (as a photographer and a white woman) in knowing another and developing interracial and inter-gendered relationships under the color line, to borrow W. E. B. DuBois' phrase.[44] Like her previous series, such as *Immediate Family*, *Proud Flesh*, and the Southern landscapes, Mann's *Men* project intertwines personal aspects with socio-political concerns. She explains her motivation for creating the series, within the context of her desire to know and understand the Black men from her past.[45] However, in my view, despite what may be her desire to mend her past, the technique, aesthetic, and modes of production she chose doom this attempt to failure. The viewers gain no knowledge of who these men in the pictures are—except their first names and that they are young and Black. Neither do they gain any knowledge about those anonymous men from her past. It might have been possible, sixty years later, to go back and try to trace those men. But even if she had found them, they are no longer the men from her childhood, and those strangers

40 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 67.
41 Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 24–25.
42 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 144–145.
43 Ibid.
44 W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996 [1903]), pp. 10, 29.
45 Mann, *Hold Still*, p. 289.

in her pictures, men from her hometown, possibly the same age as the men in her memories, cannot replace them.[46] Nor can the friendships she has since built with other Black men. The men in her pictures are confined to the illusionary space of the photograph, trapped like ghosts between past and present, vague memories and contemporary experiences, outside and inside, self and other. In the images, their past appears terrifying; their present is confusing, and their future uncertain.

Far from the closed triangle of male photographer-subject-viewer of Mapplethorpe, and his explicit eroticism, Mann presents a yearning for impossible connections. Rather than expressing the desire to possess, grab, touch, I argue *Men* conveys a longing for interaction; a desire to understand, to be close, beyond the bounds of possibility. More than representing specific individuals, the figures in the *Men* series symbolize missed opportunities and the loss of relationships that she wished for, but ultimately remained out of reach. Overall, Mann's use of the photochemical process, the fragmentation of the body that restricts our understanding of its position in space and limits the visible range, and the absence of family name in the titles, can all be viewed as defamiliarizing the other, and stressing the limitations of the medium as a system of representation.

Mann's *Men* series presents a complication of Black masculinity, which is neither always morally easy or comfortable, nor resolvable through a dichotomous ethics. An insider/outsider vis-à-vis the American history of photography and race, Mann questions its visual codes, while participating in their creation. But rather than representing a fixed identity, I argue that the photographs stress the interactions with others as constituting the Black male subjects who are always in the process of becoming. By emphasizing the vulnerability of Black masculinity, and questioning the assumed naturalness of its visual codes of representation, Mann's *Men* series contributes an important dimension to this critical discourse. It reveals this vulnerability not as a »political position of powerlessness and lack of agency,«[47] but rather as a critical category that posits new political and ethical imaginaries, widening the understanding of the effect of specific social conditions and power relations on human beings.[48]

46 Although the stated goal of Mann's project was knowingly doomed to failure, she often expressed in our conversations how miraculous and rewarding it was to form relations out of the encounters with the models, staying in touch with many of them years later, within her own limits and in a fraught and impossible situation.

47 Judith Butler, *»Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,«* Lecture, Instituto Franklin, Madrid, June 2014, p. 15.

48 Ibid., p. 37.