

Making Sense: Race and Modern Vision

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Abstract

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“Making Sense: Race and Modern Vision” explores how race as we know it becomes visually recognizable. It does so by historicizing the perceptual knowledge produced by race and vision and by demonstrating how the relationship between race and vision has come to be regarded as common sensical. In particular the dissertation examines how race has been visually structured by the development of writing practices in the modern transatlantic context. Through the analysis of a wide textual field including fiction, philosophy, and visual art, “Making Sense” traces how race has acquired “visuality” via writing that represents race as self-evidently visible. The central argument is that the practice of writing literally *makes sense* of race because, tautologically, the visuality of race is represented as existent prior to its discursive presentation.

While scholars have offered rich critiques of the role scientific vision has played in defining race (and justifying racial subjection), they have tended to explain the relationship between race and vision as overdetermined. “Making Sense” takes a different approach. It asks how the relationship between race and vision has been generated as common sensical in exploring vision through its historically aesthetic, or, sensorial structure. The story that “Making Sense” tells is narrated across four chapters. The chapters analyze a wide and unusual range of literary, visual, scientific, and philosophical texts that engage in racial discourse, including runaway slave advertisements, Kantian aesthetic philosophy, Darwinian evolutionary theory, turn-of-the-century architectural theories, black modernist fiction, and contemporary visual artwork. This collection of texts, produced in the context of national and global discourses of race, aesthetics, and modernity, is regarded as an archive of common sense vision. “Making Sense” examines how this archive demonstrates and exposes the fundamentally discursive structure and the formalist organization of the visual sense.

In tracking the universalizing moves of formalist discourses, “Making Sense” utilizes formal methods, including close reading. This dissertation’s innovation on formal analysis reorients what it means to perform historical scholarship and shows how narrow forms of disciplinary study have produced platitudes about race and vision.

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Introduction

Making Sense: Race and Modern Vision

In 2012 seventeen-year-old high school student Trayvon Martin was shot and killed walking home from a neighborhood convenience store. While unarmed, Martin was visually perceived and described by the community watchman who killed him as “a real suspicious” “black male” wearing “a dark hoodie.”¹ It was significant to me that Martin’s death and the conversations and protests that followed were happening concurrently during a stage of my dissertation research in which I was reading hundreds of 18th and 19th century North American runaway slave advertisements. These advertisements contain intense descriptions of the visual appearance of runaways, composed for the purpose of capturing them. In these ads I saw the historical emergence of the visual logic of blackness that still makes sense today and explains why Martin was murdered: the presumption that seeing visual appearance is self-evident. From bodily characteristics such as skin color to clothing such as hoodies, visual appearance functions as racial self-evidence.²

The logic of “visual” self-evidence that the 18th and 19th century advertisers used to describe their runaway property is part of a similar logic at work in contemporary racial profiling

¹ According to the recording of the call made to the Sanford police by George Zimmerman, Zimmerman reports Martin as a “real suspicious guy” and describes his appearance by describing his clothing, including the “dark hoodie, a gray hoodie.” Zimmerman describes Trayvon as a “black male” after the police asked Zimmerman to identify the race of the suspect. Audio file of Zimmerman’s call posted on “Shooting of Trayvon Martin.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 19 April 2015. Web. 19 April 2015.

² Conservative talk show host Geraldo Rivera unwittingly broached the problem of racial visual perception in urging “parents of black and Latino youngsters particularly to not let their children go out wearing hoodies.” While Rivera’s comment was probably made to distinguish and uphold black and Latino bourgeois respectability, the comment is interesting because it also indicates how the hoodie is constructed as racial and how it racializes the black and Latino teenagers who wear it. Rivera went on to make the controversial claim that if Martin “didn’t have that hoodie on, that nutty neighborhood watch guy wouldn’t have responded in that violent and aggressive way.” Video clip featuring Rivera’s talk show comments posted on ThinkProgress6, “Geraldo Rivera: Blame the Hoodie for Trayvon Martin’s Death.” Online video clip. *Youtube*. Youtube, 23 March 2012. Web. 19 April 2015.

and policing. The recent killings of black people—Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, to name only the well-known—is part of a much longer history. A similar logic of visual self-evidence informed the public’s response after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The popular idea was that differences between the “Japs” and the Chinese are *visually* identifiable, as *Life* magazine carefully explained (Figure 1).³ A 2012 Chicago Tribune publication also makes common sense visual distinctions amongst different types of turbans (as worn by “Sikh men,” “Iranian leaders,” “Taliban members,” “Indian men,” and “Muslim religious elders”) which in effect collapse national, ethnic, and religious distinctions into racial-visual ones (Figure 2).⁴ This “Turban Primer” was published two days after the racially-targeted mass shooting at a Wisconsin Sikh temple. These are just a few examples that demonstrate racial appearance as self-evident.

“Making Sense: Race and Modern Vision” explores how race as we know it becomes a trait we imagine to be visually recognizable. It revises the issue of visual perception as a problem of racial stereotyping into a question about the seemingly objective visual experience of seeing. The dissertation explores how historically, the primarily *visual* representation of race has made race appear “objectively” visible. It asks how particularly *visual* forms of racialization have consequently privileged the visibility of race due to the exceptional place vision holds in modernity. The dissertation tracks how the visibility of certain characteristics becomes racialized such that those characteristics become coded primarily as “racial.” The presumption that what is “racial” is visible continues to persist in our culture: critical discourses of race today remain centered around stabilizing or challenging race’s relation to skin color, facial features, hoodies, turbans, hair, and other visible signs of difference.

³ “How to Tell the Japs from the Chinese,” *Life* Magazine (22 December 1941).

⁴ “Turban Primer,” *RedEye* (7 August 2012).

“Making Sense” focuses on breaking down this racializing logic of visibility. I call this logic “racial visuality.” When approaching racial visuality as a logic, I find that it works through the presumption that vision is a sense we all share—a common sense. The dissertation provides an account for the presumed common sense of racial visuality by historicizing the perceptual knowledge produced by race and vision and by demonstrating how the relationship between race and vision has come to be regarded as common sensical. This investigation ends up revealing how vision is structured tautologically: race appears visually knowable because the common sense of vision is in turn structured by race. To break up this self-affirming feedback loop, the dissertation parses the relationships among visibility, visuality, and vision that have been consolidated and codetermined by common sense understandings of race. Accordingly “Making Sense” intervenes in the hegemonic presentation of the connection between the visual and the racial that continue to produce perceptual knowledge about vision and race. Therefore this dissertation provides a careful examination of racial visuality and how it has been made intelligible within so-called “aesthetic” and “scientific” discourses that identify, rationalize, or countervisualize racial visuality and the making of common sense vision. Approaching racial visuality as a common sense allows the dissertation to pinpoint not only how race has been subject to vision but the seemingly intuitive *conditions* under which race has been made subject to vision, i.e. visually intelligible.

“Making Sense” focalizes how visual common sense originates from the practice of writing about race as a visual characteristic in the modern transatlantic context. The dissertation explicates the role writing has played in constructing race’s visual status and how that role has been conveniently erased so that race appears immediately and even naturally visible. Through the analysis of a wide textual field including fiction, philosophy, and visual art, “Making Sense”

traces how race has acquired visibility via writing that represents race as self-evidently visible. Consequently, the self-evidence of visibility appears retroactively as common sense rather than discursive, writerly construction. The central argument is that the practice of writing literally *makes sense* of race because, tautologically, the visibility of race is represented in writing as existent a priori.

One of the key interventions of the dissertation is to explore and revise the Kantian aesthetic project. Kant's aesthetic critique is not explicitly about vision or race, but it is about the kind of "objective" communication that writings about racial visibility perform. This dissertation finds Kantian aesthetics to be a philosophy of communication: how humans have the capacity to communicate individual, subjective perceptions. Such communication must be performed in ways that are intelligible to others. Kant calls communication, which is expressed for the sake of social intelligibility, "objective." In Kantian aesthetic theory, paradoxically, the condition for communicating individual, private, subjective thoughts is based on the presumption that communication is objectively intelligible. Kant calls this condition "common sense." This dissertation explores how intelligible, objective communication about race, via the practice of writing, presumes and reifies race as a matter of visual common sense. The dissertation examines how common sense is structured tautologically due to the paradox of subjective/objective communication and how this structure undergirds the emergence of aesthetic culture. This dissertation also adds a racial supplement to Kant's theory of aesthetic culture. It examines how writing about racial visibility is designed for the sake of common sense intelligibility. In turn, race norms the experience of reading and writing. "Making Sense" tells the story of how such writings, composed for reader comprehension, takes vision for granted—that is, as common sense.

The Discursivity of Racial Visuality

“Making Sense” explores a definition of modernity that attends to writing, reading, and seeing as racial knowledge-making practices. The dissertation situates these practices as keyed to racial capitalism, genocide, colonialism, and mass migration through the investigation of historical artifacts and scholarly discourses established as modern, including newspapers, evolutionary theory, skyscrapers, and modernist aesthetic texts. The dissertation’s periodization of modernity emphasizes how racial visuality has been constructed in modernity and how race is specifically a modern discourse. Thus, the aforementioned artifacts and discourses work as archives of modernity that provide fascinating insights into the construction of racial visuality. The dissertation also flips the question of race and modernity. The explorations undertaken across the four chapters investigate how modernity has been constructed by racial visuality. One of the crucial arguments of the dissertation is thus that the common sense practice of seeing has been historically constructed by racial visuality. The dissertation’s approach to the modern period enables not only the question of how race is modern but also the question of how the modern is racial.

“Making Sense” argues that writing and literacy are central to the common sense of racial visuality in the modern period. Following the scholarship of Walter Ong on the visual culture of literacy and Jacques Derrida on the textuality of writing, this dissertation investigates the sense of race/vision emergent with the modern logics and practices of writing.⁵ According to Ong, “hearing-dominance” yields to “sight-dominance” with the development of mass literacy which in turn transforms human consciousness. For example, consider the oral instance in which you

⁵ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

might encounter an unfamiliar name or word. You might ask for the word to be spelled out. You are understanding the word by visualizing it, not only hearing it. This example illustrates how we might begin to formulate questions on how linguistic thought and expression depend on visual culture in modernity. For Ong, the shift from oral to written language is fundamentally a shift from sound to vision. Rather than consider writing as a “shift,” Derrida argues that writing is originary in itself.⁶ For Derrida, writing is both enclosed by and more than its visual form. Writing is constituted by visual analogues experienced as signs. The dissertation is indebted to the specific connection Derrida has made between writing and visual form and Ong between literacy and visual culture in general. Following Derrida and Ong, I understand modern literacy as a visual experience and writing as a cultivation of a formal visual logic. Modern literacy is fundamentally a *visually* comprehended system, writing fundamentally visual composition. The arrangement of the alphabet and the formulation of words, systematically arranged, line by line, in space, such as a page, are visual conceptualizations and productions.

Writing is also highly technological and artificial. Writing requires the use of tools and rules: writing is constituted by the use of visible marks with a system so controlled—the alphabet—that have no meaning in themselves but whose meaning can be determined when contextually synthesized through certain rules. As Derrida reminds us, the alphabet is a “system of graphic signs which in its principle is no longer attached to a particular language” (299). Alphabetic writing is based on a system that represents only a phonic signifier which in itself are signifiers but are taken as signs. Derrida calls alphabetic writing “pure representation,” a work of abstraction (300). The development and practice of this modern form of writing is truly amazing.

⁶ The “shift” is the biggest point of difference between Ong’s and Derrida’s arguments. Ong places much weight on the transitive relationship between orality and writing, as it affects human consciousness. Derrida would see the “transitive relationship” as a ruse, as an effect of logocentricism. Here I do not see these points at odds with each other because both Ong and Derrida recognize writing’s visuality.

As Ong argues, with wonder, “encoded visible markings engage words fully so that the exquisitely intricate structures and references evolved in sound can be visibly recorded exactly in their specific complexity and, because visibly recorded, can implement production of still more exquisite structures and references, far surpassing the potentials of oral utterance. Writing, in this ordinary sense, was and is the most momentous of all human technological inventions” (84-85).

This dissertation examines the relationship between writing and racial visibility. It explores how writing and reading about race inform how race is seen. It also explores how in turn, the visibility of writing forms the practice of reading race. I take the modern privileging of literacy (and thus vision) as my starting point. I do not take for granted how writing about race, and writing in general, and the literacy that writing presumes is formalized in part by the methods of study that already presume a relationship between textual form and meaning (both essential and nonessential). Nor do I take for granted that the discursive fields of literature, philosophy, and science. Rather, my point is, the form that is writing and the kind of sensing that writing enables are accordingly epistemologies of visual discourse, made legible yet contained in writing. This is an explicitly Derridean critique of logocentric thought, or, the presumption that ideas come first, speech expresses it, and writing copies the speech that has expressed (copied) ideas. In the case of racial visibility, if the writing seems to “refer” to race’s visibility, that means it seems like race has a visibility prior to the speech that expresses it and the writing that copies the speech. But approaching the writing as “*graphie*,” as visual form, reveals that writing refers to the appearance (the written form) of the signification of “racial visibility.” It is precisely because the writing of “racial visibility” *takes visual form* that the visibility of race seems a priori to seeing it. Investigating the structure of writing itself—its “textuality”—questions the ways in which racial visibility is contained by, formalized by, and seemingly a priori to and operative

beyond its written form. Accordingly, this dissertation aims to problematize how racial visibility is characterized by its textuality by analyzing writing itself as a question of racial visibility as form. It examines how race appears visual due to the visual power of writing. Recognizing racial visibility as textuality pries apart the writing of racial visibility from the illusion and the effects of its formal appearance, i.e. words.

The four chapters of this dissertation examine the presumed common sense of vision via textuality in order to reveal the emergences and transformations of literate activity as a fundamentally visual experience. In order to do so, the dissertation reads its archive of texts, from runaway slave advertisements to modernist aesthetic theories, for the appearance of supposedly legible racial meaning as historical demonstrations of visual common sense. I argue that these texts are exemplary but not exceptional texts that are written in such a way that assumes that readers share the same visual understandings of race that the texts claim to merely describe. In these texts I read for the textuality of race as a structure of what Derrida has named “traces”: the written form acknowledged as that which makes possible signification. The trace is the only way through which to access that which stands in as and moves into meaning (e.g. racial visibility). Traces, as the “imprint” of the work of signification, expose how meaning is both made available (the appearance of meaning) and held off (meaning as an effect of signification) (65). The dissertation takes the appearance of “race” as the very movement of signification that is always already formalized in writing. It follows the presence of such traces through the writing of modern visual culture in analyzing how the genealogies of race and vision are blended. Precisely because deconstruction is a textual activity, this dissertation uses deconstructive methods to examine the form of racial visibility and thus reveal literacy as a visual experience.

The deconstructive method reveals that writing produces knowledge about race and vision. It also emphasizes how we have become formal, that is, literate thinkers and seers in modernity.

Critiquing Racial Visuality

As it stands, vision is conventionally discussed as a scientific concern in 19th and 20th century transatlantic culture. Feminist, postcolonial, and anti-racist critiques about seeing race provide a foundation for examining what I have been calling racial visuality. As Nicholas Mirzoeff reminds us, “visuality” is constituted by the practice of visually organizing a cohesive version of history that sees, reinstates, and aestheticizes already-existing modalities of power through the language of “people,” “spaces,” and “culture.”⁷ If visuality is the naturalized view that authorizes what becomes recognizable as history, then for Mirzoeff, devisualizing visuality deconstructs that visual organization. Visuality then takes on an aesthetic, perceptual definition. It is made self-evident, or made to “feel right,” Mirzoeff argues. Paradoxically, visuality becomes self-evident through the elision of its own historicity. This elision ultimately renders vision a naturally distinct physiological sensation. This analysis echoes Jonathan Crary’s exposition of modern vision in *Techniques of the Observer*.⁸ In this classic text, Crary analyses the place of the modern visual experience in reinforcing bodily experiences as one of the distinct “five senses.” With the camera obscura as a model, vision was previously understood as a positioning of the public self through the act of observing. As such, seeing is limited to the position of the observing subject; vision necessarily corresponds to everything that is external to

⁷ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). For other historicist definitions of visuality, see Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), which includes condensed theories of visuality from the scholarship of Martin Jay, Jonathan Crary, Rosalind Krauss, Norman Bryson, and Jacqueline Rose.

⁸ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

the observer. In contrast, the modern concept of vision breaks from the observer so that vision is separated and abstracted from the act of looking. The visual experience gets further abstracted from the body through empiricist and scientific discourses of light, electricity, chemistry, and the nervous system. Thus, for Crary, the body's relation to the visual experience produces the universal idea of disembodied vision—a specifically modern definition of vision as an irreducibly physiological, “neutral,” “natural” operation. Thus the apparent ahistoricity of visuality that Mirzoeff identifies merges with the apparent universal quality of vision that Crary identifies. Mirzoeff and Crary diagnose the universality of modern vision. The dissertation aims to build upon these accounts by placing race front and center.

The uniquely modern, seemingly neutral process of vision has been further explained and critiqued in the work of scholars including Mary Louise Pratt, Donna Haraway, Lorraine Daston, Peter Galison, Colette Guillaumin, and David Theo Goldberg.⁹ These critics pinpoint the ways in which “seeing race” figures into the simultaneous developments of colonial rationalities and scientific research via visual observation. For all, seeing is the mode through which subjects are racialized in colonial and/or scientific discourses. Visual subjection is racial subjection in these accounts. For example, Colette Guillaumin claims that the role of scientific observation is to visualize the natural world. The linking of physical with social categories “invents” and naturalizes physical or somatic characteristics. This conceptualization of “the natural” maintains racist thought even in contemporary “geneticist” racial regimes. For Guillaumin, the physical and somatic characteristics of race are misrecognized as the self-evident ontology of race. The

⁹ See Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Colette Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).

significance of visual perceptibility and thus observability in scientific knowledge production explains racial categorization as a self-standing, non-relational natural order. David Theo Goldberg also elaborates on the visuality of race by examining how “color” in modernity becomes understandable as a “property” constitutive to human beings in a Lockean sense: color is color is an assignation of rational value which correlates to rational capacity. According to Goldberg, in modernity the visibility of color demands its empirical observation, whereby empirical observation is “naturally” correlated to rational moral capacity. Color is thus positioned as a derivative of nature. Furthermore, modernity needs for its very expression as moral and rational a model of race which is produced in a rationalist discourse of racial differentiation. This rationalization interprets racial difference, creating racist hierarchies.

Goldberg and Guillaumin both contend that the act of seeing race is tied to a scientific quantification and rationalization. This violent exclusion is a racializing practice that ultimately produces what appears as “race” which in effect creates modern universal humanity. The critiques of vision made by Goldberg, Guillaumin, and others are forceful reminders that “science,” like other disciplinary fields, is historically made. The theorization of vision and loosely, racial visuality in these accounts emerge as historicist critiques of scientific and empiricist discourses. While such critiques explain the role vision has played in justifying racial subjection, they posit the relationship between race and vision as given or as an unfortunate coincidence. “Making Sense” questions this relationship head on, examining how vision takes on a sensorial and thus universal, transcendent quality.

“Making Sense” acknowledges the inextricability of race and science that is modernity’s legacy. However, as Michele Wallace reminds us, “There has not been nearly the focus on reconceptualizing aesthetic criteria that there has been on refuting scientific rationalizations of

racism. Basically, this means what we've tried to do is tie down one of two fists (science and aesthetics) in a combination punch. It should come as no surprise that racism succeeds again and again in freeing the other fist."¹⁰ This dissertation does not take for granted how the critical investments we have in breaking down scientific and empirical discourses might obscure the ways in which *aesthetic* discourses have constructed racial visibility, too. As the second chapter of the dissertation argues, discourses of science have always relied upon aesthetic definitions of vision. In recent scholarship, scholars, artists, and curators have appropriated what I have been calling racial visibility to intervene in vision's role in aesthetic forms of racial subjection. The fields of African American Studies, Black Studies, and the fine arts have performed rich and foundational examinations of how visual representations and technologies of racial subjection have been used, reclaimed, and reinvented for the purposes of aesthetic self-representation and expression and critical anti-racist work. This body of groundbreaking interdisciplinary work excavates visibility as hegemony and as a site of contestation and reimagination. The scholarship of Shawn Michelle Smith, Kobena Mercer, Michael Rogin, and Richard Dyer has excavated how aesthetic visual technologies represent and racialize their subjects.¹¹ Artworks by Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, David Hammons, James Luna, and Glenn Ligon have appropriated such technologies as well as forms and discourses to critique and revise their racializing power. More recently, scholarship by Jasmine Nichole Cobb and Huey Copeland explores how African

¹⁰ Michele Wallace, "Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visibility in African American Culture" in *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), quotation on page 190.

¹¹ Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998); Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997). The fourth chapter of the dissertation will provide an overview of more recent scholarship on the relationship between aesthetic visual technologies and race.

American visual cultural production reconstructs questions of slavery.¹² Cobb focuses on early 19th century popular visual artifacts including caricatures and albums, while Copeland focuses on the artworks of gallery-represented African American artists establishing their careers in the 1990s. The scholarship of Michele Ann Stephens, Nicole Fleetwood, and Cherise Smith offers the framework of performance to interpret the alternative, countervisual strategies of African American aesthetic engagement and critique of race's visibility.¹³ "Making Sense" is indebted to this work on the visual aestheticization of race.

The dissertation aims to complicate critiques of visibility by engaging with it as a common sense logic structured by race. The dissertation argues that racial visibility is not just an outcome of modern scientific knowledge and a vehicle for racial exclusion. Denying the *sense* of vision and race's conjuncture limits the critique of racial visibility to a critique of subjection, where vision gets positioned as just one arbitrary tool among others for establishing white supremacist knowledge systems. In contrast, exposing racial visibility as common sense requires questioning how vision is constituted by race and vice versa. The dissertation's point of entry lies in placing racial visibility as common sense, that is, the *presentation of the intuition that conditions* the production of racial knowledge which has been subjectifying in modernity. Making this distinction is crucial, for the innovation and intervention of the dissertation is not only in critiquing racial knowledge but also in challenging the relationship between race and vision that has been constituted to appear as common sense.

¹² Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visibility in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015); Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹³ Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014); Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visibility, and Blackness* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011).

In their work, Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, and Ian Haney López refer to race as a particularly visual common sense.¹⁴ According to these scholars, the visibility of race in itself is culturally constructed as a matter of common sense because “visibility” works as a form of racial knowledge produced through everyday consciousness and everyday practices that feel natural. Recognizing race as a visual common sense foregrounds the ways in which racial subjection does not adequately explain naturalized and naturalizable forms of racial knowledge. As Martín Alcoff explains, racial common sense is best understood not as “the imposition of ideology” but rather “the backdrop of practical consciousness, circulating, as Foucault would say, from the bottom up as well as from the top down” (185).

To date, legal scholar Osagie Obasogie has performed the most careful investigation of racial-visual common sense.¹⁵ Obasogie’s empirically based research was motivated by the question of how the blind understand race. Obasogie interviewed a group of people who have been blind since birth and a group of sighted people, both groups diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, sex, and geographical location. As he hypothesizes, if blind versus sighted people have “fundamentally different understandings of race... that might suggest that vision plays a central role shaping... racial experiences. If, however, blind and sighted individuals have similar understandings of race, then it suggests that something else gives race its visibility and visual coherence” (52). His research reveals that both blind and sighted respondents define race through skin color and other visual traits: “race needed no other explanation than the obvious: race is what you see. It is common sense” (57). As in the lives of sighted people, in the lives of blind

¹⁴ See Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Ian Haney López, *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Osagie K. Obasogie, *Blinded By Sight: Seeing Race through the Eyes of the Blind* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

people racial distinctions are visual distinctions. The living of everyday life is articulated by blind respondents as so “filled with racial content” that they can “sense the significance of the visual distinctions they [cannot] immediately perceive” (89). Blind people, like sighted people, “are trained to seek and acknowledge the salience of the visual distinctions that society deems important” (92).¹⁶

The conclusion Obasogie draws is that everyday social practices “inculcate a visual sense of racial difference among blind people and make visual cues seem like obvious boundaries among the sighted” (93). Such definitions of race as *visually obvious* demonstrates the common sense logic that Obasogie calls “*‘race’ ipsa loquitur*,” a play on “*res ipsa loquitur*,” Latin for the common law doctrine that “the thing speaks for itself.” Race is self-evident because it is “visual.” Obasogie’s work responds directly to contemporary legal discourses of colorblindness. His findings on the common sense of race and vision are used to examine the metaphor of colorblindness activated by the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. According to Obasogie, the Equal Protection jurisprudence reduces race to a visual characteristic and privileges a visual definition of race. As a result, Equal Protection limits racial discrimination to a matter of “seeing color,” erasing the material, social, legal, and political factors of racial subordination and positioning colorblindness as a solution to racial discrimination.

The blind have a visual understanding of race: this is unsurprisingly to me and stresses 1) how race is structured as visual, “so much so, that even blind people see race,” and 2) that even the sharpest critiques of race’s visibility presume that the vision used to see racial difference is

¹⁶ Obasogie finds that the visual sense of racial difference is particularly amplified for blind people in everyday moments where sighted individuals inform blind individuals that he or she is supposedly and inadvertently in an interracial situation.

already coherent, in line with what I have articulated above as a common sense logic.¹⁷ This dissertation and Obasogie's research overlap in that both investigate the self-evident, obvious, objective quality of visual experience. While Obasogie's take on the question of vision was to approach it through the perspective of those who do not use vision, my take is to examine the idea of vision that is constructed as common sense. The blind can "see" race because its visibility is discursive. Obasogie's findings lend credit to my question about vision as a discourse of common sense. I extend this "discourse" of vision as a question of textuality and the "common sense" of vision as a question of aesthetics. As such, this dissertation turns to the deconstructive examination of sense perception: the field called aesthetics, as derived from the classical Greek as the study of the sensation, redefined in Enlightenment philosophy as a rational account of "sensing" beauty, and revised and modernized as a structure of judgment.

My approach to aesthetics is indebted to Cornel West's examination of the hegemonic aesthetic structure of modern philosophical knowledge systems. It is well established by scholars that Enlightenment philosophy has constructed and has been developed through normative and idealized discourses of vision.¹⁸ These scholars attribute the visual discourses of modern science as well as modern aesthetics to Enlightenment philosophy. West argues that such ocularcentricism structures, authorizes, and regulates the use of vision for conceptualizing, classifying, and evaluating racial difference. For West, aesthetic culture and the scientific revolution share the same roots: racist knowledge and white supremacy structures and reinforces aesthetic and scientific visual practices, and aesthetic and scientific racial knowledge reinforce

¹⁷ Obasogie, *Blinded By Sight*, 18.

¹⁸ See especially the two volumes edited by David Michael Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993) and *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1997). For a more recent engagement with the technological ocularcentricism of Enlightenment philosophy, see Jill H. Casid, *Scenes of Projection: Recasting the Enlightenment Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

each other. Accordingly, critique should be directed at the “autonomous” structures through which racial knowledge is produced. The structure that concerns this dissertation is aesthetics, as constituted by racist intellectual thought. Following West’s assessments, “Making Sense” returns to the site of aesthetics to understand racial visibility’s common sense. To investigate the philosophical relationship between race and aesthetics, the dissertation takes an unconventional route. Rather than heading straight to the racist discourses i.e. racial content of aesthetic philosophy, I examine how the logic of “common sense” that is crucial to aesthetic culture is racially structured.

The Aesthetic Culture of Racial Visibility

Modern life privileges the visual sense so much that blindness is perceived as the most threatening form of sensorial impairment. The forcefulness of Obasogie’s argument about the blind’s ability to see race resides here. The visual experience is a shared, common sense: the experience of vision relies on the assumption that others see what we can see. Everyone has—or should have—common sense; thus Immanuel Kant observed that common sense serves as the baseline for belonging to humanity (after all, it is an insult to say that someone doesn’t have common sense). As Kant wryly states, “the least that can be expected from anyone who lays claim to the name of a human being... has the unfortunate honor of being endowed with the name of common sense (*sensus communis*)... the word common comes to be the same as the vulgar, which is encountered everywhere, to possess which is certainly not an advantage or an honor.”¹⁹ Precisely because common sense seems so ordinary, it holds ideological power. As

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Ed. Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), quotation on page 173.

Antonio Gramsci clarified, common sense serves hegemony; common sense naturalizes the economic and political interests of the dominant class making these hegemonic.²⁰

This dissertation's engagement with Kantian aesthetic philosophy might seem fraught or unconvincing due to the often racist endorsements of Enlightenment philosophy. Kant wrote extensively on race, which is to be expected considering that Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy developed as questions of human diversity, history, and civilization in an era of travel and colonialism.²¹ As philosopher Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze reminds us, the longest period of Kant's tumultuous 41-year research and teaching career at the University of Königsberg was in the fields of anthropology and cultural geography, but Kant's work in those fields remains largely ignored.²² Significant scholarship on Kant and race is largely lacking, though Eze, Ronald Judy, Irene Tucker, and David Lloyd have provided fascinating critiques of Kantian philosophy that

²⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Volumes I-II*. Ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg. Trans. Antonio Callari (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992-1996).

²¹ As such, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chi-ming Yang argues that the study of Western philosophy should employ a postcolonial approach. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Chi-Ming Yang, *Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, and Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century England, 1660-1760* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). Also see Pheng Cheah, who examines the relationship between postcolonial national culture and German philosophy. Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). David Kazanjian reads Brown's *Memoirs of Carwin* (1798-1805) as contemporary with Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, reading the two texts alongside each other as explorations of modern aesthetic judgment and civilization. David Kazanjian, "Biloquial Nation: Charles Brockden Brown's National Culture" in *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

²² Kant began teaching at the University of Königsberg (then known as Albertina) in 1755 as an unsalaried lecturer. After several failed applications, even after extensive publishing and the writing of three dissertations, Kant finally secured a full professorship at the University of Königsberg in 1770. During Kant's time as a lecturer, Kant introduced geography courses to the University curriculum in 1756 and anthropology courses in 1772. See Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Ed., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997); J. A. May, *Kant's Concept of Geography and its Relation to Recent Geographical Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970); Rohlf, Michael, "Immanuel Kant," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed.

highlights its racial aspects.²³ Eze notes that most contemporary scholarship on Kant dismiss the large archive of his theories on race as merely reflective of the beliefs of his time or as popular, non-critical, journalistic writings. As Eze sees it, that body of work remains largely untouched because most contemporary philosophers do not know what to do with those writings.

By contrast, Ronald Judy, Irene Tucker, and Cornel West have focused specifically on Kant's writings on race. Judy performs a bold reading of Kant's notorious engagement in his philosophical oeuvre with "The Negro," from which Kant theorizes the principles of cognition in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.²⁴ Judy tracks how Kant uses the case of "The Negro" as an example to explain the mental capacities of humans: "The Negro is stupid." The assertion is initially positioned as a subject of judgment, as it is structured as inductive, empirical observation. The assertion refers to the *perception* of the Negro. However, Kant cites that the assertion is borrowed from a report from "Father Labat." Kant did not experience the stupidity of the Negro himself, yet this assertion is placed as foundational to Kant's theory of cognition. Judy determines that the grounds under which Kant can make this assertion is on *transcendental* grounds: no longer is "The Negro" positioned as empirical appearance but rather as concept ("The Negro")—an "a priori principle of stupidity" (14). Judy argues that the concept of *The Negro* is an ideology that is constitutive to a philosophy of the human. Furthermore, *The Negro*, as transcendental concept, allows Judy to revisit the fundamentally discursive structure of the transcendental critique. Judy locates the Kantian transcendental critique as fundamentally a problem of language as the philosophical limit for transcendence. Paradoxically, the language that brings to light the theory of knowledge must be acknowledged as that which limits

²³ Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*; Irene Tucker, *The Moment of Racial Sight: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); David Lloyd, "Race Under Representation" in *Culture-Contexture: Explorations in Anthropology and Literary Studies* Eds. E. Valentine Daniel and Jeffrey M. Peck (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

²⁴ Ronald Judy, "Kant and The Negro" *Surfaces* 1.8 (1991).

transcendence: “the process of reflection on limits entails a labor that transcends them”—which would not be possible (68).

Irene Tucker takes a historical approach, situating Kant’s writings on race in his larger body of philosophical work. According to Tucker, Kant’s theorization of race props up the overarching structure of his philosophical oeuvre. Kant’s skin-based discourse of race through the anatomical and medical reconceptualization of skin’s universality makes coherent and articulates the concepts of causation, lawfulness, contingency, universality, etc. in the kind of critical philosophy Kant is best known for today. Eze and Tucker’s attention to race in Kantian philosophy allows them to unpack how a general philosophical system that doesn’t seem to have anything to do with race is predicated on racist Enlightenment understandings. Eze and Tucker explicitly historicize race as a subject through which Kant constructed his philosophical systems. In contrast, Judy argues that the question of race, ideologically constitutive to the structure of transcendence, must be reckoned with philosophically. As Cornel West has also argued, Judy suggests an approach to Enlightenment philosophy as discourse. West understands the question of discourse as “a genealogical inquiry into the cultural and linguistic roots—in addition to the economic, political, and psychological roots—of the idea of white supremacy.”²⁵ Ignoring the fundamentally discursive and philosophical structuring of modern racism and race would continue to produce specific kinds of knowledge that reinforce and norms white supremacy.

David Lloyd’s approach to Kant is both historical and philosophical. He takes the Kantian philosophical formulation of universality in particular to be a racial problematic. Focusing on *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Lloyd historicizes race in Kantian aesthetics by

²⁵ Cornel West, “A Genealogy of Modern Racism” in *Prophecy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), quotation on page 23. Afro-American philosophy, which counters traditional modern intellectual thought, is practiced via writing as it is based on the recognition of philosophy as discourse, genre, language.

close reading how aesthetic culture is narratively structured according to the *Critique*. For Lloyd, the Kantian aesthetic theorization of universal humanity develops historically in conjunction with the representability of racial difference. However, Lloyd makes an interesting switch in his analytic approach to Kant once he claims that Kant's concept of representation emerges with the discourses of universality that structure the public sphere: he is able to claim that race is not only an emergence but the structure of this idea of representability. Here Lloyd switches from a historical to an aesthetic connection between race and philosophy and thus "uses" Kantian philosophy to examine how race fundamentally structures aesthetic culture, and thus culture in general.

Lloyd's switch to the aesthetic constitutes an intervention that opens up an anti-racist critique of aesthetic culture. Following Lloyd, this dissertation finds Kantian aesthetic philosophy valuable but not as context, method, or tool. Rather, Kant's critique of judgment provides a structure through which to analyze culture, its conditions, and its work, or what Kant called "aesthetic culture." Aesthetics is not simply about determining or challenging criteria or value but rather of the systemic emergence, function, and power of such discourses. As we know, Kant's philosophical inquiries were not about knowledge itself but about the limits of the capacity through which knowledge can be experienced. That is why Kant poses his theories as "critiques" rather than knowledge.

Undoubtedly, historicist and materialist interventions in the construction of aesthetic culture have explained and critiqued racial violence in rich ways. But the problem is, racial violence works in ways that seem outside of history and materiality, too—that is, via common sense. By its very logic (both philosophical and popular) "common sense" is understood not as knowledge (something that is apprehended) but as a discourse of intuition. Thus the investigation

of common sense in this dissertation faces some very daunting challenges. The dissertation has to simultaneously think through and against common sense. In naming racial visibility as “common sense,” the dissertation risks reifying the very discourse it aims to critique. It also risks further marginalizing the sensorial experiences and discourses that would assert that sense is not so common after all. Thus the dissertation historicizes sense as discursively produced in order to access the moves of aesthetic culture—that is, sensorial culture in cultivating, rationalizing, norming, and rendering undetectable racial violence.

The aesthetic approach allows me to deconstruct something as intangible and elusive as “common sense.” This approach requires reading *with* Kant. “Making Sense” argues that the theory of common sense that emerges in Kant’s theorization of aesthetic culture is crucial. As the first and fourth chapters of this dissertation explain in depth, I take the tautological structure of common sense developed in Kantian aesthetic theory as a framework for unpacking the appearance of racial visibility. I take Kant’s aesthetic project as a rigorous, engaging, and productive structure through which to examine what is fundamentally a question of intelligibility.

“Making Sense” analyzes a wide and unusual range of texts that engage in discourses of racial visibility, including runaway slave advertisements, Kantian aesthetic philosophy, Darwinian evolutionary theory, formalist and modernist aesthetic theories, black modernist fiction, and contemporary visual artwork. This collection of texts allows me to explore how diverse fields and disciplines presume or critique the supposed common sense of racial visibility and the seemingly objective, visual, universal quality of race. I analyze how vision becomes common sense in writing. One set of materials in this collection of texts helps me construct the genealogy of vision and race; the other, mainly by contemporary visual artists, allows me to

theorize how to countervisualize race and produce “uncommon sense.” While the four chapters proceed chronologically from the 18th century to the present, the dissertation is not tracing a continuous history of racial visibility’s common sense. Rather, each of the chapters focuses on sites that I argue are rich occasions for the exploration of the common sense of racial visibility. The sites I have chosen may seem eclectic or random: the chapters explore runaway slave advertisements, Darwinian evolutionary theory, skyscraper architecture theory, black modernist fiction, contemporary art, and modernist aesthetic theory. However, the dissertation argues that these sites emerge as illuminating cases of racial visibility’s most significant manifestations. The examination of each site taken together provide an account of some of the most informative case studies of common sense.

The first chapter, “Making Sense: Runaway Slave Portraiture, Aesthetic Judgment, and the Emergence of Racial Visibility,” lays the conceptual groundwork for the project by revealing and challenging the reciprocal and tautological relationship between vision and race. Through an analysis of 18th- and 19th-century runaway slave newspaper advertisements as sites of portraiture, the chapter explores the emergent logic of visual descriptions of the racialized black body in colonial North America. It argues that blackness is imagined as readable and formalized as “racial” through the practice and publication of descriptive writing about runaways—precisely the kind of sensorial experience that Immanuel Kant famously theorized as aesthetic judgment. The chapter revisits the Kantian aesthetic project discussed in this Introduction and hones in on Kant’s account of common sense. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the artwork of contemporary artist Glenn Ligon. Ligon’s work on advertisements for runaway slaves is used to formulate a theory of “discursivity” that countervisualizes race. This countervisual approach exposes how the readability of blackness produces an always-already racial visibility to

blackness that can be interrupted so that we might reimagine the common sensical relationships among writing, literacy, publication, and race.

The second chapter, “Race, Taste, and Aesthetic Vision in Darwinian Evolutionary Theory,” extends the first chapter’s critique of the visibility of race by exploring how Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory revises the visual logic of aesthetic judgment set out by Kant. This chapter examines Darwin’s use of observational and descriptive language for elaborating the role of vision in evolutionary theory. Darwin’s language integrates racial and aesthetic meaning into the experiences and subjects of vision. This chapter argues that racial-aesthetic visual experience redefines the place of subjectivity, objectivity, and taste in evolutionary theory and its idea of aesthetic appreciation. This chapter thus opens up questions about how the study of the senses becomes confined to “science” while aesthetics becomes reclassified as the discourse of “art.”

Chapter Three, “Racial Formalism: The Aesthetics of Form and Function,” explores how the scientific objectivity of vision makes possible the artistic universality of vision in the 20th century. This chapter explores how Darwinian ideas about aesthetics pave the way for the re-categorization of the “aesthetic” as the “artistic” through the formalist dictum that “form follows function.” This dictum was coined by the so-called father of modern architecture, Louis Sullivan. This chapter weaves together readings of Sullivan’s turn-of-the-century architectural theories with a modernist novel about race and vision that is both well-known and exemplary—Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929). This chapter draws out the novel’s critique of the skyscraper’s form and function as a racial-visual logic, a critique that has gone largely unnoticed in scholarly discussions. The unexpected pairing of Sullivan and Larsen allows the chapter to demonstrate how formalism develops out of the logic of racial visibility. Formalism’s racial-visual logic establishes the conceptualization of “high” art that ultimately consolidates the now-familiar

modernist aesthetic movements towards formal purity, universality, and transcendence across 20th-century art, architecture, and literature.

The fourth chapter, “Modernism’s Taste,” explores how the “racial formalism” treated in Chapter Three becomes “modernist” in literature, visual art, photography, and film. Specifically the theorization of “medium specificity” emerges in conjunction with each disciplinary formation and the academic institutionalization of the study and criticism of literature and art. The chapter traces how modernism unifies a discourse of medium specificity to establish a coherent narrative of modernism. The chapter examines the discourse of medium through the question of taste, which allows the chapter to demonstrate how racial visibility makes vision seem independent from race for the contemporary, so-called post-racial moment. Modernism’s focus on medium further stabilizes form as visual in the late 20th century and further confirms the common sense of racial visibility into the 21st century. The chapter returns to Kant one last time to explore common sense as a form of mediation. This return to Kant engages Walter Benjamin’s aesthetic theory to politicize Kant’s. The chapter also reexamines the “text” paintings of the artist whose work introduced the dissertation, Glenn Ligon. The paintings are comprised by painted words on canvas. Curiously, as described by the artist, the paintings are in the lineage of modernist painting. The chapter analyzes the “textual” and painterly form and context of the paintings. It argues that the paintings critique the fundamentally racial conditions of mediation and suggest that racializing the practices of reading and writing can shake up how we see. The Conclusion, “Uncommon Sense,” further explores the racial restoration of sense.

“Making Sense” interrupts visual common sense. It also renovates the Kantian aesthetic project and the way we talk about the relationship of race to vision.²⁶ While revising modern

²⁶ This dissertation is inspired by the work of Ronald Judy on Kant, as discussed earlier, and Susan Buck-Morss’s work on Hegel. Judy’s and Buck-Morss’s approaches to Kant and Hegel respectively shake up

aesthetic theory may seem like an overly ambitious goal, it is urgent and necessary to review philosophical investigations of the structuring of culture in a moment in which questions about racialized humanity are being raised everyday in the violent forms that I discussed in opening this Introduction. In revising Kantian aesthetics I work to not only deconstruct the violence of racialized vision. This dissertation also hopes to undiscipline philosophy by centralizing the questions that emerge from the everyday life-worlds of inequity and violence.

not only the history but the meanings and structures of western philosophy. See Ronald Judy, "Kant and The Negro" and Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

Images

HOW TO TELL JAPS FROM THE CHINESE

ANGRY CITIZENS VICTIMIZE ALLIES WITH EMOTIONAL OUTBURST AT ENEMY



parchment yellow complexion
more frequent epicanthic fold
higher bridge
never has rosy cheeks
lighter facial bones
longer, narrower face
scant beard

Chinese public servant, Ong Wen-hao, is representative of North Chinese anthropological group with long, fine-boned face and scant beard. Epicanthic fold of skin above eyelid is found in 85% of Chinese. Southern Chinese have round,

In the first discharge of emotions touched off by the Japanese assaults on their nation, U. S. citizens have been demonstrating a distressing ignorance on the delicate question of how to tell a Chinese from a Jap. Innocent victims in cities all over the country are many of the 75,000 U. S. Chinese, whose homeland is our staunch ally. So serious were the consequences threatened, that the Chinese consulates last week prepared to tag their nationals with identification buttons. To dispel some of this confusion, LIFE here adduces a rule-of-thumb from the anthropometric conformations that distinguish friendly Chinese from enemy alien Japs.

To physical anthropologists, devoted debunkers of race myths, the difference between Chinese and Japs is measurable in millimeters. Both are related to the Eskimo and North American Indian. The modern Jap is the descendant of Mongoloids who invaded the Japanese archipelago back in the mists of prehistory, and of the native aborigines who possessed the islands before them. Physical anthropology, in consequence, finds Japs and Chinese as closely related as Germans and English. It can, however, set apart the special types of each national group.

The typical Northern Chinese, represented by Ong Wen-hao, Chungking's Minister of Economic Affairs (*left, above*), is relatively tall and slenderly built. His complexion is parchment yellow, his face long and delicately boned, his nose more finely bridged. Representative of the Japanese people as a whole is Premier and General Hideki Tojo (*left, below*), who betrays aboriginal antecedents in a squat, long-torsoed build, a broader, more massively boned head and face, flat, often pug, nose, yellow-ocher skin and heavier beard. From this average type, aristocratic Japs, who claim kinship to the Imperial Household, diverge sharply. They are proud to approximate the patrician lines of the Northern Chinese.



earthy yellow complexion
less frequent epicanthic fold
flatter nose
sometimes rosy cheeks
heavy beard
broader, shorter face
massive cheek and jaw bone

Japanese warrior, General Hideki Tojo, current Premier, is a Samurai, closer to type of humble Jap than highbred relatives of Imperial Household. Typical are his heavy beard, massive cheek and jaw bones. Peasant Jap is squat Mongoloid, with flat, blob nose. An often sounder clue is facial expression, shaped by cultural, not anthropological, factors. Chinese wear rational calm of tolerant realists. Japs, like General Tojo, show humorless intensity of ruthless mystics.



Chinese journalist, Joe Chiang, found it necessary to advertise his nationality to gain admittance to White House press conference. Under Immigration Act of 1924, Japs and Chinese, as members of the "yellow race," are barred from immigration and naturalization.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE 81

Figure 1
Life Magazine, "How to Tell Japs from the Chinese," December 22, 1941.



Figure 2
RedEye Magazine, "Turban Primer," August 7, 2012.

Chapter 1
Making Sense: Runaway Slave Portraiture, Aesthetic Judgment, and the Emergence
of Racial Visuality

On October 8, 1799, Braxton Harrison of Charles City County, Virginia, placed the following advertisement for his missing slave in the *Norfolk Herald*:

Five Pounds Reward, FOR apprehending and delivering to me, or securing in jail so that I get him again, CHARLES, a remarkable black fellow, about 6 feet 2 or three inches high, proportionably made. Had on when he went off a blue sailor's jacket, oznaburg shirt and overhauls, carried with him a suit of black, also a pale blue coat which is much too small for him; he is a sensible fellow, is very complaisant and submissive when spoken to, and speaks slow. The best description I can give is to say he is as black as jet, generously made and as handsome a black man as any in the state weighs I guess 185 lb. is 33 years old, though looks younger. I expect he has procured a forged pass as he went off without provocation, and will endeavour to get to some of the northern states. All masters of vessels, and others are forewarned harbouring or carrying him out of the State.

CHARLES has a variety of clothes, but those mentioned are his best. He will, I expect, change his name.¹

This advertisement for Charles follows the typical form of the North American runaway advertisement. As in the description above, most ads included brief yet detailed information about the runaway's physical appearance including facial features, skin color, attractiveness, unusual bodily marks, dress, and hair as well as age, demeanor, way of speaking, intellectual qualities, and special skills. Runaway advertisements have served as a rich archive for historians of slavery and servitude because they are just about the only textual source that places the unfree

¹ Published in the *Norfolk Herald*, October 8, 1799. Taken from *The Geography of Slavery in Virginia*. Tom Costa and The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 2005. Web. 27 April. 2013.

as primary subjects. From the ads historians have cobbled together stories about who the fugitives were, when and how they escaped, where they were headed, what kind of relationships they had (including ones with their masters), and why they wanted their freedom. Many historians argue that the ads provide a rare glimpse into the lives of individual slaves in a way that allows us to see their personality and humanity. They also acknowledge that the writings were produced to reclaim human property, “stolen” from the master by the very subject of the ad.

This chapter examines the runaway slave advertisements as portraiture. Approaching the advertisement archive as portraiture gestures towards what Stephen Best has called “an emptiness at the heart of the archive: however exhaustive one’s catalog of the visual archive of slavery, it will always be lacking in works by slave themselves.”² Approaching the advertisement archive *through* the problem of others’ representations of the runaway can tell us much about 18th and 19th century understandings of visual experience and how we inherit those visual logics today. This chapter begins with an examination of 18th-century runaway advertisements from colonial newspapers to pinpoint the crucial role that writing has played in defining what appears to be “visual” about race. By focusing specifically on the print form of runaway slave representation, I locate the modern coding of blackness within the mutual developments of newspaper publication and a U.S. national culture. Some of the scholarship on runaway advertisements has recognized the advertisements as a genre of writing, and most do so in order to point out how the print form mediates or limits knowledge about slaves and slaveholders. This chapter explicitly focuses on and deconstructs this genre of writing. I explore how this practice and production of descriptive writing develops the appearance of race’s visibility. This chapter argues that it is through print advertisement that writing about blackness is articulated as

² Stephen Best, “Neither Lost nor Found: Slavery and the Visual Archive,” *Representations* 113.1 (Winter 2011): 150-163, quotation on page 151.

readable. In representing blackness a priori to writing, the advertisement form presumes that blackness is visually detectable.

This chapter tracks how the self-emancipated status of the black runaway and its print publication makes seeing and identifying the runaway through print representation appear logical through the assumption that both language and vision are shared, public processes. By the 19th century, blackness represented in print “feels” visual. The logic of seeing, reading, and writing emergent in the advertisements understands vision as a self-evident, physiological process—in other words, as common sense. This chapter also explores a contemporary commentary on writing and reading racial representation in the work of visual artist Glenn Ligon. Echoing the language of colonial and antebellum runaway slave advertisements—as well as present-day police suspect reports—Ligon’s *Runaways* lithograph prints series (1993) has often been interpreted as a commentary on the inherently racist vocabulary of blackness. I build off of that interpretation to track how *Runaways* determines not only visibility but vision as a discursive structure that emerges from the context of U.S. slavery.

By analyzing the form of the runaway description in the original sources as well as Ligon’s interpretations of them, this chapter lays the conceptual groundwork for breaking down the reciprocal and tautological relationship between vision and race that is the focus of this dissertation. My investigation of runaway slave portraiture offers the *discursivity* of the visual that is produced by black print representation as a critical approach for exploring how race and vision literally make sense. The definition of vision that emerges in the 18th and 19th centuries reveals that discourses of the visual are foundationally an “aesthetic” problem—that is, a broad question about sense. I argue that the print readability of blackness exercises aesthetic judgment. Accordingly, the chapter’s claim on the discursivity of visibility instrumentalizes a countervisual

theory of aesthetics. The countervisual perspective holds the potential to explain how the seemingly singular, physiological, common sense of vision is actually inherently structured by the history of blackness. This history has been obscured by the dehistoricized discourses of vision, race, and aesthetics that continue to regulate and privilege the visual sense in modern life.

Prerevolutionary Sartorial Visualities

Advertisements seeking runaway slaves and servants were commonplace in the 18th and 19th centuries, emerging at the same time newspapers started being published regularly in the early 1700s. By the 19th century, it was a rare occurrence not to find at least one of these runaway notices in each newspaper printing across the U.S. As early everyday artifacts of American journalism, advertisements like the one for Charles suggest how aware the literate class must have been about slavery. Moreover, as numerous historians have argued, runaway ads “give hints of the interior lives of slaves”³ and are fundamentally “the first published stories about slaves and their seizure of freedom.”⁴ Numbering in the thousands, the ads provide plentiful evidence for slave agency and resistance. I am however more concerned with how the ads, as portraiture, express the significance of visual culture as racial in the 18th century. Historian Jonathan Prude reminds us that the North American runaway ads were published in a culture where the “knowable was the visible,” a belief inherited from modern developments in European science and philosophy in the previous century.⁵ By the 18th century, Americans were deeply familiar with the descriptive language of visual observation due to the widespread use of

³ Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, *Pretends to be Free’: Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), xv.

⁴ David Waldstreicher, “Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3.56 (1999), 247

⁵ Jonathan Prude, “To Look upon the ‘Lower Sort’: Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750-1800,” *Journal of American History* 78.1 (June 1991), 124-59.

affordable prints in homes; stylistic innovations of the novel, where descriptions of settings and characters expand significantly; and the printing of images in newspapers, almanacs, and magazines. Through the power of print, a vivid vocabulary of the visual merges with the social ordering of people and things in the new world. While “the canons of gentility prescribed that visual attention should center on ladies and gentlemen,” the experience of seeing the “lower sort”—slaves and servants—was publicly structured by their visibility, at a distance, as a mass spectacle for the polite class (130-133). Prude argues that the runaway ads must be situated in this visual context: not only are the ads “a bundle of descriptions in a period filled with descriptions” (128). They are also the only “descriptions treating the ‘lower sort’ as central characters” (134). The ads can be considered an archive that reveals how 18th-century readers of print and participants of visual culture—the public—must have comprehended the power of print and runaway bodies jointly.

As historians have noted, throughout the colonial and Revolutionary periods the bulk of advertising space was taken to describe the runaway subject’s clothing in elaborate detail.⁶ Using colonial newspapers as an archive of prerevolutionary dress codes, historian Kate Haulman examines garment stylings of slaves recorded in 18th century ads.⁷ Haulman reads these ads alongside textile ads to imagine the visual literacy that readers had about fashion, fabric, slavery, and servitude. Haulman, like Prude, highlights the intensity with which the ads describe the runaway’s worn or stolen apparel. This descriptive concentration indicates the status of clothing in the 18th century public sphere. The clothing of slaves was strictly coded, demarcating

⁶ Prude notices specific patterns in the reporting of clothing in runaway slave and servant ads: 75.9% make some mention of garments, including what the runaway “had on” and “took with”; reports of clothing averaged more than double reports of other physical details; the clothing of white servants and nonchattel blacks and white were more remarked on than that of black slaves and both white and black females.

⁷ Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

the free and the unfree. Numerous scholars remind us that South Carolina's Slave Acts of 1735 and 1740 and New Orleans' Slave Act of 1786 prohibited black slaves from dressing above their condition and imposed a dress code of specific coarse fabrics.⁸ Moreover, everyone, especially unfree laborers, had a very limited wardrobe. As there was no industrial or technological development of textiles or tailoring in colonial America, clothing from that time was sure to have been "made for somebody" and not just "anybody."⁹ The one-of-a-kind status of clothing articles partnered with the visualization of the "lower sort" as an indistinguishable mass structure a rich visual vocabulary via the medium of print. The servant- or slaveholder's elaborate detailing of the runaway's apparel was thus a primary mode of distinguishing and identifying the individual.

The runaway advertisements should thus be understood as exercises in making the runaway visible to the reader. The visibility of dress maintained, secured, and distinguished the position of the polite class, as they learned how to make their gentility visually legible through their clothing. Slave and servants were also made visually legible through clothing, and they, too, were understood the power of sartorial visibility: the evidence lies in the fact that the runaways frequently took "fashionable" clothing with them rather than work garments. Advertisers explicitly made note of the "fashionable" attire of runaways precisely because it might stand out. For example, in 1723 a "Negro Man named Jack" was wearing typical slave attire including an "Osenbrigs shirt and a woollen shirt, a pair of Leather Breeches, a dark homespun Jacket" when

⁸ Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009). See also Haulman, Prude, and Shane *White and Graham White, Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Also see Stephanie M. H. Camp's alternative reading of clothing and performance on the plantation rather than in flight in *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁹ According to Claudia B. Kidwell and Margaret C. Christman, most people in the colonial period wore homemade clothes. Ready-made clothing, made by professionals, was rare and imported from England and colonial India during the 18th century. See *Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974).

he fled, but also took with him a “dark Cloase bodied fashionable Coat with a brown Kersey Great-Coat, an Old Beaver hat, a pair of square toed shoes with wooden heels.”¹⁰ Osenbrig was a coarse cloth, the commonest fabric used for clothing worn by slaves and laborers. In contrast, the coat that Jack also took with him was made of Kersey, a fine woolen fabric, and close or “cloase” fitting, which means this coat was tailored and very fashionable. Elsewhere a “Mulatto slave” named Peter Deadfoot is described in 1768 to be “extremely fond of dress; and though his holiday clothes were taken from him, when he first attempted to get off, yet, as he has probably passed for a freeman, I make no doubt he has supplied himself with others, as such a fellow would readily get employment.”¹¹ Jack, who ran away in 1776, is expected “to have had on a good Beaver Hat cocked in the Fashion, a light coloured fine Cloth jacket, without Sleeves, and may wear a Blanket Coat.”¹² In 1797, Daniel “had on when he went away nankeen overhaws and jacket, a printed kerseymere waistcoat; he wore a bolstered cravat, and his hair (or wool) queued in the present fashionable Negro stile.”¹³ Nankeen, a yellow colored cotton cloth imported from Nankin, China, was expensive and rare.¹⁴ These ads are just a few from a large body of similar notices that alert the public that the runaway has taken fashionable items and will appear well dressed or stylish. As a result, many historians believe that runaways must have used clothing as currency: to sell, to bribe with, and most importantly, to wear to pass as free.

Haulman observes that fugitives passing as free must have carefully considered how their clothing could attract or divert visual surveillance. Ads juxtaposing the “fine attire worn or stolen

¹⁰ Published in *The American Weekly Mercury*, August 1, 1723. Taken from Hodges and Brown, ‘*Pretends to be Free*’, 4.

¹¹ Published in *Virginia Gazette*, September 22, 1768. Taken from *The Geography of Slavery in Virginia*. Tom Costa and The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 2005. Web. 17 Mar. 2013.

¹² Published in *The New-York Gazette: and the Weekly Mercury*. Taken from Brown and Hodges, 186.

¹³ Advertised in *Norfolk Herald*, August 31, 1797. Taken from *The Geography of Slavery in Virginia*.

¹⁴ Haulman has studied how imported textiles to the colonies from London via the British East India Company were initially considered fashionable. Haulman analyzes how the status of calico in particular transforms from luxurious to common by the 1730s. See “Calico and the Colonies,” 31-34.

with physical characteristics such as complexion, hair, gait, and physiognomy” meant to provide “clues to the person’s true identity, no matter how he or she appeared. In doing so, they made high status into a total package that included a particular physicality, making fashionable dress without other visual markers seem suspect” (30). Hence Haulman and Prude both conclude that the intense descriptions of the runaway’s clothing served to stabilize the unfree status of the fugitives, whether to characterize the runaway in the cases where the clothing consists of old, coarse work garments, or, in the cases where the clothing is fine and fashionable, to alert the public of the runaway’s criminality in dressing above his or her station, stealing garments, and of course, running away. Additionally, Prude comments that “the runaways’ stylishness implies that common folk knew fashion” and used it to “subvert authority” (155). Historian David Waldstreicher explains, “[i]n a sense, the owners were truly advertising their own clothes, even if worn by their slaves: the clothes and the laborers had both been stolen” (254).¹⁵

The historical accounts outline how the visual discourses of the 18th century, as a discourse of social order, enriched and legitimated print public discourses. They show how the presumed visual legibility of the lower sort made them apt for print representation, and in turn, how the power of print trained and validated the sartorial as a visual field capable of written representation. It has already been well chronicled by historians and critics that newspapers, broadsides, almanacs, and other print materials were everywhere by the time of the revolution. Print publication normed discourses of what participating in the public sphere meant in colonial America. As literary critic Michael Warner has argued, print was understood as a representation and legitimation of public views. Because the everyday publicity of runaways emerges jointly with the authority of print publication, and because print writing and runaway bodies emerged as

¹⁵ Waldstreicher, “Reading the Runaways.”

readable, I suggest that the print representation of the black runaway in particular allowed an allegedly racial subject to be understood as visible—and thus, it is implied, knowable.

Prude, Haulman, and Waldstreicher give insight into the sartorial visual culture before the American Revolution, before servitude and unfreedom code almost completely as racial.

Undoubtedly, as historians have argued, the confinement of slavery to blackness and blackness to slavery resulted from the structural shifts in labor following the American Revolution. The wide vocabulary used to describe the skin color of foreign-born white servants attest that race was not yet linked consistently to skin color, and that race or skin color were not yet held as reliable signs of servitude or freedom.¹⁶ The demography of unfree labor changed after the Revolution; unfree labor became black slave labor in the South, and in the North, labor took the form of waged employment. As white servitude comes to an end in the 1830s, the runaway ads that can be found during that time and after are for black slaves and appear in Southern newspapers. The ads were just as prevalent in everyday print culture in the antebellum South as they were in the colonies. As noted by Judith Kelleher Schafer in her studies of New Orleans newspapers in the 1850s, it was a rare occurrence not to find at least one runaway slave advertisement in each printing. Like the colonial newspapers, the runaway notices were “scattered throughout the classified advertisements, often near notices of lost dogs or horses” (42).¹⁷

The advertisement archive suggests that runaway black slaves must have been common knowledge. By 1800, nearly all runaway ads were for black slaves in the North and South.

¹⁶ For example, many runaway whites are described as “dark,” “very dark,” “brown,” “swarthy,” and “sandy.” For white servant advertisements, see the Smith and Wojtowicz volume. For more on the racialization of servitude and slavery in print and visual culture, see Waldstreicher, 257-259 and Prude, 138-143.

¹⁷ Judith Kelleher Schafer, “New Orleans Slavery in 1850 as Seen in Advertisements,” *The Journal of Southern History* 47.1 (Feb. 1981).

Concurrent with the change in unfree runaway demography is a change in the information included in the runaway notices: clothing descriptions start to become much less elaborate after 1800 and are scarcely described by the 1850s. Describing the sartorial did not assist in the visual identification of the runaway as apparel became ready-made and mass-produced due to transformations in the textile and garment manufacture after the American Revolution. Strict technological patents were deregulated and the textile industry began using machine labor.¹⁸ As a result, people dressed with far less variation in the 19th century than they had prior to the American Revolution.

If, as I have tracked above, the visibility of the runaway emerges out of sartorial description, the changes in runaway advertisements after the American Revolution—when clothing manufacture and thus visual appearance becomes standardized and nondescript—requires a more careful look. The runaway descriptions from this moment are valuable precisely because unfree labor becomes racialized. The 18th-century sartorial account of visual culture contours the emergence of an American visual literacy that makes possible specifically visual racial ideologies in the 19th century. As Jasmine Nichole Cobb explains, “Slavery coded Black raciality as visible, and thus associated the denial of freedom with racial perceptibility... the habitation of an observable racial identity coincided with enslavement, over time.”¹⁹ The next section explains how blackness appears visible and thus racial. As the visibility of dress and the demography of unfreedom transform concurrently, visual signs of unfreedom slip away from clothing and rematerialize in the appearance of the surface of a racialized black body.

Remarkability, Visibility, and Racialization

¹⁸ Kidwell and Christman, 36-37.

¹⁹ Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), quotation on page 35.

The historical scholarship on runaway slaves outlined in this chapter so far recognize the runaway ads as print portraiture of the “lower sort” in the colonies, but race remains theoretically indeterminate in this body of work due to the not yet racial status of blackness in the 18th century. The historical scholarship and other theories of racial slavery attribute the racialization of blackness to U.S. slavery in the 19th century. The colonial discourse of blackness demonstrates that blackness is not quite racialized but still a kind of public knowledge during this time. Historian Walter Johnson presents one of the most compelling arguments about the visual structure of blackness. According to Johnson, linguistic articulations of race—the language of selling and buying slaves—“shaped and shaded” slave bodies into racialized bodies.²⁰ These subjective readings project “race” onto so-called objective, biological signs of skin color, size, sex, body and facial features, and behavior. Blackness is undoubtedly an effect of slavery’s racialization, but alternative stories of race may emerge when we are more precise about naming the visual relationship between slavery and blackness.

Rather than linking vision to racial subjection and slavery, I track how the self-emancipated status of the black runaway rather than the slave and its public formalization via print publication makes seeing and identifying the runaway through print representation appear logical. The logic of seeing, reading, and writing allows modern vision to be understandable as a self-evident, physiological, process—in other words, as common sense. Approaching the runaway ads as a demonstration of visual literacy (rather than subjection) constructs this alternative story of blackness as a matter of vision and vision as a matter of race. This “matter,” of course, starts with further investigation into the print form of the original source of black portraiture. Across this archive, it is presumed that what is “visible” is that which is remarkable,

²⁰ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 158.

or, apt for notation. Features that are understood as “visible”—including handsomeness and skin color—ultimately get figured as “racial” due to the practice of describing the remarkable.

I return to the portrait of Charles that introduced this chapter. A close reading of the above runaway advertisement for Charles lays the groundwork for questioning how visual signs of race transition into the 19th century. A standard ad, Charles’ ad describes his physical appearance, offers a reward, and guesses where he may be found. Unsurprisingly, the ad shares the most specific visual details regarding the attire Charles had on and took with him when he ran away: the “blue sailor’s jacket” and “oznaburg shirt and overhauls” must have been his own clothing, as those garments were typical of a laborer’s limited wardrobe, but the “suit of black” and the “pale blue coat... much too small for him” may have been hand-me-downs or stolen apparel. Slaves did not usually have suits, and the slaveholder’s note about the ill fit of pale blue coat implies that the tailored garment did not originally belong to Charles. According to the ad, the clothing described in detail are “his best” and that there are more, alerting readers that Charles may appear in other attire not described in the ad. Furthermore, the ad warns that the runaway’s name, “Charles,” may not necessarily aid in his identification; as the writer tips off, “[h]e will, I expect, change his name.”

If the runaway’s name, clothing, and even weight and age were determined unreliable for successful identification (Charles’ ad “guesses” his weight and age), reporting “remarkable” characteristics could potentially distinguish—and affix—a particular black subject. Charles’ ad, like countless others, noted the “remarkable,” “extraordinary,” or “uncommon” visible aspects of the runaway. The ad’s opening sentence deems Charles “remarkable” but does not immediately explain what exactly sets him apart. The next lines describing Charles’ clothing, demeanor and personality uses declarative, simple language: “he is” “sensible,” “complaisant,” and

“submissive.” The manner of expression here announces these qualities as matter of fact—at least from the slaveholding writer’s perspective. Additionally, this ad, like so many others, explains the slave’s reasons for running away by deflecting attention away from the realities of slavery; the slaveholder rationalizes that Charles escaped because he must have “procured a free pass as he went off without provocation.” Curiously, the language becomes less confident and assertive when the ad attempts to describe Charles’ physical appearance. The breathless syntax draws attention to the speculative: “[t]he best description I can give is to say he is as black as jet, generously made and as handsome a black man as any in the state weighs I guess 185 lb. is 33 years old, though looks younger.” Here the ad switches to first-person narration, highlighting the subjectivity and uncertainty of the writer. This sentence also finally explains what makes Charles a “remarkable black fellow.” Here, it is implied that it was the “jet” color of his skin and handsomeness of his features that made Charles “remarkable.” Pointing out the standout characteristics of the runaway was standard practice for ad writing. The majority of ads pointed out distinctive bodily characteristics of the runaway, with commentaries ranging from observations about facial features (such as “remarkable thick lips” or “uncommon large eye lids”), build and stature (“remarkable small legs for the size of his body”), and even signs of neglect and violent punishment (“large lump on one of his shins (perhaps the left) occasioned by his once having a sore leg”; “remarkable Scar on his Breast, which seems as if occasioned by the Lash of a Whip”)²¹. The practice of describing the so-called remarkable, uncommon, and extraordinary typically referred to the physical appearance of the black body. Considering how

²¹ Quotations are taken respectively from ads published in *Virginia Gazette*, March 28, 1771; *The Star and North Carolina State Gazette*, November 27, 1828; *Virginia Gazette*, April 15, 1773; *North Carolina Journal*, December 9, 1805. *Virginia Gazette* ads taken from *The Geography of Slavery in Virginia*. Tom Costa and The Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 2005. Web. 27 April. 2013. North Carolina ads taken from *North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements, 1751-1840*. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, 2011-2012. Web. 27 April. 2013.

the public was already very familiar with these everyday descriptions of runaway slaves, even when descriptions did not explicitly state that the characteristics concentrated on were of notable appearance, it must have been so obvious that the mere mention of certain characteristics already asserted uniqueness. The writing's focus on the conspicuous parts of the runaway's physical body demonstrates the privileged role of appearance for the sake of identification. Historian Daniel Meaders hypothesizes that the ads name the runaway's "most identifiable characteristic" that would have been difficult to "change at will."²² Historians John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger interpret the standard language of the ads as "accurate," "factual," and "remarkably free of racial stereotypes" (170). Because "it would not have benefited owners to include false information," some historians argue that the ads maintained some sense of "objectivity."²³

Such "objective" writing included an "honest" judgment of attractiveness. In advertisements slaves are described as "handsome," "very good looking," and "fine looking," and these judgments seem to heed descriptive conventions for the sake of successful identification. The standards and situations in which a slave's good looks could be considered visible—and therefore, objectively readable—are interesting. The runaway advertisement as a genre of writing develops a richer vocabulary to describe the pleasant appearance of the visual subject over time. In this process "handsome" is a visual barometer. In the context of 18th century newspapers, "handsome" was typically used to describe property, including houses, furniture, clothing, horses, and in interesting yet limited ways, slaves and servants. For example, in a 1780 ad in New York's *The Royal Gazette*, a "Negro Wench named Rose" is described as

²² Daniel Meaders, *Dead or Alive: Fugitive Slaves and White Indentured Servants Before 1830* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 180.

²³ Franklin and Schweninger, 170-171. Franklin and Schweninger interpret the inclusion of runaways' descriptions as handsome, intelligent, articulate, artful, etc.—in other words, the slave's appealing, pleasing, or attractive qualities—as "objective" because they do not comply to the "racial stereotypes so prevalent during the nineteenth century" (170).

“about the middle size, is a handsome black, and has an impediment in her speech.”²⁴ An 1818 ad in *The Star and North Carolina State Gazette* sketches “a negro girl named Delilah, of a black complexion, smooth skin, white handsome teeth, pleasant countenance, of tolerably large stature and 22 or 23 years of age.”²⁵ In these ads, handsome generally refers to the ampleness, significance, and generosity of what was described.²⁶ The similar phrases “well made,” “well set,” “well built” or “proportional” appear more routinely (with or without handsome) to describe human commodities. In continuity with the language of slave sales, this vocabulary evaluates the physical ability and strength of the slave.

Towards the turn of the 18th century, the word handsome slowly starts to be used differently. It becomes possible for the runaway to be identified as handsome in the way we would recognize it today: having a pleasing, attractive, dignified appearance. Recognition of this kind of handsomeness occurs less frequently than the former kind, but it still makes many appearances across the runaway ad archive. It is ambiguous which definition of “handsome” is employed in Charles’ ad, but as I have explained above, its usage denotes the remarkable. A clearer example of the new meaning of handsome is exemplified in the notice for an ad for Lens, who is described as “a handsome Wench, and may pass for a free person, as she is very well featured all but her nose, and lips, which are thick and flat, has long black curld hair and a mould on her face.”²⁷ Rocco, a “likely negro man slave,” is “about five feet ten inches high, very well made, about 25 years old, of a brown complexion, with a handsome face, all except a Roman

²⁴ Hodges and Brown, 237.

²⁵ Published in *The Star and North Carolina State Gazette*, April 10, 1818. Taken from *North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements, 1751-1840*. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, 2011-2012. Web. 17 Mar. 2013.

²⁶ According to the Oxford English Dictionary entry. “handsome” is currently defined as ‘Having a fine form or figure (usually in conjunction with full size or stateliness); ‘beautiful with dignity’ ... ‘fine’.’ “handsome, *adj.*” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 17 Mar. 2013.

²⁷ Published in *Parker’s New-York gazette; or The Weekly Post-Boy*, June 18, 1761. Taken from Hodges and Brown, 88-89.

nose.”²⁸ A “Negro Boy, named JESS, about ten years of age” who “has a very modest pleasant countenance, is a trim active cunning lad, and remarkably handsome for one of his colour; he is subtle enough to give a good account of himself, can furnish a very indifferent story, with an excellent complexion, and answer intricate questions without hesitation.”²⁹ Moses, who “will probably pass for a free man,” is “a likely young negro Fellow, of a dark Complexion, about five Feet ten Inches high, round stooping Shoulders, a small Leg, a long broad flat Foot; has a handsome Face, but a narrow Chin.”³⁰ Moreover, the ads dated later here, and overall, list scant details regarding the runaway’s clothing. Though I have not quoted each ad at length above, suffice it to say that almost all of the ads admonish their readers about the runaway’s appearance and calculating, cunning manners. Because handsomeness is already linked to trustworthiness, the ads warn readers that the handsomeness is deceptive. They warn that the “negro,” although handsome, is not free. Handsomeness, like fashionable clothing, worked as currency: slaveholders knew that handsomeness could help a runaway slave pass as free. The reference to handsome looks, then, can be considered a segue from dress to the next form of visibility. The visibility of handsomeness, like the visibility of fashionable clothing, is a matter of visual appearance.

Scholars of runaway slaves interpret these explicit warnings from slaveholders in a few notable ways. Whereas Franklin and Schweninger consider the inclusion of such information objective and thus strategic (they hypothesize that runaways described this way may have been very valuable slaves), Smith and Wojtowicz are more wary about how this kind of information

²⁸ Published in *Norfolk Herald*, May 21, 1799, and *Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser*, June 11, 1799. Taken from *The Geography of Slavery in Virginia*.

²⁹ Published in *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 30, 1777. Taken from Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz, *Blacks Who Stole Themselves: Advertisements for Runaways in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728-1790* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 133.

³⁰ Published in *Raleigh Register and North Carolina Weekly Advertiser*, June 4, 1804. Taken from *North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements, 1751-1840*.

should be read.³¹ Smith and Wojtowicz suggest that “some slaves undoubtedly found it personally advantageous to play on the misconception of whites, to behave outwardly in ways which reinforced those images” (4). Waldstreicher argues that such characterizations caution readers about the runaway’s dishonesty and thus maintain the master’s honor, meanwhile exposing how “the escapee’s own web of words, his or her confidence game, had already undermined the master’s security, or confidence, in ownership, much less in visible markers of racial difference” (261). Following Waldstreicher’s lead, I conclude that the slaveholder’s alerts about the runaway’s deceptive appearance demonstrate the belief that visual appearance of a person should, and typically would, testify to character. “Handsome” is thus no longer an observation or claim about the ableness of the slave towards the 19th century. Rather, “handsome” is often qualified by the presumed blackness of the subject across the ad archive, and certainly in all of the ads excerpted earlier: Moses “has a handsome Face, but a narrow Chin”; Rocco too “has a handsome face, all except a Roman nose”; Lens is “very well featured all but her nose, and lips, which are thick and flat”; Jess is “remarkably handsome for one of his colour.” Significantly, these descriptions express how handsome the runaway is *despite* other presumably unattractive features. The visibility of black handsomeness structures handsomeness as relative. As the value of handsomeness could potentially bring the slave in proximity to freedom, it becomes all the more necessary to limit the handsomeness to a specifically black embodiment. The ads stress the blackness of the slave by qualifying the handsomeness. In alerting the public about the specious appearance of the runaway, especially in verbalizing his or her handsomeness as deceptive, the ads create racial difference out of blackness. In return, racial blackness positions handsomeness, “for a black” subject, as remarkable—that is, describable.

³¹ Franklin and Schweninger, 170; Smith and Wojtowicz, 4.

Notation of handsomeness racializes the subject, as the syntax separates handsomeness from the “black” qualities. My point is *that handsomeness and blackness become concurrently describable after 1800*. Best shown in the description of Jess, who is “remarkably handsome for one of his colour,” handsomeness and skin color become co-dependently describable because they are both understood as *visible*. While I have looked at the writing styles from select ads above, I have pulled them as examples of a pattern reflected in the larger archive. As I have gathered from the Runaway Slave Database generated by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, between 1790-1816, the skin color of the black runaway was not very detailed; many ads simply described the runaway as a “negro” or “black” with little to no additional information.³² But ads surveyed after 1822 describe skin color with dramatic variety: these descriptions were assembled using words denoting hue (varieties of black, brown, yellow, and red), saturation (bright, dark, light), pseudo-scientific definitions of race (negro, mulatto, griff), and other interpretations of color such as ginger, copper, pumpkin, chestnut, and bacon.

Whereas clothing carried the signs of unfreedom in the 18th century, in the 19th century the signs of unfreedom move to the skin and are now remarkable. While I have concentrated on handsomeness in this analysis, I do not mean to suggest that handsomeness is especially visible. Other interesting visible features routinely remarked upon in the ads include scars and missing appendages. But unlike handsomeness, scars can be read as remnants of physical violence and disease and thus cannot stay purely visual. Scars refuse to be pinned down as a purely visual characteristic, even when the writing silences the history of such visible marks on the runaway body. Which is precisely why I have examined handsomeness instead of scars: its visibility smoothly transitions into a visuality because it is writable as innate, intradermal, and pleasant. In

³² John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slave: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 214-216.

contrast, scars are readable as epidermal: scars have an unpleasant history. I argue that it is because handsomeness holds connotations of individual essence and permanence that can develop with a racial ideology of blackness. Together, the “remarkable” visibility of skin color and handsomeness gain the status of “visual” in the antebellum period, replacing clothing’s visual status. Visual remarkability compensated for the sartorial standardization that made clothing description obsolete.

I put further pressure on the rationality of “marking” demonstrated in the ads: the uncommonness of certain physical characteristics make them literally noteworthy. The less common and more unique the subject, the more notable it is. In contrast, ordinariness is presumably difficult to represent with words. The gesturing to the remarkable—that is, the describable—represents the uncommon as *visual*. That which defines the uniqueness of the subject transforms and assimilates it as visual in quality. I refer again to the ad for Charles, the first discussed in this chapter. In Charles’ case, his particular skin color and agreeable appearance distinguish his body. At the same time Charles’ distinct personal appeal ends up being judged against and ultimately assimilated into that of “any” “black man” “in the state.” Strangely, the narration of Charles’ attractive appearance individualizes *and* generalizes the black subject. Paradoxically, Charles’ handsomeness gets figured as prominent enough (he is handsome), but becomes common when framed in terms of blackness (he is “as handsome a black man as any”). The ad suggests that Charles is a handsome individual, as runaways are commonly handsome individuals whose appearance conceals their unfreedom and fugitivity. Scholars have missed the point I am trying to make when they critique the subjective or objective description. It is the flip-flopping definition of a quality as subjective (“handsome”) that I highlight as significant. The paradoxical relationship between the subjective and the objective

throws into question the *conditions* under which the subject can be recognized as “remarkable” or “uncommon.” This condition is the common sense of vision.

The Publication of Common Sense

The previous section traced how blackness started to be articulated as visible and read as visual at the moment descriptions of clothing become less elaborate and black handsomeness becomes objectively “remarkable” in the post-revolutionary runaway ad archive. As I have already emphasized, the metaphoric structure for describing the remarkable and the uncommon—e.g. black handsomeness—assimilates the black subject into handsomeness while also seeing difference in blackness. The term “handsome” makes the runaway legible, assimilating the black subject into visibility insofar as the blackness of the human property corresponds to the public understanding of handsomeness. According to literary scholar David Lloyd, this seeing of race is a process of aesthetic judgment first theorized by Immanuel Kant.³³ Because Lloyd’s thinking has greatly influenced my own, I take his insights about the dual assimilating-racializing logic of aesthetic judgment into my own reading of Kant. This section explores Kant’s third critique for insights about the possibility of a common sense, which is a consequence of the aesthetic structuring of culture. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) develops the “objective” as a transcendental universal principle, in opposition to the “subjective,” an inner sense. By the publication of *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Kant disqualifies empiricist thinking as evidence for objectivity. Instead, Kant theorizes the subjectivity and objectivity of judgment as the conditions for “universality.”

³³ David Lloyd, “Race Under Representation,” in *Culture-Contexture: Explorations in Anthropology and Literary Studies*, eds. E. Valentine Daniel and Jeffrey M. Peck (University of California Press, 1996).

Critique of the Power of Judgment has been read selectively by literary critics who have focused on the “beautiful” and the “sublime.” Here I am interested in how the *Critique* examines the issue of intelligibility. Kant’s task is to understand reasoning that is not grounded in reference to an already existing object. Thus the text’s analyses of the beautiful and the sublime are tools for interrogating the intelligibility and possibility of universality. Kant explains how the idea of universality is made possible by judgment. In the First Introduction, Kant examines the faculty of judgment as a mediating principle between that which appears as the nature of knowledge, a priori, and that which appears as the practice of imagination. He concludes that judgment is social; it is not an autonomous experience but rather a faculty of human cognition that walks the line between the particulars of subjectivity and the universals of objectivity. Kant aims to disentangle how the judging subject can distinguish his particular, subjective experiences as categorizable and interconnected within a general system of empirical laws, “whereby it becomes possible for the power of judgment to subsume the particular under the general,” as an “aggregate of particular experiences.”³⁴ Via judgment, subjective experience is cognizable and a universal “sense,” an objectively valid category of human experience.

Kant uses the beautiful as a tool for examining how the knowability—the judgment—of the beautiful anticipates the communicability of the subject’s judgment. According to Kant, the identification of the beautiful can be defined as a private, subjective satisfaction that is expressed objectively for the sake of social interaction and communicability: “For one cannot judge that about which he is aware that the satisfaction in it is without any interest in his own case in any way except that it must contain a ground of satisfaction for everyone... Hence he will speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a property of the object and the judgment logical” (96-97).

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), 9.

Socialization requires the abstraction of “private feeling” (97). But Kant is not at all saying that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder; rather, he says that calling something beautiful “does not count on the agreement of others with his judgment of satisfaction because he has frequently found them to be agreeable with his own” (98). Here Kant stresses that a standard for recognizing the beautiful, based on communicability, precedes the judging subject’s own pleasure in the beautiful object. The ability to call an object beautiful is not a “subjective” issue. In fact, it requires thinking “in accord” with others’ judgment of the “beautiful” object. Kant’s purpose is to demonstrate how “beauty” is an always communicable, social concept. It follows then that objectivity is defined by the universal communicability of the object’s representation in a larger cultural context. Judgment, for Kant, is treated as the foundation for culture.

Henceforth Kant’s task is to figure out how the standards for judgment emerge. The power of judgment, then, is a representation of sense that establishes the baseline for “common human understanding”: “the least that can be expected from anyone who lays claim to the name of a human being, thus has the unfortunate honor of being endowed with the name of common sense (*sensus communis*)” (173). Kant accepts common sense as the minimum for claiming a stake in humanity (admitting that questioning someone’s common sense is usually taken as an insult). However, Kant’s emphasis is on how common sense enables judgment without implicating subjectivity, which would disqualify the judgment itself. Common sense allows the judging subject to communicate by “abstracting from the limitations that contingently attach to our judging; which is in turn accomplished by leaving out as far as is possible everything in one’s representational state that is matter, i.e., sensation, and attending solely to the formal peculiarities of his representation or his representational state” (174). Sensation has to be obscured for judgment to work. Sensation is the objective representation of the senses, while

feeling is always subjective. Presumably, for Kant the capacity of all humans to sense makes possible the “subjectively universal (an idea necessary for everyone),” an objective knowledge that there is universality at all (124). The judging subject, which should now be called the social subject, mediates subjective, private feelings via common sense.

Central to Kant’s aesthetic theory is representation, a form of abstraction, used by common sense. Taking common sense as the “constitutive principle of the possibility of experience,” I reevaluate how the subjectivity of judgment enables the paradoxical experience of communicating objectively in the social world. The communicability (a universality) of black remarkableness (an objective experience)—the racial readability and literacy of blackness—necessarily assumes a common sense of vision. This account of Kantian aesthetic judgment allows me to conclude that the racial determination of black handsomeness, devised for the sake of public readability, is an aesthetic judgment. The “objective” judgments of not only handsomeness but of intelligence, fashionableness, diffidence, darkness, lightness, etc. automatically demonstrate their communicability. This fundamentally public exercise makes the visual sense seem like an objective, common sense.

Lloyd has also theorized the problem of objective, common sense vision that I have identified. According to Lloyd, at the same time that aesthetic culture and sensual organization get defined together, aesthetic culture works as an index to the developmental history of race. As Lloyd explains, the problem of the visual sense is fundamentally a temporal one: sense gets represented as a temporal phenomenon through the terminology of aesthetic culture. According to Lloyd’s reading, the process of aesthetic judgment is described as a cognitive move from the “existence of the object” to the “contemplative relation to the object” to the “capacity of sight” (252). This move announces a “narrative organization of the senses” because the distance

between the object and the formalization of its representation increases (252). Lloyd stresses that personal judgment represents, or formalizes, a public or common sense in the moment the subject is formalized into the identity of the abstract subject. To think like everyone else, to have the capacity to represent subjective experience, one must interpret what is judged “objectively.” Describing the remarkable and the uncommon in the runaway ads actually interprets and reinforces the objective and the common.

As Kant formulated, the abstract subject who has the capacity to judge objectively—i.e. to perceive, and now Lloyd argues, specifically, to see—is regulated by the social ideals of taste. Lloyd notices that subjective seeing corresponds to a lower stage of communicative development, as exemplified in non-European cultures. Lloyd concludes that vision is held as the sense that can measure racial civilization because vision depends on taste. But taste is a socialized concept regulated by “every one else,” produced in and through the emergence of common sense in the public sphere. As Lloyd explains, taste and common sense each are “at once a metaphor and structured like a metaphor” (258). This formulation increasingly formalizes the visual sense because civilized (objective) seeing is presumably universal. Vision’s universality matches up with the subject’s universality, which is “attained by virtue of literal indifference”; “this Subject becomes representative in consequence of being able to take anyone’s place, of occupying any place, of a pure exchangeability. Universal where all others are particular, partial, this Subject is the perfect, disinterested judge formed for and by the public sphere” (256). The fundamentally public structure of aesthetic (racist) discourse signals its own double composition, comprised by the conceptual possibilities of “racial difference” and “universal humanity.” In spite of difference, or more accurately, because of difference, Lloyd observes that “identity is formally preserved; across cultures, human nature is essentially the

same and can therefore be developed along identical lines” (255). The racialized subject is only representable through the negation of difference. In other words, it is only through a differential relation that the racialized subject can be represented.

Lloyd’s reading is immensely helpful for my examination of the representation of the black runaway through handsomeness as a racialized metaphor. Because the structure through which vision gains sense for the subject is the structure through which the Subject is formed, vision only makes sense in the developmental narrative of the Subject. The representation of the racialized subject merely interpellates the subject in “approximation to the position of the Subject, theoretically available to all regardless of ‘race or creed,’” via “the impossible negation of racial or cultural differences” (266). That is why black handsomeness is presented as a metaphoric, differential relation in the advertisements I have analyzed. The differentiation of handsomeness is created via aesthetic judgment. Vision literally makes sense of difference, as the structure that makes possible the identity of the Subject. Because vision only makes itself knowable through the experience of identity, because vision is publicly regulated, vision appears to be self-evident. At this point, it would be useful to question how visually-identified differences, or aesthetic judgments, such as black handsomeness appear self-evident in the runaway advertisements. Put differently, what’s questioned here is how the reading public gets defined by the visual sense, and how the apparent common sense of vision prompts a unified, abstract public.

I turn to accounts of the runaway advertisements in narratives by former slaves as an interesting source for answering the questions just posed. Quite a few slave narratives comment on the quality of their discursive portraits in the runaway advertisements. According to the described black subjects, the descriptions were indeed successful. As William Parker explains in

an 1866 article, while migrating to Pennsylvania, Parker and his brother were stopped by a white man who recognizes them: “‘See here!’ said he; ‘you are the fellows that this advertisement calls for,’ at the same time taking the paper out of his pocket, and reading it to us. Sure enough, there we were, described exactly” (159).³⁵ Charles Peyton Lucas’s story in a collection of Canadian slave narratives (1856) recollects the moment a friendly stranger “said an advertisement describing me was in the tavern,--‘tawny colored man, tall, spare, and of a pleasing countenance when spoken to, and he works at blacksmithing. No scars recollected, except one on his neck. Any person who will return him to me, or lodge him in jail, so that I can get him, shall have a reward of five hundred dollars.’ My friends advised me to remove further” (109).³⁶ In her 1893 autobiography, Amanda Smith remembers when she was a child, her father harbored a fugitive who was seized by “white men that made their living by catching runaway slaves and getting the reward” (32).³⁷ According to Smith, when the slave catchers saw the fugitive “they knew he answered the advertisement given in the paper, for it was always explicitly given; the color, the height and scars on any part of his body” (33). In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs tells the story of her brother Benjamin’s escape and capture. Benjamin “was aware that he would be advertised in every port near his own town... There the advertisement met the captain’s eye. Benjamin so exactly answered its description, that the captain laid hold on

³⁵ William Parker, “The Freedman’s Story: In Two Parts,” in *The Atlantic Monthly* (vol. xvii, Feb. 1866, 152-166; Mar. 1866, 276-295). Taken from *Documenting the American South*, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004. Web. 17 Mar. 2013.

³⁶ Charles Peyton Lucas, “Charles Peyton Lucas” in *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada*, ed. Benjamin Drew (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1856). Taken from *Documenting the American South*.

³⁷ Amanda Smith, *An Autobiography The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith the Colored Evangelist; Containing an Account of Her Life Work of Faith, and Her Travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India, and Africa, as an Independent Missionary* (Chicago: Meyer & Brother, Publishers, 1893). Taken from *Documenting the American South*.

him, and bound him in chains” (21).³⁸ Key in each of these accounts is that the runaway matched the written description “exactly” and “explicitly,” meaning that the advertiser provided an identifiable visual account of the runaway to the public. Furthermore, the members of the public were able to identify the runaway via the so-called reliability of the written account; it is the reader who actively matches the subject to his written description. What we learn in these passages from slave narratives is that the slaveholding writer fashions his writing in such a way that will increase the likelihood of recovering his property, and the public recognizes the described subject through the slave holder’s description. Additionally, the described subject recognizes himself in the description; as Charles Peyton Lucas “sure enough” admits, he finds his party “described exactly.”

To see in these accounts questions the commonness of the visual experience so that it can be said that the described subject, the black subject, looks the same to everyone. In other words, that which appears to be objectively visual is also that which appears to be common sense. It is precisely because the sense of vision is understood as publicly shared that it makes sense for runaway slaves to alter their appearance. Earlier in this chapter I argued how the runaways’ approach to clothing demonstrated fluency in a very specific public understanding of the visible body. Runaways also exercised a literacy different from that of the public to ensure their self-emancipation by changing clothes, hair, and grooming techniques as well as cross-dressing in order to remain unidentified.³⁹ Runaways knew how to re-envision themselves differently from

³⁸ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000).

³⁹ See Jasmine Nichole Cobb’s reading of Jacobs’s successful escape from slavery in the chapter “A Peculiarly ‘Ocular’ Institution” in *Picture Freedom*. According to Cobb, Jacobs knew that her advertisement would claim that she would be passing as white and so dressed herself as a free black sailor instead. Cobb’s chapter argues fugitives “masterfully understood assumptions about race, vision, and visibility, and then used this knowledge to steal themselves and upend the foundational assumptions of slavery’s visual culture” (33).

the way they would be described in print and to make their own bodies readable as free to the public. In short, runaways changed their visual appearance so that, to use the words of Jacobs, they do not “meet” the “eye.” The dressing and styling practices of runaways remind us that what has been perceived as exact and accurate is constructed.

The roots of the common sense vision used to see blackness specifically emerge from the practice of objective, public communication about black visibility, and more precisely, the print materiality of black visual representation in the context of American national imagining. The fact that the runaway slave advertisement historiography is densest in studies that take the colonial period as the subject signals the foundational role that print representations of slavery have played for the development of a national culture. It is no coincidence that the meaning of blackness gets stabilized as a racial definition at the same time that mass reading publics are created by early American print capitalism, as established by Benedict Anderson.⁴⁰ I turn to Michael Warner’s argument about the co-emergence of print, a “public” that is presumed to be representative, and a new social, political order.⁴¹ Elaborating Anderson’s theory of print capitalism, Warner’s argument further illustrates how the medium of print—its “printedness”—makes possible and intelligible republican discourses that not only assume but conjure a public. In the colonies, print is understood through discursive norms of the public sphere, developed out of a specific understanding of print as the optimal medium for making “public complaints” about political issues. By the middle of the 18th century, newspapers enjoyed regular production and circulation, which “allowed them to be political in a special way”: newspapers as print artifacts “represented the material reality of an abstract public” (61).

⁴⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 1983).

⁴¹ Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990).

As these discursive norms of print are used to legitimate republican politics, they authorize the universalizing norms of public print discourses, confirming a model of the public sphere where culture takes on a supervisory role *because* this public supposes to be representational. Following the lead of Jürgen Habermas, Warner stresses that this public is a reading public. Warner argues that the logic of representation is grounded in the impersonality and anonymity of written printed rhetoric; the printed, mechanically reproducible writing mediates the relation between reader and writer—participants of the public—through the negation of the personal specificity of public discourse. This self-negation, a “personal tactic of depersonalization,” required for participation in the public unifies and universalizes public and print norms (43). Because the abstract public of print discourses is “never localizable in any relation between persons,” the readability of print avails the “promise of universal mutual recognition” (61-62). According to Warner, print publication as representation is available only to those able to abstract themselves and be recognized publicly as part of that abstract body: those defined by whiteness, maleness, and capital.

I review Warner’s argument on the role of printedness for the development of the early American public sphere while also keeping in mind Lloyd’s examination of the aesthetic-racial-public assemblage in western modernity. For Lloyd, representation unifies time, culture, and humanity under aesthetic judgment. For Warner, representation is structured by public mediation and produced through the materiality of printed writing. Warner and Lloyd both define representation as an effect of negation that promises a politics in the universal. Furthermore, Lloyd and Warner’s theorizations of the public sphere converge in that they both confirm the public as a principle of regulation. In light of Warner’s argument, I supplement Lloyd’s formulation of “race under representation” by arguing for the printedness of aesthetic judgment

(i.e. the printedness of racialized handsomeness). In the past few pages I have argued that the transference of the runaway's visuality from clothing to visually-identifiable physiological characteristics of the subject marks the historical emergence of racial blackness as a public sense. I now suggest that print produces the seemingly indisputable common sense of vision simultaneously with the objective public understanding of the racialized subject. Together the readability of print and blackness reinvents blackness as a racial visuality. Through print, the visual knowability of blackness graduates from unfreedom to physical appearance to "race." The printedness of black visual representation in the runaway ads presumes that racial blackness exists prior to the description of the runaway subject that ultimately circulates in the public. The printedness legitimizes the assumption that there is an already-visual and -racial status of blackness. As visuality gets published by this authority of blackness, as public knowledge visual readability comes to represent blackness. Blackness henceforth emits visuality. The structuring of visuality by the visual readability and literacy of blackness exposes how print readability in general comes to publicize visuality. In short, the representation of blackness legitimizes and universalizes visuality in general.

This account stresses that the visuality of blackness develops out of the runaway advertisements; by studying the printed representation of individual runaways, I have argued for the public power of print language in these ads. While there are print representations of slaves for sale, the majority of these print artifacts only announced the location and date of public auction.⁴² In contrast, the more detailed records of slaves for sale are markedly private in that these documents were not written in print or for general public: such descriptions of slaves were

⁴² Judith Schafer's study of New Orleans slavery advertisements approximates that only 13 percent of all sales were private. While private sale ads were more descriptive than auction ads, they stressed the value or bargain of the sale. See Schafer, "New Orleans Slavery in 1850 as Seen in Advertisements."

written by friends, physicians, or slave dealers by special request.⁴³ At any rate, in either public or private form, descriptions of slaves for sale used a very different vocabulary. Slaves were usually described in very general terms (“splendid,” “guaranteed”), and the text concentrated on the ableness of the body (“large enough to plow”).⁴⁴ As Johnson argues, the language of slave sales reflects the seller or buyer’s racial ideologies and identities for bargaining purposes: “the business of the slave pens was the buying and selling of slaves, not the production of wide-ranging ideas about racial proximity and inferiority” (159). The peculiar and distinctive ways in which a word like “handsome” could be deployed via print signals how the recognition of handsomeness in the black runaway publicizes race, or, racializes slavery. Therefore I contend that the printedness of writing about blackness in runaway ads proliferates blackness as a racial-visual discourse. As Waldstreicher has argued, the runaway ads, simultaneously a genre and sponsor of publication, are constitutive to the structure of the public sphere. The ads did more than sponsor newspaper publishing; they also reproduced the ideological value of print, making print necessary to recovering lost property. Waldstreicher explains, “[t]he more slaves resorted to writing passes and to sophisticated uses of the English language, the more masters used print to make up for it, lambasting the ‘evil designing persons’ who wrote passes and harbored fugitives, warning the public about smooth-tongued runaways” (269). Following Waldstreicher, I stress that print’s expansion of racial discourses publicize, or commonize, racial discourses as visual discourses and visual discourses as racial ones.

⁴³ Walter Johnson uses planter letters, agricultural and medical journals, and most of all, court testimonies to patch together how slave bodies were read racially. See “Reading Bodies and Marking Race” chapter in *Soul by Soul*.

⁴⁴ For more on the language of slave sales, including advertisements and auctions, see Schafer, Johnson, Meaders, *Dead or Alive*, and Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006).

By historicizing visuality within the publicity of black flight, my account of black visuality shows the constitution of blackness to modern regimes of vision. Scholars have established that the development of print capitalism enabled the imagining of a shared modernity. While this account of modernity grounds my analysis, for the purposes of this chapter, what's at stake in critiquing print discourses is understanding how modern vision, via print discourses, get aesthetically structured. To clarify the modern aesthetic location of vision as racial, visual, and public discourses overlap, I look to Cornel West's essay "Genealogy of Modern Racism," which provides a broad overview of the co-developments of modern discourses of race, aesthetics, science, and philosophy.⁴⁵ According to West, modern racism commences with the fusion of aesthetic culture and the scientific revolution. The methods of scientific research (finding "observation" and "evidence"), Greek ocular metaphors of truth, and classical aesthetic ideals of beauty and proportion contribute to solidifying discourses of modernity. Modernity "rests upon" an "ideal value-free subject" that verifies objective truth and knowledge by observing, ordering, comparing, and measuring (53). As science and aesthetics employ the "normative gaze" that can observe and represent visible physical characteristics, the conceptualization of racial difference and classification become possible. The aesthetic language of beauty, proportion, and moderation are explicitly invoked to regulate the emergent scientific disciplines of phrenology, physiognomy, and anthropology, which then authorize and universalize racism.

West's essay stresses the complete cooperation of aesthetics and science for the production of knowledge about race. West argues that the institutionalization of science authorizes the authority and autonomy of aesthetics. Finally, the language of aesthetic and

⁴⁵ Cornel West, "A Genealogy of Modern Racism" in *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

scientific vision naturalizes the visual experience while obscuring its discursive constitution. West's essay boldly concludes that racism and modernity become inseparable due to the discursive structure of modernity. White supremacy is endemic to modernity; therefore, modern intellectual thought produces and prohibits specific kinds of knowledge where black equality cannot have a place.

If I follow West's argument, vision appears as scientific and biological in modernity precisely because it is discursively conceived and regulated by aesthetic culture. As I see it, West's major contribution is that he theorizes the "discursive factor" or discursivity (the "neglected variable") of modern racism. Taking up this crucial point, in the next section I explore Glenn Ligon's *Runaways* print series to weave an account of discursivity as a problematic in and of itself in the study of race, and vision, race's necessary accompaniment, as I have posited through my account of visibility. My aim is to complicate ideas of the aesthetic as an "autonomous" and "visual" structure that produces historical discourses of subjects and subjection. Racism and race cannot be explained or resolved through critiques about visual subjection. Rather, we must recognize the ways in which discursivity regulates vision. Similarly, Lloyd emphasizes how culture appears as a space for rectifying the material effects of racism; contrary to the ways in which racism makes itself understood in the contemporary moment, culture actually distributes racist discourses because culture and racism are formed in tandem. Thus, it is necessary to return to the site that enables this modernized visual sense: aesthetics. Discursivity can be considered a way into aesthetics, and aesthetics a way into discursivity.

Countervisualizing Aesthetics

Following West's lead, I argue that the discursivity of aesthetic constitution modernizes vision for race and race for vision. The tautological relationship between visual rationality and the production of race does more than demonstrate common sense: the discursivity of that relation gives vision its modern form by structuring it as common sense. This section examines Ligon's *Runaways* as a theory of discursivity, cultivated from the collapse of race into its visual form. *Runaways* gives us the opportunity to review "discursivity" as a field through which description (of runaway subjects) creates blackness as an objective and thus by extension natural visual sign.

Ligon's *Runaways* series is typically exhibited, published, and viewed as a set of prints, though their showing is frequently partnered with the *Narratives* series (a set of prints playing off of the opening pages of 19th century slave narratives) or as a part of the installation *To Disembark*, a multi-media piece that engages with the *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* and a soundtrack that includes Billie Holiday and KRS-One (Figures 3-6). The series features ten different descriptive accounts of the artist by his friends. Like a runaway slave advertisement, each of the descriptions contains brief yet detailed information about Ligon's physical appearance, including height, weight, sex, race, skin color, and clothing. Each print also pairs text with a stock image from slave iconography, usually a generic singular slave figure in flight or in shackles, though two of the prints feature images of Henry Box Brown and Frederick Douglass.

Since the beginning of his career, Ligon's use of language has received much attention from art historians and curators. Though this body of criticism usually takes as its subject Ligon's abstract text paintings from the 1990s that reference literature and historical documents about African American experience, a few recent critical pieces investigate the relationship

between text and image; reading, writing, and seeing; and race and history in *Runaways* in particular. Art historian Huey Copeland claims that the series' mimicry and appropriation of the language of runaway slave portraiture interpellates the artist into a social and economic place that is, ironically, fugitive—a displacement, a disappearance, an alterity. Copeland notes that the language of *Runaways* touches upon the ways in which “any description, however benign, bears some relation to a history of stereotype and racial prejudice”⁴⁶—specifically, the racialized language used for the buying and selling of slaves that “continues to reverberate within contemporary black life,” as art historian and critic Richard Meyer argues.⁴⁷ Ligon's appropriation of the language of slavery “loosens up the text,” according to art historian Peter Erickson, giving “language a different look so that it loses its obviousness and becomes available for reinterpretation. To change the medium is to challenge the story” (30).⁴⁸ For Erickson, the medium of printmaking (and painting, in Ligon's other pieces) uses language to tell a new story; the content remains the same while the form changes. Though not specifically about *Runaways*, curator Okwui Enwezor analyzes Ligon's work as a signifying strategy in the *Narratives* print series, which explores the slave narrative genre. Reading through Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s analysis of signifying in African American culture, Enwezor argues that Ligon parodies and rewrites literature and literary conventions.⁴⁹ Like these critics, my focus on historicizing work of language in Ligon's work demonstrates the significance of appropriation as an art

⁴⁶ Huey Copeland, “Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects,” *Representations* 113.1 (Winter 2011), 95. Copeland's interpretation of *Runaways* specifically situates the series within the larger installation *To Disembark*.

⁴⁷ Richard Meyer, “Borrowed Voices: Glenn Ligon and the Force of Language” in *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*, exhibition catalog (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1998), 17.

⁴⁸ Peter Erickson, “Black Like Me: reconfiguring Blackface in the Art of Glenn Ligon and Fred Wilson,” *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 25 (Winter 2009).

⁴⁹ Okwui Enwezor, “Text, Subtext, Intertext: Painting, Language, and Signifying in the Work of Glenn Ligon” in *Glenn Ligon: America*, ed. Scott Rothkopf (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2011), 54.

making strategy for the artist. Copeland and Erickson rightly make a point about the limits of language, but they seem to miss the point that I am trying to make—what language has to do with the public and visual sense of blackness.

It is worth reviewing the concept of appropriation in conversations about Ligon's art as well as contemporary art in general. While cultural critics have explored the meaning and significance of appropriation as a question about the boundaries and power relations among people, groups, and objects, in the study of art, appropriation is specifically understood as a strategy for artists working with ideas about cultural and historical valuation in the 1980s and 1990s. Art historians and critics tend to take a stake in appropriation as a conceptual method or tool of identity politics for "black art" or "black artists." As cultural critic bell hooks notes in her study of black art discourses, "acts of appropriation are part of the process by which we make ourselves" (11).⁵⁰ Criticism about Ligon's work typically understands what hooks has called the "use" of appropriated texts as a way to work out self-identity. Ligon's work frequently shows in exhibitions thematically concerned with issues of identity or African American history that claim that appropriation in his work serves as a tool for transforming self-identity to group identity. In the catalogue for the groundbreaking *Unbecoming* solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1998, curator Judith Tannenbaum introduces Ligon's work as an exploration of how "his own identity intersects with, is filtered through, and is ultimately shaped by the social and political narratives of American culture, past and present... Through Ligon's process of unraveling the diverse sources and experiences that have shaped his identity, we come to a greater understanding of ourselves" (11).⁵¹ Similarly, curator Thelma Golden addressed a crucial relationship between Ligon's self-identity and a group identity; she claims that the text

⁵⁰ bell hooks, "The Poetics of Soul: Art for Everyone" in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995).

⁵¹ Judith Tannenbaum, "Introduction," in *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*, 11.

paintings are so powerful *because* viewers confuse Hurston, Genet, and Dyer quotes as the painter's own. Golden reads appropriation as methodology: "That is their brilliance and the brilliance of appropriation in this form. Using the first-person voice, they speak for an entire experience" (54).⁵² As assessed by Tannenbaum and Golden, Ligon's appropriation of texts work as a transformative function for different modes of identification: the paintings transform mere explorations in personal, individual self-identity into collective, group identification due to the original texts' loss of specificity. Genet, Hurston, and Dyer speak for Ligon, and Ligon in turn speaks for a collective experience. Critics and historians flatly attribute appropriation as a historiographical tool for reconciling the self-to-group-identity transformation.

Ligon is aware of these interpretations. And as an African American artist, he is especially aware of how he faces a racially reduced interpretation of identity in his art: "people of color, because we are 'raced,' are limited (whereas, white people are just 'people' and seem to have no racial identity). The work of artists of color is often reduced to being simply about race and nothing else, as if our gender, sexual, class, and other identities didn't complicate any discussions of race as a subject matter, or as if race was our 'natural' subject matter."⁵³ Ligon has mused, "The problem of art historians! How to decide what's relevant. Is the biography relevant? Or how do you deal with biography without determining the work? The work is 'x' because he's 'x.'"⁵⁴ With Ligon's comments in mind, a more critical reading of Ligon's appropriation strategy is possible. The concept and subject of appropriation have not been taken seriously enough in discussions about Ligon's work, and this is to be expected; as bell hooks and art historian Kobena Mercer have observed, these interpretations of appropriation in the work of a black artist

⁵² Thelma Golden, "Everynight," in *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*, 44.

⁵³ Byron Kim, "An Interview with Glenn Ligon," in *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*, 54.

⁵⁴ Rachel Middleman, "History with a Small 'h': A Conversation with Glenn Ligon," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12.3 (2006), 472.

reinforce the reduction of identity to an assertion about an authentic black experience.⁵⁵ By appropriating the form and content of runaway slave advertisements, Ligon is doing more than making historical connections between the contemporary moment and slavery. For Ligon, appropriation enables an exploration of blackness as a common sense which consolidates the common sense of racial visibility.

Because the form of *Runaways* remains consistent across many viewing contexts, it is important to analyze the ways in which it appears as a free-standing series of 10 lithograph prints. As it appears in series, each print cannot be seen in isolation; rather, viewing one of the prints requires referencing the others. Across the prints, each piece of writing from each print generally shares the same information about Ligon's appearance through succinct sentences. The writing states that Ligon has "ran away" and implies that the following descriptive details would aid in his identification: he is around "five feet eight inches high," "about 30 years old," and has "very short hair," "oval-shaped" "cat-eye glasses," wears a "silver watch" and a "black-and-white bead bracelet." When it comes to describing height, hair, and clothing, each print expresses the same content with very little variation in word choice or even syntax.

Descriptive connotations of race, however, are expressed with variability. All but one print describes Ligon as a racialized subject in indicating race or skin color or by conflating race with skin color. Some of the texts link Ligon's skin color to race while others mention either skin color or race. Six of the ten portraits identify Ligon as "black" (one more as "African American"), and three of those pieces elaborate on his skin color. For example, one of those prints after identifying him as a "black male" describe Ligon's "medium complexion" as "not 'light skinned,' not 'dark skinned,' slightly orange" (Figure 4). The next print that identifies

⁵⁵ hooks, *Art on My Mind*; Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Ligon as a “black man” observes that he is “pretty dark-skinned.” Another describes him to be of “quite light skin tone (faded bronze).” Two other prints describe Ligon as “medium-brown” and “medium-dark” with no further details about race. The observations about skin color (“bronze,” “orange,” “light,” “dark”) may be considered descriptive but not necessarily racial, while “black” and “African-American” are, less arguably, observations that are mediated through existing social categories. There are other physical descriptions that read racially, like a colonial or antebellum runaway ad. One description uses the language of evaluating the health of the slave body: “Wide lower face and narrow upper face. Nice teeth” (Figure 5). Ligon’s “ads” also make judgments about Ligon’s attractiveness: the artist’s physical appeal crosses a spectrum from “[m]ild-looking” to “distinguished looking” to “a little hunky.” Some of Ligon’s descriptions also warn readers about the runaway’s artfulness: Ligon is described as “[v]ery articulate, seemingly well-educated, does not look at you straight in the eye when talking to you” and “[m]oves smoothly, looks like he might have something on his mind—he’ll find you.” But other descriptions seem to conflict with those portrayals: he is also called “quiet,” “timid,” and “mild-mannered.” Such range in description of the same subject show us how differently he is seen and described by the writer. But my point here is not to dwell on the variety of description. Instead, I emphasize how reading each description against one another makes it difficult to visualize an identifiable subject. In fact, the group of portraits proliferates the subject’s identity rather than singling it out. Copeland has convincingly argued that this multiplication of identity is a play on the fugitive slave figure, but I am more interested in how these descriptions collectively open up an inquiry on writing about visual experience. *Runaways* highlights the simultaneous stabilizing and destabilizing articulation of race as visually readable and detectable. I consider how the

consensus and dissensus in the descriptions of Ligon's visual appearance invites a critique of writing and reading's racial relationship.

The series does not merely appropriate the advertising language, but the print form of the advertisement. The pairing of each text block with a type specimen of a slave figure spotlights blackness as a publication. Slave type specimens, as 19th century as stock images were called, become popular in disparate 19th-century print contexts, including slave narratives, abolitionist political satire, slave auction ads, and of course, runaway slave ads. These emblems were used and designed in the context of the burgeoning American print advertising industry. As literary scholar Marcus Wood argues, the proliferation of such conflicting usages shows that "pictures come first, the words can be fitted in afterwards."⁵⁶ Frederick Douglass, arguably the most famous runaway slave, was well aware of the various and contradictory ways such iconography got published. Douglass refused to purchase these "newspaper ornaments" for his anti-slavery newspaper, *North Star*, but did appropriate the familiar runaway slave icon to create an original typographic image for his newspaper's masthead.⁵⁷ By pairing the generic icon with a specific description of an individual, *Runaways* exposes the fluidity of the visual sign of the runaway. Two of the *Runaway* pieces include icons of specific former slaves: Henry Box Brown and Frederick Douglass (Figure 6). Even these portraits of two very specific and famous people get turned into icons that signal blackness-in-general when published alongside a text about Ligon. In his analysis of appropriation in black art, Kobena Mercer emphasizes what the strategy

⁵⁶ Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (London: Routledge, 2000), 89.

⁵⁷ Frederick Douglass, "Oh Liberty! What Deeds Are Done in Thy Name!" *North Star*, 22 February 1850. Blackwood and Wood have made compelling arguments about Douglass's engagements with type specimens for the *North Star*. See Blackwood's reading of Douglass' "Oh Liberty!" and the *North Star* masthead in "Fugitive Obscura: Runaway Slave Portraiture and Early Photographic Technology," *American Literature* 81.1 (March 2009) and Wood's chapter "Rhetoric and the Runaway" in *Blind Memory*. For more on slave print iconography, also see Michael Chaney, *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009).

reveals: that language is “inherently ambivalent and have no fixed of final meanings precisely because they are constantly subject to struggles in which different groups seek to hegemonize their definitions over the definitions of others” (257-258). The logic of appropriation only makes sense within a concept of a shared culture. Appropriation works because of “the fact that we share the same planet as our enemies and our adversaries—because the concept of ‘culture’ has been appropriated not only by social democratic discourses of ‘multiculturalism, ‘but by neoconservative discourses of the ‘new racism’ ... different subjects construct different meanings out of the *same* system of signs” (256-257). Ligon’s appropriation of the print language and images of runaway slave advertisements suggests what I call “discursivity” as a framework for re-viewing how black visibility publishes and publicizes vision into an autonomous, physiological, common sense outside of its racial constitution, so that his portraits make sense—are racially readable and seeable—to us.

Accordingly, I suggest that the subject of appropriation here is publication itself, recasting print as not just a form, but a formalization of blackness. The formalization of print publication in *Runaways* confronts how the illusory objectivity of visual representation *makes sense*, consequently pitching the public readability of blackness—visual literacy—as a condition of “race.” Building off Warner’s critique of printedness as a condition for discursively norming the public sphere, I take discursivity as an investigative site of and a critical viewpoint over the practice and production of writing for publication. *Runaways* is not just presenting print; it is presenting printedness. In making the mechanical reproducibility of black printedness its content, the mechanically-produced visual form of the artwork suggests that printedness publishes vision as a common sense. The visual form of *Runaways* asks us to “see discursivity” as the vehicle for the modernization of the visual experience. To see discursivity—the description, as an image of

printed text—is to spatialize the practice of descriptive writing as a historical print genre that norms public consensus about visibility. By making an image out of writing, Ligon spatializes the racial visibility's constitution via printedness. Ligon illustrates scholar Walter Ong's criticism about the modern technologizing of language via the spatial effects of print: it was print, not writing, that "effectively reified the word, and, with it, noetic activity."⁵⁸ The formalization of print in the artwork makes an intervention in (racial) literacy. *Runaways* is not a critique of black stereotypes. Instead, *Runaways* provides a view over the modernity of black visual readability. Though it is tempting to argue that appropriation sheds light on historical continuities, as many curators and art historians have done, I argue that appropriation in this case is far more complex. By appropriating the runaway advertisement form, *Runaways* exposes how the printedness of blackness publishes race, publishing the visual experience outside of material life. *Runaways* shows how racial description works through the assumption that both language and vision are transparent empirical processes because of the authority of print publication. That is why a description of Ligon's "nice teeth," for example, sounds objective, racial, and racist at the same time. Racial publication consequently modernizes vision by authorizing an account of vision that omits its discursive constitution. Consequently race seems to be visual because the visual seems to be objective. Modern vision emerges from its ahistorical characterization as common sense.

Thus far I have outlined the ways in which the descriptions of the artist in the *Runaways* prints expose discursivity's potential for deconstructing the common sense of race and vision, revealing race and vision as two sides of the same coin. Paradoxically, race is always invisibly present in general discourses of vision precisely because race is presumed to be visually detectable. Truly a deconstructive critique, *Runaways* foregrounds the signifying practice of

⁵⁸ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), 119.

writing: focusing on the form of writing allows the artwork to question how printedness makes meaning of writing.⁵⁹ The racial visual appearance of the described runaway subject is pressed as effects of the print form. No doubt, the appropriative work of *Runaways* is at a basic level a historicizing practice, as numerous curators and art historians have noted. The appropriation of black discursivity exposes slavery's defining role in the formalization of discursivity. But more importantly, appropriation functions to show how identifying the blackness of the described subject is the most effective way of identifying him because he is already perceived as black. This tautology of black readability obscures the crucial role that writing plays in making vision appear as an autonomous objective sense. This objectivity is the hallmark of modern vision. Put differently, in *Runaways*, the historicization of slavery's formalization into discursivity exposes how the simultaneous positioning of blackness and vision as self-evident emerges from common sense of objective vision. Only within this assumption of shared seeing can the description of the black subject be intelligible as accurate, "explicit," or "exact," to use the language of the former slaves cited earlier.

The brilliance of Ligon's work lies in its historical attentiveness to the publication of blackness. Ligon carefully specifies the role of runaway printedness—not quite slavery—in making race a matter of common sense vision. I now define discursivity as a critical approach to understanding how racial publication implicates the common sense required for public readability. If printedness confirms a model of the public sphere where society takes on a supervisory role *because* this public supposes to be representational, discursivity can be understood as a countervisual approach to aesthetics. This countervisual perspective reminds us

⁵⁹ My understanding of deconstruction is taken from Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

that “aesthetics” is fundamentally a sensorial problem. Broadly, I take aesthetics as the entry into the study of racial common sense.

I read *Runaways* as a revision of Kantian aesthetic theory. The series substantiates the centrality of race in the development of objective vision. In locating the tautology of visual self-evidence, *Runaways* determines how the judgment of racial qualities is intelligible only insofar as the judgment represents a taste for race. By positing blackness as a matter of visual common sense, *Runaways* exposes the racial structuring of modern culture. Ligon’s crucial contribution to the study of aesthetics is in shedding light on how the tension between subjectivity and objectivity is intrinsically racial because it’s aesthetic (and aesthetic because it’s racial). Because the sense through which we see is a common sense, the only possible and automatic way of making sense of blackness is to conceive of it as essentially visual. This production of self-evident visuality retroactively positions vision as a matter of fact. This misconception of race’s self-evident visual status transforms blackness into a visuality; at the same time, this black visuality is only a derivation of the transparency of language and vision that reinforces vision as a common sense. Blackness in its discursive form indicates how visuality construes the discursivity of blackness into objective knowledge. *Runaways* suggests that print publication henceforth continues to settle common sense. This commonizing effect demonstrates the singularity of aesthetic culture. Visuality thus unifies common sense—a common sense that is developed from a culture that already shares the same sense of vision. Meanwhile, this very sense also preconditions the ability to see blackness.

Furthermore, this revised definition of visuality requires a reexamination of how visuality makes sense of, or aestheticizes, race, thereafter discursivity making race a matter of common sense vision. It is through the aesthetic commonization and consolidation of visuality and the

universalization race and vision that sense in general mistakes vision as characteristically ahistorical. As Nicholas Mirzoeff reminds us, “visuality” is constituted by the practice of visually organizing a cohesive version of history that sees, reinstates, and aestheticizes already-existing modalities of power through the language of “people,” “spaces,” and “culture.” Visuality then takes on an aesthetic, perceptual definition: visuality is made to “feel right,” as Mirzoeff puts it.⁶⁰ The preceding analyses of vision complicates Mirzoeff’s point; as explained above, because it is blackness that commonizes vision, blackness aestheticizes vision into visuality. It is worth stressing again that blackness makes visuality feel self-evident. Visuality—an aestheticized product—becomes self-evident through the elision of its own racial historicity. This elision ultimately renders vision as a naturally distinct physiological sensation. Effectively, this repetitive circularity of visuality ahistoricizes vision, blocking a view of the ways in which vision has been modernized by race. This produces the common sense discourse of race and vision where the definition of blackness appears as an unfortunate misinformed interpretation of visual appearance rather than historical consequence of racial slavery endemic to discursivity. Thus the conjuncture of blackness and vision is not an arbitrary coincidence. Visuality is not just an outcome or mediation of modern knowledge systems, and visuality is not just a vehicle for racial exclusion. Denying the *sense* of this conjuncture reinscribes visuality as a kind of subjection; that denial proliferates the ahistorical conceptualization of vision that continually obscures its racial constitution. As a result, discourses of race remain centered around stabilizing, qualifying, or challenging race’s relation to a visuality such as skin color today. According to this analysis, “race” and “vision” must now be understood as senses. Because race and vision are just displays of common sense, discursivity sees through the commonization of sense. As argued by Mirzoeff, visuality is the naturalized view that authorizes what becomes recognizable as

⁶⁰ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011).

history. I add, discursivity devisualizes visuality. The theory of discursivity developed in this chapter will be taken as an analytic tool in the rest of the dissertation.

This chapter's account of vision challenges the privileging of visual technologies for theorizing vision; rather, it might be fruitful to question how visual technologies have been made possible through the common sense of vision. Theories of vision based on the representational quality of photography merely make technologically-produced visual images equivalent to vision. So it becomes all the more necessary to revisit the 19th-century writings of former slaves: as literary critic Sarah Blackwood argues, slave narratives give unique insight into how the development of visual technologies emerge from racist scientific discourses of truth and objectivity.⁶¹ Perhaps discursivity can help reformulate questions about how the vision produced by 18th and 19th century racial publication paves the way for both the development of photographic visual technologies and the re-racialization of black slavery in the 19th century.

Taking discursivity as a countervisual approach to aesthetic theory also revises Kant's principle of taste, which builds in an interpretation for a potential political position in the commonality of sense, which could be normative or radically unifying. In brief, Kant explores common sense as an "ideal norm" (123). In his attempt to explain this, he writes:

Whether there is in fact such a common sense... or whether a yet higher principle of reason only makes it into a regulative principle for us first to produce a common sense in ourselves for higher ends, thus whether taste is an original and natural faculty, or only the idea of one that is yet to be acquired and artificial, so that a judgment of taste, with its expectation of a universal assent, is in fact only a demand of reason to produce such a unanimity in the manner of sensing, and whether the 'should,' i.e., the objective necessity

⁶¹ Blackwood, "Fugitive Obscura." Blackwood stresses that photographic portraiture and the slave narrative rose in popularity at the same time.

of the confluence of the feeling of everyone with that of each, signifies only the possibility of coming to agreement about this, and the judgment of taste only provides an example of the application of this principle—this we would not and cannot yet investigate here; for now we have only to resolve the faculty of taste into its elements and to unite them ultimately in the idea of common sense. (124)

In this lengthy sentence, Kant is clearly perplexed by the relationship between common sense and taste. He clarifies that his goal is not to categorize and evaluate the origins of common sense and taste, but to observe how the co-emergence of universal and rational ways of understanding taste ends up singularizing the plural possibilities of “the manner of sensing.” Objectivity produces for culture and informs for the subject the singularity of sense. Taste is thus a demonstration of singularity—in other words, an example of *the* common sense. Because taste presupposes that there is a common sense, it is a commonizing sense, too. Taste regulates normative social behavior. Discursivity explores this theory of social normativity: how normativization produces common sense, and how common sense normativizes. Most importantly, discursivity attempts to transform sense. The second and fourth chapters of the dissertation will extend the question of how the taste for race that has set the standard of visual common sense.

I conclude with some ruminations on the legacy of black fugitivity from which racial visuality has been constructed. This chapter’s critique of racial visuality and common sense vision opens questions about the particular relationship between blackness and racial visuality: how vision has been structured to identify blackness as exceptionally racial and visual; how specifically black visuality has been exceptionally racialized; and how black visuality has proliferated and set the terms for the sense of race’s visuality in general. This chapter’s critique

of racial visibility also questions how contemporary discourses of racial criminality and policing have developed specifically out of the history of racial publication: how U.S. law enforcement and penal systems have inherited the methods of portraiture developed via runaway slave advertisements, and how historically, black visibility has been exceptionally subject to state violence. Indeed such questions are urgent to pursue in a moment where black humanity remains challenged in everyday public life.

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Images



Figure 3
 Glenn Ligon
Runaways (1993), installation view
 Suite of ten lithographs, 16 × 12 in.
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

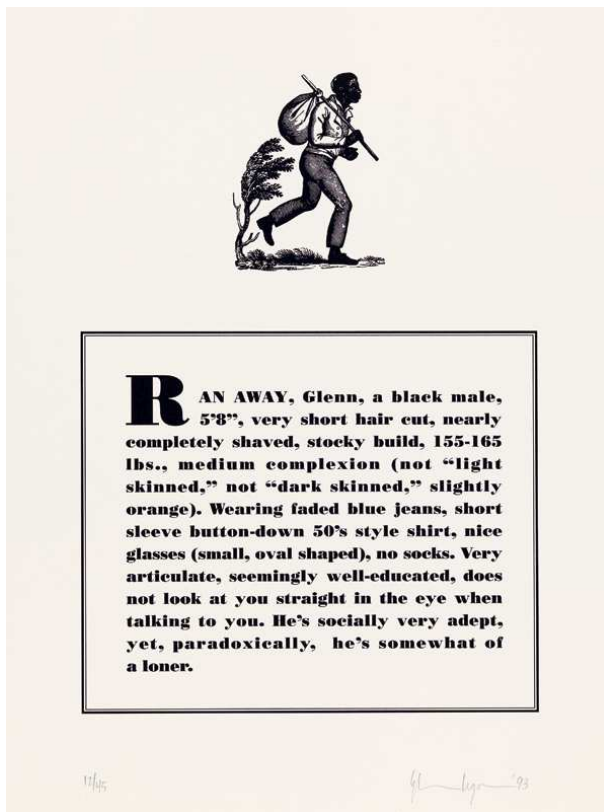


Figure 4
Runaways, detail

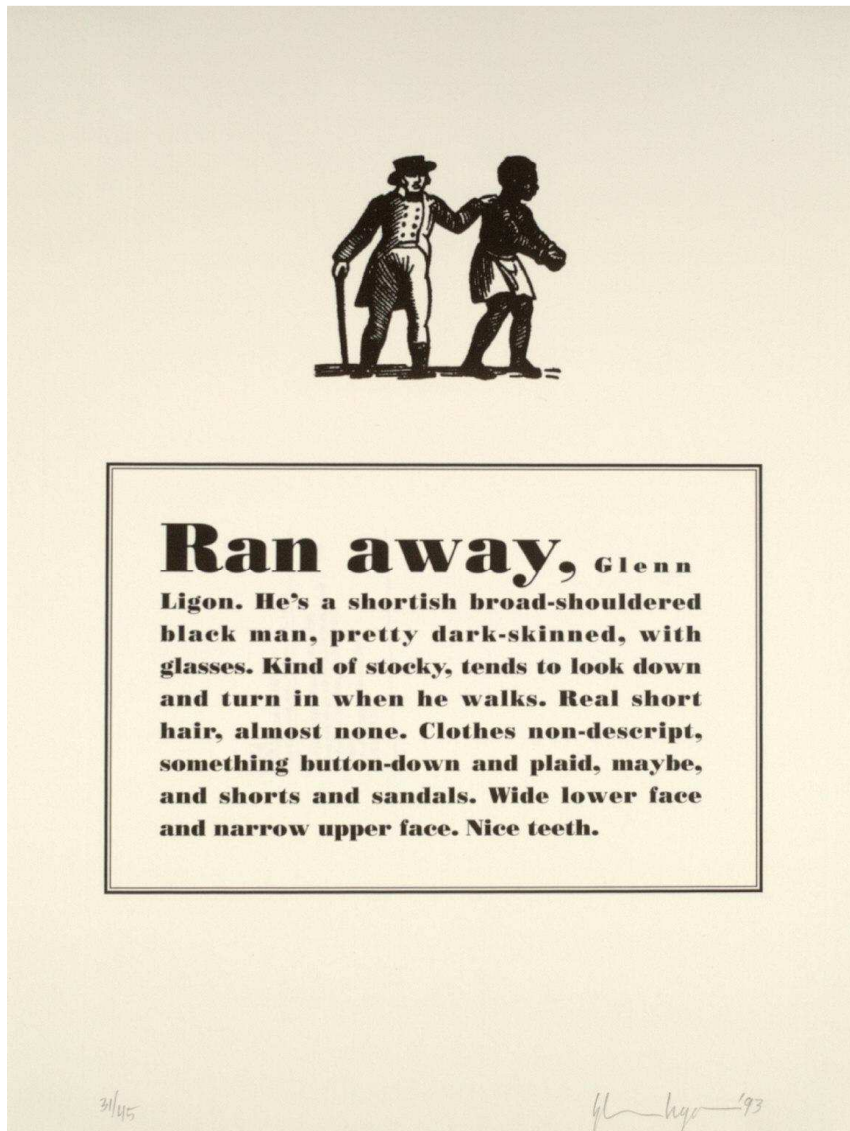


Figure 5
Runaways, detail

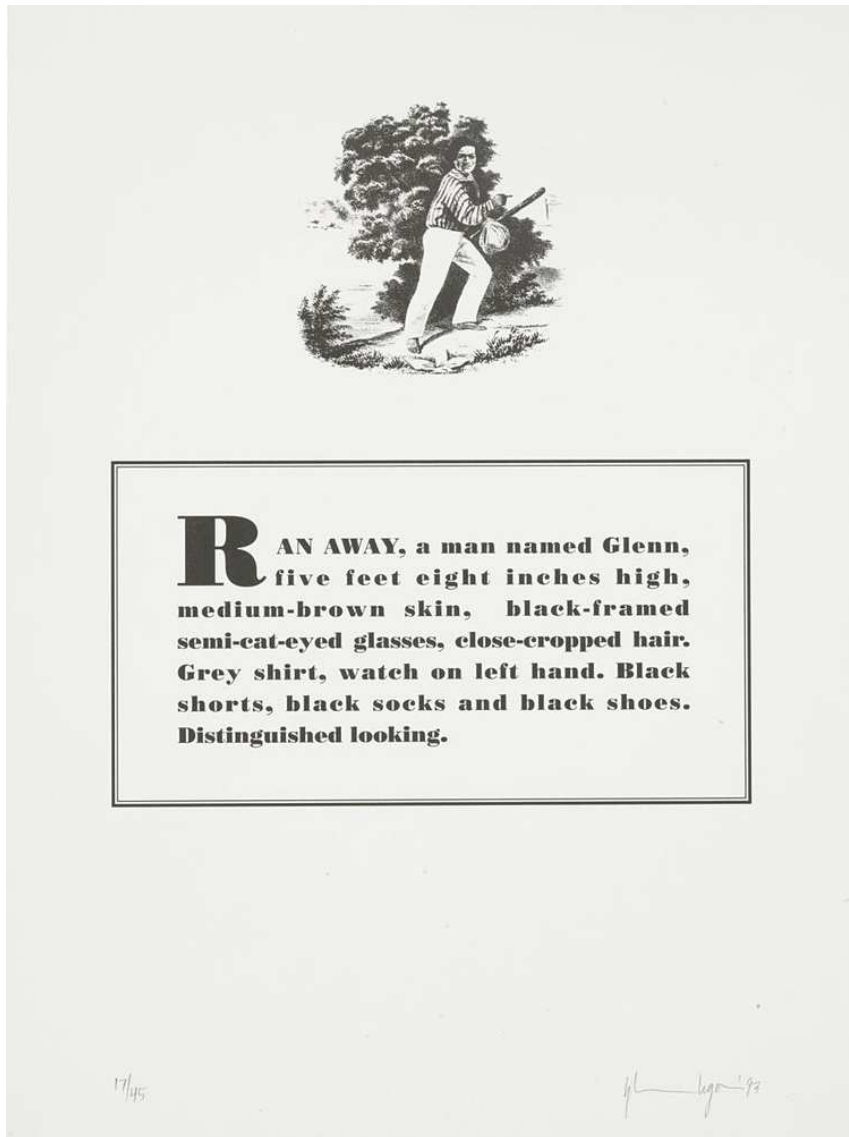


Figure 6
Runaways, detail

Chapter 2

Race, Taste, and Aesthetic Vision in Darwinian Evolutionary Theory

This chapter examines how Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory reorders and revises the visual logic of aesthetic judgment explored in the first chapter. This chapter is organized into three sections. The first section, "The Visual Discourse of Observation," explores how the concept of "variety" is defined and represented as "visual" through a reading of Darwinian assumptions about the nature of the "visible." The visual status that is assigned to the concept of variety enables the scientific practice of "observing" forms as well as processes that are typically not visible. This section explains how visual experience, crucial to the practice of scientific observation, is constructed through discourses of "visibility," "visuality," and finally "race." This section tracks the shifting definitions and distinctions in these vocabularies. In doing so, this section also establishes the vocabulary that will be used throughout the rest of the chapter.

The second section, "The Visual Aesthetics of Racial Difference," introduces the question of taste emergent in the theory of sexual selection. This section argues that Darwin constructs taste, or aesthetic preference, as racial. In aestheticizing race, Darwin's sexual selection argument not only racializes what appears to be visual but also regulates vision as a function of aesthetic appreciation. In short, this section approaches the theory of sexual selection as an aesthetic theory. It follows Darwinian aesthetic logics to deconstruct how the racial, the visual, and the aesthetic merge and reinforce each other. An analysis of Darwinian aesthetics allows me to deconstruct how race moves from aesthetic taste to natural form in evolutionary theory.

The third section, "Racial Visuality: From Natural Form to Scientific Objectivity," explores how the overlapping concepts of variety, vision, and race are naturalized and

biologized. Race moves from the position of “natural” to “visible” to “observable,” which in effect repositions vision as a discourse of scientific objectivity. This section emphasizes how vision’s objectivity during a period of revolutionary scientific discoveries marks the senses to “science” while aesthetics become reclassified into “art” discourses.

While each section builds off the questions explored in other sections, the chapter as a whole does not follow a linear course. Rather, this chapter works as a collage. The “collage” form owes itself to 1) the exploratory aims of the chapter: to see how racial visibility crops up and reemerges throughout Darwin’s most significant theories, and 2) the discursivity of evolutionary theory. As already established by Darwin scholars, evolutionary theory is based on observation and description, not theorization (this point will be further discussed in the chapter). Each of the three sections locates significant points of discursive slippage in Darwin’s writing, thus locating the moments where Darwin’s language gets in the way of his “observations.”

Much has already been said on the racial and racist foundation of Darwin’s scientific research and its influence in 19th century transatlantic modern culture. It is a well-established fact that Darwin’s work enjoyed a general popular audience. Darwin was not just read widely; he wrote to be readable.¹ Across the disciplines of literature, anthropology, biology, history, and philosophy there are rich critiques on the role vision has played in justifying racial subjection via scientific rationalizations about the nature of the visible. These critiques, however, implicitly

¹ As Gillian Beer has argued, Darwin’s manner of writing channels and makes linguistic and cultural ideas about what counts as material, scientific evidence. George Levine goes as far as to claim sexual selection as a product of Victorian culture; according to Levine, sexual selection reflects Darwin’s participation in Victorian attitudes about female gender and sexual roles. See Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 1983) and Levine, “‘And If It Be a Pretty Woman All the Better’—Darwin and Sexual Selection” in *Literature, Science, Psychoanalysis, 1830-1970: Essays in Honor of Gillian Beer*, ed. Helen Small and Trudi Tate (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003). Also see Alvar Ellegård, *Darwin and the General Reader: The Reception of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution in the British Periodical Press, 1859-1872* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and Bernard Lightman, “Darwin and the Popularization of Evolution” *Notes & Records of the Royal Society* 64 (2010): 5-24.

pose the relationship between race and vision—which the dissertation calls racial visibility—as systemic. This has already been elaborated in the Introduction chapter to the dissertation and thus will not be repeated. The explorations in this chapter show racial visibility as a *sense*: I attribute the racial and racist assumptions that constitute evolutionary theory to the common sense of vision already argued for in the previous chapter. In extension of that argument this chapter explores how that racial-visual sense is reformulated, “objectively,” in evolutionary science.

The Visual Discourse of Observation

My exploration of Darwinian vision begins with a reading of “the book that shook the world”: *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Not only considered the foundational text of the life sciences, *Origin* unsettled worldviews on divine creation, temporality, and the place and purpose of man at the time of its publication. It posited an evolutionary theory that illustrated and sanctioned nature and humanity in constant change and competition with no intention or design. *Origin* famously argued that all existing species descended from a single common progenitor from the principle of natural selection, the natural process by which some traits come to predominate, or decline, in a population due to the fitness, or unfitness, of those traits. To start locating the meaning of vision expressed in Darwinian evolutionary theory, I pay attention to the concept of variety in Darwin’s definition of natural selection. It is the appearance and inheritance of *variations* in traits that drive natural selection:

[I]f variations useful to any organic being ever do occur, assuredly individuals thus characterized will have the best chance of being preserved in the struggle for life; and from the strong principle of inheritance, these will tend to produce offspring similarly characterized. This principle of preservation, or the survival of the fittest, I have called

Natural Selection. It leads to the improvement of each creature in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life; and consequently, in most cases, to what must be regarded as an advance in organization.²

This passage focuses on the concept of “variation.” Organisms with advantageous variations in their physical living conditions (including climate, relation to other organisms, and availability of food) are “selected” for survival. Those variations that are favorable characteristics pass down to subsequent generations, shaping the emergence of different species. Thus, according to Darwin, “any variation, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species, in its infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to external nature, will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally be inherited by its offspring” (76). Darwin concludes that the preservation of “each slight variation, if useful” is the principle of Natural Selection. (76). Simply put, Darwin places “variation” as the origin of species.

Variations are extremely hard to define for the naturalist who is trying to argue that the things that can be called variations are not ontological but relative. The early chapters of *Origin* outline a classification system which distinguishes species from varieties of the same species while also critiquing the arbitrariness of classification. This struggle is reflected in the moments where Darwin feels he must redirect attention to the reasons for variation rather than its classification; as Darwin claims, “[i]t is immaterial for us whether a multitude of doubtful forms be called species or sub-species or varieties... Again, it may be asked, how is it that varieties, which I have called incipient species, become ultimately converted into good and distinct species which in most cases obviously differ from each other far more than do the varieties of the same species?” (76). Darwin suggests that the concept of variations are of interest to naturalists not for

² Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* Vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton, 1890), 160.

the sake of taxonomy but for keeping track of how a “community of descent is almost universally implied, though it can rarely be proved” (51). Darwin admits a classification system that naturalists can agree upon would be useful, even as “long catalogue of dry facts,” because the system would make it possible to trace the variation of certain traits as inheritances from a common ancestor (51). Here Darwin acknowledges classification as a discursive practice that makes scientific research possible. Darwin’s ultimate goal to create a story of the “community of descent” enmeshes with a concept of “variation” that recognizes variation as an “exaggerated” version of a “normal” trait. Such variations are presumed to be visible, as this section of the chapter shows.

The accounts of supposedly visible deviant forms that emerge throughout Darwin’s work begin with *Origin*. In this text, the word “monstrosity” covers all that is meant by apparently non-normative forms of individual organisms. *Origin*’s first concentrated mention of non-normative forms attempts to distinguish monstrosities from variations by aligning monstrosities with “individual” character and variations with “species.” According to Darwin, “At long intervals of time, out of millions of individuals reared in the same country and fed on nearly the same food, deviations of structure so strongly pronounced as to deserve to be called monstrosities arise; but monstrosities cannot be separated by any distinct line from slighter variations” (9). The vocabulary used here to describe unusual traits develops first to set the terms for recognizing how an organism “deserves” a status as abnormal. From here on, monstrosities are noted by the “extreme degree” in which the individual differs from others of the same species (18). They are determined “extreme” “when compared one with another, and more especially when compared with all the species in nature to which they are nearest allied” (18). These

monstrosities can be identified by “some considerable deviation of structure in one part, either injurious to or not useful to the species” (51).

The most influential chapter of *Origins*, “Natural Selection: or the Survival of the Fittest,” merges the definition of monstrosity with variation. Prior chapters recognized a difference between monstrosities and variations; thus far the theory of natural selection had explained that monstrosities originate from individual variations within a species. But at this point in the text, variations now appear to subsume individual traits: “Under the term of ‘variations,’ it must never be forgotten that mere individual differences are included” (100-101). In a twist, Darwin switches from discussing natural selection to an “artificial” form of selection. He claims that narrating the process of human-interest artificial selection as representative of the history of Nature’s selection elaborates the theory of natural selection. At this point Darwin is struggling with the limits of observing nature; specifically, the inability to gain temporal distance to see the gradual process of evolution. Because nature selects across periods of time that would be impossible to observe, Darwin’s solution is to observe the quicker-paced form of selection of domestic breeding instead: “As man can produce a great result with his domestic animals and plants by adding up in any given direction individual differences, so could natural selection, but far more easily from having incomparably longer time for action” (100-101). By placing domestic breeding or “artificial selection” in parallel to natural selection, Darwin claims that what is unobservable is now observable as an illustration.

Using one of his favorite examples, domesticated pigeons, Darwin first explains how the human-motivated version of selection is motivated by taking *visual* notice: “Man can act only on external and visible characters: Nature, if I may be allowed to personify the natural preservation or survival of the fittest, cares nothing for appearances, except in so far as they are

useful to any being” (102). In this passage, that which is selected as “useful,” man understands as *visibly distinct*. Darwin acknowledges that the visibility of certain traits is not necessarily naturally meaningful, e.g. useful; in contrast to nature, humans assign meaning to “only” the “external and visible.” Darwin maintains a distinction between form and appearance here. Nature may not necessarily select based on the external and the visible, but humans do, regardless of whether or not the trait is an outcome of its visibility.

The human privileging of the external and the visible is evident in the ways in which man “seldom exercises each selected character in some peculiar and fitting manner; he feeds a long and a short beaked pigeon on the same food... He does not allow the most vigorous males to struggle for the females. He does not rigidly destroy all inferior animals, but protects during each varying season, as far as lies in his power, all his productions” (102). As Darwin continues, man “often begins his selection by some half-monstrous form; or at least by some modification prominent enough to catch the eye or to be plainly useful to him” (102). The language Darwin uses to describe that which stands out from the norm is automatically understood to be visible. Darwin’s observation that man selects for forms “prominent enough to catch the eye or be plainly useful to him” places a wedge between visibility and the signifying quality of it. Visibility may not carry any inherent meaning, but visual appearance does, at least for the seer. Here Darwin opens the door for a critique on how that which appears as “visible” is an artificial distinction made by the human proclivity towards forms such as, or especially, visibilities. Human vision is understood as a limitation and a framework for observing selection for Darwin.

The kind of vision used by humans constructs selection as a visual process, and visible forms as an outcome of its natural visibility. Because artificially selected, the trait is selected *for* because it is visible in accord with human vision. I use “vision” to refer to the human experience

of seeing that unquestionably determines the way in which the trait is understood to be identifiable for selection and thus scientifically observable. “Visibility” refers to the seemingly natural appearance of the trait. The relationship between vision and the visible manifests circularly in Darwin’s theory of selection: the visibility of a trait allows it to be seen. Consequently, the visibility of the trait, identified circularly, constructs the visible as naturally visual. As a result, the trait is now positioned as a priori visible to selection. The circularity of vision and the visible is then erased because the trait seems always already visible. The “visual,” then, refers to this a priori logic of visibility that is fundamentally tautological. I use “visual” to mark the tautological construction of apparent *self-evidence*.

Distinguishing appearance from visuality allows us to keep following the visual logics of Darwinian selection: visibility obscures the constitutive role of vision in constructing that visibility, placing visibility as self-evident of visuality. Put differently, visibility comes to mean that the trait is visual; as the visibility is positioned as visually identifiable, then, the trait is understood to be visible, too. Selection can now be understood as a visually-/formally-motivated process in the case of artificial human-driven selection. Its evolutionary outcome is the specific forms and visibilities that scientists see. Natural selection can be more accurately described as the theory that explains how visibility is an outcome of selection. Visibilities are selected *for*.

The limits of observing natural selection lie in the human privileging of vision, or, the circularity of vision. This is a problem for Darwin because the limit is also the only point of access for observing the process of selection, as I have outlined so far. But I also draw attention to the way in which Darwin frames his explanation of artificial selection as a *visual representation* of natural selection. Where natural selection is explained as an abstract and natural process, artificial selection is explained as visible. For the sake of scientists (humans),

Darwin has consciously merged the “far ‘truer’” process of natural selection with the process of domestically-bred “productions” to *show* how selection works (102, 97). Because vision is the only mode through which to access how selection works, Darwin must maintain that the selection process itself is visible. As a result, vision and visibility collapse into one another because the theory itself is expressed as a visual logic: Darwin must use visibility as representative of abstract natural processes, reinforcing the trait’s appearance as visual. Simply put, for Darwin artificial selection works as a fair and far more observable representation of natural selection *because it is constructed as visible*. Scientists cannot observe natural selection, but they can observe artificial selection as a *visible representation* of selection. As such, visibility is acknowledged as constructed, yet, visibility is also the only way of influencing the evolutionary process. Darwin must describe selection as visible because he is unable to resolve the problem of vision’s circularity. It is because of selection’s tautological construction that Darwin cannot break apart that he must demonstrate a *visual* representation of selection.

The circularity of scientific, naturalist vision then is fundamentally *visualizing*. Presumptions about the nature of the visible in effect norms the visibility of forms. In describing how a trait is considered “prominent” to man via its “half-monstrous form” or “eye-catching” quality for the sake of reproducing the unusual trait, Darwin defines visibility as a result of reproductive selection. Darwin knows that visibility and use do not necessarily have a natural relationship, but that the tautology of vision links visibility with both unusual “prominence” and human “usefulness.” Accordingly, vision can be understood as a reproductive evaluation. In observing selection with vision (indeed, using vision seems to be the only way to observe), the visible is retroactively identified as visual.

Darwin's vocabulary for taking note of non-normative (monstrous, prominent, unusual, deviant) traits reinforces how it is the scientist's task to name and distinguish the norm. The trait is detectable in the first place by its specifically *visual* prominence. As literary scholar Margot Norris has argued, Darwinian nature depends on "thinking relationally"; it is the scientist's task to "order the objects of Nature" (such as those qualities readable as variations) "into a language."³ I add to Norris's point that thinking relationally not only presumes but privileges the role vision has in putting this in relation. If visibility is positioned as an outcome of the distinctly human interest in the highly visible non-normative form, this position presumes vision alone can determine what is normal from what is not. This logic again reinforces the a priori visual status of the visible. As visibility automatically distinguishes, seeing automatically puts things in relation: seeing compares and norms. Vision is placed as the most accurate scientific tool for the practice of comparing. As a result, the process of comparative reproductive evaluation assumes a visual process, and visual appearance itself is understood to hold meaning (on the evolution of the trait). Thus far I have argued that natural selection claims that variations are the source of the evolution of species, and the visibility of variations such as monstrosities are interpreted as visual. I now add that the description of natural selection as both visible (representative) processes *and* visual (interpretable natural) conflates the two. The theory of selection itself is expressed as a visual logic. Because visibility is structured *relationally*, i.e. discursively, vision, visibility, and visuality consequently collapse into one another. This collapse allows seeing to be an act of comparative visual evaluation because visual appearance is implicitly placed as the motivation for selection.

³ Margot Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst & Lawrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 38-39.

Scientific observation, as an act of seeing, collapses what is visible to scientists into what seems self-evidently visual regardless of scientific observation. The visibility of form becomes indistinguishable from the interpretation of that form as naturally visible, or as this chapter argues, “visual.” As the visible collapses into the visual for the sake of scientific observation, Darwin’s recourse is to practice visual literacy. Darwin claims that visual appearances of monstrous and abnormal variations are readable because visuality is ultimately positioned as writing. Within monstrosities belie an entire evolutionary history “like those written on paper with invisible ink,” to use Darwin’s words.⁴ Therefore Darwin’s task as a naturalist is to “discover and trace the many diverging lines of descent in our natural genealogies, by characters of any kind which have long been inherited. Rudimentary organs will speak infallibly with respect to the nature of long-lost structures.”⁵ Margot Norris has analyzed how abnormalities and absences in Darwin’s text “signify” “invisible” “needs, deprivations, migrations, adaptations, sexual desires”: “Nature speaks most loudly and eloquently through its least normative forms, through its excesses and anomalies” (41). Norris understands abnormality to have a textuality, which I find compelling. According to Norris, Darwin places abnormality as an imprint, record, palimpsest; in other words, abnormal forms are incomplete texts inscribed by and with its own evolutionary history. As Norris argues, Darwin’s definition here of absence and invisibility is based on the hermeneutic rather than empirical quality of evidence; Darwin’s nonpositivistic and synecdochic method of making sense out of “fragments, disjunctions, paradoxes, and anomalies” demonstrates his approach to nature as a *text* (36). For Darwin, nature’s forms are representations to be *read*, like objects in “a museum, a genealogical table, an ancestral portrait gallery in which

⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* Vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1868), 61.

⁵ *Origin* Vol. 2, 302.

only types are represented while the traces of their warfares, their flourishings, their migrations and hardships, are elided” (39).

Nature, put as a text, is exactly what made Darwin’s work so controversial for contemporary Victorian readers. Nature itself could be read (rather than the book of Genesis) as an explanation of the origins of life, radically destabilizing Victorian worldviews of religion, time, and the field of science. The theory of natural selection required reconceptualizing such worldviews from “design” to “evolution.” Darwin’s account of nature literally decentered the Author as well as author. As Norris and Gillian Beer explains, it is Darwin’s use of *language*—the rhetoric, method, and hermeneutics of Darwin’s writing—that theorizes evolution.⁶ This type of writing appears authored by no one; it is just a purely scientific observation. Scientists are simply reading the text already inscribed in nature.

I take up the idea of the textuality and thus readability of non-normative forms and add that such forms are textual and readable because they are described as visually self-evident, and the visual must be conceptualized through metaphoric concepts. As analyzed above, the non-normative is read for its reproductive value because it stands out *visually*. The non-normative is textual in quality because it is remarkable: extremely visual and thus visually prominent and evaluated for reproducibility. As visibility, the form, as a *reading* of reproductive potential, gets positioned as natural, condensing relative observation (visibility) into remarkability (visuality). I have already outlined in the previous chapter how qualities recognized as remarkable are deemed visual because the common sense of what is “visual” makes the uncommon apt for readability and descriptive writing. The previous chapter’s analysis of runaway slave ads concluded that what is uncommon is describable; henceforth description assimilates the uncommon as visual

⁶ See Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination* and Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*. Beer’s work will be discussed extensively later in this chapter.

and the visual as racial. In continuity with the earlier chapter's argument, the theory of natural selection facilitates the "evolution" of visuality from 18th-century practices of described forms to the 19th-century scientific discourses of natural forms. Through Darwin's writings, remarkable forms now appear naturally visual rather than simply remarkably visual as in runaway slave ads.

The theory of sexual selection opens up a reading of such visualities as selected racial inheritances, thereby reconfiguring scientifically and naturally the visual status of race. The next section further explores Darwin's elaboration of visuality. The visuality of beauty in particular sets up vision tautologically as the framework that enables the identification of racial difference. The theory of sexual selection plays the biggest role in presuming and reifying race's visual status in Darwinian theory.

The Visual Aesthetics of Racial Difference

This section begins with an investigation how "beautiful" variations, like "monstrous" ones, become readable because they are constructed as visual in *Origin* as well as *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). Like monstrosity, beauty is presumed to be outside the norm and thus visual in appearance. The theory of beauty emerges via the theory of sexual selection instead of natural selection, but, like natural selection, sexual selection is also described as a visual operation. This section will track how Darwinian evolutionary theory in general assigns significant value to the visual experience by outlining the definition of beauty that emerges from natural selection to sexual selection. This section argues that Darwin places the perception of beauty as crucial for the development of race.

To recap Darwin's argument on the place of beauty for sexual selection, elaborated in *The Descent of Man* (a text that will be discussed in depth in the next section of this chapter), the

natural female taste for beautiful yet non-functional (non-survivalist) qualities in the male position those qualities as both motivation and outcome of sexual reproduction. Thus, such non-functional traits are “in the long run greater than those derived from rather more perfect adaptation to their conditions of life” because that trait’s beauty holds the “power to charm the female.”⁷ As a result of female choice, those traits continue to get passed down to the progeny of the well-endowed male in larger numbers than that of less-endowed males (231). Simply put, though not important to survival (as in natural selection), beauty leads to the reproduction of progeny who can continue to transmit the female-selected traits.

Darwin initially opens up the question of beauty as a product of sexual selection in *Origin* because beauty may not necessarily make an individual fit for survival. Whereas natural selection describes beauty as a visible identification of human vision (which has no bearing on the evolution of traits), sexual selection universalizes the perception of beauty across the females of species. Even in *Origin*, Darwin begins to theorize the particularly *visual* status of beauty: the brief section introducing sexual selection in *Origin* claims that visual variations and diversity in “structure, colour, or ornament” of the male that measure up to the female’s “standard of beauty” improve the male’s opportunity of being selected. Here Darwin “admits” that for animals, beauty exists “for beauty’s sake; but this has been effected through sexual selection, that is, by the more beautiful males having been continually preferred by the females, and not for the delight of man” (252-253).⁸ On one hand, claiming that beauty exists for its own sake anticipates skeptical readers who would counterclaim that beauty was proof of divine creation. On the other hand, this nonutilitarian definition of beauty recognizes that the identification of “beauty” is a matter of

⁷ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), quotation on page 231.

⁸ As Kimberly Hamlin reminds us, this spurs the evolutionary study of beauty that makes beauty subject to scientific explanation. Kimberly A. Hamlin, “The ‘Case of the Bearded Woman’: Hypertrichosis and the Construction of Gender in the Age of Darwin,” *American Quarterly* 63.4 (December 2011), 955-981.

human visual experience. As Darwin cautions, the reason why it seems like animals perceive beauty too is because what humans would describe to be “gay colours” or “brilliant tints” are simply visual forms that attract interactions that would aid reproduction (252). What we would call “beautiful objects,” such as flowers, “have been rendered conspicuous in contrast with the green leaves, and in consequence at the same time beautiful, so that they may be easily observed by insects” (252). The “beautiful” then can be understood as visual conspicuity: “that a ripe strawberry or cherry is as pleasing to the eye as to the palate... will be admitted by every one. But this beauty serves merely as a guide to birds and beasts, in order that the fruit may be devoured and the manured seeds disseminated” (252). Though Darwin’s flower and fruit examples are not exactly about sexual selection, I bring these cases forward to point out how their descriptions in terms of conspicuity of color and beauty attracts animals that do reproduce sexually. Cross-species animal appreciation of beauty in the case of flowers and fruits still improves the individual’s and the species’ opportunities to reproduce albeit via natural selection. However, I would stress that Darwin is not claiming that the animals perceive and choose beauty. Rather, Darwin is saying that what “we” (humans) perceive as beautiful is what is visually conspicuous, and visual conspicuity is the trait to which humans assign the status of “beautiful.” Again, the real issue here is the language of description. Because beauty is a product of vision, vision is used to see the beautiful. As a result, that which is identified as beautiful is also positioned as visual.

Both *Origin* and *Descent* leave unexplained how beauty—that is, visual conspicuity and prominence—is perceivable to begin with. *Origin* positions beauty as “useless” because it is not key to survival, that is, the evolution of the species. As Darwin breaks it down in *Origin*,

I may first remark that the sense of beauty obviously depends on the nature of the mind, irrespective of any real quality in the admired object; and that the idea of what is beautiful, is not innate or unalterable. We see this, for instance, in the men of different races admiring an entirely different standard of beauty in their women. If beautiful objects had been created solely for man's gratification, it ought to be shown that before man appeared there was less beauty on the face of the earth than since he came on the stage. Were the beautiful volute and cone shells of the Eocene epoch, and the gracefully sculptured ammonites of the Secondary period, created that man might ages afterwards admire them in his cabinet?⁹

Here Darwin explicitly identifies beauty a matter of perception (“sense”). In line with Immanuel Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment, Darwin stresses that beauty is not an “innate or unalterable” property of the so-called beautiful object. We know that Darwin was familiar with Kant’s work, evidenced by *Descent*’s references to Kant’s arguments on “duty,” “self-restraint,” and “the number of species of man.”¹⁰ Regardless of the influence Kantian philosophy may have had on Darwin’s research, and regardless of the fact that Darwin’s most explicit engagements with Kant postdate *Origin*, I suggest that using the language of Kantian aesthetic theory as a theory of the senses and Darwinian discourses of beauty is illuminating. For Darwin, being able to call something beautiful—to filter Darwin through a Kantian vocabulary—represents objectively a

⁹ *Origin* Vol 1, 251.

¹⁰ See the Index to *Descent*, 664. According to letters, social reformer and anti-vivisectionist Frances Power Cobbe persuaded Darwin to read a translated 1871 reprint of Kant’s *Metaphysic of Ethics*, known more commonly as *Metaphysics of Morals*. This text was published in 1797, seven years after *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. See Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2002), 297 and *Darwin Correspondence Project*, University of Cambridge, 2013. Web. 19 October. 2013.

subjective, personal feeling.¹¹ Eocene shells are not “beautiful” because beauty is a quality of the shells, but rather because the judging subject experiences them as beautiful.

It is no coincidence that Darwin cites racial difference as an example that illustrates beauty as a discourse rather than independent property of the object; according to Darwin, beauty says more about standards, attested by his observation that “men of different races [admire] an entirely different standard of beauty in their women.” This point will be further discussed in the next section. Like Kant, Darwin’s point is not that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. Rather, Darwin distinguishes that a standard for recognizing the beautiful is required for the individual judging subject to be able to call something or someone beautiful as if it was a shared, objective statement. It follows then when reading Darwin through Kant that that which makes an object (the woman, as above) beautiful exists independently of any human interaction with the object. The woman is beautiful because of the expression of subjective judgment in terms of a common standard.

By the time Darwin theorizes beauty in *Descent*, the passages on human beauty continuously reaffirm that there is no universal standard of beauty. Darwin professes it remains unknown why the “senses of man” find “brilliant colours and certain forms, as well as harmonious and rhythmical sounds, give pleasure and are called beautiful.”¹² The question of

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), 96-98.

¹² *Descent*, 597. From *Origin*: “how the sense of beauty in its simplest form—that is, the reception of a peculiar kind of pleasure from certain colours, forms, and sounds—was first developed in the mind of man and of the lower animals, is a very obscure subject... there must be some fundamental cause in the constitution of the nervous system in each species.” *Origin* Vol. 1, 253. These types of concessions occur throughout *Descent* as well. See *Descent*, 94, 597. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Darwin employs the same rhetoric to explain the origins of vision with the evolution of the eye, where Darwin addresses the “difficulties of the theory of descent” by discussing the eye as a particular “organ of extreme perfection.” Darwin admits that to think that the eye “could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest degree,” but quickly reasons natural selection as the answer: “To arrive, however, at a just conclusion regarding the formation of the eye, with all its marvelous yet not

beauty as matter of visual perception rather than a formal characteristic gets further explained in *The Descent of Man*, which introduces sexual selection as a correction of an oversight in *Origin's* natural selection argument. Darwin now claims too much emphasis was placed on providing utilitarian explanations for the structures of organisms: “[it] is... probable that all organic beings, including man, possess peculiarities of structure, which neither are now, nor were formerly of any service to them, and which, therefore, are of no physiological importance.”¹³ While the sexual selection passages in *Origins* are ambiguous as to whether or not the theory applies to the human species, *Descent* is decisive on this question. *Descent* weaves together observations across species—from insects to birds to dogs to humans—to demonstrate the significance of sexual selection in the formation of species. In place of natural selection, sexual selection explains how “various unimportant characters have been acquired by man” (63). In fact, sexual selection works against natural selection because sexual selection is motivated by the “sense of beauty.”

According to the logic of sexual selection, beautiful traits, such as color, are “conspicuous” variations aesthetically appreciated and selected by females (252). Literary scholar Alys Weinbaum has observed how the question of visual perception and aesthetic taste is fundamentally a racial discourse. As Weinbaum has argued, the theory of sexual selection scandalously positions females as reproductive agents who choose partners with visually prominent traits, easy to appreciate aesthetically: colorful tail feathers, large horns, long beards, etc.¹⁴ According to Weinbaum, Darwin’s accounts across species of female choice for these

absolutely perfect characters, it is indispensable that the reason should conquer the imagination” (227). See *Origin* Vol. 1, 224-227.

¹³ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 619-620.

¹⁴ Alys Weinbaum, “Sexual Selection and the Birth of Psychoanalysis: Darwin, Freud, and the Universalization of Wayward Reproduction” in *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and*

kinds of traits accumulate into proof of the “wayward” sexual behaviors and desires of the female of each species: female choice eventually in Darwin’s chapter on “primitive humans” gets described as desire for the racial other. As Weinbaum explains, “the females in question are not solely interested in adorned males of their own kind but also in differently decorated members of other subspecies, breeds, and varieties... she audaciously makes not only a ‘bad’ but a markedly inappropriate choice of mate who is cast as an outsider” (152). What makes the female “wayward” is female sexual agency and desire for racial others that upsets Victorian assumptions about the nature of white women. The theory of sexual selection, so painstakingly distinguished from natural selection by Darwin throughout *Descent* as well as *Origin*, ends up merging with natural selection. Weinbaum claims that this collapse attributes the origin of species to wayward female desire for racialized difference. She concludes that sexual selection universalizes the “natural” sexual role of female reproduction in creating racial difference.¹⁵ As a

Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). For more on the crucial role Victorian racial ideologies have played in securing the story of common descent, see Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982) and Rosemary Jann, “Evolutionary Physiognomy and Darwin’s ‘Expression of the Emotions,’” *Victorian Review* 18.2 (Winter 1992), 1-27. Darwin’s portrayal of aggressive females and shared ancestry with non-European, non-whites was scandalous, as the theory of sexual selection countered Victorian assumptions about the nature of women. Knowing this, Darwin concedes that his theory “implies powers of discrimination and taste on the part of the female which will at first appear extremely improbable,” but insists that “the females actually have these powers” (214). Darwin then assuages his polite readers by admitting there remains a distance between themselves and animals by placing the taste of “savages” as inferior to their own: “When, however, it is said that the lower animals have a sense of beauty, it must not be supposed that such sense is comparable with that of a cultivated man, with his multiform and complex associated ideas. A more just comparison would be between the taste for the beautiful in animals, and that in the lowest savages, who admire and deck themselves with any brilliant, glittering, or curious object.” Appealing to Victorian assumptions about white superiority and the racial inferiority of non-white others actually lent more credibility to Darwin’s highly controversial interpretations.

¹⁵ As Weinbaum sums up, “female reproductive agency produces aesthetic differences visible to the observer as racial in character... The theory of sexual selection renders human females responsible for human racial diversity” (156). The rest of Weinbaum’s chapter analyzes how Freud’s science of psychoanalysis rearticulated and universalized the role of wayward female reproduction using Darwin’s theory of sexual selection. Weinbaum’s point is that both Darwin and Freud universalize female sexuality as a racializing force. As scientific theory, sexual selection—and its legacy in psychoanalysis—places genealogy as both an account and the source of female racial-sexual pathology.

result, race can be understood as a variation inherited and proliferated from a single common progenitor through female pathological sexual choices. To put it in the language I have argued with above, variations are visualities, so now race too is deemed a visuality.

Weinbaum's conclusions are significant because they provide a ground for reviewing the relationship between the racial and the aesthetic and figuring out where racial visuality fits in. Wayward female selection, as an expression of female aesthetic tastes, produces racial diversity. In the theory of sexual selection, variety—including visible racial difference, following Weinbaum—is defined as aesthetic preference and product. In the theory of natural selection, variety is defined as a characteristic or trait which, I have argued, gets read as visible and thus constructed as visual. In locating the visual definition of beauty, I have traced that aesthetic judgment operates as a visual discourse. The aesthetic taste for beauty is the taste for the visually conspicuous. The aesthetic taste for beauty is also the taste for the racially different, as Weinbaum argued. I suggest putting these insights on beauty together: accordingly, *racial difference is visually conspicuous*. Furthermore, because female aesthetic judgment is a racializing force, and “science” naturalizes female sexual preoccupations with what can be identified as visibly racial characteristics, the theory of sexual selection places aesthetic judgment as a *visual* operation. Thus I consider how Darwinian evolutionary theory naturalizes race as visual. Sexual selection fuses aesthetics, visuality, and race together. In turn, race naturalizes aesthetic taste as visual taste.

According to the aesthetic logic of sexual selection, race, as a visuality, holds the positions of taste and product. To unpack this aesthetic relationship between aesthetics and racial visuality, I turn to the final chapters of *Descent* that explicitly theorize the human taste for beauty. These selections recapitulate an argument that's familiar to readers by this point: that the

taste for beauty in the “lower and barbarous races” is similar to that of the taste for excess for animals. Darwin carefully reminds readers that his theory is “chiefly concerned with primeval times” and not the present day; however, the “only means” for analyzing “primeval times” is “to study the habits of existing semi-civilised and savage nations” (586).

The final chapters catalogue secondary sexual characteristics as simultaneously culturally beautiful and evolutionarily racial. According to Darwin, the “obliquity of the eye, which is proper to the Chinese and Japanese, is exaggerated in their pictures for the purpose, as it ‘seems, of exhibiting its beauty’” (591). American Indians “admire a head so extremely flattened as to appear to us idiotic” (595). Darwin surmises that the skull shape was selected to “exaggerate some natural and admired peculiarity.” Female Chinese “distort their feet” to make feet already “unusually small” “by nature” even smaller. Huns, Tahitians, Malays, Hottentots, Negroes, and natives of Brazil flatten noses and foreheads “for the sake of exaggerating a natural conformation... for the sake of beauty” (596). American Indians paint their bodies with red paint “in order to exaggerate their natural tint.” Europeans are only “recently” exempt from Darwin’s racial assessments; like the lower races, “until recently European women added to their naturally bright colours by rouge and white cosmetics.” While Darwin concedes to his readers that it “seems at first sight a monstrous supposition that the jet-blackness of the negro should have been gained through sexual selection,” he insists that his theory is confirmed because “we know that negroes admire their own colour” (618). In correlation with skin color, hairlessness was selected “not for the sake of nudity, but that the colour of the skin may be more fully displayed” (614). In contrast, other races, like the “bearded” ones, developed hairiness as a result of the female preference for it (616-617). According to Darwin, each race admires “their own characteristic qualities”: “the shape of the head and face, the squareness of the cheek-bones, the prominence or

depression of the nose, the colour of the skin, the length of the hair on the head, the absence of hair on the face and body, or the presence of a great beard, and so forth” (619-620). These sexually-selected characteristics, now recognizable as racial for Darwin, were “slowly and gradually exaggerated, from the more powerful and able men in each tribe, who would succeed in rearing the largest number of offspring, having selected during many generations for their wives the most strongly characterised and therefore most attractive women” (620). In explaining the evolution of what we can understand critically as racialized traits, Darwin ends up collapsing traits what would be supposed as culturally beautiful traits into what would be supposed as racial traits by his European readers.

According to this explanation, the characteristics recognized as “racial” are originally that which was perceived as sexually attractive. The characteristics known as racial have been sexually selected for because they are “beautiful.” Yet the judgment of beauty originates from thinking “in accord,” to use Kant’s vocabulary, with the common social understanding of what looks “customary.” At the same time, the judgment of beauty requires notice of the “moderate extreme,” or the non-customary. As analyzed earlier, beauty is defined by its visual peculiarity, conspicuity, and exaggeration here. The ability to perceive “perfect beauty” relies upon being able to determine variations that are “stronger” than usual. Darwin’s discussion of taste explains that what may be seen as beautiful in one “race” may be deemed monstrous by another. Beauty is not explained scientifically but rather by its cultural perception. The relativity of the relationship between beauty and monstrosity points to the framework of a common sense vision that makes beauty and monstrosity available for identification. This framework for seeing is a “taste” for “natural ornaments”—including racial characteristics—such as cicatrices on the skin, perforated lips, nostrils, and ears, and head shapes that are beautiful to savages (“admired for many

generations”) while monstrous (“hideously...distorted... deformities”) to, presumably, Darwin’s civilized European readers.

I have traced throughout this chapter that beauty is a source of struggle for Darwin because it lies outside of evolutionary explanation. Like beauty, race is declared one of those sexually-selected characteristics that “are of no service... [in] daily habits of life” (619). While originally it was the naturally female aesthetic taste for race that produced racial visual variation, inexplicably by these final chapters, male humans select for race too: “If it can be shewn that the men of different races prefer women having various characteristics, or conversely with the women, we have then to enquire whether such choice, continued during many generations, would produce any sensible effect on the race” (586). Evolutionary theory makes vision subordinate to taste for aesthetic, or, racial difference. Instead of providing an evolutionary rationale for the male capacity for aesthetic judgment, Darwin provides the following example to explain why certain characteristics of the face are perceived as beautiful:

Men accustomed to a nearly oval face, to straight and regular features, and to bright colours, admire, as we Europeans know, these points when strongly developed. On the other hand, men accustomed to a broad face, with high cheek-bones, a depressed nose, and a black skin, admire these peculiarities when strongly marked. No doubt characters of all kinds may be too much developed for beauty. Hence a perfect beauty, which implies many characters modified in a particular manner, will be in every race a prodigy. (597)

According to the conclusions drawn earlier, the concept of variety is a visual logic that both identifies and norms what gets seen as “visible” and reformulates such visibilities as inherently “visual.” Precisely because the discursively visible seems naturally visual, beauty is seen via its

uncommonness and unfamiliarity. Darwinian visual logic depends on a taste for beauty unsurprisingly through a common sense, visually-recognized concept of beauty. Accordingly, beauty is argued to be identifiable as a difference from the norm, or, through the common sense of norms. As emphasized earlier, the extent to which Darwin explains the role of vision in selection (of difference) is limited to illustrating the exaggeration, extremity, prominence, peculiarity (of either beauty or monstrosity)—that is, uncommonness—of the characteristic in view. However, there is no other way a seeing subject can determine a visual feature as “stronger” or “extreme,” or as beautiful or monstrous, without a common idea of the norm.

But following the reproductive logic of sexual selection traced by Weinbaum, “science” naturalizes female sexual preoccupations with what can be identified as visibly racial characteristics. It is the “science” of sexual selection that makes racial visibility readable. And thus the aesthetic logic of reproduction, now categorized as a matter of “science,” produces racial visibility. Because visible beautiful traits (that could be read as “racial”) has been *selected for*, the visibility of those beautiful traits are not just a coincidence. Darwin no longer needs to painstakingly mark that what humans perceive as beautiful is just a human practice of making visible distinctions. Now, beautiful traits are reproduced as visually beautiful because the visibility was purposely selected for the sake of reproduction. As a product of reproduction, beauty is now naturalized as visual. Visible beauty is no longer a matter of subjective aesthetic taste; instead, beauty, and now race, is an visual outcome as a product of reproduction. The conflation of beauty with visibility ultimately constructs the traits as evolutionarily racial rather than culturally racialized. Race has effectively moved from aesthetic taste to natural form. Race can now be defined by scientific discourse rather than aesthetic culture: because racial visibility is also a product of reproduction, a trait rather than preference, race assumes its place as

scientific rather than aesthetic discourse. The distinction between sexual selection and natural selection Darwin tried so hard to maintain is undermined and merged. For example, “the colour of the skin” may have been selected for its beauty. But that color is also “their own characteristic quality.” In other words, that which is defined as beautiful consequently is exactly what becomes understandable as racial. Beauty racializes the group that has the taste for that characteristic. According to this feedback-structured logic, the beautiful and the racial become evolutionarily and thus scientifically indistinguishable. The next section will continue to explain how the aesthetics of sexual selection get naturalized.

Racial Visuality: From Natural Form to Scientific Objectivity

This section explains how not only race but vision lies in the domain of “science” rather than aesthetic culture as visuality simultaneously prioritizes and erases the role of the visual sense in practices of observation. Darwin now claims that taste is natural rather than aesthetic/cultural preference. Darwin claims “that certain tastes may in the course of time become inherited [read: biologically]... and if so, each race would possess its own innate ideal standard of beauty... The men of each race prefer what they are accustomed to; they cannot endure any great change; but they like variety, and admire each characteristic carried to a moderate extreme” (597).¹⁶ Here “variety” remains the source of the beautiful, which has been produced by females according to the theory of sexual selection, as Weinbaum argues. And as I have synthesized above, “the racial,” a kind of variation, has been visually and aesthetically selected for. Through the sexual-racial discourse of beauty, the concept of “variety” gets turned

¹⁶ Darwin continues, “It has been argued (75. Schaaffhausen, 'Archiv. für Anthropologie,' 1866, s. 164.) that ugliness consists in an approach to the structure of the lower animals, and no doubt this is partly true with the more civilised nations, in which intellect is highly appreciated; but this explanation will hardly apply to all forms of ugliness.”

into a matter of taste. But it is not variety that is biologically “inherited”: it is the *taste* for variety that gets “inherited.” The reformulation of variety as the subject of taste also puts pressure on how the visuality of such beauty positions not just race but judgment: aesthetic judgment itself is a racial process. The taste for beauty is more accurately, the taste for variety. And the taste for variety has produced racial difference. Then, sexual selection, which operates visually, constructs race as evolutionarily visual.

Henceforth the perceptions of beauty change because tastes change because beauty is variety. Variety is now understood as a concept of nature, not aesthetics. As Darwin continues,

As the great anatomist Bichat long ago said, if every one were cast in the same mould, there would be no such thing as beauty. If all our women were to become as beautiful as the Venus de' Medici, we should for a time be charmed; but we should soon wish for variety; and as soon as we had obtained variety, we should wish to see certain characters a little exaggerated beyond the then existing common standard. (596-597).

Here Darwin reminds us that “taste is fluctuating” but “not quite arbitrary. Hence with respect to taste, which depends on many elements, but partly on habit and partly on a love of novelty, there seems no improbability in animals admiring for a very long period the same general style of ornamentation or other attractions, and yet appreciating slight changes in colours, form, or sound” (506-507). Darwin even compares the constant readjustments of taste to lasting trends in fashion: “Even in our own dress, the general character lasts long, and the changes are to a certain extent graduated” (506).¹⁷ And *Descent*’s closing paragraph reminds skeptics that “the females of natural species cannot have an unlimited scope for their taste... they are merely excited or

¹⁷ Early in his career Darwin’s son, astronomer George Howard Darwin, wrote an article in a mass periodical about the evolution of dress as analogous to modern theories of evolution. Though the article is not particularly interesting, it does provide another demonstration of the common sense that structures both biological and cultural discourses. George Howard Darwin, “Development in Dress,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* Vol XXVI (May to October 1872): 410-416.

attracted in a greater degree by one male than by another” (638). These passages suggest that taste in evolutionary theory regulates individual choices by comparing each choice against one another. Taste, as aesthetic preference, is for variety; as reproductive-motivated aesthetic judgment, taste produces variety. The circular relationship between taste and variety is what produces racial visual difference and finally *naturalizes* racial visibility.

Darwin calls taste “unconscious” and thus taste modifies the beautiful characteristics of species very gradually over time (508). Taste is framed as an unconscious aesthetic appreciation and desire for visual (racial) difference. The “unconscious” level at which taste operates explains why Darwin had suddenly started using male taste to theorize the development of race. Darwin slips into generalizing the conditions under which humans perform aesthetic judgment: the condition of taste. Female wayward aesthetic preference for racial others produced racial difference, but, male aesthetic preference remains at the level of taste. Male aesthetic taste does not produce variety. Males “just” prefer variety due to the aesthetic standards “already” produced out there, ostensibly by females. Male aesthetic taste functions as application and merely participates in the circulation and norming of racial difference.

Insofar as vision serves to perform aesthetic judgment, then the vision humans have inherited have been evolved via its capacity to appreciate beauty. Thus it can be taken that humans have been evolved to privilege vision. This is not something Darwin says explicitly, but as argued above, Darwin attempts to separate the visibility of a trait from its evolutionary selection because visibilities are discourses. But because human vision privileges the discourse of visibility, Darwin must remind us that “visible” just means “visually privileged.” Human vision then turns what is visible into “visual.” Then, the visual experience through which we exercise taste—an experience that remains unquestioned, transparent, and thus elided—is

precisely what gets positioned as a racial experience. Judging beauty and ultimately seeing is a racializing process.

In the first chapter I concluded that Kant's definition of taste is developed out of its fraught relationship with common sense. Kant first defined taste "the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest. The object of such a satisfaction is called beautiful."¹⁸ But as he explores the way subjective judgments (e.g. about the beautiful) take on "universal validity" through its communication as an objective statement, he realizes that some kind of common sense or standard precedes and enables aesthetic judgment: "only under the presupposition of such a common sense... can the judgment of taste be made."¹⁹ Taste, then, is a principle that both precedes, enables, and then regulates plural possibilities of sensing—that is, seeing race because of the taste for and of it. The fundamentally racial-aesthetic structure of reproduction, or, the taste for race, establishes and naturalizes the theory of sexual selection. The female aesthetic taste for race motivates their sexual reproductive choices, and those choices feed back into producing racial differences. Then, I stress that the reproduction of those racial differences reinforce the (visual) taste of race. Racial visibility as common sense produces race as product; then race reinforces that racial visibility is common sense. As he attempts to deflect the misinterpretation that he is claiming a uniform standard of beauty, Darwin addresses this circularity of taste by claiming that it works "unconsciously" throughout *Descent*. Here is an example of such a passage among many: "If it be admitted that the females prefer, or are *unconsciously* excited by the more beautiful males, then the males would slowly but surely be rendered more and more attractive through sexual selection" (508, my emphasis).

¹⁸ Kant, 96.

¹⁹ Kant, 122.

Scholars have already noticed how Darwin treats this strangely unconscious yet observable feedback structure of sexual selection.²⁰ Historian Stephen Alter provides a careful account of what Darwin explicitly names unconscious selection in conjunction with sexual selection throughout his notebooks and finally in *Descent*.²¹ Alter sheds light on how the concept of race (as sexually selected) developed out of Darwin's research on the so-called unconscious and insensible experience of recognizing beauty or sexual attractiveness. Alter's assessment of Darwin's sources reveals that Darwin borrowed assumptions about beauty from records and guidebooks about domestic breeds for his own theory of sexual selection: namely, the themes of unconsciousness and insensibleness in determining standards of beauty. According to these breeding texts, uncommunicated shared standards—i.e. unconscious and insensible tastes—make individual members in a larger community converge rather than diverge in opinion. Put differently, the unconscious, insensible standard emerges and operates as a taste for race.

Though not Alter's main point, his most useful one is that Darwin's claim to the imperceptibility of a common standard of beauty is interestingly illogical if we take his word choices seriously: if the unconscious/insensible is defined by its inability to be perceived, then no one would be able to observe it, including Darwin. According to Alter, that is why Darwin limits the phrase "unconscious selection" to situations that can be said to have an external cause or

²⁰ In addition to the scholarship I outline in the next few pages, see Jason A. Tipton, "Darwin's Beautiful Notion: Sexual Selection and the Plurality of Moral Codes," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 21.2 (1999) 119-135. Alternatively, for an account that demonstrates the potential outside of the feedback structure, see Whitney Davis, "The Sense of Beauty: Homosexuality and Sexual Selection in Victorian Aesthetics" in *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (West Sussex: Columbia UP, 2010). Davis explores a homosexual sense of beauty that emerges from his reading of the reciprocity between the theories of natural selection and sexual selection. Davis too argues that Darwinian evolutionary theory adds to Kantian formulations of aesthetic judgment. His following chapters also study how Freud picks up on this line of aesthetic theory, as I will do towards the end of this section, but Davis follows this line of inquiry through Freud's writings on homosexuality.

²¹ Stephen G. Alter, "Separated at Birth: The Interlinked Origins of Darwin's Unconscious Selection Concept and the Application of Sexual Selection to Race," *Journal of the History of Biology* 40 (2007), 231-258.

agent (where a breeder selects preferred individuals for reproduction) in contrast to sexual processes of choosing mates (a kind of self-breeding). In the latter operation specific traits are bred for and beauty (or strength, lightness, heaviness, etc.) is placed as a purposive effect. Sexual selection, however, has no such framework of functionality as explained earlier. Instead, beauty (or other sexually-selected traits) is a matter of taste that has no effect because taste is common sensical.

Alter suggests that Darwin's use of "unconscious" illustrates the difficulty with the language available for making observations.²² I take this slippage between the matter of unobservability and the language used to observe as extremely revealing. I bring in Gillian Beer's insights here, as she has established how the practices of writing in the 19th century literary arts and sciences shared vocabularies, narrative structures, temporal concepts, and readerships. As Victorian literary and scientific prose struggle to use language that reflects the position of the writer as "observer or experimenter, rather than as designer or god," time in Darwin's style of narration is described not from the "beginning" of the story but at the "moment of observation" instead (40, 59).²³ Along with this temporal perspective, the sensorial perspective also gets restructured in Darwin's writing: the linguistic articulation of sensorial experience—"the things individually seen, heard, smelt, touched, tasted"—illustrates the subject of observation as an image of evidence (61).²⁴ Beer's argument is crucial because it shows that

²² Also see Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*, and Tucker, "Observing Selection: Charles Darwin and the Emergence of the Racial Sign" in *The Moment of Racial Sight*.

²³ This temporal perspective—demonstrated by the merging perspective of scientific observer, writer, and reader in Darwin's use of the rhetorical "we"—interpellates the reader into a history of profusion and diversity of species, the descent of "one moving and proliferating family" (61).

²⁴ Beer reminds us that while "the events of the natural world are language-free, language controls our apprehension of knowledge, and is itself determined by current historical conditions and by the order implicit in syntax, grammar, and other rhetorical properties such as metaphor, as well as by the selective intensity of individual experience" (46). Thus to take Darwin's language seriously would require a deeper look at the familiarity with which readers would have experienced his writing style. Because Darwin's

Darwin's language of order/ing is fundamentally *descriptive*. As Beer stresses, Darwin's writing aimed to observe and describe, not hypothesize or invent.

I have argued that the language of observation develops historically out of the practice of descriptive writing that norms public consensus about visibility in emergent modernity. Chapter One argued that the writing and readability of blackness in 18th and 19th century newspaper runaway ads produce racial description as objective, rendering a self-evident visibility to race that molds visibility as well as vision into an objective, singular, common sense experience. Thus racial visibility seems self-evident. This chapter tracks the way the sense of race and vision get reordered in the 19th century by evolutionary theory. Thus far I have read sexual selection as aesthetic-racial judgment that produces racial difference as an outcome of the taste for race. Tautologically, taste "unconsciously" provides the conditions under which aesthetic judgments, such as seeing race, are possible and turns sense, i.e. vision, into a singular, objective, shared experience. I also argue that any discourse of visual appearance as objective is made possible by the taste of race that develops out of the discursivity of vision. Darwin's language of observation necessarily transforms the aesthetic judgment of taste into an observation. Observation in turn reflects vision as an autonomous objective sense, reaffirming the centrality of race in the conceptualization of objectivity.

To conclude, my analysis of the sensorial logic of reproduction exposes the redundant nature of vision. If taste as an ideal norm exemplifies the common sense, it is racial visibility that "unconsciously" norms vision as the natural and thus objective sense through which race "tastes" visual. Visibility of difference (race, beauty, monstrosity) is a reproduction of the visibility of difference (race); race is already acceptable as difference because difference always already

terminology is not technically scientific but instead colloquial, "the terms could expand their parameters to draw on other shared assumptions" (47).

seems visual. In other words, the theory of selection structures vision in accord with an account of *racial visuality*. Evolutionary theory's version of racial visuality configures visual difference as an outcome of a way of seeing that which is different (extreme, exaggerated, abnormal—the beautiful/monstrous). As vision continually resets the place of race as visual, race tastes visual, effectively regulating vision as common sense. This structure of vision ultimately positions racial visuality as origin, instantiation, and reproduction of racial formation all at the same time.

When Darwin describes the taste for race by the unconscious process of selection, this is actually a rhetorical move that conflates seeing with objective observing, ultimately glossing over the discursivity of vision. Thus Darwin cannot help but call selection “unconscious,” which finally rationalizes, conceals, and thus naturalizes the common sense of vision's objectivity. Darwin's theory of sexual selection normativizes common sense vision as objective because it has been settled as an unconscious, natural operation in the evolutionary process. Moreover, because the visualities of individuals and species and the seeing of those visualities, or being seen and seeing, feed back into each other, the “unconscious” nature of visual common sense enables and reinforces the idea of the visual objectivity of racial visuality as well as common descent.

Racial visuality now feels biological. “Naturally,” this feeling makes racial visuality reproductive, reproducible, and reproduction. As laid out in the previous chapter, this chapter as a part of the whole dissertation locates a *naturalized* sensorial structure that regulates *scientifically* the discourse and thus experience of vision. Vision, recast by science, makes available new ways of seeing race as a self-evident, visible, *objective* characteristic.

This chapter on the objectivity of scientific discourses as an account of racial visuality is markedly different from the scholarship that has examined how scientific objectivity develops

against the “subjectivity” of artistic practices. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have tracked how “the relationship between art and science had largely been one of collaboration, not opposition.”²⁵ As artists began to “defend the willful imposition of self as the sine qua non of art,” “scientists increasingly insisted on the opposite: their images must be purged of any trace of self.” According to Daston and Galison, scientific developments in the practice of observation in the 19th-century are reformulations of Enlightenment conceptualizations of the self’s relation to knowledge.²⁶ Daston and Galison read Kant’s account of the “objective” as the a priori condition for understanding sensation as a coherent, common experience; objectivity for Kant is a question of epistemology, a stance that critiques the “metaphysical ambitions” of previous Enlightenment thinkers (215). In contrast, the “subjective” refers to the impressionable, empirical psychology of the individual; together, the tension between the objective and the subjective, as two sides of wills are conceived as an ethical problem by Kant. According to Daston and Galison, the Kantian objective and subjective are therefore questions of epistemology and ethics (rather than truth), creatively misinterpreted by 19th-century scientists in response to the problem of the self in executing scientific work: scientists redefined objectivity as an epistemological goal, rather than concern, which necessitated the suppression of subjectivity.

Daston and Galison analyze the place of the scientific subject, or the scientist. In reading the discourse of sacrifice and self-denial in scientific “ego-documents” such as autobiographies, biographies, and lab notebooks, Daston and Galison identify a paradox of self without subjectivity, will without willfulness: “subjectivity and objectivity defined poles of the same axis

²⁵ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), quotation on 187.

²⁶ For another critique that draws Darwin in line with Kant, see Irene Tucker’s “Observing Selection: Charles Darwin and the Emergence of the Racial Sign” chapter in *The Moment of Racial Sight*. Tucker’s work on Kant, reviewed in the Introduction chapter, extends into an analysis of the no-point-of-view quality of Darwin’s writing as a structure of “acculturated observation.” Tucker claims that this point-of-view-lessness “constitutes Darwin’s most fundamental break with the traditions of natural history and Enlightenment philosophy that precede him” (176).

of the will: the will asserted (subjectivity) and the will restrained (objectivity)—the latter by a further assertion of will” (228). According to these writings, the problem of subjectivity was resolved by practicing research techniques with “a self-denying passivity, which might be described as the will to willessness. The only way for the active self to attain the desired receptivity to nature was to turn its domineering will inward—to practice self-discipline, self-restraint, self-abnegation, self-annihilation, and a multitude of other techniques of self-imposed selflessness” (203). Through the practice of writing about research, scientific work is no longer conceptualized by the rule of reason but by the discourse of will.

Hugh Ridley has also traced the discourse of scientific objectivity to Kantian accounts of knowledge production.²⁷ According to Ridley, Kantian theories of epistemology, especially the *Critiques of Reason*, ask “what science could and could not reveal” (51). German Romantic philosophers such as Schelling also creatively misinterpreted Kant’s insistence on a “separation between the teleological and mechanical explorations of the natural world” (51). While Kant did not mean for scientific inquiry to be cast as “mechanical,” Schelling places the arts hierarchically above the simple “mechanics” of scientific inquiry and takes art as teleological and aesthetic exploration (51). While Ridley’s critique does not focus on the discourses of objectivity and subjectivity, like Daston and Galison, Ridley understands the separation of the art and science to misreadings of Kant.

Other influential arguments on objectivity as a viewing framework structured by the discursivity of scientific observation include the now well-established works of Mary Louise Pratt and Donna Haraway. Pratt has examined how print narratives of European travel and conquest authorized the scientific systematization of nature and the ordering of a natural

²⁷ Hugh Ridley, *Darwin Becomes Art: Aesthetic Vision in the Wake of Darwin* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014).

history.²⁸ According to Pratt, because the construction of natural history requires human intervention in order to compose an order, a strategy for minimizing the presence of the observer develops: narration concentrates on visual description so that observing, researching, and seeing appear objective and neutral rather than colonially and racially subjectifying. The narration maintains “seeing as inherently passive and curiosity as innocent” (67). Donna Haraway has analyzed the masculinist rhetoric of “modest witnessing,” a writing technique of disinterested truth-telling that puts the world of subjects and objects in the places that we know today.²⁹ Because the disciplined gentleman scientist have the agency to witness, they are the “self-invisible source of vision,” and “colored, sexed, and laboring persons” are positioned epistemologically as objects of vision (32). Historian Chris Otter makes a similar argument in his work on Victorian visuality but specifies that the objects of vision—lower class people—are understood as “desensitized.”³⁰ Specific arguments about Darwin’s objectivity include historian Paul White’s intervention in the conceptualization of objectivity as a historical narrative of scientific restraint.³¹ White stresses that Darwin’s observations were not practiced in institutional labs but at home, as a father, with sympathies to his children, animals (including his pet dogs), abolitionist causes, and his popular readership. White suggests that objectivity should be considered a practice of scientific engagement, one that is ironically informed by domestic emotional life.

²⁸ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

²⁹ Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), quotation on 33.

³⁰ Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³¹ Paul White, “Darwin’s Emotions: The Scientific Self and the Sentiment of Objectivity” *Isis* 100.4 (2009), 811-826. Also see Tiffany Watt-Smith, “Darwin’s Flinch: Sensation Theatre and Scientific Looking in 1872” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15.1 (April 2010), 101-118. Watt-Smith also provides an account of objectivity that is informed by emotion, or rather, the unruliness of emotion. She attributes scientific methods for fixing the unruliness of emotion to the popular experience of theatrical spectatorship.

Here I have argued that scientific objectivity is constituted by racial visibility. The shifting place of racial visibility from aesthetic taste to natural form constructs race as a natural product and thus observable. Observation takes vision for granted which consequently naturalizes it. As a result, that which is observed (race) becomes objectively visible. By foregrounding the centrality of racial visibility for the operation of modern vision, I aim to reorient objectivity's role in that operation: how objectivity, as a constitutive part of vision, feels (scientific) because it *tastes racial*. The feel ultimately elides the taste so that seeing focalizes with objective observing; consequently, vision becomes intelligible as objective. The visual sense once again obscures its racial constitution. Henceforth, taste is obscured, and the aesthetic, sensorial structure drops out. Aesthetics then takes on a new life in art. The next two chapters of the dissertation explore this point.

Chapter 3 Racial Formalism: The Aesthetics of Form and Function

Perhaps no other axiom has been more influential for modern and contemporary design than “form follows function.” Famously coined in 1896 by Louis Sullivan—known as the father of modernism, the skyscraper, and American architecture—the phrase is taken as a universal design criterion: objects must be designed according to their purpose. While there is significant scholarship on the historical development of Sullivan’s axiom and its legacy, an in-depth investigation of the theoretically *racial* relationship of form to function is needed. This chapter examines how it is principally through the theorization of form and function in aesthetic theory (not design and construction) that Sullivan claims the skyscraper for modern art. Sullivan’s aesthetic claims for the skyscraper are developed throughout his three most significant, widely-read texts: “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered” (1896), his autobiography, *The Autobiography of an Idea* (1924), and his collection of essays, *Kindergarten Chats* (1934).¹ Sullivan’s writing practice disavows the central place discursivity holds for the aesthetic theorization of modern architecture: the theory of form and function erases the writing used to theorize it. This chapter pinpoints the discourse of the visual sense, as it enables this erasure of writing, as a fundamentally racial logic of visibility. This visual-racial sense and its discursive effects construct the properties of aesthetic forms as self-evidently visible and thus visual, in effect synthesizing aesthetics with formalism. The formalism traced in this chapter places

¹ “The Tall Office Building,” originally published in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, a popular literature and science periodical, was one of the first theories of skyscraper aesthetics. *The Autobiography of an Idea*, oddly written in the third person, was commissioned by the American Institute of Architects after the dissolution of Sullivan’s practice and personal life shortly before his death. *Kindergarten Chats* was originally published as 52 separate serial articles in *the Interstate Architect and Builder* in 1901-1902 and revised for book publication in 1918 but published posthumously in 1934. Written in dialogue, *Kindergarten Chats* was an explicit attempt to decenter academic discourses of architecture, which required finding an alternative to the Beaux-Arts tradition.

discourses of the visual sense produced by racial visibility as the origin of modernist aesthetics rather than the autonomy of “form.”

Scholarship that theorizes how race is endemic to modern architecture is wanting, as critical discourses of race and architecture tend to focus specifically on the architecture of racially segregated spaces or on the racial science discourses manifest in architecture history and theory.² Nonetheless the work of Darell Wayne Fields, Craig L. Wilkins, William A. Gleason, Anne Cheng, and Charles L. Davis provide the richest research on race and architecture by gesturing towards the fundamental place writing holds for the emergence of modern architecture. Most critical for my interest in the common sense of vision is architect and architectural historian Darell Fields’ book on the question, “what does architecture have to do with blackness?”³ By close reading the fundamentally racial definition of architectural style in canonical aesthetic discourses—primarily through Hegel—Fields exposes how discourses of architecture as a fine art construct an abstract rhetoric of “blackness” that is philosophically repressed yet foundational for European architecture. According to Fields, this rhetoric makes blackness philosophically constitutive to the aesthetic discourses of (European) architecture, albeit in negation. Fascinatingly, Fields uses literary methods—via signifyin(g), as theorized by literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr.—to “reintroduce” the repressed blackness to architecture. Architect Craig L. Wilkins theorizes racial equity in the spaces, disciplines, and professions of architecture where

² For scholarship focusing on architectural discourses based on racial science, see Georges Teysot, *A Typology of Everyday Constellations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013) and Joanna Merwood, “Western Architecture: Regionalism and Race in the Inland Architect” in *Chicago Architecture: Histories, Revisions, Alternatives* eds. Charles Waldheim and Katerina Rüedi Ray (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3-14. For scholarship focusing on racially segregated spaces, see the volumes edited by Lesley Naa Norle Lokko, *White Papers, Black Marks: Architecture, Race, Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and Craig Evan Barton, *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001). Also see K. Ian Grandison, “Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America” *American Quarterly* 51.3 (September 1999), 529-579.

³ Darell Wayne Fields, *Architecture in Black* (London & New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000).

African American participation has been resisted and rendered invisible.⁴ Literary scholar William Gleason analyzes how the built environment gets constructed by racial understandings of architectural style and erases the centrality of race for architecture in the U.S.⁵ Gleason creatively uses representations of architecture in literature to build back the constitutive place of race in American architecture. Literary scholar Anne Cheng also restores race by tracing the development of “skin” (as exterior cladding is often called in architectural vocabularies) as an aesthetic value for influential figures of global modernism: Josephine Baker, Adolf Loos, and Le Corbusier.⁶ It is no surprise that Cheng, a literary scholar, focuses on the *discourse* of the “second skin.” Architectural historian Charles Davis traces 19th-century discourses of architectural style in the context of racial science to restore the centrality of racial discourses for the development of modern architecture.⁷ As Davis argues, both race and style are discussed with terminologies drawn from popular science: inherent, organic, primitive, and aesthetic. In Davis’ dissertation as well as another one of his essays that I discuss later in this chapter, he investigates how language performs a racial intervention in architectural theory.

I expand on the foundational work of these scholars by locating the place of racial visibility in Sullivan’s aesthetic theories. My research speaks directly to these scholars’ impulses to locate race by historicizing what Fields calls the “aesthetic/linguistic conversion” and what I have called “discursivity”: this chapter aims to restore the discursive framework of aesthetic formalism to see its racial dimensions. After an examination of Sullivan’s aesthetic theory, I

⁴ Craig L. Wilkins, *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture, and Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

⁵ William A. Gleason, *Sites Unseen: Architecture, Race, and American Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

⁶ Anne Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷ Charles L. Davis, *Tracing the Integrations of Race and Style Theory in Nineteenth-Century Architectural Style Debates: E. E. Viollet-le-Duc and Gottfried, Semper, 1834-1890*, Diss., University of Pennsylvania (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2009).

track how Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) sheds light on the architectural structuring of racial visibility. Larsen's now-canonical novel has been the subject of academic literary criticism for over three decades.⁸ To this already well-established conversation on *Passing* I add an architectural supplement: I argue that Larsen's text works as a racial critique of Sullivan's formalist dictum. My reading of *Passing* traces how the erasure of formalism's discursivity is also the erasure of formalism's racial structuring. Where Sullivan erases his writing for the sake of formal purity, Larsen formalizes her writing in order to racialize it. The unusual pairing of Sullivan's architecture theories with Larsen's novel reveals that *racial* formalism undergirds the conceptualization of modern art.

19th Century American Architecture and The Chicago School Architects

Up to the early 19th century, discourses of architecture in the U.S. tended to focus on utility, economy, and simplicity. Thomas Jefferson and Asher Benjamin, the most influential architects of early America, appropriated European models of architecture and repurposed them for the new nation.⁹ By the middle of the 19th century, the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris had become the most influential system of architectural education not only in Europe but the U.S. as well. Americans were well-represented in the school; they constituted the largest foreign population there. Upon returning to the U.S., the alumni designed in the Beaux-Arts style, solidifying its popularity well into the 20th century.

⁸ Deborah McDowell's introduction to the republication of *Passing* and *Quicksand* in a single volume examined the texts with fresh eyes: McDowell performs a queer reading of the texts. Deborah E. McDowell, "Introduction" in *Passing and Quicksand. By Nella Larsen*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

⁹ For overviews of U.S. architecture history, see Hanno-Walter Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory: From Vitruvius to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966), and David Watkin, *A History of Western Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2005).

American industrial and urban development increased the designing of city architecture in the Beaux-Arts style across the U.S., but an alternative approach to design was developing in Chicago. After the 1871 fire that destroyed much of the city, architects and engineers quickly began experimenting and building with load-bearing steel frames, prefabricated terracotta and glass cladding, fireproof materials, elevators, and electrical wiring. This new practice of building and design was called “Chicago Construction.” The “Chicago School” architects experimented with load-bearing steel frames rather than the load-bearing walls of conventional construction, allowing buildings to become taller than ever. Not only fireproof, such tall buildings—marvelously declared “skyscrapers”—eased the expenses of property development and office space leasing following the recession of 1873 that made real estate increasingly unaffordable. The first skyscrapers were designed by the Chicago School: the first steel-framed building, the Home Insurance Building in Chicago, was designed by William Le Baron Jenney (completed 1884, demolished 1931; Figure 7); the first all-steel framed building, the Rand McNally Building in Chicago, was designed by Daniel Burnham and John Root (completed 1889, demolished 1911); and the prototype of skyscrapers and modern architecture, the well-received and still-standing Wainwright Building in St. Louis, was designed by Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan (completed 1891; Figure 8).

The Chicago School envisioned what is now called not only a uniquely American architecture but a modern architecture, challenging the popular Beaux-Arts style. Louis Sullivan, like most serious young American architects, was trained at the *École des Beaux-Arts* but left after one year. As explained in Sullivan’s autobiography, “the theory of the School... was not the reality he sought, but an abstraction, a method, a state of mind, that was local and specific; not universal... He felt that beneath the law of the School lay a law which it ignored unsuspectingly

or with fixed intention.”¹⁰ The Chicago School theorized their work to some extent as an alternative to the hegemony of the Beaux-Arts. As Sullivan claims, the “art and design in Chicago had begun to take on a recognizable character of its own”; in contrast, the “architects of the East were appalled by it and could make no contribution to it” (313-314). But, as narrated in architectural history discourses, the progressive theories of the Chicago School stopped short with the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Though Chicago architect Daniel Burnham was selected as the Chief of Construction, the architects he appointed for the most important buildings at the Fair were New York Beaux-Arts architects, including the largest architectural practice in the world at the time, McKim, Mead and White.¹¹

Celebrated as the “White City,” the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition grandiloquently consolidated Beaux-Arts classicism in the U.S. The temporary buildings were rapidly constructed and finished with decorative veneers and faux marble facades to imitate the classical style (Figure 9).¹² With the exception of Louis Sullivan’s Transportation Building, the entire campus was built in the Beaux-Arts style (Figures 10 & 11). Though the Transportation Building received international acclaim—it received three medals from the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs—American critics were not impressed because its design did not fit in with the rest of the fairgrounds. The White City, enthusiastically received by the American public, established an American brand of Beaux-Arts stylistic hegemony known as the American Renaissance that would last well into the 20th century. Assessing the pivotal influence the World’s Fair had on

¹⁰ Louis Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1956), 240. Originally published in 1924.

¹¹ David H. Crook outlines an interesting timeline and account of professional relationships regarding the administrative planning of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. See “Louis Sullivan and the Golden Doorway” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 25.4 (1967), 250-258.

¹² Rebecca S. Graff has studied in-depth how the ephemeral and inexpensive nature of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition reflected and shaped emergent middle-class consumption practices. See “Dream City, Plaster City: Worlds’ Fairs and the Gilding of American Material Culture” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16.4 (2012), 696-716.

American architecture three decades later, Sullivan dramatically described the Beaux-Arts style as a “virus” originating from the characterless architectural designs of New York City. In his 1924 autobiography he writes:

Chicago’s progressive status comes to a halt with the “Columbian Ecstasy”... The violent outbreak of the Classic and the Renaissance in the East, which slowly spread westward, contaminating all that it touched, both at its source and outward. The selling campaign of the bogus antique was remarkably well managed through skillful publicity and propaganda, by those who were first to see its commercial possibilities... Thus Architecture died in the land of the free and the home of the brave,—in a land declaring its fervid democracy, its inventiveness, its resourcefulness, its unique daring, enterprise and progress... The damage wrought by the World’s Fair will last for half a century from its date, if not longer. It has penetrated deep into the constitution of the American mind, effecting there lesions significant of dementia... Architecture, be it known, is dead.¹³

For Sullivan, a progressive architecture would express the distinct liberal democratic ideals of the U.S. rather than imitate the prescriptive European design. Sullivan located the skyscraper in particular as a distinct American architectural form capable of expressing what Sullivan proclaims “natural law” throughout his 39-year publication career: that “form ever follows function.” As James R. Abbott argues, for Sullivan “the skyscraper was not so much a function of engineering as it was a cultural expression, one that bore testimony to democracy’s fulfillment.”¹⁴

Such explicit theories and rallies for architecture’s civic role run throughout the texts produced by Sullivan in his 39-year publication career. From his first official publication,

¹³ *Autobiography*, 324-325.

¹⁴ James R. Abbott, “Louis Sullivan, Architectural Modernism, and the Creation of Democratic Space” *The American Sociologist* 31.1 (Spring 2000), 62-85.

“Characteristics and Tendencies of American Architecture” (1885), Sullivan critiques the American appropriation of European architectural tradition, specifically the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Sullivan was more prolific as a writer than practicing architect, perhaps because Sullivan had fewer opportunities to design after 1894. Sullivan’s most productive years as an architect were during his tenure with Dankmar Adler between 1879-1894. Adler, a trained engineer with a good business sense, hired Sullivan, a more artistically- and philosophically-minded designer. After they became partners in 1883, Adler and Sullivan was known for their theaters during the early years, including the highly-praised Auditorium Building (Figure 12), and later, their office buildings, until the firm dissolved in 1894. Sullivan never achieved the same level of success again. Though Sullivan remained highly respected in the professional architecture community, his commissions were limited to a number of small Midwestern banks known as Sullivan’s “jewel boxes” (1908-1920) and the Schlesinger and Mayer department store (completed 1899; Figure 13), from 1904-2007 the Carson, Pirie, Scott department store, renamed the Sullivan Center in 2007.

This chapter examines the “organic” logic of form and function developed throughout Sullivan’s writings (refined by his most renowned mentee, Frank Lloyd Wright) as the foundation for modern architecture. It is principally through the language of form and function—through the discursivity of philosophical writing and *not* the design and construction of buildings—that Sullivan is able to claim architecture for modern art. Sullivan’s writings, however, paradoxically disavow the central place writing holds for the aesthetic theorization of modern architecture. In fact, Sullivan’s architectural theory positions “words” in opposition to architecture: “creative thinking must be done without words... real thinking is always in the present tense... The present is the organic moment, the living moment... When you think

organically you will act organically. Just so soon as your thoughts begin to take on an organic quality, your buildings will begin to take on an organic quality, and thereafter they will grow and develop together.”¹⁵ The next section will analyze the discourse of form and function developed throughout Sullivan’s most widely-read texts: the article “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered” (1896), his autobiography *The Autobiography of an Idea* (1924), and *Kindergarten Chats* (1934).

“The Tall Office Building,” originally published in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, a popular literature and science periodical, was one of the first to theorize the aesthetics of the skyscraper. *The Autobiography of an Idea* was commissioned by the American Institute of Architects well after the dissolution of Sullivan’s practice and personal life and shortly before his death.¹⁶ The autobiography, oddly written in the third person, traces Sullivan’s personal growth and career as a progress narrative of architecture theory. *Kindergarten Chats* was originally published as 52 separate serial articles in *the Interstate Architect and Builder* in 1901-1902 and revised for publication in book form in 1918, though not published until ten years after Sullivan’s death in 1934. *Kindergarten Chats* was an explicit attempt to decenter academic discourses of architecture, which required finding an alternative to the Beaux-Arts tradition. *Kindergarten Chats* is a dialogue between an unnamed architecture teacher (arguably Sullivan) and a student.¹⁷ This chapter will trace Sullivan’s aesthetic theory by weaving together a close reading of these three texts.

¹⁵ Louis Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1979), 51-52.

¹⁶ The AIA also commissioned Sullivan for a book of drawings illustrating his design theory of architectural ornamentation. Louis Sullivan, *System of Architectural Ornament* (1924).

¹⁷ The “chats” aimed to articulate an architecture theory that would “appeal to all those who may be interested the nature of Architecture as a creative art. The work is... couched in easy dialogue form and its doctrine should be intelligible to all: for it is based on the realities of every-day life and is essentially democratic” (15). The “simple and elementary” premise and style of the book (“hence the title

Form and Function: From Archetype to Aesthetics

Sullivan's aesthetic and nationalist claims for the skyscraper emerge specifically during a moment of renovation of the architectural profession. According to architectural historian Mary N. Woods, architecture became a profession in the 19th century through the building of private practices, university programs, professional societies, and definitions of architecture (vs. engineering, drafting, etc.).¹⁸ The Western Association of Architects (WAA) pushed for licensing bills in Chicago, under the direction of Dankmar Adler (Sullivan's partner).¹⁹ Citing skyscrapers as an example, Adler argued that licensed architects were imperative for the design and construction of such complex buildings. But builders, mechanics, home owners, and some architects opposed licensing, as the state would be designating who would have the right to design and build. Furthermore, Woods reminds us, regulation via professional societies and state bills became answers to the problem of the changing face of architecture and labor: African Americans, immigrants, laborers, and women. The licensing bill was passed in 1897, positioning the architect as professional practitioner and also liable for faulty design and construction. Such discourses of the architect as artist must be understood within the context of these debates defining the specialized knowledge of the professional architect against the labor of artisans and tradespeople.

'Kindergarten Chats'") aims to form a bottom-up theory of architecture and testifies to how "academic training" had "submerged and ignored" "natural spontaneous powers" of art's social and democratic role (15).

¹⁸ Mary N. Woods, *From Craft to Profession: The Practice of Architecture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Interestingly, Woods discovered that the language of the WAA membership policy avoided the term "architect" and the masculine pronoun, simply defining the architect as a "professional person whose sole occupation" was to draft drawings and act as a mediator between building and client.

Responding to Sullivan’s famous maxim, architectural historian Carol Willis argues that “form follows finance”: skyscraper design decisions must be read within financial and profit concerns, real estate rules, zoning ordinances, and the rise of speculative capitalism.²⁰ Willis reminds us that aesthetics is guided or constrained by the “formulas of finance.” Reading more into the architect’s position, architecture historian Daniel Bluestone reads aesthetic form as a mediation of public and private interests. Bluestone tracks Sullivan’s stance on “shirt-front” buildings—high buildings designed with a façade towards the street—and his argument for “full four-front or all around structures” with the technological development of the skyscraper.²¹ Reminding us that structurally, the four sides of steel-framed buildings are identical, Bluestone argues that “form following function” has more to do with “defin[ing] the problem, not the solution”: the problem of the conflicting interests between private commercial skyscraper building and public resistance to how skyscrapers were changing urban spaces—streetscape, natural lighting, etc. As Bluestone suggests, Sullivan’s answer lay in aesthetics, a public “right to beauty”: he imagined the landscape of a city of skyscrapers in panorama so the city’s skylines of skyscrapers can be appreciated “all around” by the public.

Joanna Merwood-Salisbury argues that Sullivan’s architectural theory must be read in the context of the contentious relationship between the architect and builder, art and capital, and aesthetics and labor.²² The Chicago Construction enabled taller buildings, quicker construction, thinner walls, and cheap cladding; in other words, the Chicago Construction enabled maximum

²⁰ Carol Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995). Also the volume *Architecture and Capitalism: 1845 to the Present* ed. Peggy Deamer (New York: Routledge, 2014).

²¹ Daniel Bluestone, “Louis H. Sullivan’s Chicago: From ‘Shirt Front,’ to Alley, to ‘All Around Structures’” *Winterthur Portfolio* 47.1 (Spring 2013), 65-98.

²² Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, *Chicago 1890: The Skyscraper and the Modern City* (University of Chicago Press, 2009) and “The First Chicago School and the Ideology of the Skyscraper” in *Architecture and Capitalism: 1845 to the Present* ed. Peggy Deamer (New York: Routledge, 2014).

rentable space and profit. As a result, relationships between architect, engineer, contractor, and union tradesman changed drastically. The skyscraper, backed by corporate investments, was increasingly critiqued around the world as a capitalist product. With the development of load-bearing steel frames, the building exterior could be clad in lightweight brick and terracotta, made in mass, cheaply—without the skilled masonry that was required for load-bearing walls before the advent of steel frames. (In the 20th century, architects would experiment with skins of glass, concrete, sheet metal, etc.) Conveniently, architecture no longer needed the craft and union labor of the stonemason, bricklayer, and carpenters, appeasing the Chicago architects' continual fear of union strike; working class political unrest and anarchic movements culminating with the Haymarket bombing in 1886 were positioned as threats to the architecture profession. It was within this fractious relationship between architecture and labor that Sullivan developed the theory of architecture as an art that “depended less on the collaborative creation of large groups of building craftsmen, and more on the individual interpretive power of the architect”²³ while “naturalizing” skyscrapers as “the organic product of its environment”²⁴ rather than a capitalist product. According to Merwood-Salisbury, Sullivan’s “principal task was to create an architecture that expressed the triumph of business and technology over forces that threatened to destabilize the city” (38). At the same time, Sullivan harbored resentment over how much the architecture profession depended on finance capital, as his own firm, Adler & Sullivan, dissolved in 1894 due to financial problems following the Panic of 1893. Especially because the skyscraper was a commercial enterprise, it was necessary that Sullivan claim the skyscraper for modern art. This claim was staked through Sullivan’s prolific publication career, most likely because he had fewer opportunities to design after his firm closed.

²³ Merwood-Salisbury, *Chicago 1890*, 43.

²⁴ Merwood-Salisbury, “The First Chicago School,” 39.

While Merwood-Salisbury moves on to analyzing Sullivan's work in architectural ornamentation as art, I return to his theoretical writings. Throughout Sullivan's writings, the architect (not the "speculator-engineer-builder") is positioned as the one who can find a natural solution in an aesthetic approach to architecture.²⁵ The aesthetic claim to architecture is most famously theorized in Sullivan's 1896 essay, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," published two years after Adler & Sullivan dissolved. Claiming the architect's intellect as a "gift" and "feeling" in opposition to the labor of craftsmen, technicians, and engineers, this essay insists on the architect's role as conceptual thinker. According to the essay, "architect" does not necessarily refer to the academically trained architect, but instead to the "man with a strong, natural liking for buildings," an "enviable gift of logic," and a "feeling for form purely and simply as form" (205). Sullivan reshapes the architect's labor as logical, intellectual, and scholarly. In fact, the architect's special intellectual abilities surpass material conditions and limits: "the true cause of a building... lies, proximately, in the mind of one man, and that man is the architect... whatever the mind is, the building will be its image, regardless of materials, regardless of labor, regardless of cost."²⁶ The architect's abilities are evidenced in the forms that follow function, which is, in the buildings—the art—designed by the architect.

At the same time, if a building's form follows function, the intellectual labor of the architect is rendered invisible: "a man of unfettered observation and fair average intelligence might soon have learned... *that every building you see is the image of the man whom you do not*

²⁵ Louis Sullivan, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered" in *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1979), 202-213. Originally published in *Lippincott's*, March 1896. Quotation from page 205: "This may perhaps seem a bald result and a heartless, pessimistic way of stating it, but even so we certainly have advanced a most characteristic stage beyond the imagined sinister building of the speculator-engineer-building combination. For the hand of the architect is now definitely felt in the decisive position at once taken, and the suggestion of a thoroughly sound, logical, coherent expression of the condition is becoming apparent."

²⁶ *Kindergarten Chats*, 32.

see. That the man is the reality, the building its offspring. [T]he cause of work... was mental, not physical” (24, Sullivan’s italics). Here we see the 19th-century formulation of form’s expressiveness get redefined for 20th-century aesthetic modernity. For John Ruskin the artist subjectively mediates for the viewer the representation of objects, but for Sullivan, the architect, as artist, is rendered “invisible.” The artist does not subjectively mediate or represent; instead, the architect-artist is found in “his executed work, not through his words, gestures, or suavities” (33). By focalizing architecture’s “material nature and its animating essence”—i.e. its form—and downplaying the architect, Sullivan claims architecture as a “*plastic art*. This truth... must eventually prevail because [it is] founded upon a culture of common sense and human recognition... The Great *Modern Inversion*, for which the world of mankind has been preparing purblindly through the ages, is now under way in its world-wide awakening” (Sullivan’s italics).²⁷ It is the architect’s job to create forms that speak for themselves, to create “modern” architecture that upholds the universal, natural laws of form. Architecture that follows “pecuniary demands” fails to follow natural law and results in a “sinister building of the speculator-engineer-builder combination” (203, 205).

To describe the characteristics of the “modern plastic art” that would solve the “sinister” problem of skyscraper aesthetics, Sullivan refers architects to an elaborate theory of the “natural” through which the tall office building gains a “thoroughly sound, logical, coherent expression” (205). For Sullivan, the current architecture is unsound, illogical, and incoherent because it does not follow the laws of form; architects have not yet approached building design as a formal aesthetic problem. Though designed by trained architects, the buildings look like a “sterile pile,” a “crude, harsh, brutal agglomeration” (202). As Sullivan reprimands, a “sixteen-story building must not consist of sixteen separate, distinct and unrelated buildings piled one upon the other

²⁷ *Autobiography*, 327-328.

until the top of the pile is reached” (207). Interestingly, half of “The Tall Office Building” is devoted to theorizing the *natural laws of form* (the discussion on the specific solution for skyscraper aesthetics is limited to one paragraph in the entire article).

Sullivan does explicitly mention the contributions of the scientific study of natural law for his aesthetic theory in his autobiography. Most Sullivan scholars who have discussed discourses of the natural in Sullivan’s work attribute his definitions of nature and natural law to the 19th-century Transcendentalism. Critics who have examined the “natural” and “democratic” ideals put forth in Sullivan’s architecture theory tend to explore the influence of the egalitarian poetics of Transcendentalism on Sullivan; indeed, Sullivan repeated called for the organic approach to architecture as a kind of poetry.²⁸ Sullivan’s numerous pronouncements for a poetic-democratic approach to architecture throughout his oeuvre certainly make this body of scholarship easy to appreciate.

Other critics have briefly mentioned the significance of popular science on Sullivan because he brings it up himself in his autobiography, but less attention has been paid to the relationship between Sullivan’s theory of form as natural law and scientific-utilitarian theories of form. While architectural historian Georges Teyssot does not discuss Sullivan in particular, his research sketches how rationalist theories of architecture borrowed freely from biological

²⁸ See Laurie Weingarten, *Louis H. Sullivan and a 19th-Century Poetics of Naturalized Architecture* (London, UK: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2009) and “A Transcendentalist Discourse in the Poetics of Technology: Louis Sullivan’s Transportation Building and Walt Whitman’s ‘Passage to India’” *Word & Image* 3.2 (1987), 202-221; Alan Trachtenberg, “Louis Sullivan’s Auditorium Building” in *Lincoln’s Smile and Other Enigmas* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Kevin Murphy, “Walt Whitman and Louis Sullivan: The Aesthetics of Egalitarianism” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 6.1 (1988), 1-15; Naomi Tanabe Uechi, *Evolving Transcendentalism in Literature and Architecture: Frank Furness, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

vocabularies of typology, ethnography, and criminology.²⁹ Teyssot tracks a history of typology as a modern aesthetic through the mutual exchanges of vocabulary and ideas in discourses of architecture and discourses of bodies: both the language used to describe types in architecture and the language used to describe types in human bodies categorize and make intelligible an “inside” and “outside,” “form” and “function,” and ultimately, “organic” and “prosthetic.” Modern aesthetics, then, must be understood in the context of such normative knowledges produced by “typological thinking” in the legacy of Cuvier, Lamarck, Darwin, and others. Architectural historian Barry Bergdoll has investigated how Sullivan was influenced by French architect and critic Ruprich-Robert who was himself influenced by Darwinian evolutionary theory.³⁰ According to Bergdoll, Ruprich-Robert’s design philosophy was built from scientific theories of natural forms, specifically their order and generation. Architect and architectural historian Martin Bressani explores the work of another influential architect on Sullivan, Eugène-Emanuel Viollet-le-Duc, who in turn was influenced by art theory of Nicolas Paillot de Montabert.³¹ Bressani argues that the role of drawing is key in Viollet-le-Duc’s formulation of his rationalist approach to architecture (purposefully in antagonism to the École des Beaux-Arts) because of Montabert’s rationalist theory of drawing: drawing teaches us how to rationally manage perceived reality. Architectural historian Joanna Merwood-Salisbury outlines how the Chicago School in particular drew heavily from Viollet-le-Duc’s comparative analysis of

²⁹ Georges Teyssot, “Norm and Type. Variations on a Theme” in *Architecture and the Sciences: Exchanging Metaphors* eds. Antoine Picon and Alessandra Ponte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003), 140-173 and *A Typology of Everyday Constellations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

³⁰ Bergdoll focuses on Sullivan’s writings of architectural ornament. Barry Bergdoll, “Of Crystals, Cells, and Strata: Natural History and Debates on the Form of a New Architecture in the Nineteenth Century,” *Architectural History* 50 (2007), 1-29.

³¹ Martin Bressani, “Viollet-le-Duc’s Optic” in *Architecture and the Sciences: Exchanging Metaphors* eds. Antoine Picon and Alessandra Ponte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003), 118-139.

architecture by region and race: in this “ethnographic” movement, “the history of architecture was the history of civilization, which was, in turn the history of race and racial expansion.”³²

I find most useful the work of architectural historian Charles Davis, the only scholar who spends significant time on the relationship between race and the theory of form and function. In an essay analyzing Sullivan’s *Autobiography*, Davis argues that the “creative memoir” can be read as an “ontogenetic” and “phylogenetic” bildungsroman.³³ Taking up the biological discourse of ontogeny and phylogeny (“the developmental patterns of individual and collective organisms respectively”), Davis argues that the *Autobiography* uses the “developmental language” of physiognomic descriptions as a narrative strategy. Sullivan describes himself to be of “mongrel origin.”³⁴ According to Sullivan, his mother “seemed French,” with “the typical eyelids, expressive hazel eyes, an oval face, features mobile... medium stature, trimly built, highly emotional, and given to ecstasies of speech,” but her parents were not French: her father “was straight German of the Hanoverian type—6 feet tall, well proportioned, erect carriage, and topped by a domical head, full clean-shaven face, thick lips, small gray eyes, beetling brows and bottle-nose,” and her mother, although Swiss-French, had an “unmistakable” “Florentine nose” (11). Sullivan’s paternity is described as “excessively” Irish: Sullivan’s father was “medium size[d]” and had “too-sloping shoulders,” an “excessive Irish face” with “small repulsive eyes—the eyes of a pig—of nondescript color and no flash, sunk into his head under rough brows” (14). Davis reads such descriptions against the backdrop of physiognomy’s popularity at the turn of the century. In fact, according to Davis, Sullivan was known to have owned physiognomy texts

³² Joanna Merwood, “Western Architecture: Regionalism and Race in the Inland Architect,” 6.

³³ Charles Davis, “On Physiognomic Difference in Louis Sullivan’s *The Autobiography of an Idea* (1924),” *Race & Architecture: Studying the Historical Intersections of Culture and Form*. 7 March. 2013. Web. 25 February. 2014.

³⁴ *Autobiography*, 11.

by Johann Caspar Lavater, Max Nordau, and Alfred E. Willis according to an auction catalog created during the period of Sullivan's financial decline.

Davis' most insightful point is that the racialized "laws" of physiognomy allowed Sullivan to consider its application to inanimate, nonorganic entities. Davis cites as an example how Sullivan describes his first sight of France after visiting England: "As they moved into the little harbor of Dieppe, what was left of Louis gazed at the quaint city with acceptance and delight. How different from England. What a change in physiognomy" (218). According to Davis, the "personification" of Dieppe here illustrates the foundational place physiognomy holds in Sullivan's architecture theory. Davis reminds us that Willis does not explain physiognomic description only in relation to human features; rather, it is a tool for analyzing universal natural principles. Physiognomy, as a field of study, can be understood as just one approach to the study of natural laws. Physiognomy designates how in the organic and non-organic, the human and the inanimate, *description exposes character*.

Following Davis's point about the expository work of description, I examine the specifically visual logic that emerges out of *describing* natural laws. As discussed in my previous chapter, scientific work makes sense (of its subjects)—it visualizes (race)—through the assumption that the object's visibility means something. Put differently, observation makes visual sense. I traced how Darwinian evolutionary theory naturalizes race as an aesthetic via the presumption of a common sense of vision. The language of evolutionary theory ultimately reformulates the visual logic of aesthetic judgment, as Darwin figures aesthetic appreciation as the primary function of vision. The visual common sense reemerges and reorders the meaning of aesthetics again through Sullivan's architecture theory. Therefore I examine how this common sense subtends Sullivan's aesthetic theories. Sullivan has specifically named the influences of

“Spencer, Darwin, Huxley, Tyndall, and the Germans” (249).³⁵ While it is certainly helpful to know that Sullivan himself says that his work is indebted to these scientists, it is more interesting to see how they get translated as architecture theory. I find it far more useful to revisit Sullivan’s aesthetic theories than the historical record of Sullivan’s scientific influences. Where Davis locates race in Sullivan’s architectural theory within the practice of physiognomic description, I go directly to the description of form and function.³⁶ I argue that form and function, formulated as both common sense and artistic enterprise, merge and emerge as a racialized.

The way Sullivan names his influences is telling because he uses the form of the progress narrative (or as argued by Davis, the bildungsroman). The scientific theories and architecture are connected because they are described as such: Sullivan is able to “discover” that the fields of science and architecture are but cogs in a universal formal system and thus is able to refer architects to theories of natural law as an aesthetic model. As Sullivan writes:

³⁵ As explained in the autobiography, these scientists introduced Sullivan to “*The Scientific Method.*” He saw in it a power of solution he long had fruitlessly been seeking. His key to an outlook took shape in the scientific method of approach to that which lay behind appearances; a relentless method whereby to arrive at the truth by tireless pursuit... He must learn to use it with a craftsman’s skill. For the scientific method was based on exact observation from which, by the inductive system of reasoning, an inference was drawn, an hypothesis framed, to be held tentatively in ‘suspended judgment’ until the gathering of further data might raise it to the dignity of a theory, which theory, if it could stand up under further rigorous testing, would slowly pass into that domain of ordered and accepted knowledge we fondly believe to be Truth” (249-250). In the next few pages, Sullivan glosses over each scientist’s contributions. Sullivan took from Darwin, the “stupendous” theory of evolution; from Spencer, the “simple unorganized idea of *beneficent power*” (254-255, Sullivan’s italics). Yet, Sullivan is far more detailed about the influence of colleague John Edelman during his brief stint at William Le Baron Jenney’s office (Jenney constructed the first steel-framed building) than the influence of his science textbooks. As Sullivan narrates, “One day John explained his theory of *suppressed functions*; and Louis, startled, saw in a flash that this meant the real clue to the mystery that lay behind the veil of appearances... with John’s aid, Louis saw the outer and the inner world more clearly, and the world of men began to assume a semblance of form, and of function” (207, Sullivan’s italics).

³⁶ Davis briefly analyzes Sullivan’s use of ornament as a representation of hybridized American citizenry (read: “phylogenetic,” or, collective) and calls for a more rigorous study of modern architecture’s racial content in ornament: “Analyzing the relationship between individualism and cultural nationalism in Sullivan’s oeuvre enables us to locate the specific racial content of his architectural ornament for an ‘American race’ of peoples. It also enables us to locate the racial content of architectural organism in the so-called Chicago School more generally... [including] Frank Lloyd Wright, George Emslie, and Claude Bragdon just to name a few.”

All things in nature have a shape, that is to say, a form, an outward semblance, that tells us what they are, that distinguishes them from ourselves and from each other. Unfailing in nature these shapes express the inner life, the native quality of the animal, tree, bird, fish... they are so characteristic, so recognizable, that we say, simply, it is “natural” it should be so... Unceasingly the essence of things is taking the shape in the matter of things, and this unspeaking process we call birth and growth... it seems ever as though the life and the form were absolutely one and inseparable...³⁷

Here Sullivan is “thrilled” to have discovered the “treasure” of “a universal law admitting of no exception in any phase or application whatsoever” (290). And as Sullivan slowly grows as an architect, he realizes that “it was not simply a matter of form expressing function, but [t]hat function *created* or organized its form... Discernment of this idea threw a vast light upon all things within the universe, and condensed with astounding impressiveness upon mankind, upon civilizations, all institutions every form and aspect of society” (290). According to Sullivan, he is merely describing the natural law of form: he poses form in *relation* so that it is something that *shows* “the pervading law of all things organic, and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function” (208). Sullivan places science and architecture analogously as “manifestations” of nature and “the all-power of Life... But it was... the application of these powers... that thrilled Louis to the depths as he realized that, as one stumbling upon... the open sesame” (290-291). Sullivan is not just using the language of science for architecture here, nor is he claiming architecture as a matter of scientific rationale. Rather, scientific theories and architecture seem connected for Sullivan because they are *describable* as *appearance*. The

³⁷ “Tall Office Building,” 207-208.

appearance and thus describability of form assumes that form is natural creation (by essence and meaning) demonstrative of universal phenomena. Sullivan inherits the Darwinian definitions of natural appearance I have traced in another chapter: that the Darwinian concept of form is constructed by the “objectivity” of his descriptive language. No wonder Sullivan was compelled to write his autobiography in the third person: description depends on a logic of objectivity, and third person narration lends itself to this. Moreover, Sullivan’s framing of the autobiography as an autobiography of an “idea” (rather than his life) enhances the descriptive, objective quality of architectural logic.

The so-called natural is used to describe a relationship between “form” and “inner life,” “shape” and “essence,” outside and inside. Art historian Caroline Van Eck has also traced Sullivan’s definition of form and function back to Darwin but argues that Sullivan’s use of “function” “comes to refer to something like ‘essence’ or ‘character’” instead: “Since Sullivan does not tell us anything about the ‘function’ of waves or clouds but only repeats with different examples that ‘a thing looks like what it is’, we are left with an almost tautological and hence rather unilluminating equation of form and function.”³⁸ Van Eck’s observation is correct. Sullivan’s aesthetic logic, simply put, amounts to: visual appearance (form) *shows* the natural expression of form (function).

While Van Eck finds this tautology a problem, I regard it as an opportunity to understand the order and organization of form, expression, and visual experience. Sullivan’s description of form as both a “clue” and natural law presumes that form is visible insofar as function is readable via the visibility of form. Form, as something that *shows*, requires a “steadfast eye” to “unveil” how “life... takes on its forms in an accord perfectly responsive to its needs” (“Tall

³⁸ Caroline Van Eck, *Organicism in Nineteenth-Century Architecture: An Inquiry into its Theoretical and Philosophical Background* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura Press, 1994), quotation on page 276. Thus Van Eck aligns Sullivan’s theory of functionalism within the classical architectural tradition.

Office Building,” 208; *Autobiography*, 290). Vision (the “steadfast eye”) is automatically positioned as the sense that recognizes (“unveils”) natural and aesthetic forms. The describability of form as a universal, lawful demonstration of nature in effect conflates the natural with the universal and form with appearance, making these relationships appear objectively visual. The place vision holds here presumes that form is detectable via sight and thus visually meaningful. In other words, vision makes forms appear naturally visual. As Darwin’s inheritor, Sullivan assumes that visibility itself is adequate proof of function: “Nature, in its visible, objective forms, impinges on the eyes its aspects of beauty of form and color.”³⁹ This visual logic is based on the assumption that visibility itself is adequate proof of meaning (which for Sullivan is “interior”) so that a common sense of vision is unquestionably the method in which form can be detected. If form evidences function, visibility evidences natural visibility. Put differently, through description, visibility formalizes into visibility: form is actually visual formalization yet tautologically understood as visual and thus lawful. Because visual forms are natural, lawful demonstrations, Sullivan is then able to claim that nature models universal and thus objectively good design.

For Sullivan, the current architecture is unnatural, illogical, and irrational because they do not follow natural law. Sullivan insists that formal architectural training gets in the way of “natural” common sense visual solution to the tall office building. A jab at trained architects designing in the Beaux-Arts, Sullivan says that to “reason naturally... seems beyond [them]... I regard [their views] as secondary only, non-essential, and as touching not at all upon the vital spot, upon the quick of the entire matter, upon the true, the immovable philosophy of the

³⁹ *Kindergarten Chats*, 33.

architectural art”—that “form ever follows function.”⁴⁰ To theorize the skyscraper, Sullivan theorizes a natural law of architecture: form and function reflects “the pervading law of all things organic, and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function.” (208). The key word in the aphorism is “follows.” Form, then, can be considered an exteriorized result of function.

Here, the “expressive” theory of Darwinian visual form takes a new life in the redefinition of form as it *follows* function. Darwin theorizes that form has functional (or “utilitarian”) purpose in the theory of natural selection, and Sullivan takes Darwin’s point further in claiming that form is ideally function’s effect. As Sullivan says elsewhere, function can be considered “pressure of a living force” and form the “resultant structure or mechanism whereby such invisible force is made manifest and operative.”⁴¹ Form *evidences* function. I stress it is not exactly Ruskinian aesthetics that modern arts—including Sullivan’s work—emerge from, as some Sullivan scholars have argued, but the Darwinian concepts of form and utility. Ruskin insisted on a cohesive theory of the arts across poetry, painting, and architecture that establishes the truthful “representation of facts” as “the foundation of all art.”⁴² The artist has the privilege of expressing the truth of nature; according to Ruskin, the goal of art is to show the “bare, clear, downright statement of facts, showing in each particular... what the truth of nature is, and then seeking for the plain expression of it” (48). But for Sullivan, art does not simply represent or

⁴⁰ “Tall Office Building,” 207. Sullivan continues, “the tall office building should not, must not, be made a field for the display of architectural knowledge in the encyclopaedic sense; that too much learning in this instance is fully as dangerous, as obnoxious, as too little learning” (207).

⁴¹ *Kindergarten Chats*, 48

⁴² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Volume I (London and Aylesbury: Hazell, Watson, and Viney, Limited, 1888), 46.

express. An overarching aesthetic theory and the art produced by its application correct the inability to see that which is universal and natural.

Sullivan determines the cases in which form does not follow function as cases of poor vision: “Shall we, then, daily violate this law in our art? Are we so decadent, so imbecile, so utterly weak of eyesight, that we cannot perceive this truth so simple, so very simple? Is it indeed a truth so transparent that we see through it but do not see it [and] perceive that the shape, form, outward expression, design... of the tall office building should in the very nature of things follow the functions of the building?” (206). It follows, then, that for Sullivan the “immovable philosophy of the architectural art” that is nature can now be claimed not simply as a model but as a formal archetype—a “final comprehensive formula” for skyscraper aesthetics (207). This formula, applied elsewhere (i.e. for art production), would produce art that adheres to universal, natural law. Moreover, to design according to the formula is to design aesthetically and to use eyesight properly. In chastising architects who do not understand the nature of form as those who do not know how to see, Sullivan attributes bad architecture to bad aesthetics and poor vision. Poor vision, as a lack of common sense (as unnatural, illogical, irrational), consequently produces bad art. Scientific vision is not simply grafted onto architectural theory here, and “form and function” is no longer simply descriptive of a natural universal law: it is now a generative theory of modern art. Sullivan’s most brilliant contribution to the discourse of modern art is in redefining aesthetics as a theory that can correct vision, or, produce good—modern—art. Then, “aesthetics” can be defined as the visual acuity that is required for the production and evaluation of modern art. When Sullivan finally speaks directly to solving the aesthetic problem of skyscraper design—the crux of the article—it is indeed articulated as a matter of using visual common sense. He asks, “[W]hat is the chief characteristic of the tall office building? And at

once we answer, it is lofty” (205). The form, then, “must be tall, every inch of it tall... It must be every inch a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exultation that from bottom to top it is a unit without a single dissenting line” (205). According to the aesthetic logic of form and function, because the building is tall, it should look tall; its height must be visually emphasized.

According to Sullivan, visual common sense replaces the need for language. Sullivan asserts that fine arts needs to “enter and carry on a form of language, of expression, of communication, of explanation that lies beyond words. Now architecture as at present practiced is a crude pretense at art” because “[w]ords and phrases have usurped the place of function and form. [P]hrase-making has come to be an accepted substitute for architecture-making... Hence its form has become abnormal. It no longer speaks in tones of ringing eloquence... it now cries out to the attentive ear with an appalling, inarticulate cry, now muffled...” (49-50). In other words, buildings, and all art, should speak for themselves. The visual form, when designed with corrected vision, omits any need for language because *visuality is presumed by nature to be self-evident*. Sullivan’s theory attempts to make form and meaning *identical*, i.e. form self-evident, such that language is no longer necessary for understanding fine art. And form is no longer representative of function but identical to it: “form and function are one,” as Sullivan’s most famous mentee, Frank Lloyd Wright, argues.⁴³

Sullivan aims to make form self-evident by cutting out the use of words. Making form and function identical is an attempt to overcome the fundamentally discursive structure of common sense vision. And yet, paradoxically, the more Sullivan calls for “the real, the plastic, the poetic architectural art”—a formalist modern architecture—the more writing becomes

⁴³ Frank Lloyd Wright, “The Architectural Form” in *The Essential Frank Lloyd Wright: Critical Writings on Architecture* ed. Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), quotation on 315. This is just one among many of Wright’s references to Sullivan’s writings on form and function.

necessary. Arguing for the limits of writing and making writing unnecessary requires lots of writing. It is interesting that Sullivan does not acknowledge the hundreds of thousands of words used in his long publication career to theorize architecture. Instead, he describes the limits of writing that art should overcome:

I may say that real thinking is better done without words than with them, and creative thinking *must* be done without words... words are clumsy: you have no time to select and group them. Hence you must think in terms of *images*, of pictures, of states of feeling, of rhythm... Writing is but the slow, snail-like creeping of words, climbing, laboriously, over a little structure that *resembles* the thought.⁴⁴

It is crucial that we recognize not simply what is being expressed here (that there are limits to writing) but also that Sullivan must write so much in order to caution artists to “take your mind away from words, and bend it to thinking [in terms of images, feelings, rhythms]” (51).

Sullivan’s disavowal of discursivity is significant: it is necessary for these formalist theorists to claim the purely visual aesthetic value of form while using writing to make such claims. The formalism that ensues not only obscures but actively erases its discursive structure.

This is how racial visibility works: through the negation of language. Darell Fields would call this the negation of blackness.⁴⁵ This kind of formalism conveniently regulates and circulates vision’s objective, universal, transcendent quality as common sense. This erasure, a consequence of making form and function identical, sets the stage for the formalist practice of modern art.

Modern art is “high” because it is purely formal: that is, visually congruent and thus self-

⁴⁴ Sullivan continues, “creative thinking must be done without words... real thinking is always in the present tense... The present is the organic moment, the living moment... When you think organically you will act organically. Just so soon as your thoughts begin to take on an organic quality, your buildings will begin to take on an organic quality, and thereafter they will grow and develop together.” *Kindergarten Chats*, 50-52. Frank Lloyd Wright would revise Sullivan’s words once again into the now-familiar modernist architectural discourse of the “organic.”

⁴⁵ Fields, *Architecture in Black*.

referential, or, wordless. As visually self-evident, the forms of modernism “speak” for themselves. Sullivan’s consolidation of the visual with the identical affirms the role of aesthetics for modern/ist discourses of universality. Formalist aesthetics in return conveniently regulate and circulate vision’s universal, transcendent quality as common sense. Formalist aesthetics modernizes vision for the 20th century as vision appears physiologically and historically autonomous: discourses of modern art in turn reformulate vision as atemporal and ahistorical, and aesthetics get relegated to an artistic concern. It also makes writing necessary for modern art to be categorized as such, which will be further explored in the next chapter. In short, discourses of modern art are made possible because formalism is constructed by a common sense of vision that omits its racialization.

My analysis thus far has established the theory of form and function as a generative theory of aesthetics, meant for application in the production and evaluation of art. The aesthetic theory of form and function is a call for the artistic restoration of this universal natural law. Aesthetics emerges as an optical tool for making the kind of good art that lifts the “veil of appearances,” so that the outside matches the inside and the form matches the function. Artists, including architects, can be considered ophthalmologists in Sullivan’s aesthetic theory. The task of the artist is to make function visually self-evident, to produce art that makes form and function identical—to restore and regulate vision as common sense. Then, truly artistic art would render “words,” as Sullivan puts it, obsolete. In fact, Sullivan positions words in opposition to architecture. As a result, language and visual form get posed in opposition to each other. Visual aesthetic form is theorized for the 20th century as a matter of natural universal law that transcends language.

Racial Formalism

Art history conventionally attributes the development of formalism to turn-of-the-century experiments with the autonomy of art. For example, Clive Bell and Roger Fry supplied some of the most well-known theorizations of the intrinsic value of art's formal qualities, disengaging art from content and context.⁴⁶ This conceptualization of aesthetics, which contemporary cultural critics have argued is a bourgeois enterprise, merges aesthetic value with a “purely” *formal* significance. Aesthetic appreciation becomes constrained within discourses of formalist art criticism, and art becomes autonomous, providing the conditions under which “modern art” would be recognized in the 20th century. As Jürgen Habermas explains, the “new language of form” develops an aestheticized discourse of functionalism with an “*inherent aesthetic logic*” so that autonomy is understood as the main feature of avant-garde architecture and art.⁴⁷ The language of form has been rightly critiqued for ahistorical tendencies. For example, what is known as “institutional critique” exposes the language of form as the idealization and creation of the Western (and white) avant-garde.

Furthermore, some art historians and critics see the emergence of formalism as a misreading of Kant. As Kant scholar Chris Dowling stresses, 19th-century Romantic critics and artists conveniently and creatively misinterpreted the notion of disinterestedness that undergirds

⁴⁶ See Clive Bell, *Art* (1914) and Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (1920). Most art history survey texts as well as criticism on the discipline of art history situate formalism this way. For examples, see *Art in Theory 1815-1900* and *Art in Theory 1900-2000* eds. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002) and Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1996).

⁴⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “Modern and Postmodern Architecture” in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), quotation on page 421, Habermas’ italics. Furthermore, some art historians and critics see the emergence of formalism as a misreading of the Kantian notion of disinterestedness to propel discourses of art for art’s sake. See “Aesthetic Formalism,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Chris Dowling, James Fieser, Bradley Dowden and the University of Tennessee at Martin, 1995. Web. 20 April. 2014 and Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Kantian aesthetic theory to propel discourses of art for art's sake.⁴⁸ As a result, “anyone interested in the arts in the early part of the nineteenth century would be exposed to a new aesthetic doctrine whose currency involved variations on terms including *aesthetic*, *disinterest*, *free*, *beauty*, *form* and *sublime*... All or any of which could be referred to by the expression *L'art pour l'art*; all of which became increasingly associated with the term *aesthetic*” (Dowling's italics). Sullivan's aesthetic theory certainly demonstrates and contributes to all of these modernist understandings of formalism.

This chapter constructs a genealogy of formalism that exposes the racial sense that has been crucial to its emergence. The dissertation as a whole aims to provide an alternative historical account of aesthetics by centralizing the role of racial visibility for the construction of vision's common sense. I have thus far emphasized that it is through the investigation of race, in the runaway slave archives and Darwinian evolutionary theory, that can provide a corrective to the normativization of sense that Kant critiqued. Building on the work of David Lloyd, I have used aesthetic judgment as a framework to recognize how racial visibility structures the common sense of vision required to see race objectively. As Lloyd has argued, in presuming the capacity for the idea of the universal (i.e. humanity), aesthetic judgment in effect formalizes it, making possible the ideas of human diversity and racial difference.⁴⁹ In aesthetic judgment, the capacity to represent subjective experience “objectively” makes available the universal, abstract “Subject without properties”: “a purely formal identity with humanity in general” (255-256). Accordingly, Lloyd observes that the discourse of race emerges not from the “antagonistic recognition of difference” but from the difference that depends on a principle of identity which is essentially

⁴⁸ “Aesthetic Formalism,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Chris Dowling, James Fieser, Bradley Dowden and the University of Tennessee at Martin, 1995. Web. 20 April. 2014. Also see Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁹ David Lloyd, “Race Under Representation,” in *Culture-Contexture: Explorations in Anthropology and Literary Studies*, eds. E. Valentine Daniel and Jeffrey M. Peck (University of California Press, 1996).

temporal and metaphoric, a narrativizing that unifies by differentiating. Metaphors, as structures of seeing likeness despite difference, work because they function as the overcoming of difference by the discreteness of that which are compared. The descriptions of black handsomeness as examined in my first chapter exemplify how vision literally makes sense of difference, or formalizes it, making vision and its subjects appear to be self-evident.

Sullivan conceives form and function as potentially self-evident because there is a difference between them, and that difference has already been defined and elided as racial. The next section will show Sullivan's vision, as a racial epistemology, cannot but continue to circulate a racial relationship between form and function. Sullivan's aim to make form and function self-evidently identical attempts to provide a shortcut between visuality and meaning by cutting out the use of words *because race seems visual*. We are back to the problem of discursivity that is the focus of this dissertation. Making form and function identical is an attempt to "overcome difference by identity," as Lloyd would put it. This attempt ultimately assimilates difference not into the abstract (universal natural law) but into the material practice that is art-making. But that assimilation ends up making difference appear as "residue": "[d]ifferences that in the first instance have no meaning and no law come to signify negatively under the law of identity that produces them" (258).⁵⁰ That residue, I suggest, is the discursivity of racial visuality.

It is no coincidence that formalist discourses of vision have co-developed with visual discourses of race. I bring the conclusions I have drawn above to bear on Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing*. While there is much scholarly discussion on *Passing*, the lofty presence of skyscrapers in the text has gone largely unnoticed. Larsen exposes how formalist aesthetics has

⁵⁰ Racism, accordingly, "make sense" and achieves its self-evidence only in relation to the law of identity that governs equally assimilation and exclusion.

been made possible through the modern discourse that is “race.” Passing was certainly not a new phenomenon during the time in which Larsen wrote; new patterns of unfreedom were establishing the culture of Jim Crow, lynching, and mass migrations to industrialized U.S. cities. As I have argued elsewhere, in the 18th century runaway slaves were attempting to pass for free (not necessarily white), but after the American Revolution, the practice of writing about race as a visual characteristic helped consolidate whiteness and freedom and blackness and slavery.⁵¹ This chapter understands the discourse of racial passing in 19th century African American print, literary, and visual culture as a critique of the common sense of vision: these texts underscore how skin color and other racial visualities are unreliable signs for race and are often accompanied by critiques of rape and the white supremacist discourses of miscegenation. For example, as William Craft explains in his 1860 slave narrative, precisely because it is common sense that “every coloured person’s complexion is *prima facie* evidence of his being a slave,” that common sense can be used to escape slavery. The Crafts escape successfully because William’s light-skinned wife Ellen, whose complexion does not evidence her slave status, allows her to pass as a white gentleman traveling with his slave, the darker-skinned William.⁵²

In the wake of the failures of Reconstruction, passing became a mode of accessing the legal and institutional resources whiteness accorded. In her classic article, legal scholar Cheryl Harris argues that “[w]hiteness as the embodiment of white privilege transcended mere belief or

⁵¹ The first chapter of my dissertation, “Runaway Slave Portraiture and the Publication of Modern Vision,” takes 18th- and 19th-century runaway slave newspaper advertisements as portraiture to explore the emergent logic of visual description in colonial North America. I argue blackness gets imagined as readable and formalized as “racial” through the kind of sensorial experience that Immanuel Kant famously theorized as aesthetic judgment.

⁵² William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* ed. John Ernest (Acton, Massachusetts: Copley Publishing Group, 2000), 25.

preference; it became usable property, the subject of the law's regard and protection."⁵³ Yet, as Harris reminds us, whiteness is valuable precisely because it works as inalienable property. In other words, the value of whiteness is structured by its strictly private enjoyment. Within this larger social, legal, cultural, and economic context, passing received modernist literary attention towards the end of the 19th century and well into the 20th. James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Charles Chesnutt, Walter White, Langston Hughes, and of course Nella Larsen have arguably written the most influential literature on passing.⁵⁴

Since Deborah McDowell's groundbreaking reintroduction to *Passing*, Larsen's novel has opened rich scholarly conversations because of the complexity with which race, gender, class, sexual, and queer politics are broached.⁵⁵ To this conversation I add an architectural thread. I not only examine the complexity of racial passing in Larsen's novel but also read it as an aesthetic theory. As I have been arguing thus far, the modernist aim to make form self-evident, visually congruent, wordless, and transcendent is an aim to provide a shortcut between visuality and meaning. My reading of *Passing* traces how the writing-out of form's discursive structure is the writing-out of vision's racial counterpart. According to the text, it is racial visuality that regulates the aesthetic standards of form and function, which quietly consolidates the kind of formalism that is required to establish modernist aesthetic movements. *Passing*

⁵³ Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property" in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* eds. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotenda, Gary Peller, Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), quotation on page 282.

⁵⁴ Literary scholar Gayle Wald, among other critics, has usefully pointed out how the narrative strategies of African American modernist writers work both as demonstrations and critiques of gendered, classed, and national ideologies of racial identity as well as racial collectivity. Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). Pamela Caughie also performs an excellent critique on black modernism and the making of class, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Pamela L. Caughie, "'The Best People': The Making of the Black Bourgeoisie in Writings of the Negro Renaissance" *Modernism/Modernity* 20.3 (September 2013), 519-537.

⁵⁵ Deborah E. McDowell, "Introduction" in *Passing and Quicksand. By Nella Larsen.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

exposes formalism's fundamentally racial frame by exploring the relationship between skyscrapers and the senses necessary for racial passing. The text explores the unreliability and interpretability of racial visibility specifically in the space of the skyscraper. Larsen presents the spaces of racial passing as a heuristic to break down "when" common sense vision renders race visually detectable and norms vision and "when" it doesn't.

Passing opens with the protagonist, Irene Redfield, receiving what she considers an audacious letter from her childhood friend, Clare Kendry, prompting the narrative to return to the memory of "that time in Chicago" when Irene and Clare reunited for the first time since childhood. The story then flashes back to Irene's visit to Chicago from Harlem two years ago: Irene is running errands in downtown Chicago on a day so hot "the very outlines of the buildings shuddered as if in protest at the heat. Quivering lines sprang up from baked pavements and wriggled along the shining car-tracks. The automobiles parked at the kerbs were a dancing blaze, and the glass of the shop-windows threw out a blinding radiance. Sharp particles of dust rose from the burning sidewalks, stinging the seared or dripping skins of wilting pedestrians."⁵⁶ Written in the third-person but exclusively from Irene's perspective, "we have little choice but to co-suffer this disturbed vision," as literary scholar Gabrielle McIntire observes.⁵⁷ I add that we should notice how the passage describes the sight of Chicago's buildings as destabilizing experience. The sight of tall Chicago buildings here echo the way Sullivan has described them: as Sullivan observes of "this sterile pile, this crude, harsh, brutal agglomeration" in "The Tall Office Building," "How shall we proclaim from the dizzy height of this strange, weird, modern housetop the peaceful evangel of sentiment, of beauty, the cult of a higher life?" (202). The mere

⁵⁶ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929) in *Quicksand and Passing*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986), quotation on page 146.

⁵⁷ McIntire argues later that Irene's other senses are more perceptive. Gabrielle McIntyre, "Toward a Narratology of Passing: Epistemology, Race, and Misrecognition in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" *Callaloo* 35.3 (2012), 778-794, quotation on page 781.

sight of these buildings has the potential to stun and destabilize the viewer. Both Sullivan's and Larsen's passages about Chicago buildings problematize the sensorial unmanageability of the reputedly visual skyscraper. The mere sight of these buildings has the potential to stun and destabilize the viewer, vision dangerously giving way to other senses.

Sullivan of course aims to resolve the threatening non-visual sensations by bringing "graciousness" and "beauty" to the visual form of the building (202). Sullivan's insistence on a congruous formal identity, or, visibility (of function), is in response to the threat of sensorial unmanageability. Formalism allows aesthetic experience to remain constrained to the visual field.⁵⁸ In *Passing*, however, the sensorial solution is to enter the building. After seeing a man in the crowded streets pass out from the heat, Irene also feels unstable: "Suddenly she was aware that the whole street had a wobbly look, and realized that she was about to faint" (147). Irene hails a cab, and the driver offers to take her to the rooftop restaurant at the Drayton Hotel, assuming Irene is white. Irene does not protest.

The "strange, weird, modern" sense described when experiencing the sight of the tall buildings transforms once inside. Literary scholar Adrienne Brown's innovative analysis of the place of blackness in the skyscraper is useful for understanding Irene's place inside the tall building. Brown uses James Weldon Johnson's fascinating comment on the skyscraper as the only uniquely American field of art produced by whites as an entry point into theorizing "the black skyscraper."⁵⁹ As Brown suggests, we need to consider how black writers also "conceived of black modernism outside of Harlem's geographical boundaries" (536). Through an analysis of

⁵⁸ Russ Castronovo argues that the professional academic study of aesthetics at this time period aimed to "systematize beauty, adducing formal principles and timeless properties that governed sensation. Divided into disquisitions on harmony, symmetry, proportion, balance, unity, simplicity, and purity of form, these materials presented aesthetics as a coherent field whose effects upon human subjects could be predicted." Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), quotation on 12.

⁵⁹ Adrienne Brown, "The Black Skyscraper" *American Literature* 85.3 (September 2013), 531-561.

fiction by W.E.B. DuBois and Wallace Thurman, Brown argues that the “distorted and sketchy” views and inhabitations the skyscraper provides positions the skyscraper as an alternative to the “urban optics of the status quo” and also as an utopian “projection of a yet-unrealized democracy” (558). I consider how *Passing* provides not just other views or spaces in what Brown has called “the black skyscraper” but also other sensorial experiences. Upon entering the skyscraper as a visibly white woman, Irene’s vision reorients itself. Once Irene is on the rooftop of the hotel, “[i]t was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below” (147).

According to historian David E. Nye, the skyscraper radically changed the distinction between outside and inside: “Built into its very architecture were exclusivity, remoteness, and climate control. The life of the street ceased to be a vibrant theater filled with identifiable people, and instead became a distant realm inhabited by figures so small as to become abstractions.”⁶⁰ The kind of visual experience that Irene is having is what Nye has described as the momentary adoption of “the perspective of the captain of industry. One does not merely escape the clasp of the street; one enters the panopticon of corporate power” (265). The panoramic view Irene enjoys is not one that is available to all citizens every day. After all, the rooftop restaurant is a white bourgeois space, and Irene is a black bourgeois woman passing for white. By passing, Irene is able to take a “magical” ride to the top of the skyscraper, thereby reproducing the erasure of the labor and capital in Sullivanian aesthetic theory. Irene and Sullivan foreground instead the visual stabilization that the skyscraper provides. Inside the segregated space of the skyscraper, Irene’s vision stabilizes because she was able to escape the street and can pass visibly as white.

⁶⁰ David E. Nye, “The Sublime and the Skyline: The New York Skyscraper” in *The American Skyscraper: Cultural Histories* ed. Roberta Moudry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 255-269, quotation on 263.

Irene passes in the posh high-rise hotel because she “is in a space where she is not supposed to be,” as geographer Perry L. Carter has argued: it was assumed that “anyone located in White Space was White.”⁶¹ Because Irene’s body is not read as black in the skyscraper, it “[fails] to disrupt... geographies of racial expectations, demonstrating that Whiteness is as much about physical location as it is about unmarked bodies” (238). Space, i.e. de jure and de facto segregation, norms visual expectations. The act of racial passing relies on a common sense of vision that is the logic of racial visibility.⁶² Irene can pass because she is a black person who *looks* white in the skyscraper. The preceding statement should sound like a common sense explanation precisely because the act of racial passing relies on a visual common sense where race is presumed to be visually self-evident. On one hand, racial passing, as a spatial transgression and a performance of identity, demonstrates and norms the common sense of vision and thus race. On the other hand, racial passing also exposes race’s construction as a visibility. Visual racial form (visible whiteness) and “function” (black self-identity) complicates Sullivan’s aesthetic standards when accounting for the spatial dynamics of race. The extra-evidence or even non-evidence (rather than self-evidence) of form in the case of the identity of the passer demonstrates the incongruity of “form and function.” When I use “identity” here I am gesturing

⁶¹ Perry L. Carter, “The Penumbra Spaces of Nella Larsen’s Passing: Undecidable Bodies, Mobile Identities, and the Deconstruction of Racial Boundaries” *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 13.3 (August 2006), 227-246, quotations on pages 237-238.

⁶² Samira Kawash has performed an interesting analysis about the visual epistemology of race in which *Passing* intervenes. Kawash and I share a very similar line of inquiry; she even attributes “the phenotypical differences we associate with different races”—what I’ve called race’s visual status—to “common sense” (129). Kawash too is interested in how in *Passing* “the visible becomes an insufficient guarantee of knowledge. As a result, the possibility of a gap opens up between what the body says and what the body means” (130). However, where I trace common sense to racial visibility, Kawash traces to the historically legal discourses of miscegenation and blood. Kawash determines the law as “the epistemological context in which the passing body takes on a particular charge,” prompting her to read the passing figure for the relationship between “knowability and visibility” (131-132). I remain focused on the *sensorial* epistemology of race’s “knowability and visibility” rather than the subject of passing. As traced in this chapter, my take on passing is as the demonstration and deconstruction of racial visibility’s common sense. See Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

to the rich and well-established criticism on the social categories through which subjects represent, legitimize, perform, recognize, and know themselves. But I am also referring to the definition of identity I've outlined earlier following my analysis of Sullivan's functionalist problem of self-evidence and its solution in formal identity, where identity consolidates with visuality. In the case of passing, however, the incongruity of race's visuality actually gives the passing woman her identity *because* form and function are not identical. Precisely due to this visual (formal) incongruity, the black woman with "uncommon" skin color is able to pass imperceptibly.⁶³ The formalist logic of identity in racial passing exposes visual common sense, that is, the corrected, good vision that Sullivan argued for, as normative vision. Thus the instances of passing, presented in the novel as moments that simultaneously undo and uphold racial visuality, provide sensorial insight.

As Irene enjoys the rooftop view, a "racial sense" outside of vision emerges. At first, Irene uses her eyes to experience the panorama: from her place in the "panopticon" (to use Nye's language) she gazes at the "lower buildings," "the bright unstirred blue of the lake reaching away to an undetected horizon," and "the specks of cars and people creeping about in the streets... thinking how silly they looked" (148). Her gaze then turns to an "attractive-looking woman" at the next table "with those dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin" (148). Irene, "conscious that she had been staring... looked quickly away" (149). Irene's mind was back on her own thoughts, her "unseeing eyes far away on the lake, when by some sixth sense she was acutely aware that someone was watching her" (149). The "sixth sense" alerts Irene at exactly the moment she is not using her eyes. Irene reacts by

⁶³ It is due to this visual incongruity that Clare, the other passer in the novel, can pass permanently and her white husband, ignorant about Clare's black heritage, can joke about how Clare's skin is "getting" darker and darker... You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger" (171).

reverting to the use of vision, leading to a series of further visual exchanges with the woman. Aiming to make the gazer feel “disconcertment at having been detected in her steady scrutiny,” Irene looks directly back at her, but it is Irene who feels self-conscious instead: “Feeling her colour heighten under the continued inspection, she slid her eyes down” and wondered if there was something wrong with her outfit that warranted such attention. Knowing there isn’t, Irene’s “brown eyes politely returned the stare of the other’s black ones, which never for an instant fell or wavered. Irene made a little mental shrug. Oh well, let her look! . . . She stole another glance. Still looking. What strange languorous eyes she had!” (149-150). Then Irene’s own “eyes flashed” wondering if she is being stared at because the gazer “somehow know[s] that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro” (150). Irene ponders,

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn’t possibly know.⁶⁴

Irene’s passing thus far in the hotel has already confirmed a common sense of vision, at least a common sense that whites will see her as white. The sixth sense, however, alerts Irene that this woman might not share this sense; it allows Irene to suspect that the way whites see her and the way Irene sees herself may not be the way *this* woman sees and thus makes Irene feel alert to possible racial detection. The sixth sense, then, works as a racializing self-consciousness that alerts the visual trespasser she could get caught. It works as a device that disaggregates common sense vision and directs us to the load-bearing “frame” that enables skyscraper construction: the

⁶⁴ *Passing*, 150.

common sense of racial visibility. The incongruity of Irene's visibility and her identity separates the common sense of vision from the common sense of race's visibility. This questioning of the normative visual experience that would and should make Irene appear visibly white despite Irene's black "identity" in effect interrupts racial visibility. The skyscraper space accords the non-evidently black woman—the visual trespasser—enhanced sensorial experiences precisely because she is where she does not belong.

Elsewhere in the novel, Irene also claims that the sixth sense helps her distinguish racial identity in instances in which racial identity is not visually self-evident. This point is explored further in a scene set a party thrown by Hugh Wentworth, a Carl Van Vechton-like white patron of the New Negro causes in which Irene is involved. As Irene and Wentworth chat about Clare, who is also attending the party, Wentworth admits he can't tell whether she is white or black. Irene retorts, "Nobody can. Not by looking... I'm afraid I can't explain. Not clearly. There are ways. But they're not definite or tangible" (206). Giving her recent experience with an acquaintance named Dorothy as an example, Irene contemplates how she knows someone is white or black: "In less than five minutes, I knew she was a 'fay.' Not from anything she did or said or anything in her appearance. Just—just something. A thing that couldn't be registered" (206). Here Irene asserts the unreliability of visual appearance for determining race and the trustworthiness of some other kind of intuition—a sixth sense that breaks down the common sense of racial visibility. The sixth sense highlights how race's visibility is constructed but also suggests that race has identity beyond visibility and is identifiable by other means.

Though the sixth sense exposes the construction of race's common sense, it is ultimately rendered nonfunctional. A closer reading of the earlier hotel rooftop scene, where Irene assumed that the "annoying woman" staring at her was white, reveals that this sense doesn't work

reliably. As “Irene vainly tried to recall where and when this woman could have known her,” she wonders, “What white girls had she known well enough to have been familiarly addressed as ‘Rene by them? Irene studied the lovely creature standing beside her for some clue to her identity” (151). Despite Irene’s self-professed ability to sense when someone is black, as it turns out, the woman is her childhood friend Clare, who is also passing. (Unlike Irene, however, Clare has crossed over the “color line” permanently.) In this first episode of the sixth sense, it seems to loom over Irene as she is studying Clare: “Irene felt that she was just about to remember her. For about the woman was some quality, an intangible something, too vague to define, too remote to seize, but which was, to Irene Redfield, very familiar. And that voice. Surely she’d heard those husky tones somewhere before” (151). Ultimately it is not the sixth sense that helps Irene identify Clare. She finally remembers Clare by the *sound* of her laughter.⁶⁵ While the sixth sense allows Irene to countervisualize (racialize) her own common-sense visibility, it does not help her (racially) identify Clare. Ultimately Irene’s vision—assessable as a sense shared with the hotel staff and other whites—obscures her racial sense. In other words, Irene, too, sees normatively, that is common sensically.

For literary scholar Candice M. Jenkins this “alleged black intangibility” (which I’ve included as part of the “something” the novel calls “sixth sense”) might arguably be a claim about black essentialism, but Jenkins decides it is not since it works as a tool that “allows bourgeois blacks to control the boundaries of their community from within.”⁶⁶ While I agree with Jenkins on the point that the sixth sense regulates black bourgeois values, a closer reading reveals that the sixth sense does not actually get “used.” Irene describes the meaning of the sixth sense insofar as it detects non-visual blackness (knowing when someone is passing)

⁶⁵ McIntire, 783.

⁶⁶ Candice M. Jenkins, “Decoding Essentialism: Cultural Authenticity and the Black Bourgeoisie in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” *MELUS* 30.3 (Fall 2005), 129-154, quotation on 145.

ambivalently: “It’s funny about ‘passing.’ We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it” (185-186). In fact, when Irene has the opportunity to expose Clare’s blackness to her husband during a happenchance meeting, Irene doesn’t and kicks herself for it: “That instinctive loyalty to a race. Why couldn’t she get free of it?... What she felt was not so much resentment as a dull despair because she could not change herself in this respect, could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry” (227). Later, she realizes “something held her back” from telling her own husband about the meeting. Over and over Irene’s racial knowledge is formed by the sixth sense, but ultimately this formalized knowledge does not serve a purpose or remains unutilized despite her resentment (or desire) for Clare.

As the story progresses, the sixth sense becomes increasingly overpowered by other senses. While the sixth sense may not yield clear results for Irene, she remains alert to it. It warns Irene that Clare will not be persuaded by Irene’s rational arguments against Clare’s idea to visit Harlem as a passing woman.⁶⁷ It also affirms her plans to keep her family together and affirms her national belonging after she becomes suspicious that her husband Brian and Clare are having an affair:

She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband. Now that she had relieved herself of what was almost like a guilty knowledge, admitted that which by some sixth sense she had long known, she could again reach out for plans. Could think of ways to keep Brian

⁶⁷ Irene feels her sixth sense again when Clare unexpectedly shows up at Irene’s house because Irene never wrote her back. After Clare confesses how anxious she had been awaiting a response from Irene, Irene grows flustered, and the “sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling” she has for Clare confuses the decision she had made to cut off Clare. Trying to explain herself, Irene “was trying to collect her arguments, for some sixth sense warned her that it was going to be harder than she thought to convince Clare Kendry of the folly for her” (194).

by her side, and in New York. For she would not go to Brazil. She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted. Not even because of Clare Kendry, or a hundred Clare Kendrys.⁶⁸

By this point in the story, it has become clear that Irene is an unreliable narrator, so the reader may question Irene's claims here to do what's best for her family. And as many critics have argued, it remains unclear if it is Brian's or Clare's dishonesty that bothers Irene. At any rate, this passage underscores how knowledge released by the sixth sense mediates her claims to American citizenship and rejects her husband's romanticized racial politics about Brazil. The language of Irene's American citizenship is distinctly architectural: she "belongs," "grows," and is "rooted" in the "land of rising towers." To use Sullivan's language of the formalist skyscraper, Irene sees herself "*in situ*... growing, breathing, living, however morbidly, and with however much of hectic flush, turgid opulence and internal decay" in distinctly American surroundings.⁶⁹ In sync with Sullivan's proclamations, Irene "see[s] [the skyscraper] just as you may see... your own people and your own nation function, grow and take on form about you" (65). Like a skyscraper, Irene grows "organically" from American "soil." Irene's claim to a national identity echoes Sullivan's architectural-aesthetic language of the natural and universal: "architecture, its organic forms, its inorganic materials [becomes] the plastic medium whereby you shall express not word-thoughts but building-thoughts, and the function then will flow to the minutest details of form in orderly sequence, as surely as the sap flows to the tip of the slenderest tendril of a vine" (55).

I have outlined above that before this moment, the story narrated the emergence and definition of Irene's sixth sense. Although above I have suggested that the sixth sense ultimately

⁶⁸ *Passing*, 235.

⁶⁹ *Kindergarten Chats*, 65.

serves no clear function for Irene, I point out what the sixth sense does do is allow us to get a sense of Irene's interiority. As literary critic Samira Kawash argues, the "deep subjectivity" of this perspective is most importantly a narrative strategy that shows the story from Irene's limited narrative perspective.⁷⁰ It allows us to understand Irene's thoughts and feelings intimately. But the narrative style shifts after Irene's nationalist-aesthetic claim—or description—as a skyscraper. Irene's thoughts and feelings are no longer integrated into the story. The instant and non-visual albeit unreliable knowledge that the sixth sense Irene was able to feel thus far disappears. In the final episode of Irene's sixth sense, she, Brian, and Clare attend the Freeland's party at the top floor of a high-rise apartment building. Brian and Clare flirt as the group looks for the stairs. When Brian asks Clare about whether or not she's ever gone up to the sixth floor, Clare says, "Why, of course! We're on the seventeenth" (236). Brian's banter ("I mean, did you ever go up by nigger-power?") prompts Clare to say that she grew up in an apartment on the top floor of a building without an elevator. Incensed by the flirtatious banter between the two, Irene "[informs] them in quite her ordinary voice" that she has found the entrance to the apartment.

Henceforth, Irene begins to "express not word-thoughts but building-thoughts," as Sullivan would put it.⁷¹ Irene's appearances and sensations are "just" described, as natural law is "just" described by Sullivan through the final part of the novel. I am suggesting at this point in the story the subject of the text switches from passing, as a critique of racial visibility, to the kind of "pure language" that aesthetic formalism endorses. At this point the subjects of Irene's eyes, ears, and body are described in detail, but they are no longer sensorially experienced and

⁷⁰ According to Kawash, the narrative perspective "produces an impenetrable barrier between what might have happened and what Irene thinks or what the reader can know... the text seems to insist that there is nothing more than what we are told, that this is all knowledge can be, an unreliable, scattered filtering of events and artifacts that refuse to add up to a truth" (164).

⁷¹ Sullivan proclaims in "The Tall Office Building" that architecture "shall express not word-thoughts but building-thoughts, and the function then will flow to the minutest details of form in orderly sequence, as surely as the sap flows to the tip of the slenderest tendril of a vine" (55).

subjectively interpreted. Descriptions are now detached from Irene's perspective; while the events in the narrative are richly, aesthetically described, Irene seems anaestheticized. At the party, Irene appears dazed and becomes unreadable; she "sat almost silent, smiling now and then, that she might appear amused" (237). She is described to be "muttering," "sitting," "laughing," and finally "hearing." Irene "heard [Dave's] voice across the hall, carelessly polite... Then the roar of John Bellew's [Clare's husband's] voice above all the other noises of the room"; "Irene heard [Brian] saying: 'I'm Redfield. What the devil's the matter with you?'" (238). Finally, the narrative style becomes most formally descriptive yet ambiguous in meaning when Clare falls from the sixth-floor window: "What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone" (239). The responses are described in detail but without clear subjects: "There was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony" and "A frenzied rush of feet down long flights of stairs. The slamming of distant doors. Voices" (239). When Irene's reactions are finally described, all we know is that "[s]he sat down and remained quite still, staring at a ridiculous Japanese print on the wall across the room. Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry'" (239).

Here the text provides detailed descriptions of the sights, sounds, temperatures, and tastes before and after Clare's fatal fall from the sixth-floor long casement-window, but ultimately, like the characters in the story, we do not know if Clare jumped out or if Irene pushed her. There is no evidence diagetically or in the text's descriptive account for any particular reading.

Description, while "purely formal," that is, aesthetic, is not self-evident at this point in the novel. Description merely *passes* for content; it *appears* as meaningful, objective, and pure. Earlier I

examined how the logic of description makes visual sense for Sullivan: describing the subject of vision makes it appear naturally visual and thus objective and universal because *description makes sense (of visual form) via racial visibility*. The apparent visibility of form that Sullivan turns into a theory of formalist aesthetics is made possible by the presumption of race's visibility. Like the skyscraper, blackness has always required visual formal constraint precisely because race is not reliably visual—or more accurately, because race has been constructed by common sense vision. Larsen uses the case of passing to remind us that like racial visibility, formal appearance withholds. The instance of passing demonstrates this constructedness, this crisis, of visibility.

To resolve this crisis, so that racial visibility can inherently *mean*, so that vision can be produce racial meaning, Irene no longer inhabits tall buildings. Now Irene *functions* like Sullivanian aesthetic forms. Not Brian and Clare's affair, not Brian's desire to move to Brazil, not "a hundred Clare Kendrys" can "uproot" Irene from the "land of rising towers." In formalizing Irene into a skyscraper, *Passing* critiques describability and thus formalism as fundamentally racial. It is racial visibility that makes form appear visual and thus describable. Where Sullivan describes laws of form, Larsen describes laws of form as discursively produced, or, visually normed. The subject of Larsen's text has switched from passing, as a critique of racial visibility, to the kind of "pure" language that aesthetic formalism endorses. *Passing* writes back in the load racial visibility bears for modern architecture.

Clare's violently fatal fall from the tall building reads allegorically. Clare has subverted the common sense of racial visibility as the permanent passer for her individual gain. Then she is literally expunged from the American skyscraper. Whether or not Clare expelled herself, it is clear that a self-professed "race woman" like Irene, functioning like a skyscraper, artistically

corrects vision.⁷² While Irene feels “bound to [Clare] by those very ties of race,” Clare “cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it,” which infuriates Irene (182). And it is not only Clare’s disregard for racial identity and allegiance with which Irene struggles. Her husband detests the “uplift” role he has been put in as a respectable, middle-class physician serving poor blacks: “Lord! how I hate sick people, and their stupid, meddling families, and smelly, dirty rooms, and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways” (186). Brian’s “dislike and disgust for his profession and his country” and his “strange” and “fantastic” notion of escape to Brazil had always threatened the “sense of security, the feeling of permanence from the life which [Irene] had so admirably arranged for them all” (187). Literary scholar Pamela L. Caughie’s argument on the making of the black bourgeoisie in *Passing* is helpful in understanding Irene’s artistry: Irene’s episodes of passing enact not only passing as white but also passing as bourgeois. Clare, in contrast, is self-assured about all of her places in the rooftop restaurant, Harlem, and “Negro Welfare League” events. Clare’s “rootlessness” and “indifference to social conventions” allows her to “[inhabit] her body unself-consciously, not because she is the real thing but because, in Clare, Larsen has created a character who... exists outside the representational conventions of class fictions... [T]he black bourgeoisie ultimately [protects] the passer they disdain” for their own stake in a middle-class identity within the larger black community (527-529). As Caughie claims, Larsen exposes how class is made during a moment in which “newly educated and propertied” blacks threatened to “merge with the intellectual class and render its distinctions of taste, both in the realm of art and in the art of living, indistinguishable from those of the

⁷² While Irene feels “bound to [Clare] by those very ties of race,” Clare “cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it,” which infuriates Irene (182) It is not only Clare’s disregard for racial identity and allegiance that Irene is struggling with as a “New Negro.” Her husband detests the “uplift” role he has been put in as a respectable, middle-class physician serving poor blacks. Brian’s “dislike and disgust for his profession and his country” and his “strange” and “fantastic” notion escape the U.S. for Brazil had always threatened the “sense of security, the feeling of permanence from the life which [Irene] had so admirably arranged for them all” (187).

proliferating black middle class” (531). According to Caughie, Larsen’s text challenges how the artists of the Harlem Renaissance differentiated the goals of black modernist art from the class markers of the black bourgeoisie: as they privilege “aesthetics” as a differentiating practice, ultimately “aesthetics” conflates with the tastes of the bourgeoisie. Like the aesthetically-corrected skyscraper, Irene’s discerning taste consolidates, universalizes, and regulates the visual experience in the name of aesthetic form and modern art. As a formalist skyscraper growing from American “soil,” Irene “must be every inch a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exultation that from bottom to top it is a unit without a single dissenting line,” to use Sullivan’s description of the aesthetically-corrected skyscraper (*Passing* 235, “Tall Office Building” 206). With Clare’s death, the sixth sense no longer counteracts Sullivanian aesthetic vision but becomes absorbed into its “pure forms.”

As art, architecture has a civic duty to what literary scholar Russ Castronovo has called the “beautiful feelings” of democracy, which requires making the familiar and well-established distinction between the cultured and the masses, high art and low. Castronovo reminds us that aesthetic discourses developed in tandem with discourses of citizenship and liberal reform across the U.S. in response to class, immigration, migration, lynching, and popular culture.⁷³ According to Castronovo, aesthetic discourses of creativity, beauty, and art served as tools for fulfilling the national promise of democracy during such unstable times. Sullivan’s writings assert the civic role of aesthetics emergent at the turn-of-the-century and architecture as a particular form of aesthetic expression. As artists, architects are responsible for channeling that feeling appropriately—that is, through the normativization of vision. Like the laws of form and function, democracy is also formulated as a natural law for Sullivan: “Democracy is a vast, slow-urging

⁷³ Castronovo examines how discourses of aesthetics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with academic and reformer participants alike, were governed by civic pedagogies (as well as nationalist critiques).

impulse which little by little and more and more broadly is ever exalting man in spirit and imparting to him a definition of his true image... It is of a drift of nature which tends ever toward perfecting a type and the individuals of the type, until that impulse shall have attained to consummation.”⁷⁴ For both Irene and Sullivan, the fine art of architecture, as a correction of vision, serves to “[elevate] the public taste, [set] forth of the true standards of design, in pure form, a system of education by example, the gradual formation of a background of culture for the masses” (*Autobiography* 326). In correcting vision, the skyscraper norms the common sense of vision: it keeps blackness in its racial-visual place while also universalizing (via aesthetic formalism) race’s visuality and whiteness as the objective, universal standard of good vision.

Larsen’s text questions reformatory civic aesthetic expressions. It reminds us that architecture’s racial sense is violent. Clare’s death underscores the normativizing violence of tasteful vision, the kind of violence Walter Benjamin would identify in a few years as aestheticization. According to Castronovo, “it was never clear which side art, aesthetics, and beauty were on” (64). This violence serves and produces visual knowledge and practices that reinforce modern regimes of racial subjection. In turn, aesthetics normativizes such violence. Formalism must be understood as the attempt to overcome and omit the racial (discursive) structure of vision—to make vision tasteful and race common sense. Race’s visuality secures the privileged role of vision that conditions aesthetic formalism.

The phenomenon of passing demonstrates how the visual formal incongruity of race is not an “exception” to the law of form. Rather, the visual paradox that is racial visuality provides the conditions for the emergence of visual discourses of modern art. What makes modern art appear modern and form appear visual is the discursivity of aesthetic theory. Consequently, race can only emerge as the blind spot of formalist aesthetics. Where Sullivan formalizes aesthetics

⁷⁴ *Kindergarten Chats*, 97.

by writing out vision (and thus race), *Passing* restores the place of racial visibility to aesthetics by formalizing discursivity itself. In doing so, Larsen exposes how the erasure of discursivity formalizes not just appearances but the senses, too. The modernist aestheticization of vision effectively numbs its (racial) sense. Formalism “anaesthetically satisfies the senses,” to use a phrase from Larsen’s other novel, *Quicksand*.⁷⁵ Modern art simultaneously corrects vision, elevates popular taste, and serves democracy, which means art production must use formalist vision, bourgeois taste, and violent citizenship as aesthetic resources. Then the art produced following the advent of modern art must be understood through the anaestheticizing violence of (racial) formalism.

Writing’s Challenge

The modernist commitment to the purity of form has erased the discursivity of racial visibility, including the labor required to build great buildings, enabling the modern consolidation of common sense vision. Landscape architecture scholar and designer Ian Grandison’s work invites us to think about the material conditions of architectural production as a “challenge” to formalism. If, as Grandison observes, form seems to “transcend” because it seems objective, then we need to understand the system through which formalism appears objective. This chapter’s analysis of vision’s common sense aimed to break down formalism’s objective appearance. For Grandison, that “sense” is the patronage system through which high art gets produced. As Grandison reminds us, formalism affirms the patronage system—the capital—that makes high art possible. While my critique focuses on the production of sense that enables the readability of

⁷⁵ *Quicksand*’s mixed-race protagonist, Helga Crane, who had previously denounced religion in favor for a sensuous life of beautiful clothing, objects, social events, and travels, now embraces religion “[because] in its coming it had brought this other thing, this anaesthetic satisfaction for her senses” (118). Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (1928) in *Quicksand and Passing*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

material form (as visual), Grandison remains firmly materialist: “Helped by patrons, geniuses realize... architectural ideals that are worthy of canonization and thereby serve as perpetual models for all design. The built environment might now be understood relative to the history of these exemplary works, its forms infinitely classified according to styles, types, and periods so that cultural-historical context becomes nonessential to the meaning supposedly embodied in objects.”⁷⁶ Grandison offers “radicalizing vernacularism” as a way into “challenging formalism.” Grandison interprets the unstable, problematic definitions of the “vernacular” in architectural history and theory as the optimal site that “draws attention to the arbitrariness of the theoretical criteria that separate architecture and the vernacular and in this way contests the boundaries that architecture must hold sacred to preserve its identity and autonomy.”⁷⁷ To Grandison’s “vernacular” I add the categories of “outsider,” “folk,” and “self-taught.” Simply put, to critique formalism is to critique the discipline. But it is significant that critique is understood as fundamentally “discursive.” According to Grandison, “[t]o recognize that the ‘vernacular’ built environment is situated in a discursive context is not a passive observation, but a kind of call to action to investigate the relations of such environments to discourses that empower some by disempowering others—in other words, to the operation of ideology as discourse” (112). Grandison then goes on to briefly suggest studying “landscapes from below” in contradistinction to formalist architecture.

I draw attention to how Grandison and Darell Fields, and for that matter, Louis Sullivan—all of whom are practicing architects—are compelled to *write* in order to politicize their art. Even architect Peter Blake’s scathing critique that “form follows fiasco” is executed via

⁷⁶ K. Ian Grandison, “Challenging Formalism: The Implication of Contemporary Cultural Theory for Historic Preservation” *Landscape Journal* 18.1 (1999), 30-40, quotation on 38.

⁷⁷ K. Ian Grandison, “Radicalizing Vernacularism: Exploiting the ‘Vernacular’ as Architecture’s Other” *Appendix 4* (1999), 98-119, quotation on 105.

writing.⁷⁸ This chapter opened with an overview of the scholarship that deconstructs the racial frame of modern architecture.⁷⁹ Grandison, Fields, Wilkins, Gleason, Cheng, and Davis' excavation of race in architecture fascinatingly foregrounds the *discursive* moves of architectural aesthetics. It is interesting that some of Fields' criticism is written as stories featuring the signifying monkey.⁸⁰ Despite Sullivan's claim that good art corrects vision, that aesthetic formalism produces fine art, rendering words unnecessary, there seems to be a hope among the aforementioned critics that writing race back into aesthetic theory exposes its racial frame. For example, my close reading of Sullivan's aesthetic theory was my way of writing race back into the consolidation of vision's common sense. While Grandison, Fields, Gleason, Davis, and Cheng do not actually spend too much time theorizing the centrality of writing, their mode of research through the *language* of architecture gestures towards the necessary and fundamental place writing holds for the emergence of modern architecture, or as I argue, for the co-development of race and vision.

I would like to close this chapter deliberating on how writing becomes the mode through which the place of race in architecture can be restored. Following discourses of modernism (which the next chapter will pursue), the traditional training of artists in the western art world has valued an exceptional amount of discursive production; in my own education as an artist it was

⁷⁸ See Peter Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1974). Blake's most interesting criticisms point out the failures of modernist functionalist "fantasies" by historicizing the erasures of labor, albeit very generally. For example, Blake attributes the "fantasy of the open plan" to Frank Lloyd Wright's obsession with Japanese houses; Blake argues Wright "failed" to realize that Japanese houses were built as open spaces because of the "availability of cheap servants/and/or the availability of enslaved wives" (32). While Blake seems to make these kind of points to highlight the ironies and thus failures of modern architecture, I of course would argue that such orientalist or racial knowledges *constitute* the discourses of modernism. For an extended critique of architectural orientalism, see William Gleason's chapter "Keyless Rooms: Frank Lloyd Wright and Charlie Chan" in *Sites Unseen*.

⁷⁹ Perhaps my naming of race as a "frame" provides an interesting counterpart to Anne Cheng's analysis of racial-architectural "skin."

⁸⁰ See the last chapter of *Architecture in Black* and Fields' writings in the unfortunately short-lived journal edited by Fields about race and architecture, *Appendix: Culture/Theory/Praxis*.

expected and assumed that artists must write well and be well-read in art history, theory, and criticism. Yet, art production itself is not understood as a method but an object of study. It is worth noting that even the disciplines of art and architectural history do not typically require art production or design. As art historian James Elkins has repeatedly noted, the study of art does not require competency in art-making.⁸¹ (In contrast, scholars of music history or theory must play well enough to aid their research, and obviously, scholars of literature write often and plentifully.) Even claiming that art contributes to history or philosophy or theory requires a discursive form: writing from artists, art historians, critics, or curators. At the risk of putting it too bluntly, writing is the method for studying art and art's aesthetic position despite formalism's emergence via writing's elision. Though Grandison, Fields, Davis, Gleason, Cheng, and of course Larsen do not say so themselves, writing also seems to intervene in racial formalism. Indeed as I've argued, writing has the potential to countervisualize despite vision's *discursive* construction.

I make these observations to emphasize that production of high modern art is conceivable as a highly literate activity *because vision is constructed by the discursivity of racial visibility*. This dissertation has strategically borrowed the language of form used in high art discourses precisely because vision always already presumes an essential relationship between form and meaning, from Darwin to Sullivan. As Larsen's *Passing* teaches us, formalism, a racial common sense, violently norms vision such that the art that is produced following the advent of modern art must be understood as a product of the violence of (racial) formalism. Thus I claim that form and the kind of sensing that form enables are accordingly visual-racial epistemologies. The goal of a political writing—or critique—is to read beyond visibility and for racial visibility. The next

⁸¹ See James Elkins, *Visual Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2008), *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), and *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, University of Chicago, 2003).

chapter will explore the aestheticization of vision as a common sense that norms us into formal seers and thinkers in modernity. Taking canonical aesthetic theories of modernism, it questions how modernist discourses of “medium specificity” stabilizes racial formalism, which in turn confirms the autonomy of race’s visuality in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Images



Figure 7
Home Insurance Building, Chicago, IL, completed 1884, demolished 1931
Architect: William Le Baron Jenney



Figure 8
Wainwright Building, St. Louis, MO, completed 1891
Architect: Adler & Sullivan



Figure 9
World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, IL, 1893, view from Great Basin



Figure 10
Transportation Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, IL 1893
Architect: Louis Sullivan



Figure 11
Transportation Building, detail



Figure 12
Auditorium Building, Chicago, IL, completed 1889
Architect: Adler & Sullivan



Figure 13
Schlesinger and Mayer Store, Chicago, IL, completed 1899
Carson, Pirie, Scott Store 1904-2007; Sullivan Center 2008-present
Architect: Louis Sullivan

Chapter 4 Modernism's Taste

This chapter picks up where the previous chapter left off: it examines how formalism in the second half of the 20th century hones in on “medium” as the material apparatus through which the form takes shape. This chapter responds to Marshall McLuhan’s well known dictum: “the medium is the message” by examining the modernist logic of “medium specificity.”¹ In the previous chapter I outlined that the formalism that emerges at the turn of the century announces that art should speak for itself. This chapter argues that formalist aesthetics transforms into modernist aesthetics in the refinement of form via discourses of “medium specificity.” It is through the theorization of medium specificity in the mid-20th century that the definition of modern art moves from discourses of formalist identity, where good aesthetic forms render discursivity unnecessary, to discourses of art for art’s sake.

Modernist theories of art and aesthetics in the 20th century place significant value on the role and use of medium. The discourses of modernism assume that “medium” is the mode or tool of expression through which the artwork is created. For example, the medium of painting would be paint, the medium of sculpture might be wood, bronze, or steel. Medium in these cases are material, tactile, and raw. Medium is harder to define in the cases of art forms such as literature, photography, and film; these art forms use modes that are arguably not material but constituted by multiple layers of mediation practices. The medium of literature might be language or word, but it might also be pen and paper or computers. The medium of photography might be light (through which an image is produced, by the exposure of the film to light, for chemical developing) or pixels but it might also be the camera. I provide these examples not to determine

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1994).

what medium means in the fields of the literary and visual arts but to introduce the question of medium's status and logic in the discourses of modernism. Across the critical studies of painting, sculpture, literature, and film, "medium specificity" remains the language through which aesthetic autonomy become possible. Modernism unifies a discourse of medium, and the discourse of medium makes modernism coherent. The modernist definition of medium in effect positions the discourse of medium "before" modernism as limited to concerns regarding the artist's technical expertise in that medium.² In contrast, modernism relies on a reconceptualization of medium that helped endorse the argument of art for art's sake. This chapter argues that modernist discourses place "medium" constitutive to the emergence of art for art's sake, which simultaneously legitimizes the institutional and professional study of modern art and literature.

These discourses developed and remain foundational to the institutional and disciplinary study of modernism in literature, visual arts, photography, and film. Thus this chapter examines how the power of medium specificity revises race's visibility, returning to Kantian aesthetic theory to locate the modernist positioning of racial visibility. This chapter deconstructs how medium specificity works to exercise, regulate, and norm taste. It does so by taking the Kantian concept of taste as a condition of mediation. Approaching the discourse of medium as a question of taste allows me to assess how racial visibility makes vision seem independent from race for the contemporary, so-called post-racial moment. The chapter then reads Kant's aesthetic theory alongside Walter Benjamin's most famous theory of aesthetics, "The Work of Art in the Age of

² There, medium "was" defined as the apparatus or vehicle that the artist skillfully used for the sake of good storytelling and picture-making. As the story of modernism goes, "before" modernism, for example, a painter used his paints skillfully to represent the subject in a realistic, exemplary, or other satisfying ways; the painting is executed for the purpose of being a portrait, picture, or other representational object. With modernism, the painter uses his paints to make a painting that does not have to "be" anything other than a painting. This presumption will be further discussed later in the section.

Its Reproducibility,” which it regards as an intervention in the violence of taste and mediation. In contrast to the modernist definition of media, Benjamin reminds us that media can restore aesthetics—that is, sense. Media can help regain and politicize forms of perception that have been aestheticized. Finally, the chapter closes with an exploration of the paintings of Glenn Ligon. His work reminds us to reconsider what we know as common sense.

Modernism's Media

This section traces the discourse of medium specificity across the most crucial theories of modernism and how it has formalized and institutionalized the disciplinary study of literature, visual art, photography, and film.³ In the fields of literature and the visual arts, it is well-accepted that certain figures helped consolidate the disciplines and institutions as they are known today: for literary studies and university English departments, the New Critics, including John Crowe Ransom, W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., Cleanth Brooks, and their predecessor, T. S. Eliot; for art history and criticism at the university as well as art institutions including museums, Clement Greenberg. While singular figures are less readily named for photography and film, in these fields the university and the museum remain the locations of aesthetic consolidation.

This section will synthesize how across the fields of modernism, “medium” 1) is located as the site of aesthetic meaning such that the meaning of an artwork lies “within itself” rather than in artistic intentions or production contexts (which are understood as “outside” of the artwork) and 2) establishes and legitimizes the artwork as an object of study, which in turn

³ Stefka Mihaylova argues for a radically different genealogy of formalism for theater arts. Unlike the theories of medium specificity that emerge in the mid-20th century which are traced in this chapter, theories of the theatrical medium, as argued by Mihaylova, emerge in the 1990s in response to neoliberal multiculturalism (rather than discourses of art for art's sake). Accordingly, theories of theatrical medium specificity have the power to shake up and revise discourses of formalism, too. Stefka Mihaylova, *Viewers in Distress: Restaging the Socially Marked Body at the Turn of the Century* (publication forthcoming).

establishes and legitimizes the professional study of modern art at institutions such as universities and museums. While my synthesis may seem overly detailed, it is crucial that I draw out the role of “medium specificity” in the fields of English and art/film/photography history and criticism. The following section deconstructs how modernist discourses of medium mediate racial visibility. This synthesis of modernism’s media will allow me to explain how medium remains understood as a universal truth in theories of modern art and aesthetics and thus upholds racial visibility.

It has been well-established that the New Critics centralized literature as the object of study for the discipline of English and introduced “close reading” as a methodology unique and specific for the discipline and the study of literature.⁴ In doing so, they transformed scholars of English “from cultured gentlemen into a profession.”⁵ Literary criticism requires expert professional methods of interpretation: the close reading of literary form and technique condenses aesthetic value to the “medium” that is “language” in literature, consequently solidifying the literary canon. This professional, academic method can only be learned in English departments, consolidating what John Guillory has called the “institutional victory” of New Criticism: the traditional canon is reaffirmed and close reading is determined as the unique “pedagogic strategy” for literary interpretation.⁶ By locating the aesthetic place of literature’s

⁴ See John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and “Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines” in *Disciplinary at the Fin de Siècle* ed. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Robert Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998); Catherine Gallagher, “The History of Literary Criticism,” *Daedalus* 126.1 (Winter 1997); Jane Gallop, “The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading,” *Profession* (2007); Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Andrew DuBois and Frank Lentricchia, *Close Reading: The Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁵ Jane Gallop, “The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading,” quotation on page 183.

⁶ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, quotations on page 141.

medium—language—literature achieves autonomy and its modernist status on one hand, and on the other, English, as a discipline, establishes its institutional and professional place at the university.

It is well known that the New Critics were highly influenced by the work of T. S. Eliot, including his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919).⁷ This essay is known to have opened the door to the insistence that the “personality” of the poet does not give insight into the meaning of the poem. Eliot claims that the inspiration for art production does not come from raw genius personality but the “finely perfected” handling of “medium.” For Eliot, that medium is the mind of the poet; the mind is not the inherent source of good art but rather a product of refinement. As Eliot explains, “the poet has... not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.” The use of scientific language helps Eliot “depersonalize” art and approach its study scientifically. Eliot suggests that the “medium” is like a “transforming catalyst,” “the action which takes place when a finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.” I point how medium emerges here: Eliot positions the “medium” as an “impersonal” mode or tool of the expression which “combines” and “fuses” together “particles” and “elements” into a work of art.

The co-emergence of “medium” and “depersonalization” in Eliot’s work becomes crucial for New Criticism. The New Critical definition of medium develops alongside the exposition of what W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley declared the “intentional fallacy” in one of the foundational texts of New Criticism: *The Verbal Icon* (1954).⁸ Taking cues from Eliot, the

⁷ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), taken from *Modern American Poetry*. Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1999-2014. Web. 27 April 2015.

⁸ W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy” in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (New York: Noonday Press, 1954).

“New” critical aim was to foreground the form of the work, necessarily rendering the artist invisible. The “invisibility” of the artist, a position traced in the previous chapter through the aesthetic theories of Louis Sullivan, was thus maintained in the “New” accounts of formalism. According to John Crowe Ransom, the presumption that meaning comes from the artist rather than the artwork itself “is an odious view” because “it denies the autonomy of the artist as one who interests himself in the artistic object in his own right, and likewise the autonomy of the work itself as existing for its own sake.”⁹ Following Ransom, Wimsatt and Beardsley claim that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (3). Rather, a poem that “works” is one that “is” rather than “means [or intends] to be”: “The poem is not the critics’ own and not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge.” (4, 5). Author or artist intent bears no weight in determining the meanings of form; as argued in the previous chapter, formalist discourses have been constructed to dictate that aesthetic forms “should” speak for themselves.

With the romantic fallacies out of the way, the New Critics are able to locate aesthetic meaning with “scientific” precision in the *language* of literary form. As Wimsatt and Beardsley clarify, “poetry differs from practical messages” because in poetry, as a “feat of style,” “meaning is handled all at once... all or most of what is said or implied is relevant” (4). In contrast, “practical messages... are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention” (5). In order

⁹ Ransom, clearly influenced by Kantian aesthetic theory, goes on to say, “Furthermore, we must regard as uncritical the use of an extensive vocabulary which ascribes to the object properties really discovered in the subject, as: *moving, exciting, entertaining, pitiful, great*, if I am not mistaken, and *admirable*, on a slightly different ground; and, in strictness, *beautiful* itself.” John Crowe Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 13.4 (Autumn 1937).

to distinguish the use of language in the art of poetry from the practicality of linguistic communication, “form” gets defined through its “medium.” For the literary arts, form “should” be constituted by the distinct, unique, self-conscious use of *language* specifically as *medium*: “A poem can be only through its meaning—since its medium is words—yet it is, simply is, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant” (4). Cleanth Brooks, in another foundational New Critic text (*The Well Wrought Urn*, 1947), uses a quote from philosopher W. M. Urban to emphasize the constitutive role of medium in artistic literary production: “The artist does not first intuit his object and then find the appropriate medium. It is rather in and through his medium that he intuits the object.”¹⁰ Meaning is made possible by the medium (language). Accordingly this kind of formalist aesthetics emerges out of the formulation of medium as *the* apparatus of literary art production and the site of aesthetic meaning. As Wimsatt sums up, “complexity of form is sophistication of content” (82). The right handling of the medium produces complex forms and thus sophisticated content.

According to conventional accounts of modern art, “before” modernism, aesthetic value was located in the *illusion* of transparency. As Clement Greenberg observed of the literary and visual arts, before modernist medium specificity, medium was taken as important insofar it expressed the content transparently.¹¹ “Good” artists were good purportedly because their expertise in the medium focalized the content of the work such that the execution and technique was unnoticeable. Simply put, the artworks were successful when the content was apparent in spite of the constructedness of the illusion due to the specificity of the medium. The artist’s task

¹⁰ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947), quotation on page 199.

¹¹ Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I: Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944* Ed. John O’Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Originally published in *partisan Review*, New York 7.4 (July-August 1940).

was to overcome the medium in order to give the illusion. But now that the specific medium of language in the case of the literary arts is located as the site of aesthetic meaning, such meaning can only be interpreted through the “objective,” “systematic” practice of literary criticism. Thus New Criticism answers Ransom’s (and Eliot’s) call for a “scientific” method.¹² As the sciences were becoming disciplines in the university, the New Critics struggled to develop a systematic approach to the study of literature that was analogous to the empiricist methods central to the study of science. On one hand, the definition of language as medium clearly determines a clear object of study. On the other hand, having a clear object of study paves the way for designing a unified method that also legitimizes and validates the profession of “literary critic” at the university. Thus the New Critics are able to establish that the interpretation of literature requires professional critics: “The function of the objective critic is by approximate descriptions of poems, or multiple restatements of their meaning, to aid other readers to come to an intuitive and full realization of poems themselves and hence to know good poems and distinguish them from bad ones” (Wimsatt, 83). According to Brooks, only the “formalist critic” is an expert in analyzing “the work itself,” in contrast to those whom Ransom called “amateurs” dabbling in history, biography, and psychology.¹³ Ransom claims that it the *critic*’s job to “take the poem apart, or analyse it, for the sake of uncovering... [meaningful aesthetic] features.”¹⁴ Wimsatt claims the important jobs critics do by comparing the poem to a mathematical concept: “In each poem there is something... which can never be expressed in other terms. It is like the square root

¹² Ransom embraces the description of criticism’s methods as “scientific” as it refers to the “systematic”: “I do not think we need to be afraid that criticism, trying to be a sort of science, will inevitably fail and give up in despair, or else fail without realizing it and enjoy some hollow and pretentious career. It will never be a very exact science, or even a nearly exact one. But neither will psychology.... Nor sociology... It does not matter whether we call them sciences or just systematic studies...”

¹³ Cleanth Brooks, “The Formalist Critics” *The Kenyon Review* 13.1 (Winter 1951), quotation on page 74; Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.”

¹⁴ Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.”

of two or like pi, which cannot be expressed by rational numbers, but only as their limit. Criticism of poetry is like 1.414... or 3.1416..., not all it would be, yet all that can be had and very useful” (83). Ransom is blunt about explaining why literature needs *formalist* critics in particular: as he scoffs, “not anybody... can do criticism,” not even “eminent” English professors.¹⁵

Hereafter discursive production gets secured and becomes absolutely necessary for the theorization of meaning for literary modernism. The placement of language as aesthetic medium in effect singularizes the medium (language) as the mode through which meaning is accessible. Yet, as already explained in Chapter Three, the claim that meaning lies in the form ironically requires the proliferation of words. As numerous literary scholars have observed, the privileging of language here—which I stress is the privileging of the distinct medium of the literary object—allows English departments to transform into the site for the professional practice of literary criticism.

For the fine arts of painting, sculpture, and to a certain extent, photography and film, the theorization of medium emerged out of arguments for the centrality of abstraction to the development of modern art. It is well-established that Clement Greenberg provided the momentum for theorizing the significance of medium in arguing for the “modernist” features of modern art. Doing so, as we know, structures the history of art as a progress narrative. With modern art the “end” of the narrative, the story of modern art’s development authenticates itself, i.e. the modernist taste for abstraction. Moreover, the modernness of modern art positions medium as essence of the art form, and thus modern art assumes to be self-reflexive (and thus

¹⁵ Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.” Ransom explicitly demands that criticism “be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons—which means that its proper seat is in the universities... Rather than occasional criticism by amateurs, I should think the whole enterprise might be seriously taken in hand by professionals” “who have had formal training in [literary] theory and technique.”

self-authenticating) because it adheres to the essence of its form. These points have been much critiqued and will be discussed later in the chapter.

Greenberg is certainly not the only theorist of the role of medium in the definition of modern art; critics Robert Morris, Richard Wollheim, and Stanley Cavell and artists Roger Hilton and Jules Olitski are some of the other highly influential interlocutors on the question. However, Greenberg's theories remain the touchstone for the discourse of modern art in the discipline of art history as well as in the departmental and exhibitionary organizations of art institutions. In contrast to arguments for realism and figurative art at the time, "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940) famously located the historical condition and justification for abstraction and its fulfilment of modern aesthetics in medium.¹⁶ The essay provides a broad historical account for the development of abstraction through the ways the problematic of medium has been approached for the visual arts. (Arguably, the essay also endorses select artists and rationalizes Greenberg's own taste for Abstract Expressionism.) According to the essay, the visual arts remained "subservient" to the dominant art form since the 17th century—literature—because visual art, like literature, aimed for the illusion of transparency. Visual art "denied" its own "nature" yet became technically sophisticated precisely in order to "conceal" the medium through which the art is produced: "In other words, the artist must have gained such power of his material as to annihilate it seemingly in favor of illusion... Not only could painting imitate sculpture, and sculpture, painting, but both could attempt to reproduce the effects of literature," resulting in what Greenberg calls a "confusion of the arts" (24).¹⁷ In contrast, for Greenberg, music paved the way for progressive and avant garde, i.e. formalist, art:

¹⁶ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon."

¹⁷ The "confusion of the arts" becomes "worse" in the 19th century, as the practice and the discourses of painting and sculpture develop out of the romantic artistic ideals of bourgeois society ("Bourgeois society gave [talented painters] a prescription, and they filled it—with talent," 27). It became avant-garde's task

[I]t was discovered that the advantage of music lay chiefly in the fact that it was an ‘abstract’ art, an art of ‘pure form.’ It was such because it was incapable, objectively, of communicating anything else than a sensation, and because this sensation could not be conceived in any other terms than those of the sense through which it entered the consciousness. An imitative painting can be described in terms of non-visual identities, a piece of music cannot, whether it attempts to imitate or not. The effects of music are the effects, essentially of pure form; those of painting and poetry are too often accidental to the formal natures of these arts. (31)

To Greenberg, abstraction is the “purest” formalism because that abstraction avails exclusive and specific access to sensations. Echoing Kantian aesthetic theory, Greenberg claims that the definition of art thus should be “solely in the terms of the sense or faculty which perceived its effect and by excluding from each art whatever is intelligible in the terms of any other sense or faculty” (31). Defining art through the exclusivity of its sensorial experience is thus the project of abstraction. That is why abstraction cultivates “pure art,” because it self-reflexively and “self-sufficiently” enfolds within it sensorial experience. As Greenberg declares, “it is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself” (32). With the achievement of medium specificity—the purified and self-authenticated version of formalist aesthetics—we have arrived at “the end of art,” as Arthur Danto notoriously proclaimed.¹⁸ According to Danto, “at first only mimesis was art... finally, it became apparent that there was no stylistic or philosophical

to find “new and adequate cultural forms for the expression of that same society without at the same time succumbing to its ideological divisions and its refusal to permit the arts to be their own justification” (28). According to Greenberg, the avant garde’s defocalization of “subject matter” “meant a new and greater emphasis upon form, and it also involved the assertion of the arts as independent vocations, disciplines and crafts, absolutely autonomous, and entitled to respect for their own sakes, and not merely as vessels of communication. It was the signal for a revolt against the dominance of literature, which was subject matter at its most oppressive” (28).

¹⁸ Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

constraints. There is no special way works of art have to be. And that is the present and, I should say, the final moment in the master narrative. It is the end of the story” (47).

As with New Criticism, Greenberg’s account of art not only presumes that medium is not transparent but also makes explicit that this is a quality that “should” be amplified: “To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized. For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically” (32-33).¹⁹ Modernism across the literary and visual arts embraces the opacity (vs. transparency) of the identity of the art object by “deliberately emphasiz[ing] the illusoriness of the illusions which [the artist] pretends to create” (35). Thus “good” aesthetic forms “should” be experienced through “eyesight alone,” to borrow the Greenbergian phrase that art historian Caroline Jones has painstakingly examined in the most thorough singular treatment of Greenberg’s work.²⁰

Greenberg’s modernism has been tremendously influential for the fields of photography and film, fields whose categorization as “art” has been long debated. My point here is not to argue for photography and film as art, but to provide a very brief overview of how the discourse

¹⁹ Greenberg’s chief concern at this point in the essay is to understand how painting in particular embraces the “opacity” of medium through the “progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium” (32). Techniques of shading, tonality, brushstroke, etc. formerly used to illustrate perspective and depth of space are abandoned to “instinctively accommodate” the medium. As a result, “the picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas... A vibrating tension is set up as the objects struggle to maintain their volume against the tendency of the real picture plane to re-assert its material flatness and crush them to silhouettes” (35). Greenberg would later claim in his famous 1965 essay “Modernist Painting” that “[f]latness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.” Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, quotation on page 775. Originally published in *Art & Literature* 4 (Spring 1965): 193-201.

²⁰ Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

of photography and film as art too rely on the specificity of medium.²¹ As argued by Geoffrey Batchen, medium remains the site for distinguishing photography and film's aesthetic autonomy throughout both formalist and postmodernist discourses.²² Furthermore, photography gains its new modernist status through *institutionalized* discourses of medium specificity. In Greenbergian fashion, John Szarkowski, curator of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art from 1962-1991, argued for the fine art status of photography through the inherent capacity of the medium to "take" rather than make pictures. Szarkowski outlines "the history of the medium in terms of the photographers' progressive awareness of characteristic and problems that have seemed inherent to the medium," including that of seeing "The Thing Itself," i.e. image of the camera's subject and not just the subject; of using details to make the picture "real"; and of framing, timing, and perspective, all with aesthetic decisiveness.²³

Szarkowski was one of the most vocal theorists of photography's medium specificity, undoubtedly because he had the platform of MoMA from which to speak. The museum has been much critiqued as the institution for and institutionalization of modern art discourses. In the space of the museum, fine art painting, sculpture, photography, and film establishes, gains, and expresses its aesthetic autonomy. The groundbreaking scholarship of James Clifford, Tony Bennett, Douglass Crimp, Annie E. Coombes, and Timothy Mitchell has paid careful attention to the disciplining power of the museum institution. As they have argued, the construction of the museum as a space of representation (of knowledge, progress, universality, objectivity, democracy) is built upon histories of empire, colonialism, consumerism, tourism, objectification,

²¹ For a fantastic overview of the debates, see James Elkins, ed. *Photography Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007).

²² Formalism locates the nature, identity, essence of photography within itself; postmodernism locates it in the multiplicity and mutability of the medium as culturally contingent. Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

²³ John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc. and the Museum of Modern Art, 1966), quotation on page 7.

spectatorship, and the bourgeois public sphere—i.e., western modernity.²⁴ The inclusion of photography into the fine arts sheds particularly new light on the ways in which art institutions reorganize, develop, and produce aesthetic meaning and value. For Douglass Crimp, the new status of photography as high art has been consolidated by the museum. According to Crimp, photography's history has always been "plural," imbricated in discourses of "information, documentation, evidence, illustration, reportage."²⁵ However, the formation and institutionalization of photography departments in museums consequently "ghettoize" photography into an art form: "The formerly plural field of photography will henceforth be reduced to the single, all-encompassing *aesthetic*... so now photography acquires *its* autonomy as it too enters the museum" (75, Crimp's emphases). Christopher Phillips has gone as far as to say that museums have ironically "reappropriated" what Walter Benjamin called "aura."²⁶ According to Phillips, the reproducibility of the photograph that politically liberated art from aura (as Benjamin argued) is reclaimed by the museum and reinstated into photography.

In the discussions of film as art, theorizing (and critiquing) a specific "film language" has been crucial to the critical modernist project for scholars such as André Bazin, Gilles Deleuze, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, Mary Anne Doane, and Jean-Louis Baudry. While theories of film language do not always make explicit claims about film language (which includes the apparatuses of cinema) as medium, these theories remain invested in locating (and

²⁴ See James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); Douglass Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture, and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994); Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order" in *The Art of Art History* Ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁵ Douglass Crimp, "The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject" in *On the Museum's Ruins*.

²⁶ According to Phillips, museums have unabashedly placed photography's origins in the privileged western pictorial tradition. Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography" *October* 22 (Autumn 1982).

critiquing) the essence of film “within itself” for the purpose of claiming film as modern art. It is well established that the development of auteur theory, in conjunction with French New Wave cinema, the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and what *Cahier* called American “academicism” (the auteur style that emerged due to the so-called autonomy of the Hollywood system), has been heavily influential for the theorization of cinematic aesthetic modernism. Geneviève Sellier has even argued that *Cahiers* invented cinematic aesthetic modernity, constructing cinema as a form of modern art (and integrating within it the gendered culture of New Wave filmmakers).²⁷ Andrew Sarris, who coined the term “auteur theory” in 1962, argues for film’s status as “art” through discourses of abstraction. According to Sarris, cinema’s essence is specific to the form in which it is created and thus is practiced and produced by its own logic, which “cannot be rendered in noncinematic terms.”²⁸ The premise is that what makes film “art” is its self-reflexive production. Film, as art, “is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as art,” which can be seen through formal aesthetic “patterns” that position the director as artist (453). Peter Wollen also focuses on the aesthetic patterns of “oppositions” and “eccentricities” throughout a larger body of the auteur’s work.²⁹ Similarly, the formalist discourses of *mise en scène* put forth by *Cahiers* reinforce the privileged position of the auteur.

Interestingly, Wollen explicitly announces that auteur theory is a tool for interpretation, not film production. In locating aesthetic meaning in the *formal* patterns that emerge throughout the artist’s body of work, Wollen, Sarris, and *Cahiers* establish an institutionalizable film history: historical perspectives and knowledge of an oeuvre is necessary in order to appreciate

²⁷ Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema* Trans. Kristen Ross (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

²⁸ Andrew Sarris, “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), quotation on page 453. Originally published in *Film Culture* (Winter 1962-63).

²⁹ Peter Wollen, “The Auteur Theory” in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972).

the aesthetic meaning of a single film of the auteur. In other words, auteur theory establishes 1) the need for professional and academic film critics; 2) film as a text requiring study and as an art object; and 3) a canon for film studies.

It is indeed a strange twist that the emergence of film studies, art criticism and theory, and literary studies clearly constructs an artist. The specificity of medium in formalist aesthetic modernism continues to render the artist invisible (an argument traced in Chapter Three), but medium specificity also ironically reinstates the artist in forming the canon. Of course, as already well argued, canon formation rationalizes and reinforces the universalist discourses of artistic originality, individuality, freedom, genius, etc. and ignores its historical emergence in contexts of the World Wars, the Cold War, mass immigration, and the Civil Rights movement. The emergence of modernist criticism thus has been rightly critiqued as post-war white supremacy and racial nationalism at a time of contestation.³⁰ Therefore criticism as an academic profession must be contextualized within a moment of radical changes to the university as the traditionally elite student population begins to shift with the increasing admission of women, people of color, veterans, and working class students.

In light of this chapter's focus on medium specificity, the heroic discourses of the artist and the modernist canons merely affirm the *common sense* of artistic autonomy: across the modern arts, aesthetic meaning in *form*. This is no different that the aesthetic logic of racial visuality traced in the previous chapter: race's visuality has set the standard for formalist aesthetics, where aesthetic theory claims that formal appearance "*should*" be identical to its

³⁰ For example, see Karen O'Kane, "Before the New Criticism: Modernism and the Nashville Group," *Mississippi Quarterly* 51.4 (1998); Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997); Robert Stam and Louise Spence, "Colonialism, Racism, and Representation," *Screen* 24.2 (1983); Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, "The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order," *boundary 2* 18.3 (Autumn 1991); D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988).

aesthetic meaning and yet at the same time such a claim *norms* race as visual so that form transparently makes (visual) sense. Medium specificity's aesthetic logic maintains that *form holds identity* but singularizes medium as the mode through which that identity is accessible so that meaning lies exclusively "within itself."

Moreover, this aesthetic logic supposes that the medium constituting the form is *not* transparent, as the next section elaborates. Modernist medium specificity thus engages directly with the *representational* quality of medium, which becomes the content itself. The self-reflexivity of the form is then best evaluated by the specialist critic. For better or worse, the auteurist, Greenbergian, and New Critical modernist revisions to aesthetic formalism brought a new level of intellectual rigor to the practices and disciplines of film, art, and literary criticism. Their modernist theories solidified departments, art institutions, canons, and the role of the professional and academic critic. As Jonathan Harris reminds us, modernist art and criticism developed together; as "self-compositions," modernist art criticism works "to confirm the autonomy of both modernist [art] and criticism."³¹ The next section explores how medium specificity positions what this dissertation has deemed central to modern aesthetic culture: racial visuality.

Medium, Mediation, and Common Sense

Modernism reformulates racial visuality so that the common sense of race is not defined by its visual transparency anymore but by its self-reflexive, self-authenticating representability. If, as argued in Chapter Three, racial visuality suggests that form and meaning should be identical *such that form immediately means*, the modernist reformulation of form and meaning's

³¹ While Harris is speaking specifically about Greenberg and modern painting, I use the statement to apply to all of the modernisms. Jonathan Harris, *Writing Back to Modern Art: After Greenberg, Fried, and Clark* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), quotation on page 72.

relationship is quite different because medium specificity not only recognizes but amplifies the representational quality of medium. It follows, then, that modernist theories of medium specificity place meaning in the *mediation* of form. In the case of early 20th-century formalism, the relationship between form and meaning is valuable when transparent; as Chapter Three argued, the common sense of racial visibility presents race as transparently visual. Thus the formalism that follows from that common sense places aesthetic meaning in the identity, or, immediacy of form. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have observed, the construction of medium's transparency achieves a logic of immediacy, i.e. an experience without mediation: art's success depends on the erasure of the medium through which the art object can be seen.³² While Bolter and Grusin discuss techniques and genres of realism as examples of immediacy (for example, trompe l'oeil, linear perspective, etc.), my earlier analysis of formalist aesthetics has shown that racial visibility makes form appear "immediate."

In contrast, modernist aesthetics depends on a logic of self-conscious, self-reflexive, self-authenticating "hypermediacy." As Bolter and Grusin sum up, "[a]ccording to Clement Greenberg's influential formulation, it was not until modernism that the cultural dominance of the paradigm of transparency was effectively challenged. In modernist art, the logic of hypermediacy could express itself both as a fracturing of the space of the picture and as a hyperconscious recognition or acknowledgement of the medium" (38). (Interestingly, Greenberg's theory of medium specificity that I traced earlier actually claims that such hypermediation expresses "greater immediacy sensations."³³) In the modernist case, it is the medium through which forms are constructed—the mediation of form—that gains the status of "meaning." Aesthetic meaning moves from form, as aesthetic (formalized) art object, to

³² Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

³³ Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," 30.

mediation, as the apparatus of aesthetics (medium's specificity). The common sense of racial visuality no longer assumes transparency in the light of hypermediacy.

To investigate the *mediating* power of medium specificity that redefines the common sense of race's visuality, I turn to Kantian aesthetic theory as a theory of mediation. In this dissertation I have been using Kant's idea of aesthetic judgment as a theory of intelligibility, communicability, and formalization. Through a reading of Kant, more rigorous definitions of immediacy and hypermediacy—that is, mediation—take shape through the shifting functions of “common sense” in aesthetic judgment. Kant's examination of the role of “taste” in aesthetic judgment is significant here. For Kant, taste works as a kind of social barometer, which this chapter examines. As many scholars and critics have argued, theories of modernism have expressed, justified, reinforced, and normed particular tastes, securing the canons we know today. But the aspect of taste that I want to reconsider is the condition of taste rather than its subjects or objects. In effect building on the conclusions of the first chapter on the radical potential of taste to shift common sense, here I track how taste has the capacity to mediate, or commonize, the sense identified throughout the dissertation as racial visuality. The shifting relationship between sense and taste in Kant's aesthetic critique moves the meaning of racial visuality fluidly from visual structure to objective characteristic. Therefore I begin my revision of aesthetic judgment with an examination of the mediating power of taste.

Kant's clearest definition of taste is “the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest” (the “object of such satisfaction is called beautiful”).³⁴ Taste provides the conditions under which aesthetic judgment can happen (e.g., calling an object “beautiful”). The “grounds of the satisfaction” for the subject

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Ed. Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), quotation on page 96.

are not personal and private (“subjective”) but rather set in the “logical” assumption that others can be satisfied, too. Therefore the subject “will speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a property of the object and the object and the judgment logical... although it is only aesthetic and contains merely a relation of the representation of the object to the subject” (97). Thus Kant concludes that the capacity to make such “objective” claims in aesthetic experience depends on the “judgment of taste, with the consciousness of an abstraction in it from all interest, a claim to validity for everyone without the universality that pertains to objects, i.e., it must be combined with a claim to subjective universality.” Kant’s most crucial point is that taste, and thus aesthetic judgment, says more about the sociability of the subject than the object of judgment. It is only because the subject is social that judgment of the “very interesting” (i.e. “to me”) can be communicated in a “disinterested” way. Communicability requires the judgment to relate to the object, to seem objective, to make it possible for others to sense the object too without dismissing the judgment as a private subjective feeling. It is common sense that makes private subjective feelings available into the objective representation of sense—the forms of sense. This disinterestedness that is expressed objectively enables the idea of the universal—that “everyone” should also be able to judge the object (as beautiful, etc.)

Paradoxically, taste seems to be both subjective and objective. Typically we think of subjective and objective as diametrically opposed. However, in Kantian terms, their meanings are rooted in the theorization of the conditions of aesthetic judgment, where the possibility of communicating subjective experience necessarily formalizes the object. Taste allows the subject to take pleasure in his or her senses, and in this way taste is subjective. “It would be folly to dispute the judgment of another that is different from our own,” Kant admits, as “condemning it as incorrect, as if it were logically opposed to our own” (97). Therefore, to say that “everyone

has his own taste (of the senses) is valid” (97). At the same time, there are expectations that there is *agreement* in taste. The subject calls a thing beautiful and can even demand others to agree with him or her because the subject always already incorporates taste, as common sense, into his or her judgment. If they do not concur, the subject “rebukes them... and denies that they have taste, though he nevertheless requires that they ought to have it; and to this extent one cannot say, ‘Everyone has his special taste.’ This would be as much as to say that there is no taste at all, i.e., no aesthetic judgment that could make a rightful claim to the assent of everyone” (98). Kant provides the example of a party to clarify: when “someone... knows how to entertain his guests with agreeable things (of enjoyment through all the senses), so that they are all pleased, [it is said] that he has taste” (98). This kind of taste, while experienced privately and subjectively, is satisfying because it is “objectively universally valid”: the appreciation of the object does not come from the object itself but from the recognition that the object represents that which is universal (e.g. that which is recognized as beautiful).

Simply put, taste here demonstrates aesthetic judgment “in relation to sociability” (98). The seemingly paradoxical satisfaction of the subjective sensorial experience of taste, represented objectively, *makes possible aesthetic culture*. Simply put, aesthetic culture postulates a “universal voice” that is not mediated by subjective sensation but is “an aesthetic judgment that could *at the same time* be considered valid for everyone. The judgment of taste does not itself postulate the accord of everyone... it only ascribes this agreement to everyone, as a case of the rule with regard to which it expects confirmation not from concepts *but only from the consent of others*. The universal voice is thus only an idea (what it rests on will not yet be investigated here)” (101, *emphases mine*). What makes taste, and aesthetic judgment, so perplexing to Kant is *that there is no “when” or “where” that can be located*: as he questions whether or not

(subjective) sensation precedes judgment (of the object; i.e. universal communicability) or vice versa (in Section 9), what Kant is able to determine is that the judgment of taste allows the object to be recognized (as universally representable) *immediately* as it is sensed (subjectively enjoyed).³⁵ Kant's use of terms that express simultaneity ("at the same time," "in unison," "in combination") shows his struggle with defining "when" taste is acquired, used, and accounted for and "where" taste comes from. My point here is that in the process of attempting to locate the "when" and "where"—to define the possibilities of the *a priori*—Kant theorizes what seems *immediate* because *unifying*. "Immediate" here describes how judgment, sensation, and understanding emerge "in unison" because there is a direct, uninterrupted, intuitive, instant quality to conceptual unification. As Kant himself put it in the quotation offered earlier, "at the same time" he explicates the network of taste, a theorization of common sense becomes necessary: if judgments of taste require objects, subjective pleasure, objective representation, and universal validity, then the judgment of taste assumes common sense.³⁶ Again the immediacy of common sense 1) enables judgment and also 2) regulates the principle of (objective) representability and 3) avails the (subjective) sensation of representation. As Kant scholar John Kaag clarifies, this "three-pronged assertion" determines that common sense is "equally" a

³⁵ As Kant explains: "Now this merely subjective (aesthetic judging of the object, or of the representation through which the object is given, precedes the pleasure in it, and is the ground of this pleasure in the harmony of the faculties of cognition; but on that universality of the subjective conditions of the judging of objects alone in this universal subjective validity of satisfaction, which we combine with the representation of the object that we call beautiful, grounded. That being able to communicate one's state of mind, even if only with regard to the faculties of cognition, carries a pleasure with it, could easily be established (empirically and psychologically) from the natural tendency of human beings to sociability. But that is not enough for our purposes. When we call something beautiful, the pleasure that we feel is expected of everyone else in the judgment of taste as necessary, just as if it were to be regarded as a property of the object that is determined in it in accordance with concepts; but beauty is nothing by itself, without relation to the feelings of the subject. However, we must reserve the discussion of this question until we have answered another: how and whether aesthetic judgments *a priori* are possible." (103)

³⁶ See Section 20 in particular.

faculty, a norm, and a feeling.³⁷ “Common sense” is the name for all the things that are happening in unification so that the relationships among taste, objectivity, and common sense appear immediate. Put differently, *common sense mediates*.³⁸ Taking common sense as mediation provides insights into how immediacy gets expressed in tautology. As Kant writes, without pause,

[t]his indeterminate norm of a common sense is really presupposed by us: our presumption in making judgments of taste proves that. Whether there is in fact a common sense, as a constitutive principle of the possibility of experience, or whether a yet higher principle of reason only makes it into a regulative principle for us first to produce a common sense in ourselves for higher ends, thus whether taste is an original and natural faculty, or only the idea of one that is yet to be acquired and is artificial, so that a judgment of taste, with its expectation of a universal assent, is in fact only a demand of reason to produce such a unanimity in the manner of sensing, and whether the ‘should,’ i.e., the objective necessity of the confluence of the feeling of everyone with that of each, signifies only the possibility of coming to agreement about this, and the judgment of taste only provides an example of the application of this principle—this we would not and cannot yet investigate here; for now we have only to resolve the faculty of taste into its elements and to unite them ultimately in the idea of a common sense. (124)

Sense is common immediately as it is commonizing,: sense is always already unifying.

³⁷ John Kaag, *Thinking Through the Imagination: Aesthetics in Human Cognition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

³⁸ Typically when Kant scholars discuss the mediary aspects of aesthetic judgment, they focus on the ways in which the art object, as form, mediates. Jacques Rancière does recognize the mediating power of common sense but does not spend too much time developing this point, as his focus is on examining Lyotard’s politicized reading of the Kantian sublime. See Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Trans. Steven Corcoran (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009).

Thus far this dissertation has tracked the common sense of racial visibility through the discourses of matching up, identity. The description of a runaway is performed in such a way to match up to his or her apparent visual identity. Natural selection presumes, observes, and develops an evolutionary theory of forms matching their biological functions. Early formalist aesthetics dictates that form and function match up identically so that formal designs speak (function) for themselves. And finally, modernist aesthetics declares art's autonomy through medium-specific self-reflexivity. For this dissertation Kantian aesthetic theory has been valuable in providing an account of the intelligibility of that "matching up": common sense. The kind of formalism traced in the previous chapter can be seen as a demonstration of the hegemony of Kantian aesthetic judgment: the making of the art object in claiming the "objective" aesthetic value of form, which makes the subjective taste recede so that form's meaning and race's visibility *make sense*. But the key point I'm making in this chapter is that common sense necessarily is a tautology. My close reading of taste above has analyzed how such a theory expresses itself in terms of tautology; Kant is well aware of this. The structure of tautology is, as I have been arguing throughout the dissertation, the structure of racial visibility: race is visual (and this is understood as common sense) because vision has been structured by (the common sense of) race. Finally, because racial visibility is common sense, we have acquired a taste for it. Tautologically, race tastes visual because the common sense of racial visibility unifies vision.

What we learn through the Kantian theory explored so far is why it makes sense for modernism to shift aesthetic value from the demand for transparency (because race is not necessarily visual) to autonomy (to refuse the co-structuring of race and vision). The common sense of racial visibility is simultaneously and equally a condition, a feeling, and an ideal norm, and racial visibility moves fluidly throughout these statuses of common sense. Consider the

moves. The status of common sense as *condition* (here, the mediating structure that makes race visual) is regulated by and normed for racial visibility precisely because race is not necessarily visual. Consequently, making visibility identical to visibility becomes the aim. In other words, in its normed state visibility is understood as visibility. The things that appear visible are normed into being visual. Here, the aspect of common sense through which racial visibility works is as *ideal norm*. Henceforth the work of the common sense is to position vision as an apparatus through which race, among other objects, is not only to be represented (in communication) but also to be agreed upon as commonly sensed. Thus racial visibility becomes a *feeling*, too. As the common sense of race unifies with a taste for race, it seems like racial visibility is a property of the object rather than the sense that conditions the ability to see race. As a result, vision appears autonomous from race though it is not. Race appears as an object of vision, obscuring how race and vision are co-developed senses. Common sense (now, racial visibility) makes race visually objective, allowing even the most astute critiques of race's visibility to miss how the tautology of race and vision disguises the relationship between vision and race as an overdetermination or coincidence.

If the common sense (racial visibility) necessarily appears in the structure of tautology, of course the discourse of aesthetic autonomy is not only another demonstration of but an expansion of the tautology. Racial meaning is now also consolidated by the apparatuses and techniques of vision (mediation) on top of visibility's transparent and unifying (immediate) quality. Racial visibility is no longer simply a common sense logic; it mediates—"tastes"—too. Now, vision seems autonomous from race *because* race is structured by vision. Art seems autonomous from its contexts *because* art's autonomy is structured by taste (for abstraction, aestheticization, visibility, race). Theories of medium and mediation can be understood as further demonstrations

and proliferations of the logic of racial visibility. The ability to claim such a thing as medium specificity also emerges out of the attempt to commonize sense, to mediate vision independently from race.

Politicizing Taste

This dissertation has been tracking the common sense of race and vision and critiques of such aestheticization. At this point I turn to exploring the restoration of sense. This section brings together Kantian common sense with Benjaminian aesthetic politics. Through Kantian aesthetic judgment, we have learned that common sense, and racial visibility, mediate. Next, I analyze how Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility" can be read as a power critique of common sense.³⁹ While Benjamin is not writing about race, I develop his theory of apperception as a political alternative to the common sense of racial visibility. Benjaminian aesthetic theory provides a useful intervention because he so forcefully links aesthetics back to sense. I take the essay's sensorial and apperceptive explication of aesthetics as a way to revise, i.e. politicize Kantian aesthetics. The stakes of tracking aesthetic theory in this famous essay are on the ways in which aesthetics transform and create racial meaning through technologies of production. The significance of Benjamin's contribution is that the form of art is what makes "aesthetic" definition possible; art is not merely a function of aesthetic ideology. Rather, art is the mode through which sense perception can be reconstructed. Using this insight, I will assess how aesthetics has mobilized a racial politics and legitimized racial subjection.

My reading of the "Work of Art" essay focuses its broad account of *human perception*. Benjamin provides a definition of art through the concept of aura and its "decay," famously

³⁹ I use the most recently translated second version of the essay in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3 1935-1938* Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002). Essay translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn.

using film as a case study. Benjamin begins this account by describing the conditions that destroy “aura.” According to Benjamin, when the reproducible “mass existence” of the artwork substitutes its “unique existence,” “aura” no longer factors in to the definition of art. For example, art forms such as photography and film are produced by technological reproduction and distributed and experienced in mass. These art forms do not need to be experienced in specific and unique locations or spaces. The reproducible form itself denies the artwork its original status as authentic or unique. Technological reproducibility “emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual” (106). Ritual, a “theology of art” that has engendered “the doctrine of *l’art pour l’art*,” “in turn gave rise to a negative theology, in the form of an idea of ‘pure’ art, which rejects not only any social function but any definition in terms of a representational content” (106). Such discourses of art for art’s sake—which Benjamin situates historically as aesthetic discourses—are exactly what I have identified as formalism in the previous chapter.

However, the decay of aura not only transforms the definition of art but also human sense perception: “The stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose ‘sense for sameness in the world’ has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique” (105). Aura’s destruction is the “signature” of a radical change in perception. In turn, perception too changes the meaning art, as uniqueness no longer defines art. In the age of technological reproducibility, where human sense perception uses “sameness” to redefine art, “medium” takes on an interesting status: “if changes in the medium of present-day perception can be understood as a decay of the aura, it is possible to demonstrate the social determinants of that decay” (104). While this statement is certainly making a point about the effect of new media on aura (that technological reproduction de-authorizes the unique existence of art), the most interesting part is that medium is positioned as a

perceptual means. Medium is an apparatus that can clarify the transformation of sensorial experience for Benjamin. This is radically different from the modernist definition of medium. Medium is not simply a tool for art production. Rather, medium can determine the way the senses work.

In focalizing the historical changes in human modes of perception of art objects, we can see that “medium” is placed as a defining factor: “*Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception.* The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history” (104, Benjamin’s emphasis).⁴⁰ Because of new media, art no longer needs to be defined by its “unique existence in a particular place”—that is, its “authenticity... the idea of tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing... *The whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological—and of course not only technological—reproduction*” (103, Benjamin’s emphasis). At the same time, medium in and of itself is ambivalent. As already well-discussed by other scholars, technological media, especially the camera apparatus, can exploit and aestheticize politics, or it can “*establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus*” (117, Benjamin’s emphasis). Of course, we know that technological media has not only instrumentalized but emerged out of racial and gendered practices. Brian Hochman, Alice Maurice, Kara Keeling, Jacqueline Goldsby, Alys Weinbaum, and Harryette Mullen have provided some of the most thorough accounts.⁴¹ Famously, feminist

⁴⁰ For example, “the era of the migration of peoples... which saw the rise of the late-Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis... developed not only an art different from that of antiquity but also a different perception” (104).

⁴¹ See Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic origins of Modern Media Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Alice Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007); Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and*

film scholars including Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane have explicated the gendered and subjecting practices of filmmaking.⁴²

Now we can see that the investigation of art media is an investigation into the historical organization of the human senses. To put it in terms of this dissertation's goal in examining the making of common sense vision: the medium of the work of art provides the conditions for the making of sense. And when artwork is no longer defined by its uniqueness, due to a change in medium, art can be "*based on a different practice: politics*" (106, Benjamin's emphasis).

Benjamin states that the doctrine of art for art's sake is

the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology... This is evidently the consummation of *l'art pour l'art*. Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. *Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.* (122)

Here, the power of medium lies not in the self-reflexivity of formalization but in the transformation of sensorial experience "through"—*mediated by*—the artwork. It is *mediation* that defines the aesthetic qualities of the work because it holds the politicizing potential to reorganize the senses. And as I have outlined above, racial visibility is the mediation that has defined the aesthetic qualities of the artwork.

Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Alys Weinbaum, "Racial Aura: Walter Benjamin and the Work of Art in a Biotechnological Age" *Literature and Medicine* 26.1 (Spring 2007); Harryette Mullen, "Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness" *diacritics* 24.2-3 (Summer-Fall 1994).

⁴² I refer to the groundbreaking articles by Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18 and Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body" *October* 17 (1981): 22-36.

For Benjamin, it is the modern move towards mass forms of perception, “through” the experience of artworks by the masses, that brings forth possibilities for artistic politics. Admittedly utopian, Benjamin claims that there are possibilities in mass, collective sense perception of the artwork because “this mode of reception gives the masses no means of organizing and regulating their response”; things that could be received dangerously at the individual level can be prevented or invalidated when received collectively (in fact, collective spectatorship has the potential to counter and “heal” “mass psychosis”) (117). Regarding the specific techniques of inducing collective sense perception, Benjamin briefly explores through technological media such as the camera apparatus as they reveal what the human senses cannot perceive; for example, the close-up, slow motion, and long shot are “ingenious” functions that “[bring] to light entirely new structures of matter” and can free and manipulate space and time (117). Film is a mediator and mediation between the camera apparatus and actors and audiences, as it catches what cannot be seen and temporally and spatially experienced in the present. This new “optical unconscious” access gives us access the “deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes” in the “actual world,” too (118). The experience of watching films and of spectatorship provides a radically different perceptual experience in each individual viewer because it occurs in mass, collective form: “nowhere more than in the cinema are the reactions of individuals, which together make up the massive reaction of the audience, determined by the imminent concentration of reactions into a mass. No sooner are these reactions manifest than they regulate one another” (116).

Aesthetics should now be defined as the theory of perception, which can be instrumentalized just as much for radical politics as for imperialist warfare. As I have traced in Chapter Three, aesthetic formalism has taken aesthetic theory into aestheticization: the

assimilation yet erasure of racial visibility in the theorization of aesthetic form demonstrates the aestheticization—common sense—of racial visibility. This dissertation has deconstructed how the common sense of race’s visibility in diverse articulations of aesthetic logics (runaway ads, evolutionary theory, skyscraper theory) aestheticizes race and vision. This dissertation has also explored how works of art (visual and literary) provide critiques of the common sense of race and vision. Benjamin’s stance on media aesthetics is now introduced as a response to the aestheticizing violence of formalist and modernist aesthetic theories.

I read the aesthetic theory put forth in “The Work of Art” as a revision of Kantian aesthetic judgment in particular as it can now be used to politicize the making of racial-visual sense. In the first chapter, I began laying a ground for revising the Kantian principle of taste as something that could gesture towards a politicalized common sense. To restate, Kant does not seek to understand the origins of taste, but rather how universal understanding of taste singularizes the plural possibilities of sensorial experience. According to my earlier readings of Kant, to focus on the commonizing power of sense that constitutes common sense is to pinpoint taste as the singular demonstration of the common sense. In this chapter, Kant’s aesthetics has been useful in examining the structure of the common sense whose tautological expression continues to commonize sense. As discussed in-depth earlier, sense is always common and commonizing “at the same time.” This analysis of common sense reveals how and why there is no such position to see that which is in the field of vision not already structured by the view that vision provides.

Benjaminian aesthetic critique provides a way to re-calibrate common sense for political work. In Benjaminian terms: if sense (vision and race) has been aestheticized and also aestheticizes (is common and also commonizes), such that aesthetic taste serves to both

demonstrate and confirm a common sense (of race and vision that makes race appear visual because vision is racial and vice versa), the media of modern art may be able to readjust taste for a different kind of common sense—a politicized aesthetics—precisely because aesthetic culture is a *public* culture. In terms of this dissertation: as vision and race is common and also commonizes, and as aesthetic taste serves to both demonstrate and confirm racial visibility, media can readjust taste precisely because by Kantian definition taste is publicly determined and normed.

As I have argued in Chapter One, the communicability—specifically, describability and readability of racialized bodies in runaway slave advertisements—of aesthetic judgment, conditioned by and affirmative of common sense, supposes, demonstrates, confirms, and norms the public sphere. In Benjamin’s aesthetics, it is through collective, mass reception that transforms aesthetic culture. The relationships among sense, artworks, and viewers are what transforms aesthetics. This form of modern reception and redefinition of aesthetics politicize public culture, too; the new media of art has the potential to create a public culture that does not serve bourgeois capitalism.

This chapter is indebted to the critical scholarship on the hegemonic relationship between public and aesthetic culture. In the “public” institutions of the university and the museum, aesthetics has been politicized primarily through the critique of knowledge production, disciplinary formation, and exhibition practices. Such critiques are foundational to the questions pursued in this chapter. Though the critical route I take to politicize aesthetics is through the examination of how racial visibility works as common sense, broadly, these critiques of aesthetics have set up the frameworks and vocabularies through which this chapter questions the racializing power of aesthetic discourses.

For example, critical approaches to the discourses of primitivism and orientalism have provided occasions to critique the discipline of art history as a narrative of Western modernity and the avant-garde, as housed in the modern museum institutions that claim to serve a public. James Clifford's well-known examination of the notorious 1984 Museum of Modern Art exhibition "'Primitivism' in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" underscored how modernist claims of "affinities" between western modern art (such as Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror*, 1932) and non-western artifacts (such as a Kwakiutl half-mask, production date and context deliberately obscured by curators) universalizes culture, politics and history. Such claims are based upon formalism, that is, upon a *visual* discourse of "resemblance (an effect actually created by the camera angle). In this exhibition a universal message, 'Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,' is produced by careful selection and maintenance of a specific angle of vision" (193).⁴³ Ikem Stanley Okoye has called such assimilations of African, Indigenous, and Asian art into modern art discourses a "disciplinary generosity" that only serves the "function" of narrating the modernity of the U.S. and Europe for the sake of western art's aesthetic autonomy, i.e. modernism.⁴⁴ In claiming art for art's sake, modern (western) art "masks (apparently with success) its own 'function'... ineluctably as a site for the narration of (and dialogue with) a privileged national history" (611). Furthermore, due to the philosophical framework of Western avant-garde modernism, the art produced by the "Third World" in the contemporary so-called global context can only be philosophically positioned as an "arrière-

⁴³ James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern" in *The Predicament of Culture*.

⁴⁴ Ikem Stanley Okoye, "Tribe and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 78.4 (December 1996), quotation on page 611. Following the argument of "form and function" in the previous chapter, no wonder Okoye's critique has to use the dictum.

garde,” according to Shigemi Inaga.⁴⁵ The concept of the avant-garde is a “one-way dispossession”: “non-Western culture provides the Western avant-garde with an alibi but, in so doing, the non-Western avant-garde is uprooted, and is capable of basing itself upon its own culture only through reference to the Western avant-garde” (69).

The scholarship in Kymberly Pinder’s *Race-ing Art History* and Kobena Mercer’s *Annotating Art’s Histories* anthologies confront and redefine such self-serving narratives of art.⁴⁶ These anthologies provide overviews of and alternatives to traditional (western/modernist) ways of understanding primitivism and orientalism. For example, the anthologies include examinations of how modern artists of color including Romare Bearden, William Henry Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, and Wilfredo Lam engaged with, participated in, borrowed, critiqued, and revised the discourses of primitivism and orientalism. Within the museum institution, there have been efforts to exhibit the canon of modern art in way that acknowledges its historical contexts or to expand the canon to claim “multiple modernities,” to use the title of the major 2013-2015 Centre Pompidou exhibition in Paris featuring the National Museum of Modern Art collection.⁴⁷ This exhibition aims to be seen as a corrective to the ways in which “the great Greenbergian narrative... eliminate[d] from Modernism its original hybridity, its twofold definition—formal and social-minded, savant and popular.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Shigemi Inaga, “The Impossible Avant-Garde in Japan: Does the Avant-Garde Exist in the Third World? Japan’s Example: A Borderline Case of Misunderstanding in Aesthetic Intercultural Exchange,” Trans. Margaret J. Flynn *Comparative and General Literature* 41 (1993).

⁴⁶ See *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History* Ed. Kymberly N. Pinder (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) and the four volumes of *Annotating Art’s Histories: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in the Visual Arts* Ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005-2008).

⁴⁷ Of course, the general concept of multiple modernities has been in debate for far longer. This concept emerges out of the critiques of narratives of western modernity, which we are most familiar with through the work of Frederic Jameson, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and others.

⁴⁸ Quotation from one of the curators of the exhibition and a curator at the National Museum of Art, Michael Gauthier in an essay from the catalog. Michael Gauthier, “A Brief History of Modernism” in *Multiple Modernities 1905-1970* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2014), quotation on page 34.

Art activism has accompanied the rise of the modern museum institution. Artist coalitions and collectives such as Spiral, Art Workers Coalition, Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, Guerilla Girls, and Gran Fury, as well as numerous individual artists, are well-known for protesting institutional racism, sexism, and homophobia and for making demands for the integration of diverse and political artworks made by women artists and artists of color into the museum. It was against and alongside black art activism that the Studio Museum in Harlem, the first black art institution including a collection, exhibitions, and artist residency program, opened in 1968. Artists' protests and demands have been made through the artworks themselves, by pulling out of slated exhibitions, and through discursive production such as statements, essays, and criticism. As Kellie Jones has stressed, black activist art groups were not only demanding institutional representation but also "proper scholarship and criticism... [A]ctivists soon realised that poorly-conceived exhibitions were just as bad as not showing at all. Artists' careers foundered and disappeared if they were not written about, discussed, and cultivated. Where were the writers, curators, scholars, then, who could do for black artists what Clement Greenberg and others had done for American painters at mid-century?"⁴⁹

Alternative art, criticism, and curatorial practices have also problematized the discourse of aesthetic autonomy, the power of art institutions, and the progress narratives of art history through creative critiques of the public sphere as it is transforming from the classical model of

⁴⁹ Kellie Jones has done a fascinating study of black arts activism in response to the limited opportunities for black artists to show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The heart of her essay claims that black painter Frank Bowling responded to the lack of writing on black artists by writing criticism himself. Jones places Bowling as an significant figure in the emergent theoretical discourse of black art and black aesthetics. Kellie Jones, "'It's Not Enough to Say 'Black is Beautiful'': Abstraction at the Whitney 1969-1974" in *Discrepant Abstraction* Ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2006), quotation on page 165.

bourgeois public representation to a model of the neoliberal markets.⁵⁰ According to these critiques, because the institutions that support and cultivate formalist, modernist aesthetic discourses, modern art serves to unify a bourgeois public sphere. Thus, as Simon Sheikh argues, critical art and curatorial practices confront “high modernism’s ideals of a singular, autonomous and formally complete artwork” and are situated “in a heterogeneous field, where the significations and communications of the work shift in relation to space, contexts and publics.”⁵¹ Artists such as Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser, Coco Fusco, and Fred Wilson have made the most exciting interventions in the normative discourses of the public, universality, and audience through the critical approaches to art production, exhibition, and distribution known as “institutional critique.” Not surprisingly, ample discursive production accompanies such performative, installation, and documentary forms of critique.

While this dissertation is indebted to the scholarship, criticism, and artwork outlined above, this chapter politicizes modern aesthetics by focusing on the culture of sense rather than the public. According to Benjamin, art’s task is to address modernity critically. As Benjamin scholar Susan Buck-Morss argues: to transform the meaning of “aesthetics” by making it a political concept in order to challenge “the tradition of modernism” that has actually

⁵⁰ Critics Simon Sheikh, Frazer Ward, Chantal Mouffe, Gregory Sholette, and Miwon Kwon engage with Habermasian theories of the public sphere to critique what is called, for better or worse, “public art.” See Simon Sheikh, “In the Place of the Public Sphere? Or, the World in Fragments” and “Public Spheres & The Functions of Progressive Art Institutions,” *republicart.net* (2004); Frazer Ward, “The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity,” *October 73* (Summer 1995); Chantal Mouffe, “For an Agonistic Public Sphere” in *Democracy Unrealized* Ed. Okwui Enwezor (Ostfeldern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje-Cantz, 2002); Gregory Sholette, “Some Call it Art: From Imaginary Autonomy to Autonomous Collectivity” http://www.gregorysholette.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/06_somecallit1.pdf (2000); Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) and “Public Art as Publicity,” *republicart.net* (2002).

⁵¹ Sheikh calls for a deeper consideration of artworks “that do not employ the notion of a bourgeois public sphere, but rather different fragments, camp- and/or counter-publics. Or at least, different ideas of public, be they utopian or heterotopian.” Simon Sheikh, “In the Place of the Public Sphere? Or, the World in Fragments.”

“anaestheticized” or numbed the senses.⁵² Art that restores the senses can disrupt the kind of aesthetics that is “the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology. This is evidently the consummation of *l’art pour l’art*” (Benjamin, 122).

Racial Apperception

As I have argued in the previous chapter, aesthetic formalism positions aesthetics a priori art (formalist aesthetics provides ideal criteria for good modern art). But in the Benjaminian perspective, art defines aesthetics and not the other way around. Benjamin’s essay enables a new definition of aesthetics that is not a normativizing sensibility or rationality but a theory of sensorial restoration “through” art. This section explores the “apperceptive habits” that can restore aestheticized vision—what this dissertation has been taking as the common sense of race and vision, and what this chapter has been taking as the violent mediation of racial visibility. I return to the ways in which apperceptions, as defined by Benjamin, renovate the sensorial experience of modern art, and art made in modernity, by directly responding to the aestheticizing violence of racial visibility.

Benjamin’s comments regarding specific techniques of art’s aesthetic politics is limited to a brief discussion in section XVII on “apperception,” a concept left unclearly defined by Benjamin and untreated by most scholars.⁵³ In this section, Benjamin explains how the reception of artworks can be thought of in “twofold manner: by use and by perception. Or, better: tactilely and optically” (120). Perhaps it is no coincidence that the example of art Benjamin uses to

⁵² Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered” *October* 62 (Autumn 1992), quotation on page 5.

⁵³ Rodolphe Gasché explores the phrase “the deepening of apperception” from *The Work of Art* essay but does not quite theorize apperception distinctly from sense perception. See Rodolphe Gasché’s chapter “The Deepening of Apperception: On Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Film” in *The Stelliferous Fold: Toward a Virtual Law of Literature’s Self-Formation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

elaborate this point is architecture. Chapter Three took architecture as a demonstration of formalist aesthetics and then examined Nella Larsen's *Passing* as a critique of formalist architecture. It is fitting that Benjamin and Nella Larsen both use architecture to open up a discussion on sensorial alternatives to aestheticized politics. According to Benjamin, when one encounters an artwork such as a "famous building," the tactical, use experience of the building is distinct from its optical perception. In fact, the tactical use of the building "determines" the visual sense of it because "habitual" use invites more careful attention to the work than the spontaneous, "casual noticing" of seeing the work, "[f]or the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means—that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit" (120, Benjamin's emphasis). Art that mobilizes via habit, through distraction, can be considered an experience of "apperception":

The sort of distraction that is provided by art represents a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of apperception... *Reception in distraction—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception—finds in film its true training ground.* Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception. In this respect, too, it proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics. (120, Benjamin's italics)

Apperceptions are induced and made legible by the effects of the apparatuses of technological reproducibility—of new mediums and media. The art produced in these mediums and media make different kinds of sense. Simply put, the apperception that emerges from mass reception reformulates aesthetics back into the theory of the senses.

Alys Weinbaum has argued that race makes itself both present and absent in the age of technological reproducibility because race has been constructed through discourses of authenticity.⁵⁴ Both the denial and the authenticity of the biological existence of race demonstrates the “aura” of race in the Benjaminian sense: “the paradoxical authenticity of the art object in the age of mechanical reproducibility is captured by and condensed in the concept of aura, the paradoxical persistence of race in our supposedly post-racial moment” in the concept Weinbaum calls “racial aura” (217). Following Weinbaum’s point on race’s “constitutively auratic” character, I consider apperception as a way to illuminate the constitutive role of racial visibility in the aestheticization of vision. In the present post-racial colorblind moment, it is racial visibility that makes it common sense to perform the visual (racial) practice that is known as the policing of black lives on one hand, and on the other, to produce and consume skin care and cosmetic products that conflate skin color with racial and ethnic characteristics. Perhaps apperception has the power to elucidate the constitutive role racial visibility has played in the common sense of vision we see through today so that we can separate the visibility of race from its visibility. Claiming apperception can reinvent the visual-racial “habits,” the taste we have for race. And apperception can train us to sense uncommonly, too.

Visual Literacy

To explore how apperceptions are induced by the work of art, I return to the work of artist Glenn Ligon. In the first chapter, I argued that his *Runaways* series (1992) theorizes racial discursivity. The print series appropriates not simply the language of runaway slave ads but the

⁵⁴ Weinbaum is the only scholar to spend a significant amount of time developing a Benjaminian theory of race. For Weinbaum, “the age of technological reproducibility” is the current post-racial moment where biotechnologies of reproduction seemingly paradoxically both disavow and depend on historically biological discourses of race.

mechanical reproducibility of black printedness and the “publication” of visual-racial common sense. This racializing publication modernizes vision by authorizing an account of vision that omits its discursive constitution—by making vision common sense. Thus Ligon’s attention to the discursivity of common sense race/vision (not slavery in general, as most critics have argued) exposes how racial description “makes sense” visually, transforming racial blackness into visibility. In this chapter, I turn to some of Ligon’s best known artworks: his 1990s text paintings that excerpt passages from literature which art critics have called “representative” of African American experience. The paintings include quotations from Zora Neale Hurston’s 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (each of the following phrases constitute a separate painting: “I remember the very day that I became colored” (Figure 14), “I do not always feel colored,” “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background,” and “I am not tragically colored”); Jean Genet’s 1959 play *The Blacks* (“I’m turning into a specter before your very eyes and I’m going to haunt you”); and Nella Larsen’s 1928 novel *Passing* (“Passing”) (Figure 15). Each of these paintings, approximately the size of a door, is executed by stenciling the text onto a white canvas, panel, or even an actual door with black oilstick (though there are some paintings that use white oilstick). Due to the rich, waxy, crayon-like quality of oilstick, the paintings have a highly textured, rough surface. While the text at the top of the painting is clearly legible, the text gradually becomes unreadable towards the bottom; as a result of the accumulation of the oil medium on the stencils as the stenciled words are repeated (or drawn) through the clogged stencil all the way down to the bottom of the canvas, the graphics of each letter appear as abstract, pattern-like patches of black and white paint. In some of the paintings, the bottom of the canvas appears almost all black.

Until recently, critics tended to talk about Ligon's text paintings in terms of the content of the text because of the way he appropriates the language of other sources to constitute the "image" of the artwork. I have already provided an overview of how Ligon's use of language, and what the language expresses, remains central to discussions about the meaning of his work in critical academic and art world discussions in Chapter One and thus will not repeat them here. Recently, however, scholars, critics, and curators have paid attention to the aesthetic, formal—that is, painterly—qualities of Ligon's work. The curator of Glenn Ligon's 25-year career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2011, Scott Rothkopf, performs a careful formal analysis of the painting and its painterly-ness of *Untitled: (I Remember the Very Day That I Became Colored)* (1990) (Figure 14):

By the time Ligon arrives at the bottom of the panel, things have fallen apart... The gaps between words contain phantom letters that are the traces of those adjacent on the stencil to the ones Ligon is inscribing (for example, the ghost of a *J* appears next to a darkly rendered *I*). A black line forms on the right edge of the panel, where a slight lip in the door catches the medium as the stencil gets dragged by. The letters smear into one another. Their edges fog, as oil seeps beneath the stencil or collects on its back, so the very act of pressing it tightly necessarily adds a penumbra when such pressing is meant to keep things sharp. Within this scratchy, smeary field, Ligon attempts to increase definition by stenciling the same letter on top of itself. But the registration is a little off, and suddenly an *A* has two parallel edges within its sticky relief. Once Ligon reaches the end of the panel, days after he began, the painting seems exhausted, tense, a miasma of stuttering words caught in the act of emerging from and receding into one another. He

stencils the final word, *BECAME*, so faintly it is scarcely visible. The *E* barely fits.

Ligon's voice—and Hurston's—can almost not be heard.⁵⁵

As Rothkopf rationalizes, “My point in drawing so much attention to these details and decisions in Ligon’s art is to make salient the surface qualities that tend to flatten in reproductions and disappear in discussions focused more exclusively on questions of identity and race. We cannot ignore these formal attributes, because Ligon clearly paid so much attention to them...” (27-28). Rothkopf then moves on to discussing the “political” investment in Ligon’s “source material and his manipulations of it” (29). While I don’t think the reason why we should pay attention to the aesthetic qualities of the work is because the artist has, Rothkopf’s wonderfully thorough formal analysis demonstrates the hallmark methods for the interpretation of modern art. According to Rothkopf’s analysis, it is medium that reveals the skill, conceptualization, and labor that goes into producing the artwork. For Rothkopf, “drawing attention” to the “surface qualities” should problematize the tendency for Ligon’s work to be analyzed exclusively through the writing that’s on the “surface”—a tendency which has ultimately oversimplified the artworks into those banal conversations on Ligon’s racial identity.

Rothkopf’s critique shows the difficulty of discussing Ligon’s paintings: treating the aesthetic qualities elides the work of the language, and treating the language elides the aesthetic. I add, when these conversations do overlap, it is through discourses of identity: the overlap of artist (painter) and self- (black, gay, male) identities. While lately the critical conversations about Ligon’s paintings have changed, they still treat aesthetics (the visual/formal) at the expense of the language use (appropriation as method, engagements with history, culture, and literature) and vice versa, and the attempt to bring together the two conversations that seems distinct is almost

⁵⁵ Scott Rothkopf, “Glenn Ligon: AMERICA” in *Glenn Ligon: AMERICA* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Yale University Press, 2011), quotation on page 27.

always through the rubric of identity politics. This focus on identity has however expanded since the 90s from discourses of self and group cultural identity to discourses of artist and painter identities. Discussions about Ligon's identity as an artist and painter are typically used to facilitate arguments about Ligon's work as a commentary or critique on the famous discourses of romanticized white heterosexual masculinist identities asserted in the canonically modernist art of the Abstract Expressionists. Admittedly, these scholars and critics are just following up on the way Ligon has narrated his growth as an artist; Ligon himself has proclaimed that he began his painting career as an abstract expressionist.⁵⁶ Even analyses of Ligon's work by one of Ligon's most careful interlocutors, art historian and curator Darby English, remain committed to the issue of the painter identity.⁵⁷ English has however made the astute point that

One does not just look at this painting but rather positions oneself like a reader before a text, scanning it from the top of the... canvas and proceeding across and down until the work of the painting is done... One continues reading til just about the midpoint of the work. Then, due to the paint gathering on the back of Ligon's stencil, the means of intervention itself (whose traces has been visible from line one) begins to mark the writing, disfiguring the letters, it seems, as quickly as Ligon can commit them to canvas. For the viewer, the entire bottom third of the pictures becomes the site of an excavation to resurrect some sense of... [the] text from the work's coarse, emblackening facture.⁵⁸

As English explains, "the difficulty of Ligon's work that one can easily forget one is looking at a painting. The specific danger of collapsing these paintings is that if we assume that the work's

⁵⁶ Ligon has said, "When I first started making art, painting was one of the few spaces in my life where I felt free. I was into abstract expressionism—with an emphasis on expressionism. I had a crisis of sorts when I realized there was too much of a gap between what I wanted to say and the means I had to say it with... The crisis I faced prompted a move toward the direct quotation of texts." See "Interview" with Byron Kim in *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*, quotation on page 51.

⁵⁷ Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

⁵⁸ English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, quotation on page 219.

textuality exhausts its substance, we overlook the import of the transformation brought about when the word graduates to picturehood” (222). While English goes on to connect the formal quality of textual picturehood to the destabilization of identity as a kind of politics, this argument unapologetically emerges out of modernist values of medium, surface, flatness, texture, etc. *and* its conventional counterpart discourse of identity.⁵⁹ The construction of discourses of identity politics as a response to modernism is, of course, a story with which we are already familiar: the *postmodernism* of identity politics critiques modernist discourses of authenticity, difference, and history. Moreover, bold moves have been made to revise modernism by using identity politics as broadly conceived through discourses of the Other, orientalism, primitivism, postcolonialism, diaspora, performativity, etc.

Despite this dichotomous relationship between aesthetics and politics in the Ligon criticism, there is a general consensus from scholars and critics on the difficult relationship between reading and viewing Ligon’s paintings. Even while this crucial relationship between reading and viewing has been pinpointed, scholars and critics adhere to modernist values of the art object—Ligon’s use of the paint medium—as evident in Rothkopf’s and English’s readings rather than the experience of reading and seeing. However, the focus on medium in Rothkopf’s and English’s formal analyses is inevitably partnered with an observation about the practice of writing. That is because it is not only the “content” of Ligon’s work but his particular handling of

⁵⁹ Precisely because “almost no matter how hard one tries, one can neither stop nor go on reading such a picture,” English argues that “the work is, strictly speaking, without a surface: because it occupies the domains of both verbal and visual images at once, but each so partially that neither dominates our understanding” (239-240). English recognizes “surfacelessness”—in contrast to the privilege of surface in the canon of modern painting—as the strange status of the text’s movement into “picture” due to the reading of the text rather than viewing of the painting, a movement that ultimately constitutes the painting itself. According to English, such a “volumetric presence” destabilizes the modernist aesthetic valuation of painting at the same that that it destabilizes identity: “Ligon’s text paintings need to remain surfaceless in order to foreclose such abstraction and to continue the process inaugurated in the works discussed thus far: not to reflect but to achieve a texture of their own. This is a process out of which no secure identity can emerge...” (244-245).

medium that questions the relationships among reading, writing, and seeing. I return to another passage in Rothkopf's carefully detailed account of Ligon's process of painting the text. Ligon stencils one oily letter at a time across the canvas, from left to right, as if writing script on a page. Rothkopf guesses that the systematic stenciling procedure grows tedious for Ligon:

Working down the surface, Ligon faces countless small decisions that belie the systematic nature of his process... By the fifteenth and sixteenth lines, he makes a mistake, ending with *COLO* and beginning again with *ORED*, thus repeating the second *O* in the word. But there is no erasing oil stick. His hands tire; his patience wears; the back of his stencil is covered with pigment from sliding across all of the letters already laid down... At the middle of the painting, he is working almost blind—up close, he can't see the surface as a whole, and the dirty stencil partially occludes the areas next to the stroke he needs to make. (27)

As a result, the text appears “exhausted, tense,”⁶⁰ and “disfigured”⁶¹ towards the bottom of the canvas. Rothkopf provides an account of the painting's execution that reminds us that the practice of writing is designed for the sake of reading. Jacques Derrida has explicated this spatial-visual organization of writing.⁶² Derrida extends Jean-Jacques Rousseau's explanation of writing's development from Greek as an economical movement from agricultural origins: like the ploughman, the writer turns the ox and plough around at the end of the line/furrow and begins writing/ploughing from the opposite direction to save time, space and energy. But with writing, after reaching the end of the line, the next line proceeds at the left side again instead of the more economic right side for the sake of comfortable reading. Writing develops as a

⁶⁰ Rothkopf, 27.

⁶¹ English, 219.

⁶² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

“compromise” “between the eye and the hand... one does not only write, one reads a little blindly, guided by the order of the hand” (289). Therefore Derrida concludes that the space of writing is “sensible,” the space of reading “intelligible,” and that the two spaces are also always already inseparable. The space of writing has come to be always already readable. Rothkopf’s account of Ligon’s painting process elucidates how the process works as a laborious “compromise” between reading and writing. Rothkopf describes how the line-by-line spatial execution of the painting breaks down and puts in slow motion the practice of writing.

I add that the inseparable processes of reading and writing are further complicated by the question of viewing the painting and reading and seeing the writing: in these paintings, how is reading *seeing* and thus *sensing*? On one hand, experiencing these paintings throws into question what the difference between seeing and reading is; on the other hand, it illuminates the ways in which seeing (not quite viewing) and reading are co-implicated. As literate subjects of the language, it is difficult for a literate viewer to take even a glance at a painting like *Untitled: (I Remember the Very Day That I Became Colored)* (Figure 14) and not be able to visually perceive the painting without “knowing” that the picture “reads” “I remember the very day that I became colored.” Yet, to read the text is also to see its textural, painted graphic form, as English details it. Thus the act of reading here necessarily requires the perception of the graphically formal (painterly, compositional) quality of what appears to be discursive. In contrast to English, however, I emphasize the *literacy* that is required to *see* the artwork. This dissertation has been tracking the tremendous amount of writing that it has taken to secure the objectivity, self-evidence, identity, and finally self-reflexivity of aesthetic culture through the common sense of vision, i.e., the shortcut I have identified as the supposed sense—the *literacy*—of racial visuality. My point on literacy here returns to the argument of the first chapter, which historicized how

writing has been designed for racial-visual literacy. Vision has been structured to be the sense that recognizes racial subjects. However this chapter puts further pressure on that point in questioning how such a sense inhabits the form of writing, in the visual order of writing's space.

We have learned that literacy is a visual experience from Walter Ong.⁶³ Vision is a “dissecting sense”; it “comes to a human being from one direction at a time: to look at a room or a landscape, I must move my eyes around from one part to another” (72). Writing gives words a visual presence. Literacy (versus orality) is a shift to visual (versus sound) space: as argued in the first chapter, it is print culture that teaches the public how to see. Literacy is always already a visual skill, as it requires the comprehension of alphabetic letters—developed as an operation of sound—as visual representation. It is significant that Ligon produces the paintings painstakingly one letter at a time. Derrida questions how writing is spatially structured, and Ong questions how that space is specifically visual. As Ong has observed, words as visual representation is a thing in and of itself, not simply a representation of an object:

Sound... exists only when it is going out of existence. I cannot have all of the word present at once: when I say ‘existence’, by the time I get to the ‘-tence’, the ‘exis-’ is gone. The alphabet implies that matters are otherwise, that a word is a thing, not an event, that it is present all at once, and that it can be cut up into little pieces, which can even be written forwards and pronounced backwards... A picture, say, of a bird does not reduce sound to space, for it represents an object, not a word... All script represents words as in some way things, quiescent objects, immobile marks for assimilation by vision. (91)

I use Ong's examination to highlight how Ligon's paintings make uncommon visual sense.

Writing “was and is the most momentous of all human technological inventions. It is not a mere

⁶³ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

appendage to speech. Because it moves speech from the oral-aural to a new sensory world, that of vision, it transforms thought as well. Notches on sticks and other *aides-mémoire* lead up to writing, but they do not restructure the human lifeworld as true writing does” (Ong, 85). Additionally, as Derrida notes, writing is always already formed by intelligibility (reading). Writing is rendered as the representation of speech. The visual practice that is reading is obscured by the system of speech that renders signifiers (which are visual forms) transparent to the signified’s sound. Consequently the “self-reading” constitution of the writing gets erased and overcome by writing’s form.

I consider Ligon’s paintings a rumination on how the spatial and material process of painting formalizes into the specifically *visual* form we recognize as “writing.” The reading (seeing) of Ligon’s stenciled words is the sensing of the visuality of the word—that is, the visuality of race—that constitutes literacy. The dual experience of reading and seeing the painting exposes how racial visuality seems to guide the Derridean writer’s hand: it seems to be representing the visibility of race but is only representing the writing that have formalized racial visuality. The painting shows the writing of racial visuality’s emergence as self-reading. In the spirit of Benjaminian aesthetic critique, medium is politicized in reminding us that the linguistic medium and the visual medium are not only mediations of each other. Rather, the stenciling shows how race has been developed, literally, by “visual literacy.” The exquisite ability to read and write develops from the visual-racial sense we call vision.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ “Visual literacy” is a peculiar concept that has been under intellectual questioning. In the introduction to the collection of essays in the book *Visual Literacy*, James Elkins has traced how the concept has been in “uncommon and intermittent use for over a hundred and fifty years... [typically] used to denote low-level, secondary school appreciate, of the sort that enables a student to identify Michelangelo’s *David*” (1). In the book, W. J. T. Mitchell offers visual literacy as “connoisseurship: rich, highly cultivated, and trained experiences and techniques of visual observation” (13-14). I use the phrase to refer to, critique, and philosophize the concept of visual literacy as an effect of common sense vision. James Elkins, ed. *Visual Literacy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

As we know, when the viewer follows the text to the bottom of the canvas, the text is abstracted and thus becomes unreadable. But literacy, I argue, is also a sensorial experience: reading these large text paintings requires the reader-viewer to move from the left side of the painting to the right. When the line has been read, the reader-viewer must move his or her body back towards the left side of the painting to begin reading the next line. The paintings beg to be looked at closely due to their formalist quality (Why do the words look like that? How is the painting made?) (Figure 16). Once we are close enough, however, we start to read the increasingly illegible words as the eye moves down the canvas; reading the dissolving graphics of the stenciled text at this point produces a dizzying effect and strains the eye as we keep reading. The difficulty in experiencing the paintings demonstrates the sensorial discrepancy between knowing what the text says and seeing it. This experience may be considered beyond the optical and instead as *apperceptive*: the discrepancy between reading and seeing acknowledges the fundamentally sensorial structure of aesthetics. Apperception makes uncommon sense of literacy and vision. Such sensing of the text demonstrates the experience of reading and seeing as both distinct and inseparable sensorial experiences due to the literacy of common sense vision and race.

Reading is not simply collapsing into seeing by Ligon. Rather, reading and seeing are positioned in sensorial relation to each other so that vision must be understood as a mediation of literacy and vice versa. The ability to apprehend the painting via reading requires seeing, yet, seeing presumes literacy. Vision and literacy are structured tautologically in Ligon's paintings, as is Kantian mediation, as explained earlier in the chapter. The conjunctive experience of reading and seeing positions them as a subjective sensorial experience for the individual viewer but also critiques the conditions of mediating between reading and seeing. In other words,

Ligon's paintings critique aesthetic judgment and the production of taste. *Untitled (Passing)* (Figure 15) makes especially explicit the logic of how the visuality of form is a demonstration of (racial) taste: the word "passing" constitutes the picture because the discursivity of passing (racial visuality's appearance) depends on the common sense of vision which, tautologically, is being used to see the picture of "passing." This painting shows how the practices of vision and literacy are mediations of each other because *writing for the visual and the appearance of race's visuality* has built the taste and common sense of vision and race.

Images



Figure 14

Glenn Ligon

Untitled: (I Remember the Very Day That I Became Colored) (1990)

Oil stick, gesso, and graphite on wood, 80 × 30 in.

Collection of George C. Wolfe



Figure 15
 Glenn Ligon
Untitled (Passing) (1991)
 Oil stick, gesso, and graphite on canvas, 80 × 30 in.
 Collection of Susan and Michael Hort



Figure 16
Viewer at *Glenn Ligon: America* exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012
(New York Times photo)

Conclusion Uncommon Sense

“Making Sense: Race and Modern Vision” has traced how modern vision has been produced as able to see race by investigating racial visibility as a common sense logic. It has shown how prodigious practices of writing have been constitutive to the common sense of racial visibility. Deconstructive readings have allowed this dissertation to examine how the discursivity of visual culture has been elided, erased, and disavowed. As the third and fourth chapters of the dissertation show, writing is the mode through which art and art’s aesthetic position is studied *despite* the aesthetic claims that form is pure, that it “speaks for itself,” and constitutes its own meaning. Accordingly, the dissertation has argued that a critical response to racial common sense would require restoring, or, *racializing* the forms that appear visible and thus common sensical. The four chapters have explored the roots, branches, and offshoots that have allowed race to appear visible due to the objective, self-evident, pure, universal, and self-reflexive appearances of racial visibility.

I conclude this dissertation by returning to the question of discursivity: how visual culture has required significant amounts of discursive production. The last two chapters in particular have focused on this question. They explored how art production and theorization is a highly discursive, literate activity precisely because vision is discursively constructed by racial visibility. The final chapter stressed that visibility and literacy can come hand in hand, through a close reading of Glenn Ligon’s work as a sensorial restoration that demonstrates the experience of reading as *seeing*. I argued for an “apperceptive” response, following Walter Benjamin, to racial visibility’s common sense.

The dissertation recognizes and has embraced the practice of critique in the written form. At this point, I also wonder about the limits of using writing to critique racial visibility. I contemplate how the visual experience might be interrupted through a different use of the eyes. To consider the kind of training that it would take to sense uncommonly, I would like to perform what might be an unconventional reading of Josef Albers's color theory textbook, *Interaction of Color* (1963). The famous Bauhaus modernist painter and designer is probably best known for the *Homage to the Square* series, begun in 1949 and continued throughout Albers' entire life until 1976. The series explored color relationships exclusively within the same nested-square composition (Figure 17). First a student and then a professor at the Bauhaus until it shut down under Nazi pressure, Albers moved to the U.S. in 1933 (the same year Walter Benjamin moved to Paris) and taught at Black Mountain College and later Yale University (his students included Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Eva Hesse). *Interaction of Color* was published to help students and teachers experiment with the relationships between colors.¹ The book received mixed reviews, as it "recommended such a radical departure from traditional, hidebound ways of seeing," as art historian and curator Nicholas Fox Weber puts it in the Forward to the 2006 reprint.² Art instructors and students in the university are likely to be familiar with this text even today; as an undergraduate art major, I was required to take a color theory course whose curriculum was based on Albers's text.

Interaction of Color explains visual phenomenon including color relativity, gradation, after-image, vibrating edges, and illusions of space, transparency, and mixture to demonstrate how the visual experience consists of the "discrepancy between physical fact and psychic

¹ As Albers himself puts it, the book "is a record of an experimental way of studying color and teaching color." Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color: Revised and Expanded Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), quotation on page 1.

² Quotation on page x.

effect”: “What counts here—first and last—is not so-called knowledge of so-called facts, but vision—seeing” (2). Albers distinguishes vision from knowledge by instructing readers to create and study images in a way that deconstructs the process of seeing. Quite simply put, the book encourages viewers to embrace vision as a perceptual trick. For example, in the chapter titled “Why color deception?—after-image, simultaneous contrast,” Albers explains “why colors read differently from what they really (physically) are” by having readers make an image and then view it according to his instruction:³

[C]ut out in red and white color paper 2 equal circles... and mark their centers with a small black dot. Then past them—horizontally related—the red circle to the left and the white one to the right, on the blackboard... with equal amounts of black before, between, and after the 2 circles. Now, by staring steadily at the marked center of the red circle (up to half a minute) one soon discovers how difficult it is to keep the eye fixed on a point. After a while, moon-sickle shapes appear, moving along the circle’s periphery. In spite of this, one must continue to focus on the red center point in order to assure the desired experience. Then quickly shift the focus to the center of the white circle. From the class one usually hears noises which indicate surprise or astonishment. This happens because all normal eyes suddenly see green or blue-green instead of white. (22)

As Albers explains, the viewer sees green, the complementary color of red, as the phenomenon “called after-image, or simultaneous contrast” (22). “The fact that the after-image or simultaneous contrast is a psycho-physiological phenomenon should prove that no normal eye, not even the most trained one, is foolproof against color deception. He who claims to see colors independent of their illusionary changes fools only himself, and no one else” (23). It is interesting to note the dramatic language used to critique the visual experience by a modernist

³ Quotation and analogous image on page 94 (Figure 18).

artist like Albers. While it might be a stretch to say Albers's assertion that our vision deceives us is an aesthetic critique, nonetheless, the discursive form of instruction that accompanies the deceptive visual exercises intervenes in a common sense understanding of vision.

I evoke Albers's instruction and description of the visual experience of the after-image, among other color illusions, to open up a discussion on uncommon sense vision. I take an instance such as "color deception" as apperceptive training. Color deception, according to Albers, confronts viewers to think about that which is seen as an "illusion" as a perceptual effect. This kind of visual experience is beyond what Benjamin would call the "optical" since it requires viewers to recognize the sensorial aspect of vision along with the optical. In the case of the green after-image described by Albers above, the viewer "knows" the circle is white but sees green instead and simultaneously knows and perceives the "red" of the red circle. Even more strangely, color deception literally produces other colors. In the case of the color study above, we see green even though it's not there. Common sense tells us that we are looking at a white circle but our eyes see green moon-sickle shapes instead. Here, knowledge about the view and the sensorial experience of it does not "match up" (an experience that "should" not happen in runaway slave ads, evolutionary theory, formalist aesthetics, and modern art) and even appears as a hallucination. Albers's visual exercises provide this chapter with a language for recognizing the discrepancy between common sense ("physical fact") and vision ("psychic effect").

To conclude the dissertation, I look to the collaborative paintings of Glenn Ligon and Byron Kim as works that explore sensorial discrepancy. Ligon and Kim are contemporary artists formally trained as painters who are also longtime friends. Ligon's text-based work has already been discussed in depth in the first and fourth chapters. Kim is best known for his painting project *Synecdoche* (1991-present), a series of over 400 panels, installed in grid form (Figure

19). Each panel, painted in a single color, corresponds with the skin color of the sitter painted from life by Kim. The project has raised interesting questions about monochrome abstract painting and racial politics. Kim and Ligon have even produced an extension of *Synecdoche* together in a painting called *Black and White* (1993; Figure 20).

Ligon and Kim have explicitly talked about their commitments to formalist aesthetics and abstract painting as well as their problems with these discourses. In an interview conversation between the two artists published in Glenn Ligon's 1998 *Un/becoming* exhibition catalog, the artists discuss Ligon's approach to the paint medium. Here, Ligon claims that the paint medium does special perceptual work. In an anecdote about viewing "one of my favorite paintings in the world," Abstract Expressionist painter Willem de Kooning's *Pirate* (1981), Ligon attributes the power to the famous painting to the "luscious, sensual nature of the paint."⁴ (52). As Ligon explains,

I would stand in front of [Willem de Kooning's *Pirate*] for a few minutes and it seemed to get brighter and come into sharp focus. This happened with other artists' paintings, but it seemed to happen most often with de Kooning's work, particularly with that painting. I took it to mean I had a special bond with his paintings—that I 'got' them in a very mystical way. A couple of years later, I was in a car with my brother and I couldn't read the signs on the side of the highway. My brother said, 'You need glasses.' I went to an optometrist and, sure enough, I did need glasses. The next time I went to see *Pirate*, the thing that usually happened didn't happen. I realized that what I had taken for a mysterious transmission from the painting to my brain was actually my eyes taking a few minutes to focus on what was in front of me. Curiously, this didn't diminish the painting at all. I think what I was always responding to, what always moved me, was the traces of

⁴ Byron Kim, "An Interview with Glenn Ligon," quotation on page 52.

the body that I read in the swoops and strokes in the work... The materiality of the paint does the work... (52)

The special perceptual status that Ligon attributes to the paint medium in this story aims to confirm Ligon's engagement with the specificity of the medium in his work. As Ligon continues, "I hope that the beauty of the surfaces facilitates an engagement with the ideas in the texts, or the ideas behind my positioning of the texts" (52-53).

Elsewhere, Byron Kim also wonders about the perceptual experience induced by the medium of painting. In a discussion referring to Mark Rothko's paintings, Kim wonders, "I don't deny that these moments of transcendence occur [in Mark Rothko's paintings]. I'm sure they do. But I often wonder to what extent these phenomena are prompted by purely visual, neurological stimulation and to what extent they are governed by convention, what we have learned."⁵ Ligon and Kim determine that the experience of viewing the works of two of the most prominent figures of modernist painting, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko respectively, happens specifically through the paint medium. While Ligon explains the subjective visual experience of the work ("what I had taken for a mysterious transmission from the painting to my brain was actually my eyes taking a few minutes to focus on what was in front of me"), Kim ruminates on the conditions under which one objectively sees the work ("I often wonder to what extent these phenomena are prompted by purely visual, neurological stimulation and to what extent they are governed by convention, what we have learned").

Ligon and Kim observe that it is through the artistic, expert handling of the medium that art induces sense perceptions: as Ligon says, the "materiality of the paint does the work." Yet Ligon and Kim recognize that the discourses of medium specificity—the valuation of expert handling of the paint, the aesthetic formal qualities of their work—are not available or applicable

⁵ Byron Kim, "An Attempt at Dogma," quotation on page 16.

to them. As racialized artists, Ligon and Kim have spoken individually and together on how the formalist aesthetic qualities of their work get discussed in limited ways despite their commitment to abstract painting.⁶ Ligon's and Kim's painting careers developed in a context where viewers and critics kept ignoring the formal aesthetic qualities of their works and instead were assuming that their works were about the artists' racial and ethnic identities.

It is significant that Ligon's and Kim's claims about medium's sensorial effects are immediately followed with questions about whether or not their work can be discussed as having similar perceptual effects. According to Ligon, "One art critic said that my paintings weren't 'aesthetic,'" which seems ironic to Ligon since the "rich, painterly surfaces is certainly part of what the work is about" (52-53). Ligon considers how the formalist, aesthetic qualities of his work remain overlooked because of the presumption of racial content in the work. As Ligon says explicitly, "The work of artists of color is often reduced to being simply about race and nothing else, as if our gender, sexual, class, and other identities didn't complicate any discussions of race as a subject matter, or as if race was our 'natural' subject matter" (54). Byron Kim shares similar concerns. Like Ligon, Kim's observations about perception and medium are intimately tied to discourses of racial content. As he wonders, what would it mean to make paintings that look "exactly like Brice Marden's 'Grove Group' ... except that I painted them. These paintings would respond directly to those who ask me, 'Why are you making abstract paintings?' The 'you' meaning Asian-American-artist, artist-of-color, artist-with-something-to-say. Of course, my

⁶ Byron Kim, "An Interview with Glenn Ligon" in *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*. Exhibition catalog. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1997); Byron Kim, "An Attempt at Dogma," *Godzilla Newsletter*, 1992. Taken from Eugenie Tsai, "Between Heaven and Earth," in *Threshold: Byron Kim 1990-2004*. Exhibition catalog. (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2004); Constance M. Lewallen's interview "Generosity: A Conversation with Byron Kim, Janine Antoni, and Glenn Ligon" in *Threshold: Byron Kim 1990-2004*.

intention would be to make this line of questioning the inevitable content of the painting, one that would dominate the ostensible, conventionally romantic context” (Tsai, 17).

Ligon and Kim’s collaborative painting, *The Triumph of American Painting* (1993; Figure 21), can be understood as a response to the discourses of aesthetic purity and universality that are not available for seeing their work. *The Triumph of American Painting* takes the words of the professional art critic, Irving Sandler, author of *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (the title says it all).⁷ The text of the painting is an excerpt of Sandler’s writing on Mark Rothko. Sandler, in conventional formalist fashion, interprets how Rothko’s work prompts a “sense of self-transcendence” (183). Ligon and Kim use Ligon’s stencil technique in this very large painting (80 x 62 in.), but the letters and ground are relatively clean so that the text remains very legible. Sandler’s, and Ligon and Kim’s, text reads:

[The] myriad pulsations generated by minute surface changes give rise to an overwhelming chromatic sensation. The all-pervading impression is intensified by the field effect, the environmental size of the pictures, and the illusion of atmosphere generated by the thinly coated color. The subtly stained and blotted modulations of color that dematerialize both surfaces and contours transform the rectangular planes into blocks of colored ether. The blurring of the edges prevents the shapes from hardening and dislodges them, causing them to hover outward, enveloping the viewer in the luminous aura they radiate. Conversely, the rectangles also seem to recede, turning into layers of veils that shroud some mysterious presence that one is made to feel is there and to which one must penetrate. As one does in suspenseful reverie, one feels drawn into the vast apparitional spaces that threaten to dissolve both the viewer and his world. At the same

⁷ Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

time the frontal parallel patterns accentuate the picture plane and counteract the sense of depth, preventing the surface from vaporizing too much. Although each eroded rectangle is dis-[embodied, it reads as a more or less finite container, the ominous presence is therefore materialized]. (183, bracketed parts include the words that Ligon and Kim left out)

Ligon and Kim are not simply pictorially representing the textual representation of Rothko's painting. It is tempting—and exciting—to read the painting in terms of self-reflexivity, as it seems like the content here is Sandler's criticism (the claims to the triumph of American painting) and the form is expressed in techniques of remediation with the nesting of the Rothko painting in Sandler's text in the Ligon-Kim painted canvas. However, this painting is not a representation of itself. It is not about its self-production but the media of its production. It is the formalization of the conditions of modern art production: the discursivity of expert criticism and the literacy that is required to *see* modern art. As a painting of discursivity, *Triumph* is truly an aesthetic, formalist painting. *Triumph* explains why Ligon's and Kim's work is not discussed in terms of aesthetic form. It is due to the construction of aesthetic purity and universality by the discursivity and obscuration of racial visibility.

For both Kim and Ligon, the public's refusal to engage with their paintings formally and aesthetically brings to light the problematic and seemingly irreconcilable tension between aesthetic form and presumed racial content. Ligon's and Kim's tremendously insightful deliberations remind us that the medium is the message. This "message" is always already full of racial content because medium is constituted by the supposed objectivity, self-evidence, purity, universality, and self-reflexivity of vision. In other words, the racialization of the "message" in discourses of contemporary art made by artists of color emphasizes the ways in which racial

visuality has constructed modern vision. This vision has simultaneously erased racial visibility's constitutional role and universalized the invisibility of whiteness as the aesthetic standard. Racial visibility has necessarily and constitutionally become the blind spot of modern aesthetics.

Images

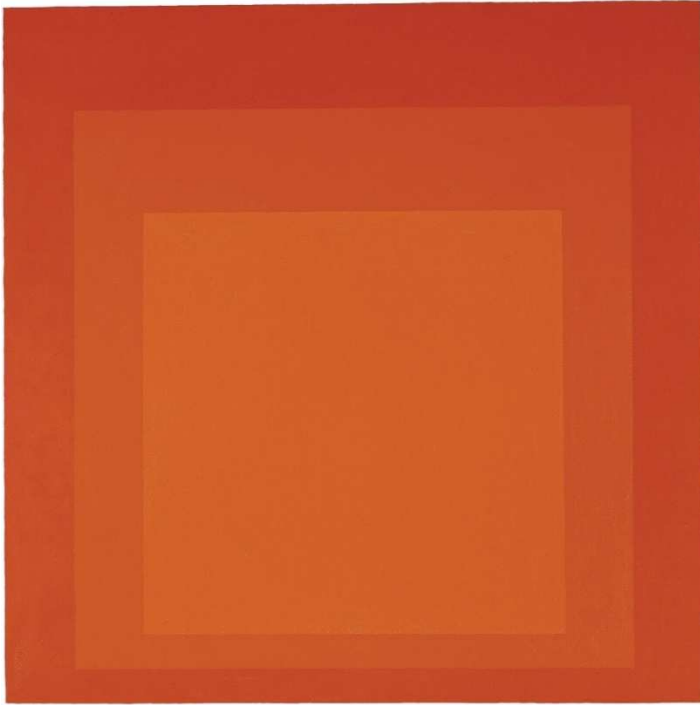


Figure 17
Josef Albers
Homage to the Square: Sentinel (1962)
Oil on canvas mounted on Masonite, 48 × 48 in.
Collection of Dayton Art Institute

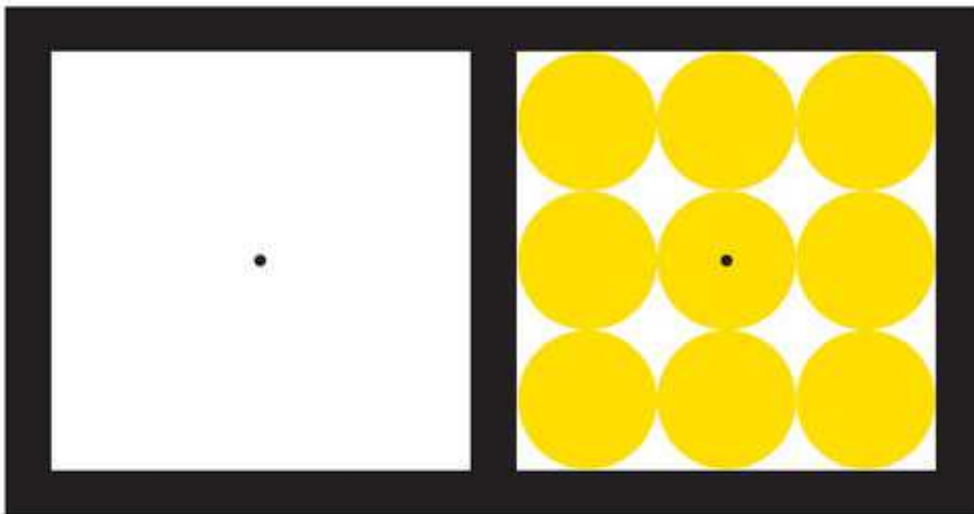


Figure 18
Josef Albers
After-image (simultaneous contrast) exercise from *Interaction of Color* (1963)



Figure 19
Byron Kim
Synecdoche (1991-present)
Oil and wax on wood, each panel 10×8 inches; overall $120 \frac{1}{4} \times 350 \frac{1}{4}$ in.
Collection of the National Gallery of Art
Photo of installation at the Whitney Museum of American Art

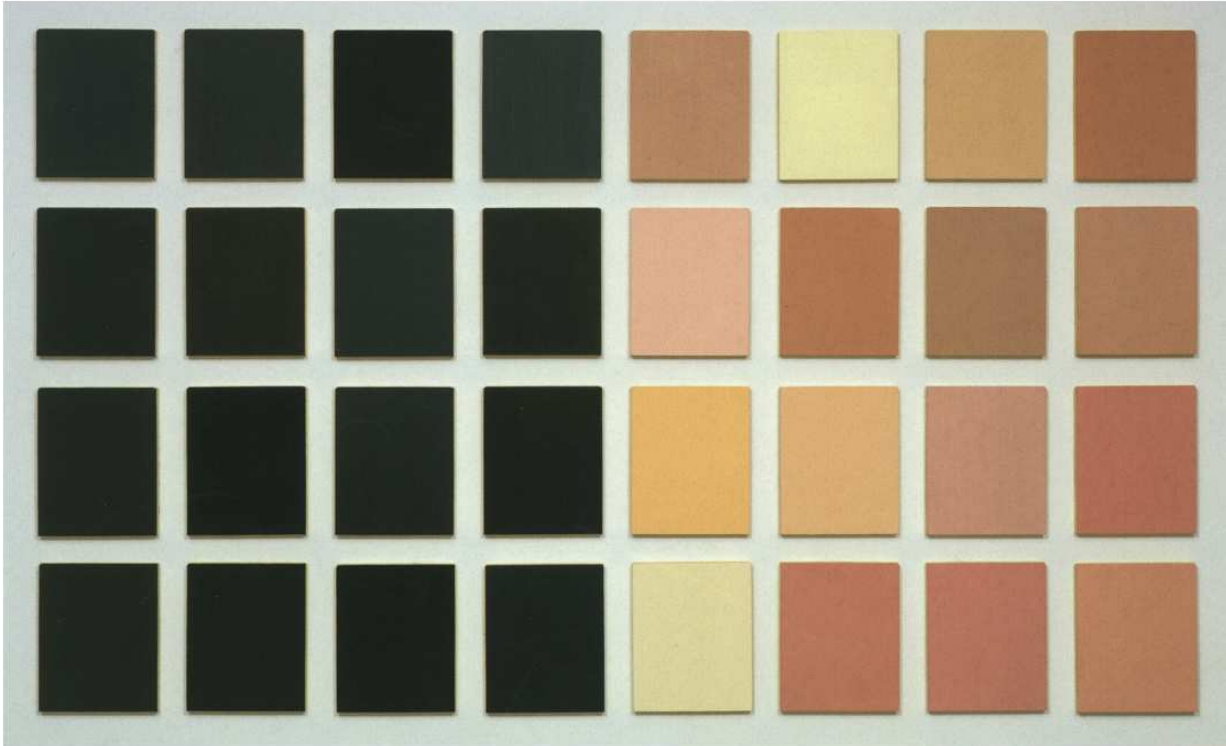


Figure 20
Byron Kim and Glenn Ligon
Black and White (1993)
Oil on wood panels, each panel 10 × 8 in. (25.4 × 20.3 cm); overall 43 × 71 in.
Collection of Smithsonian American Art Museum

myriad pulsations generated by minute surface changes give rise to an overwhelming chromatic sensation. The all-pervading impression is intensified by the field effect, the environmental size of the pictures, and the illusion of atmosphere generated by the thinly coated color. The subtly stained and blotted modulations of color that dematerialize both surfaces and contours transform the rectangular planes into blocks of colored ether. The blurring of the edges prevents the shapes from hardening and dislodges them, causing them to hover outward, enveloping the viewer in the luminous aura they radiate. Conversely, the rectangles also seem to recede, turning into layers of veils that shroud some mysterious presence that one is made to feel is there and to which one must penetrate. As one does in suspenseful reverie, one feels drawn into vast apparitional spaces that threaten to dissolve both the viewer and his world. At the same time the frontal parallel patterns accentuate the picture plane and counteract the sense of depth, preventing the surface from vaporizing too much. Although each eroded rectangle is dis-

Figure 21
Glenn Ligon and Byron Kim
The Triumph of American Painting (1993)
Oilstick on linen, 80 × 20 in.
Collection of the artist

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