

Blinded by Sight: The Racial Body and the Origins of the Social Construction of Race

Michael Omi and Howard Winant

OBASOGIE, OSAGIE K. 2013. *Blinded by Sight: Seeing Race Through the Eyes of the Blind*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Osagie K. Obasogie's Blinded by Sight: Seeing Race through the Eyes of the Blind (2014) makes important contributions to both to the sociology of law and to critical race studies. The book challenges "colorblind" racial ideology by showing empirically that people who are blind from birth nevertheless "see" race, grasping it as a nearly omnipresent feature of social interaction and social organization. These insights, however, do not diminish the importance of the racial body. Beyond refuting colorblindness, Obasogie's book points to a neverending tension, embedded in what we call racial formation, between the social construction of race and the corporeality of race. This tension has been present since the dawn of empire and African slavery. Obasogie's achievement of falsifying colorblindness should not lead us to neglect the importance of the racial body.

A number of books and articles have challenged the prevailing racial ideology of colorblindness by documenting the depth and persistence of structural racism in the United States, and correspondingly arguing that "race conscious" policies and practices are necessary to address systemic inequalities. In *Blinded by Sight*, Osagie Obasogie takes a different approach. He provides a provocative critique of the basic assumptions that are foundational to the ideology of colorblindness itself. He questions a fundamental aspect of race epistemology—namely, that race is something we see. In sharp contrast to this understanding, he emphasizes how social context and interactions shape and construct how we understand race visually.

In many respects, *Blinded by Sight* is two books in one. It provides an empirical study of how the blind understand race and racism, and explores how the concept of race as visually self-evident distorts the laws, policies, and practices dealing with racial discrimination. Here we center our discussion on the social context and interactions that construct the visual significance we impart to race.

In another context, it would be quite useful to reflect upon blindness itself—what might be called the "disability" of blindness—in light of the refiguration of

Michael Omi is Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies and Associate Director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at the University of California, Berkeley.

Howard Winant is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the founding director of the University of California Center for New Racial Studies (UCCNRS), a UC MultiCampus Research Program.

disability studies that is well under way, especially in the United States. We refer here to disability not as a physical condition but as a marker of identity/difference, something not entirely distinct from race (Solomon 2012). But Obasogie argues here that “broader social practices outside of actual vision” not only shape our understanding of race but also shape our vision of vision itself (71). This is true whether we are sighted or not.

Obasogie sees his book as a second-generation effort in the social constructionist tradition that questions this fundamental aspect of race epistemology—namely, that race is what we see. Early on, he cites our work as an example of the emphasis given to the phenotypic dimension of race in the social constructionist literature:

Omi and Winant’s emphasis on phenotypes—defined as “the set of *observable* characteristics of an individual resulting from the interaction of its genotype and the environment” (emphasis added)—highlights the extent to which race conversations within sociology already implicate visibility as an epistemological starting point. (28)

Obasogie’s critique of assuming the “visible” as a starting point extends to the ways that the visual dimensions of race are rendered unproblematic:

It is the selection and attribution of meaning that necessarily constitute a social and historical process; the method through which these phenotypes or observable characteristics are invoked—vision or visual references—is outside of Omi and Winant’s substantive constructionist argument and goes without meaningful critique. This approach is repeated throughout the social constructionist literature on race. (29)

We accept this criticism and have endeavored to incorporate it in the new edition of our book.¹ Our effort in this essay is to build on Obasogie’s examination of the “broader social practices outside of actual vision” to offer an argument for the corporeal, the phenomic, the ocularity of race. This is not intended as a challenge of Obasogie’s core insights about race as a set of social practices and social structures. We consider that *Blinded by Sight* draws upon and extends our work on racial formation theory in important ways.

But we still want to reflect on the role of the body in race and racism. We address the theme of racial phenomics in light of Obasogie’s commitment, which we share, to a social constructionist theory of race. How do these two dimensions of raciality interact? On the one hand we have the corporeal dimensions of race, the ocular or phenotypical aspects. On the other we have the social constructedness of race, the socialized, experiential, and institutional dimensions of race. The first theme, the racial body, the ocularity of race, is what Obasogie’s blind subjects cannot see, what they cannot experience visually. The second theme, the social construction of race, is what they

1. Obasogie cites an earlier edition of our book. Influenced by his work, we say a lot more about the “ocular” dimensions of race in our new edition (Omi and Winant 2015).

experience and understand *anyway*, ocularity be damned. That experience, of course, helps Obasogie demonstrate the shallowness of the concept of “colorblindness.”

Initially, these appear to be contradictory dimensions of race. For if race is indeed socially constructed, then its phenotypic dimensions are called into question. If race is less inscribed on the body, if it is less visible or indeed invisible, if it is more social and less “biological,” then that means ideas about racial corporeality, about racial belonging and racial identity, must give ground. These notions lose some of their embeddedness as their sociality and constructedness attains greater acceptance. Although racial “common sense” seems to indicate that the race concept refers to different types of human bodies, as a phenomic matter race is, so to speak, downgraded in the metonym of biosociality (or biopolitics *à la* Foucault 2008). This is due to the now widely recognized social constructedness of race. And that is more or less the view expressed in *Blinded by Sight*. To paraphrase and considerably reduce the scope and depth of Obasogie’s analysis: the visibility of race, and the corporeality of race, may be largely absent, but the social construction of race is so ubiquitous, so built-in, in US society that racialization still occurs, quite seamlessly, for the blind as much as for the sighted.

But what if the *corporeal* dimensions of race also persist, for example in respect to racial profiling or in terms of epigenetics? What if race is *both* marked on the body in ways we call phenotypic or ocular *and* socially constructed? Is this a contradiction, something that calls for an either/or choice?

We don’t think so. Rather we suggest that there is an unstable relation between the two: a tension or resonance. These two dimensions of racialization can coexist; indeed they must. We know that race is about the body, that it involves the selection of phenomic features of human bodies for the marking that is racialization; and we know that this selection, this marking, takes different forms in different sociohistorical contexts. We have defined race as “a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (Omi and Winant 2015, 110). We still want to argue that even though race is socially constructed, the phenotypic, the “fact of blackness” (or whiteness, or brownness, etc.), *continues to matter*.

Synthesizing these two determinations of racial meaning is a bigger job that we can carry out here. Instead, let us consider a single example, indeed the original, constitutive scenario of racial formation in the Americas. We refer to the simultaneous recognition in that formative encounter of two distinctions among humans:

- The corporealization of race as a marker of bodily otherness, a literal embodiment of human difference between European *conquistadores*/settlers on the one hand, and indigenous/chattelized natives/slaves on the other; and
- The social construction of race as a power relation—and therefore an incipient political distinction or political technology—that was a practical necessity of rule itself, of settler over native, or of master over slave; and that was soon enough also a political technology for resistance and rebellion.

By considering conquest and racial slavery in the Americas, as well as rebellion and resistance to it, we can show how these two seemingly contradictory dimensions of racialization have actually coexisted since the origins of modern world and have exercised a codetermining relationship from the get-go.

Didn't the conquest of the Americas and institutionalization of racial slavery in this hemisphere involve *both* the corporealization and the social construction of race? Conquest of indigenous peoples and African slavery, besides being predatory and genocidal, were both belligerent, uncertain, and risky endeavors. Both combined structure and representation, as all racial projects do. Military expeditions, the *encomienda* system, the elaboration of the *Code Noir*, the entire architecture of primitive accumulation across the Atlantic, such were the *structural dimensions* of this ontological racial project. And in terms of representation, these developments were immediately, practically, and necessarily ocular, born out of contact itself. Conquest involved more than genocide and dispossession. Concretely, it consisted of relationships of oppression and resistance, and sometimes cooperation, between Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans.

Europeans depended upon their colonial subjects: on exploitative labor relations (notably enslavement of indigenous people), on sexual subjugation (notably rape), and on constant policing of racial boundaries. Consider "manifest destiny." Consider the *bandeirantes* in the Brazilian hinterlands or *sertão*: these were "pioneers," in other words raiders, explorers, and fortune-hunters, largely from the São Paulo area, sometimes "mixed-race," who trafficked indigenous people into slavery (Weinstein 2015). The enslavement of Africans and their descendants operated similarly: coercion, exploitation, and the denial of common humanity required constant enforcement (Hadden 2001). Who was a slave and who was free, who was a settler and who a native, were corporeally signified.

It is not anachronistic to note the origins of what we now call intersectionality here: the contours and form of labor regimes, the possession and abuse of human chattel, the stigma of "color," all were both enforced and resisted. These were all corporeal, and hence ocular, questions. In other words, the task of domination was conducive to visual classification along lines that were racial from the outset. And as recent historical research shows, the exigencies of resistance also demanded the ocular coding of bodies (Lovejoy and Rogers 1994; Thornton 1998). For these sorts of reasons, racial identities were also blurry from early on: in "mixed race" identities, in "miscegenation" (a word we abhor), we see early instances of intersectionality as well. From conquest to abolition to profiling, we see the need for policing: in the black codes and slavery laws, in policing and juridical procedures, and indeed in constant legal efforts to define racial boundaries (Gross 2008; Moran and Car-bado 2008; Cottrol 2013).

We are suggesting, then, that the phenomic dimensions of race have their origins in early processes of social construction—or political construction, or biopolitics if you prefer. These early racial formation processes emerged with a certain immediacy from conquest and settlement and African racial slavery themselves. They were "social facts" (Durkheim's phrase) that predated, and perhaps prefigured, any worked-out account of race. The social construction of race was there from the beginning, driven not by any consolidated view on who black people were or who Native Americans were (those views developed later), or indeed who Europeans were. Indeed the early articulations of phenomic raciality often confounded the only systematic classificatory tool that people had: their religion.

In the absence of an established raciology,² immediate and practical political needs shaped race: to assert control, to police the empire, to take possession of land, and to extract labor. These were the imperatives of rule, the early racial formation projects of the conquerors and slavemasters. Corporeality, ocularity, visibility, were central elements of conquest and slavery from the start, and remain so today, in the age of “colorblindness.”

That was from “above,” in the structure of settler colonialism, primitive accumulation, and human chattelization. From “below,” from the natives’ and enslaved people’s point of view, the ocular was also important: it was a key element of resistance. To revolt, to resist, to practice your religion or speak your native language, it was necessary to recognize your comrade in the concentration camps, the slave labor camps that we euphemistically call plantations. How do you do this? At least in some measure by her skin, her color, her body.³

So the phenomics of race emerge very early as the political technology of conquest and slavery, and as the source of resistance and revolt. The immensity of this historical arc, the *longue durée* of racial formation from religion to science to politics, also underlies our claim that race provided a master concept for our understanding of oppression and resistance (Omi and Winant 2015). But it is worth noting that right from the beginning of this historical trajectory something like the social construction of race was already present. Before the white talking heads had debated the philosophical anthropology of Native Americans, or Africans, well before that in fact, the immediate need to classify and categorize, to “make up people” (as Ian Hacking [1999] puts it) had already surfaced: Who was a European, a settler, a free man (there were no free women), and who was an *Indio*, an African, a slave?

As a practical matter, a political technology relatively devoid of theology or philosophy, the very exercise of power required these distinctions. The main criteria available for this purpose were phenomic: the visual appearance of bodies. Bodies had to be judged, sometimes under great pressure and with speed—for violence was omnipresent—as like or unlike, similar or different. This social (or more properly, this power-oriented, this political) construction, this phenomic categorical imperative, would soon enough be reprocessed in the discourse available at the time: primarily and for a long time to come, theological discourse.

Only after conquest was assured and slave trading was an established transnational business, only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, only then did the familiar (and from our standpoint preposterous) debates take place among whites as to the nature and humanity of the native and the African. Sepúlveda and las Casas

2. Paul Gilroy defines this term as “the lore that brings the virtual realities of ‘race’ to dismal and destructive life” (2000, 11).

3. Note that as in any panethnicizing process, racialization (or “lumping”) was far from automatic. Nor were the dynamics of solidarity or resistance entirely based on phenotype. Thornton (1998), Lovejoy and Trotman (2003), Mullin (1995), and others suggest that African ethnicities may have provided an alternative form of slaves’ collective mobilization. Thornton argues, for example, that numerous slave revolts were betrayed as a result of inter-ethnic rivalries. These authors also discuss how in the US context slave owners, and the market in human chattel all on its own, worked to break up ethnic ties on individual plantations and in particular localities. Klein and Vidal Luna (2009) discuss some of these patterns in Brazil.

mixed it up early—at Valladolid in 1550 (Todorov 1984). Kant and Hegel, Locke and Hume, Voltaire and Jefferson, all the European big heads in fact, still made outrageous claims about race centuries later. It was only after the founding genocides were established historical facts, after the mines of Potosí, after the liquidation of the Arawak, after the Angolan “way of death” (Miller 1996 [1988]), that rationalization—also known as racial “science”—became necessary. And still today we can hear the echoes of those scientific excuses: “Sure there were terrible brutalities, but these backward peoples had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the modern world,” and so on. Even Marx, a firm abolitionist who denounced “the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins” (1967, 351) and proclaimed in *Capital* that “labor cannot emancipate itself in a white skin where in a black skin it is branded” (1967, 329), was susceptible to this sort of thinking.⁴

It follows from this that both the social construction of race *and* the ocularity of race are indispensable elements of racial formation. But nothing about this analysis should lead us to think that race is a fundamentally ocular phenomenon, a “mere matter of color” that can somehow be ignored, either by the sighted or the blind, as colorblind ideology would suggest.

Social construction-oriented approaches, such as racial formation theory and critical race theory, subalternity theory, help provide the tools we need to problematize the ocularity-based account of race, without dispensing with it entirely. But we still have to wrestle with the various uses of the racial body, both in theory and in practice. Without an account of the racial body, of the phenomic dimensions of race, how can we understand the practice of police racial profiling? How can we grasp the present resurgence of racial “science,” for example the new racial genomics or the peculiarities of racial biostatistics, without such an account (Duster 2003; Zuberi 2003)?

We agree with Obasogie’s overall point that broader social practices outside of what we can visually observe profoundly shape our popular notions of race and the meanings we impart to it. We don’t take the ocularity of race for granted nor do we mean to suggest that racial differences are visually self-evident. The very meaning of race is contingent and flexible, and visibility itself is a very constructed matter. By drawing attention to the impossibility of “colorblindness,” by showing empirically that even the blind *see* race, Obasogie has deepened our understanding of the social construction of this phenomenon, this set of conflicts and identities that has proved so crucial in shaping the modern world. Obasogie’s overall argument, in our view, does not negate the phenomic and ocular dimensions of raciality. Instead, it further elucidates them and deepens our understanding of them. We welcome his call for a critical approach to how racial phenotypes or observable characteristics are invoked and his convincing demonstration of the necessity for a deeper analysis of the visuality of race. And we congratulate him for making an important advance in that project.

4. Both Marx and Engels sometimes suggest that European empire, for all its horrors, was preparing its subjects to enter the modern world, to give up their backwardness, and so on (see Marx and Engels 1972).

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