Skin Feeling

By Sofia SamatarSeptember 25, 2015

What it is to be encountered as a surface, to be constantly exposed as something you are not.

1. POOR ROBIN

In a moment of crisis, Charlie "Bird" Parker stripped off all his clothes. The episode followed a disastrous 1946 recording session for Dial Records: Parker was suffering from heroin withdrawal, his muscle spasms so severe he could hardly keep up with the band. That night he left a cigarette butt smoldering on his mattress and wandered nude into the lobby of his Los Angeles hotel. He was arrested, clubbed, handcuffed to a cot at the county jail, and charged with suspected arson, resisting arrest, and indecent exposure.

It was a spectacular crash, the kind we want from artists. The owner of Dial Records arranged for Parker to be transferred to Camarillo State Mental Hospital, where he would spend the next six months. The experience produced the song "Relaxin' at Camarillo," although that wasn't Parker's original title.

Camarillo State Hospital closed in 1997. In 2002, it became California State University Channel Islands, where I now work.

As a black academic, part of a tiny minority, I often feel hypervisible, exposed. Crossing a courtyard among the white walls, perhaps passing the window of Bird's old room, I ask myself: Why did he take his clothes off?

Ralph Ellison reads Bird's story as that of an artist-addict hounded by the public, by the hunger of his fans for some new drama: "In the end he had no private life and his most tragic moments were drained of human significance." Wondering what kind of bird Bird was, Ellison settles on the

robin, because of Walter Page's lyrics to a tune Charlie Parker would have heard in Kansas City:

Oh, they picked poor robin clean
Oh, they picked poor robin clean
They tied poor robin to a stump
Lord, they picked all the feathers
Round from robin's rump
Oh, they picked poor Robin clean.

Ellison's subject here is the unbearable visibility of the performer, but it's not so far from the invisibility of his Invisible Man, who appears to others as "only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything except me." The invisibility of a person is also the visibility of race.

I'm interested in visibility as it relates to the lives and working conditions of academics of color, at a time when visibility has come to dominate discussions of race in U.S. universities to such an extent that it has made other frameworks for approaching difference virtually impossible. We speak of diversity, of representation. Diversity, unlike the work of anti-racism, can be represented visually through statistics. How many of X do you have? What percent? There is an obsession with seeing bodies that raises the ghosts of racial memory. These ghosts haunt black performance: Charlie Parker, for example, grew up with and rejected the comedy of the minstrel show, which plays with and replays the violence of plantation spectatorship. The same ghosts haunt the academy, and we can sense them if we understand that the issue is not so much how blackness is made visible, whether the purpose is to defame or to defend, but the fact that in either case, visibility is the end point. The visual marker of blackness stands in for the person, and once it has taken the person's place, it becomes amenable to a variety of uses. In Ellison's words, it's "drained of human significance." I think of the abolitionist emblem *Am I Not a Man*

and a Brother?, which was reproduced on brooches and hairpins.

2. SKIN FEELING

Academics of color experience an enervating visibility, but it's not simply that we're part of a very small minority. We are also a desired minority, at least for appearance's sake. University life demands that academics of color commodify themselves as symbols of diversity—in fact, as diversity itself, since diversity, in this context, is located entirely in the realm of the symbolic. There's a wound in the rupture between the diversity manifested in the body of the professor of color and the realities affecting that person's community or communities. I, for example, am a black professor in the era of mass incarceration of black people through the War on Drugs; I am a Somali American professor in the era of surveillance and drone strikes perpetuated through the War on Terror.

In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander taps into that wound: "Highly visible examples of black success are critical to the maintenance of a racial caste system in the era of colorblindness." It's not that we're too few, nor is it that we suffer survivor guilt for having escaped the fate of so many in our communities. It's that our visibility is consumed in a way that legitimizes the structures of exclusion.

Skin feeling: to be encountered as a surface.

This has everything to do with reading. As a graduate student in a seminar on world literature, I remember arguing that no one who took representation as a goal could ever come up with an adequate model for creating anthologies. The classics of Western literature are admitted to these anthologies based on their perceived artistic or philosophical merit; meanwhile works from Kenya, from India, from Jordan, from Vietnam, will be admitted to make the anthology "representative." David Damrosch discusses these different logics: works of world literature may be chosen for stature and influence, he writes, or as "windows on the world." I hate

this. Homer is our epic artist, Dickens our realist artist, Ng?g? our Kenyan —or worse, our African—artist.

The other students and the professor argue that we ought to concentrate on representation "for now," as anthologies of world literature are still so often skewed toward white male authors. I refuse to be satisfied with this. Although I can't articulate it at the time, I'm beginning to sense the mechanics of visibility. The one who makes it into the anthology stands for all the others, rendering them unnecessary, redundant. The chosen work is a "window on the world," transparent, impermeable, a barrier masquerading as a door.

CAN YOU SEE ME?

Some weeks after the representation debate, one of the other students in the seminar clears her throat. She glances at me across the table, shrinks back slightly, hands raised as if to protect herself. "I want to talk about representation. Don't pounce on me!"

Startled, I laugh. "I don't pounce!"

Everyone chuckles, uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry," she says. "Pounce—it sounds so aggressive."

I'm suddenly aware that I'm the only black person in the room. Stunned, I feel the hot cloak of "angry black woman" descending. But I don't pounce, I keep thinking, I'm not aggressive, I'm not. I hate confrontation. I'm often frustrated with myself for being too nice. The air gets smaller, I'm angry and black, black angry and black black black. A moment I'll later describe as a "double-consciousness brainfreeze."

Skin feeling: to be constantly exposed as something you are not.

There is almost no way, in places where black people are few, to talk about

the complexities of blackness, to go beneath the surface of a predictable form and refuse to be an institutional ornament. I reject much of the thinking I see in mixed race studies and the energy invested in claiming an "other" box on the U.S. census; at the same time, as a mixed person, I am aware of the privileges afforded by a light complexion and the flat, news-radio accent of the white Midwest. I am aware of being African American in the manner of our most illustrious exception, Barack Obama: born to a white American mother and an East African father. African and Caribbean immigrants and their children make up a disproportionately large slice of the black middle class, but at my university, where black members of the teaching faculty can be counted on one hand, I am diversity. There is pressure to stand in for a largely absent community, to speak on its behalf.

The reign of predictable forms. I want to fight this, to acknowledge that I am not a descendant of slaves and that it matters, and to do this without belittling my scholarship on black cultural production or distancing myself from black identity.

I want to expose myself.

3. POWER POINT

Doris Parker, Bird's third wife, who visited him at Camarillo before they were married, describes the scene that led Bird to beg for release from the hospital—a spectacle of imprisonment whose eerie power comes not just from visibility, but from its reproduction, from the tyranny of form:

"He told me one time that this man used to get up every morning and eat breakfast and go stand—look out on a hill. And so, for about three mornings, Charlie had gone out and watched him. And all of a sudden, he had a mental vision of, like, ten years from now there would be this man, and him and whoever was behind him, watching them to see what they were looking at. He said that was when he panicked, and he felt he had to get out of there."

A nightmare of visibility and repetition. Pointless gazing. One man after another. A looking that produces nothing but looks. I think of the boxlike figures reproduced in university Power Point presentations to illustrate the numbers on diversity. The figures are differentiated by color: soothing shades without too much contrast, beige to brown, like the color scheme in the lobby of a bank. There aren't very many brown ones. Still, there are more than we had last year. I'm scribbling numbers, trying to figure out what percent of one figure is me.

I cling to Bird. Not just because he was black or because he found himself in an institution sharing much of its architecture with mine, but because he was a jazz artist and jazz feels like the antidote to this Power Point, a source of what diversity programs promise and fail to deliver. Unexpectedness. Dazzling unpredictability. The thrill as the artist steps out, as the script becomes a pair of wings. "You wanted to be known by your name, not 'that nigger over there,'" said Bird's friend Bob Redcross. "To be an individual was the most important thing in the world."

4. THE FALL OF DR. W

Summer 2012. I'm working hard on my dissertation. One afternoon, on campus, I run into Dr. W. Dr. W is on my dissertation committee; we joined the university at the same time; I took a class with him our first semester, and the paper I wrote for him won a prize and became my first publication. I doubt I'd have submitted it to a journal without his encouragement. We stand in the sun, laughing and talking about work. Dr. W is Kenyan and writes about Kenyan prison literature; he's driving himself hard to meet the deadline for his first book. I think of us as teammates, our successes intertwined, but this is the last time I will ever see him. In a few weeks, he'll be arrested for exposing himself to a student, just off campus, close to where we're standing now.

Skin feeling.

The students in my graduate program are in shock. We've all read about

Dr. W in the local paper. I'm sitting with my best friend in the department. We're lifting our hands and dropping them, gasping, drowning, we don't know what to think. My friend has worked as Dr. W's teaching assistant. She's never sensed anything inappropriate. Neither have I. She wonders if there's "something wrong," if he's been framed by the police—a black professor, after all, it's possible—but no, he admitted to the act. What we'll keep asking ourselves, what everyone in the department will keep asking, is this: why did he flash someone he knew? One of his undergraduate students. Of course it's wrong to flash anyone, but why this? It's like he wanted to get caught.

Flashback: Brownsville, Texas, 1990. I'm visiting a friend. We're both nineteen. We're crossing a giant street, in my memory it feels as if we're crossing a highway, and there underneath a bridge stands an older man in a baseball cap, and when we look at him he drops his pants. His balls are huge. We run. We can't stop laughing. A memory of near-hysterical silliness, which I now recognize as a mild form of terror, in the way that an itch is a mild form of pain. It's the first time I've been flashed (though it will not be the last). I wonder if the terror is what makes everything seem huge: the street, the balls. This is the context I have for the act of indecent exposure. It takes place in a zone of squalor, a decayed industrial wasteland. There's no one around. It's not my teacher. It's not my friend.

I am furious with Dr. W. He had a chance at a brilliant career at a research university. His book was almost done. He might have gone up for early tenure. In the weeks following his arrest, I argue against everyone who regards him with compassion. "He has a problem," say some people in the department, "he needs help." Fine, I tell them, but he can get help far away from a university classroom! Are you going to privilege this one person over the hundreds of women who will take his classes, visit his office? (Like me, like me.) Today, at a couple of years' remove, I'm still angry, and also my heart hurts. In the fall of Dr. W I see a reaction to extreme pressure, a reaction that is no less real for being unjustifiable, like the fall of Charlie

Parker, the heroin addict. Why did he take his clothes off? LOOK AT ME. Is it possible, without attempting to absolve Dr. W, to recognize the inflexibility of the structures within which he labored, the tenure track stretching out before him? To recognize the forms in which he was required to produce knowledge of the interior of a prison under Daniel arap Moi. How do you get off a moving train? You jump. I remember a conference the year before his fall, how Dr. W gave a talk on the subject of his research, concluding with a poem by Alamin Mazrui, who was detained under Moi: "Niguse"—"Touch Me."

When I'm released
I will ask anyone
to touch me
delicately
sensitively
but
truly!

When I'm released. I'll ask anyone. Niguse. Touch me. The idea that anyone, anyone at all outside this prison, would be able to touch me truly. Inside the prison, all forms of touching are false. Dr. W at the microphone in his handsome suit, surrounded by an audience of academics.

Can a sense of constant exposure lead one to a compulsion toward that very thing? Robert George Reisner describes a fancy dress party in Harlem, and how Charlie Parker "suddenly emerged from a room with his horn and played a long solo of extraordinary beauty." Bird and his horn. The guests looking up, arrested by the sound. Such a gift, the solo, the individual voice. A voice that could belong to no one else. "His attire was conspicuous," Reisner informs us. "He was completely naked."

And yet flashing isn't a solo. It's a routine, a repetition. Dr. W admitted to the police that he'd flashed several women before. Five times, he said. Is there anything more banal than this kind of abuse? I feel like I'm picking

up feathers here, trying to put them back where they belong. Poor cock robin! And yet he won't be covered. He's forever visible to me, exposed. What is it that drives me to attempt this rescue, to make something out of this abject episode? Don't I have better models?

Nobody wants to emulate a bad model. Maybe there's something important about role models that are completely hopeless and trashed. I won't copy Dr. W. I can't march behind him across a Power Point slide. He makes the easy questions grotesque. *Am I not a man and a brother*?

5. PAST DUE

I listen to "Relaxin' at Camarillo" over and over. I don't think I've ever heard anything so cheerful. I think about how Bird wrote it down in a taxi. A scrawl nobody else could read. His original title was "Past Due."

What was past due? What kind of debt? In the meeting, pale figures line the Power Point slide like underdone gingerbread cookies. Our mission is to add more brown ones, to even it up a bit, to pay the debt so that everybody can relax. I'm here because I care, because I don't know what else to do, and because I was asked. By the end of my second year, I'm on three different diversity committees. Center, commission, task force. I'm leading two of them. I am, at one time, worker, expert, and evidence of success.

In the logic of diversity work, bodies of color form a material that must accumulate until it reaches a certain mass. Once that's done, everyone can stop talking about it. For now, we minimize talk by representing our work with charts that can be taken in instantly, at a glance. In her book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Sara Ahmed writes of diversity workers of color: "We are ticks in the boxes; we tick their boxes." The box is the predictable form, the tick the sign of how quickly you can get past it. Get past us.

Well, you ask, should we dissolve all the committees, then? Keep faculty of

color off them? What's your solution? Try to read the demand for solutions and your frustration for what they are: products of the logic of diversity work, which wants to get the debt paid, over with, done. Diversity work is slow and yet it's always in a rush. It can't relax. It can't afford the informal gesture, the improvised note, the tangential question that moves off script, away from representation into some weird territory of you and me talking in this room right now. Diversity work can't afford to entertain the thought that some debts can't be paid, that they might just be past due. With agonizing slowness, this work grinds on toward payment—that is, toward the point where it will no longer exist. It's a suicidal project.

6. HOTEL CALIFORNIA

J, who now teaches in the Psychology Program, used to be a researcher at Camarillo State Hospital. One day he takes me to the hill behind the former chapel where, he tells me, a patient at Camarillo State once built himself a house. Tugging aside the vines, we find steps carved into the hill. Higher up, there's a flat space where the patient laid concrete foundations. Concrete! Where did he get it? J doesn't know. We stand looking down at the campus. Somebody's put a plastic chair up here. It's a haunted spot, full of presences that criss-cross one another among the ruins of a secret and dogged labor. A labor whose meaning remains obscure, the little house mostly gone now, the remaining stones without character, withdrawn. I can't know why the patient built the house, and I'm wary of investing the project with too much romance, when it may have been more of a survival strategy, a way of emerging on the other side of something unbearable. Still, the campus looks different from up here. The figure of Bird's lone man looks different, too—the man who so terrified him, looking out on a hill. Maybe the man was looking at this hill, imagining how he could improvise, rig something up within the institution.

There's a rumor, almost certainly false, that the Eagles song "Hotel California" was written about Camarillo State Hospital. A paranoid version of a pretty jail with a beast that won't die at its heart. Well yes, I know, I'm

in it up to my ears. I'm in it and trying to figure out how to be in it, improvising with a heroin addict and a flasher. These are not ideal conditions. But after all, we're all working with what we've got in the university, weirdly homeless together, camping out. I'm not talking about hospitality, inclusion, or a "welcoming environment"—all ways of saying the guest had better behave. I don't buy the institution's attempts to appropriate notions of "family" or "home life." I'm talking about a hotel. I'm saying I don't belong here and neither do you. So let's meet in this space where we don't belong. Like hospitals, hotels are haunted places, teeming with the ghosts of those who were not at home there, who slept there, ate there, played the sax for the dances on Saturday nights. Ghosts of the itinerant ones who passed through having found, temporarily and among strangers, a way to relax. One of the websites I sift through in my obsession with Bird points out that his time at Camarillo may have been "the only true holiday" of his short life.

The most beautiful story I know about Bird was told by August Blume:

"There was this musician's girl who had a bad case for Bird's music. She left her fiancé to follow Charlie… The musician went out looking for the girl and found her registered in the same hotel as Parker. She had asked for and managed to get a room right next door to Bird. She had put a chair against the wall, and she would sit there, her ear glued to the plaster, listening to Bird's incessant practicing. Her boyfriend took another chair and joined her, the both of them holding hands and listening through the wall."

These days, I'm turning around the idea of jazz study—wondering if there's a way that study can borrow from jazz, which is not just about individualism, but is rather, as Ellison writes, "a marvel of social organization." As I write, a marvel of social organization takes place in San Francisco: black women activists block an intersection in the financial district, several of them with their torsos bare, protesting police brutality

against their sisters in response to a report called Say Her Name. Say her name. “To be an individual was the most important thing in the world.” These women improvise a space both public and private, an occupied space. They set up altars. They form a wall. The decision some make to go bare-chested, the organizers explain, draws on African traditions. It’s a riff, a variation on the practice of women exposing themselves as a protest or in war. I think of Dr. W’s Kenya where, Wambui Mwangi writes, “A group of women stripping naked in public is one of our most potent political practices.”

There are different kinds of exposure, of organization, of study, of strategy, of being together in public, of being skin.

“I put quite a bit of study into the horn,” said Bird. How do you study that way? I keep coming back to the hotel, to the couple beside the wall, how Bird was invisible to them but not inaudible, how closely they listened to him, studying through the wall. The barrier seems so important to me, the fact that it was a wall and not a window. There could be no pretense of accessibility. And yet. Something was happening there, in the fraught intimacy of the listeners, at that moment in their charged and unhappy history. This is another inadequate model—after all, it was a kind of invasion, Bird unaware of what was going on—but its elements haunt me, demanding a remix: sound, touch, a broken history, a rapt attentiveness, an uncertain future.

I think of Bird’s innovation, the sublime difficulty of his music. “Its rhythms were out of stride and seemingly arbitrary,” Ellison writes, “its drummers frozen-faced introverts dedicated to chaos.” That frozen face is a wall: a conscious rejection of the grins of the minstrel show. The sound of bop, too, is deliberately inaccessible, its complexity springing partly from the desire to be known by name, to receive credit for one’s art, “to create a jazz that could not be so easily imitated and exploited by white musicians.” This is a dream of something so raw it can’t be bottled and sold, an

exposure so intimate and unstable it acts as a barrier to appropriation.

I'm looking for that kind of wall. A sound. Somebody to hold my hand.

I'm right here in front of you
Touch me again please!
Touch me!
Touch me!