Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Critical Arts

South-North Cultural and Media Studies

ISSN: 0256-0046 (Print) 1992-6049 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcrc20

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To cite this article: Kimberly Lamm (2015) Between the open and the hidden: clothing, segregation, and the feminine counter-archive in the photographs of Gordon Parks, Critical Arts, 29:sup1, 134-149, DOI: 10.1080/02560046.2015.1102266

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2015.1102266

Published online: 26 Nov 2015.

Between the open and the hidden: clothing, segregation, and the feminine counter-archive in the photographs of Gordon Parks

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Abstract

In this article I analyse the photographs Gordon Parks produced for the *Life* photo-essay *The restraints: open and hidden*, which depicts Jim Crow segregation in Mobile, Alabama. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's (1996) attention to the archival unconscious and Hortense Spillers' (1987) concept of 'ungendering', I argue that Parks' photographs of women's and girls' clothing manifest his background in fashion photography and highlight the counter-archival pressure black femininity places on Jim Crow segregation and the photo-essay itself.

Keywords: archive, black femininity, fashion, Gordon Parks, *Life* magazine, ungendering

Introduction

In this article, I focus on the colour photographs of the Jim Crow South which Gordon Parks produced for the photo-essay entitled *The restraints: open and hidden* (hereafter '*The restraints*') which appeared in a 1956 edition of *Life* magazine, the popular American weekly that ran from 1936 to 1972. These images have received considerable attention over the past few years. In 2012, six years after Parks' death, the Executive Director of the Gordon Parks Foundation found over 200 transparencies hidden in an unopened box labeled 'Segregation Series'. Most

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critical arts
Routledge Taylor & Francis Group
UNISA university of south africa PRESS
29 (S1) 2015
DOI: 10.1080/02560046.2015.1102266
ISSN 0256-0046/Online 1992-6049
pp.134–149

of the images had never been seen before, and they suggest a more capacious vision than what was allowed to appear in the pages of *Life*. I am interested in Parks' thematic and compositional investment in the clothing African-American women wear in these photographs, which is crucial to their strong visual impression. The clothing – mostly dresses and circle skirts made of soft cotton in demure pastel colours or floral, striped and tartan prints – signal a 1950s American femininity, and perform covert political work resisting the erasure of black femininity by Jim Crow racism and, more subtly, the implicit priority given to masculinity in many anti-racist political projects, including *The restraints*. Indeed, Parks' images of women and girls speak to the more specific experience of 'Jane Crow', the term Pauli Murray (1965) invented to address what Ayesha K. Hardison (2014: 1) identifies as the 'patriarchal conventions also subjugating African-American women'.

Many of Parks' photographs that make the forms and colours of women's and girls' clothing central to their focus draw the eye away from the Jim Crow signs without occluding them or denying their impact. This emphasis on women's and girls' clothing can be seen in the recently discovered image, *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956* (Figure 1). In this photograph, Parks captures a moment in which Joanne Wilson and her niece are standing outside a movie theatre. Wilson searches in her purse for money to buy her niece popcorn. They are wearing their Sunday best, and stand under the bright neon sign that designates the entrance for coloured people. Although it is difficult to deny the strong presence of the sign, Wilson and her niece seem oblivious to it, and they clearly form the focus of the photograph. Parks' choice to narrow the depth of field contributes to their centrality, as do the horizontal lines of the metal bars across the open door, which correspond to the silver bumper of the approaching car. The bright neon red of the lettering makes the sign stand out, but the dresses Wilson and her niece wear – pale blue and white, made of light and softly layered chiffon fabrics – lift the composition up and beyond the signs that advertise the punitive installment of racial difference. It is interesting that this photograph, in which Parks makes such a persuasive argument against segregation by highlighting women's clothing and its suggestions of femininity, is not included in *The restraints*. There are photographs in the photo-essay that make clothing their focus, but, in my view, none of them feature Parks' attention to women's sartorial adornment as sharply as *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956.*

Except for a few brief mentions – Maurice Berger (2014: 15) recently wrote that *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956*, 'could at first be mistaken for one of [Parks'] fashion photographs' – the attention to clothing displayed in these images has not been considered part of their subject matter or design. This omission is notable, particularly since fashion photography was crucial to the development of Parks' career: his first job as a photographer was shooting women's clothes for a department store. And yet, the lack of attention to Parks' visual investment in women's clothes

Figure 1: *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956*. Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

makes sense. Jim Crow segregation was consequential; its punitive effects continue to reverberate (and still exist in different forms). Women's clothing, on the other hand, is largely linked to the presumed superficialities of both femininity and the image – an assessment that is heightened by clothing's commodity status. Clothing is often not thought to possess the weight of historical importance, and many scholars consider it a distraction from 'real' political work.

These arguments are not completely unfounded. Clothing – and particularly fashionable clothing – exists on the surface of spectacle and consumer culture. But

these arguments rely on an entrenched bias against femininity, commodification and display, and do not account for the ways in which clothing has been part of African-American women's subtle claim to visibility and respectability in American culture. Challenging the assumption that images of women's clothing do not warrant serious attention, I argue that Parks brings his talent for, and experience with, fashion photography to bear on his visual depictions of segregation in *The restraints*, thereby allowing black femininity to connect and trouble two aspects of Parks' archive that are usually separated in standard accounts of his work.

My analysis of Parks' photographs draws from two dimensions of Jacques Derrida's *Archive fever: a Freudian impression* (1996): the archive's alignment with the law and the unconscious. Derrida (ibid: 3) argues that the archive is composed through the principal of sameness, which he renders as quite severe in its insistence on order: 'In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or *secret* which could separate (*secemere*), or partition, in an absolute manner.' The mechanism through which the order of the archive is established is 'consignation' – an organising principle that unifies, identifies and classifies a set of objects into that which Derrida (ibid.) describes as 'a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony, in which all the elements articulate a unity of an ideal configuration'. Resonating with the punitive orders of Jim Crow cultures, the etymology of the word 'archive' points to a history in which archive is linked to the power to make laws – a power that is articulated in spatial terms:

> The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. One account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that *place* which is their house … that official documents are filed. (ibid: 2)

With Derrida's emphasis on the archive as a manifestation of the law, one could say that both race and gender are concepts that create living archives of subjectification. That is, race and gender are discursive terms that place bodies and subjectivities into a definitive and predetermined order; the identities race and gender work to name and produce or 'gather together' (as Derrida [ibid: 3] puts it) a set of heterogeneous characteristics into one 'ideal configuration', which is then placed on a hierarchical scale and assigned relative value. In cultures of white patriarchal dominance (such as Jim Crow), the black feminine functions as the 'outside' to the archival organisation of both race and gender. It creates a counter-archive that implicitly challenges the 'legality and legitimacy' of both whiteness and masculinity (ibid: 4).

Needless to say, Derrida's theorisation of the archive does not conclude with its 'legality and legitimacy'. By focusing on the archival drives which Sigmund Freud theorises, Derrida (1996) presents the archive as a psychoanalytic object: unstable and elusive, without a stable origin or centre, and subject to the ultimate outside that

is the unconscious. To think of the archive in relation to the unconscious is to value what is not said as much as what is said. Together, the archive and the unconscious bring conscious intentions into question and allow for the possibility that repressed histories appear indirectly through the archive. This archival unconscious is pertinent to Parks' photographs and the women's clothing that appears so gracefully within their frames, because it is unlikely that the subversions they articulate were consciously intended. Moreover, if the photographs reveal the counter-archival pressure of black femininity – as I argue they do – Parks' lens and compositional imagination would have had to move into spaces in which strict gender identifications blur, which means relinquishing (at least momentarily) the privileges bestowed upon the male photographer to contain black femininity and reinforce its otherness.

Hortense Spillers' (1987) concept of 'ungendering' helps to identify the repressed histories manifesting in the representations of black femininity in Parks' photographs. 'Ungendering' brings into relief the subversive work femininity performs, challenging both segregation and the emerging forms of anti-racist resistance which attempt to undo segregation's punitive hegemony. Articulated in her 1987 essay, 'Mama's baby, papa's maybe: an American grammar book', ungendering names a particularly brutal form of violence endemic to the transatlantic slave trade in which the female body was reduced to an undifferentiated physiological mass, or what Spillers (1987: 206) calls 'a zero degree of flesh'. Through the violence of ungendering, which Spillers (ibid: 207) describes as 'specifically externalized acts of torture and prostration', the legibility of gender identity is erased and the outlines of a female body are no longer discernible. Within the American symbolic order – the 'grammar' of Spillers' title – ungendering inaugurated a history of discursive acts in which African-American women were clumped into a category of blackness in which sexual difference was erased. This exclusion set the historical stage for African-American women to be punished for not aligning with the forms of proper femininity from which they were barred – an exclusion that is no doubt transmitted to African-American men, albeit less directly. The ungendering of African-American women has placed them outside the archives of race and gender in the United States (US), but the photographs in *The restraints* suggest how black women's clothing can work against ungendering's exclusionary force.

Gordon Parks at *Life*

In 1949, after his successful black-and-white photo-essay *Harlem's Gang Leader*, in which Parks portrays the 17-year-old Red Jackson (the gang leader in the title) with depth and complexity, he was hired as a staff photographer for *Life.* The first African-American employed in this capacity at *Life*, Parks worked at the magazine for over 20 years, producing over 15 images for the cover. With its wide circulation (at its post-war peak, 20 million Americans subscribed) and its commitment to

visual and aesthetic quality (Luce cited in Doss 2001: 229) and its 'big pictures, beautiful pictures, exciting pictures', landing a job as a staff photographer at *Life* was a milestone for an ambitious photographer like Parks.

The privilege of being the first black photographer for *Life* magazine came with limitations. Though by no means the only subjects he was assigned to – Parks covered many others, including fashion – Erika Doss (2001: 225, 233) argues that Parks was ambivalent about the fact that he was the photographer designated to report on events involving race and racism, and it does seem as though there were 'restraints' on what he could say about both. Wendy Kozol (2001: 60) reports that at *Life* it was the editors rather than the photographers who decided the layout of the stories. Photographers did not have a say about the texts that framed their images, which makes it difficult to know exactly how and why a photograph such as *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956* did not make it into the photo-essay. Robert Wallace was the writer for the text of *The restraints*, and it is unclear who decided to use the euphemism 'restraints' for segregation (ibid: 67).

Life could be considered as an archive of mainstream 20th-century American culture. Doss (2001: 227) takes such an assessment to a shrewder level, describing America's most famous 'picture magazine' as 'a monolithic medium of dominant white consensus'. That is, *Life* significantly contributed to maintaining the naturalness of white dominance. Becoming the photographer who recorded historical events linked to African-Americans, Parks' work at *Life* marked a shift in the magazine's portrayal of US race relations, although his work did not completely transform the magazine's dominant white consensus. *Life*'s depictions of African-Americans in the early decades of the magazine were, in Doss' (ibid: 229) words, 'meager and abysmal', but the magazine was not a complete whitewash – it covered the 1955 trial of Emmett Till's murderers. And yet, *Life* never supported radical anti-racist demands, and had a long history of creating patronising images of African-Americans as icons of an almost absolute difference that rendered them objects of pity. As Doss (ibid: 228) argues, *Life*'s representation of American race relations suggests 'hesitancy about picturing racial justice, or its lack of knowledge about how to do so'. At the same time, *Life* considered itself a serious news magazine and was obliged to represent charged and controversial historical events, even as the events were toned down so as not to upset, in Doss' (ibid: 238) words, 'its liberal vision of an integrated, middle-class American democracy'.

Produced near the beginning of Parks' career at *Life* and a key example of his work there, *The restraints* depicts life within the veil of segregation in the rural South, with a particular focus on Mobile, Alabama. *The restraints* unequivocally demonstrates Parks' talent for working against the othering of African Americans in which photography was complicit. He works at the seams between historical forces and discrepant singularities, which means he is able to depict something like the

experiences of living within the confines of racial segregation without conflating his subjects with those confines. In this sense, the photo-essay is congruent with the other stories about race relations which Parks produced for *Life* magazine, but there are a few important differences. While many of Parks' *Life* photographs were shot in black-and-white, therefore aligning with the archive of Civil Rights photography, for this series Parks used colour film, which helps draw attention to the patterns and details of the women's clothing. And while most of the stories about race Parks composed for *Life* magazine focus on post-war black masculinity – from 17-year-old gang leaders in Harlem (the subject of his first photo-essay) to Elridge Cleaver (the subject of his last) – the full set of images that he produced in preparation for the photo-essay suggests that photographing women and girls was a primary focus, which indicated in turn a resistance to the photo-essay's ultimate emphasis on the patriarchal organisation of the family.

The restraints centres on the extended family of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton, who worked as sharecroppers and had nine children. A daughter (a school teacher) and a son (a university professor) are featured prominently in the story. The photo-essay is devoted to portraying, as Robert Wallace (1956: 99) puts it, 'the effect of the restraints, in pride, education, job opportunity, recreation and housing'. The essay focuses on the burdens and struggles of both men and women in the Thornton family, but begins with a father and ends with a son, making the many images of women and girls that did not appear in *Life* particularly compelling. While there is a strong focus on revealing impoverished material conditions, in the photo-essay Parks also attempts to render what is far more difficult to portray: the difficulty or even the impossibility of speaking against the restrictive circumstances in which the Thorntons and millions of other black families had been placed in the Jim Crow South. Wallace (ibid.) writes: 'Although the Thorntons are thoughtful, and in private, articulate, they do not make many direct statements about segregation. This is because they face yet another restraint – the constant fear of publicly speaking their minds.' One could say that *The restraints* is an attempt to create an historical counter-archive of the restraints on speaking which Jim Crow segregation enforced, thus substantiating and complicating Derrida's (1996) argument that the archive is a stringent but ultimately fragile instantiation of the law that can come undone. Parks' photographs and Wallace's text begin to suggest the statements about segregation the Thornton family could not make themselves, but the power to represent is not completely given over to the photographer and writer. Parks in particular draws attention to the subtle forms of resistant articulation in which the Thorntons – and particularly the women of the family – engaged. That is, his photographs, which are so attentive to the colour and form of women's clothing, suggest a latent awareness of the possibility that clothing was a stealth strategy – taking place somewhere between

the 'open' and the 'hidden' – in which African-American women resisted Jim Crow culture and the denigrations it enforced.

As I suggested in my evocation of Derrida's psychoanalytic conceptualisation of the archive, my readings of Parks' photographs do not hinge upon the conscious intentions of either Parks or the women and girls who appear within them. That is, I am not claiming that there was a consciously declared will to strategically resist the specific form of gender and racial oppression that ungendering names. On one level, Parks depicts the fact that the girls and women simply wore clothes. But Jim Crow segregation was too severe to rule out the slightest subversion, and anything that attested to one's capacity to arrange one's life constituted a form of resistance. This is why Spillers' 'Mama's baby, papa's maybe' (1987) is important. The concept of ungendering that is central to Spillers' argument has the historical weight and expanse to inflect simple quotidian acts such as wearing clothes with both historical and psychic complexity.

While Spillers argues that ungendering was a means by which racial difference was produced, she also demonstrates that it was not a singular historical event fixed to the time of enslavement. Instead, the acts and histories ungendering names became a constitutive force in the production of black female subjectivities that had multiple iterations and reverberated in psychic time. Which is to say that the women and girls in Parks' photographs created arguments with their clothing that resist the history of ungendering, and perhaps they did so through the inheritance of resistant strategies along the maternal line, without necessarily consciously identifying those arguments as such. Through his images, Parks contributes to realising those arguments, and brings them to the visual surface of his photographs.

Parks' attention to the relationships between clothing, segregation, and the maternal line is evident in *Ondria Tanner and Her Grandmother Window Shopping, Mobile, Alabama, 1956* (Figure 2). Here, Parks photographs Ondria Tanner (who seems to be about six years old) through the glass display cases placed at the front of a department store. The store caters to white customers and discriminates against black customers by refusing to let them try on clothes before purchasing, and highlights the assumed and pervasive value of whiteness by only displaying white mannequins. Parks photographs Ondria between the rows of white mannequins as she looks at them from the side. This compositional choice symbolically positions the mannequins as a grid of recognisable order that is constituted by placing bodies marked by racial difference to its outside. It also draws attention to Parks' careful distance from, and proximity to, this scene of seeing and internalising segregation's restraints. Ondria's grandmother protectively and gently holds the girl back with her hand – a gesture that emphasises the girl's desire for sartorial objects she cannot consume; a desire that animates her eyes and body. But even as this photograph depicts the historical layers of restraints – both Ondria's and her grandmother's – the

Figure 2: *Ondria Tanner and Her Grandmother Window Shopping, Mobile, Alabama, 1956*. Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

girl's dress is not dissimilar from those presented in the display case: the dusky rose of her dress corresponds with the various accents in the fabric of the dresses she looks at, and the light turquoise blue of her grandmother's skirt moves through the display case, even refracting through the panes of glass.

Parks and fashion

Fashion was crucial to Parks' photographic imagination, and it could be argued that fashion photography lies at the core of his artistic practice. In his autobiography

A choice of weapons (2010), Parks describes his work as a porter on the '400' – a train that ran daily between Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Chicago. Well-to-do travelers would leave copies of *Vogue* on the seats. Parks (2010: 196) writes that he would

> study the luxurious fashion photographs on its pages and the uncommon names of the photographers who took them – Steichen, Blumenfeld, Horst, Beaton, Hoyningen-Huene. How lucky they were, I thought. Day-dreaming once, I printed my name under a Steichen portrait of Katharine Cornell. And my imagination assured me that it looked quite natural there.

After persistently trying to get department stores to hire him, he finally got a break at Frank Murphy's, which Parks (ibid.) identifies as 'the most fashionable store in St. Paul'. This opportunity did not come from Frank Murphy himself – he answered Parks' request with an unequivocal 'no' – but from Mrs. Murphy, who 'bewilder[ed]' both men with her bold, unabashed audacity (ibid.).

In Parks' rendering of the photo shoot, he and Mrs. Murphy became collaborators in this creative project. Describing that first job, Parks (ibid: 198) writes:

> The dresses and models were beautiful. And Mrs. Murphy seemed just as excited as I was about the whole thing. She went around buttoning the girls into the lovely evening dresses she had selected. And Frank Murphy stood by, watching with a quizzical and skeptical eye.

On one level, this scene is simply about the work of a fashion shoot. On another, this scene erodes (at least momentarily) the white male authority embodied by 'Mr. Frank Murphy', by evoking interracial desires and the taboo of a white woman – here rendered as a rebellious wife – in intimate proximity to an African-American man. Parks suggests but does not pursue these meanings. His focus quickly returns to the making of the photographs: 'My lighting, inspired by the pictures I had so often studied in the pages of *Vogue,* wasn't all that bad' (ibid: 198). Studying *Vogue* paid off. Parks would go on to work for *Vogue* in the 1940s, hired by artistic director Alexander Liberman.

Parks' fashion photography had wide and imaginative range and deserves more sustained attention than I can provide here. However, I briefly focus on two dimensions of his fashion archive that seem to manifest in *The restraints*. The first is Parks' interest in making the scene of production the background for the fashion image. The second is his talent for composing images that highlight the relationships between the body, clothing, and architectural thresholds.

In a series of fashion photographs produced in 1956, Parks creates a compelling meditation on the work that goes into producing clothing. In *Samuel Rober's Vivid Tops*, Parks places three women wearing pastel tops and pantsuits in a crowded factory space. The models are either sitting on or leaning against piles of fabric, and

there is a visual correspondence between the surrounding fabric and the clothing they wear. In *Philip Sills' Print Suit*, a model poses elegantly amidst pipes, fog, and a wheelbarrow over which a large piece of pink cloth has been draped.

This focus on the production of clothing as a commodity and its visual presentations also finds its way into the photographs in *The restraints*. One shows a young woman (Minnie Louise Causey, one of the Thorntons' daughters) hauling a large pile of clothing to an iron pot in which the garments will be boiled and cleaned. Another depicts Virgie Lee Tanner ironing clothes in the corner of a dilapidated bedroom in which pieces of wallpaper are peeling off the walls. Seen in relation to the consistent emphasis on clothing in *The restraints*, these photographs suggest that wearing clothing was a way to claim the labour that went into their care and maintenance – a claim that may extend back to the exploitation of slave labour for the production of cotton.

Parks' attention to architectural thresholds is particularly evident in a black-and-white photograph published in 1952, featuring a 'nursemaid's kerchief' by the hat designer Lilly Dache. In this profile photograph, the white woman wearing the kerchief hat places her elbows on a table and props her head on her gloved hands. She does so before a window, whose curved shape is accentuated by dark foliage circling its interior frame. The architectural outlines of tall buildings blur in the background. The foliage seems to touch the straight line of the model's back – a line that leads the eye to the hat she wears. These interrelated aspects of the composition create a meditation on photographic framing, a consistent feature of Parks' fashion photographs in which clothing becomes a form of architecture and architecture a form of clothing. I believe Parks brought this dimension of his fashion photography to *The restraints*, as many of the images in the series deploy the thresholds of homes and windows as frames within the visual field that draw attention to the ways in which his subjects have arranged their bodies in the forms and colours of clothing, thereby subtly resisting their stringent placement within the spaces of Jim Crow.

Reading segregation, reading clothing

The imbrication of clothing and architecture developed in Parks' fashion photographs finds its way into *The restraints*, becoming a subtle part of his argument against segregation. In *At Segregated Drinking Fountain*, *Mobile, Alabama, 1956* (Figure 3) – one of the iconic photographs from the photo-essay – Parks creates a tableau featuring women's clothing as the primary feature of the composition. In this photograph, two women stand to the right of a 'WHITE ONLY' drinking fountain, waiting as girls are gathered around and drinking at the 'COLORED ONLY' fountain. The women's circle skirts – with their bright and intricate patterns, tightly belted at the waist, and made wide with petticoats – are clearly on display as clothing, but also as shapes and compositional forms that take the eye away from

Figure 3: *At Segregated Drinking Fountain, Mobile, Alabama, 1956*. Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

the fountains, the signage, and their demarcation of space. These skirts lead the eye to the little girls' dresses, creating a sight line that moves across the 'WHITE ONLY' sign painted onto one of the two drinking fountains. It is difficult to deny the restrictive power of this sign. Because of it, the women are waiting to drink from the fountain labeled 'COLORED ONLY' and thus have to participate in their secondary status. Their clothes, however, suggest care and feminine pleasure that supersedes the restrictions of the 'WHITE ONLY' sign and articulate a counter-argument to the racial hierarchies of value it attempts to enforce.

The political differences between *At Segregated Drinking Fountain*, *Mobile, Alabama, 1956* and the depictions of fashionable clothing adorning the bodies of white Euro-American women in Parks' fashion photographs are notable. However, to insist upon their absolute difference ultimately occludes the possibility of seeing how Parks made the clothes the women and girls wore – or, more aptly, arranged themselves within – central to his compositions and their suggestions that the signs of segregation can be resisted and rewritten. In *Untitled, Shady Grove, 1956*, it is the girl's bright red dress upon which the composition of the photograph hinges, and the image is anchored. The boys' shirts and red arrow beneath the word 'COLORED' echo and reiterate the red of her dress. But the red also extends outward beyond the designated space they stand under, linking the various red accents in the signage of the ice-cream store.

While the red moving through *Untitled, Shady Grove, 1956* defies segregation's spatial restraint, there is an innocuous charm to this photograph that testifies to African-American respectability and could be said to align with the safe distance from racial injustice that characterised *Life* magazine's portrayal of American racism. There were, of course, other dimensions of segregation that were much more difficult to represent, such as the restrooms designated 'coloured' that did not have separate lavatories for men and women. This spatial collapse of sexual difference, which relegated black bodies to what Elizabeth Abel (2010: 130) identifies as a 'subhuman outside', was designed to insult black women, as this collapse preemptively barred access to the recognition offered by a discernible gender identity and the culture of respectability that had been developed to protect black women from enslavement's sexual exploitations. The segregated bathrooms produced racial difference through the erasure of sexual difference, which has been crucial to the nature/culture distinction, thereby situating black bodies in the immanence of nature and away from the potential transcendence of culture.

The Jim Crow restrooms that collapsed the sexes together are strong examples of ungendering in American cultural history. Reappearing in institutional reiterations of enslavement that attempted to relegate African-Americans to the status of the non-human – of which Jim Crow segregation is a clear example – Spillers argues that ungendering haunts the grammar through which African-American women have been placed and perceived in the US. Spillers' formulations assist in seeing Parks' photographic attention to clothing as an expression of African-American women's desires to arrange images of their bodies that align with the archive of gender legibility. That is, part of what makes Parks' photographs and the well-dressed women that appear within their carefully arranged tableaus so compelling is that they so subtly reject the ungendering of African-American women passed down from, and circulating through, dominant American culture. Put another way, Parks' photographs and the forms of feminine sartorial display they index create

a counter-archive that is centered on the value of femininity (not its unquestioned denial), which contributes to rendering the specific forms of racism that impacted the lives of black women and thereby testifies to women's covert and even unconscious strategies for resisting the punitive restrictions of the ungendering at work in Jim Crow segregation.

To understand how clothing figures within a resistance to ungendering, I gesture to another essay by Spillers: '"An order of constancy": notes on Brooks and the feminine' (1985), in which Spillers focuses on Gwendolyn Brooks' book *Maud Martha* (1953), a poetic novel published three years before the issue of *Life* magazine containing *The restraints* appeared on newsstands across the US. Though Brooks' narrative takes place in Chicago, Illinois, and *The restraints* focuses on the specificities of Jim Crow segregation in Mobile, Alabama, *Maud Martha* represents the imaginative and sensuous pleasures a young black woman takes in modest forms of visual arrangements (which include clothing and interior decoration) and is therefore appropriate for thinking through Parks' photographic attention to the details of women's clothing. For Spillers, Brooks' *Maud Martha* is notable because it portrays black femininity as an active, imaginative practice that crafts spaces between hyper-visibility and the denigrating forms of invisibility, in which the under-acknowledged history of ungendering has prominently figured. Spillers' analysis of Brooks' work suggests that attending to visual pleasures opens onto the singularity of subjectivity: that is, spaces that are not completely beholden to racism's punitive restraints or the readily available terms for fighting against them. Moreover, Spillers' interpretation of *Maud Martha* suggests that *femininity* is the gender identity which is easiest to devalue, and is therefore a key impediment to seeing clothes and the proto-black feminist desires that might be moving through them. Spillers discusses the difficulty of allowing femininity into a form of discursive visibility since it is considered, for the most part, useless and obsolete. With characteristic insight, Spillers (1985: 132) explains:

> Trapped between the Scylla of feminist mandates on the one hand and the Charybdis of dominative and patriarchal modes of power on the other, the subject of 'feminine attributes' is apparently abandoned to a useless set of traits, not unlike a sixth toe or finger in some phase of human evolution.

Despite this mutually reinforcing disdain, Spillers (1985: 137) attempts to bring 'feminine attributes' into relief by turning to the aesthetic theories of J.C. Friedrich Schiller and his characterisation of femininity as 'maximum changeability', translating it into Maud Martha's 'highly developed powers to *play* and to play well within the framework of possibilities to which she has access'.

Even though the 'framework of possibilities' to which Spillers refers would have been wider in Chicago, Illinois, than in Mobile, Alabama, I pursue the connection

Spillers creates between play and femininity, and conclude by returning to *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956*. As I argued, Wilson and her niece seem oblivious to the sign 'COLORED ENTRANCE' just above them, and their beautiful clothing contributes to the sense that they are not defined by this sign and the power it wields. While there is a correspondence between the turquoise of the neon arrow and the blue of Wilson's dress, the bright red of the sign seems flashy and overstated. The soft blue pastel of Wilson's chiffon dress and her niece's lacy white dress indirectly call attention to the sign's almost desperate insistence, which undermines its power. The clothing is unabashedly feminine and suggests the playful malleability Spillers points to in her analysis of *Maud Martha*.

As mentioned, *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956* was not included in *The restraints*. Perhaps it was the conceptual separation between depicting fashionable clothing and the more serious work of exposing racial injustice that I have traced and tried to undo in this essay that justified its exclusion. Perhaps it was because of the bra strap that fell down Wilson's arm as she attended to her niece's desires. Decades later, Wilson wondered why Parks did not ask her at the time to correct what Maurice Berger (2014: 15) identifies as her 'only sartorial flaw'. It is in this context that Wilson (cited in Berger 2014: 15) explains her motivations for dressing up: 'I did not want to be mistaken for a servant. Dressing well made me feel first class. I wanted to set an example.' But of course it was the loose bra strap that provoked Berger to suggest that this image, with its elegance and flair, could have been one of Parks' fashion photographs. And, finally, perhaps *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama 1956* was not included in *The restraints* because this photograph, which is so suggestive of intergenerational inheritances among women who are *not* completely shadowed by ungendering, puts black femininity's counter-archival pressure on the efforts to legitimise black masculinity, which *The restraints* ultimately underscores. Either way, it is apparent that the eye for clothing Parks developed in fashion photography represented an attention to the aesthetic details – both open and hidden – that black women composed for themselves within the archives of segregation's restraints.

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