

The Wet Darkroom as Distributive Sensorium: Material Aliveness and the Poetics of Production

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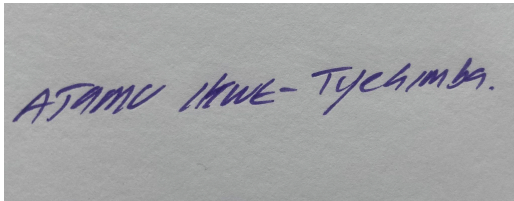
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Declaration

This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis. During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.



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Abstract

This thesis is grounded in ongoing debates about how photographic images are read, particularly the persistent tendency for Black queer photography to be approached primarily through the frameworks of identity -thinking and representation. While such readings remain valuable, they often eclipse the conditions, materials, and gestures through which these images come into being. This research argues instead for a shift toward praxis: toward the material procedures, sensual relations, and atmospheric operations that shape photographic production. By foregrounding the process, this thesis re-situates Black queer photographic work within the distributive, sensuous, and material dynamics that inform its making. In response to the limitations of representational readings, *The Wet Darkroom as Distributive Sensorium* proposes a new approach that concretely changes the register of analysis. Rather than treating the wet darkroom as a neutral technical space, the thesis focuses on its material and sensuous dimensions, its textures, atmospheres, chemical agencies, and tactile negotiations, that actively shape photographic emergence. Despite its foundational role, the wet darkroom remains strangely under-theorised across both historical and contemporary photographic studies, a gap this thesis directly confronts.

The central premise is that by foregrounding logics of sense and prioritising the non-visual aspects of image-making, a different method of engaging Black queer photographic practice becomes possible. This approach challenges entrenched orientations within photographic studies that overvalue vision and underplay the radical materiality of darkness, its immersive, distributive, and sensory operations that contribute to the formation of the image as a kind of photographic skin.

Accordingly, the thesis argues for understanding the wet darkroom as both the site and expression of a poetics of production. Here, the darkroom becomes not merely a technical chamber but a generative, sensuous environment that co- collaborates in the emergence of the wet image. This practice-led research reconfigures photographic studies, methods, and methodologies by disrupting conventional understandings of the darkroom and reclaiming it as an active, non-neutral agent in the making of images. Chapter 1, *Darkness*, challenges Enlightenment and representational frameworks in order to shift attention from vision to the non-representational dimensions of making. Chapter 2, *Exposure*, explores how image-making intersects with poetics of error, touch and transgression. Chapter 3, *Liquidity*, examines moments when processes “fail,” reframing these instances as generative poetics of error and aligning liquidity with destructive plasticity.

Ultimately, the thesis argues for a sensually attuned material theory of the wet darkroom, one that refuses the flattening of this space and its images, and instead insists on the experiential, the immaterial, and the poetics of making-as-sensing.

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“To accept sensuousness in scholarship is to eject the conceit control in which mind and body, self and other are considered separate”¹

Peter Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*

“The porous space of the darkroom, then has never been a neutral container for photographic production, nor has usually been the sanitised and orderly space that many of its representations have sought to convey”²

Sara Dominici, *The Darkroom: Chemical, Cultural Industrial*, *Photoresearcher*

¹ Peter Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, xvii

² Sara Dominici, "The Darkroom: Chemical, Cultural Industrial," *Photo Researcher* 24 (2024), 4

Introduction

"The iron water cools; paper shown to light turns black as the skin on my arm"³

- Michael S. Harper

"What are the words you do not have yet, what do you need to say"⁴

- Audre lorde

This research takes as its starting point an interrogation of *the artist's darkroom*, a site that is unique and specific to this research and this researcher. Distinct from the institutional or commercial darkroom, the artist's darkroom it can be argued is not a fixed or purpose built site but a provisional, makeshift space which is constantly assembled and reassembled.

Over the course of the research, this artist's darkroom was held in various spaces within the home including the bathroom, the kitchen, the cellar, and the closet.

Therefore this thesis is rooted in the wet darkroom as a space which possesses its own materiality; one which in turn affects the process and production of the photographic work of art. It repositions the wet darkroom not as a passive container for servicing the production of the photographic image but as an 'alive' site ; a sensual-material space. The darkroom as this thesis reframes it is posed as standing fundamentally against the tendency to treat darkroom led photography as either nostalgic craft or obsolete technology. Instead , the research insists on the darkroom's continuing relevance as a space where knowledge emerges through embodied, immersive engagement with photographic materials , chemicals and processes. The wet darkroom, with its distinctive sensual

³ Michael S. Harper ,*Images of Kin: New and Selected Poems*.University of Illinois Press. 2008,132

⁴ Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*,Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1980, 13

-material , remains strikingly under-theorised within contemporary photographic studies.

While substantial scholarly attention has been devoted to analysing photographic images, their representational politics, their circulation in visual culture and their ontological status remarkably little theoretical or critical work has attended to the experiential, sensory, and material dimensions of the wet darkroom practice itself.

This research is in agreement with Sara Dominici when she says:

“ there has been limited scholarly research bringing theoretical and critical understandings of photography to bear on the relationship between , the people who have worked in this space , and the products of their labour”⁵

Building on this foundation, this practice-led research additionally draws upon a range of scholars including Silverman, Wall, Cho, Gupta, Batchen, and Geimer who through their insights engage with the materials of the darkroom to reframe photographic studies through questions of resemblance, chemistry, race, colonial history, and the significance of the accidental or unintended trace. In doing so, the research builds on and extends these frameworks that treat the wet darkroom not merely as a technical space of production but as a site where meaning, identity, and history are actively negotiated materially and theoretically.

This gap becomes particularly conspicuous when we consider that for over a century and a half, the darkroom served as the essential site of photographic production, a liminal space where latent images are coaxed into visibility through careful, embodied manipulation of light-sensitive materials and chemical processes. Yet photographic theory has largely overlooked what happens *before* we arrive at the final print, privileging the finished image over the sensuous labour of its making. This dissertation addresses that absence by foregrounding the sensual-material attributes of the darkroom itself, developing what I call a *distributive sensorium* a concept that recognises the darkroom not as a neutral container for technical procedures, but as an active sensory field where the non- visual aspects in

⁵ Sara Dominici ed, *The Darkroom: Chemical, Cultural Industrial*, PhotoResearcher No 41 , 2024, 4.

particular , touch, smell, delay , temperature, and temporal awareness collaborate to produce photographic knowledge and the photographic work of art.

Current debates in photography tend to pivot around binary positions: either reducing photography to a captured, representative index ⁶, thereby privileging the final image product, or arguing that photography has nothing whatsoever to do with the image, especially given the impact of digital technologies and the proliferation of smartphone photography⁷. This dissertation proposes a ‘step back’ from these binary positions to revisit fundamental notions of photographic making by engaging intimately with the darkroom and its encounters with and between the photographic which takes place *before* the manifestation of the material-textual photographic work of art.

Too often, work by Black queer photographers is appraised through a socio-political lens , where identity- thinking and representation is privileged. Process and production are overlooked,even though they are intimately linked.

⁶ This is not an exhaustive list and the researcher has selected those books which are highly sighted over the years including: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard, London, Vintage: 1981, Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), Mark Sealy, *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2019),Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy, *Different* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001)Deborah Bright, ed., *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).While these books are interesting in and of themselves, and has informed the researchers thinking , there is a tendency toward overdetermination of the photograph as index, a theoretical framework that, while productive, often crowds out other ways of understanding photographic meaning-making. More often than not, the darkroom is oddly ignored or undertheorised in these seminal texts on photography. This oversight is particularly striking given that the darkroom represents a crucial site of photographic production. This theoretical blind spot reveals an incomplete account of photographic ontology, one that brackets the transformative practices occurring between exposure and finished print. It should be noted that this list is not exhaustive, but rather indicative of a broader theoretical tendency within photography studies.

⁷ See the following ground breaking books: Daniel Rubinstein, *How Photography Changed Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022),Daniel Rubinstein, Johnny Golding, and Andy Fisher, eds., *On the Verge of Photography: Imaging Beyond Representation* (Birmingham, UK: ARTicle Press, 2013),Joanna Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), Fragmentation of the Photographic Image in the Digital Age (2019), Daniel Rubinstein, ed., *Fragmentation of the Photographic Image in the Digital Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019)

While I do not discount representational analysis, up to a point, this research insists that attention to the sensual-material dimensions of photographic practice offers another vital mode of engagement, one that honours the sophisticated embodied intelligence required to work in the darkroom. By foregrounding process and production alongside subject matter similarly focused on sensuality, this research resists the flattening of photographic work into a form of sociological evidence, instead treating the darkroom as a site where aesthetic, political, and sensory knowledge intimately intertwine.

This practice-led research reframes the wet darkroom as a distributive sensorium, drawing on insights from sensory studies, new materialism, and radical matter to articulate a more nuanced understanding of photographic practice. The concept of the distributive sensorium recognises that darkroom knowledge is not centralised in the photographer's conscious intention or visual perception alone, but is distributed across multiple sensory registers, material agencies, and temporal durations. The darkroom practitioner navigates their craft through tactile intelligence: the feel of paper grain beneath fingertips, the temperature of developing solutions, the physical manipulation of trays and tongs. Olfactory awareness is equally vital: the acrid sharpness of fixer, the metallic sweetness of ferric compounds in platinum printing, the subtle variations in chemical freshness that signal optimal developing conditions. Also significant are the weight and texture of photographic paper; the sound of chemistry being mixed for film or paper; the changing smell of a developing solution as it exhausts; the visual transformation of an image gradually appearing in the developer; the tactile feedback of agitating a print in its tray; the ambient temperature and humidity of the darkroom space; the temporal duration of each processing stage.

All these sensory dimensions collaborate to constitute darkroom practice as a form of distributive, embodied intelligence. These multi-sensorial encounters cannot be fully captured in technical manuals or reduced to procedural steps; rather, they reside in the practitioner's capacity to sense subtle variations in material conditions and respond appropriately. The darkroom emerges, therefore, as a space of sensory intensity and attunement, where materials possess their own vitality and where the photographer's body becomes an instrument of perception attuned to chemical, atmospheric, and temporal shifts.

Photographic theory's overemphasis on the visual has systematically marginalised other forms of sensory engagement with the medium. The Enlightenment privilege of vision as the most objective, rational sense has been thoroughly critiqued by sensory studies scholars, who demonstrate how this hierarchy marginalises other forms of sensory intelligence and reproduces particular power relations. By shifting focus from the role of vision to the non-visual aspects of being in and with the darkroom, this research accounts for darkroom practice within a framework that challenges the overdetermination of the technological and sociological dimensions of photography while simultaneously privileging the sensual attributes of making the photographic work of art.

This reframing aims to create a more subtle and sensuous appreciation of both the material and immaterial dimensions of the wet darkroom, acknowledging not only the tangible substances of paper, chemistry, and equipment, but also the intangible atmospheres, temporal rhythms, anticipatory tensions, and multi-sensory awarenesses that constitute darkroom experience.

Such attention becomes both crucial and urgent in the age of digital technologies. As traditional and analogue photographic practice becomes increasingly marginalised or romanticised, there is a pressing need to articulate what is genuinely distinctive about wet darkroom processes not through nostalgic appeals to authenticity, but through rigorous attention to the specific forms of knowledge, experience, and creative possibility that alchemical⁸ practices afford.

The uniqueness of this research emerges from sustained practitioner observations and insights, particularly through engagement with traditional process photography.⁹ The platinum printing process serves as a particularly rich site of investigation, offering distinct sensory and material qualities that differ markedly from conventional silver gelatin printing.

The platinum print process demands heightened attention to paper texture, coating techniques, humidity levels, contact printing exposure, and the distinctive chemistry of iron-based developers. Each stage of this process amplifies the darkroom's sensuous dimensions: the viscosity of coating solution as it spreads across paper fibers, the delicate timing required before exposure, the gradual revelation of the image in the clearing bath, the subtle tonal distinctions that emerge as the print dries and oxidizes over hours or days.

⁸ In the wet darkroom, "alchemical" is a shorthand for the magical, transformative process of printing where the latent images become visible to the naked eye.

⁹ Throughout this research I prefer the term "traditional processes" rather than "alternative processes" because it better reflects the historical roots and legitimacy of these methods. Many so-called "alternative" techniques such as cyanotype, platinum printing, gum bichromate, or wet plate collodion were once mainstream photographic practices. Calling them "traditional" acknowledges their long, established lineage and emphasizes that they are not fringe or secondary, but foundational to the medium's development. The term also avoids the implication that these processes are merely unconventional or experimental, highlighting instead their craftsmanship, heritage, and the intentional choice to engage with photography's rich past. In addition the term alternative has come into cultural circulation since the advent of digital and network culture and this sadly falls into a binary framework (analogue v digital, print v screen, form v content) in which this research aims to move outside of.

Through this sustained, embodied engagement, the research aims to underscore and think-feel through the darkroom as a non-neutral laboratory of sensual phenomena, where chemical, material, temporal, atmospheric, and bodily factors interact to produce photographic outcomes that cannot be reduced to mere technical execution or visual representation. Working across salt prints, platinum prints, and investigations of commercially produced papers¹⁰ This practice-led inquiry generates new knowledge through multi-sensory engagement rather than purely visual or intellectual means. The research also embraces moments of failure and material recalcitrance, which are those instances when chemicals behave unexpectedly, when papers refuse to cooperate, when images emerge differently than anticipated in the act of working with test prints and the wet image.

This research proposes a radical new sensuous paradigm for a sophisticated theoretical/material rethinking of the wet darkroom and image making.

This research is interdisciplinary and promiscuous and includes contemporary philosophy (discourse theory) radical matter/ana -materialism, new materialism , non- representational photography,critical race theory alongside photographic studies.

¹⁰ Papers used in this research include: Hahnemühle Platinum Rag, Arches Platine ,Bergger COT 320 and Tosa Washi Japanese Tissue Paper.

Future research will extend this investigation to include handmade papers from the Caribbean and the African continent. This expansion responds to the need to move away from Euro-American dominance in photographic materials, recognising that different paper-making traditions carry their own sensory-material intelligence and cultural knowledge. Papers made from banana fiber, papyrus, or other indigenous plant materials offer distinct tactile, absorbent, and structural properties that may interact with platinum chemistry in ways that challenge established technical protocols. By working with papers rooted in non-Western material traditions, this future research aims to explore how photographic practice can potentially be decolonised at the level of substrate itself, acknowledging that the choice of paper implicates histories of trade, colonialism, and cultural exchange.

It deeply draws on sensory studies, recognising that sensory perception is not a purely biological process but something deeply influenced by culture, history, and context.

Sensory studies scholarship demonstrates how different cultures and historical periods have organised, valued, and interpreted sensory information in radically different ways, challenging traditional Western philosophical frameworks that separate mind and body or elevate vision above other senses. The field's emphasis on embodied knowledge, the idea that we come to understand the world through bodily experience provides crucial grounding for understanding darkroom practice as a form of intelligence that operates through touch, tactility, smell, temperature sensitivity, and temporal attunement.

Additionally, this research engages with radical matter theory, drawing on thinkers such as Johnny Golding's work on the erotics of sense and skin-flesh corporalities, as well as Audre Lorde's writings on the erotic as power and Samuel R. Delany's explorations of contact and sensation.

These frameworks allow for an understanding of the darkroom as a space of sensuous encounter, where materials used in the context of the darkroom (metals, tones, chemicals, digital environments) possess their own vitality and where knowledge emerges simultaneously with and through bodily engagement with photographic substances. The dissertation and its argument unfolds across three complementary chapters, each exploring a distinct dimension of the darkroom's distributive sensorium:

Chapter 1, Darkness: Skin, Opacity and the Shadows of Enlightenment examines the cultural and philosophical meanings of darkness within photographic practice. Against Enlightenment valorisation of light, clarity, and visual knowledge, this chapter explores opacity as both precondition and aesthetic principle in darkroom work. It investigates how darkness functions not as mere absence but as an active, generative force, a space where vision is not the primary sense in the wet darkroom but how the other senses become primary navigational tools. This chapter considers how the darkroom's darkness challenges ocularcentrism and opens possibilities for alternative forms of knowing, attending particularly to how darkness has been racialised and gendered within Western philosophical and scientific traditions.

Chapter 2, Exposure: Delay and the Tactile Time of the Darkroom explores the temporal dimensions of analogue photographic practice, examining how the darkroom operates according to rhythms fundamentally different from digital immediacy. This chapter investigates exposure as a temporal concept that extends beyond the shutter's decisive moment to encompass the protracted durations of chemical development, the waiting periods between processing stages, and the delayed revelation of the final image. It considers how this temporal delay cultivates particular forms of attention, patience, and anticipatory awareness, while also exploring the tactile dimensions of photographic time and how duration is felt through the body's engagement with materials and processes.

Chapter 3, Liquidity: Poetics of Error, Immersion, and the Distributive Sensorium examines the liquid environments of darkroom chemistry, exploring how the photographer becomes immersed (both literally and metaphorically) in the material processes of image-making.

This chapter develops the concept of the distributive sensorium most fully, demonstrating how darkroom knowledge is distributed across human perception, chemical agency, material properties, and atmospheric conditions. It attends particularly to moments of material recalcitrance, when substances resist intention, when processes fail, when unexpected results emerge, arguing that these breakdowns reveal the distributive nature of photographic agency and open generative possibilities for understanding photographic production beyond human control or technical mastery.

The research methodology centers on the production of new photographic work and revisiting previous images, working extensively with traditional printing processes including salt prints and platinum prints.¹¹

¹¹ The salt print was created by William Henry Fox Talbot in the mid-1830s. It was the dominant photographic process from 1839 until approximately 1860. Salt prints have a warmer tone and softer appearance than albumen prints, with images existing within paper fibers rather than upon them, inviting tactile engagement. Working with salt prints revealed photography at its most elemental: common salt and silver transforming into light-reactive compounds, images emerging slowly under sunlight. The process foregrounds touch, sensitized paper's texture determining image quality and durational time through gradual darkening. Salt printing exemplifies the sensual-material intelligence central to this research, where knowledge emerges through embodied encounter with chemical and atmospheric agencies. Platinum printing, introduced commercially in 1879 by William Willis, uses iron salts sensitized to light rather than silver. The process demands heightened sensory attunement: coating viscosity felt through brush strokes, humidity levels sensed atmospherically, paper texture determining chemistry absorption, the metallic sweetness of ferric compounds permeating the darkroom air. Unlike silver processes, platinum prints develop through clearing baths that gradually reveal the image, requiring patience and temporal sensitivity. The paper's surface becomes inseparable from the image itself, with platinum particles embedding within fibers rather than sitting atop them. This intimate material fusion exemplifies the distributive sensorium where knowledge emerges through touch, smell, atmospheric awareness, and chemical agency, not visual control alone. Platinum printing foregrounds material recalcitrance and collaborative making. The images accompanying this practice-led research were produced in various makeshift darkrooms over the course of the project. They will form part of the display during the viva and were created to develop the theoretical concerns central to the Distributive Sensorium.

This process has involved researching a range of paper types which are commercially produced as well as investigating historical photographic processes, literature and manuals. Archive visits to significant photographic collections have informed the contextual understanding of analogue practices, while sustained material experimentation with various papers and chemicals has generated the experiential knowledge base from which theoretical insights emerge.

The uniqueness of this research lies in its commitment to underscore and think-feel through the darkroom and traditional process photography as sites of sensuous phenomena that privilege process and production through the senses, particularly touch and smell. By applying sensory studies frameworks and radical matter theory to darkroom photographic practice, this research calls into question assumed narratives about the role and place of the darkroom in contemporary photographic studies and practice. It generates new considerations by traversing historical and contemporary thinking on the darkroom as both technical facility and experiential site, ultimately proposing that attention to the darkroom's sensual-material dimensions offers vital knowledge that has been systematically overlooked in photographic discourse.

In an era of digital ubiquity, this research does not advocate for analog photography through nostalgia or technophobia, but rather insists on the continuing relevance of embodied, sensory engagement with photographic materials. The wet darkroom, understood as a distributive sensorium, offers a model for thinking about how knowledge emerges through material encounter, how creative practice operates through distributed agencies, and how the senses collaborate to produce forms of sensual intelligences. This

dissertation, therefore, contributes not only to photographic studies but also to broader conversations about materiality, embodiment, sensory experience, and the production of knowledge through an artistic -photographic practice.

In developing this sensual -material research methodology, various photographic archives were visited, including the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Martin Parr Foundation, Lightworks Community Darkroom and the Royal Photographic Society. These repositories were chosen specifically for their collections of platinum prints, which is the research and artistic practice medium of choice.

It is vital that a new kind of darkroom praxis begins to emerge: one where the immaterial, and sensual, remain at its very core without concept poor notions of identity - thinking and representation entering into the picture , photographic or otherwise.

Chapter 1: Darkness: Skin, Opacity and the Shadows of Enlightenment

We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates.

Junichiro Tanizak, *In Praise of Shadows*

*But the darkness pulls in everything:
shapes and fires, animals and myself,
(...)*

I have faith in nights.
Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Hours*



Figure 1. Black Boy on the Verge of Suckling Fish Christ, 21 October 2020, Bromide Digital Print

Introduction

This chapter examines darkness as a material condition of photographic practice and as a site where the racial, sexual, and epistemic orders of illumination are confronted and contested. It begins by situating photography within a modern optical genealogy from Renaissance perspective to Enlightenment method, in which illumination becomes synonymous with truth and knowledge and darkness is managed as its antithetical remainder. This genealogy extends beyond metaphor: it institutes a visual regime that simplifies perception, linking visibility to mastery and obscurity to deficiency. Against this inheritance, the chapter argues that the darkroom is not independent of the image but constitutive of it, exposing how appearance depends upon calibrated concealment, latency, and restraint.

The argument proceeds in three moves. First, it reframes darkness as operative rather than oppositional: concealment functions as a generative structure (Lyotard), opacity as an ethics of relation that resists reduction and capture (Glissant), and latency as an operative field of metastable potentials (Simondon). These redefinitions have political consequences, countering the Enlightenment's demand for full exposure – the same demand that shaped colonial optics, the legibility of race, and the medicalisation of sexuality. Darkness, in this sense, becomes a medium through which to think about the entanglement of knowledge, violence, and pleasure.

Second, it develops a practice-led account of darkness as a method through the physical, sensorial, philosophical and more importantly through the praxis of the darkroom in the *Ecce Homo: Portraits of Black Trans Men* series.

Through the manipulation of texture, paper, and tone, the series approaches blackness not as a representational category but as a material practice that works with the trace of trauma: the residue of histories that continue to shape perception and embodiment.

Darkness becomes a way of engaging the past as a living condition, where the processes of exposure and withholding articulate both vulnerability and endurance.

Third, the chapter extends the analysis to surface and topology: darkness is treated as a libidinal skin (Lyotard), thickened by friction (Macharia's *frottage*), and sustained by an onto-sensate logic that keeps form open (Golding). In this register, the erotic operates as an epistemic force: an ongoing negotiation of proximity, touch, and resistance through which blackness and queerness remain materially and affectively alive.

To undo the Enlightenment conceptualisation of light as both a material and a method of knowing both through illumination and clarification: this chapter rethinks darkness and the photographic darkroom as both a material condition of generation and a mode of knowledge. The darkroom is not invoked here as metaphor but as praxis: a sensuous, political, and epistemic site in which the material procedures of concealment, latency, and broadly understood tactility operate as methods of thought. Through this practice, darkness becomes a living analytic – a way of working through the histories of race, sexuality, and visibility not by representing them but by reconfiguring the conditions through which they appear.

1.1 Dialectics of Illumination: The Economy of Enlightenment and the Invention of Darkness

i. Darkness Invented

The methods of this thesis are not genealogical, and a comprehensive history of how light and darkness have been understood across cultures lies beyond its scope.¹² Yet to grasp the materiality of the darkroom and to consider both its space and time beyond their auxiliary role in photographic production, a focused epistemographic tracing of darkness is needed, particularly its technological dimension. It is necessary to examine how the epistemic project initiated in early modernity and intensified through Enlightenment thought, with its technologies of vision and understanding, established the philosophical conditions for photography's emergence, and how photographic practice undermined these ideals from the outset.

The genealogy outlined here, therefore, serves to situate the discussion: it traces the construction of Western metaphysics and dialectics of vision, a tradition that later claimed universality through its colonial dissemination, even as other visual systems maintained different relations between light, shadow, and knowledge.

Before darkness and light were formalised through the discipline and instruments of optics, they existed as both material medium and spiritual substance, lived through practices of shelter, navigation, and ritual, and later contemplated through theology.¹³

¹² For more extensive historical and epistemographic accounts of the visual regimes that enabled photography's emergence, see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

¹³ Hans Blumenberg, *Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation*, in *Modernity and the Enlightenment*, trans. Henry Pickford (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

In medieval cosmology, *lux* and *tenebrae* named degrees within a single divine order. The darkness was the depth through which divine radiance was said to pass beyond comprehension. In the writings attributed to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the *nubes lucis*, or “cloud of light,” described darkness as the point where divine radiance overwhelms human vision.¹⁴ In that sense, darkness was not conceived dialectically, as absence, but as overabundance: the excess of illumination that escapes measure, “the ray of divine darkness . . . beyond light and beyond knowledge”.¹⁵

What distinguishes the Renaissance from the previous epochs is that the analytical interplay between the light and darkness becomes instrumental rather than symbolic. The contrast between illumination and obscurity is formalised as an operational mechanism of knowledge, giving rise to what will later become the modern dialectic of vision: light as the medium of reason, darkness as its necessary counterpart.¹⁶

The early modern period consolidates a shift already latent within earlier cosmologies: the reorganisation of light and darkness into a regulated opposition. Ernst Cassirer describes this as the “transfer of light from God to the intellect”.¹⁷ With that transfer, the reciprocity between brightness and shadow is reconfigured within a human epistemic frame. The

¹⁴Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite was a late antique Christian Neoplatonist who wrote under a pseudonym to merge Greek metaphysics with Christian theology. The corpus traditionally attributed to him was composed in the late fifth or early sixth century and falsely ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian convert of Saint Paul mentioned in *Acts* 17:34.

¹⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, pref. René Roques, intro. Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 135–37.

¹⁶ This articulation is my own, informed by Jonathan Crary’s account of the early modern observer and the epistemic reorganisation of vision in *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Hans Belting’s discussion of the transition from symbolic to operational images in *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Martin Jay’s analysis of Western scopic metaphysics in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 144.

Renaissance makes this transformation visible by designing new architectures for regulating obscurity. In *De pictura* (1435), Leon Battista Alberti describes the picture plane as a transparent window through which the world may be rationally arranged.¹⁸

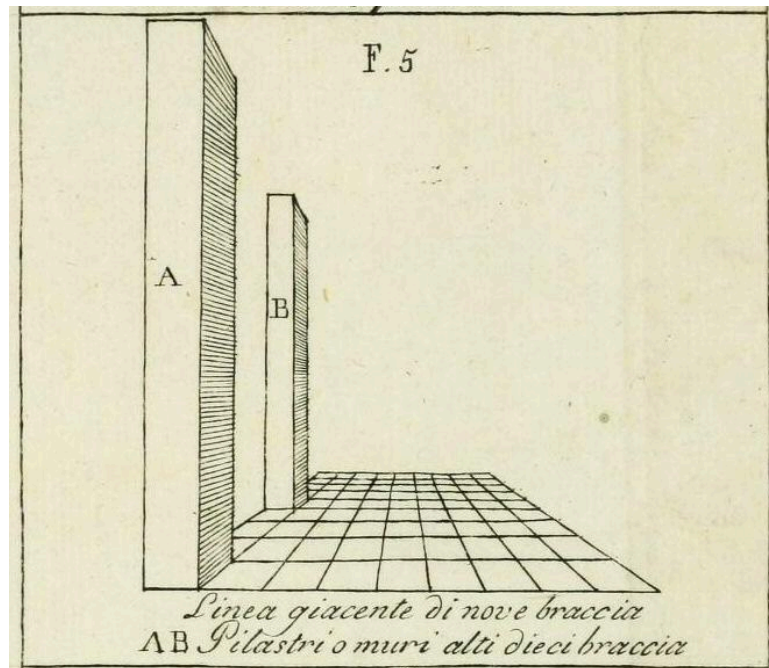


Figure 2. Alberti's diagram showing pillars in perspective on a grid in *Della Pittura*, 1804 edition

Vision becomes a matter of geometry: rays of light traverse an ordered grid that fixes the visible within a single, coherent frame. Leonardo da Vinci's optical studies continue this logic, treating illumination as measurable and proportionate, inscribed in the principles of order. In both, material and perceptual processes are converted into abstractions, their sensuous excess disciplined into form.

¹⁸ "We see the picture as if through an open window." Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 54. (Originally *De pictura*, 1435.)

Through these developments, darkness ceases to signify divine plenitude and gradually becomes a technological interior: the controlled space within which clarity appears. Yet this interiorisation also marks the erasure of mediation itself, the point at which the apparatus of seeing is naturalised as the condition of truth. This thesis repositions darkness and its material spatio-temporalities not as an anterior stage awaiting illumination but as a space equipped with its own operational logics and technologies.

Kepler's *Dioptrice* (1611) marks a critical moment in the technical understanding of vision. In his study of refraction and the behaviour of light through lenses, Kepler offers the first mathematically precise account of the *camera obscura*, transforming it from an artistic aid into an optical instrument. The "dark chamber," admitting a single beam of light through a small aperture, inverts and projects the external world onto a luminous surface. For Kepler, this was a demonstration of how the eye itself functions: light enters through the pupil and forms an image upon the retina. In this translation, vision becomes fully machinic; perception is modelled through the logic of the device.¹⁹

Darkness becomes necessary for the production of visibility, yet excluded from the account of knowledge that visibility serves. The apparatus is treated as neutral, its own opacity subsumed under the pursuit of optical clarity. In this model, obscurity is not a hindrance but the hidden infrastructure of perception itself, that must continually erase the trace of its own material labour in order to make light intelligible.

¹⁹ Johannes Kepler, *Optics: Paralipomena to Witelo & Optical Part of Astronomy*, trans. William H. Donahue (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 2000), 136–145.

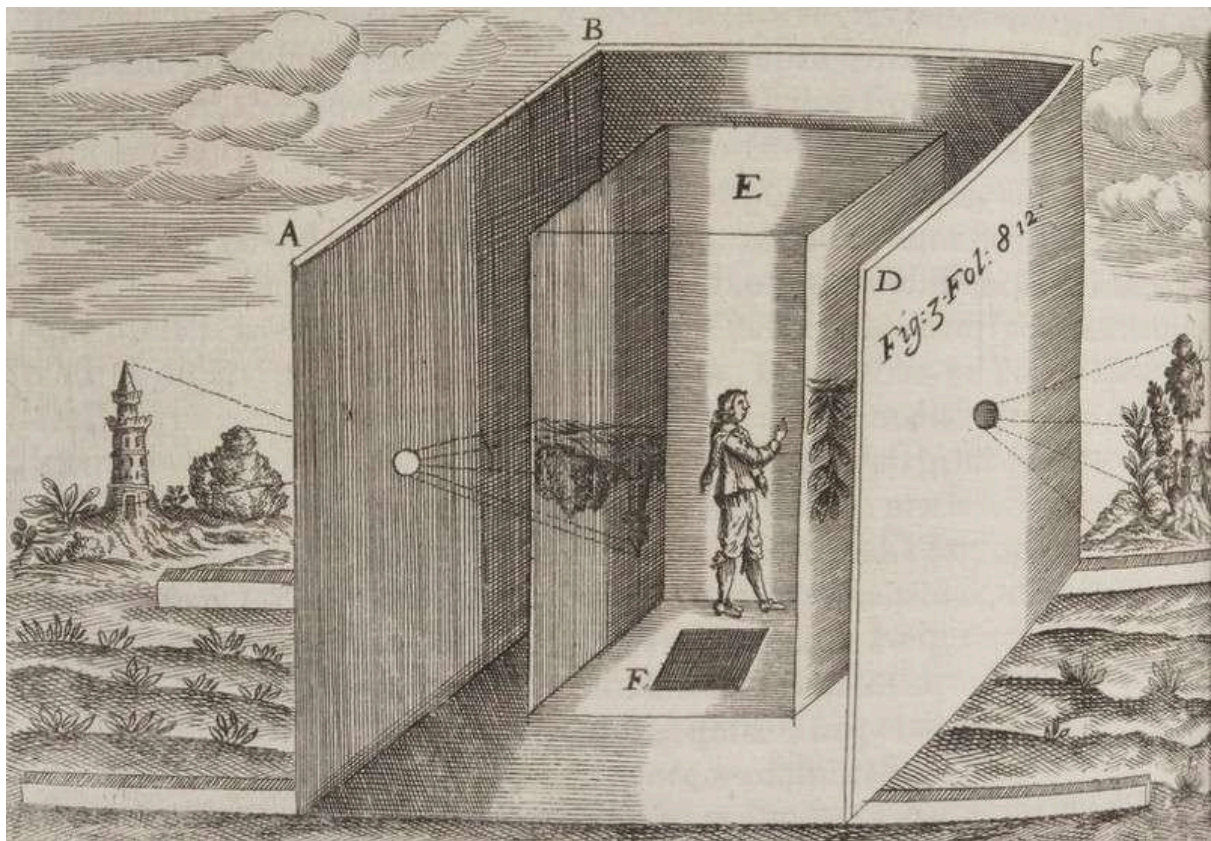


Figure 3. Engraving of a "portable" camera obscura in *Ars Magna Lucis Et Umbrae*,
Athanasius Kircher 1645

The darkroom's infrastructural role echoes the status of the camera obscura: an essential space that nonetheless remains subordinate to the production of the 'true' object of knowledge. This practice-led philosophical work seeks to reverse that hierarchy and assemble a framework for navigating the shadows of the dark space,

ii. Darkness ‘Managed’

The Enlightenment inherits the Renaissance’s optical infrastructure and reconstitutes it as epistemology. What Alberti and Kepler had configured as the geometry of sight became, by the seventeenth century, the metaphysics of reason. The very idea of knowledge becomes synonymous with the management of obscurity.²⁰

Francis Bacon marks the beginning of this shift. In *Novum Organum* (1620), he proposes that human understanding must be led “gently by the hand to things themselves, and their light”.²¹ The phrase appears benign, but it announces a decisive reconfiguration: darkness ceases to be a theological category and becomes a condition of human inadequacy. For Bacon, darkness needs to be corrected through disciplined observation. The metaphor of illumination becomes the method’s governing image. The *light of nature* he invokes is no longer divine revelation but clarity of observation, where the senses are trained to yield truth through exposure. What is obscured must be rendered transparent, what resists the gaze must be made visible. The task of science, in this formulation, is not simply to observe the world but to transform it into an observable object.

In *Dioptrique* (1637) and *Meditations* (1641), René Descartes aligns the certainty of knowledge with the clarity of vision. The true idea, like a well-illuminated object, must be “clear and distinct,” separated from the shadows of confusion.²²

²⁰ Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

²¹ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*. Edited by Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

²² René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, trans. Paul J. Olscamp (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 65–98; and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24–25.

This coupling of reason and light has a structural function: it translates the geometry of optics into the grammar of epistemology. The eye becomes the model for the mind, and perception the template for thought. According to this logic, to know is to render distinct, to render distinct is to divide. Darkness, in line with this logic, is redefined as the state of indistinction that reason must continuously overcome.

Descartes' account of vision and knowledge establishes an epistemic ideal defined by clarity and distinction.

What can be rendered distinct from confusion is what can be known with certainty. This principle of clarity entails a logic of distance: to know is to separate, to observe from a position of control. By decomposing white light into its spectral colours, Newton, in *Opticks* (1704), gives empirical form to the rational transparency that Descartes had defined conceptually. Illumination becomes measurable and divisible: a phenomenon that can be analysed, replicated, and quantified. The spectrum provides a model of analysis that will come to characterise the Enlightenment method more broadly as the conversion of continuity into discrete, examinable parts.²³

This thesis, particularly Chapter 3, advances a mode of knowing that proceeds through immersion rather than separation, refusing the need to break continuities into discrete units. Foucault's remark that "visibility is a trap" clarifies how the Enlightenment's fascination with light depended on the management of darkness.²⁴

²³ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 55–63.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 200.

The new sciences of observation were conducted in interiors designed for control: the laboratory, the observatory, and the study arranged illumination through calibrated exclusion. Within these spaces, light required its dialectical opposite to function, and darkness became the technical medium through which knowledge could be secured. Through these arrangements, obscurity acquires a precise epistemic role. It operates as the infrastructural remainder of reason, the background condition that sustains every act of observation. Crary and Jay both trace this continuity, showing how Enlightenment optics established a model of detached, disciplined vision in which seeing and knowing became structurally aligned.²⁵



²⁵ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); See also: Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Figure 4. An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump by Joseph Wright of Derby, 1768

By the eighteenth century, the management of darkness had become integral to the production of knowledge. Obscurity persisted as the hidden infrastructure of rational inquiry, the material and conceptual condition that allowed illumination to appear total.

iii. Darkness Moralised

The Enlightenment's reorganisation of vision does not remain confined to the epistemic domain. Its economy of light acquires ethical, political, and anthropological form. Once illumination becomes the sign of truth, it inevitably becomes the measure of virtue.

The moralisation of light completes the logic inaugurated by perspective and formalised by method: the translation of optical clarity into moral hierarchy. In this conversion, darkness is no longer the manageable remainder of knowledge but its living counterfigure – the sign of immaturity, deviation, or savagery. The same metaphysics that identified reason with light begins to identify civilisation with whiteness, making the visible not merely the ground of truth but the criterion of humanity itself.²⁶

Immanuel Kant gives this transformation its philosophical coherence. In *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, he defines Enlightenment as humanity's emergence from "self-incurred immaturity"²⁷. In that sense, maturity is measured by exposure, to remain in darkness is to remain a child. Kant's language converts an epistemic distinction into an ethical one – illumination becomes discipline, opacity fault. The challenge

²⁶ David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

undertaken by this research is to rethink the rigour of knowing outside the morality of light, proposing instead a different form of onto-epistemo-ethics.

The modern passage from darkness to light operates as a moral directive, securing the Enlightenment's image of itself as a project of liberation. Yet this movement is not universal. The capacity to stand in light becomes the privilege of those already recognised as rational.

Sylvia Wynter identifies this moment as the point at which *Man* replaces *Humanity*: an ontological substitution that grounds the modern order.²⁸ The Enlightenment's promise of universality, she argues, depends on a racialised division between transparency and opacity, where the figure of the European subject embodies the clear light of reason and all others are cast into the shadow of its glow. The light that Kant extols as moral illumination thus doubles as a system of exclusion. It distinguishes not only between maturity and immaturity but between those who may know and those who may be known. The epistemic operation of making-visible becomes a social one: the object of light is always the other of the observer.

Fanon exposes the political culmination of the Enlightenment's treatment of darkness in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He describes the colonial world as "Manichean," divided into "zones of light and dark".²⁹ The Enlightenment's symbolic opposition between illumination and obscurity becomes, under colonial modernity, a spatial and racial order. Darkness, once a theological or epistemic category, is reconstituted as corporeal condition. It no longer denotes the limits of knowledge but the supposed limits of being.

²⁸ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260.

²⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 140.

The subject of modernity defines itself through an act of luminous negation: to see is to master, and to be seen is to be fixed within light's hierarchy. Achille Mbembe extends Fanon's analysis, arguing that modern reason operates through "a luminous principle" which, in claiming universality, "disowns its own night".³⁰

The Enlightenment's radiance rests on this denial: its light depends on the shadow of colonial domination. Modernity's expansion of illumination, whether through technologies of seeing or the rhetoric of progress, unfolds alongside conquest and extraction. The geometry of perspective becomes the geometry of empire: Europe fixed at the luminous centre, its peripheries cast into shade. In this configuration, darkness is no longer interior but territorial, redistributed across the surface of the globe.

Walter Mignolo identifies this as the "colonial difference," a visual and epistemic order that aligns reason with light and positions the rest of the world as its obscured counterpart.³¹

The Enlightenment's universalism thus conceals an optical asymmetry: the power to illuminate becomes the power to define. Darkness, once the inner condition of the technologies of vision, is displaced outward – onto lands, bodies, and histories.

This conversion of optical to anthropological difference reveals the extent to which visibility functions as power. In the colonial archive, the survey, the ethnographic photograph, and the census, illumination enables a taxonomy. What is brought to light is simultaneously named, measured, and controlled.

³⁰ Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 43.

³¹ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 56.

The epistemic virtue of clarity merges with the bureaucratic virtue of order. The dark body is made visible not to be recognised but to be rendered legible within a system that defines legibility as value. As Ariella Azoulay and Allan Sekula later show, the photographic act in its colonial activity inherits this same logic: to photograph is to assert ownership over the visible.³²

The racialisation of light becomes material in the most physical sense. The sciences of ‘man’ – anthropology, physiognomy, and phrenology – translated the interplay of light and shadow into instruments of classification. In this schema, skin became a spectrum of reason: tonal gradations were read as indices of moral and intellectual worth. Within the taxonomies of the colonial gaze, dark subjects were meticulously catalogued and visually documented, their difference exhibited as evidence of ontological otherness.

The photographic and ethnographic image thus naturalised hierarchy, presenting cultural variation as proof of essential inequality. In such images, gestures of exposure – unclothed torsos, displayed bodies – were construed as signs of primitivism, fusing moral judgment with visual spectacle. This economy of seeing rendered the racialised body simultaneously utilitarian and fetishised: an object of study and of fascination.³³

The instrumental illumination of the other, presented as pursuit of knowledge, often masked a sadistic pleasure in the act of looking. The “dark body” entered both the colonial

³² Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008)

³³ See Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 3–64; Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2012); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); and Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

archive and the cabinet of curiosities, reproduced across engravings, photographs, and collections that fed the collective imaginaries. What had once been divine radiance reappeared as biological determinism: darkness redefined as deficiency or under-development.³⁴

In this shift, the metaphysical hierarchy of illumination was inscribed directly onto the human body. The photographic experiments leading this thesis undo this taxonomic gaze, creating situation when the camera's presence participates in the curious arrangements

Sylvia Wynter's claim that modernity's "descriptive statement of Man" is both overrepresented and racially particular finds concrete expression in this visual order.³⁵ The clarity of the Enlightenment subject depends on the opacity of its racialised counterpart; universality is maintained by producing difference in optical terms. The Enlightenment thereby institutes a double optic: transparency for the subject, exposure for the other.

It can be argued that within this regime, virtue and visibility converge. To be good is to appear correctly illuminated, to deviate is to fall into shadow. Fanon's account of the "white gaze" captures the violence of this logic – the condition of being perceived without the power to return perception.³⁶ Enlightenment's luminous ideal transforms the management of darkness into a politics of life.

iv. Emergence of the Darkroom: Materiality of Light and Darkness

³⁴ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive"

³⁵ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 266.

³⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 112.

This brief epistemographic investigation shows that, by the time photography emerges, the equation of light with truth and darkness with its limit is already fully established. The medium begins within the Enlightenment's optical imagination, yet its very operation dismantles the epistemology it inherits. The photographic apparatus carries forward the conviction that illumination discloses truth and that nature, under sufficient exposure, will inscribe its own image. In practice, however, photography makes this confidence untenable. Its chemistry renders light unstable, its procedures reintroduce darkness as condition rather than obstacle, and its temporality replaces revelation with latency. What the Enlightenment conceived as metaphor, the correspondence between light and reason, becomes an experimental fact that immediately fails to hold.

It was within this optical regime that Nicéphore Niépce, in the 1820s, produced what is now regarded as the first photograph. His *heliograph* of 1826–27, a view from his studio window, used bitumen of Judea spread on a pewter plate, hardened by eight hours of sunlight.³⁷ The process seemed to literalise the Enlightenment's metaphor: the world inscribing itself through light. Yet this alignment of nature and reason immediately fractured. The heliograph's image was barely visible, its surface degraded by the same illumination that produced it. Light had to be rationed, timed, chemically tempered. The long exposure demonstrated that the passage from revelation to record was not smooth and automatic.

Daguerre's and Talbot's near-simultaneous inventions of 1839–41 developed Niépce's principle into reproducible systems, but both retained this precarious dependence on

³⁷Jean-Claude Lemagny and André Rouillé, *A History of Photography: Social and Cultural Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 15.

darkness. Daguerre's *daguerreotype* required that a silver-coated copper plate be sensitised in semi-darkness with iodine vapour, exposed to daylight for seconds, and then returned to near darkness for development over heated mercury. The procedure that had promised to fix light upon metal depended on its immediate exclusion. The photograph appeared only within a chamber of fumes. It was an environment more alchemical than rational, closer to laboratory hazard than to revelation.

Talbot's *calotype* introduced the most significant epistemic disturbance: the latent image. A sheet of paper, treated with silver nitrate and gallic acid, recorded an imperceptible trace that only later manifested in the darkroom. The image was not simultaneous with exposure but delayed, invisible, uncertain. In *The Pencil of Nature*, Talbot described this process as "the marvellous property of nature herself to draw her own picture," yet his claim was belied by his own method.³⁸ The "pencil of nature" required an environment of managed obscurity, where the potential image was coaxed into existence through chemical agitation. Knowledge did not arise at the moment of illumination but through a precise choreography of concealment, whose operations this chapter traces. By mid-century, darkness had become infrastructural. Treatises such as Robert Hunt's *Manual of Photography* (1841) and Frederick Scott Archer's instructions for the *wet collodion process* (1851) specified "a room darkened except for a single ruby window".³⁹

³⁸ William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1844), 3.

³⁹ Robert Hunt, *A Manual of Photography* (London: George Knight & Sons, 1841), 28–29. See also: Frederick Scott Archer, "On the Use of Collodion in Photography," *The Chemist* 2 (March 1851): 257–258.

Collodion plates, requiring constant moisture, had to be exposed and developed within minutes, photographers carried portable dark tents into the field.⁴⁰ Darkness became architectural apparatus, it was a calibrated space within which light could be handled without annihilating its trace. The Enlightenment laboratory, designed for exposure and inspection, gave way to a new architectural logic: knowledge conducted under minimal illumination.

The instability of light was registered not only in practice but in discourse. John Herschel, who coined the terms *negative* and *positive*, warned in 1839 of the “fugitive impressions of the sun,” images that darkened into oblivion when left in daylight. Daguerre himself cautioned against “overexposure,” the saturation at which form dissolved. Light, the supposed instrument of clarity, revealed itself as corrosive.⁴¹ The photograph’s success depended on its partial failure: an image too fully illuminated would self-destruct.

The photograph’s temporality, despite its apparent immediacy, especially in relation to painting, revealed itself to be sequential, experimental, and often fragile. Each step risked contamination or collapse. What emerged as the “true” image was the residue of these negotiations, not the manifestation of an ideal form. Chapter 2 investigates the materiality and philosophical consequences of this delay.

⁴⁰ John F. W. Herschel, “Note on the Art of Photography, or The Application of the Chemical Rays of Light to the Purposes of Pictorial Representation,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 129 (1839): 5.

⁴¹ Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Various Processes of the Daguerreotype and the Diorama* (London: J. and H. Mandel, 1839), 12.

The material logic of early photography also complicated the Enlightenment's notion of nature as transparent witness. The image's fidelity depended on substances: silver halides, collodion, mercury vapour that did not behave predictably. Chemical sensitivity varied with humidity and temperature and plates did not respond identically. Nature resisted and decayed rather than obediently imprinting itself. The ideal of objective vision required elaborate mediation: darkrooms, glass plates, fixing agents, exposure charts. Nature's self-image, far from spontaneous, was technologically negotiated.

Even the supposed neutrality of light was structured by hierarchy. Early photographic emulsions, particularly those based on silver halides, were most sensitive to blue and ultraviolet wavelengths. Calibrated and tested predominantly on lighter-skinned subjects, they rendered darker complexions underexposed and indistinct. This imbalance was not the result of deliberate exclusion but of a normative standard embedded in the material design of the medium.⁴² What became "correct" exposure reflected the spectral biases of its development rather than any optical truth. In this way, photography inherited the Enlightenment's visual logic, luminosity equated with legibility, shadow with opacity, translating these hierarchies into chemistry itself. The darkroom praxis leading the investigation of this thesis actively challenges this standard of exposure, as discussed in further sections.

⁴² Lorna Roth, "Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 1 (2009): 111–136.



Figure 5: Shirley Cards



Figure 5 and 6. The original Shirley Card (top), 1978 and the Multiracial Shirley Card, North America. 1995. The original Shirley Card, distributed to photo labs and printers as a universal calibration tool, standardised exposure and colour balance around white skin, embedding a racialised reference value into photographic chemistry. The later multiracial card signals an institutional recognition of this bias, yet also reveals how calibration continues to rely on normative models of legibility.

What photography contributed, therefore, was not simply another technique of control but the exposure of control's conditions. Every image recorded its own instability: uneven development, fogging, streaks, light leaks. These imperfections made the photograph indexical not of nature's transparency but of the indeterminacy of photography and matter itself. In its chemical stains, the medium displayed the labour required to maintain the illusion of illumination.

The Enlightenment's promise that light could speak for reason met its counterexample in silver nitrate's volatility.

This shift from illumination to restraint signals a broader transformation in the politics of seeing. The Enlightenment had sought transparency as the precondition of knowledge. This thesis argues that the processes of photography, and the material engagement required to sustain them, expose visibility as neither fixed nor purely indexical, but profoundly plastic, shaped within the latent space of the darkroom. The photograph's survival required that the image remain partially concealed.

The medium thus established a new epistemic economy: an art and science of delayed revelation. By converting light from metaphor into matter, photography revealed what Enlightenment reason could not admit, that illumination alone produces blindness. The photograph's dependence on partial obscurity, its chemical contingencies, its temporal delays, and its residues of error all testify to a different logic of knowing that treats darkness as condition. In its apparatus, the Enlightenment's dream of a world made transparent collapses into the necessity of its own shadow. This thesis argues, through an analysis of the material practices of the darkroom, that the photographic image is not the culmination of modern vision but its material crisis: light discovering, within itself, the impossibility of absolute clarity.

To think from the darkroom is not simply about rejecting Enlightenment visibility or claiming that light and darkness are equally valid or complementary. It means intervening in a genealogy of light that stretches back to Renaissance perspective and culminates in modernity's obsessive insistence on total exposure.

1.2 Concealment, Opacity, and the Material Presence of Darkness

i. From Dialectics to Material Condition

To move beyond the dialectic of light and darkness in the context of the darkroom, it is crucial to investigate this space not only epistemographically but materially. Such an approach makes it possible to grasp the darkroom's role as generative rather than merely auxiliary to photography understood as an output. Just as unruly photographic processes exposed the fallacy of the Enlightenment ideal of nature imprinting itself through light

upon the photographic surface, the darkness of the darkroom must be rethought outside its neat opposition to illumination. Its materiality demands consideration not as a negation or deficiency of light, but as a condition with its own agency, logic and textures. Redeeming the antithesis is insufficient. The question becomes, rather: what is epistemic darkness when it is no longer conceived as lack, absence, or some primordial state preceding creation through light?

To romanticise darkness as the redeemed antithesis of light would be an analytical trap. Such a gesture merely inverts the hierarchy it seeks to unsettle, turning darkness into the alluring negative of reason: mysterious, sensual, irrational, playful or dangerous. Yet this reversal would remain caught within the same dialectical logic that structures Enlightenment thought is the continual production of meaning through dialectical binary opposition. The danger here is not merely political. As Bernac argues, conceiving the Enlightenment purely as the triumph of reason and instrumental logic obscures how its violence was not a by-product but an integral, pleasurable force of its sensuous economy.

The gaze that classifies also desires: its drive to render the world legible is inseparable from the erotic charge of domination. The taxonomic image: those ordered displays of bodies under inspection, belonged as much to the theatre of voyeurism as to the archive of knowledge. Within this visual economy, the dark subject was not simply represented but staged as spectacle, subjected to an exposure that claimed to enlighten while enacting curiosity-driven, sadistic violation.⁴³

⁴³ Sonia Bernac, "The Book of Meat", *A Bestiary of Distributed Intelligence: Topologies of Fascist Emergence* (London: Royal College of Art, 2025), 36.

In consequence, the task, rather, is to understand darkness and the darkroom as material conditions of practice: not as the negation of illumination but as operative environments and substances in which photography takes form. To create with darkness is to engage its physical, chemical, and epistemic density, to recognise it as substance rather than metaphor. This approach also demands attention to the politics of embodiment: to the histories through which certain bodies and knowledges were rendered dark under the illuminated force of Enlightenment reason, and to how working within darkness might reconfigure that condition as method, unsettling both the common sense of exclusionary logics and the analytical impasses produced by identitarian responses to racialised discourse

ii. Concealment as Generative Structure

This thesis argues that to inhabit darkness as a working condition is to recognise its paradoxical nature: it shelters and conceals as much as it exposes both what is imperceptible and what risks destruction under illumination. Within the darkroom, opacity is not absence but controlled saturation, a space dense with potential and attuned to fragility. What counts as darkness of the darkroom is the faint safelight, calibrated to the threshold of sensitivity, delineating a space in which seeing must be continuously negotiated rather than presumed. This threshold defines an ethics of seeing: the photograph can appear only through the careful maintenance of its concealment.

Darkroom-based photographic practice emphasises the disciplined architecture of darkness: sealed chambers, light traps, and procedural rhythms designed to preserve darkness as the very condition of visibility. What surfaces under red light is a gradual material event of the

darkroom, its emergence dependent on temperature, duration, touch and fragile chemical balance.

The anatomy of this concealment requires closer analysis, whether it is a concealment of something or a concealment *from* something. The work of Jean-François Lyotard becomes helpful in resolving that false opposition. In his work that can be considered an anti-representational manifesto, *Libidinal Economy*, his observation that “who knows not how to hide, knows not how to love” should not be read as psychological or affective claim, but as an ontological one: concealment is what allows intensity, and appearance to endure.⁴⁴ To hide, for Lyotard, is not to refuse revelation but to stage it, to hold the event in tension so that it does not exhaust itself and lose meaning in full disclosure. In this sense, concealment prevents tautology, it operates as a generative force, a procedure that sustains the possibility of meaning.⁴⁵

Within the darkroom, this logic of secrecy should be understood materially. The image does not pre-exist illumination but is composed through the careful sequencing of darkness and light, through gestures that maintain instability rather than resolve it. To overexpose is to annihilate. Therefore, the darkroom becomes a laboratory of *dissimulation*, where visibility is produced, patterned and shaped by the very conditions that withhold it. The notion of *Dissimulation*, for Lyotard, carries no moral charge – it is an operation by which a temporary discursive marking – an appearance – becomes possible.⁴⁶ Every system must “conceal” the radical simultaneity that sustains it to enable meaning’s legibility. Radical, simultaneous

⁴⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 3.

⁴⁵ Lyotard, “Tensor”, *Libidinal Economy*.

⁴⁶ Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 50.

transparency would paradoxically mean the lack of meaningful information. The darkroom enacts this condition materially: visibility is not the revelation of what lies hidden but the effect of the pattern of concealment.

iii. Opacity as Ethics of Relation

If Lyotard exposes concealment as the structural condition through which form and meaning stabilise, Glissant rearticulates that necessity as an ethical stance. In that sense, Glissant's *right to opacity* gains a new meaning.⁴⁷ This should not be read simply as the right to conceal in the face of the modern demand for transparency and total comprehension. Rather, opacity becomes the very condition of making, of allowing form to emerge. To claim opacity is not to withdraw from relation (of light) but to sustain it under conditions of partial visibility. For Glissant, the opaque is that which resists reduction to sameness yet remains active in relation: "relation is not made of transparency but of opacity".⁴⁸ Within the darkroom, this right becomes the ethics of conduct. The photographic process depends upon maintaining space/time that cannot be fully illuminated without destruction. Opacity thus appears not as a metaphor for secrecy but as the procedural ground of visibility itself. The image exists through what it withholds, its legibility depends on its capacity to remain, in part, unexposed.

The image, when it takes form, is never the recovery of what was hidden but the consequence of a choreography that experiments with *the possible* that here signals not potentiality as future realisation but, following Simondon, the metastable field in which

⁴⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.

⁴⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190..

matter and perception co-compose form. For Simondon, perception is “not a recording, but an operation; it prolongs the individuation of the world within the living being, and that of the living being within the world”.⁴⁹ In this sense, perception is not the passive reception of a finalised image but a continuation of the same individuating process through which matter and sense co-emerge. Metastability here denotes a condition of potential transformation, in which multiple tendencies coexist. This framework can be used to think through the photographic process. This suggests that the image does not reproduce a prior reality but participates in its ongoing material formation.

iv. Latency as Continuous Condition

In the test prints for *Ecce Homo* (2023), these processes become materially legible. Uneven exposures, tonal gradients, and partial developments register as documents of the image’s negotiation with its own conditions of emergence. Each print carries the trace of time held in suspension, the duration of its latency inscribed in chemical residue and surface variation. The brush strokes of sensitiser across the paper interrupt the smooth continuity expected of photographic finish, revealing the contingent material choreography that makes the image possible. The photograph is the record of its modulation: the calibrated balance between concealment and partial disclosure.

The practice of the darkroom, particularly the practice that led this thesis, allows for a different reading of latency. Rather than a liminal interval between exposure and image, latency designates a condition in its own right. It should be understood as an operative field

⁴⁹ Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 206.

rather than a passage. The latent image persists in a metastable state in Simondon's sense: a configuration charged with internal tensions and multiple possible resolutions. These potentials demand careful mediation. Once developed, however, the image retains the trace of that delay, its surface records the duration of its own becoming, the time it has taken to appear.

The tests for *Ecce Homo* led to the realisation that the darkroom does not simply precede the image as preparatory stage, but that its latency persists within the image as a continuous metastable condition.

1.3 Topology of Darkness: Skin, Frottage and the End of Representation

i. Practising Darkness: Material Experiments in Conditions of Invisibility

Latency, concealment, and opacity, discussed in the previous section, offer a way to grasp the processes and material darkness of the darkroom as neither auxiliary nor secondary to the final revelation of the image. Rather than a preparatory stage preceding visibility, the darkroom sets up a space filled with darkness, where the conditions of appearance are themselves negotiated. This section, through an analysis of the *Ecce Homo* portrait series,

examines the wider ethical and political consequences of such a shift.



Figure 7. Cole , *Ecce Homo* , 2023, *Hahnemühle Platinum Rag*⁵⁰

⁵⁰ *Ecce Homo* is a series of 20 portraits of Black Trans Men. This process centric project investigated both concepts , form and aesthetics of analogue photography. It exposed literally and metaphorically,

Just as the Enlightenment's dialectic of light and darkness produced specific distributions of power through regimes of visibility, rethinking darkness as an active and generative condition opens the possibility for dark subjects to exist differently within photographic space. The photographs stage the very negotiation between what can appear and what must remain withheld rather than simply depicting bodies under exposure.

Breaking with the understanding of darkness as a singularity, a uniform space defined by the absence of visual information and rethinking it as a generative space of experimentation with its own sensorial strategies results in both a praxis and a body of work in which the photographic surface loses its presumed neutrality. Over decades of photographic practice, this inquiry has explored the possibilities of depicting dark subjects within dark environments, developing an extended material engagement with the procedures of the darkroom. The photographs rarely isolate the figure from its setting. Instead, they cultivate conditions of low contrast and tonal density. The research process involved systematic experimentation with a range of printing papers to test how surface texture mediates tone and visibility.

Among these, Tosa Washi Japanese tissue proved most responsive to the aims of this investigation. When wet, it is both delicate and robust, allowing manipulation during processing without disintegration. Its fibrous surface absorbs chemistry unevenly, softening

those tangible aspects of those normally hidden processes which take place in the wet darkroom. Production, making, and process are frequently overlooked in the work by black queer photographers and these portraits of black trans men addressed this gap by placing process, marks, gestures and mistakes at the centre of the work. As with other black and queer histories, the visual narratives of black trans men, whilst being relatively rare in the context of the UK, also tend not to attempt to uncover a myriad of experiences and complex, nuanced representations. These misleading visual histories and one dimensional representation deny the visibility of black trans people, especially black trans men who are African, Caribbean, and black British. This work in progress seeks to represent black trans men on their own terms, and to photograph pioneers, movers, shakers, prominent and ordinary black trans men.

tonal transitions and diffusing the boundary between figure and ground. Printed on this paper, works such as *The Sensual Chorus of Gestures* invite a mode of looking that resists conventional hierarchies of clarity. The viewer must adjust to a low-exposure environment in which the eye learns to navigate minute shifts in texture, quiet changes in reflexivity, and surfaces that almost entirely absorb light, directing attention toward the surface as the locus of material and perceptual negotiation.

In this sense, the resulting images restage the perceptual conditions of their own formation. The gaze slows and adjusts, acquiring a tactile quality as it moves through a space where visibility is never immediate nor complete. Texture thus functions as a structural principle, linking the depicted people, chemical surface of the print, the embodied labour of the darkroom, and the sensory engagement of the viewer. Darkness here is not a theme but a methodological condition: a sustained, procedural encounter through which visibility is materially produced rather than conceptually represented.

In *Some of Portraits and Nudes* (2020), this textural enquiry extends into the use of props whose tonal qualities are indistinguishable from those of the depicted bodies. Latex, leather, black feathers, lace, and skin occupy the same register of saturation and contrast, forcing the eye to differentiate between various forms and textures of darkness itself. This compositional strategy shifts the terms of visibility: the viewer must work within darkness rather than against it, discerning through proximity and subtle differences of texture rather than illumination.



Figure 8. Umbrella, (self-portrait), Platinum Print, 20 x 20 Inches , *Hahnemühle Platinum Rag* , 2023

The politics of seeing negotiated and proposed through this approach casts the photographed subjects in a different shade, literally and conceptually. This darkness-driven work, for which the investigation of blackness is integral, approaches blackness not through the representation of tropes, requisites, or conventions tied to Blackness and its colonial histories, but through a departure from what is already visible. Instead, it is explored through the experimental manipulation of darkness as material and condition. The subjects, all dark and in the dark, resist the extractive logic of illumination. They do not appear as captured objects of the camera's gaze but as participants in choreographed configurations with props and materials. At times, they evoke still lifes composed into sensuous forms: faces unseen, bodies contorted, at others, portraits in which the distinction between form and flesh, texture and tone, collapses into ambiguity. In doing so, the images articulate blackness not as a given external category to be depicted, but as a practice of opacity, an enacted, sensuous engagement with the limits of visibility.



Figure 9. The Archivist , 2025 , 10 x 8 inches , Hahnemühle Platinum Rag,

Crucially, this photographic investigation does not shy away from violence or from the risk of semantic contamination. The dark objects: props and fabrics, are not chosen arbitrarily for their textural appeal but are also composed through conflicting semantic associations that exploit tensions between traditionally understood masculinity and femininity, the contemporary and the vintage, the trivial and the serious, the luxurious and the abject. In the series, sharp stilettos appear beside tickling feathers, symbols of domination are countered by gestures of tenderness. The costumes sustain this deliberate eclecticism: handcuffs that could be recalling histories or contemporary practices of enslavement reveal themselves as jewellery, leather belts that suggest involuntary restraint are revealed as BDSM harnesses. In one image, a figure wearing a beaked mask, recalling both the seventeenth-century plague doctor and the contemporary bondage hood, gently holds a cluster of fragile eggs close to the body.



Figure 10. Crow Bird Boy, 2022

The semantic field of these compositions revolves around exploitation and violence yet resists closure. Meaning circulates through contradiction and betrayal, seriousness and beauty coexist with humour. Objects refuse the fixity of their usual associations and representation, establishing an experimental field where symbolic or structural forms of

meaning production are destabilised by sensuous logics. The quality of darkness becomes a strategy of a semantic system of an artwork resisting symbolical clarity and closure.

It could be said that the meaning is queered. Yet queerness here is not an aesthetic of identity or the performance of what is associated with the queer, but what Golding calls an onto-sensate logic: a mode of thinking that folds the erotic, the material, and the epistemic into one another without recourse to transcendental categories. In *Ecce Homo*, *Eros & Ontology in the Age of Incompleteness and Entanglement* (2014), a text referenced by the *Ecce Homo* photographic series, Golding describes queerness as that which “refuses to ‘fit in’ to an Absolute Universal Truth or pure ontological given,” operating instead through “messy, dirty logics of difference and decay”.⁵¹ In this sense, the queering of meaning in these photographs does not emerge through representation but through the conditions of openness that govern their material production.

The darkroom’s material darkness and the textured opacity of the prints enact such a queer ontology that unsettles the purity of light and the clarity of form and meaning, operating within what Golding names the *groundless grounds of one’s humanity*: the present negotiated by coexistence of “acne and smells, vitality, anger, cruelty, joy, weakness, intelligence, stupidity and temptation”.⁵² The darkness is a practice of sense-making that resists the dialectical compulsion to resolve contradiction. The photographic surface itself becomes a queer site of thought, inviting new connections and contaminations, keeping the work sensuously, and politically alive.

⁵¹ Johnny Golding, “Ecce Homo - sexual, Eros & Ontology in the Age of Incompleteness and Entanglement,” in *Ecce Homo: The Wound of Love*, ed. Ajamu X and Campbell X (London: Autograph ABP, 2014), n.p.

⁵² Ibid.

ii. Frottage as Method: Friction, Touch, and Emergence of Sense

The tensions between violence and materiality that emerge in this practice, where the queer and the black are figured through conflicting semantic and sensorial logics, find a critical analogue in the work of Keguro Macharia. In *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora*, Macharia proposes *frottage* as a methodological response to the limits of how blackness has been theorised. He argues that approaches to the black diaspora often rely on the visual or linguistic legibility of identity, treating blackness as something that can be unambiguously represented, or translated into knowledge.⁵³ Such frameworks risk reinstating the epistemic logic of colonial and sexological regimes, which sought to render blackness and queerness intelligible through taxonomies of race and the pathologisation of desire, making visibility itself a tool of governance.

By appropriating the term *frottage* from erotic practice and the visual arts, Macharia articulates a mode of thinking that insists on the material and frictional dimensions of sense-making in the present, while resisting any gesture that would relativise the trauma of the past. In its erotic sense, *frottage* names the rubbing of bodies against one another, in its artistic sense, it refers to a technique of rubbing over textured surfaces to produce an indexical trace through touch. Macharia reworks this double meaning to describe how blackness itself emerges through material and historical trace, through the enforced proximities of the Atlantic slave trade and the continued frictions of diasporic life. “Bodies against each other; bodies against the ship; writing implements against ledgers,” he writes,

⁵³ Keguro Macharia, *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy across the Black Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 3–5.

evoking the ways in which blackness was inscribed, felt, and transmitted through violent intimacies.⁵⁴

From this starting point, *frottage* becomes a critical practice for apprehending the ongoing frictions that constitute black life. It describes how blackness continues to take form through proximity, irritation, repetition, and the enforced intimacies of belonging imposed by violence: “bodies rubbing along and against bodies, histories rubbing along and against histories”. In *The Sensuous Chorus of Gestures*, this ambiguity of touch is grasped through images in which bodies are sutured into a shared topology. The gestures oscillate between intimacy and subtlety, yet can also read as insistent, uncomfortable, or even non-consensual. The work moves between tenderness and violation, between the care embedded in an intimate gesture and the sense of bodies pressed into a de-individuated, conjoined whole. The rubbing of bodies against each other investigates the power of proximity in meaning-making: the emergence of unexpected semantic intimacies, frictions, and betrayals.

⁵⁴ Macharia, *Frottage*, 2.



Figure 11. *A Sensual Chorus of Gestures VI*, 2024



Figure 12. *A Sensual Chorus of Gestures XVI*, 2024

Through these persistent frictions, blackness appears as both the residue and renewal of history, an emergence that carries its past within the texture of the present. It is through these physical and historical rubbings that blackness takes form. This double condition marks both its trauma and its possibility: the intergenerational persistence of violence rendered palpable in the present, and the capacity to treat blackness, darkness, as a generative category whose meaning remains accessible and malleable rather than reenacted. Macharia's argument thus shifts the question of blackness from representation to generation, from what can be seen or narrated to what is materially felt, transmitted, and continually re-formed.

The queer dimension of *frottage* arises in this reorientation. By aligning epistemology with touch, pleasure, and the sensuous encounter, Macharia frames blackness as a site of relational, erotic possibility and curiosity that resists the normative demands of clarity or coherence. Queerness, in this sense, is not separate to blackness but emerges within the same frictive conditions.

This reframing bears directly on the material practices of darkness. Like Macharia's *frottage*, the darkroom privileges material attentiveness, embodiment and approaches time as material. Both *frottage* and the photographic process operate within conditions that are not devoid of violence, where every gesture carries the possibility of irreversible obliteration. Each produces a material, indexical trace – a record that claims to reveal its source yet can only ever register its imprint. A photograph of a body asserts presence but delivers only a surface impression; *frottage*, likewise, forces a drawing onto a textured ground that appears

to show what lies beneath but can render only the evidence of an indexical mark- an imprint. *Frottage* and photographic darkness therefore share a methodological ground in material relation, where visibility is always fragmentary, and where meaning arises from the tension it establishes with loss.

To think the darkroom through *frottage*, as proposed in this thesis, is to acknowledge that intelligibility itself is a form of rubbing, where different forms of matter or sensorial regimes touch. The photographic surface, tactile and contingent, functions as a record of such frictional intimacy. Within this framework, blackness and queerness cease to operate as representational categories and instead emerge as material operations: practices of touch that reconfigure both the meaning and the limits of visibility.

iii. Topologies of Darkness: the Photographic Surface

The space and time of the darkroom is proposed here as part of the anti-representational turn within materialist philosophies of surface, which understand the ontological complexity as arising through continuous material processes of transformation and emergence rather than through psychoanalytical stratification, forms of metaphysical splits or structuralist semantic tensions and productions. This thesis therefore reconsiders the darkroom as part of the photographic surface in this broader ontological sense, as a surface with thickness in Lyotard's terms: not a passive support for representation, but a dynamic formation, within which matter and sense are continuously reconfigured. This "thickness" here means the dynamic capacity of the surface to generate difference within itself, to sustain transformation without recourse to any underlying depth or origin.

In *Libidinal Economy*, Lyotard describes the being as the “libidinal band”: a single, continuous surface of intensities through which matter is perpetually transformed. The libidinal here does not denote the sexual alone but the sensate, embodied, and affective processes through which sense itself is produced.⁵⁵ The band, figured by Lyotard as a skin, possesses neither depth nor exteriority. It is genesis conceived topologically, as a continuous dynamic field in which meaning, form, value, and sensation are coextensive and in constant transformation. It means that matter does not derive its meaning from an external source, nor does it possess inherent meaning. Rather, it participates in processes through which sense emerges immanently from material interaction, of which semantic tensions are a part. The libidinal band constitutes the emergent *is* of being: the continual material process through and within which all sensing and sense-making takes place.

As laid out in *Libidinal Economy*, when this surface cools, the movements of intensity condense into structured forms, or what Lyotard calls *dispositifs*: libidinal investments of knowledge, power, and representation that momentarily stabilise the field. In this sense, the photographic surface, of which the darkroom forms an active part, can be read not as a neutral site of development but as an extension of the libidinal band itself: a sensuous thickness within which subjects, matter, light, and gesture continuously rub against one another. Here, perception and chemical process, flesh and emulsion, semantic and physical tensions are folded into a single skin of material negotiation, where each photograph emerges as a temporary *dispositif*, a cooled trace of the intensities that have passed across it.

⁵⁵ Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 3–5.

In this configuration, darkness can be understood as a topological (photographic) surface – a continuous field in which visibility, matter, and sense are locally folded rather than hierarchically ordered. This surface is neither metaphorical nor strictly visual. It describes the operational space where touch and latency act as formative forces. The darkroom and the photograph occupy–form the same topology: both sustain tension between concealment and revelation, stability and transformation. Like Lyotard’s libidinal band, this surface thickens through friction; like Macharia’s *frottage*, it generates meaning through contact rather than representation; and like Golding’s onto-sensate logic, it sustains contradiction as the condition of intelligibility.

The topology of darkness can therefore be understood as a kind of dark skin – an active interface through which material, optical, and ethical processes continually fold into one another. Darkness in this research and practice, then, is not what envelops the image from without but what dynamically constitutes its very structure – a dynamic space where material, ethical, and sensorial processes take place. To work within darkness is to operate within this (dark) surface: to participate in its topology through which the photographic image takes form.

Chapter 1 reconceived darkness as a material and epistemic condition of photographic practice rather than the simple opposite of light or a representational category. It traced how Enlightenment optics and colonial regimes of visibility aligned illumination with reason, virtue, and whiteness, and how photography both inherited and materially unsettled this order. Through Lyotard, Glissant, Simondon, Macharia, Golding, and a practice-led analysis of the photographic series, the chapter repositioned the darkroom,

understood in its expanded sense as a space of darkness, as a libidinal, topological surface in which concealment, opacity, latency, blackness, and queerness act as modes of sense-making. Darkness emerged as a generative environment that reorganises the very conditions within which meaning takes form, shaping how bodies, images, and histories touch. The next chapter shifts to the temporal dimension of this material darkness, examining delay and tactile time.

CHAPTER 2 - Exposure: Delay and the Tactile Time of the Darkroom

"Materials are not allowed to be vagabond, dirty or contagious, they are used to think about or to think with."⁵⁶

' We need to unmake our methodological habits , including : the desire for certainty ;the expectation that we can usually arrive at more or less stable conclusions about the way things are"⁵⁷

Introduction

This chapter amplifies upon a series of interrelated themes , which emerges from a persistent question which has reappeared throughout the production of work in the darkroom: How, and in what ways, notions of delay and tactile time, which are always part of the photographic act, *make matter* in the wet darkroom. It proposes that delay is intimately entwined within photographic process and production, yet by reframing delay not as error but as a site of potentiality, alternative insights into process and production can be generated in the making of photographic work.

Drawing on Kris Belden-Adams's *Photography and Failure: One Medium's Entanglement with Flops, Underdogs, and Disappointments*, the chapter recognises that

"any history focused exclusively on success inherently omits, neglects, and/or overlooks certain practices, practitioners, or institutions that may (or may not) make important contributions to the overall narrative."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Petra Lange-Berndt, ed., *Materiality: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 13.

⁵⁷ John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 9.

⁵⁸ Kris Belden-Adams's *Photography and Failure: One Medium's Entanglement with Flops, Underdogs, and Disappointments*, 2.

Delay, as defined in this chapter, refers to moments when any aspect of the photographic process ruptures, or to put it another way, when materials become wayward⁵⁹.

By drawing on thinkers including Barad, Bennett, Bataille, and Glissant, the chapter grapples with how delay, through the lenses of indeterminacy, dust and dirt, and improvisation, opens up new perspectives on process and production. These material deviations and chemical fractures move beyond binary conceptions of failure (good versus bad, mastery versus lack of control). The chapter therefore makes the claim that delay constitutes a form of anti-teleology, which subverts the idea that the final outcome of darkroom work is typically the final print.

Finally, the chapter considers the traditional darkroom as a controlled environment in which chemicals and images develop under strict conditions of timing, temperature, and regulated bodily movement. Material waywardness disrupts these normative practices through failure, contamination, mistakes, flaws, and imperfections. Delay, therefore, can be seen, and more importantly sensed and felt, against multiple normative frameworks.

2.1 Delay

This section interrogates delay as a form of material agency that disrupts normative processes within the darkroom. It draws on theoretical frameworks that position matter as

⁵⁹ This notion of materials being wayward draws on Saidiya Hartman's *waywardness* in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* frames improvisation, refusal, and the creation of possibility under constraint. Waywardness entails navigating uncertainty and emerging conditions rather than following prescribed paths. In the wet darkroom, this concept resonates: delays, chemical unpredictability, and the capricious behaviour of materials require practitioners to improvise, respond, and negotiate outcomes in real time. Just as Hartman's subjects produce new possibilities by engaging with restrictive social structures, darkroom practitioners co-create with materials, where hesitation, unplanned events, and failure are not deficiencies but productive forces that shape the emergence of photographic knowledge.

active rather than passive. Jane Bennett's claim in *Vibrant Matter* that materials possess vitality provides an initial point of entry into this discussion. Karen Barad extends this position in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* by rejecting conceptions of matter as inert and developing the notion of intra-action, through which materials and phenomena co-emerge. Barad's assertion that "matter is not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency" offers crucial grounding for analysing how darkroom materials exceed human intention and control.

Building on this understanding, delay is approached as a form of transgression. Drawing on Georges Bataille's account of heterogeneous matter, matter that resists conceptual domestication, this analysis recognises that material unpredictability as forms of excess that challenge the disciplined order of darkroom practice. Bataille's claim that matter eludes taming provides a critical framework for understanding darkroom materials that behave erratically or unexpectedly. Édouard Glissant's opacity further complements this approach by affirming the value of incompleteness, irreducibility, and the right not to be fully known. His work supports an understanding of delay as a productive interruption rather than a deficit.

The discussion then turns to what occurs before the photographic image emerges. Traditional darkroom practice is often associated with mastery and precision, yet this research contests the assumption that photographers maintain full control over their materials. Instead, it proposes a theoretical reframing in which materials exercise agency alongside the practitioner. Delay is interpreted as the underside of the photographic act, revealing aspects of process that remain invisible in the final print.

By situating delay as inherent rather than accidental, this framework demonstrates how dust, dirt, and other disruptions expand the field of photographic meaning.

Delay is also understood as a sensual and embodied experience, drawing attention back to the photographer's body in contact with materials. Through this lens, the darkroom becomes a site of experimentation and embodied curiosity rather than a site governed solely by precision. The remaining sections of the chapter therefore interrogates forms of delay through three interconnected themes: indeterminacy, dust and dirt, and unruly improvisation.

The analysis next addresses the darkroom as a space structured by temporal uncertainty. Unlike the instantaneous exposure of a camera's shutter, darkroom printing unfolds over a duration whose exact boundaries remain unknown until the image appears in the developer. This F constitutes a defining feature of analogue photographic practice. As scholarship on photographic temporality suggests, photography engages with "deferred temporality," where meaning emerges through prolonged material interaction rather than immediate capture.



Fig 13 Courtney McFarland, 2018, Salt Print 2018, Arches Platine

Figure 13 Spotting working prints illustrate this indeterminacy in practice. Before exposing a full sheet of paper, printers produce graduated test exposures to identify suitable

exposure time.⁶⁰ These procedures reveal the impossibility of predicting how light, chemistry, and paper interact. The test strip functions not only as a measuring tool but also as evidence of measurement's limits.

This unpredictability arises from the variability of chemical processes. Temperature shifts alter development rates; paper emulsions change as they age; chemistry depletes through use; and environmental factors such as humidity, water quality, and safelight conditions introduce further deviations. These variables demonstrate what Karen Fackler describes as "material entanglement," wherein human and non-human agencies intersect. Photographic outcomes depend on the interplay of intention and material behaviour, rather than unilateral human control.

Bennett's concept of "thing-power" further illuminates this relationship. Materials such as silver halides, gelatin emulsions, and chemical solutions act according to their own propensities, and the time required for development constitutes the temporal space in which these propensities manifest. Barad's notion of intra-action⁶¹ offers a complementary framework, positioning the photographic image as the outcome of entangled agencies, chemical, environmental, and human, rather than the execution of a pre-determined plan.

This relational dynamic can be understood as a form of collaboration or co-authorship with indeterminate outcomes. Although Roland Barthes questions stable notions of authorship,

⁶⁰ It is the researchers future intention to examine test strips/working prints as material artifacts in their own right of analogue decision-making and how these can document the photographer's working process and aesthetic judgment.

⁶¹ See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Barad introduces "intra-action" to describe how entities do not precede their relations but emerge through their mutual entanglement, challenging the notion of independent agents interacting.

⁶²Michel Foucault later argues that the author function continues to organise meaning even when intention is decentralised.⁶³ Applied to darkroom practice, this suggests that the photographer's role persists but in dialogue with material and sensory forces.

Sensory studies of photography, including Elizabeth Edwards's concept of the "sensory photograph," offer further insight. Darkroom practice involves multiple sensory registers, the smell of chemicals, the feel of wet paper, the warmth or coolness of solutions, the sound of running water, and the subtle visual shifts as images emerge. These sensory encounters shape the experience of delay, transforming waiting into an active mode of material engagement.

Drawing on new materialist perspectives⁶⁴, delay reframed not as an obstacle but as a condition of possibility. Test strips, working prints, and incremental adjustments become practices of negotiation rather than control. Jane Vuorinen's articulation of "agential separability" is particularly relevant here: the photographer distinguishes themselves from the materials they work with, yet remains entangled with them. The final print thus bears

⁶² See "Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,'" in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–148. Barthes argues that the author's intentions should not dictate textual meaning; instead, meaning emerges through the reader's engagement, decentering singular authorship and emphasizing interpretation as collaborative and generative.

⁶³ See Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101–120. Foucault explores the "author-function" as a constructed category that regulates discourse, questioning singular authorship and examining how texts circulate through multiple voices, institutional frameworks, and interpretive contexts that collectively shape meaning.

⁶⁴ This research draws on new materialist theory to reframe the darkroom in relation to its own materiality and material agency. Rather than positioning the photographer as sole author manipulating inert materials, a new materialist approach recognizes the active participation of chemistry, paper, light, and time in co-producing photographic outcomes. See the following: Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University Press (2010); Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, Open Humanities Press (2012)

traces of these negotiations, representing what Barad calls “material-discursive practices” in which matter and meaning are inseparable.

Delay in darkroom printing therefore ‘represents’ more than waiting; it constitutes the temporal structure through which photographer and materials interact. Darkroom outcomes can therefore remain uncertain because chemical, physical, and environmental agencies continue to act on their own terms. Recognising this complexity aligns with Bennett’s view that acknowledging material agency encourages a more expansive understanding of causality and responsibility.

This conceptualisation inhabits delay not as a technical deficiency but as a main characteristic of the wet darkroom, the variability of materials, the unpredictability of chemical processes, and the instability of duration are not failures but intrinsic features of the medium. Additionally to this line of argument, taking delay as a form of indeterminacy, refers to the inherent unpredictability of wet analogue processes and the impossibility of complete control over how chemicals interact with paper or how materials behave in darkroom time. Chemicals possess their own temporalities; paper changes its consistency (dry to wet to dry) and responds variably; and wet processes unfold between intention and material actuality. Indeterminacy therefore enables materials as collaborators with the researcher’s body process and production.

This recognition also acknowledges how chance plays a central role within this framework, introducing variations that exceed planning and control. Rather than treating these variations as obstacles, this research positions them as indicators of material agency. If indeterminacy is fundamental to photographic practice, then the final print emerges not as

the fulfilment of intention alone but as the result of complex engagements between human and non-human forces.

2.2 Delay as Transgression

"A transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it."⁶⁵

This section approaches delay from a different angle, treating it not as something to be removed but as a lens through which to understand photographic process and production.

In the darkroom, delay is not merely a technical failure or inefficiency to be overcome.

Rather, it functions as a generative condition that exposes the tensions, materialities, and temporal structures inherent in image-making. To attend to delay is to focus on what is normally overlooked: the waiting, the hesitation, and the moments when nothing appears to happen, yet everything is at stake.

Drawing on Bataille's concept of transgression, delay can be understood not as the absence of action but as an active violation of normative photographic practices. For Bataille, transgression does not destroy boundaries but reveals and intensifies them through the act of crossing.

Similarly, in the darkroom, delay interrupts the smooth passage from latent image to fixed print, revealing the temporal assumptions that underpin practice, including expectations of efficiency, productivity, and the prioritization of results over process.

Delay operates as unproductive time, existing outside the logic of photographic labor. In cultures organized around efficiency, such unproductive time is often perceived as waste or

⁶⁵ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 49.

failure. Yet it is precisely this unproductivity that renders delay transgressive. In practice, delay manifests as the seconds after submerging paper when no visible change occurs, the extended development that risks overexposure, hesitation before immersion in a stop bath, or the observation of chemistry as it exhausts itself. These intervals resist incorporation into the linear flow of production, making them excessive yet revealing.

Furthermore, delay fractures the presumed continuity of photographic processes, which conventionally proceed linearly through exposure, development, stop, fix, wash, and drying.

Time is often assumed homogeneous, divisible, and equivalent across stages. Delay introduces discontinuity, creating gaps and moments when the process stalls or diverges.

These ruptures are not merely technical problems but ontological conditions that expose photography's reliance on temporally constructed structures rather than inevitable natural laws

Bataille's distinction between homogeneous and heterogeneous time illuminates this tension. Homogeneous time is measurable, calculated, and equivalent, whereas heterogeneous time is variable, resistant to measurement, and marked by intensity rather than duration. In the darkroom, practitioners negotiate both temporalities. They adhere to prescribed timing while simultaneously attending to the heterogeneous temporality of chemical action and the unpredictable emergence of the image. Delay intensifies this tension, generating friction that produces new possibilities and ways of attending to the image's becoming.

Delay also situates the practitioner at the threshold between production and non-production, between the emergence of the image and its potential dissolution. This threshold exemplifies Bataille's concept of the "limit experience,"⁶⁶ which occurs at the boundary of what is possible or knowable. Every moment of delay poses uncertainty: will the print emerge or collapse? Chemistry behaves unpredictably, environmental conditions fluctuate, and materials resist control. Development both actualizes potential and threatens dissolution, making the latent image's vulnerability palpable.

Bataille's notion of formlessness, or *l'informe*, further clarifies the relationship between delay and darkroom materiality. Formlessness undermines categories, destabilizes hierarchies, and declassifies matter, acting as both a creative and destructive force. Darkroom chemicals, including developer, stop bath, and the fixer. They reveal latent images while simultaneously threatening to dissolve them. Practitioners navigate the narrow margins between formation and destruction through bodily engagement, sensing the texture of wet paper, tonal subtleties, and the passage of time through proprioception and attention.

This base materiality situates darkroom practice within viscous, toxic, and olfactorily intense substances that resist idealization. Developer stains, fixer emits sulfurous odors, and stop bath irritates if mishandled. These characteristics are essential to the medium and extend beyond incidental nuisances. Delay prolongs contact between paper and chemistry, saturating fibers and softening emulsions, leaving traces of immersion that are both

⁶⁶ Bataille's notion of limit experience is useful here as it designates intense moments that dissolve selfhood, rational boundaries and includes experiences of transgression, eroticism, ecstasy, or horror that expose the impossibility and continuity underlying existence. This framing is useful in order to complicate being in and with the darkroom. See Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: SUNY Press), 1988.

chemical and symbolic. Consequently, the wet darkroom becomes a site in which human intention negotiates with material resistance, highlighting photography as a process of temporary stabilization rather than absolute mastery.

Dust and dirt further extend this argument. These material intrusions disrupt conventional notions of productivity, introducing slowness, obstruction, and repetition. They reveal what is normally excluded: failure, mess, and unpredictability. Following Bill Brown's "thing theory,"⁶⁷ dust and dirt emerge as objects demanding attention precisely when they disrupt smooth functioning. Delay creates conditions for their recognition, drawing the practitioner's awareness to the material ecology of the darkroom and to the interactions between human and nonhuman agency.

Ultimately, delay, understood as transgression and excess, can open a space for attending to the normally overlooked dimensions of photographic practice. It cultivates heightened attentiveness, facilitates negotiation with materials, and situates the practitioner within the process rather than outside it. To embrace delay is to value duration over efficiency, to recognize waiting as productive, and to acknowledge mess and failure as essential aspects of making. The darkroom thus emerges as a site where human intention intersects with material resistance and where images arise not from mastery but from ongoing negotiation with forces beyond control.

⁶⁷ Bill Brown's "thing theory" distinguishes between objects and how items function transparently in everyday use; he makes the claim that objects cease working smoothly, revealing themselves through breakdown or interruption. Things emerge when materiality becomes conspicuous, exposing networks of production and meaning that ordinarily remain invisible, transforming subject-object relations. See Bill Brown, ed., *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). See also Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 163–86.

2.3 Unruly Improv

“ Staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present ...entwined in a myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings”⁶⁸

Following the discussion of delay as transgression, this section examines improvisation as a theoretical framework that emerges directly from the material and temporal contingencies of darkroom practice. Improvisation is inseparable from moments when materials resist expectation or outcomes remain uncertain. In these circumstances, improvisation becomes necessary, enabling the photographer to respond productively to emergent conditions rather than treating deviations as mere failures. Improvisation shifts focus from the final print to the unfolding process itself. In analogue photography, where the endpoint is often assumed to be the completed image, improvisation foregrounds adjustments and decisions made in real time. Photographers respond to variations in timing, temperature, exposure, and chemical development, producing interventions that are contingent, emergent, and materially informed.

This improvisational approach subverts normative darkroom practices. Standard procedures provide guidance, yet actual practice consistently involves deviation and adaptation.

Photographers do not merely follow rules; they engage with the specificities of each moment, reading materials, chemicals, and environmental conditions to determine subsequent steps.

⁶⁸ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, 2016, 1.

In doing so, improvisation reveals the contingent and relational nature of darkroom practice, linking directly to previous discussions of indeterminacy and delay. Moreover, improvisation embraces unexpected outcomes, chemical accidents, or “mistakes” as productive. Rather than discarding these events, the practitioner works with emergent materials, allowing them to guide decision-making. This reframing of error as integral to process aligns with the earlier conceptualisation of dust, dirt, and delay as co-creative forces.

Barad’s framework of intra-action further illuminates this dynamic, showing that human and non-human agencies co-constitute outcomes. Improvisation acknowledges this co-constitution: the photographer does not act upon passive materials but enters into exchanges with agencies possessing their own tendencies. Outcomes emerge through interaction rather than pre-determined intention, reinforcing the chapter’s emphasis on delay, material agency, and unpredictability.

Bodily memory and tacit knowledge play a crucial role in improvisational practice. Repeated engagement with material, gestures,⁶⁹ timing, and sensory attunement, enables nuanced responses to indeterminacy. These somatic dimensions, often undertheorised, constitute essential aspects of improvisational competence. Consequently, unruly improvisation reconfigures authority in the darkroom. Skill and knowledge remain important, but expertise is framed as attunement to material tendencies, limits, and affordances rather than unilateral control. Improvisation occurs in the spaces between intention and outcome,

⁶⁹ The definition of gesture, this research draws on is by Vilém Flusser who defines a gesture as “a movement of the body or of a tool attached to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation.” in Flusser, Vilém. *Gestures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. This research also wants to expand the notion of gestures whether it is by hand making coating the chemicals on paper for the platinum print or unique gestures of the brush strokes on the paper. These different forms of gestures may be termed exquisite See Nicky Coutts and Henry Rogers, eds. *Queereal Secretions: Artistic Research as Exquisite Practice*. Glasgow: Article Press, 2023.

between control and surprise, positioning the darkroom as a site of responsive, embodied, and materially-informed creativity. By linking improvisation to earlier discussions of delay and material agency, this section sets the stage for exploring how temporal experience, which is named as tactile time, creates a structure for these practices, emphasizing the relational and sensory dimensions of wet photographic knowledge.

2.4 Tactile Time

“The material body is center and central. The Body is the ground of thought”⁷⁰

“If a revolt is to come, it will have to come from the five senses”⁷¹

Building on the prior discussion of improvisation, this section introduces tactile time as a framework for understanding the temporal and sensory experience of darkroom practice. Whereas technical manuals dictate precise intervals for processing film or printing, tactile time emerges from the lived experience of waiting, handling, and interacting with materials in the darkroom. Tactile time exists alongside chronological time, and simultaneously complicates it. emphasizing that duration in the darkroom is always negotiated through bodily engagement with substances that possess their own rhythms, resistances, and agencies.

Bergson's concept of *durée* provides the philosophical foundation for understanding tactile time. He distinguishes between scientific time which is conceived as a spatial juxtaposition

⁷⁰ Gloria, E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Edited by Analouse Keating, Duke University Press, 5

⁷¹ Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. Francis Cowper (Paris, New York: Flammarion, 1995), 71.

of instants and lived temporal experience, where time actually happens and causes everything to happen⁷² In the darkroom, this distinction becomes materially palpable. Duration cannot be broken into separate moments; it is an inherently continuous and interconnected process where parts of time interpenetrate rather than exist separately side by side.⁷³ The researcher experiences this as the image slowly emerges in the developer tray and each moment contains the accumulated memory of all preceding moments, creating what Bergson describes as a qualitative continuum of "lasting through" as experienced by consciousness, distinct from the objectified quantitative multiplicity measured by mechanical clocks.⁷⁴

This temporal complexity manifests physically through the hands. The duration of development cannot be accurately measured by timer alone; it must be felt through the resistance of paper as it's lifted from the bath, sensed in the subtle temperature shifts between chemical solutions, intuited through the visual transformation happening beneath the surface of the liquid. Intelligence masks the flow of time by conceiving it as instants on a line, yet the mind remains capable of apprehending universal becoming when it moves beyond this spatialized conception⁷⁵ In darkroom practice, the practitioner's attention oscillates between clock time, the objective measurement that ensures repeatability and experiential duration that feels the quality of chemical transformation that guides responsive intervention.

⁷² For Bergson's distinction is made between *durée* and spatialised time, see Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1910), pp. 75-104.

⁷³ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p. 101.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-110.

⁷⁵ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 128.

In agreement with Rosmarie Waldrop, which it can be argued speaks to tactile time, she states

“The Body says “I’ all by itself”⁷⁶

In the darkroom, this manifests in temperature differentials in chemical baths, the weight of wet paper, and the olfactory presence of developer and fixer. Understanding development time requires sensory engagement, not just timers or instructions. The coldness of the stop bath against fingertips, the particular viscosity of exhausted developer versus fresh solution, the way paper curls differently depending on its moisture content and temperature, these sensual tactile cues become temporal markers, indicating where in the developmental process the image exists.

Michel Serres' philosophy of mingled bodies places skin at the center of knowledge, describing it as the site where

"the world and my body touch each other, the feeling and the felt, defining their common edge"⁷⁷

The skin functions as a topological meeting point where sensations of life occur, a milieu through which the world and body mingle together.⁷⁸ In the darkroom, this mingling becomes explicit: chemical vapors contact the mucous membranes of the nose and throat, liquids coat the skin of hands and forearms, the temperature of solutions radiates through touch. As Serres observes, the sense organs appear on the skin where it is soft, fine, and

⁷⁶ Waldrop, Rosmarie, *Grid Box* in *A Convergence of Birds*, edited by Safran Foer, Penguin Books, 2001, 182.

⁷⁷ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 80.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

ultra-receptive; the body radiates wisdom and should not become a statue or tomb.⁷⁹ The darkroom practitioner's body becomes inscribed with the traces of practice—callouses from handling paper edges, chemical stains on fingernails, the particular posture developed from hours standing at the enlarger.

Karen Barad's reconceptualization of touch further expands this view: touching is what matter does, not just what the human practitioner performs⁸⁰ Silver halides "touch" light, developer "touches" grains, and paper "touches" liquids.

The practitioner's touch becomes one among many in a network of material interactions that constitutes the photographic process. This extends the earlier discussions of delay and improvisation, situating human action within a broader ecology of entangled agencies.

Touch, in this framework, is not a unidirectional imposition of human will upon passive matter but a reciprocal encounter where all participants are mutually affected.

Keguro Macharia's concept of frottage, is another way to engage with time , they allude to the practice of rubbing against and with other bodies, this offers a compelling metaphor for darkroom practice⁸¹ Just as Macharia uses frottage as both metaphor and method to explore intimacy and vulnerability, the darkroom practitioner engages in continuous frottage with materials: fingers rubbing against the texture of paper to assess its thickness and finish, hands agitating trays in rhythmic motions that ensure even development, bodies leaning against counters as weight shifts during long printing sessions. This rubbing

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸⁰ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 152-185. See also Karen Barad, "On Touching: The Inhuman That Therefore I Am," in *Power of Material / Politics of Materiality*, eds. Susanne Witzgall and Kerstin Stakemeier (Zurich: diaphanes, 2014), 153-164.

⁸¹ For Macharia's conceptualisation of frottage as theoretical and experiential practice, see Keguro Macharia, *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

together generates knowledge that cannot be articulated verbally, however it is sensed and felt.

Philosophical insights from Bergson and Deleuze provide further grounding. Bergson's *durée* emphasizes that no two moments can be identical, for one always contains the memory left by the other; consciousness itself equals this continuous growth of memory.⁸² In the darkroom, tactile time combines chronological measurement (Chronos) with experiential waiting (Aion), producing intervals in which duration is qualitatively felt rather than calculated. The practitioner learns to sense when a print has developed adequately not through rigid adherence to prescribed times but through accumulated experience, the visual memory of how an image should appear at various stages, the embodied knowledge of how long "two minutes" actually feels when standing in the darkroom's temporal suspension.

Deleuze's distinction between Chronos and Aion aligns tactile time and experience with the anticipatory emergence of the latent image, connecting sensory engagement to material-temporal processes.⁸³ The latent image exists in a state of potentiality, neither fully present nor absent, awaiting the touch of chemistry to manifest.

This liminal temporality mirrors the practitioner's experience of waiting, waiting actively attentive yet receptive, prepared to intervene yet patient with process.

This framework underscores the distributed nature of time and knowledge. Tactile time arises from the interactions among mind, body, and materials, while also shaping outcomes through responsive interventions. Jane Bennett's notion of assemblage agency reinforces

⁸²Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p. 100.

⁸³ For Deleuze's discussion of Chronos and Aion, see Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (London: Continuum, 2001), 61-77.

that causality and temporality are distributed across multiple actants, human and non-human alike⁸⁴ The viscosity of the developer, the resistance of paper, and the cold of the stop bath are not obstacles but sensory cues that guide the practitioner's engagement. When the developer begins to exhaust, its tactile quality changes subtly, becoming less eager to react. The experienced practitioner recognizes this shift through touch before any visible degradation in print quality occurs.

The darkroom practitioner develops a sophisticated sensual literacy: knowing how much pressure to apply when squeegeeing prints, sensing the right moment to lift paper from the developer through the subtle resistance felt through fingers, understanding how different papers require different handling based on their thickness and texture. This knowledge accumulates in muscles, tendons, and joints, what cultural critic what theorist Amber Jamella Musser, terms as sensation

“ Sensation resides at the border of reality and consciousness. It marks the body's existence as a perceiving subject and the world's existence as an object to be perceived”⁸⁵

In a similar vein, Serres describes how consciousness itself arises from the skin's folding upon itself, without this self-touching, this contact of self with itself, there would be no internal sense, no body image; we would live without consciousness, featureless, on the point of vanishing.⁸⁶ In the darkroom, this self-reflexive touch becomes explicit:

practitioners develop muscle memory for specific movements, proprioceptive awareness of their position in space relative to equipment, haptic recognition of materials and chemicals.

⁸⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 20-38. See particularly Chapter 2, "The Agency of Assemblages."

⁸⁵ Musser, J, Amber, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power and Masochism*, New York University Press , 2014 1.

⁸⁶ Serres, *The Five Senses*, 80.

This tactile knowledge operates largely beneath conscious awareness yet fundamentally structures darkroom practice.

The reciprocal nature of contact means practitioner, materials, and environment affect each other simultaneously. Hands become stained and hardened by chemical exposure; the darkroom's temperature influences how chemicals perform; the practitioner's body heat subtly warms solutions during extended contact.

Touch involves becoming aware of what one's body undergoes.⁸⁷ In the darkroom, this awareness extends beyond individual safety to encompass care for materials: sensing when paper is becoming damaged through over-handling, recognizing when chemicals are approaching exhaustion, understanding how environmental conditions affect process stability.

Tactile time thus constitutes an active mode of knowing, emphasizing the embodied, relational, and emergent dimensions of darkroom practice. Time in the wet darkroom cannot be reduced to clock measurement precisely because it is lived through the body's engagement with materials that possess their own temporal rhythms and choreography. The practitioner ideally must attune to these overlapping temporalities, developing what might be called a "polyphonic" temporal sensibility, which is the ability to track multiple simultaneous durations and respond appropriately to their convergences and divergences.

⁸⁷ The claim made here is that we must account for tacit knowledge in relation to being in the darkroom, that embodied, practical understanding that exceeds articulation yet structures photographic practice. See Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), Harry Collins, *Tacit and Explicit Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Finally, tactile time connects back to delay, material agency, and improvisation. In the sense that it renders visible the temporality of chemical and material processes, the relationality of human and non-human actors, and the experiential dimension of making. In this framework, the darkroom becomes a space in which time is both lived and material, where images emerge through negotiation with matter, and where knowledge is produced through sensory engagement and sustained attention. The practitioner's expertise resides not in mastery over materials but in cultivated sensitivity to their agencies which is developed through countless hours of tactile contact, producing what might be called sensual intelligences: an understanding of the wet darkroom gained through the sense of touch, that is integral to how photographers interact with the darkroom environment and come to understand the shape and feel of materials and space around them.⁸⁸

Where Chapter 2 explored notions of delay and tactile time, establishing how material and temporal disruptions open spaces of potentiality, this next chapter shifts focus to notions of

⁸⁸ see David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 45-72. See also *The Tactile Eye*, Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media, Laura U. Marks *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) see also Constance Classen *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012)

immersion and the poetics of error. The analysis now turns to the practitioner's sustained engagement with these troubled moments. Error, viewed through the lens of immersion, develops its own poetics which is a language of accidents, contaminations, and chemical surprises that speaks to alternative ways of knowing and making photographs.



Figure 14: Trouble shooting test prints (Yusuf) 2024

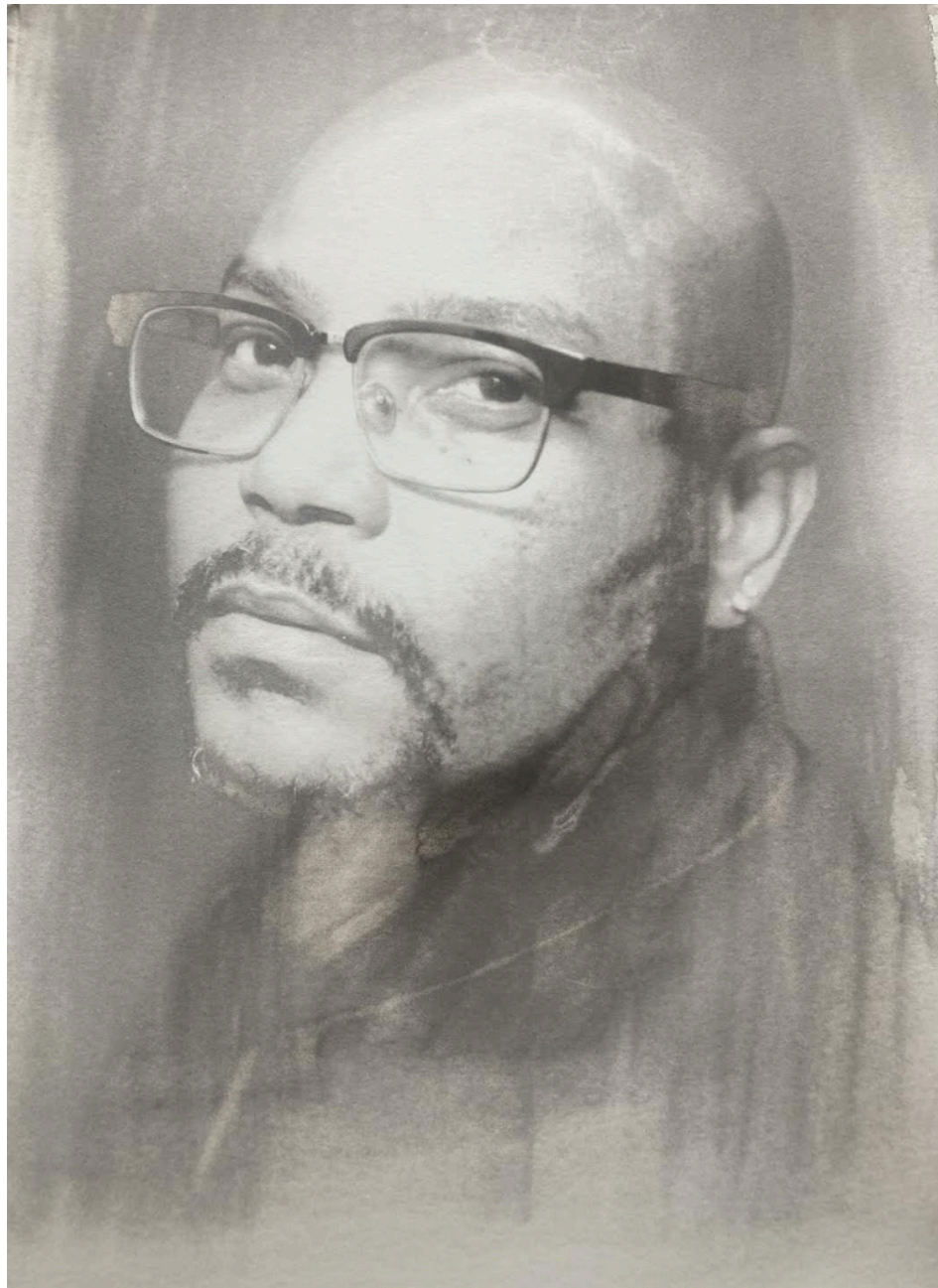


Figure 15: Trouble shooting test prints 10 x 8 inches (Chaune King, Ecce Homo)2024

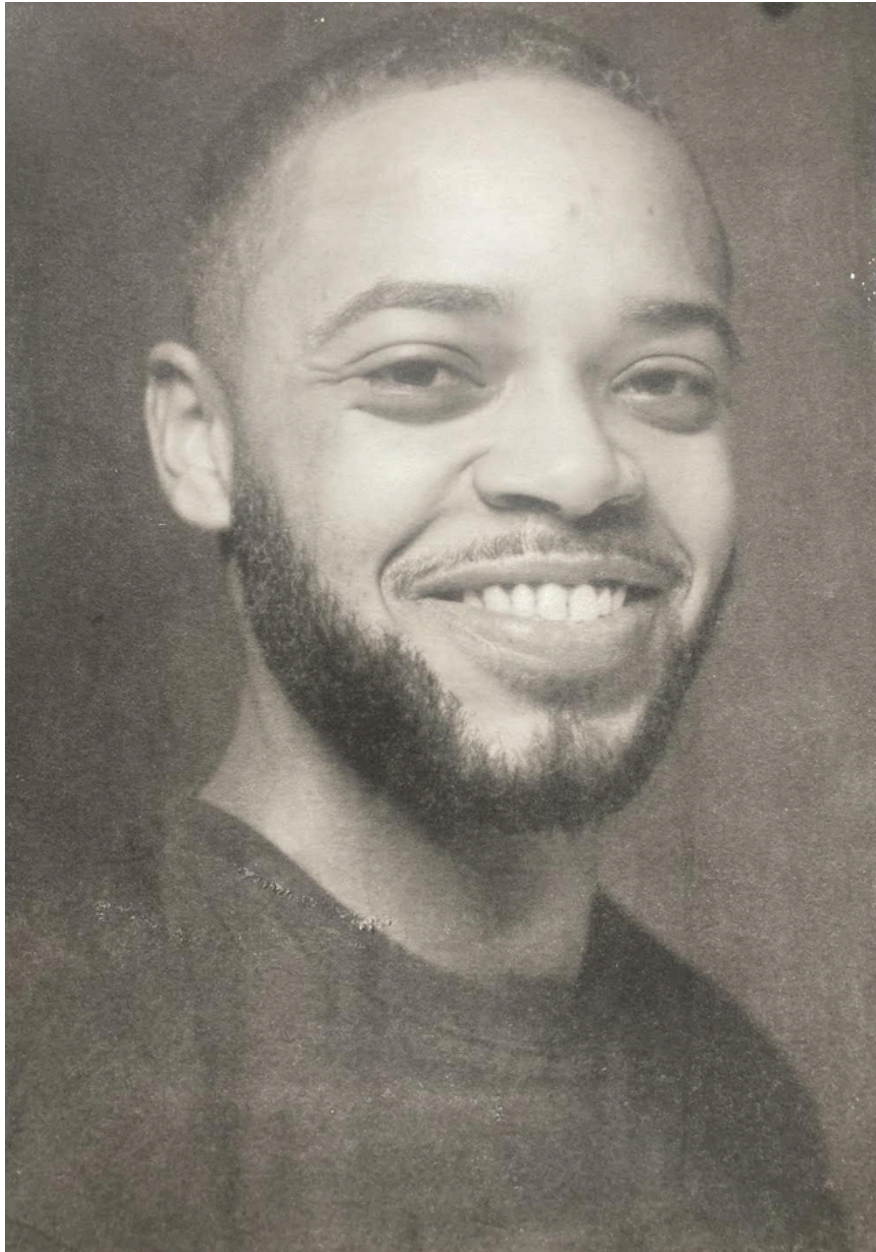


Figure 16: Trouble shooting test prints (Cole) 2024



Figure 16 : Lightwork Community Darkroom , 2023 (Artist in Residence)

Chapter 3 Liquidity: Poetics of Error, Immersion, and the Distributive Sensorium

"Dirt is essentially a disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt:

it exists in the eye of the beholder"

"The body is the vehicle , not the point"⁸⁹

"For the Erotic is not only a question of what we do,
it is how fully aware we are in the doing"⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Morrison, Toni, *Jazz*, New York: Plume , 1993.228.

⁹⁰ Audre , Lorde , *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* ,*Sister Outsider* Penguin Books, 2007,44



Figure 17: *A Sensual Chorus of Gestures*, 2024



Figure 18: *Sensual Chorus of Gestures*, 2024

Introduction

This chapter builds its argument from the material conditions of wet darkroom practice, assembling liquidity as the framework through which its analytic concerns can be investigated. The analysis emerges from the darkroom's working conditions: its chemical behaviours, sensory demands, failures, interruptions, and the contingencies intrinsic to analogue photographic work. These encounters provide the starting point for understanding liquidity both as a material condition of analogue photographic process and as a broader framework for thinking the darkroom beyond its immediate physical procedures.

The chapter proceeds by examining three interwoven dynamics. 1) First, it redefines precision through attunement, showing how the body, chemicals, equipment, and environment cohere through responsive diffused calibration rather than singular vector of control. 2) Second, it turns to dust and dirt as material intrusions that disclose the system's limits: points at which the darkroom's ordered procedures encounter recalcitrant, contingent matter. These encounters are treated not as aesthetic accidents but as structural conditions that reveal the system's incompleteness. 3) Finally, the chapter develops the darkroom as a distributive sensorium and onto-erotic milieu, drawing on Lorde, Golding, Nancy, and others to show how touch, material attractions, and cross-scale attunements produce meaning directly and non-representationally within the photographic surface.

By approaching the darkroom through liquidity, the chapter argues that photographic meaning does not reside in the final image but in the unstable, reciprocal processes that constitute the photographic event as a whole. The darkroom becomes a space where error,

immersion, and sensuous distribution are the very mechanisms through which photographs *make sense*.

3.1 Poetics of Error

i. Distributive Contingency: Rethinking Bodily Precision through Attunement

As discussed in detail in Chapter 1, the darkroom, as construed in this thesis, resists any dialectical polarity that would oppose order, cleanliness, light, clarity, and predictability to sensuousness, darkness, and uncertainty, or to construe these terms as complementary counterparts. Instead, it establishes a mode of rigorous and sensuous engagement with material that itself resists such dialectical staging. Yet, given photography's historical alignment with precise techniques of measurement and a certain cold indexicality, and the darkroom's own association with cleanliness and control, it becomes necessary to examine its relation to contingency more closely.

Contingency enters the photographic process in multiple ways, beginning long before the darkroom. Light, as material, is never still: composed of oscillating electromagnetic waves and particulate quanta, it drifts and scatters through air, bending around moisture and dust, refracting through layers of atmosphere. Its intensity, temperature, and spectral grain shift with cloud density and particulate presence, producing minute variations that no apparatus can fully stabilise. The camera's mechanisms – lens, shutter, aperture, all the mechanical protrusions and openings – translate these fluctuations through their own sensitivities: a fractional delay, the tremor of a hand, a minute vibration as the mirror releases. Even the emulsion that receives the image carries its own disposition, clusters of silver halides unevenly dispersed, their receptivity changing with age and storage.

Each exposure gathers these small variations into the latent image, a quiet accumulation of indeterminacies long before the print meets the tray of developer.

This thesis argues that within the darkroom, such contingencies thicken. Temperature drifts almost imperceptibly, humidity swells the paper, the developer exhales its metallic scent as it oxidises, light from the safelamp shifts in hue, glancing off the damp surface of the print. Feedback loops of noise, error, randomness, and drift become the pulse of the process itself, rather than interruptions. The darkroom modulates these fluctuations, allowing each deviation to find its rhythm within the liquid field. Every print emerges as a transient coherence within these circulating intensities, as a brief crystallisation of breath, movement, and chemical “mood” understood here as material orientation of matter.

All these processes described in the previous sections allow for rethinking of precision in the context of photographic praxis and the darkroom. Precision is better understood as attunement – in this context, the body’s ongoing calibration to viscosity, temperature, and touch.

Even though attunement can be traced to Heidegger’s account of *Stimmung*, its onto-theological framing is not useful here. Johnny Golding’s reworking of attunement within material practice offers a more exacting and operational move (as further sections discuss). For Golding, attunement names the capacity to think-make from within the fractal and continuously shifting conditions of the present, rather than from a position of external oversight. It designates a mode of rigorous, sensuous material involvement in which perception, action, and thought co-emerge.

Attunement is a disciplined inhabitation of the “discursive cloud” of intensities, refrains, ruptures, and micro-movements through which the present takes form. Meaning arises not through representation or dialectical ordering but through springing, folding, drifting, and other non-linear processes that allow a configuration to cohere without stabilising into essence.

In Golding’s framing, attunement is an always-reciprocal praxis of material listening that privileges no single sense, remaining with differential shifts long enough for meaning to surface immanently. It demands a willingness to be altered by the encounter and an acceptance that meaning is produced through the event’s own dynamics rather than through interpretative mastery.⁹¹

Developers ripen, fixers tire, and the agitation of trays sends slow vortices through the liquid, carrying fragments of tone across the surface. The body in the darkroom becomes an instrument tuned to the murmurs of chemical life: the hiss of reaction, the soft resistance of emulsion, the slight warmth of paper as it absorbs light. Timing is no longer expressible through the measurable units but becomes a question of responsiveness – the felt interval between action and appearance.

⁹¹ Johnny Golding, “Fractal Philosophy, Trembling a Plane of Immanence: On the Quest for ‘Attunement’ as the Task of Art.” In *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, edited by Stephen Zepke and Simon O’Sullivan, 133–154. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

This is easily observable in the experimental methods such as solarisation, chemigrams, and photograms that do not introduce chance from the outside; they heighten what the process already wants to do.

Each of these techniques amplifies the darkroom's latent volatility, inviting its internal dynamics to declare themselves. In solarisation, the partial reversal of tones occurs when the material, momentarily re-exposed to light, reveals its threshold between inscription and erasure. Chemigrams allow chemicals to move freely across the surface, tracing currents and diffusions that echo the slow hydraulics of development itself. In the photogram, the absence of a negative exposes the most direct form of contact – light touching emulsion, body or object pressed against paper – making visible the oscillation between intention and material response. None of these practices source or impose randomness. They tune the generative unruliness of the medium, letting it participate in the transformative process. Through this dialogue, precision becomes sensuous awareness, the act of making merges with the material's own duration.

Attunement in this context is less about control than about attentiveness to matter. The practitioner reads the rhythm of chemical reaction through the fingertips, through smell and sight, learning when the image is ready not by rule but by resonance. The darkroom cultivates a kind of haptic intelligence: the ability to sense viscosity by the drag of liquid, to read temperature in the skin, to intuit density from the shimmer of wet paper under the safelight. These micro-perceptions form a loop of feedback between body and material, where neither leads nor follows.

Each repetition of the process alters the chemistry slightly, the oxidation of the developer, the residue of previous prints, the trace of the practitioner's own sweat and breath. The resulting prints are never iterations of the same event but distinct states in a continuum of transformation. The darkroom teaches that to act precisely is to move with the process rather than against it, to register its subtle variations as part of its intelligence.

Even in the most disciplined practice, the body leaks into the work. Breath hovers over the tray, the weight of a gesture bends light, fingertips graze the surface of the wet paper, leaving residues of salt and oil. In that sense, the darkroom is not a space of mastery over unpredictability or some sensuous chaos of darkness. The darkroom allows for the slow intelligence of various forms of matter, intention and contingency to be folded into image through fragile equilibriums, as discussed in chapter 1. Each print bears the trace of that negotiation, a record of light, warmth, humidity, and hesitation that belongs to the same continuous field of material condition.

This contingency can also reveal itself in a less physical way, where different material discourses leak into each other. For example, in the test for *The Sensuous Chorus of Gestures*, the standard procedure of placing a step wedge beneath the print introduces an unexpected dimension to the piece. On one hand, the step wedge functions as it conventionally does: to calibrate tonal range and assess the exposure–development relation of the photograph. Yet, within a praxis attuned to blackness and the darkroom, that ostensibly neutral strip begins to trouble itself. It recalls the photographic discourses and technologies historically used to standardise exposure for white skin, and even the racist practices that sought to measure, codify, and taxonomise skin tone. The step wedge,

intended as a universal standard, becomes a reminder of the classificatory violence embedded in calibration itself.

That condition of multifaceted, sometimes nested, sometimes overarching, sometimes discrete contingency permeating and conditioning the entirety of the photographic process and the event of the darkroom, which this thesis assembles in this section as a form of liquidity, should not be understood as a uniform formlessness that underpins any attempt at absolute form. In this sense, it aligns with Fred Moten's work in *Black and Blur*, which develops a theory of generative contingency closely aligned with the concerns outlined here. For Moten, what might appear as emptiness or lack is refigured as what he calls "the absolute presence of blur... Blueblackblur is our concern".⁹² Darkness here names a condition of incessant differentiation and relation, a mode of being that refuses enclosure or completion.

Moten turns to chromatic theory and cultural history, observing that black is often rendered or perceived as a deep or dark blue. In doing so, he situates blue not as the negation of black but as one of its expressive conditions – a chromatic articulation through which blackness's reflective and absorptive capacities become sensible. For him blue is "something (not) (in) between things – a medium, the material within which the pigment is suspended, through which it's transferred, in both reflection and absorption".⁹³ Blue, here, is not a metaphor for blackness but one of its material articulations – a chromatic condition

⁹² Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 226.

⁹³ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 237.

that names the transmissive plenitude of blackness. It describes how blackness holds and conducts light, how reflection and absorption occur simultaneously, how relation endures through motion rather than stasis.

Blur, in this framework, is the activity of that condition – the continual movement through which blackness maintains its generativity. The darkroom can be grasped within this Motenian logic: its contingency and liquidity constitute the material mode of blur, the process through which form emerges, hesitates, and transforms without ceasing to be continuous. Black, blur, and blue together articulate the logic of liquidity – a state in which matter sustains coherence through variation, and where uncertainty is not opposed to precision but becomes its very mode of existence.

This chromatic logic, translated into the grammar of the darkroom, takes on a different register. The safelight is red, yet it performs a function comparable to Moten's blue. For Moten, blue is not merely a medium but also a thing – the material within which the pigment is suspended, and the event through which it is transferred, reflected, and absorbed. It is both substance and relation, a chromatic matter that carries its own activity. The red safelight enacts a similar dual logic. It is a physical thing – light of the longest wavelength, low in energy, and it functions as a medium that permits visibility without revelation. In doing so, it maintains the liquidity of blackness by preserving the potential of the photographic surface, allowing form to circulate without fixing. Red, in this sense, is the blue of the darkroom: a wavelength and a condition, a material and an act, through which the generative blur remains perceptible yet protected.



Figure 19: The Patron Saint of Darkrooms , Autograph 2023



Figure 20: The Rubber Darkroom above images are within the rubber darkroom

ii. Material Fractures: Discrete Contaminations of Dust and Dirt

The previous section discussed how various non-uniform contingencies are integral forces in the processual continuum of the darkroom rather than errors to be eliminated or immobilised. This section shifts focus to the discrete forms of darkroom “errors” - traces, and analyses them as material fractures – opportunities for systemic refolding.

In the context of the darkroom, dust and dirt are conventionally regarded as disruptions to photographic production. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, this research draws a distinction between them to examine how each operates within the material and conceptual economy of the darkroom.

Within the darkroom ecology, the origin of dust is never certain: it may have settled already on the lens when the picture was being taken, the negative, the enlarger’s matrix, or only now upon the surface of the print. It may be a particle or the image of one, a trace of matter or its optical echo. Its location is often not entirely knowable. It is particulate, atmospheric, and often imperceptible until it interrupts a process or leaves a trace. As Joseph Amato observes in *Dust: A History of the Small and the Invisible*, dust is “the universal equaliser,” meaning that it accumulates, settles, and circulates, marking not only the persistence of matter but also the slow transformation of everything it touches.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Joseph A. Amato, *Dust: A History of the Small and the Invisible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 5.

In this sense, dust participates in the distributed condition of the darkroom: it moves between materials and operations, tracing what has passed while remaining suspended in the present, registering both decay and continuation. Each speck of dust attached to photographic surfaces acts as a form of inadvertent mark-making, revealing the extent to which agency in the darkroom belongs not solely to the photographer but to matter itself. Its presence undermines the fantasy of control that governs the darkroom's procedural order, reminding that even within the most disciplined environment, time and material agency exceed their containment.

This section approaches dust not as a contaminant to be eliminated but as an active participant in the photographic process. Situating dust as an actor within the darkroom requires recognising its material agency. Jane Bennett's framework in *Vibrant Matter* is instructive here: she calls for an attention to the vitality of matter and to what she terms "thing-power," the capacity of non-human materials to produce effects and participate in events.⁹⁵ Dust, in this sense, is not inert residue clinging to objects but a non-conscious actant within the darkroom's ecology. Its agency is diffuse and distributed, operating through minute shifts of air, static, and touch. To understand this agency within the ontology of the darkroom is to understand them within the feedback loops that link air, moisture, temperature, and gesture.

Dust articulates itself differently with each photographic surface. It can appear as a discrete spectacle: a mark, a punctum, a glint of matter that announces its own interference, or as a film so fine it merges with the image, forming a membrane-skin that seals or veils it. It

⁹⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–4.

oscillates between being a surface and being a mark: at once a visible trace and a condition of visibility. In this way, dust participates in the image's making and unmaking, adding, blurring, or initiating informational and pictorial loss. In Bennett's terms, this is not the animation of inert matter but the recognition of its vitality – its capacity to reconfigure relations, to act and to be acted upon. Dust's behaviour within the darkroom exemplifies what Bennett describes as the “active materiality” of the world: a dispersed field of agencies in which human and non-human forces co-compose events.⁹⁶ To perceive dust in this way is to shift from mastery to attunement, from control to collaboration with matter's own fluctuating intelligence.

There is a certain inevitability to dust , or to everything becoming dust , a nostalgic association with time, decay, and the slow sedimentation of neglect, or, conversely, with pure environmental error: a speck of dust as an atmospheric glitch. Dust gathers without intention; it is neither cause nor effect but the quiet consequence of material duration. As such, it belongs to the order of, one could argue, “pure” contingency, an occurrence for which no one can be held accountable. Dirt, by contrast, can certainly arise through contingency, but it does not carry the same abstract, temporal inevitability.

Dust is often treated as if it appears from nowhere, yet it is largely composed of shed human skin, fragments flaking from the body and settling into new topologies. In domestic and studio environments, a substantial proportion of dust consists of desquamated skin cells mixed with fibres, soil particles, hair, and other minute debris. This material continuity allows dust to act as a dispersed, dislocated filter, at once granular and continuous, a

⁹⁶ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 20.

residue of bodily presence that detaches, circulates, and quietly settles across surfaces, images and equipment.

Yet, when it encounters moisture, its condition alters. In contact with liquid – developer, fixer, emulsion, saliva, sweat, the salt trace of skin, or other corporeal residues – the particulate becomes viscous, dust becomes dirt. Within the darkroom's liquidity, distinctions between chemical and bodily, mechanical and sensuous, begin to blur. What settles on the surface of the print may as easily derive from the breath or the body as from the air, each leaving its film, its sheen, its insistence on presence.

This shift should be seen as ontological: matter crossing thresholds of state and meaning, modifying its texture, density, and moral inflection. Dirt emerges as matter that has moved, matter displaced, and in that displacement it enters the domain of the improper - that which exceeds containment and disturbs classification. Mary Douglas notices that "reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death." Dirt, therefore, is not simply a physical phenomenon but a conceptual category that reveals much about the politics of the systems of order and their exclusions.⁹⁷ Dirt possesses physical presence and is simultaneously socially, culturally, affectively and morally constructed. It is also constituted through all these political frameworks that determine what counts as contamination. Following Lagerspetz's *A Philosophy of Dirt*, this research understands dirt not merely as excluded

⁹⁷ *Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.* Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 36.

matter out of place but as a fundamental aspect of human experience that acts as both material substance and symbolic marker.⁹⁸

Within the space–time of the darkroom, dirt bears the burden of intentionality or failed duty – the residue of what should have been cleaned, the trace of an unfulfilled protocol of concealment. It marks the failure of maintenance and the interruption of the darkroom’s telos of smooth representation. Things are dirty not because they are inherently so, but because the standards – the contract of photographic procedure have been breached. Dust and dirt introduce a form of unexpected indexicality that cannot be erased – the mark that should not have been made.

The darkroom praxis that underpins this thesis remains particularly attuned to the contingencies of dirt and its accidental agency, exploring how these might offer alternative frameworks for rethinking the photographic act. By relinquishing the insistence on controlled outcomes, this practice cultivates feedback loops with the productive accident, allowing chance, contamination, and error to participate in the formation of the image. In that sense, the darkroom is not as a site of execution but as a living system – an ecology of materials, gestures, and unforeseen events through which images emerge as negotiations between intention and matter.

Both dust and dirt can be understood as instances of matter’s recalcitrance – its non-intentional unruliness and its resistance to total incorporation within systems of order. Their activity is not willed but emergent within physical interactions, adhesion, and decay.

⁹⁸ Olli Lagerspetz, *A Philosophy of Dirt* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

They do not act *against* control so much as they expose the limits of control itself - the limits of treating matter as a resource. Within the darkroom, their persistence interrupts the smooth continuity of procedure, disclosing the extent to which the photographic process depends on an unstable material equilibrium. Dust and dirt therefore introduce a mode of material resistance – an agency dispersed across surfaces and reactions, asserting the partial autonomy of matter from human design.

But the dirtiness of the darkroom is not reducible to potential shortcomings in cleanliness or embracing the material contingency and temporary agencies of mark-making matter. In fact, there is no way of knowing whether the darkroom is ever truly clean. Within its economy, visibility itself is contaminated – produced by the red safelight, a light that reveals without exposing, holding things in suspension between clarity and concealment. Under its dim spectral wash, eyesight no longer suffices for navigation; surfaces must be felt rather than seen, and the eye yields to touch. The red light is both protective and permissive: it preserves the latent image while inviting other forms of contact. Within this “dirty” illumination, the senses marginalised by the Enlightenment’s hierarchy of perception are reactivated in a strange, distributed intimacy. The darkroom choreographs the body into new modes of attunement, where accident becomes method and contact becomes form. Dirtiness, in this sense, is not invoked provocatively but as a refusal of sensorial purity, understood as singularity and separation.

Within this “dirty” illumination, the senses marginalised by the Enlightenment’s hierarchy of perception are reactivated in a strange, distributed intimacy. The darkroom choreographs the body into new modes of attunement, where accident becomes method and contact

becomes form.

To situate the darkroom's material behaviour in a broader theoretical lineage, it is useful to recall Georges Bataille's formulation of *l'informe* in the *Documents* project of the late 1920s. For Bataille, the formless was not an aesthetic category in a visual or physical sense but an operation: a way of undoing the hierarchies that stabilise form, function, and meaning. *L'informe* designates the moment when form loses its ideal abstraction and is returned to matter's debased excess.⁹⁹ This move is expanded in his later writing on base materialism, where matter is treated as continuous, impure, and resistant to the idealisations that structure Western metaphysics.

Within this framework, dirt in the darkroom does not merely contaminate an image but performs the operation Bataille describes. It pulls the image away from the transcendence of representation, and into viscosity, collapsing the distinction between form and the material processes that enable it. As in Bataille's thinking, matter refuses the clarity that depends on the separation of the figure and ground, matter and form and its supposed purity.

iii. Liquidity as destructive plasticity

In this context, the dustiness and dirtiness of the darkroom participate in what this chapter develops as a condition of liquidity, marking the work's systemic incompleteness. By *incompleteness*, this thesis refers not to an artwork's unfinished state but to a structural uncertainty within the system itself, closer to the logics suggested by Gödel's insights into

⁹⁹ Georges Bataille, "Formless," in *Documents*, no. 7 (December 1929): 382.

systemic incompleteness than to an aesthetic of fragmentation.¹⁰⁰ Matter in the darkroom resists stabilisation: dust, dirt, particulate and continuous interference unsettle the clarity of form and reveal how any image emerges within the conditions that cannot be fully controlled or formalised.

In Gödel's work, incompleteness refers to the inherent limits of any sufficiently complex formal system: there will always be propositions that are true but unprovable from within the system's own rules. Referenced here, the aim is not to impose Gödel onto photographic practice, but to point to a structural analogy: that systems, mathematical, physical, or artistic, contain internal conditions that cannot be entirely stabilised, predicted, or resolved from within their own operations. In this chapter, liquidity is assembled with this in mind: a systemic refusal of closure. Dirtiness becomes one way of expressing this refusal – recalcitrance of material conditions that resist the geometries of absolute logics, keeping the system contingently open, unsettled, and generative. Liquidity marks a form of systemic plasticity. Liquidity implies a form of poiesis.

However, liquidity, as developed in this chapter, aligns with Catherine Malabou's account of plasticity understood as a capacity for transformation that also includes the possibility of irreversible rupture. In *Ontology of the Accident*, Malabou emphasises that destructive plasticity is not the opposite of formative plasticity, nor its dramatic counterpart: "Plasticity is at once the capacity to take form, the capacity to give form, and the capacity to destroy form".¹⁰¹ It is the possibility that a system undergoes a change so profound that no previous

¹⁰⁰ Kurt Gödel, "On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems I." In *Kurt Gödel: Collected Works, Volume I: Publications 1929–1936*, edited by Solomon Feferman et al., 144–195. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

¹⁰¹ Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 6.

structure, orientation, or recognisable logic survives. Destruction is an event after which no return is possible: "We must all of us recognize that we might, one day, become someone else, an absolute other, someone who will never be reconciled with themselves again".¹⁰²

Seen through this lens, the darkroom's liquidity should be misconstrued as vitalism, it is not simply a figure of openness or material playfulness. The particulate interferences of dust and dirt register both the potential for the system to shift (its formative plasticity) and the ever-present risk of irreversible loss (its destructive plasticity). Every print operates on this threshold: the same liquid conditions that coax the image into appearance can just as easily erase it. Liquidity therefore designates a systemic plasticity in which transformation and annihilation are materially intertwined, not dialectically, because they contain no antithesis or contradiction. They are the consequences of systemic possibility.

In this sense, liquidity marks more than systemic contingency, openness or generativity of matter. It exposes the fragility of the photographic surface itself: in the darkroom, the very conditions through which the image emerges: immersion, exposure, chemical transitions, and the photographer's handling, are also those that threaten it. The plane of the image, opening the surface to another dimension of pictorial illusion, remains perpetually vulnerable to disappearance.

Read alongside darkroom practice, destructive plasticity clarifies the stakes of working within such conditions. Darkroom chemicals are agents of irreversible change: a temperature shift, a moment of light leakage, or minor contamination can produce an unexpected artefact or eliminate the image entirely. Liquidity therefore includes the

¹⁰² Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 1.

constant risk of obliteration, the point at which the image gives way to absence rather than emergence. What disappears cannot be recovered, and this irreversibility becomes part of the darkroom's distributed condition. Therefore, the safelight of the darkroom does not make it a uniformly protected or nurturing environment, its generativity is inseparable from its violence and the possibility that the work - and the space-time it stabilised - may be lost.

In this sense, the safelight does not guarantee protection. The darkroom's generativity is inseparable from its capacity for erasure, and from the long histories in which certain images, bodies, and narratives have been more vulnerable to disappearance than others. The fragility of the photographic surface echoes a broader precarity in what and who becomes recordable and remains held within collective memory. The work, and the fragile space-time it momentarily stabilises, can be lost, and with it the possibility of being seen or witnessed at all.

3.2 Distributive Sensorium

i. Immersion: Wet Materialities and the Distributive Choreographies of the Darkroom

The irreversibility of destructive liquidity discussed in the previous section, and the danger it poses to the pictorial plane, frames the conditions of immersion and the distributive sensorium explored here. The darkroom is, in the most immediate sense, a wet environment: images come into being through the submersion of surfaces, their withdrawal from liquids, the pouring of chemicals, the movement of water, and the ambient presence of vapour. This literal wetness provides the ground for the broader use of *liquidity* developed

in this chapter. Liquidity is invoked here as a way of understanding how darkroom processes constitute a mode of sensing and sense-making.

Crucially, this does not entail a vitalist softening of boundaries and the emphasis on the flux of matter. The limits of trays, containers, lens, skin, paper or photographic space are not dissolved into a sensuous relativism. Instead, the darkroom reorders the hierarchy of the enlightening gaze that presumes knowledge arises from stable separations in time and space. What replaces this is not an equalising disorder or flow, but a different negotiation of space altogether. This knowledge is, nevertheless, precise, rigorous, and structurally exposed to risks and violations, as outlined earlier. The darkroom constructs a new mode of conduct, where navigation depends on contingencies, thresholds, and multisensorial attunement to material processes.

The immersion of the body in the darkroom relies on tactility, sound, smell, proprioceptive adjustments, and an improvised precision shaped by muscle memory. Breath slows to stabilise a hand, the spatial layout of trays, tongs, and containers is recalled rather than seen, movements are calibrated by habit rather than sight. A simple list of 'senses' does not capture this mode of operation, because it exceeds the discrete divisions of touch, smell, or hearing in a way much more contaminated than any violations of synesthesia. The darkroom senses are not hybrid or blurred; what emerges is a kind of multisensory choreography.

Chemical odours, often acrid or metallic, announce the proximity of trays before they are seen, the low hiss of running water marks the limits of the wet area, a sideways step locates the developer tray, a slight lean forward confirms the position of the fixer, the arm extends along a route memorised through repetition rather than vision. Fingers learn the viscosity of each solution, the resistance of tongs, the temperature shift between chemicals. Breath is often deliberately slowed to steady a hand when lifting paper from one tray to the next. The confined layout is internalised spatially: the safe light, the timer, the enlarger, the drying rack, each mapped and perpetually adjusted as coordinates in a navigational field. Precision emerges, paradoxically, through the diffusion of tiny feedback loops rather than through a single controlling vector of sight and reason.

That does not mean that the darkroom's immersion is a space where anything goes. Certain disturbances introduce productive deviations, allowing new tensions within the pictorial plane, unexpected softening or blurring, or shifts in contrast that generate alternative visual possibilities. Yet the same distributed choreography is also susceptible to failure: paper tears, skin irritation from chemical exposure, blistering, accidental overexposure, slips in confined spaces, spilled liquids, misplaced caps, condensation, perspiration that interferes with handling, or moments of hesitation that compromise the process. The darkroom's liquidity and the body's immersion cannot therefore be read solely as a space of safe envelopment in darkness devoid of tensions. The immersive choreography of the darkroom involves its own fragility, error, breakdown and loss.

The immersion at stake here is not the submersion of a body into a medium, but the production of a field of intensified attunement in which space, time, and bodies become

mutually constituent in both sensory and informational terms in the present. Immersion names a mode of meaning-making that arises through careful attunement to material processes. Within this field, boundaries are not dissolved but recalibrated, generating new lines, contours, and provisional 'skins' through which experience and knowledge are organised. Sensuousness, in this sense, designates the formation of these distributed bodies and bodies of knowledge, rather than any metaphysical communion. On a smaller scale, this immersive attunement aligns with the development of any skilled practice in which the body becomes part of an instrument and the instrument becomes an extension of the body, mediated through interfaces that generate a shared field of action.

In the darkroom, however, this attunement is intensified: the entire field becomes a site of sensuous negotiation, a choreography of tensions, proximities, drips, hesitations, and pressures. The body leans into the space and the space presses back through heat, humidity, chemical bite, the soft resistance of wet paper, the pull of tongs, the slight tremor of a hand hovering over a tray. The body is redistributed through space, and space becomes an operative extension of the body. Crucially, such moments do not imply sentient or sensing matter. Rather, they expose how material agencies and bodily rhythms come into frictions and attractions, forming temporary affiliations. The erotic charge here lies in the intimate, finely calibrated exchange between body and material process. It is both the micro-forces that govern adhesion, capillarity, and surface attraction and large-scale cohesions stretching both spatially and temporally outside of the darkroom's walls.

Johnny Golding, in *After the Dark Room: Ana-materialism and the Sensuous Fractalities of Speed and Light (or does the image still speak a thousand words?)*, describes darkroom

immersion as “a multiplicity/slice-fragment of self, fastening onto what lies to hand, where the fastening (as it were), not to mention the ‘that which lies to hand,’ is couched (Heidegger might say ‘enframed’) precisely by a double-helix set of relations.”¹⁰³ Golding emphasises the immediacy of reciprocal grasping: an always-distributed, mutual pull among material things. Within the darkroom, this “co-insiding” unsettles the provisional partitions between subject, object, and environment. Sensuousness emerges through these negotiated frictions, bodies, materials, images, and contexts forming shifting surfaces of contact, each slightly altering the other without collapsing into a homogenised dark whole.

The Heideggerian reciprocity expressed by the equation $A = A$ – the first principle of identity – already presupposes a plurality of relations, an identity always embedded, from the outset, in a world. Golding pushes this further by refusing the onto-theological impulse that still persists in Heidegger’s framework, the impulse to import meaning from outside into matter. In her reworking, the belonging of $A = A$ expands and folds, generating meaning through rough feedback loops.¹⁰⁴ *Roughness* is meant here in the mathematical sense, as the fractal, non-smooth modulation of relations in which small perturbations propagate across scales, producing new articulations without recourse to an external origin of sense.¹⁰⁵ The equation’s stable ‘=’ gives way to a bi or multi or pan directional exchange, $\rightleftharpoons$, marking identity not as self-sameness but as ongoing, sensuous, curious

¹⁰³ Johnny Golding, “After the Dark Room: Ana-materialism and the Sensuous Fractalities of Speed & Light (or, does the image still speak a thousand words?).” In *On the Verge of Photography: Imaging Beyond Representation*, edited by Daniel Rubinstein and Andy Fisher, 8–?. ARTICLE Press, 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Johnny Golding, “The Courage to Matter,” in *Data Loam: Sometimes Hard, Usually Soft: The Future of Knowledge Systems*, ed. Johnny Golding, Martin Reinhart, and Mattia Paganelli (Berlin: De Gruyter, (2021), 12–13.

¹⁰⁵ Johnny Golding talks about the philosophical consequences of this roughness here: Johnny Golding, “Fractal philosophy (and the small matter of learning how to listen): Attunement as the task of art,” *CTheory* (2010).

encounter-return-attunement through/within matter touches itself, through which meaning gets established.

ii. Onto-Erotics of Touch

The onto-erotics of the darkroom concerns a mode of touch in which sensing and sense-making occur as part of the same onto-epistemo-ethical movement rather than simply pointing to sensual nature of the darkroom's environment. Golding's ana-materialism provides a crucial framework for grasping the subtlety of this point. Ana-materialism names a materiality that is neither foundational nor representational: matter does not await the imposition of form or meaning, nor does it bear an external or universal trace.¹⁰⁶ Instead, it is constituted through discontinuous, recursive articulations: cross-scale events in which surfaces, forces, and intensities co-inside and differentiate themselves. The encounter, in Golding's terms, is not an exchange between pre-formed entities but a shared material insistence, a partial overlapping in which matter alters itself in the very act of attraction.¹⁰⁷ Touch becomes one of the primary sites of this articulation. In the darkroom, chemicals, trays, clips, skin, vapour, paper, and light participate in this ana-material reciprocity. Each contact, dipping, lifting, sliding, brushing, condensing, recasts the material field from which the photographic surface emerges.

Nancy's writing on bodies offers an ontology of contact that further clarifies this operation of touch. In *Corpus*, he argues that a body exists only at its limit: its identity is not an interior

¹⁰⁶ Johnny Golding, "Ana-Materialism and the Pineal Eye: Becoming Golden and the Aesthetic of Matter," in *Fractal Ontologies: The Aesthetics of Complexity*, ed. Laura U. Marks and Arnd Schneider (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016), 25–42.

¹⁰⁷ Johnny Golding, "Fractal Philosophy (and the Small Matter of Learning How to Listen): Attunement as the Task of Art," in *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, ed. Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 133–154.

essence but the surface at which it meets forms of otherness.¹⁰⁸ Touch is the articulation of this limit. It is “the spacing of bodies,” an exposure in which proximity and separation coincide. Sense arises here, not as interior meaning but as the circulation that takes place on, within and between surfaces brought into relation.

In *The Muses*, Nancy extends this logic to the image, describing it as an event of exposition: a surface marked by what touches it, presenting the traces of its exposures while never relinquishing its exteriority. In the darkroom, this condition acquires duration and density.¹⁰⁹ The developing print is passed from chemical to chemical, from tray to air to suspension line, each contact inscribing a slight difference while the image withdraws into its next state. This distributed touch should not be understood as a synthesis of micro-gestures but a recursive limit-position through which the image acquires density, contrast, and legibility.

Lefebvre helps specify the spatial dimension of this onto-erotic field by showing that space is continuously composed through the interrelation of *spatial practice*, *representations of space*, and *representational spaces*.¹¹⁰ In the darkroom, these dimensions condense into a single operable milieu. Spatial practice appears in the repetitive gestures that give the room its rhythm: moving in semi-darkness, tracing the rims of trays, locating the lip of the developing tank through tactile cues, pacing the precise distances between enlarger, chemicals and drying line. Representations of space emerge in the technical prescriptions that govern these operations: exposure charts, dilution ratios, temporal protocols, schemata

¹⁰⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 15–18.

¹⁰⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1–3, 9–12.

¹¹⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

through which the darkroom is conceived as a functional environment. Representational space, finally, arises from the lived atmosphere saturating these practices: humidity, heat, chemical odour, and the suspended anticipation that accompanies the gradual appearance of an image.

For Lefebvre, space is produced at the junction where these dimensions meet and intrude upon one another.¹¹¹ Touch is the operative hinge of this junction. Each submersion of paper, each agitation of liquid, each withdrawal from the bath translates abstract schemata into embodied sequences and inflects the lived atmosphere of the room. These tactile adjustments continually reorganise the relations among bodies, vessels, surfaces and fluids, sustaining the darkroom as a spatial configuration. The darkroom is therefore not a passive setting for sensuous experience but a spatial (or spatio-temporal) apparatus whose coherence depends on ongoing, contact-driven reproduction, where the erotics of touch is inseparable from the production of space itself.

iii. Distributive Materiality, Embodied Attunement and The Sensorium of the Darkroom

The *Sensuous Chorus of Gestures* is a photographic attempt to grasp the distributive nature of the darkroom's space. The assembled photographic plane is composed as a plural body: figures press into one another in close proximity, their faces, or even their heads, excluded from the pictorial field. These bodies fold into each other, not as a homogenised mass, but as an acephalic hybrid, a shared corporeality whose boundaries blur without dissolving.

¹¹¹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38–39.

This dark topology is not contained within the pictorial plane. Hands reach in from outside the photographic frame, entering as partial bodies whose positions and proximities unsettle distinctions of sex or individual boundary. Their gestures mesh with the scene, producing a configuration in which bodies are neither anonymised nor clearly separable – distributed in a shared material involvement.

Touch here does not mark the meeting of distinct entities, but the force that sutures an otherwise impossible topology into momentary coherence – a dark body that holds together without collapsing into abstraction.

articulation of this thesis: the photographic act as a distributed sensorium, within which the darkroom constitutes a crucial site. *The Sensuous Chorus of Gestures* makes it possible to grasp the multiplicity of surfaces that participate in photographic meaning, not only the body's surface and the composite surface assembled between bodies, but also the surface of the camera, its interior chambers, the darkroom's trays and vessels, and the pictorial surface itself.

These surfaces remain active long before and long after the moment the image is “developed”: drying, settling, fading, acquiring dust and undergoing further material transformations.

The series also clarifies what this thesis names as the onto-erotic. Here the erotic does not operate in a solely sexual register, though the intensities of saliva, lips, genitals, orgasms and bodily fluids are often present and crucial. In the *Reluctant Voyeurs* series, the faces captured register an intimate strain, the particular tension of bodies absorbed in their own

erotic self-attunement. Rather, the onto-erotic here aligns with what Audre Lorde describes as “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings,” a transformative force.¹¹² Lorde’s formulation is essential here because she frames the erotic as a force of knowledge, connection and transformation, not simply as a feature of desire. In this context, the erotic marks the material pull through which surfaces, bodies and processes solicit and alter one another: a mode of cohesion that generates new configurations of sense. It names the encounter through which disparate elements meet, affect, and recompose each other within the photographic act.

In this sense, the erotic becomes the operative logic of the darkroom’s distributed materiality: a transformative form of attunement through which the image comes into being, and through which meaning is constituted as a material event.

If the production of meaning does not happen solely within the pictorial frame of a photograph, or even within the broader semantic cloud of resemblances and motifs evoked by the photograph and its context, then the focus shifts toward the photographic surface-band itself, as discussed in Chapter 1. When this surface-band is approached in its extended material sense, as the entirety of its frictions, processes and attunements, meaning no longer appears as an effect added afterwards, but as something immediate to these material operations. The image’s sense arises in the same gestures, pressures and adjustments that form its material articulation. Meaning emerges within recursive, touch-driven operations that compose the surface-skin: a material immediacy rather than a representational screen.

¹¹² Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 55.

This thesis, through liquidity, investigates the anatomy, embodiment and enfleshment of the darkroom's distributed sensorium. In this ontology, *embodiment* refers to the way the darkroom assembles bodies – human, chemical, optical, atmospheric – into configurations that generate new skins of meaning and resemblance. It names the organisational dimension of darkroom materiality: how operators, tools, surfaces and timings temporarily cohere into knowledge-making assemblages. *Enfleshment*, by contrast, marks the sensuous and exposed register of this material field: the pleasure and pain of contact, the grease and residue of fingers, the humidity of breath, the drag of dust, the sting and odour of chemicals. It is matter at its most tactile, saturated and insistent. These two registers are not separable; they are co-extensive articulations of the same distributed milieu, allowing the darkroom to think through the patterned organisation of bodies and the sensuous insistence of matter upon them.

Liquidity makes this interlacing visible. Space is no longer an innocent interval between objects but as a charged, red-lit, dust-laden, vapour-thick, chemically saturated *thing* in which embodied arrangements and fleshed surfaces are continuously reworked. Liquidity clarifies the darkroom's continuity: a distributive milieu in which processes bleed into one another without collapsing into homogeneity. It is not equalising or uniform; it is produced through frictions among divergent ontologies and regimes of meaning that meet within the darkroom's operations. The sensorium of the darkroom is therefore neither a relativising flux nor a synthesis of discrete components. It is this distributed materiality and enfleshment, held together by liquid operations, that constitutes the plural darkroom ontology and praxis explored here.

The form of knowledge that arises from this material distribution is poetic. It is a mode of thinking that proceeds through touching, adjusting, waiting, handling – understanding shaped in the same gestures that modulate viscosity, temperature, timing and exposure. Embodied attunement and enfleshed receptivity are the very medium in which reflection occurs. Darkroom poiesis names this condition, in which sense emerges within the enacted distributive material sensorium itself.

In the (safe)light of this chapter, it becomes possible to argue that all photographs, even digital ones, possess their own kind of wet darkroom. Each remains systemically open to contingency: the dust and dirt of reciprocal matter, the sensuous pressures of mark-making bodies, and the extended event of a distributive sensorium to which they are folded. In digital media these contingencies assume different forms, but they should not be understood as cleaner or less “dirty” than the photochemical infrastructures from which they arise. Instead, they carry their own material noise, their own embedded frictions, and their own political histories of contact and visibility.

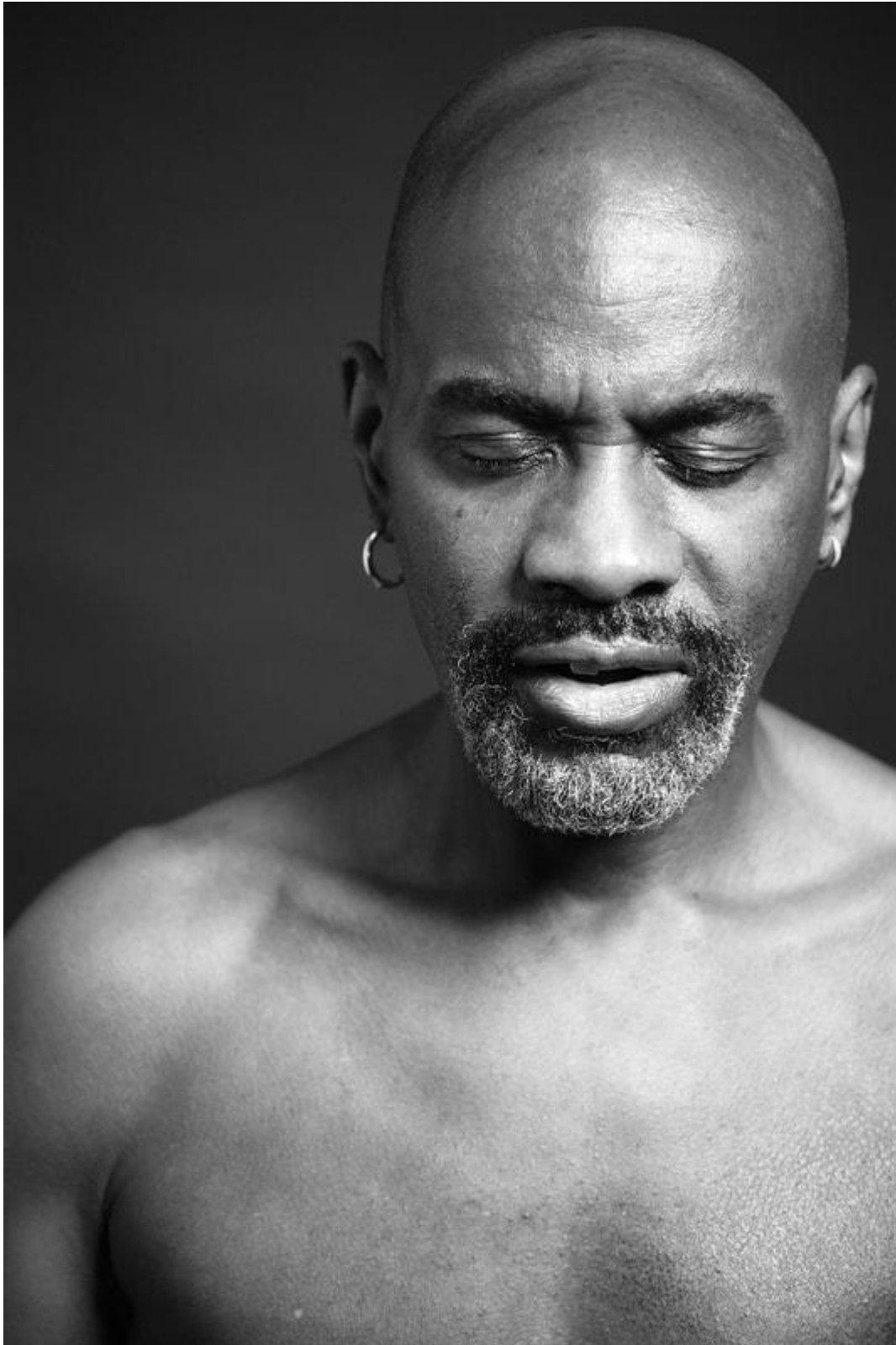


Figure 21: Wes Image from *Reluctant Voyeurs*, 2022

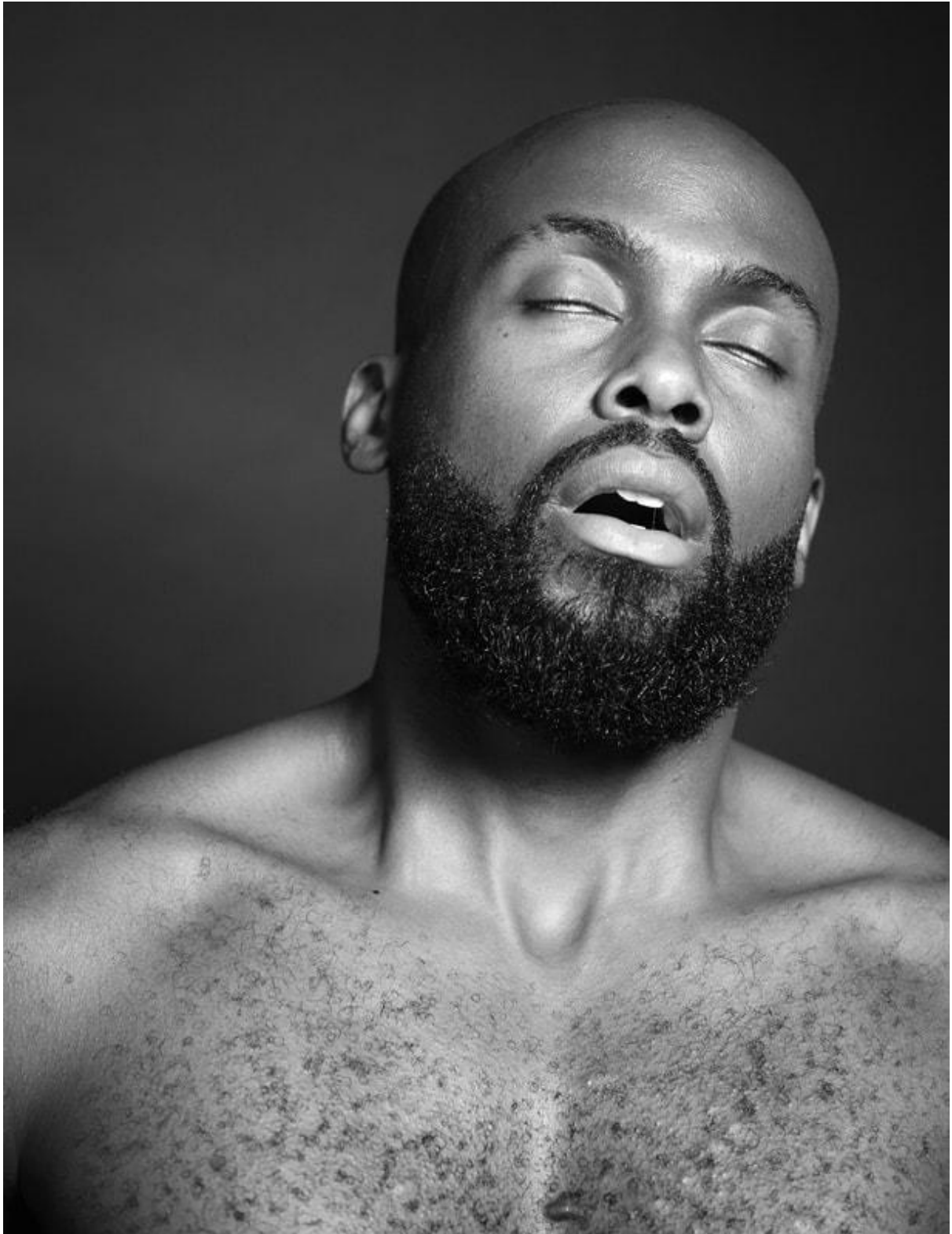


Figure 22: Dwayne Black, Image from *Reluctant Voyeurs*, 2022



Figure 23: Blaize from Reluctant Voyeurs Series, 2022

Building on the previous chapters' investigations of darkness, delay and tactile time, this final chapter rethinks the darkroom as an immersive distributive sensorium in which photographic knowledge is not anchored in vision alone but dispersed across sensory registers, material agencies, and temporal rhythms. By re-conceiving precision as attunement and treating material contingencies as possessing their own poetics and generative logics, the chapter has assembled darkroom liquidity as a mode of plasticity in which emergence and erasure remain inseparable. Meaning, in this framework, is onto-erotic and poetic: it arises through the choreographies of sensing and sense-making rather than through the stable, finalised image.

Conclusion

This thesis is rooted in the critical importance of process and the making of the photographic work of art. It emerges from a sustained belief that the wet darkroom, as a material site in itself, remains strikingly undertheorised within both historical and contemporary photographic history and studies. The driving premise has been that by foregrounding the materiality and sensuousness of the darkroom and by prioritising the non-visual aspects of image-making with particular attention to opacity, liquidity, and tactility, this research extends, transgresses, and expands what the wet darkroom is or can become: photographic, sexual, or otherwise.

My original contribution to photographic theory and studies challenges conventional notions of the darkroom by theorising it as a form of distributive sensorium and the latent image as an encounter. This move, both literal and figurative, deliberately rubs against and sidesteps the overdetermination of ocularcentrism and readings of the darkroom solely through technological function or sociological analysis once the image has emerged. By addressing the darkroom as a non-neutral laboratory and calling attention to the sensual-material attributes of making with subject matter similarly focused on sensuality, this practice places darkness, liquidity, flesh, skin, bodily gestures, and delay at the centre of inquiry.

Three interrelated research questions have guided this investigation. First, how do wet darkroom practices challenge Enlightenment epistemologies through opacity and embodied sensing? Second, how do notions of delay and tactile time which are always part of the photographic 'act' make matter in the wet darkroom? Third, how can the wet darkroom, as its own material site, enable new insights into this space as a distributive sensorium?

These questions have been explored through three complementary chapters. Chapter 1, *Darkness*, re-engages with the Enlightenment to address darkness, light, opacity, latency, and shadows, thereby shifting debate from the overdetermination of vision to non-visual aspects of being in the wet darkroom. Following this, Chapter 2, *Exposure*, offers a new way of thinking about process when things do not 'work,' reframing delay as generative and moving beyond chronological time in the darkroom to what is being named as tactile time, which runs alongside the centrality of tactility and odours within the space and act of making. Finally, Chapter 3, *Liquidity*, examines the wet darkroom as a non-neutral laboratory in relation to its own matter and materiality, emphasising questions of agency and vitality.

The theoretical and methodological moves initiated by these interconnected chapters collectively reframe the wet darkroom as a distributive sensorium. This research is born from my own practitioner experiences and observations of being in and of the dark, quite literally. The overarching aim has been to articulate a nuanced understanding of this particular darkened space and what takes place before the perceived outcome of darkroom work which is the finished, fully developed image. A sophisticated sensual-material theory of the darkroom has emerged, one which positions the wet darkroom as a non-neutral

laboratory without losing sight of the experiential, the immaterial, the erotic, and the sensual aspects of process, production, and making-as-sensing.

Throughout this thesis, I have interrogated the prevailing conceptualisation of the darkroom as a passive and neutral backdrop whose function is restricted to servicing image production. In response, the central argument repositions the darkroom in relation to its own materiality, reconceptualising it as a material body in its own right. Whereas the wet darkroom has been predominantly theorised through an ocular and technologically overdetermined lens, this study recalibrates the critical framework toward tactility and olfaction. The darkroom is theorised here as a distributive sensorium – a space of multiple encounters between human and non-human entanglements in the creation of photographic works.

Building on this reconceptualisation, this research advances the darkroom as a site of sensuous photographic knowledge production, wherein non-visual forms of knowledge such as touch, smell, and rhythm prove intrinsic to process and production. Darkroom materials and the photographer's body interact in ways that are both unpredictable and generative, resisting instrumentalist or purely technical accounts of photographic practice. This reframing is not merely conceptual but material and corporeal, emerging from the lived experience of making work and the ways in which materials themselves insist upon their own particular modes of encounter.

Additionally, this thesis makes another contribution to knowledge, it articulates a sensual-material methodology operative through touch, smell, rhythm, and delay, providing a framework for practice-led research that takes seriously the ways in which materials, processes, and bodies co-constitute photographic meaning and production.

These contributions resonate across several fields. In photographic studies, centering the role of non-visual senses challenges the discipline to reconsider what counts as photographic knowledge and how such knowledge is produced. In Sensory Studies, demonstrating how materials and processes resist passivity contributes to ongoing debates about the agency of materials and the vitality of matter. In practice-led research methodologies, integrating sensory experience with theoretical reflection models a mode of scholarly inquiry that refuses the separation of thinking and making, theory and practice.

This practice-led research emerges from sustained practitioner experience as a darkroom and fine art photographic artist, coupled with sustained observation of darkroom labour and tacit knowledge. The research proceeded from the premise that there exists a pressing need to rethink the wet darkroom in relation to its own materiality, with particular emphasis on the sensual-material attributes of process and production. This positioning is not merely autobiographical but methodological, insisting that certain forms of knowledge about photographic practice can only emerge from within the material conditions of that practice.

The contributions pivots away from the overdetermination of technical aspects in darkroom discourse and the ocular-centrism that has dominated engagement with this photographic environment. By redirecting critical attention to darkness, touch, and smell, this research develops a theoretically sophisticated, sensual-material rethinking of photographic

production and its embeddedness in the wet darkroom. This redirection is not a rejection of vision but rather an insistence on the multiplicity of sensory modalities through which photographic work comes into being.

Central to this thesis is the argument that the wet darkroom constitutes a distributive sensorium rather than a neutral site subservient to image production. Through sustained interplay between theoretical texts, material processes, and the production of new work, this research demonstrates that the wet darkroom remains strikingly undertheorised particularly outside contexts of image production and within contemporary photographic practice and studies. These areas of discourse have radically changed since the advent of digital and network culture and the closing of many commercial and independent darkrooms in London and across the UK. This gap represents a fundamental misrecognition of the darkroom's role in photographic production.

By rethinking the darkroom in relation to its own materiality and foregrounding the sensual-material attributes of process, production, and the photographic act, this thesis posits that the darkroom functions both literally and figuratively as another kind of body. Through attention to sensuality and sensuousness, this research addresses a critical gap in current UK photographic scholarship. It draws promiscuously across multiple disciplines, including non-dialectical theories, sensory studies, radical matter, and new materialist thought, by refusing the boundaries that have traditionally separated these fields.

The central claim is that the wet darkroom operates as a distributive sensorium and that the latent image constitutes a form of encounter. This fundamentally reorients how we understand the corporeal dimensions of photographic practice, viewing the darkroom not

merely in terms of its materiality, but as a differentiated body with its own agencies and capacities. This reorientation extends beyond photographic studies, contributing to broader conversations about creative labour, embodied knowledge, and the relationship between human and non-human actors in processes of making.

There are other implications which can extend beyond the immediate context of darkroom practice. By demonstrating that the wet darkroom operates as a distributive sensorium, this thesis opens questions about other photographic spaces and practices that might be reconsidered through a sensual-material lens, for instance, darkrooms outside of commercial, community, or shared spaces to include bathrooms, kitchens, garages, closets, and storage rooms.

Moreover, by positioning the darkroom as a non-neutral laboratory and foregrounding entanglements between human and non-human actors, this research contributes to broader conversations about agency, collaboration, and sense-making. The darkroom, as theorised here, is not a space of human mastery over inert materials but rather a site of negotiation, encounter, and mutual transformation. This understanding has implications for how we think about creative authorship, artistic labour, and the ethics of making.

Future Research

This thesis has opened up several new lines of inquiry, one that connects the photographic darkroom with the sexual darkroom and backroom in ways that are not immediately obvious. Future research will investigate the unexpected theoretical and sensory resonances between these two spaces. Although they emerge from distinct artistic and social practices, both rely on darkness, the senses in particular touch and smell and the unique characteristic soundscapes that shape how bodies move in and through the dark. Attending to the sonic dimension the hums, whispers, muffled gestures, and rhythmic repetitions can potentially deepen an interdisciplinary and promiscuous understanding of how atmosphere and acoustics guide behaviour, produce meaning, and create forms of intimacy or creativity. Such an inquiry offers rich potential for conversations across visual culture, queer studies, sensory studies, radical matter, and sound studies.

The wet photographic darkroom and the sexual darkroom or backroom share a fundamental logic of obscurity as a generative condition, and this is mirrored in their acoustics. In the photographic darkroom, the low red glow is accompanied by the soft sloshing of trays, the drip of water, the click of timers, and the quiet concentration that settles into the room like another layer of darkness. These sounds are part of the developing process: they signal timing, transformation, and the delicate choreography between chemical reactions and human touch. The darkroom's soundscape—subtle, repetitive, nearly intimate—reinforces the sense that creation occurs not in full visibility but within an environment where the unseen and the unheard guide the emergence of form.

Similarly, the sexual darkroom or backroom is shaped as much by its sonic atmosphere as by its reduced visibility. In this setting, sound becomes a primary orienting force: footsteps negotiating uncertain space, the rustle of clothing, low voices blending with ambient music filtering from outside, and the textured hush that arises from people navigating sensual encounters in near-darkness.

These sonic cues create a field in which anonymity, ambiguity, and sensory attunement become central. In both spaces, darkness and sound collaborate to produce environments where perception shifts away from visual dominance and toward embodied listening.

Exploring these resonances opens fertile ground for future research on how darkness, tactility, smell, and acoustics cultivate intimacy, creativity, and alternative modes of presence that refuse the clarity and surveillance of fully illuminated, fully audible spaces.

Appendices



Figure 24: Eric Gyamfi (born 1990 -) Eric Gyamfi , from *Julius and I*, 2023, Cyanotypes



Figure 25: Rotimi Fani -Kayode (1955-1989) Adebisi, Gum Bichromate Print ,1989



Figure 26 Darrel Ellis (1958–1992), Silver Gelatin Print (1990)



Figure 27 Paul Mpagi Sepuya , Darkroom , Studio Mirror, 2022

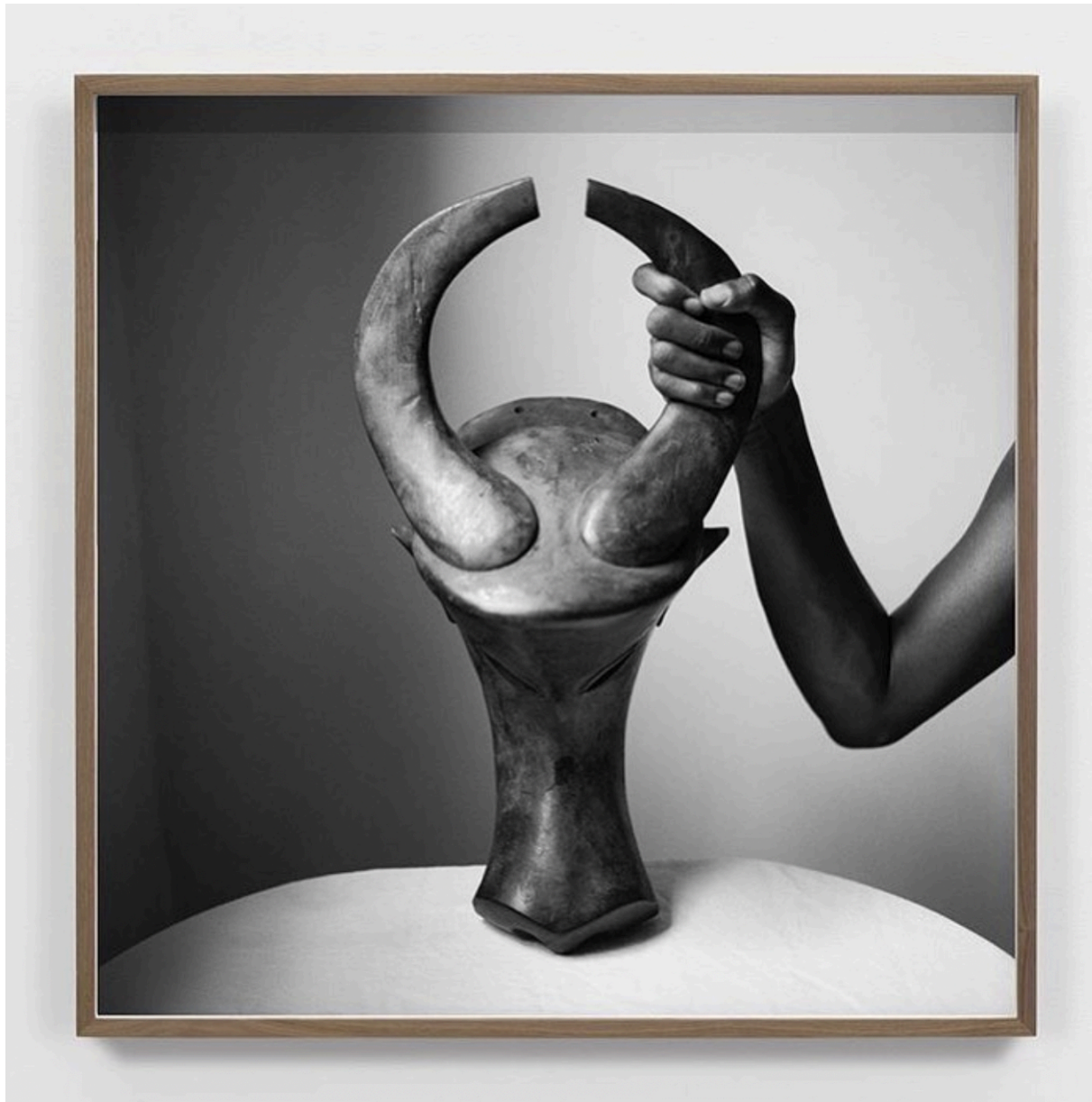


Figure 28 John Edmonds , Bull Mask (from the Ivory Coast), 2019 , Silver Gelatin Print

While the main thesis did not directly examine the work of other photographers, future research will benefit significantly from doing so particularly Black queer photographers (Rotimi Fani- Kayode (1955 -1989), Darell Ellis (1958-1992) , Eric Gyamfi, John Edmonds, Paul Mpagi Sepuya)whose practices included a strong darkroom element and all have worked with traditional print processes. The omission was intentional, as the thesis focused primarily on personal experimentation, process-driven exploration, and the development of a theoretical framework on the wet darkroom as a distributive sensorium. Acknowledging this gap opens a productive space for further inquiry. Many Black queer photographers have shaped their practice through analogue methods, and engaging with their work would provide critical cultural, historical, and aesthetic context that aligns closely with the themes explored in this project.

Examining these photographers in future research would allow for a deeper understanding of how identity, materiality, and process intersect in analogue image-making. Their darkroom-centred approaches often carry embodied and political dimensions, reflecting lived experiences and communities that have historically been underrepresented in photographic discourse. Studying their work would not only offer technical and material insights, such as alternative uses of light, texture, and chemical manipulation but also illuminate conceptual strategies This could enrich the project's methodological grounding and help situate it within a broader lineage of analogue experimentation led by Black queer artists.

Furthermore, Black queer photographers frequently articulate philosophies around slowness in the darkroom , and the tactility of analogue processes, all of which resonate with the motivations behind this thesis. Incorporating their perspectives in future research would therefore strengthen the academic depth of the work while expanding its cultural and theoretical framework.

The Na₂ Method in Platinum/Palladium Printing

This thesis worked with the Na₂ method (*Ecce Homo, A Sensual Chorus of Gestures*) it is a modern refinement of the traditional platinum–palladium (Pt/Pd) printing process, created to provide precise and predictable contrast control. In the classic Pt/Pd process, image formation occurs when ultraviolet light reduces Ferric Oxalate to Ferrous Oxalate, which in turn reduces platinum or palladium salts to their metallic forms within the paper fibers. Historically, printers relied on Potassium Chlorate or other strong oxidising agents to adjust contrast, but these chemicals were inconsistent and often produced grainy or harsh tonal transitions. The Na₂ method replaces those oxidizers with Sodium Chloroplatinate, known colloquially as “Na₂.” This contrast-control agent works in far smaller quantities than earlier additives and interacts more cleanly with Ferric Oxalate, producing smoother tonal gradation, improved midtone separation, and greater consistency between prints. Its introduction also allowed palladium-only prints traditionally low in contrast to achieve a wider and more controllable tonal scale.

Although platinum printing itself was invented in the 1870s by William Willis, the Na₂ method is a contemporary development.

This thesis experimented with a diverse range of papers, including traditional cotton rag, fine art archival sheets, and Japanese washi varieties such as Tosa Washi (see *A Sensual Chorus of Gestures*). The Intention was to investigate their response to platinum-palladium sensitisers, coating behavior, wet-handling durability, and tonal rendition, highlighting the interplay between paper choice and the final print quality.

Chemicals

Sodium Chloroplatinate

Sodium Chloropalladite

Ferric Oxalate

Potassium Oxalate (warm developer)

Ammonium Citrate (cool developer)

Sodium Citrate (cool developer)

Negatives

Digital negatives were made with Pictorio

Paper

Throughout this research process , a range of papers were used and experimented with including:

Hahnemühle Platinum Rag

Arches Platine

Legion Revere

Bergger COT320

Toshi Wasi Japanese Tissue Paper

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