

Eight Notes on Blankness

Sarah Osment

- 1 More often than not, as any critic will tell you, the background is as important as the foreground in looking at things.
- 2 I, for one, can only contemplate so many faces and dwell in so many pores and follow so many folds before my eyes start to travel toward the edge of the frame, toward the place that's transfixed these pilgrims where, we are told, Blackfoot, Idaho, approaches Butte, Montana, and where, we find out, buttes approach blankness.
- 3 The picture seems to offer refuge from its crowdedness in that haze: a welcome dependence on the fuzzy and the opaque. The road ahead provides a place of projection for the photograph's viewer (interpretive closure—the end of meaning) and for its subjects (the end of the road).
- 4 But whatever relief I may find in the image's negative space is fleeting, because the sclera forces us back to the fore, to the white of one eye and the thousand-yard stare behind it.
- 5 In his 1957 preface to *The Americans*, written the same year that *On the Road* recast hitchhiking as a liberatory act, Jack Kerouac considered how "[a]fter seeing these pictures you'd end up finally not knowing any more whether a jukebox is sadder than a coffin." The disorientation Kerouac describes here has partly to do with what he calls the "intermediary mysteries" that both occasion and condition Frank's work. Indeed, looking at this photograph at times titled *The Hitchhikers*, one is confronted with a litany of unknowns: Who are these men? Where did they come from? Where are they headed? Am I, too, hitchhiking, as the photograph's title seems to imply? Suspended between purpose, vulnerability, and fear, even the expressions here are blank.
- 6 A little digging will tell you that Frank picked up the two men one evening along US Highway 91 and drove them to Butte—an event that, if true, nicely captures the contingency that is so often attributed to the medium. Roland Barthes describes photography along just these lines, noting how it remains "wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope." But this photograph is deceptively uncomposed.
- 7 "Is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning?" In looking at this image, I'm reminded of Ishmael's famous question about the annihilating void known as Moby Dick. The logic of this photograph's blankness—of that land, in that look—provokes a similar question in me. Frank's blankness is neither neutral nor innocent, then, but so thickly layered as to exhaust any one interpretive path. Melvillean, not Lockean.
- 8 Because its blankness is so available for projection and yet so well-worn, I find this image difficult to travel with, and through.



Robert Frank

U.S. 91 – Leaving Blackfoot, Idaho, 1956

gelatin silver print, 22 x 33.3 cm