

# HABITS OF HOSTILITY ON SEEING RACE

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When the critical legal theorist Gary Peller was growing up during the period of school desegregation in Atlanta, he was chosen among a select group of high school students to participate in a city-wide project of “unlearning racism.” The students were brought together in a large room, the lights were turned off, and the students were invited to touch each other’s faces in the dark. The lesson hoped for was that, in the dark, the students would learn that race makes no difference. Peller persuasively critiques this exercise as a sham because, when the lights were turned back on, the economic and political disparities between the black and white communities in Atlanta were still in place, and a serious attempt to address racism had to address those disparities. But in one sense, the school administrators understood correctly the importance of racialized visible differences in student interaction. By eliminating visibility, they hoped the usual distrust and hostility would be absent and new forms of interaction might surface. Unfortunately, the lights had to be turned back on, and things were then indeed, as Peller says, just the same.

In this essay I want to think through the relationship between the visibility of race and racism. If one believes that the very existence of race entails racism, this question will be a non-starter, but I want to table that issue at least for the moment. That issue, of whether race entails racism, turns on the way in which we understand racial identity, which needs a lengthy argument itself. If we understand racial identity as a historically created, socially important category that essentially names a cultural identity, it is not clear to me that racist hierarchies are entailed. Nonetheless, to identify a cultural group through their visible racialized features

(that is, features in which race is thought to inhere) seems arbitrary and, at least, inherently dangerous. If the viability of race as a category of identity depends on its cultural rather than physical manifestations, shouldn’t the whole process of *seeing* race come to an end? This is the topic that I want to focus on in this essay: the visibility of race. Peller is surely right that eliminating the visible practices of racialization is not sufficient for the elimination of racism, but we might still ask: is it perhaps necessary?

It is easy to imagine a situation, such as Danzy Senna describes in her autobiographical novel, *Caucasia*, in which two sisters share the same two parents, grow up in the same house, but are assigned different racial identities.<sup>1</sup> If their parents differ in racial background, or if even just one parent comes from a “mixed” background, this scenario is all too common in social contexts, such as North America, where gradations of skin color or alterations in hair texture signify differences of type. In other words, though siblings are genetically closer than any other human relationship, racial identity can be assigned differentially without regard to ancestry, background experiences, or biology. I raise this to underscore the complete idiocy of practices of racial seeing that ground identity on such trivial criteria. But one might then wonder the following: would I prefer that the two sisters share a racial identity, on one side or the other? Am I suggesting that though their “visible” race is thought to differ, their “real” race, based on genetic inheritance, is the same? This is equally absurd. It would seem then that neither biological nor morphological features should have the power of designating race.

However, it is an indisputable fact about the social reality of mainstream North America that racial consciousness works through learned practices and habits of visual discrimination and visible marks on the body. In this way, race operates differently from ethnic or cultural identities, which can be transcended, with enough effort. Inherent to the concept of race is the idea that it exists there on the body itself, not simply on its ornaments or in its behaviors. Races may have indeterminate borders, and some individuals may appear ambiguous, but many people believe that (a) there exists a fact of the matter about one's racial identity, usually determined by ancestry, and (b) that identity is discernible if one peers long enough at, or observes carefully enough, the person's physical features and practiced mannerisms. Though the commonly accepted definition of race explains it by ancestry, the ideology of race asserts its impervious visibility, despite the fact that the two are not always in sync. When the visible trace of known ancestry is not manifest, people look for it, carefully, as those of us who are of mixed race know all too well. To feel one's face studied with great seriousness, not for its (hoped for) character lines, or its distinctiveness, but for its telltale racial trace, can be a peculiarly unsettling experience, fully justifying of all Sartre's horror of the Look.

Knowing how to pin down those of ambiguous lineage is crucial in this society because racializing perceptual practices are used to produce a visual registry of any given social field. This field is organized differentially to distribute the likelihood of intersubjective trust, the extension of epistemic credence, and empathy. A body that is racialized, then, is over-determined through racial classifications and their associated attributions. As Fanon described it, one is indeed a "slave not of the 'idea' others have of me but of my own appearance."<sup>2</sup>

There are several reasons why one might argue that we must begin to unlearn racial seeing. Most simply, one might argue that, without racial seeing, there can be no races, and thus no

racism. Even if one might want to hold onto the cultural or ethnic identities that race is sometimes used to signify, one could hold that it is the visible feature of *race*, as opposed to culture and ethnicity, that is inherently pernicious and this is because the visualization of raced attributes works to naturalize the constructions of racial types. There is no doubt that visual differences are "real" differences, in the sense that the visual markers of race are manifest in real features even if those features are made to stand out in relief and are treated as type distinctions rather than gradations. Still, it is the very fact of visibility itself that makes such markers especially valuable for the naturalizing ideologies of race. All the more reason to disentangle social identity from visible bodily attributes.

Moreover, perception has the added attribute of being, as Merleau-Ponty said, "not presumed true, but defined as access to truth."<sup>3</sup> Perception cannot readily or easily become the object of analysis itself. Merleau-Ponty's description of attenuated processes of perception is especially helpful here. Perceptual processes involved in cognition can become organized, like bodily movements used to perform various operations, into integrated units that become attenuated to such a degree that they are experienced as simple, uninterpreted perception. In the case of the blind man's use of a stick to find objects, Merleau-Ponty says,

It would appear in this case that perception is always a reading off from the same sensory data, but constantly accelerated, and operating with ever more attenuated signals. But habit does not *consist* in interpreting the pressures of the stick on the hand as indications of certain positions of the stick, and these as signs of an external object, since it *relieves us of the necessity* of doing so.<sup>4</sup>

He then contrasts this account with a more positivist approach:

Intellectualism cannot conceive any passage from the perspective to the thing itself, or from sign to significance otherwise than as an interpretation, an apperception, a cognitive inten-

tion. . . . But this analysis distorts both the sign and the meaning: it separates out, by a process of objectification of both, the sense-content, which is already "pregnant" with a meaning, and the invariant core . . . it conceals the organic relationship between subject and world, the active transcendence of consciousness, the momentum which carries it into a thing and into a world by means of its organs and instruments. The analysis of motor habit as an extension of existence leads on, then, to an analysis of perceptual habit as the coming into possession of a world. . . . In the gaze we have at our disposal a natural instrument analogous to the blind man's stick.<sup>5</sup>

This account would explain both why racializing attributions are nearly impossible to discern and why they are resistant to alteration or erasure. Our experience of habitual perceptions is so attenuated as to skip the stage of conscious interpretation and intent. Indeed, interpretation is the wrong word here: we are simply perceiving. And the traditional pre-Hegelian modernist account of perception, what I called above "positivism," blocks our appreciation of this. It is just such a modernist account that would explain why it is commonly believed that for one to be a racist one must be able to access in their consciousness some racist belief, and that if introspection fails to produce such a belief then one is simply not racist. An habitual fear of African-Americans or a condescension toward Latinos is seen as simple perception of the real, justified by the nature of things in themselves without need of an interpretive intermediary of historico-cultural schemas of meaning. A vision-centric approach to cognition would seem to lend itself easily to a positivist ideology, as if the act of seeing is not an act of interpretation, and as if what is visible and thus what is seen is thus indubitable.

In a series of recent studies on the treatment of vision in the history of philosophy, collected and, to some extent, inspired by David Michael Levin, a number of other problems with vision as a source of knowledge have been explored.<sup>6</sup> According to Gary Shapiro, Nietzsche recog-

nized the critical importance that the privileging of vision for the purposes of cognition has played in the Western tendency toward a metaphysics of presence.<sup>7</sup> The will wants everything to be totally visible and totally clear. As Shapiro points out, however, this indicates that for Nietzsche it is not that the organ of sight itself tends toward transcendental metaphysics, since here it is merely doing the bidding of the will. But it does suggest that vision is especially useful in perpetrating the illusion of transparent cognition. What cannot be "made totally visible and clear," moreover, may disappear altogether from consciousness, as Herman Rapaport shows, such as the cinders that remained in the crematoria of Nazi death camps.<sup>8</sup>

A further danger follows from the fact that vision itself is all too often thought to operate as a solitary means to knowledge. Against claims from another, one demands to "see for oneself," as if sight is an individual operation that tests others' claims without also always relying on them. By contrast, knowledge based on the auditory sense, some have argued, is inherently dialogic, and encourages us to listen to what the other says, rather than merely judging how they appear. And of course, from Foucault we have developed a sensibility to the disciplining potential of visibility. Ours is an era where surveillance is the preferred route of power; where power expands itself through an expansion of visibility in work places, public spaces, and even private ones. "Visibility is a trap," declares Foucault, "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." On this point we find him seeming to agree with his nemesis, Sartre, for whom the look of the other is a kind of death.

Racism makes productive use of this look, using learned visual cues to demarcate and organize human kinds. It has been suggested by Goldberg and West that the genealogy of race itself emerged simultaneous to the ocularcentric tendencies of the western

episteme, in which the criteria for knowledge was classifiability, which in turn required visible difference. Without the operation through sight, then, perhaps race would truly wither away, or mutate into less oppressive forms of social identity, e.g., ethnicity and culture, which make reference to the histories, experiences, and productions of a people, to their subjective life, in other words, and not merely to objective and arbitrary bodily features.

Without too much effort, one can imagine a distant future in which human differences are not organized in the terms of race; one can imagine this much more easily than, by contrast, one might imagine a future without gender. Unless we abolish the biological division of labor in the reproduction of the human species, there will continue to be a profound difference between the males and females of our species, even if the meanings, the implications, the boundaries, and the intensity of that difference continue, as they always have, to transform. Still, the bodily and visible differences that exist between most males and females is supervenient on the biological division of labor. Alternatively, the visible markers of race have no biological correlates, as Gould, Marshall, Washburn, Livingston and others have shown.<sup>10</sup> Conventional race categories have no correspondence to genotype, genetic variability, or clinal variations. And the phenotypical features used to differentiate the races are underdetermined by genetic inheritance in any case. The claim that there is a behavioral or intellectual correlation to current race categories would require (a) a genetic frequency that conforms to race categories, but that in fact does not obtain, and (b) proof that genes determine phenotype, morphology and behavior, but that also does not obtain (and could not given everything we know about genes). Thus, using racial categories to direct biological research has been described as “focusing the microscope on the box the slides came in.”<sup>11</sup>

The physical features conventionally used to differentiate the races are almost laughably insignificant: skin tone, hair texture, shape of facial features. These markers do have some

practical effects, in the effects of sun exposure on the skin, and in the effects of various products used on the hair and skin, for example. But such facts are clearly insignificant compared, for example, to the difference between those who bear the labor pains and those who hold the hand of those who bear the labor pains, between those who nurse and those who can sleep through the night, between those whose bodies almost single-handedly create, develop, nurture, and then give birth and those for whom, during these same nine months, “parental involvement” is optional. I could go on, but the point is simply that the physical correlates of race and gender identity are not of the same order of significance. The differences that race and gender make are of a different order.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, it is easier to imagine a future without race than without gender: if the complete elimination of gender would require a radical overhaul of biological reproduction, the elimination of race would seem only to require a retooling of our perceptual apparatuses. But here, I want to insert a worry: some white folks have declared, no doubt prematurely, that they have already reached utopia. While the rest of us continue to see in color, they declare themselves to be color-blind, to not notice whether people are “black, white, green or purple.”

Bernita Berry and Patricia Williams have both noted this phenomena and passionately critiqued it.<sup>13</sup> Williams recounts that in her son’s nursery school, color-blindness had been pressed upon the children by well-meaning teachers, with the result of leaving “those in my son’s position pulled between the clarity of their own experience and the often alienating terms in which they must seek social acceptance.”<sup>14</sup> Despite the teachers’ attempts to deny the relevance of color, racism was still active on the playground as the children fought over whether “black people could play ‘good guys.’”<sup>15</sup> Williams argues that, although she embraces “color-blindness as a legitimate hope for the future,” in our contemporary context “the very notion of blindness about color constitutes an ideological confusion at best,

and denial at its very worst.”<sup>16</sup> Berry argues that such statements as “I just see people; I don’t see color” . . . reflect a deeply hidden effect of racism. This statement reduces socially significant human differences to invisibility and meaningless hype whereby one does not have to acknowledge what one does not see.”<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, she explains, the statement is meant to impart that racism “may be a reality for those other people ‘those minorities’ but they do not exist for the speaker.”<sup>18</sup> I found growing up in the post civil rights south that color-blindness was regularly claimed by white folks and regularly repudiated by folks of color. There seemed to be an anxiety about the perception of race on the part of some whites, a fear of acknowledging that one sees it.

The interesting, independent film *Suture* has been talked about as the best visual representation of postmodernism in the past decade, but I think it also evidences a revealing anxiety about seeing race. The film offers an intriguing narrative about a case of fratricide in which a white man (Vincent) attempts to murder his black brother (Clay) and stage it as his own suicide. The attempted murder fails, but Clay is severely burned and injured, and only after much surgery does Clay regain his body intact. The twist is that, although Vincent’s attempt to murder Clay fails, his identity switch succeeds. As Clay recuperates, with his dark skin quite visible, we expect the hospital staff and Vincent’s friend who visits him in the hospital to notice that the survivor of the accident is a different man, not the white Vincent as the identification papers on his body at the time of the accident led people to believe. But they all mistake him as Vincent. And Clay’s amnesia eventually results in his own belief that he is his white brother, despite the fact that he looks at pictures and even a videotape of the “original” Vincent.

*Suture* thus provides an effective dramatization of the way in which the self is constituted by the other: Clay becomes Vincent because everyone around him treats him as Vincent. And because Vincent is white and Clay is

black, when Clay becomes Vincent his life takes a 180 degree turn, which is played to comic effect in, for example, his sudden development of a taste in classical music. Clay becomes Vincent in social position, sensibilities, and even memory. He assumes ownership of all of Vincent’s possessions, and Vincent’s friends and the police impose memories of Vincent’s past on Clay. Thus, it is not simply that Clay has been mistaken for Vincent, but that Clay is transformed into Vincent when he is interpellated as white; his subjectivity and characteristics change so radically that, by the end, it is clear that Clay is, indeed, dead.

The term “suture” itself is, of course, a key concept from Lacan. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, who has developed a very interesting Lacanian reading of the film, explains Lacan’s concept of suture as “the process by which the subject comes to find a place for itself in a signifying chain by inserting itself in what is perceived as a gap, a place-holder for it.”<sup>19</sup> Clay becomes Vincent by such a process in which he, or his body, is inserted into the place-holder for Vincent. Seshadri-Crooks’s reading of the film develops several different themes, but she shares my view that it tries to foreground for the audience our own racial seeing, that is, the importance we attach to racial identity. The new Vincent’s skin tone is not explained in reference to skin grafting or surgery; his friends and family all look at the old Vincent’s photographs, then back to the new Vincent, and exclaim that there is an exact match. The movie ends with none of the characters noticing that the man who survived the car bombing has dark skin while the man who they think him to be had light skin. As Seshadri-Crooks puts it, “By requiring us to suspend our *belief* [that is, that no one in the film recognizes the visible difference between Clay and Vincent], the film . . . puts pressure on our suturing into the narration and forces a purchase of our visual pleasure at the price of our own raced subjectivities.”<sup>20</sup> The suturing we are made to be aware of, the film-maker’s must have hoped, is ultimately not Clay’s into his

brother's life but our own suturing into racist society.

While I can appreciate the efficacy of the film toward this end, I also believe it manifests a (white) anxiety about seeing race. The coherence of the narrative depends on all the characters being, in effect, color blind, in the colloquial sense of the phrase that Williams and Berry critique. Yet if the audience is made to feel that their own racial seeing is racist, they must then aspire to become like the whites in the movie who apparently cannot see skin color. It is true that, by the end of the movie, Clay no longer exists in any significant sense, and thus Clay *is* Vincent. But the audience is also privy to the knowledge that, even if Clay no longer exists, the man who has assumed Vincent's life is not identical to Vincent. Anyone, it would seem, of any bodily form, could be sutured into anyone else's life. On this view, the "true" self that exists below a racist overlay can cast aside its racialized identity as an animal might shed its skin. Even if we can imagine a distant future without race, I would argue that today racial identity cannot be shed this easily nor is it fully reducible to its visible markers such that without them, an individual would simply drop its racial identity.

In order to consider the viability and desirability of the view that *Suture* seems to endorse, let me start by raising again the question of whether the hope for an eradication of visible racial identity is in collusion with the color-blind declaration that Williams and Berry critique. Williams and Berry leave open the possibility of a future beyond race, but their critique of the color blind position is, as I said, not simply based on skepticism of its likely reality, but also on their insistence that race needs to be seen. As Berry puts it, the refusal to see race has the effect of reducing "socially significant human difference to invisibleness and meaningless hype." This argument could be interpreted in two possible ways: (1) race needs to be seen because only then will racism and the ways in which race has distorted human identity be seen, or (2) race needs to be seen in order to see racism and the ways in which race

has distorted human identity, but also in order to acknowledge the positive sense of racial identity that has been carved from histories of oppression. Racial identity may have begun in oppression, but the experience of even these sorts of collective identities (i.e., racialized identities) is not always expressed as trauma or manifested as tribalism, to quote Benjamin Barber. In this light, Toni Morrison has made the interesting claim that,

The defenders of Western hegemony sense the encroachment and have already defined the possibility of imagining race without dominance—without hierarchy—as "barbarism." We are already being asked to understand such a world as the destruction of the four-gated city, as the end of history. We are already being asked to know such a world as aftermath—as rubbish, as an already damaged experience, as a valueless future. Once again, the political consequences of new and threatening theoretical work is the ascription of an already named catastrophe. It is therefore more urgent than ever to develop nonmessianic language to refigure the raced community. . . . These questions, which have engaged so many, have troubled all of my work. How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home. How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling?<sup>21</sup>

For Morrison, it would seem, race identity needs sublation, not a simple negation. But perhaps Morrison's emphasis is on identity rather than race. That is, her main concern may be that in the guise of granting equality whites will demand the sacrifice of identity or more properly of collective differences, a demand not unlike the demand of one-way assimilation, the effect of which is to eliminate all identities save one. Thus, I take Morrison to be disagreeing with those from Jean-Paul Sartre to Nancy Fraser who imagine the utopian future as one in which social categories of identity, whether black or white, Jew or Gentile, Latino or Anglo, no longer have purchase on individual lives. In "Black Orpheus," Sartre perceptively addressed some aspects of racism in

Western literature but assumed that the future we all want would be, not reformulation and redemption of social identity, but its disappearance. Squarely operating within the western tradition on this topic at least, Sartre could not imagine social identity as anything but a constraint on individual freedom. Nancy Fraser echoes this in her recent work, when she portrays the ideal future as “socialism in the economy plus deconstruction in the culture” which will require “that all people be *weaned* from their attachment to current cultural constructions of their interests and identities.”<sup>22</sup>

But what about race? Social identities can take numerous forms, and collective differences can be articulated through historical experience, religion, cultural coherence, even geographical location, any of which is surely better than the arbitrary and insignificant phenotypic differences by which race is assigned. What is unique about race is this necessary marking of the body itself. Gender also operates in this way socially, but as I’ve said it bears a deeper relation to truly significant human difference than race has or can. Isn’t it the visibility itself that gives race its “lethal cling”?

If this is so, we might then want to ask: what are the real possibilities of reducing race visibility?

Despite the fact that since Locke philosophers have characterized color as a secondary rather than primary quality, color perception is the result of external stimulation, in particular, as C. L. Hardin explains, “the detection of electromagnetic radiation in the wavelength band extending from 380 to 760 nm (one nanometer = one millimicron = one billionth of a meter).”<sup>23</sup> The immediate source of visual stimulation is “light which has been reflected from the surface of physical objects. Such surfaces normally reflect incident light selectively; the pattern of wavelength selectivity determines the color which we see the object as having.”<sup>24</sup> Variations in color perception are explained generally by “the state of adaptation of the eye, the character of the illuminant, and the color

and brightness of surrounding objects.”<sup>25</sup> There is disagreement among scientists who study color perception about why our vision is restricted to the color spectrum that runs from red to blue, and why the mix of hues is limited, but the facts about our perceptual limits are indisputable. For human beings, as the old example goes, “nothing can be red all over and green all over.”

Such naturalized accounts of color perception may well create anxiety when linked to practices of racial identification, given that naturalized accounts of race and racism have been such an important part of racial ideology. And in fact, naturalized explanations of the creation of racial categories are still popular. Lawrence Hirschfeld reports that “the prevalent point of view in psychology is that racialized thought is a by-product of the way information is organized and processed.”<sup>26</sup> Here’s how the argument goes: The propensity to classify facilitates thought by “reducing the sheer amount of information to which people need to attend.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, classifications can “extend our knowledge by capturing nonobvious similarities between their members.”<sup>28</sup> We need only see that a given creature is a cat to be able to infer its food preferences, sleeping habits, and likely aversion to dogs without having to learn these facts from an extended observation of the individual animal. Psychologists then infer that (a) because of the human propensity to classify on the basis of “conspicuous physical similarities” and (b) because gender and race have “prominent physical correlates,” it follows that the categorization of humans by gender and race is natural to human cognition.

But would such a process be functional in the way that, say, the classification “cat” is functional? In regard to gender, the physical capacities for reproduction of males and females is certainly a fact that will at times be useful to know, but what do we learn when we classify people by race? What hair salon they might go to? What is pernicious about race classifications, which of course has also been

pernicious about the history of gender classifications, is the host of attributes purportedly correlating to physical racial features. Here is where we clearly need more explanatory resources than the basic wiring of the human eye and the functional orientation of human cognition.

The practice of othering those who are different in skin tone is historically and culturally particular. In *The Black Notebooks*, Toi Derricotte describes what her life has been like as a black woman who is light enough often to pass as white. She recounts the following experience:

A black boy in the fourth grade says to me, "I'd like to be your son."

A white boy sitting near him responds, "You could *never* be her son."

"Why not?" I ask.

"Because he's black."

[And then Toi says,] "But I'm black, too."

He looks at me, his eyes swimming with confusion and pain.

Derricotte then offers an explanation of this incident as follows:

White children might have a more difficult time forming a concept of kinship with people of different colors. Black children grow up in families where there is every conceivable color, texture of hair, thickness of feature. In white families there is much less difference. I decide to test this.

"How many in the room have people in their families that are all different colors, some people as light as I am, some people as dark as Sheldon?"

All the black kids raise their hands.

"How many have people in their family that are all just about the same color?"

All the white kids raise their hands.<sup>29</sup>

The propensity to identify those of different colors as potential family members is commonplace in Caribbean cultures as well where families often include people who are of different "races," at least races by North American standards, and these are not just in-laws. This does not make racism or the preference for

whiteness disappear, but it does shift the locus of othering such that skin tone is not sufficient for classification.

Lawrence Hirschfeld's work on children's construction of human kinds provides evidence that children come to know which visible features are relevant to human classifications only after they "integrate their perceptual knowledge with ontological knowledge."<sup>30</sup> This is not to say that the perceptual competences are irrelevant or secondary, but that they become operable in cognition only when children adapt to what Hirschfeld calls domain specific competence, or the ability to gain, organize and use "knowledge about a particular content area."<sup>31</sup> In other words, the mind is not, as previous psychologists typically imagined, like a general all-purpose problem solver but more like a "collection of . . . special-purpose tools, each targeting a specific problem or content."<sup>32</sup> Domain specific competences direct "attention to certain sorts of data" as well as posit ontological organizations of perceptible phenomena. This is only to reinforce the claims of philosophers from Mead to Heidegger to Merleau-Ponty that the results of perception represent sedimented contextual knowledges, that "our individual sensibilities and perceptions are never purely individual, but are the result of our upbringing, heritage and identity."<sup>33</sup> Still it is always nice to have empirical confirmations.

Previous researchers on race classification have generally hypothesized the construction of racial categories as building from perception in a linear causal sequence. In contrast, Hirschfeld hypothesized two types of cognitive competence: perceptual and domain specific, that can work in tandem or sequentially in either order. For example, a child might learn the relevant conceptual domain of color in her culture, by which color is used to organize human kinds, and only then "begin to attend in earnest to the physical correlates that adults believe are important in racial classification."<sup>34</sup> To show this he devised a set of experiments to test the following prediction: that the ability to recall the racial identity of a person



should be higher on “verbal rather than visual tasks” given his hypothesis that social ontologies are initially derived from discursive information. “The standard view predicts that racial cognition should be better evoked by visual than by verbal stimuli.”<sup>35</sup> Hirschfeld’s method was as follows: “Sixty-four 3- and 4-year old French pre-schoolers” were read a series of simple stories in which the characters were each described in terms of race, occupation, gender, behavior, and a nonracial physical feature (such as body type or age).<sup>36</sup> The children’s recall was then tested. In every case, occupation was remembered far better than any other attribute. However, four year olds showed a marked improvement over three year olds in their ability to remember race. These results were then compared to a similar study in which visual narratives rather than spoken narratives were used with a different group of children. Here, gender out-ranked occupation in the number of times it was recalled, and race dropped significantly down. In a further visual narrative experiment adding in more variables, children remembered clothing, gender, and behavior about equally, with race dropping to less than half and even to a quarter of the other markers. The fact that race was less well remembered when the narrative was visual rather than verbal strongly suggests that the visual cues of race become operable only after a child has developed a cognitive competence specific to the domain of race in his or her cultural context.

These results do not suggest that human beings might be led to confuse light with dark skin tone, as in the *Suture* example, or that we would become colorblind, but that color could certainly become less salient, less memorable, and that we could come to perceive skin tone in the way it more exactly is presented to consciousness: as a continuously varying attribute rather than a set of discrete categories.

The attempts to explain racial classifications by natural facts of human cognition are surely inadequate. Sight does not lead in a di-

rect line to race. However, we still have the arguments of the philosophers that relying on vision for knowledge is itself a dangerous practice: it obscures its interpretive operations through a veneer of pure perception, and thus can lend itself to a metaphysics of presence where the perception of “sexual licentiousness” or “dull wittedness” appears as a fact in the world. But is sight really worse than other avenues in this regard? Differences of diction and accent can get as easily marked as the sign of innate inferiority as differences of appearance. The olfactory senses have also been used to legitimize discrimination. Racism is an equal opportunity interpreter across the five senses.

One might well think that we should turn away from the senses altogether as too unreliable. But sometimes sight is our best chance for human communication, if we can only learn to be attentive enough. Adorno reminds us, against Levinas, that “the mechanism of ‘pathic projection’ determines that those in power perceive as human only their own reflected image.”<sup>37</sup> We are not always moved to ethical responsiveness by the face of the Other. Nonetheless, if our visual faculty did not by itself lead us to this depravity, then eliminating its role in cognition cannot be either necessary or sufficient if we wish to unlearn racism. Rather, we need new domain specific competences within which to practice our sight. In the movie *My Dinner with Andre*, the egotistical Andre recounts to his dull-witted friend Wallace that he has suddenly seen anew the picture of his wife that he has carried in his wallet for twenty years. Before, he had always seen his wife in the picture as sensuous and beautiful; only much later did he look hard at the photograph and notice how sad she looked, how profoundly unhappy. It took maturity perhaps for Andre to see the truth that the picture held for him, to learn the competences by which he could notice what was right before his eyes all along. I suspect that, like Andre, we simply need to learn to see better.

## ENDNOTES

1. Danzy Senna, *Caucasia* (New York: Penguin, 1998).
2. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 116.
3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: The Humanities Press, 1960), p. xvi.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 152–53.
6. See David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), and *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).
7. See Gary Shapiro, “In the Shadows of Philosophy: Nietzsche and the Question of Vision,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, pp. 124–42.
8. See Herman Rapaport, “Time’s Cinders,” in *ibid.*, pp. 218–33.
9. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 200–01.
10. These articles are collected in Sandra Harding, ed., *The Racial Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
11. Frank B. Livingstone, “On the Nonexistence of Human Races,” in *ibid.*, pp. 133–41.
12. I hope I will not be misread here as implying that the current arrangements of childcare are caused by the biological division of labor in reproduction, or that females have all the disadvantageous differences and males all the advantageous ones, or that these very differences are forever unchangeable, or that the human species admits of only two, discrete and clearly demarcated genders. I am not saying any of these things. I am simply saying that the physical correlates of race and gender identity are not of the same order of significance, nor can they be made so without extremely radical changes in the process of human reproduction.
13. Bernita C. Berry, “‘I Just See People’: Exercises in Learning the Effects of Racism and Sexism,” in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, edited by Linda A. Bell and David Blumenfeld (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), pp. 45–51; Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: Noonday Press, 1997).
14. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
17. Berry, “I Just See People,” p. 46.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
19. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 105.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
21. Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House that Race Built*, ed. by Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Random House, 1998), pp. 5 and 11.
22. Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 31.
23. C. L. Hardin, “A New Look at Color,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (April 1984): 125.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. Lawrence A. Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture, and the Child’s Construction of Human Kinds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 8.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Toi Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey* (New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1997), p. 105.
30. Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making*, p. 137.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
32. *Ibid.*
33. This is Georgia Warnke’s helpful gloss on the view of vision held by Mead and Habermas. See her “Ocularcentrism and Social Criticism,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 305.
34. Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making*, p. 137.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
36. Hirschfeld describes his experiments and reports their results in chapters 4, 5, and 6 of *Race in the Making*.

37. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life* (London: New Left Books, 1988, p.

105; quoted by David Michael Levin in his "Introduction" to *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 19.

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