

Response to Gómez and Omi and Winant

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

Laura Gómez and Michael Omi and Howard Winant offer thoughtful commentaries on Blinded by Sight: Seeing Race Through the Eyes of the Blind that expand an important discussion on the constructed and constitutive aspects of race. This response attempts to continue this conversation by putting the book's substantive innovations in dialogue with its methodological contributions.

The commentaries by Gómez and Omi & Winant on *Blinded by Sight* are a welcome addition to an evolving conversation on the nature of race, how it becomes “knowable,” and the relevance of human variation—skin tone, facial features, and the like—in relation to what we see, what we think, and how we feel. I appreciate Gómez’s attentiveness to the distinctions and synergies between legal and racial consciousness, and her call for race scholars to explore opportunities to think about race across multiple levels of lived experiences whether they be “macro,” “micro,” or in between. Similarly, Omi and Winant’s invitation to race scholars to take the body seriously in our constructive and constitutive models puts a finer point on how we must engage critiques in an iterative manner that respects both theory and the basic physical fact of human difference. These comments share an important theme that reflects a key challenge in race scholarship: how can we simultaneously capture the real, quotidian aspects of race—the everyday nature of looking different and its material consequences—while also considering the manner in which these interactions are produced by deeper sociological phenomenon that are not immediately present to us yet nonetheless create the conditions for people to experience the world around them in particular ways?

Blinded by Sight attempts to do several things. It is an empirical exploration into a question that has not been researched before—*how do blind people understand race?* It is also a legal intervention into the very idea of colorblindness and its coherence by putting the empirical findings of blind people’s ability to “see” race in conversation with the conceptual and doctrinal shortcomings of colorblindness as a seemingly attractive framework for managing the state’s use of racial categories. The book is also a theoretical engagement with social constructionist theory as a way to add to its insights into how meanings attach to bodies, drawing attention to a separate but related constitutive process—that is, the sociological forces that lead racial bodies to *become* salient and visible rather than this visibility simply being obvious and self evident. But *Blinded by Sight* can also be read as a methods book

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that attempts to develop a new approach to race scholarship that can attend to some of the challenges in race scholarship raised by Gómez and Omi and Winant.

We are at a defining moment in the study of race. At the very time that social and political discourses urge a colorblind, postracial framework, race continues to be a significant determinant for people's well-being and life opportunities. As such, understanding the ways that race affects people's lives is becoming increasingly complicated, requiring new tools to tease out how the rules and aspirations of formal equality in a post-Civil Rights era can not only fail to produce the fairness and justice it seeks, but can themselves become mechanisms of racial privilege and oppression. Within this broader social, legal, and political challenge lies the methodological problem of how social scientists should study race. This challenge highlights a deeper tension in the social sciences in that while we traditionally theorize race as a social construction, we often measure it as if it is a "real," static variable that exists as a fact in the world like a tree or rock. Thus, there is an opportunity to rethink race and its measurement in light of the discursive and political challenges presented by postracial and colorblind advocacy while also closing the conceptual gap in how social scientists theorize and measure race.

In this context, *Blinded by Sight* can be seen as part of a new effort at developing methods that blend critical race approaches to theorizing race with empirical collections of data that speak to how race is lived on the ground. This emerging effort at an empirical critical race theory, or eCRT, has blossomed over the past few years¹ and is providing new ways of thinking critically about how race and racism are central to social relations while using social science methods in a manner that is consistent with this theoretical framing. *Blinded by Sight* works from an eCRT standpoint by developing a theoretically informed research question that explores (and exposes) colorblindness through qualitative research methods that examine blind people's racial experiences. It is precisely through this nontraditional paring of critical race theory and empirical research that *Blinded by Sight* is able to get at a particular racial experience among blind people that has been unexplored and put these findings in conversation with broader doctrinal trends as a way to have a deeper understanding of how colorblind discourses are warping our understanding of race and reaffirming the very racial hierarchies that law claims to disavow.

It is my hope that *Blinded by Sight* is not only read as a substantive contribution to our understanding of American law and race relations, but also as a methods book that can help future race scholars design research that explores the tricky, nuanced, and nonobvious ways in which race continues to permeate everyday life. *Blinded by Sight* leverages a particular synergy between critical race theory and qualitative methods—that is, CRT's openness to using storytelling to understand lived experiences and qualitative research methods' ability to collect and report narratives as meaningful data points that tells us about everyday life. This is not the only synergy available, and I encourage future researchers to explore, for example, how

1. For examples of eCRT scholarship, see symposium issues in the *UC Irvine Law Review* (<http://www.law.uci.edu/lawreview/issuearchive/vol3no2.html>), *Fordham Law Review* (<http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol83/iss6/>), and *Wisconsin Law Review* (<http://wisconsinlawreview.org/volume-2016-no-3/>).

critical race perspectives can orient survey research projects or how critical race understandings of identity might help shape the design of statistical models. To be sure, the relationship between CRT and empiricism is bidirectional, and there are important opportunities for thinking about how social science methods can push critical race theory to new levels. The prospects for this relationship are as promising as they are endless, and the need is great.