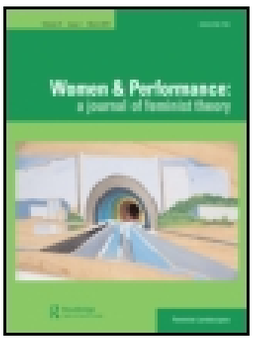

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Surface play: rewriting black interiorities through camouflage and abstraction in Mickalene Thomas's oeuvre

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This essay examines the use of camouflage, artifice, and abstraction – as strategies of surface-play – by Mickalene Thomas, a contemporary painter. Many scholars have focused on Thomas's use of painting materials (e.g. enamel, rhinestones, glitter) that locate her work within discourses of consumer culture and beauty in hip-hop aesthetics. While providing a different orientation to the look through the black queer gaze, the author argues that Thomas's method (e.g. photography, collage-painting, installation) and use of materials signify the surface of her work as a corporeal topography of black interiorities. Camouflage, artifice, and abstraction reveal interiorities hidden in plain sight. The first part of this article examines camouflage and artifice as porous surface-play, while the second part turns to a discussion of abstraction in Thomas's work as a method that pushes the boundaries of representation and abstractionism.

Keywords: Mickalene Thomas; artifice; camouflage; photography; interiority; surface aesthetics; abstraction; surface-play; painting; surface-at-play; surface; affect; psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

Landscape with Woman Washing Her Feet (2008) by Mickalene Thomas depicts a cloudy blue sky as the backdrop of a scene of leisure. Trees, leaves, and branches adorn the left and right sides of the work. The unlikely materials of glitter and rhinestones are used to highlight details in the trees, leaves, and branches. To construct a sky full of clouds, white patches are rendered through various tonal shades of paper and paint. Looking closely, one can discern a patch of brown and black. *Landscape* uses camouflage, artifice, and abstraction through an assortment of textiles, paints, and glitters to construct epidermal surfaces. These epidermal surfaces vacillate between real and fictive geographies of black embodiment and subjectivity. The black patches against a camel-colored coat – what appears much like the fur of a cheetah – becomes a speculative interpretation of black feminine subjectivity and black interiority. The title reveals a presence among the landscape and without a point of reference; the woman remains an abstraction.

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Landscape with Woman Washing Her Feet puts to use Nicolas Poussin's 1650 painting of the same name.[1] Poussin's painting is composed of three figures: the central subject is a European woman washing her feet by a pond while a man peers over the hedge to observe her. The woman's attendant, a black woman, waits off to the side. Poussin's placement of these figures form a triad onto the canvas whereby the man, painted through brown and greenish undertones, blends into the landscape and hedge, while the woman and her attendant remain vibrant in the foreground. The woman's skin is depicted as porcelain and contrasts with the cream and camel color of her gown. The attendant's gold and blue dress also provides a contrast to the relatively subdued colors that comprise the surrounding landscape. This triad complicates the relationship between patriarchy and anti-blackness whereby women remain the object to be looked at and consumed, but only certain women. The attendant waits patiently to the side, as an aside and accessory to the leisure of her madam. Poussin's display of the relational labor of the attendant to the woman performs a literal abstraction in which the attendant becomes an extension of the landscape that the madam leisurely enjoys. Returning to Thomas's recalculation of this scene, no-body is present. Rather textile, rhinestones, and glitter function as a camouflage and obscure the presence of explicit subjectivity (Thomas 2012, 20). The only subject that does figure into the painting is the attendant depicted through a patchwork of black glittered dots on brown. All other subjects become indiscernible. Their presence or lack thereof is left to the viewer to interpret. One reading of the cheetah print, as representative of the attendant, evokes primal attributes of speed and ferocity that drudge up a well-rehearsed signification of black femininity as animal and unhuman. Alternatively, a recovery narrative reads the omission of the woman and her onlooker,*and* the centrality of the attendant, as reclaiming genealogies of black pathology while holding up iterations of beauty in blackness.[2] In this article, I argue that Mickalene Thomas's uses of camouflage and abstractionism disrupt representation and recovery narratives. Using Thomas's art as an example, I mobilize a theory of *surface play* through which to understand black interiority as dynamic. Through surface play, the photographs of black women that comprise Thomas's paintings and the more complete abstract works (e.g. *Tête de Femme* [2014]) can be read as abstractions rather than as figurative or representational.

Exemplified in *Landscape with Woman Washing Her Feet,* the enactment of surface play is three-fold: through Poussin's painting as reference; Thomas's omissions of the madam, the onlooker, and the abstraction of the attendant; and the topographic information presented in the canvas itself. The canvas gives itself to an unfixed interpretation through collage and appropriation, which call attention to formations of black queer and feminine subjectivities, and ultimately interiority. This, I argue, provides more dynamic iterations of black interiorities and the material reality of black being.

The speculative imagination of camouflage and abstraction formulate expansive black interiorities. This is in part evidenced by Thomas's art-making process that moves through photography, collage, installation, and, most recently, time-based media. Thomas explicitly understands these multi-modalities as an extension of her painting practice (Laster and Thomas 2014). The literal surfaces of Thomas's work prod the expansiveness of interiority through its topographical dimensions. It is through these practices of layering media (e.g. photography, collage, installation-as-painting) and the topographical geography of the surface itself from which I constitute a theory of *surface play* (or surface-at-play).

Surface play marks the porousness of black interiorities as an infinite series of folds in meaning, materiality, and process, while annotating genealogies of surfacism in art history and visual culture that repress aspects of seeing and describing.

Performance studies, black visual culture, affect theory, and psychoanalysis provide the theoretical scaffolding for surface play and its various interfaces. This process makes visible black interiorities as corporeal topographies of flesh to space (McMillan 2012, 31–32). My approach mirrors recent arguments in performance studies and visual culture on the use of surface/depth to delineate interpretive threads in ephemeral and material objects (Best and Marcus 2009; Cheng 2011; Muñoz 2009; Spillers 1987). Here, surface offers a method of susceptibility to take seriously the "need for the Other" and orients the surface – rather than some lurking depth – as a significant site to engage meaning (Cheng 2009, 101; Best and Marcus 2009, 6). Surface play embraces the surface as an affective and ethical stance, in opposition to a suspiciousness of what is concealed in the depths of the work. Taking a nod from Stuart Hall, play denotes a doubling of meaning. On the one hand, play suggests the impermanence of the surface itself; on the other, it pronounces the instability of the surface through strategies deployed in black aesthetics. This cultural play exceeds the binary structure of representation by asking different questions at different points in time (Hall 1990, 26). Content and history come to bear on what is believed to be representative of difference and what is believed to define characteristics of abstraction.

In *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness,* Darby English (2007) maps such a process of cultural play by reading several notable black visual and performance artists against the disciplinary genealogy of "black art." English counters the project of "exercises of power" that would secure a monolithic "black artist" to a disciplined institution of "black art" (26). These disciplinary and ideological modes that English seeks to denaturalize are most pronounced in the use of dislocation and spatialization (2007, 31, 266). It is in the opening chapter – in which English takes up Locke, DuBois, and Fanon, tracing the way discourses of blackness both produce the limits of representation and constitute the problem of it – that I take up in my discussion of Thomas's camouflage and abstractionist technique (2007, 44). Whereby English encourages us to envision new ways of seeing black art, my intervention seeks to attempt such modes of shifting perception by arguing that art objects can and do produce multiple and fraught interiorities through such practices of the fold, the cut, embellishment, and extraction. Surface play resists the impulse to make oppositional representation and abstraction by fraying the very lines of demarcation between the two. A turn to the fray of demarcation reveals how surface play formulates repetitive movements across interior and exterior landscapes that imagine dynamic modes of subject formation.

Gilles Deleuze's theory of the fold and Hortense Spillers's body/flesh paradigm frame my use of surface play. Deleuze (1993) theorizes the fold as the interior of matter that is a fold of the outside exterior. Consciousness is the result of matter that has been continually folded until exteriority becomes interiority itself. The concept of the fold allows Deleuze to think creatively about the production of subjectivity and to imagine non-human forms of existence. Deleuze writes of interiority as among the components of mind, body, god, and matter. Interiority is exteriority that is flattened into a plane of immanence without opposition. This plane is not bound to a mental design, but, rather, is the metaphysical and ontological itself (Deleuze 2001). By extension, the fold is analogous to

conceptualizing the relationship of the self to the self and the self to the material world, while critiquing assessments of interiority and exteriority that appear in debates on depth and its surface. To this end, Deleuze does not privilege interiority and its relational language, the essence of depth. Rather, as Muñoz reminds us, Deleuze does not champion surface over depth and quite explicitly makes the argument that the psychoanalytic – the symptom – and the affective – pre-sensation and feeling – are not stark dichotomies. Even as Muñoz introduces the special issue of *Women & Performance* entitled "Between Psychoanalysis and Affect: a Public Feeling Project" by thinking the un-bound of psychoanalysis and affect theory, I find Muñoz's assertion on the "play or movement of surfaces" compelling (2009, 124). By nuancing psychoanalysis and affect as traditions not in opposition, Muñoz illuminates where the surface becomes the plane onto which the material, the psychic reality, and the immaterial world complicate subject formation (2009, 123–125).[3]

It is Hortense Spillers's well-rehearsed and formative breaking between body and flesh that brings to light the impact of race and gender on the fold and surface. Spillers' differentiation of body and flesh thinks interiority and exteriority through an orientation to the afterlife of slavery: this American grammar of race, "with a narrative self, [who] in apparent unity of feeling … uncovers how to subjugate the 'foreign'" (1987, 70). Spillers differentiates between the body and flesh. The former is the apotheosis of a liberated subject position; the latter is total objectification, a violent reduction of the body to a thing, that is the "absence from a subject position" (Spillers 1987, 67). For black women, the denial of will excludes them completely from female subjectivity. Spillers also makes explicit how the body and flesh function in tandem and concurrently with each other: the flesh – "the zero degree of social conception" before the social discourse of the body –that is converted to property is never fully alienated in the process of transformation from the body. The skin becomes this threshold of remembrance, whereby "these undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" (Spillers 1987, 67). The flesh registers memory and in this way formulates a breakdown between body/psyche differentiations. The flesh remembers, making itself known to the captive body, and mobilizes remembrance as an active encounter with survival. Is this not a fold? Bringing Spillers to the Deleuzian fold, I argue for a tussling of the dichotomy between the body, the flesh, and the skin. I reimagine Spillers's framing of the body and flesh as a recasting of fold theory that can bear race. Through the conjoining of bodyflesh and bodypsyche, the skin – surface – functions as a way towards black interiorities, rather than its antithesis, as strategy, rather than only a site of injury. The psyche remembers, is known and felt and marked on the body's skin. The body feels. Thus, the corporeality of subjectivity frames the material body as not only relational, but constitutive to the soul as fold. The soul-spirit-psyche bears the mark of a blurred relationship to the psyche's conscious and subconscious mind. Returning to the flesh, the flesh that is housed by an epidermal surface, we begin to materialize the psyche's mark on the body and its fold into a non-oppositional interior. A richer sense of the mind-body relation and its unfolding between psyche and skin is a necessary process of seeing and understanding. To this end, theorizing the surface – skin as Stephens (2014, 4–8) remind us – mobilizes "skin as a libidinal conflict and intersubjective relation" that ushers in an attunement to "skin-linked knowledge" and navigates the bodily mode of relating in the world and to others.

Furthermore, the social and communal aspects of interiority are further pronounced in skin and its contrapuntal reading with Deleuze and Spillers's notion of interior sociality. Spillers names interior intersubjectivity as the process by which the social interaction of race and difference " … carr[y] over its message onto an interior … [and] insinuates itself not only across and between ethnicities but within" (2003, 385). Deleuze understands intersubjectivity as the fold (relation of the self to the self), and one that is comprised of the exterior (social) world. Race and interiority operates in the province of human ecosystems and not divine law. Interiority through intersubjectivity positions the unconscious and phantasmal alongside vision, while paying attention to the social contexts of the object. How then can we think bodyflesh as a process of fold theory, whereby race and gender are instrumental social intersubjectivities that inform surface play? A turn to surfacism in art history briefly outlines the overlying narrative of race and gender difference in systems of aesthetic practice and its relational genealogy to the neoliberal human's psyche knowledge.

Surfacism in art history has been theorized more extensively in relation to various European genres of painting (e.g. Dutch, Baroque, Realism) that at times deviate and repress the undertones of race and gender logics. Visual culture critic John Berger attributes surfacism to the visual economy of European art through the invention of oil painting in the sixteenth century and the formation of new ideas about wealth and moral standing (1972, 84). Berger uses Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassador* (1533) as an example of the formative using of oil painting to render in detail statesmen, Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selves, and their possessions of symbolic scientific and artistic achievement. Berger draws a parallel with the details of the objects as the "new power of capital" and "new attitudes towards property exchange" (1972, 86–87). While the painting stands in as an early rendering of power and wealth in painting, the work also confronts the formation of the neoliberal human and its implication in aesthetic practice, what Wynter (1992) calls "unsettling the coloniality of being" (237–239).[4] Surfacism gives way to a way of seeing bound up in optical effects made achievable in oil painting, while simultaneously ordering how subjects and objects fit into a colonial world order. Other practices of aesthetic surfacism attributed to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century techniques emerged across Europe and continue this fashioning. For example, Christine Buci-Glucksmann ([1986] 2013) argues that Baroque artistic production often embellished the surfaces beyond the depths of the painting to increase ornamental detail. Surfaces produced an "anamorphosistic mirror … that distort [ed] the visual image – or more precisely, reveal[ed] the conventional rather than the natural quality of normal specularity by showing its dependency on the materiality of the medium of reflection" (Jay 1988, 17). These techniques disrupted the hegemony of Cartesian perspectivalism that relied on metaphysical implications of light as the will of God and later retained the power of an objective optical order (Foster 1988, 6). Contrasting the Dutch styles of describing and Cartesian traditions that used monocular geometry, Buci-Glucksmann ([1986] 2013; 1984) has argued that Baroque styles used techniques that mirrored reality but embellished its surface to pronounce the artificial conventions of the time. This self-consciousness made for visible contradiction between the surface and depth of the work and the non-normative restraints of its creation. Krista Thompson importantly annotates aesthetic surfacism through an attention to black skin. By reflecting on the naturalized ways of seeing and describing black skin and its visual economy – shine – through the material greasing of the black body for sale on the auction block and "the vested interest

in glossing over the scars of the enslaved … [by] rendering illegible the hieroglyphics of the flesh," Thompson calls attention to the negation of the reflective surface of skin in early painterly manifestations of surfacism (Thompson 2009, 488). These visual modes of surface and commodity production reveal the scopic regimes of history – one that represses racial (and gendered) modes of perception – in order to configure notions of race and gender. The naturalization of seeing through prestige painting and an attunement to the artificiality of embellishment inscribes judgment and value of being into aesthetic practice. As Wynter (2003) reminds us, these beliefs and values assigned to being reveal themselves in the contemporary orientation to the neo-liberal human. Thus, contemporary articulations of beauty and citizenship reinforce a neo-casting of the human as a particular orientation to existence and subject formation. Surface play takes stock of these traditions and casts the ever-present manifestation of difference (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) onto the topography of aesthetic practice in order to respond to the complexities of these moments. Deleuze's theorization of the fold and the surface as a part of the depths, rather than a superficial iteration of the self, crafts a significant intervention into aesthetic perception. An invitation to take seriously the surface-depth as part and parcel to each other discourages easy dismissals of the surface as superficial, unrelated, and without effect on subject formation. Further, Spillers's foregrounding of bodyflesh and race produce the environment where the psychic life of being has to envision difference and make itself known in the social world. Contextualizing surfacism and its normalizing regimes of truth and perception demonstrate how formations of the neoliberal human structure black interiorities.

Theorizing surfaces-at-play as an orientation to the topography of the canvas and its interface with authorial and spectorial perception allows us to conceive of interiority as nuanced, contingent, and contradictory. For the purposes of this article, I turn to the topography of the canvas, camouflage, and abstractionism for what they tell us about bodyflesh. Later, I take a closer look at the material and process of making through the cut, the fold, embellishment, and extraction as paralleling modes of interiority. Thomas's painting-making process – mixed-media photography, collage, and installation – provide numerous sites of contemplation on the textural planes and affective inflections of bodyflesh. The surfaces of Thomas's canvases produce a constellation of libidinal drives and objects. These trans-referential works set the stage for a discussion of surface play and its "struggle between affinity and differentiation as a structuring force in the racialization of the human psyche" (Stephens 2014, 7). Ultimately, surface play as a verb constitutes the layers of Thomas's practice and paintings as active and shifting modes of perception. Moreover, through an exploration of camouflage and abstraction, surface play culls for the things that are hidden from view but also hidden in plain sight. I interpret Thomas's canvases and installations as indicative of the profundities of the struggle of black interiorities and material reality. While it might seem counterintuitive to look at the surface of the work itself for what is hiding in plain sight, it is precisely these strategies of deception that disrupt an explicit boundary between representation and abstraction. Because debates on art and identity have often been launched around representation as formative to structural ideologies of difference (racial or otherwise), a turn to camouflage and abstractionism warrants rigorous engagement for how black cultural production can account for and disrupt normative subject formations that rely on protocols of race, gender, and sexuality to regulate the body and psyche. Put differently, I argue that abstraction and camouflage not only

reveal something about the diversity of interiority and socialization, but are also indicative of the ethical problem of the neoliberal human.

This article is divided into two interrelated sections. The first section turns to Thomas's process of making paintings through photography, collage, and installation. I argue that the use of camouflage as a technology of perception utilizes surface play to narrate illegible and legible seams of black interiority through an elegy to Thomas's late mother Sandra Bush. The second section turns to a close reading of black interiorities by drawing on an under-analyzed body of work, *Tête de Femme* (2014). Through the cut and fold, extraction and embellishment, I map out an expanded black ontological treatment of the surface. I conclude with some final thoughts on the implications for the neoliberal human.

2. Techniques of camouflage and surface play in Thomas's practice

Turning to techniques of camouflage, I examine this technology as a condition of perception. These conditions of perception and imperception formulate surface play through the self and are indicative of the topographical geography of the canvas. Art historian Roy R. Behrens provides a cultural history of camouflage, noting its early origins in the French verb *camoufler*, meaning to mask or disguise. The nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a turn in the use of camouflage, first through its deployment by the military and later as the figurative non-military art of concealment (Behrens 1981, 9). Here, camouflage functions as the authenticity of appearance and the negation of such appearance in physical, social, and political contexts. Dazzle, a form of ship camouflage, was used during World War I and II. Bright stripes and swirls of color were painted onto the mast of ships, not to conceal military vessels from view, but rather to make the ship hypervisible and thus confuse the enemy about the ship's course. Through "strategic concealment and exposure," camouflage was used to modify the appearance and distract clear recognition of the ship from enemy view (Covert 2007, 50–51). American artists Grant Wood and Frank Stella were *camoufleurs*, hired by the military to camouflage equipment. More recently, artist Lucien Smith's large-scale *Tigris* paintings (2014) explore the Freudian notion of screen memory and Vietnamese camouflage patterns. While camouflage can minimize the presence of an object, these same mechanisms of concealment can work to attract attention.[5]

A more recent study by Laura Levin (2014) mobilizes the art of camouflage as a performative practice of the everyday self. Not just a temporary strategy of invisibility and an attempt to erase one's own appearance or hide out in a larger environment, Levin suggests that camouflage can describe the very nature of human subjectivity by recounting conscious and unconscious constitutions of the subject in space (2014, 7). Levin uses Roger Caillois's (1984[1936]) typography of disguise, camouflage, and intimidation as a philosophical challenge between personal distinction, often deployed in theories of subjectivity. Caillois uses these three categories to distinguish camouflage from disguise, a form of mimicry associated with masquerade. In this context, rather than altering the external to disguise or masquerade as something else, camouflage functions as a spatial act in relation to the body's negotiation with a setting or landscape (Levin 2014, 37). As a painter, Thomas engages landscape as a historical erasure of black bodies. She adopts compositional structures of iconic works by Édouard Manet and Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet to center black

women in the history of modernism. Thomas does this work by playing with the surface of her canvas and by using multiple materials that act as screens to render affective imprints.

To understand how surface play provides an innovative theory through which to look at Thomas's work, it is useful to look at the visual expressions of camouflage within broader feminist practices of making. Feminist practitioners have mobilized camouflage – tactics of perceptivity and imperceptibility – to contemplate the performative qualities of race, sexuality, and gender. Installation artist Yayoi Kusama (1929–), with her early associations with abstract expressionism, is a significant figure for contemporary formulations of camouflage in feminist practice. In her work, absurd orientations to space produced through pattern and repetitive sculptural form put the viewer's body into space. Her mirror installations use pattern and play to construct an experience that abstracts the body against an absurd landscape, folding the surface of her own inner imaginations and dreams into a public site. While viewers participate in Kusama's environments by literally inhabiting the space, Cuban-American mixed media artist Ana Mendieta (1948–85) used the body's relationship to earth and nature to comment on ontologies of being and femininity. Her earth body sculptures emphasized the impact of patriarchy on women's bodies and paralleled these acts to modes of colonization and imperialism affecting Cuba and the Americas. Other feminist cultural producers have used the surface of their work to signal the messy terrain of being, the erotic, and institutions of power. For example, Ghada Amer's (1963–) use of thread painting marks the surface of the canvas as a threshold of the fold to expose private sex as a public act. *The Slightly Smaller Colored Square Paintings* (2001) depict various stages of pornography that are embroidered onto the surface of a canvas. These encounters are at once public and made intimate, when the thread on the canvas obscures components of the event. The use of needle and thread create a layer of artifice that both embellishes the canvas and the intimacy of the act. This instance of embellishment and artifice is pronounced in Wangechi Mutu's (1972–) body of work through collage and, most recently, time-based media and sculpture. Mutu is most known for utilizing a range of materials and elements to construct monstrous bodies that reflect the implications of black femininity. Often, these collages include machine parts and pornographic images that craft part woman–part machine figures. Tactics of hiding in plain sight and modes of misperception are used to disrupt a viewer encounter.

In elaborating the idea of surface play and Thomas's feminist practice of camouflage, it is important to mobilize both the aesthetic terms with which she draws on the body, the landscape, and the material, and the explicit political framework of race, gender, and sexuality that influence such a world picture. What does it mean to think about camouflage when blackness and gender are relegated to the background or stand in for negation itself? What would it look like for the spectator to become the 'setting'? What does this kind of spatial collapse mean for contemporary understandings of subjectivity? How might the act of making human bodies continuous within the picture plane destabilize or alternatively reinscribe the potentially dangerous figure/ground relation implied in Thomas's paintings? Given that contemporary forms of camouflage are expressed through a distinct visual language that reflects the nature of perception more broadly, how might we cull Thomas's painting as a meditation on race, gender, and sexuality, and its influence on the visual field?

Understanding the visual and cultural manifestations of camouflage and its surface play brings into focus why artists like Mickalene Thomas use this visual language in their practice and why it provides a framework for critical reflection on material culture and black interiority. Thomas has made direct reference to her engagement with camouflage in her practice. In an interview with curator Lisa Melandri regarding her exhibition *Mickalene Thomas: Origins of the Universe*, Thomas states: "I am very interested in the various layers of presentation, perception, and masking that influence how we see a person" (2012). Thomas evokes masking and artifice, elements of camouflage to conceptualize the elements that we hid of ourselves and their impacts on our lives as social subjects. Echoing the genealogy of conspicuous consumption and abstraction plotted in *Landscape of Woman Washing Her Feet* in the opening paragraphs of this article, Thomas recognizes the exterior work of crafting perception and the interior work of strategizing such perception that recall and call out universal notions of beauty and the human. Superimposing black femininities with the worlds of Courbet and Manet, Thomas participates in a larger epistemological project of détournement on beauty, visual pleasure, and the neoliberal human.

The photographs, collage, and installation elements that inform Thomas's painting practice register camouflage as interiority and topographical geography. The uses of multiple modalities reflected in her work index legibility and illegibility through an attunement to surface. Photography presents various kinds of reflective and referential surfaces, while her paintings utilize multiple collage strategies and materials to make multi-ridged topographies. The installations that feature prominently in the production of her paintings act as further textural inflection. The foregrounding of surfacism is evident in Thomas's *Landscape with Camouflage* (2012), where amongst the artist's trademark techniques and textile of an exterior nature scene, camouflage is used to engage with the history of race in American landscape painting. Often, humans are depicted as bystanders to nature, creating an experience of being. With regards to camouflage – especially as it pertains to race and gender – Thomas is mindful not only of modes of appearance in space, but also of how camouflage can negate race and gender as the literal skin and flesh that signify difference.

Mickalene Thomas's exhibition *Muse and Tête-à-Tête* (2017) centralizes the artist's use of photography in her painting practice. Included in the exhibition is a collection of photographic works used by Thomas to stage her large-scale paintings.[6] These photographs are displayed alongside a curated selection of photographers that inspire Thomas's work and an installation that presents a set quite like one used to make *tableaux vivants* in her well-known paintings.[7] Thomas flattens the spatial dimensions of the original photograph – at first a set installation – and retains the blunt edges by creating a collage of fragments that create a new painting that is then embellished with rhinestones and other materials. This process directs an attention to the physical surface(s) of the work. For example, a photograph of *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010) features prominently within the space, and depicts the photograph that later becomes the painting of the same name. If *Les Trois Femmes Noires* exemplifies one example of Thomas's process of making – from set, to photograph, to collaged painting – what can we unpack about the use of artifice and camouflage in the context of this work?

Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires and its use of camouflage ask the viewer to take seriously the condition of perception as an enabling force that informs lines of sight. Thomas transforms Édouard Manet's canvas (1862–63) into a collaged

photograph, as well as a large-scale rhinestone-encrusted mural. Thomas replaces the naked women and scandalously dressed men with three black women who look and return the gaze of the spectator. These figures serve as a staffage providing the viewer with a sense of scale and distance, unlike Manet's rendition. The women are fashionably styled in sundresses with bangles, make-up, and natural hair. The relationship between gender, race, and space are heightened. In the Lacanian sense, women are the environment against which men articulate their difference (Irigaray 1985). "Camouflage [functions as] a question of foreground and background. It [camouflage] is a matter of defining the self against a given cultural horizon" (Levin 2014, 110). In *Les Trois Femmes Noires,* artifice and camouflage provide the mode that enables blackness as the environment in which whiteness becomes human. The surface play of *Les Trois Femmes Noires* functions on multiple trajectories. The design of the background foregrounds the black women through the use of enamel, rhinestones, and glitter. It is the background that remains abstract and lacking in considerable detail. Color – golden light – against silhouetted trees give the impression of a forest and is reflected in both photograph and mural. The background, as an illusion of what exists, reflects the artificiality of a constructed design. Thompson's "surface of the surface" proves informative here. Challenging the privileging of the photograph as transparent document, "surface of the surface" draws attention to other articulations of the surface that include embellishment, reflectiveness, and screen from which to draw attention to representational spaces for figuring black subjects (Thompson 2015, 33). Enamel, glitter, and rhinestones heighten the presentation of the three femmes. These materials also act as a reflective surface that juxtaposes what is represented and repressed. Viewers must negotiate the illusion of the self and the alter-ego of the self.

Surface-at-play is further articulated through viewer and subject encounters with the set designs. Participants are often photographed in spaces that later become the focal point for Thomas's larger-scale paintings. Through installation, Thomas has invited spectators to envision themselves in interaction with these landscapes. These immersive environments give spectators an opportunity to physically experience and imagine themselves in this world. In environments like *How to Organize a Room Around a Striking Piece of Art* (2012), the viewer is placed in the space where brown wall panels, patterned furniture, and textile act as decor. The art on the walls are reproductions of earlier works by Thomas including *Sandra Leaning with Head Back* (2012), *Michelle O* (2008)*,* and *Hair Portrait* (2013). The installation could easily double as one of the elaborate sets used for Thomas's representational paintings. Life-size, the space acts as a screen where the people that populate much of Thomas's well-known works, are hauntings. *How to Organize a Room* provides an occasion for several media and screens to come together into an immersive experience for the viewer and doubles as a shrine to the artist's late mother. The installation literally collapses a multitude of surfaces, material, and spectatorial experiences into a singular phenomenological phantasmagoria that serves as a fantastical shrine to (or portrait of) the artist's late mother Sandra Bush, who passed away before the exhibition.

The doubling of subterfuge for both the spectator and the subject of the exhibition marks what aspects of black interiority are porous and opaque. This becomes clearer when Thomas produces a body of work in memorial to her mother. The first gallery depicts several images of Bush reclining on a couch, sitting erect, standing with a smile, and looking to the side. Each color photograph is shot in 1970s stylistic vernaculars and

displays a casual snapshot quality where Bush's Afro is the focal point. Screening in the second gallery is a biographical film of Thomas's mother entitled *Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman* (2012). Viewers are encouraged to watch the video from within an expanded set, quite like the one built to stage Thomas's collage paintings and photographs. The work combines intimate interviews conducted with Bush, family photographs, and clips from popular culture to convey the triumphs, failings, and perseverance of Mama Bush. The mismatched upholstered fabric, fake wood paneling, and jigsaw-puzzle tiled floor again connote the 1970s, even if the approach to interior design is more reimagined than real and in this sense not so far removed from the painted interiors and landscapes modeled after Courbet and Manet. However distant in time, place, demographic, and class, the material world is recalcitrant.

Though Thomas's art is relatively forthright in the depiction of unstable surfaces, reliance on the artificiality of rhinestones as structural signifiers, flattened vectors, and collaged bodies and objects constantly shift the viewer's perspective. This continual shift of perspective destabilizes the meaning of subject formation and interiority. What is identifiable flesh? What synthetic materials are assigned to constitute flesh? Returning to landscape and interior as embodiment, the artworks that adorn the wall of *How to Organize a Room* form the first bodily reference, while the space itself and the organization of the room structures the viewer's relationship to the "striking pieces of art." The practicality of design is framed in relation to reproductions of Thomas's work. These reproductions act as the focal point without the presence of actual subjects. Instead, the spectator becomes the source of embodiment in space as they are encouraged to watch the screen as biography of Sandra Bush.

Interior spaces and landscapes animate dis-ease through design elements that move beyond the parameters of the flesh to articulate differing perspectives on identification and the surface. The use of design and decorative strategies locates subjectivity in an embodied object that does not rely on explicit representation. Instead, the subject is representational only through indirect reproduction and ghosting. Through a nostalgic reference to Black National iconography and her late mother as muse, Thomas's interiors reflect the haunting of the past on the present. The viewer encounters the sublime through the boundless subjectivity of the interior. In Thomas's interiors, a case for surface play can be made through the very resistance to the divide between subject and object. This relationship is signified in the physical landscape of the interior as a visible articulation of interiority. Mobilizing location and subjectivity in abstraction, Thomas's use of collage constructs a satirical camouflage and artifice that both reveals and conceals the struggle over the image. Collaging and aspects of abstraction gesture to citational landscapes that distort the boundaries between reality and the artificial, the original and the reproduction. Camouflage blends into an already existing landscape while simultaneously enabling dis-ease. Landscapes are fragmented, both fitting into an original location and receding into new imaginative territories of creation. The real and the fictive conspire in visual art, signifying the struggle over identifications.

Reading Thomas's work through camouflage and artifice means holding a quagmire of tensions. Spectators are caught among these tensions that the surfaces of the work hold and spill from. In *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires,* these surfaces fold into each other, revealing other folds of spectatorial desire. The surface of the photography is

smooth, a rendition of a flattening of the three dimensionalities of Thomas's set designs. The set as a stage engages the surface of the alter ego present in *Les Trois Femmes Noires*. Yet the emboldened painting that brings these three women beyond life-size marks another fold and set of surfaces of susceptibility. It is this constellation of tactics that formulate – at the very basis of perception – counter-visualities of perception. These counter-visualities are further explored in the next section through abstractionism.

3. Discrepant abstractionism and *Tête de Femme* (2014)

I have thus far argued for an attunement to the less obvious modes of subjectivity visible in Thomas's work through an engagement with the literal surfaces of her canvases. Accordingly, I turn to the displacement of realism for alternative aesthetics characterized by abstractionism and its intermingling with surface play. Historically, abstractionism has focused on art that does not create recognizable objects or scenes.[8] Form, shape, line, and color function as the site of meaning and are viewed as independent from visual references in the world. While abstraction indicates a departure from reality, such a departure can occur at varying degree – slight, partial, and complete – and thus has been said to exist on a continuum. Even at the degree of complete abstraction, such stylistic engagement can enact real-world references. An abstractionist artwork emphasizes a distance from reality and makes visible the artificial character of its creation.

Geometrical abstractionism, for example, combines geometrical forms to create non-representational objects. This engagement was first popularized by European avant-garde artists in the early twentieth century. Throughout twentieth-century art-historical discourse, critics and artists working within pure strains of abstraction have often suggested that geometric abstraction represented the height of a non-objective art practice, which stresses the root plasticity and two-dimensionality of painting as an artistic medium (Dabrowski 2004).[9] Thus, it has been suggested that geometric abstraction might function as a solution to problems concerning the need for modernist painting to reject the illusionistic practices of reality from the past, while addressing the inherently two-dimensional nature of the picture plane and the function of the canvas as its support. Cubist practice of collage and *papiers collés* (1912) also emphasized the flatness of the picture surface – as the carrier of applied elements – as well as the physical "reality" of the explored forms and materials (Dabrowski 2004). The surface in such context, whether through the bold use of paint to create visual depth on a surface or the use of various techniques to flatten perception, sought to focus on the two-dimensional features of the painting, while in keeping with the Cubist process of purifying art of the vestiges of visual reality.

While geometric abstractionism might be viewed as the purest form of abstractionist art, several historical movements have use geometrical motifs and symbols rooted in representational, political, and national terrain. Take for example the Newark Museum exhibition "Constructivist Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s–50s" in 2010. The show presents a Pan-American approach to the period of Modernism in the Americas, where South American and U.S. American artists explored some of the same stylistic concerns derived in Europe. South American artist Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949), born in Montevideo, Uruguay, spent much of his early adulthood in France and Spain sampling European modernism and taking particular interest in the abstract geometric styles

associated with movements like Russian Constructivism and Dutch Neoplasticism. In *New York Street Scene* (1920), the image is both chaotic and compartmentalized, busy and contained. Here, the European-derived mode of geometric abstraction is visible and yet details of New York life are also visible: enclosed walls, shop signs, traffic jams, pedestrians, most of them dark-skinned, heading in all directions. This work suggests some of the elements common to artists working in a geometric mode in North and South America; elements that Holland Cotter (2010) notes include a blending of local and trans-Atlantic sources, a fundamentally urban sensibility, and an awareness of art's use as a vehicle for abstract ideas and muted feelings. Returning to the previous discussion on surface and depth, how might we think of the qualities of abstractionism at the level of surface calibration? What might be gained by recalculating the surface alongside its depths, not simply as the deflection of referential points, nor in opposition?

I am less interested in how Thomas's work fits neatly within histories of abstraction in art, yet I am captivated by the artist's uses of abstractionism and how these strategies intervene in the nature of representation and its orientation to difference. It is here that I assert that Thomas's work gestures to the body or the landscape as interiority by pulling at the hard lines of representation. To this end, what happens if we approach her work through abstraction? How does Thomas's unique approach to collage and materiality render an affective imprint in excess of a purely representational strategy? What might an attunement to the canvas as surface-at-play obstruct and misshape? Thomas's distinct style of making painting through collage deploy emergent strategies of disguise and befuddlement of black interiority. In a 2014 interview with Paul Laster, Thomas emphatically stated:

> It [collage] allows me to juxtapose the image with various resources that I collect … It allows me to respond to the world today. Our world is a mix of collaged images and information that we constantly have to sift through. Our world is constantly being covered or layered by some new form or idea, ideology or culture … I'm interested in a form of amalgamation, an overload of information – what does one do with that? How do you make sense of that? How do you ground yourself with all of these things that are going on? Can you create something new with all of that information? (Laster and Thomas 2014)

Echoing strategies of camouflage by feminist and black cultural producers, Thomas recognizes the amalgamation of materials on the surface of her collage paintings as an extension of the intermixing of experience, tradition, and ideologies that inform modern cultural formation. By superimposing worlds staged by Courbet or Manet and scripting back women into those histories, Thomas ripples a codification of the visual field. Thomas's modes of composition in collage as embodied articulations of black femininity and in turn multiple interiorities utilizes the fold and the cut, embellishment, and extraction as insightful fodder to map an expanding black ontological treatment of surface.

The fold – like the cut– in economic discourse parallels metaphors of the human body. In economic discourse, cuts identify the body politic of individuals that are amputated from the nation-state or eliminated as superfluous to the economic machine. The tradition of cutting into the body is at the heart of creating and an articulation of subjectivity itself. Hilto Steyerl's astute theory of the cut draws on Nietzschean modes of torture used to collect debt in Roman law. Here, the body can be split among creditors to settle a debt (Steyerl 2012, 178). The fold, like the cut, has strong connections to the formation of the

nation-state, economic discourse, and the Wynteran ethno-class human's calculations of aesthetic practices (Wynter 2003). A clear connection can be made through collage in painting as an expression of modernity and its impact on being. While the earliest uses of collage go back to 200 BC with the invention of paper in China, collage in the modernist sense is credited to Cubist painters George Braque and Pablo Picasso. Picasso first used the technique with oil painting. *Still Life with Chair Caning* [Nature-morte à la chaise cannée] (1912) utilizes an oil-cloth design of a chair pasted onto canvas. The application of glue is used to paste patches of material onto a surface. These techniques both displayed painting's relationship to sculpture and the production of meaning. The former mobilized patches of material as a site of contamination with the surface of the painting, while the latter mobilized the historical ideologies and culture of the time through bits of newspaper incorporated into the geography of the work. Further parallels can be made to the economy of the body and modes of production in the nation. The emergence of collage parallels the after-effects of the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution brought about a notable shift in the world history of population growth, economics, and wealth. The overproduction of materials through automated technology invaded the landscape and produced an excess of goods, materials, and the disposability of the worker. Where the enslaved did not own the body – the object of production – the post-industrial revolution implicated black labor as both in excess and necessary to its mathematics. The cut might be placed in relation to extraction: something is removed from an object. What we know of this object is that its most obvious interpretation requires that a portion of its landscape be disconnected from the entity. Mapping a parallel relationship of the fold to embellishment, in this context the object in question has not been amputated, but rather folded into and onto itself. In this way, embellishment has taken place, whereby the fold that has been created enhances an already present surface.

There are several bodies mobilized in this interchange of metaphors: literal bodies in the metaphorical cut and fold and the metaphorical bodies represented in the nation as forward moving. These encounters between cut and fold, extraction and embellishment, are the nuances of the surface. These strategies of collage enact modernity and subjectivity as complicit and troubled. Cheng uses the parlance of the "contaminated zone" whereby encounter compels a muddling through in moments of impurity, when reification and recognition fuse, and when conditions of subjecthood and objecthood merge (2009, 105; 2011). Taking on susceptibility as opposed to the symptom of the other, interiority in the contaminated zone requires an attention to the need of and for the other. Thomas's multi-textual surfaces take this order as determinative of their various mises-en-scène, which at once evoke Plato's eternal beauty in form, shape, and color alongside the cross-cultural discrepancies – the "intimacies of four continents" (Lowe 2015) – that shape lineages of collage and painting. To think through these sites of contamination is to map an expanded discursive treatment of surface.

Mickalene Thomas's body of work, *Tête de Femme* (2014) offers a germane example of the black ontology of surface and key tropes of the cut, the fold, extraction, and embellishment as technologies of surface play.[10] To create larger-than-life portraits of her subjects, Thomas looks to early twentieth-century Cubism and contemporary Pop references. Comprised of nine works, *Tête de Femme* reduces the heads of women into formal and geometric elements by depicting deconstructed facial portraits composed of cutouts and

overlays. Using an assortment of materials, a trademark of her process of making, these facial renderings obstruct and reveal what Fanon (2008[1967]) understands to be the jaundice face of racism in his work *Black Skin, White Mask*. *Tête de Femme* makes visible how the cut and fold mobilize contamination zones of black interiorities.

Take for example *Untitled* #2 (2014), which presents the figure as an asymmetrical mask where the features in the foreground blend into the surrounding elements of the background. The left eye stands in contrast to its realist rendering on the right. A doorway surrounded by a patch of green stands in as sight. Below the eyes is a golden glittery patch of texture, followed by a series of triangles that make out the nose or connecting gap between nostril and lip. The lip is drawn and then spills into the geometric shape of orange: bleeding or folding into the background. The color palette vacillates among pastel pinks, blues, purples, and yellows that make up a Dadaistic collection of fragmented papers of background. In relative contrast, *Untitled #8* (2014) places the mask onto a black and adjacent pink background. Negative and positive space is made apparent. The eyes are constructed from the inverse of the other through the use of white paper on black on white, and pink, white, black, and gold. The lip is defined by the coloring-in of its shape and also is cut out and placed within the boundary of curves. The eyebrows figure at once as a squiggled line and a patterned argyle of blues, reds, and whites. Finally, the borders that make the face a face cannot be contained and spill into the background of collaged materials, only shaped by a curve of blue here, and a curve of blue there. Cubism and Dadaist collage and appropriation are visible and are simultaneously located in Thomas's contemporary notation on beauty. There is a way in which Thomas's works, by nature of their lack of depth-of-field and their abundant material heterogeneity, push the viewer out, keeping them on the surface of the image.

Unlike Thomas's more representational work of black women, the deconstructed quality of *Tête de Femme* obstructs clear racial (and gendered) identifications. Color, line, and shape come to bear on the symbolic ordering of meaning in visual culture and confront universal characterizations of race and gender. Focusing quite literally on the crown, eight of the nine works remain untitled, with the exception of *Carla* (2014). The citational work of the title does little to locate a racial threshold. Does *Untitled #2* reflect whiteness? Does *Untitled #8* and the use of black paper suggest blackness? *Carla* and the pronunciation of a lime-green background as skin unmakes the human as alien. Thomas adheres to some of the tropes of abstraction and the Greenbergian call to purity. This helps us think about the crisis of representation and current debates on the visual as a field of disciplining, fraught, and troubling orientations of perception. Abstraction as an act of perception is one that separates and withdraws itself from something or,someone else. In this context, stylistic practices of signification through formal elements of art – line, shape, form, color – adhere to universal claims of purity and are susceptible to the whims of the Other. When Thomas is asked about the assumed ethnicity of the women she notes: "It could be anyone. Anyone can bring their own notions to this because it could be them. It's geometric shapes that come together to create a form. In a way, they are of black women, but they're not" (Thomas 2014). The process of considering something independently from its associations, attributes, or concrete accompaniments makes visible the symptom of race in imagining whiteness as universal. Abstractionism to a certain extent asks for that consideration. However, remembering that even the representational is at a distance from

its referent,,abstract art objects might seemingly also be at a distance from abstraction. Thus, modern abstraction, often understood as untainted and fixed, is in fact a fantasy of embodiment and "the story of intractable, racialized corporeality turns out to draw from – perhaps to even rely on – the play and pleasures of abstraction" (Cheng 2009, 114). Abstraction, while connected to specific debates in abstract art, is about the gestural and the figurative modes of susceptibility to the other in the work. This is a universal that puts difference – racial and gendered differentiation – to use as fodder to produce and then name beauty. The viewer projects their own orientations onto the facial masks even as they represent no body and simultaneously all black women. Building on the previous argument wherein camouflage mobilizes the struggle of perception and imperceptions, a turn to abstractionism extends and ruptures perception as necessarily universal or legible. Through such a solicitation, *Tête de Femme* proposes that we test our bodies against its form.

4. Black interiorities and a sublime in difference

Mickalene Thomas engages in a much more radical interrogation of contemporary popular culture by drawing on approaches to representation and vernacular visual modernity to accentuate black, queer, and feminine subjectivities – and ultimately black interiorities. As Spillers foregrounds, surface play illuminates the topography of the art object, the surface of the body, and the flesh of enslaved Africans and people of African descent as fraught racial demarcations and psychic experience. Black cultural producers have been aware of how blackness and the visual logics of Cartesian perspectivalism mobilize normative regimes of perception. Surface aesthetics as interiority casts light on these normative regimes and inform radical approaches to cultural production. Unlike universalizing modes of subject formation, surface play disrupts normative disembodied scopic regimes that rely on race, heteronormativity, and negation to frame a living, breathing subject. Surface play highlights how blackness comes to bear on the impermanence of the surface, thus highlighting other forms of perception.

Much of the visual practices of feminist artists and black cultural producers bring attention to other experiences of seeing and perceiving. They have used camouflage and abstractionism to critique the limits of subject formation based in heteropatriarchy and anti-black racism, which universalize a world picture of neoliberalism. To communicate alternative approaches to subject formations, technologies of the cut, the fold, extraction, and embellishment have been used to articulate nuanced interior landscapes and black interiorities outside the boundaries of the human. Returning to a Wynteran application of the problem of the ethno-class human and its influence on the very foundations of aesthetic value, this exploration of Thomas's work substantiates how strategies of camouflage and abstractionism indeed provide innovative forms of expressive visuality against the neoliberal human.

By foregrounding psychoanalytical and affective approaches to interiority, surface play illuminates the politics of blackness and subject formation in a contemporary moment in which black hyper-visibility, the boundaries of the nation-state, and the question of who constitutes a full human and citizen is particularly pronounced. Thomas's work problematizes the conditions of imagining interiority as fold, and, in particular, how black

interiorities come to bear on aesthetic practice. What possibilities lie in imagining black interiorities at the intersection of blending into and enabling *dis-ease* in an already troubled landscape? Might abstraction and camouflage in surface play accentuate the hyper-visibility of difference in normative regimes of perception and simultaneously forge new forms of being? Thomas's mobilization of camouflage and abstractionism capture such contestations, forging new orientations to being and the meaning of aesthetics itself.

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Notes

1. Nicolas Poussin (1595–1665) was a leading painter of the French Baroque style. Favoring the use of line over color, Poussin has been credited with an attention to clarity, order, and measurement.
2. I am referencing considerable debates on blackness and representation, particularly as they pertain to femininity. Many scholars have focused on reconciling negative imagery of blackness, while others have done recovery works to reclaim these representations. Jennifer Nash (2014) provides an astute negotiation of these debates in black feminist scholarship and illuminates the limitations of such a dialectic engagement with black sexuality and pleasure.
3. Even as Muñoz traces Deleuzian and Freudian orthodoxies of thought, he is clear to make the assessment that Deleuze and Freud are not in total opposition. Muñoz's (2009) intention is to argue that we gain the possibility of theorizing interiority more fully without such opposition between schools of thought (125).
4. See Wynter's (1992) "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice" for an extensive discussion on the ethno-class human and reimagining a decolonized aesthetic reading practice.
5. Ann Elias, Ross Harley, and Nicholas Tsoutas identify two overlapping meanings for camouflage that include the history and principles of camouflage as it emerged in the context of modernity. This is juxtaposed against new approaches to camouflage in the age of heightened digital surveillance and technologies (Elias et al. 2015, viii). This distracting role of camouflage – to deceive by minimizing *presence of profile* – is of course only half the story, as the very same mechanisms of contrived outward appearances also work to attract attention (127).
6. The exhibition to which I am referring took place in the Meyeroff Gallery at the Maryland Institute for the Arts from January to March 2017.
7. Inspiration includes Deana Lawson, Zanele Muholi, Renee Cox, and LaToya Ruby Frazier.

8. The late nineteenth century saw a shift in Western art away from what was once underpinned by regimes of perspective and the reproduction of reality. The end of the nineteenth century ushered in artists interested in breaking with this approach through a departure from the illusion of reality. This shift also reflected critical changes in technological and scientific innovation of the time.
9. Dabrowski asserts that elemental geometric forms take up different stylistic trajectories in Europe and Russia. For example, in Holland Piet Mondrian's (1872–1944) "Neoplasticism" attempted to expunge all reference to the real world. In Russia it took the form of "Suprematism." Avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) is known for coining Suprematism, in which he created nonobjective compositions of elemental forms floating in white unstructured space, and strove to achieve "the absolute": the higher spiritual reality that he called the "fourth dimension" (Dabrowski 2004).
10. *Tête de Femme* (2014), the exhibition to which I am referring here, took place at Lehmann Maupin Gallery from June to August of 2014.

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