

Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self

Linda Martín Alcoff

Print publication date: 2006

Print ISBN-13: 9780195137347

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: Feb-06

DOI: 10.1093/0195137345.001.0001

The Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment

Linda Martín Alcoff

DOI: 10.1093/0195137345.003.0007

Abstract and Keywords

When one realizes the indeterminacy of racial categories — their fluid borders, arbitrary criteria, and cultural variety — it may be tempting to adopt a nominalism about race, that race is no more real than phlogiston or witchcraft. This chapter resists this conclusion based on phenomenological grounds and insists that race is real. It explores reasons for the current confusion about race, considers various approaches to knowledge about race, and proposes a preliminary phenomenological account of racial identity as it is lived in the body of various racialized subjects at a given cultural moment. It is argued that only when we come to be very clear about how race is lived, in its multiple manifestations, and only when we can come to appreciate its often hidden epistemic effects and its power over collective imaginations can we entertain even the remote possibility of its eventual transformation.

Keywords: racism, race, racial identity, white identity, phenomenological account

When one realizes the indeterminacy of racial categories, their fluid borders, arbitrary criteria and cultural variety, it may be tempting to adopt a nominalism about race, that race is no more real than phlogiston or witchcraft. In this chapter I resist this conclusion primarily on phenomenological grounds. Race is real, certainly more real than phlogiston, though like witchcraft its “reality” is internal to certain schemas of social ontology that are themselves dependent on social practice. As an element of social ontology, the reality of race is certainly capable of radical

transformation and perhaps eradication. My focus, however, will not be on the possible future permutations of racializing practices but on the intense present reality of race. I will explore reasons for the current confusion about race, consider various approaches to knowledge about race, and venture a preliminary phenomenological account of racial identity as it is lived in the body of various racialized subjects at a given cultural moment. Only when we come to be very clear about how race is lived, in its multiple manifestations, and only when we can come to appreciate its often hidden epistemic effects and its power over collective imaginations can we entertain even the remote possibility of its eventual transformation.

Modern Racism

Contemporary confusions about race can be directly traced to the historical genealogy of the present concept. Recently, the West (meaning Anglo-European cultures) has been credited with originating the idea of race as we use it today, during the era of early modernism or what Foucault called the classical episteme.¹ In this era, Foucault suggests, the newly emerging sciences understood knowledge primarily as a practice of ordering and classifying on the basis of essential differences (1970, 1994). Classification of human beings by race also had a strong conceptual relationship with mapmaking, in which the expanding geographical areas of the globe “discovered” by Europeans were given order and intelligibility in part through their association with racial types. Thus, the labeling and mapping of conquered (p. 180) terrain, the naturalist classifications of life forms of all types, and the typologies of “natural races” were all practices that enjoyed an analogical similarity and emerged in the first period of European conquest, no doubt motivated by Europeans’ need to comprehend and manage their suddenly enlarged world. The increased diversity of the world would be less daunting if neutralized through the formulation of an ordering system. There is a wonderful moment in the 1993 film about mixed race identities, *Map of the Human Heart*, in which an Inuit man asks a white engineer who has come to northern Canada to map the region, “Why are you making maps?” Without hesitation, the white man responds, “They will be very accurate.” To question the very project of mapmaking was unintelligible to this bureaucrat of empire. Similarly unintelligible to European elites was the question of whether human diversity should be ranked.

Arguing via Foucault, both Cornel West and David Theo Goldberg have attempted genealogies of modern racism that link the Western fetishistic practices of classification, the forming of tables and ordering schemas,

and the consequent naturalistic primacy of the visible with the creation of metaphysical and moral hierarchies between racialized categories of human beings (Goldberg 1993; West 1982). West argues that the application of natural history techniques to the study of the human species produced a comparative analysis “based on visible, especially physical, characteristics [which] permit one to discern identity and difference, equality and inequality, beauty and ugliness among animals and human bodies” (1982, 55). Given this genesis, the concept of race and of racial difference emerged as that which is visible, classifiable, and morally salient.

However, in this same early modern period, the juxtaposition of these human classification practices with an emerging liberal ideology that espoused universalism produced a confused and contradictory account of race from which, I believe, Western discourses as well as Western “commonsense knowledge,” in a Gramscian sense, are still suffering today. Visible differences are still relied upon for the classification of human types, and yet visible difference threatens the liberal universalistic concepts of justice based on sameness by invoking the specter of difference. Classification systems contain this threat by enclosing the entirety of difference within a taxonomy organized by a single logic, such as a table of IQ test scores grouped by race. Differences of kind become transformed into differences of degree. Ranking differences thus works to nullify relativism and protect universalism. But the resultant juxtaposition between universalist legitimation narratives that deny or trivialize difference (political science and the law) and the detailed taxonomies of physical, moral, and intellectual human difference (anthropology and genetics) is one of the greatest antinomies of modernism.

2

The new development of critical race studies has begun to erode most of the theoretical props for racial hierarchies in academic discourses. Today the naturalistic classification systems which would reify human variability into moral categories and the Eurocentric teleologies that would excuse, if not justify, colonialism have been largely exposed as specious. And the realm of the visible, or what is taken as self-evidently visible (which is how the ideology of racism naturalizes racial designation), is recognized as the product of a specific form of perceptual practice, rather than the natural result of human sight. Anti-essentialisms have corroded the sense of (p. 181) visible difference as the “sign” of a deeper, more fundamental difference, a difference in behavioral disposition, in moral and rational capacity, or in cultural achievement. Moreover, there is a newly emerging biological consensus that race is a myth, that the term corresponds to no

significant biological category, and that no existing racial classifications correlate in useful ways to gene frequencies, clinal variations, or any significant human biological difference. ³

However, at the same time, and in a striking parallel to the earlier modernist contradictions regarding the significance of race, in the very midst of our contemporary skepticism toward race as a natural kind stands the compelling social reality that race, or racialized identities, have as much political, sociological, and economic salience as they ever had. As Goldberg puts it, liberal Western societies today maintain a paradoxical position whereby “Race is irrelevant, but all is race” (1993, 6). The legitimacy and moral relevance of racial concepts is officially denied even while race continues to determine job prospects, career possibilities, available places to live, potential friends and lovers, reactions from police, credence from jurors, and the amount of credibility one is given by one's students. Race may not correlate with clinal variations, but it persistently correlates with a statistically overwhelming significance in wage levels, unemployment levels, poverty levels, and the likelihood of incarceration. As of 1992, black and Latino men working full time in the United States earned an average of 68 percent of what white men earned, while black and Latina women earned 59 percent. As of 1995, Latino and black unemployment rates were more than double that of whites. ⁴

But for those still working within a liberal framework, the devastating sociological reality of race is but an artificial overlay on more fundamental constituents of the self. The specificity of culturally embedded and marked bodies is routinely set aside in projects that aim toward a general analysis. Even for some poststructuralists, because race is a contingent construction, or the epiphenomenon of essentialist discourses, it is ultimately without any more explanatory power or epistemological relevance than on the liberal view. Thus, for all our critical innovations in understanding the vagaries of racist domination and the conceptual apparatus that yields racism, too many today remain stuck in the modernist paradox that race is determinant of a great deal of social reality, even while our scientists, policy makers and philosophers would have us deny its existence.

No wonder, then, that we are confused about what to do with the category of race. Naturalistic approaches to the “real”—in which conceptual frameworks are thought to be determined by nature itself—cannot make sense of the cultural variety, recent history, and biological invalidity of race, though there are some positions that endeavor to define race in this way nonetheless.

Universalistic political systems in which justice is predicated on sameness cannot help but view racial consciousness with consternation and dismay. Thus, within the modern episteme, the continued use of racial categories leads inevitably to political paradox.

Contextualism about Race

Contemporary race theory has endeavored to transcend the paradoxes of classical liberalism and to make explicit the implicit ideologies of race. On the questions of (p. 182) the status of the category race and whether racial identity should be continued, this recent body of work falls roughly into three positions:

(1) *Nominalism* (or eliminativism). Race is not real, meaning that racial terms do not refer to anything “really real,” principally because recent science has invalidated race as a salient or even meaningful biological category. It is the biological meaning of racial concepts that have led to racism, but racial concepts are *necessarily* biological claims (as opposed to ethnic or cultural concepts, for example). Therefore, the use of racial concepts should be avoided in order to be metaphysically accurate as well as to further an antiracist agenda.

(2) *Essentialism*. Race is an elemental category of identity with explanatory power. Members of racial groups share a set of characteristics, a set of political interests, and a historical destiny. The problem of racism has affected the content given to racial description rather than the method of racial description itself.

(3) *Contextualism*. Race is socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and reproduced through learned perceptual practices. Whether or not it is valid to use racial concepts and whether or not their use will have positive or negative political effects depends on the context.

The first position—which I call nominalism—fails to capture the multiple meanings of race and assumes incorrectly that race can refer only to biology. It also falsely assumes on the basis of a commitment to semantic realism and an overinflation of the importance of science that racial concepts can have no nonbiological referent and thus no valid meaning. It naively assumes that an end to the use of racial concepts will solve (or contribute toward solving) the current enormous sociological and economic determinism of racialized identities, and that this positive result can occur before we try to understand the ways in which beliefs and practices of racialization have

informed every political theory, every conceptual framework, and every metanarrative, at least in the West.

The second position—which I call essentialism—fails to capture the fluidity and open-endedness of racial meanings. It wrongly assumes that racial identities are obvious and easily demarcated, that racialized groupings are homogeneous, and that ancestry is all-determining. It operates on a mistaken notion of what cultures are, as if they are merely the developing expression of an originary logic rather than the effect of negotiations from multiple sources. And it promotes the futile mission of opposing the tide of global hybridization and identity metamorphosis.

The third position—which I call contextualism—is clearly the best option both politically and as a metaphysical description.⁵ It can acknowledge the current devastating reality of race while holding open the possibility that present-day racial formations may change significantly or perhaps wither away. It provides a better explanation for the variety of racial beliefs and practices across cultures, and thus acknowledges the contingency and uncertainty of racial identities and boundaries. One can hold without contradiction that racialized identities are produced, sustained, and sometimes transformed through social beliefs and practices and yet that race is real, as real as anything else in lived experience, with operative effects in the social world.

Contextualist approaches come in two forms: objectivist and subjectivist. Objectivist approaches attempt a definition of race general enough to be applicable (p. 183) across a variety of contexts even while recognizing that context will determine the specific content and political valence given to a racial concept. These approaches start with sociological facts, Census categories and their transformations, and the history of racializations to develop an account of how race organizes social relations. Sanjek, for example, defines race as “the framework of ranked categories segmenting the human population that was developed by western Europeans following their global expansion in the 1400's” (1994, 1). Most of the current debates over race concern only objective definitions of race and racial identity.

However, objectivist approaches to race that chart its effects in the public domain sometimes hinder an appreciation for the everydayness of racial experience. Objectivist approaches that define race by invoking metanarratives of historical experience, cultural traditions, or processes of colonization and that take a third-person perspective can be inattentive to the microinteractions in which racialization operates, is reproduced, and is

sometimes resignified. In contrast, subjectivist approaches that begin from the lived experience of racialization can reveal how race is constitutive of bodily experience, subjectivity, judgment, and epistemic relationships. Such subjective descriptions, as Fanon gives, show how one's designated race is a constitutive element of fundamental, everyday embodied existence, psychic life, and social interaction.

During the building of the Panama Canal, workers were divided and identified by the U.S.-owned and run Panama Canal Commission as "gold" (whites) and "silver" (West Indian blacks), denoting the form of currency in which they were paid. "Gold" and "silver" workers were given separate and differently constructed living quarters, different currency for wages, different commissaries, and different tasks, and they were attributed different characteristics. In Canal Commission documents, gold workers were described as loyal, earnest, responsible, self-sacrificing, and enthusiastic. Silver workers were described as shiftless, inconstant, exasperating, irresponsible, carefree, "yet as reliable a workman as our own American cottonfield hand" (Haskin 1913, 162). Here race explicitly determined economic and social status, but it also was understood by the dominant white authorities to be the *determinate constitutive factor of subjectivity*, indicating personal character traits and internal constitution (for example, blacks were thought to be more resistant to yellow fever). Such publicly instituted and circulated associations between race and subjectivity must naturally have an effect on the self-perceptions of those persons so described. Thus, racialized identities affect not only one's public status but one's experienced selfhood as well.

Omi and Winant offer an account of race that attempts to include both the macrolevel and the microlevel, or objective and subjective levels, of social relations. The macrolevel consists of economic, political, and cultural structures, or "sites," in which the formation and management of racial collectivities occur, and thus is what I am calling an objectivist account. The microlevel consists of the microprocesses by which individual identities are formed (Omi and Winant 1986, 66-67). In regard to the microlevel, they claim that "one of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race" (62). They also develop a description of "racial etiquette" as "a set of interpretive codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of daily life. Rules shaped by (p. 184) our perception of race in a comprehensively racial society determine the "presentation of self," distinction of status, and appropriate modes of conduct" (62). Although Omi and Winant don't pursue this idea of a

racial etiquette much further, it is a productive way to explore how race operates preconsciously on spoken and unspoken interaction, gesture, affect, and stance, and in this way producing what I call a subjectivist account. Greetings, handshakes, proximity, tone of voice, all reveal the effects of racial awareness, the presumption of superiority vis-à-vis the other, or the protective defenses against the possibility of racism and misrecognition. ⁶ I will make use here once again of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the habitual body I introduced in chapter 4, which is the concept of a default position the body assumes in various commonly experienced circumstances that integrates and unifies our movements through a kind of unconscious physical shorthand. This idea could be useful here to understand how individuals fall into race-conscious habitual postures in cross-racial encounters. ⁷ Merleau-Ponty is mainly discussing motor habits of perception and movement used in performing various operations such as driving or typing, but the concept can easily be applied to postural attitudes and modes of perception taken in interactions with others whose identities are marked by gender, race, age, and so on. Following Fanon, Gordon, and Weiss, I will also argue that racialization structures the visual sphere and the imaginary self, and can block the development of coherent body images (Fanon 1967; Gordon 19958; Weiss 1998, esp. 26–33). ⁸

Subjectivist and objectivist approaches to understanding race are not mutually exclusive; Fanon's account has elements of both. I agree with Omi and Winant that any adequate account of race would need to encompass both. But it seems to me that although subjectivist approaches have important advantages in accounting for how race works, they have been underdeveloped in the recent theoretical literature, even while there are many first-person memoirs and rich descriptions of racial experience that might be tapped for theoretical analysis.

A possible reason for the hesitancy one might have in going in this direction is a fear that phenomenological description will naturalize or fetishize racial experiences. This can happen when descriptions of felt experience begin to operate as *explanations* of felt experience, as if the experience itself is fully self-presenting and explanatory. In other words, the claim here would be that one need go no further than accessible experience to explain the experience. For example, if one believes that human beings group perceptual objects under concepts as the natural result of our need to cope with the blooming, buzzing variety of perceptual experience, then one might be led to think that racial categories are the understandable result of the need to group and categorize. In other words, racism is the unfortunate but inevitable result of

human cognitive processes. Phenomenological descriptions that detail the overwhelming salience of racializations for given individuals might then be used as support for such a belief.

Against this, I will argue that although racial classification does operate on the basis of perceptual difference, it is also the case that, as Merleau-Ponty argues, perception represents sedimented contextual knowledges. So the process by which human bodies are differentiated and categorized by type is a process *preceded* by group oppression, rather than one that causes and thus “explains” racism as a (p. 185) natural result. Such an account is compatible with Hegel's view that conflict arises from our *parallel* desires rather than our “innate” differences, a view that has many advantages.

However, I would not want to say, as some nominalists seem almost to say, that racialization has only an arbitrary connection to the realm of the visible. Visual differences are “real” differences, and by that very fact they are especially valuable for the naturalizing ideologies of racism. But there is no perception of the visible that is not already imbued with value. And the body itself is a dynamic material domain, not just because it can be “seen” differently, but because the materiality of the body itself is, as Grosz puts it, volatile: “It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body of a determinate type” (1994, x).

In what follows, then, I will pursue a subjectivist approach that makes use of Merleau-Ponty's nonfoundationalist account of lived experience. A phenomenological approach can render our tacit knowledge about racial embodiment explicit. Despite the fact that, at least until recently and at least for those whites not living in the South, it appears generally to be the case that most whites did not consciously “feel white,” there were gestural and perceptual practices correlated to racial identity and a tacit but substantive racialized subjectivity. Other groups in the United States have often been very conscious of the ways in which racial categories affected experience and presentations of self, but some of their knowledge about race is also tacit and carried in the body.

By drawing from tacit knowledge about racial identity, subjectivist approaches also, I would argue, operate from a different epistemology or justificatory strategy, and one that can make productive use of Gramsci's account of “common sense” or everyday consciousness discernible in practices, rather than a self-consciousness achieved through reflection.

Common sense is made up of that which seems obviously true and enjoys consensus or near consensus. Despite its felt naturalness, however, common sense is “culturally constituted—not as false consciousness is, by imposition from above, but by the sediment” of past historical beliefs and practices of a given society or culture (Gramsci 1971). If we apply this account to a racial common sense, we would understand it not as the imposition of ideology but as part of the backdrop of practical consciousness, circulating, as Foucault would say, from the bottom up as well as from the top down. Racial knowledges exist at the site of common sense. Effectively in agreement with this Foucauldian approach, Omi and Winant also argue that racialization should not be understood simply as something imposed; for example, they suggest that racial “etiquette is not mere universal adherence to the dominant group's rules, but a more dynamic combination of these rules with the values and beliefs of subordinated groups” (62). They emphasize that a subordinate group can play a role in shaping racial formations through the particular patterns of resistance taken up.

The epistemically relevant point here is that the *source* of racializations, or at least one important source, is in the microprocesses of subjective existence. I would add to this, however, the obvious point that racial common sense varies both across and within racial groups, and the differences we find are likely to be significant. In (p. 186) any case, it has largely been an uninterrogated white common sense, albeit in all its internal variety, that has dominated the public discourse and theoretical analysis about race in the United States.

White Antiwhiteness

Here is Jack Kerouac, the iconized white Beat prophet, writing in his journal in 1949, describing a late-evening walk through the black and Mexican neighborhoods of Denver: “I stopped at a little shack where a man sold hot, red chili in paper containers. I bought some and ate it strolling in the dark, mysterious streets. I wished I was a Negro, a Denver Mexican, or even a Jap, anything but a white man disillusioned by the best in his own ‘white’ world. (And all my life I had white ambitions!)” (1998, 56). Kerouac in this passage is characteristically ahead of his time. Kerouac was aware of the racialized others, whom he recognizes in their unified nonwhiteness, but unlike many other whites (at least, Northern whites), he was also aware of his own whiteness and able to articulate the contours of its segregated subjective life in his comment that even ambitions have a racial identity. He is disillusioned with the pretensions of white culture, and out of this

disillusionment he senses the arbitrariness of his dominant status, which makes it impossible for him to rest easy with it or relax in it. And thus he longs to escape it.

This felt disjuncture for Kerouac between his white body (or his non-nonwhiteness) and his sense of having a nonwhite sensibility operates in the very postural model of the body, a concept introduced by Sir Henry Head to name that nonlinguistic imaginary position of the body in the world and its imagined relation to its environment and to other bodies (see [Grosz 1994](#), 64–69; [Weiss 1998](#), 7–9). Kerouac pictured himself as outside “white society” or positioned on its margins. He thought of himself as having the aesthetic sensibility and temporal orientation of the other-than-white, in his irreverent cynicism toward the white world's self-presentations and declared intentions. In a different diary entry, he said that “the best the ‘white world’ has to offer [is] not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, music; not enough night” (56). Who is this “me” whose ability to appreciate and to desire joy, kicks, music, and life exceeds the white world? Who is it indeed whose virility and capacity for feeling is larger than the sallow, impotent blandness the white world (in his portrayal) can afford? It can only be a nonwhite, though Kerouac here relies precisely on the white world's own projection of ecstatic emotions outside of itself, outside of white identity. In other words, even in his “nonwhite” sensibility, he operates from within a white schema of signification (a paradox that can also beset nonwhite bodies).

Kerouac's nonwhite postural body image, though, is pierced by the experience of walking through these “dark” streets, encountering the “real” other in the flesh, which then prompts him to recognize the incoherence between his own felt body image—the one he surely felt in upper-class white society—and the body image now induced by the alienation he felt in what for him were foreign neighborhoods. Returning to the entry where he described his Denver walk, we find him say: “I was so sad—in the violet dark, strolling—wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-minded, ecstatic Negroes of America. ... How I yearned to be (p. 187) transformed into an Eddy, a Neal, a jazz musician, a nigger, a construction worker, a softball pitcher, anything in these wild, dark humming streets of Denver night—anything but myself so pale and unhappy, so dim” (56). Fanon suggested that for black people in the colonial world, it was Sartre's third ontological dimension of bodily experience—the consciousness of one's body as a body-for-others—that dominates (1967, chaps. 5 and 7). Kerouac experiences this in the nonwhite Denver neighborhoods, where the third dimension comes to dominate his own preferred body image, to render his

postural model incoherent, leading him to a melancholic resignation of his “paleness.”

Notice also that in these passages Kerouac juxtaposes, perhaps unconsciously, reiterations of the darkness and mystery of his surroundings with a characterization of “Negroes” as open, fully readable, transparent. What is “dark” to him is not their nature or state of mind, which he presumes to fully know, but their *ability* to be happy and true-minded. This capacity has escaped him; it is what he envies and longs for. He is not satisfied with the level of ecstasy available in the white world; and yet he cannot discover how to access the affect he perceives outside of it. He yearns to be “anything but myself so pale and unhappy, so dim.” Just as ambitions are racialized, so too are *his* melancholia and *their* happiness.

Fanon also suggested that racism and colonialism create significant challenges for maintaining the equilibrium in one's body image, an equilibrium achieved, as Weiss helpfully explains, through reconciling one's own “ ‘tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual’ experiences with the structure imposed by this historico-racial schema, a structure that provides the ‘racial parameters’ within which the corporeal schema is supposed to fit” (1998, 27). The near incommensurability between first-person experience and historico-racial schema disenables equilibrium and creates what Fanon calls a “corporeal malediction.” Kerouac, coming from the other side of the colonial equation, must have experienced this corporeal malediction as well. His desire to be transformed into an “Eddy” and so on is a desire to resolve the disequilibrium induced by conflicting first- and third-person dimensions of the body in favor of the first. I would suggest that today, more and more whites are experiencing a similar disequilibrium, as they come to perceive the racial parameters that structure whiteness differently in different communities—white and nonwhite—and may find that none of these can be made coherent with their own preferred body or postural image.

Perception

Because race works through the domain of the visible, the experience of race is predicated first and foremost on the perception of race, a perception whose specific mode is a learned ability. Merleau-Ponty says of perception:

Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The

world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. ... [M]an is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself. (1962, x-xi)

(p. 188) If race is a structure of contemporary perception, then it helps constitute the necessary background from which I know myself. It makes up a part of what appears to me as the natural setting of all my thoughts. It is the field, rather than that which stands out. The perceptual practices involved in racializations are then tacit, almost hidden from view, and thus almost immune from critical reflection. Merleau-Ponty goes on: "Perception is, not presumed true, but defined as access to truth" (xvi). Inside such a system, perception cannot itself be the object of analysis. Thus, Kerouac could "see" with immediacy the character of nonwhite lives and nonwhite emotional subjectivity. And yet the mechanism of that act of perceiving itself could not be seen, and thus could not be seen by him as also racialized.

Perceptual practices can be organized, like bodily movements used to perform various operations, into integrated units that become habitual. In the following passage Merleau-Ponty explains his idea of perceptual habits through the example of a blind man's use of a stick to find objects: "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" (1962, 152; emphasis in original). In other words, the overt act of interpreting is skipped in an attenuated process of perceptual knowing. He goes on to contrast 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 intention. ... 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. ... [I]t 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. (1962, 152-53)

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 consciousness some racist belief, and that if introspection fails to produce such a belief then one is simply not racist. A 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.

(p. 189) If interpretation by this account operates as simple perception, at least in certain cases, are we not led to pessimism about the possibility of altering the perceptual habits of racializations? Here I would think that the multiple schemas operating in many if not most social spaces today would mitigate against an absolute determinism and thus pessimism. Perceptual practices are dynamic even when congealed into habit, and that dynamism can be activated by the existence of multiple forms of the gaze in various cultural productions and by the challenge of contradictory perceptions. To put it simply, people are capable of change. Merleau-Ponty's analysis helps to provide a more accurate understanding of where—that is, at what level of experience—change needs to occur.

White Ambitions

Phenomenological descriptions of racial identity can reveal a differentiation or distribution of felt connectedness to others. Kerouac's sadness is prompted by his lack of felt connection, a connection he may have anticipated when initiating his walk through the black and Mexican Denver neighborhoods, but one that does not present itself. However, felt connection is a complex issue, undetermined solely by phenotype. The felt connectedness to visibly similar others may produce either flight or empathic identification or other possible dispositions.

Compare Kerouac's perceptions with the autobiographical confession that dramatically opens Richard Rodriguez's book, *Days of Obligation*: "I used to stare at the Indian in the mirror. The wide nostrils, the thick lips. Starring Paul Muni as Benito Juarez. Such a long face—such a long nose—sculpted by indifferent, blunt thumbs, and of such common clay. No one in my family had a face as dark or as Indian as mine. My face could not portray the ambition I brought to it" (1992, 1). Here there is actually little contrast with Kerouac's account: Rodriguez echoes his white racialization of ambition, in which the desire to be a writer and a public intellectual in the United States cannot be associated with an "Indian" face. In an earlier memoir, he recounts how as an adolescent he tried to shave the darkness off his skin in a fit of agonized frustration (1983, 5). Like Kerouac again, Rodriguez wants to escape, and he experiences racial identity as a cage constraining his future, his aspirations; also like Kerouac he experiences it as somehow at odds with his felt subjectivity. His postural body image is internally incoherent, and Rodriguez struggles persistently against the racial parameters that Fanon says characterizes colonized consciousness. Where Kerouac forgoes white ambition and yet resigns himself to whiteness, Rodriguez pursues white ambitions and in this way seeks to escape his visible identity and to repudiate his felt connection with visibly similar others.

Rodriguez recounts a conversation he had with an American Indian student when he was teaching at Berkeley.

"You're not Indian, you're Mexican," he said. "You wouldn't understand."

He meant I was cut. Diluted.

Understand what?

He meant I was not an Indian in America. He meant he was an enemy of the history that had otherwise created me. ... I saw his face—his refusal to consort with the living—as the face of a dead man. (1992, 5)

(p. 190) Rodriguez experiences Mexican identity as necessarily hybridized, "cut," "diluted." He projects onto his interlocutor the belief that Mexican identity is a deformed identity, when in reality the man simply said, "You are Mexican and not Indian," counterposing two identities rather than an identity and a dilution of identity. Yet Rodriguez's projection is of course overdetermined by the general denigration of mixed identities, particularly mixed racial identities, that is a painful feature of many

contemporary societies. The mixed person, unless she or he declares in her self-representation as well as her everyday practices to be identified with one group or another, feels rejection from every group, and is ready to be slighted on an everyday basis for presuming an unjustified association. She is constantly on trial, and unable to claim epistemic authority to speak as or to represent. Rodriguez experiences a double hybridity: the hybridity of a Mexican American educated and enculturated in an Anglo environment, and the hybridity of *Latinidad* itself, between *indigenismo* and *conquistador*.

Rodriguez deflects this denigration by demarcating his hybrid world into neatly mapped spaces and urging their segregation. He argues that Spanish, the mother tongue, the female tongue, is proper to the private sphere, and should be spoken only at home for bilingual Latinos in the United States. He characterizes English as the public language, the language of social intercourse, the language for intervening in politics, and thus a language clearly coded masculine. English is justifiably normative because its universality is simply inevitable, Rodriguez argues. Thus he has been an important public critic of bilingual education programs and any policy that might have the effect of incorrectly merging what should be carefully sequestered realms of discourse.

In the above passage, Rodriguez also construes his own white ambitions—to master English and assimilate in a public Anglo world—as representing life. Life moves forward, it adapts, it transforms, and in this way it survives. Assimilation to an Anglo world is life; the resistance to assimilation is an embrace of death. Thus he sees the man's face in the cafeteria as the face of a dead man. Unlike Kerouac on this point, Rodriguez does not romanticize the nonwhite racial Other, which is a form of love Lewis Gordon aptly likens to pet loving.⁹ By incorporating aspects of an Anglo identity, and pursuing an identity based on the metanarrative of “American” progress and cultural development, Rodriguez perceives himself as choosing life. He further describes his interlocutor in the conversation already quoted as a “moody brave,” and “a near-somnambulist, beautiful in an off-putting way, but interesting, too, because I never saw him without the current issue of *The New York Review of Books* under his arm, which I took as an advertisement of ambition” (1992, 4–5). For Rodriguez, ambition can *only* be white; there is no conception of an ambition beyond or apart from intercourse in a dominant Anglo world. In the description just given, Rodriguez associates the man's physical appearance with distance: it is off-putting despite its beauty. Racial difference is often experienced as a distancing without regard to spatial proximity. Yet Rodriguez has hopes for the possibility of a relationship—

of the man being included in Rodriguez's own wider frame of reference—by his possession of a journal that signifies for him a transcendence of the physical mark. Anglo identity is again associated with the public, the realm of ambition, the sphere of action in a social world, while Indian identity remains on (p. 191) the body, pulling against ambition, social intercourse, even, Rodriguez says, life itself. Thus, he sees the man as a near somnambulist, a man poised between the life embodied in the *New York Review of Books* and the death of a historical dreamworld.

The Visual Registry

No less than Kerouac, Rodriguez reads others and himself through visible signs on the body, reading his “long nose sculpted by indifferent, blunt thumbs” as “incapable of portraying” his ambition. I would argue that this mediation through the visible, working on both the inside and the outside, both on the way we read ourselves and the way others read us, is what is unique to racialized identities as opposed to ethnic and cultural identities. The criteria thought to determine racial identity have ranged from ancestry, experience, self-understanding, to habits and practices, yet these sources are coded through visible inscriptions on the body. The processes by which racial identities are produced work through the shapes and shades of human morphology, the size and shape of the nose, the design of the eye, the breadth of the cheekbones, the texture of hair, and the intensity of pigment, and these subordinate other markers such as dress, customs, and practices. And the visual registry thus produced has been correlated with rational capacity, epistemic reliability, moral condition, and, of course, aesthetic value. Rodriguez has learned this visual registry in its dominant white form, and thus he moves back and forth between exploring its racism¹⁰ and adopting it as his own perspective, letting it dominate his body image almost as a perceptual habit-body, or habit of perception.

“Visibility is a trap,” says Foucault (1979, 200). He explains: “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” (201). What could be more permanently visible than that which is inscribed on the body itself?

As I have already argued, racial identities that are not readily visible create fear, consternation, and the sometimes hysterical determination to find their visible trace. The case of Alice Rhineland that I discussed in the introduction, forced to bare her breasts in a court of law, exhibits this

determination, as does the Nazi effort to find physical signs of Jewish identity that could be measured with calipers. English attitudes toward the Irish provide still another example. Similar to the Jews, the Irish were a racialized group internal to Europe until the twentieth century. L. Gibbons quotes the following passage in which a first-time English visitor to Ireland records his observations: “I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. ... But to see white chimpanzees was dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours” (Gibbons 1991, 96; quoted in Loomba 1998, 109). The observer in this passage experienced a disequilibrium in his corporeal self-image prompted by finding his own features in the degraded Other.

Clearly, one source of the importance of visibility for racialized identities is the need to manage and segregate populations and to catch individuals who trespass beyond their rightful bounds. But there is another reason for the importance of visibility, a reason I would argue is as significant as the first: visible difference naturalizes racial meanings. Merleau-Ponty claims that “when we speak of the flesh (p. 192) of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe a world covered over with our own projections” (1962, 136; emphasis added). In other words, the visible is not merely an epiphenomenon of culture, and thus precisely lies its value for racialization. We may need to be trained to pick out some features over others as the most salient to identity, but those features nonetheless have a material reality. This is why both Kerouac and Rodriguez experience racial identity as impossible to alter: Kerouac cannot “become Negro” no matter how much he would like to, and Rodriguez can only fail to shave the darkness off his skin. Locating race in the visible thus produces the experience that racial identity is immutable.

This is why race *must* work through the visible markers on the body, even if those markers are *made* more visible through learned processes. Visible difference, which is materially present even if its meanings are not, can be used to signify or provide purported access to a subjectivity through observable, “natural” attributes, to provide a window on the interiority of the self—thus making it possible for a Kerouac to confidently assume an ability to perceive directly ecstasy and true-mindedness even though he knows nothing more about the individuals that surround him than the color of their skin.

In some cases, the perceptual habits are so strong and so unnoticed that visible difference is deployed in every encounter. In other situations, the deployment of visible difference can be dependent on the presence of other elements to become salient or all-determining. For an example of such a situation, I will relate a case I discussed with a philosophy graduate student with whom I regularly converse about issues in the classroom. White undergraduates walking into an introductory philosophy course in upstate New York might not expect an Asian American instructor, but after an initial surprise the students appeared to feel at ease in the class as he (I'll call him "John") discussed Descartes and Leibniz and patiently explained to struggling undergraduates how to follow an argument in early modern texts. John himself then began to relax in the classroom, interacting without self-consciousness with a largely white class. His postural body image was at those moments normative, familiar, trustworthy. Despite the hierarchy between students and teacher, there seemed to be little or no racial distancing in their interactions.

However, at a certain point in the semester, John introduced the subject of race into the course through an assigned reading on the cognitive dimensions of racism. This topic had a visceral effect on classroom dynamics. Previously open-faced students lowered their eyes and declined to participate in discussion. John felt a different texture of perception, as if he were being watched or observed from a distance. His previously felt normativity eroded, and with it his teaching confidence. It was not that before he had thought of himself as white, but that he had imagined *and experienced* himself as normative, accepted, recognized as an instructor capable of leading students toward greater understanding. Now he was reminded, forcibly, that his body image self was unstable and contingent, and that his racialized identity was uppermost in the minds of white students who suddenly developed a skeptical attitude toward his analysis and imparted it in a manner they had not been confident enough to develop before.

I have experienced this scenario many times myself, if I raise the issue of race, cultural imperialism, the U.S. invasion of Panama, or sometimes issues of sexism (p. 193) in classes not self-selected for students interested in these topics, and colleagues of mine who are African American or Latino have described similar classroom experiences. Epistemic authority is shifted away from a professor of color when he or she addresses issues of race, away from women addressing issues of gender. Suddenly, white students lose their analytical docility and become vigilant critics of biased

methodology. The visible identity of the teacher counteracts all claims of objectivity or earned authority as knower. Such an experience, as Eduardo Mendietta has suggested, is as if one finds oneself in the world ahead of oneself, the space one occupies as already occupied. One's lived self is effectively dislodged when an already outlined but very different self appears to be operating in the same exact location.

Fanon argues that the “Negro, because of his body, impedes the closing of the postural schema for the white man” (1967, 160). But this disturbance of the normative white postural schema seems to occur only when something that seems to be a “nonwhite subjectivity” is made apparent. Before a nonwhite professor assigns an article on race, white students' postural body image can remain intact, unchallenged. The teachers' otherness at this stage can be subsumed under a number of nonthreatening categories, from the compliant servant to the assimilated other who demonstrably accepts a white worldview as the truth, and so on. The students do not perceive the teachers' recognition of them as challenging in any way. When race enters the classroom as a theme, and especially as a theme introduced by a nonwhite, their confidence and ease about how the teacher is perceiving them begins to erode, creating a break between first- and third-person perspectives. Only then is their postural schema disrupted. Disequilibrium for whites is not an inevitable result of the mere presence of racial others, then, even in a historico-racial schema of white supremacy, though it may be experienced as a potential disruption that the body appreciates and which puts it in the mode of watchfulness.

For a nonwhite called back from a normative postural image to a racialized “epidermal schema” as Fanon put it, the habit body one falls into at such moments, I would suggest, is protective, defensive. A hyperactive self-awareness must interrogate the likely meanings that will be attributed to every utterance, gesture, or action one takes. The available options of interaction across the visible difference seem closed down to two: combative resistance without hope of persuasion, or an attempt to return to the category of nonthreatening other, perhaps through attaining the place of the not-really-other. Neither can yield a true relationship or dialogue; both are options already given within the white dominant racial structure. No original move can be recognized.

When I was much younger, I remember finding out with a shock that a white lover, my first serious relationship, had pursued me because I was Latina, which no doubt stimulated his vision of exoticism. We had grown up in the

same neighborhood, attended the same schools, listened to the same music, and shared similar ambitions toward college and escape from our shared class. Yet our first encounters, our first dates, which I had naively believed were dominated by a powerful emotional and intellectual connection, were experienced by him as a fascinating crossing over to the forbidden, to the Other in that reified, racializing sense. ¹¹ I felt incredulity, and then humiliation, trying to imagine myself as he saw me, replaying (p. 194) my gestures and actions, reflecting back even on the clothes I wore, all in an attempt to discern the signs he may have picked up, to see myself as he must have seen me. I felt caught in that moment, finding myself occupying a position already occupied and fashioned elsewhere, incapable of mutual interaction.

There is a visual registry operating in social relations that is socially constructed, historically evolving, and culturally variegated but nonetheless powerfully determinant over individual experience. And for that reason, it also powerfully mediates body image and the postural model of the body. Racial self-awareness has its own habit-body, created by individual responses to racism, to challenges from racial others, and so on. The existence of multiple historico-racial schemas produces a disequilibrium that cannot easily be solved in multiracial democratic spaces—that is, spaces where no side is completely silenced. Racial identity, then, permeates our being in the world, our being-with-others, and our consciousness of our self as a being-for-others.

Phenomenological descriptions such as the ones I have discussed here operate uncomfortably to reactivate racist perception and experience. One might worry that such descriptions will have consolidating effects by repeating, even explaining, the process of racist attribution, suggesting its depth and impermeability. But the reactivations produced by critical phenomenological description don't simply repeat the racializing perception but can reorient the positionality of consciousness. Unveiling the steps that are now attenuated and habitual will force a recognition of one's agency in reconfiguring a postural body image or a habitual perception. Noticing the way in which meanings are located on the body has at least the potential to disrupt the current racializing processes.

If racism is manifest at the level of perception itself and in the very domain of visibility, then an amelioration of racism would be apparent in the world we perceive as visible. A reduction of racism will affect perception itself, as well as comportment, body image, and so on. Toward this, our first task, it

seems to me, is to make visible the practices of visibility itself, to outline the background from which our knowledge of others and of ourselves appears in relief. From there we may be able to alter the associated meanings ascribed to visible difference.

Notes:

(1.) On the origin of race as an idea, see Omi and Winant 1985, 58–59; [Gregory and Sanjek 1994](#), 2; and [Eze 1997](#), in which are collected the original sources.

(2.) The widespread popularity of *The Bell Curve* thesis, which classifies and ranks intellectual ability by racial identity, and assumes a single standard of intelligence, is proof that vestiges of the classical episteme remain in place today. See [Herrnstein and Murray 1994](#).

(3.) On these points, see the essays in [Harding 1993](#). Harding explains that a cline is “a continuous gradation over space in the form of a frequency of a trait” (133). Frank B. Livingstone's essay in this collection argues that the differences in gene frequency among populations can be adequately explained without any reference to race.

(4.) For more statistics on racial disparities, see [Hacker 1995](#).

(5.) I prefer contextualism to social constructionism because of the wide misuse and misunderstandings too often prevalent with the use of the second term. Social constructionism is sometimes interpreted along the lines of an idealism in which total agency is given to individual actors, as if we can construct new identities out of whole cloth. I hope that contextualism will convey the idea that what race *is* is dependent on context.

(6.) Mixed race people who are not easily categorizable by visible markers create unease precisely because one doesn't know how to act or talk with them. All of these practices change enormously across cultures; for example, in Latin America, mixed race persons do not create a cognitive crisis because they are the norm. There, racial identity is determined along a continuum of color without sharp borders.

(7.) See [Merleau-Ponty 1962](#), esp. part 1. See also the elucidation of this concept in [Weiss 1998](#), chap. 1.

(8.) See also [Grosz 1994](#) for an excellent explanation and development of the concept of body image, esp. chaps. 3 and 4.

(9.) [Gordon 1995](#), 117ff. Gordon argues that romanticizing and exoticizing racial others (as in “I just *love* black people”) is like animal loving in that it seeks an object that has consciousness without judgment, that can know it is loved but be incapable of understanding or judging the one who loves.

(10.) There are numerous insightful analyses of racism in *Days of Obligation*; see esp. chap. 1.

(11.) I learned this because he has written a novel based on his experience of our relationship.

