Guest Editor’s Introduction: Visual Culture and Race

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MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., Volume 39, Number 2, Summer 2014, pp. 1-11 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press

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There is power in looking.
—bell hooks (“Oppositional” 115)

In her groundbreaking essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” (1992), bell hooks discusses the stakes of looking in a racially segregated United States. She proposes that restrictions and prohibitions on the black gaze that were established during slavery and reinforced in the post-Reconstruction era in the spectacle of lynching incited black viewers to adopt a critical mode of looking, an oppositional gaze of resistance: “[A]l]l attempts to repress our/black peoples’ right to gaze . . . produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze” (116). hooks emphasizes the importance of looking in US history and the urgency of refusing racism by looking back. Notably, she does not focus on the spectacle of racism or on countless racist representations but on the gaze itself and the power of resistant acts of looking. The essential questions hooks addresses activate two scholarly discourses that intersect in productive ways: visual culture studies and critical studies of race. Her questions encourage one to consider, as this special issue does, how looking has been racialized in the United States.

As an interdisciplinary conversation, visual culture studies is not beholden to the histories of representation claimed by any one field, such as art history, literature, film studies, or popular culture studies. Instead, visual culture studies aims to “show seeing” (Mitchell),¹ to focus not simply on vision but on “visuality” or “sight as a social fact” (Foster ix). In other words, instead of rehearsing a disciplinary canon of artworks, objects, events, or texts, it encourages scholars to investigate how people learn to see and come to understand themselves as viewers. Critical studies of race share this interdisciplinary impetus and focus on the social forces that shape many different practices. In the most general sense, the critical study of race examines the social construction of race or race “as a social fact.” Bringing these two conversations to bear on one another suggests that if sight is a social practice, it is also racialized in the United States, shaped and directed by the racial contours and context of the social sphere.
The intersection of visual culture studies and critical studies of race opens up important ways to understand the cultural specificity of looking and of race as a visual cultural dynamic. Working at this crucial juncture, this special issue considers looking and seeing as racialized practices in the United States. It interrogates how subjects adopt racial positions as they learn to look and how looking itself constitutes a performance of race across almost two centuries of US history, from the early nineteenth to the early twenty-first, and in contexts ranging from slavery, colonialism, allotment, the Great Migration, the Chicano art movement, the contemporary art world, and contemporary popular culture. Most pointedly, this issue endeavors to move the discussion of race and the visual beyond an assessment of representations to consider questions about looking and the ways in which looking produces racialized _viewers_, not simply racialized objects of view. The essays collected here examine how subjects are produced through practices of looking, how looking is learned, and how seeing is culturally coded in terms of race. A number of the essays also “show seeing” differently, assessing how individual subjects might see the same thing from different perspectives or how they might not see the same thing at all. Together, the contributors share in a visual culture analysis that understands race as a matter of looking.

As looking is racialized, it is also gendered, as a long line of feminist theorists, drawing on Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking work on the “male gaze,” have taught us. Race and gender intersect and inform one another in the performance and power of “the gaze.” By attending to both race and gender, one discovers that not all male gazes are equal, and whiteness can sometimes grant white women access to a gaze generally reserved for men. To take the extreme case of spectacle lynchings in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century US culture, one finds severe prohibitions against the black male gaze and remarkable permissions to look granted to white women at these gruesome scenes. According to hooks, “black men were murdered/lynched for looking at white womanhood” (“Oppositional” 118), and white women, shielded under a rhetoric of racial and sexual “innocence,” participated in the murder of black men.

Looking, seeing, and the gaze overlap practically and conceptually in many ways, but they also mark important distinctions in how vision becomes the social fact of visuality. _Looking_ can be understood as the social performance of sight, the active gesture in the realm of visuality. But looking is not necessarily the same as _seeing_, which can be understood as a matter of conscious perception. Dominant cultural invitations to negate or disregard, such as those accorded to white viewers, intervene in the process of looking to produce cultural blind spots. In other words, a viewer might look but fail to see. And he or she might refuse to look altogether.\(^2\) Such structured patterns of privileged looking and blindness might be said to constitute a _gaze_, a dominant mode of looking that is culturally sanctioned as well as circumscribed and often contested.\(^3\)
Many important studies of race have attended to questions of visibility, noting how racialized subjects are made simultaneously hypervisible and invisible. Most have understood race as the object of a gaze, rather than as a subjective status produced by the performance of a gaze (rather than a performance for a gaze). As early as the turn of the twentieth century, however, W. E. B. Du Bois understood the imbrication of these dynamics of seeing and being seen. He explained “double-consciousness,” for him the defining feature of African American identity, as a distinctly visual dynamic, as “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” For Du Bois, learning to see oneself refracted through the lens of a dominant white gaze also enabled one to unsettle the authority of that gaze and to learn to see differently with what he called “second-sight” (8). As I have argued elsewhere, Du Bois was an early visual theorist of race and claimed for himself the position of a seeing subject.

Du Bois’s second sight, the revelation of double consciousness, is a critical vision through which one sees how one is seen. In this way, seeing and being seen can never fully be untangled. However, I am interested in pursuing the point of looking beyond its logical limit because so much critical attention has been given to being seen as a racialized position and to representations as the site where subjectivities are shaped. As important as this work has been and continues to be, it also threatens to leave us with a static taxonomy in which race is parsed ever more carefully and yet remains objectified, the object of a careful view. Scholars in performance studies have sought to disrupt the stasis of such a taxonomy by suggesting that people play to and against the assumptions of a dominant cultural gaze, thereby dismantling its power to contain and constrain objects under view. Daphne A. Brooks, for example, studies “Afro-alienation acts” (4), in which artists “critically defamiliariz[e] their own bodies by way of performance in order to yield alternative racial and gender epistemologies” (5). In such cases, the object of view performs to and against a gaze, challenging and disrupting its strategies of visual containment.

What this special issue hopes to underscore is the ways in which looking itself is a racialized performance. As Nicole R. Fleetwood has argued, “the visual sphere is a performative field where seeing race is not a transparent act; it is itself a ‘doing’” (7). By attending further not only to the act of “seeing race” but also to the act of looking as itself racialized, one can better understand the power dynamics of the visual sphere. One can learn who is authorized to look and to see and therefore to claim to know. Moreover, one can study, with hooks, Irit Rogoff, and Nicholas Mirzoeff, how and when unauthorized viewers seize “the right to look.” And importantly, one can examine how and when subjects purport to look but fail to see.

If visual culture studies is about “showing seeing,” it must also be about showing not-seeing and refusals to look. Cultural privileges of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability grant some viewers special access to the gaze but also limit
what those viewers can see. One might focus on poverty, prisons, climate change, or the effects of war, to name only some of the most obvious blind spots in contemporary US culture, some of the most blatant refusals to look. As much as looking is about ways of seeing, it is often about not seeing the structures that constitute one’s access to the gaze. As Rogoff has argued, “What the eye purportedly ‘sees’ is dictated to it by an entire set of beliefs and desires” (22). In studying acts of looking, then, visual culture scholars must also study that to which viewers remain blind.

Whiteness is privileged in the visual field of the United States, as numerous scholars following Richard Dyer have argued. White viewers often remain unmarked, invisible in their privileged positions as those who gaze at others. Nevertheless, a dominant visual field is sustained only through acts of looking; it is constantly (re)produced and racialized through performances of looking and seeing. Even those viewers who are privileged in the visual arena must continually assert their right to look. To return to one of the most difficult historical examples, the presence of so many white spectators in lynching photographs underscores the desire of white men and women to be seen as powerful wielders of the torch, the rope, and the gaze.

White subjects learn to embody privilege precisely by learning to look, as Teresa A. Goddu demonstrates in her essay in this issue, “Anti-Slavery’s Panoramic Perspective.” In her study of antebellum abolition periodicals and visual print culture, she shows how Northern white abolitionists learned to understand themselves as subjects and to occupy positions of racial and middle-class privilege through lessons in looking. Anti-slavery periodicals encouraged Northern white viewers to identify with an elevated point of view, what Goddu calls a “panoramic perspective,” generally occupied by slaveholders in printed “views” of slavery, even as they also taught Northern white viewers to reinvest that morally sanctioned position with the ideals of national freedom. In other words, Northern white viewers were taught to see themselves as morally superior viewers who nevertheless occupied the same “bird’s-eye view” of slavery held by oppressive Southern slaveholders. From this elevated vantage, Northern white viewers were taught to understand their privilege and superiority in relation to all of slavery’s subjects, including slaveholders and the enslaved. Assuming a gaze from above, they learned to inhabit their privilege by looking down on the world of slavery.

As subjects learn how to look, they also learn what to see. A single image can serve as evidence for profoundly different views. Despite a trenchant popular cultural faith in the evidentiary quality of the photograph, the meaning of a photograph cannot be fixed; it is malleable and open to all kinds of discursive directives and contradictory readings. In “Parallax, Transit, Transmotion: Reading Race in the Allotment Photographs of E. Jane Gay,” a discussion of Gay’s allotment photographs of the Nez Perce, Nicole Tonkovich argues that even
images made through a colonial lens can be seen to register the persistence of Native sovereignty. What is visible to one viewing subject may be invisible to another, hidden in plain sight. Using the imagery of parallax, in which the same object is seen from different points of view in order to measure the distance between viewer and viewed, Tonkovich shows how Gay’s allotment photographs can be seen as measures of Nez Perce “transit” toward the assimilation dictated by US allotment policies or as measures of Nez Perce “transmotion” toward a resistant and hybrid self-definition marking Native survivance.

Two of the essays in this special issue focus explicitly on the queer critical practice of learning to see differently. Extending and sometimes problematizing feminist analyses of a gendered gaze, queer theorists have revealed the blind spots of a heteronormative gaze, showing how queer subjects critically read and re-read coded social performances. Robb Hernández, in “Drawing Offensive/Offensive Drawing: Toward a Theory of Mariconógraphy,” and Thomas Xavier Sarmiento, in “The Empire Sings Back: Glee’s Queer Materialization of Filipina/o America,” assess and critique the terms by which a dominant visual culture marks subjects in terms of either race or sexuality and steadfastly refuses to see multiple and simultaneous forms of difference. They focus instead on the pleasure of refusing scripted representations and discerning different codes, the pleasure of reclaiming and subverting dominant representations. Hernández and Sarmiento perform the queer practices of reading against the grain that José Esteban Muñoz has called “disidentification.”

Hernández challenges the racial and heteronormative blind spots that have obscured queer Chicano art within a larger visual culture. He brings into view critical performances and practices eclipsed by the nationalist machismo of the Chicano art movement and the whitewashing of Eurocentric “gay art.” Putting into play what he calls “mariconógraphy,” Hernández names a critical visual practice that seeks to reinscribe the figure of the “maricón,” as well as one that endeavors to see the blind spots in heteronormative and Eurocentric visual archives. Mariconógraphy is both a “set of subversive images and resistant re-readings unified in their attitude and sensibility.” That attitude and sensibility playfully subvert the obfuscations effected by both Latino heteronormativity and white gay racial dominance, bringing disruptive practices of representation and reading into view. In his essay, Hernández performs mariconógraphy through a critical reading of the mariconographic work of two Chicano artists active in Los Angeles in the 1970s, Joey Terrill and Teddy Sandoval.

Pursuing his own disidentifying viewing practices, Sarmiento focuses on alternative narratives of race and sexual identity in the popular television show Glee. He too questions the way “race and sexuality continue to be framed as mutually exclusive within popular discourses.” Glee contains characters by identifying them according to single markers of difference, foreclosing on more complex and multiple identity formations. However, as Sarmiento demonstrates,
viewers might see things differently. He assesses the way Sunshine Corazon, a character identified as Filipina, is also subtly eroticized on the show, and Blaine Anderson, a “white” character identified as “gay,” is racialized by audience members on fan sites who call attention to the multiracial Filipino identity of Darren Criss, the actor who plays Blaine. By attending to the Filipina/o characters on *Glee*, Sarmiento also underscores a repressed blind spot in the show’s story of diversity in the Ohio heartland, namely, the legacy of US colonialism in the Philippines, which is also subtly signaled by the name of the school where much of the show’s action takes place: William McKinley High School. Sarmiento’s analysis draws forth “the traces of US empire” that disrupt *Glee*s multicultural logic.

As Sarmiento’s discussion of repressed colonial history suggests, looking without seeing is a performance of racial privilege. Matthew David Goodwin emphasizes and critiques such faulty vision in “The Optical Revolution of ADÁL’s *Los Out of Focus Nuyoricans*.” ADÁL’s blurry images from 1996, which mimic the tight cropping and square format of institutional headshots and passport photographs, present faces recognizable only as such, without the detail that would distinguish one from the other and allow individuals to be identified. As Goodwin explains, these out-of-focus images are not exactly invisible, but they are also not clearly brought into view. ADÁL uses blurred vision to suggest symbolically the unrecognized status of Nuyoricans in both the United States and Puerto Rico, as well as their hybrid cultural position.

If visual culture studies is about looking rather than representations per se, it opens up a wide range of texts and spaces for critical contemplation. Although rarely considered visual culture beyond incursions of visual description, literature is a key site through which looking is learned and viewing subjects are produced. In this way, literature can be understood as a form of visual culture. Literary texts provide a platform through which race and racialized subjects are posited at the intersection of competing gazes. Readers learn to see as they watch characters looking at one another, and as outside viewers guided by a narrator they are sometimes privileged to discern what characters cannot. As Sarah Blackwood argues in her reading of Elizabeth Keckley’s memoir *Behind the Scenes: or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868), African American literature provides a unique perspective on national visual culture and offers readers a lens onto black visual subjectivities. Despite the relative dearth of images produced by African Americans in the nineteenth century, African American literature reveals a robust engagement with visual culture and the broader dynamics of a racialized visuality. In “Making Good Use of Our Eyes*: Nineteenth-Century African Americans Write Visual Culture,*” Blackwood proposes that the traces of “nineteenth-century black viewing practices” can be found in texts and that “nineteenth-century African Americans attempted to write visual culture.” Authors such as Keckley asserted
their own visual literacy while also critiquing the limitations of “white sight” through which white subjects learn to see only what they want to know.

In “Unashamedly Black’: Jim Crow Aesthetics and the Visual Logic of Shame,” her discussion of shame as a visual dynamic, Eurie Dahn examines the ways in which texts such as the Chicago Defender of the 1920s and Nella Larsen’s novel Quicksand (1928) instruct readers in how to see themselves and others according to racial standards largely determined by class. Dahn shows how intraracial surveillance is informed by interracial dynamics, and how shame at “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” in Du Bois’s words, functions as a mode of class discipline. Studying the way shame is inscribed in the letters pages of the Chicago Defender and through the formalist experimentation of Larsen’s novel, Dahn suggests that shame’s dynamic of shifting perspectives ultimately works to unsettle the seeming fixity of racial stereotypes and roles. Dahn argues that even an affect as seemingly pernicious as shame can show one that race and racial judgments are not stable but a matter of one’s point of view.

The intraracial dynamics of shaming in the Chicago Defender were brought into concrete visual form in Jay Jackson’s 1930s “As Others See Us” comics. As Amy M. Mooney demonstrates in “Seeing ‘As Others See Us’: The Chicago Defender Cartoonist Jay Jackson as Cultural Critic,” Jackson’s cartoons depict the “shameful” behavior against which Chicago Defender readers were invited to pose their African American middle-class identities. Jackson’s comics focus on figures that watch others, interpolating viewers of the comics in a dynamic of evaluative looking. Readers of the Chicago Defender are meant to see and measure the follies of Jackson’s characters, but as Mooney argues, they are also meant to see with sympathy, recognizing their own foibles as displayed in Jackson’s sketches.

As literature can be said to constitute visual culture, literary texts are also important sources of interrogation for visual artists, as Janet Neary demonstrates. In “Representational Static: Visual Slave Narratives of Contemporary Art,” Neary shows how contemporary African American artists, such as Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, and Ellen Driscoll, appropriate the forms of nineteenth-century slave narratives to destabilize the visual signs of authentication inscribed in those texts. In doing so, they also call attention to and undermine the discourses of authenticity that continue to circumscribe the work of contemporary black artists. Studying “visual slave narratives of contemporary art,” Neary shows how artists have troubled the place of the visual in the articulation of race, unsettling the authority of a white gaze by turning it back on itself. Ligon’s work especially calls forth the viewer’s expectations, making the assumptions that shape the practices of looking for race his subject.

Blackwood and Dahn propose that literature is visual culture in that it asks readers to see figures posed at the nexus of looking relations and importantly to understand themselves as privileged bearers of the gaze. Neary examines
the ways in which the visual demarcates race in literary texts, and the ways in which both ex-slave narrators and contemporary artists have sought to unsettle and challenge the privilege of a reader/viewer’s speculative gaze.

Like the artists Neary studies, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks draws on historical material to call attention to contemporary acts of racialized viewing. In “Witnessing and Wounding in Suzan-Lori Parks’s Venus,” Stacie McCormick argues that Parks reframes the historical spectacle of Sara Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, in order to complicate the visual consumption of the hypervisible black female body. Parks resurrects the Venus, collapsing past and present in uncanny excess flesh that cannot be contained by the spectacle of the body. Further, Parks calls on her audience members to recognize the forces of spectacle that dehumanize the Venus. By including an audience within the play, Parks refracts the colonizing gaze back on itself, making contemporary viewers aware of their participation in the objectification of the Venus.

Contemporary artist Jean-Ulrick Désert also works to unsettle the privilege of a white viewer who purports to “see” race. As Jerry Philogene proposes in “Dyaspora All Up in the Mix: Jean-Ulrick Désert, Mapping Fragmented Archaeologies,” Désert uses the strategies of camp and sartorial play to perform the “troubling presence” of the black male body in his performance piece Negerhosen2000/The Travel Albums v. 2 (2007). Dressed in elaborate Lederhosen of his own design, this Haitian-born, Berlin-based black diasporic artist “theatrically engages ideas about modernity and mobility.” He asks viewers to engage and participate in his performances, inviting them to photograph him and record their responses to his display. The archive of images that results from this interaction marks Désert’s disruptive art as it also brings the racialized dynamics of looking into view.

The wide range of texts and media, as well as the disparate historical moments examined in this special issue, cohere around the questions the scholars pose. Together, they focus in productive and exciting ways on questions of looking. Their work departs from taxonomic studies of representations of race to focus on how practices of looking are racialized. Once again, they do not ask what does race look like but how are racialized subjects produced through practices of looking? How is seeing an act of racial inscription, the claiming of a racial position? How is sight itself racialized? Together, their work provides an important model for studying visual culture and race as a matter of looking, one that promises to open up new avenues of research as well as new ways of seeing.

Notes

1. Other scholars that have examined shifting social practices of vision include Jonathan Crary and Martin Jay.
2. Cassandra Jackson takes an innovative approach to the problem of looking and seeing, suggesting the reverse of what I have articulated, that one might see without looking. For Jackson, seeing is a way of “perceiving the complex power dynamics of our own vision” (111) in a way that does not reinscribe the relationships of power inherent in looking.

3. The gaze has a long history as a category of analysis in feminist film theory, where it has been used primarily in psychoanalytically inflected discussions of sexual difference in the field of vision. Drawing on that work, I use the term gaze to denote the ways in which other social structures beyond and in combination with those of sexual difference, such as colonialism, slavery, and institutionalized racism, might be said to produce a dominant vision of the world. For a concise overview of some of the ways in which the gaze has been used in art history and visual culture studies, see Margaret Olin.

4. Many scholars have made these points. Several salient examples include Frantz Fanon, Kobena Mercer, Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, Maurice O. Wallace, and bell hooks (Black).

5. See my discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois as an early visual theorist of race (Photography).

6. In “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination” (1992), hooks declares access to the gaze a matter of racial privilege, proposing that despite violent prohibitions against the gaze from slavery through the Jim Crow era, African Americans have nevertheless evaluated white people with a “critical ‘ethnographic’ gaze” (167). Irit Rogoff asks, “What are the visual codes by which some are allowed to look, others to hazard a peek, and still others are forbidden to look altogether? In what political discourses can we understand looking and returning the gaze as an act of political resistance?” (16). According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, visuality names the authorized look of power instantiated historically in plantation slavery, Western imperialism, and the visualized battlefield of modern warfare; conversely, countervisuality names the practices of the disempowered when they claim autonomy and assert their “right to look” (1-34).

7. Important studies of whiteness and visual culture include those by Richard Dyer, Michael Rogin, Eric Lott, Martin A. Berger, and hooks (“Representations”).

8. Michael A. Chaney has undertaken the important work of reading literature as visual culture. My own thoughts along these lines were first articulated in American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture (1999).

Works Cited


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