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## James Smalls

# Visualizing Race: A Lifelong Process and Training

As both experience and idea, “race” has taken on cult status in our contemporary moment. Race has always been a volatile entity, a slippery creation in the turbulent domain of classification schemes, which has become “critical for organizing our social, cultural, political, and aesthetic lives.”<sup>1</sup> Cultural theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Stuart Hall have observed that race does not denote a given, innate, or neutral classification; instead, it is fluid and multiple in its production of the individual as a site of meaning. Historically, definitions of race have tended to move back and forth from humanistic descriptions of a singular, unique personage to the individual as the metaphoric and iconic representative of a group, nation, culture, principle, or ideology. The mobility of racial designation emphasizes to what extent race and raciality—the state of being raced from without—are unstable. Racial designation from without and its internalization

underscore the process as a persistent myth. This is partly so because racial identity is one of a variety of identities that wreak havoc on the notion of a unified, natural, self-evident subjectivity.

Fanon characterized the effects of race as bordering on the pathological—as symbolizing humanity’s disalienation from itself.<sup>2</sup> As a “lifelong process and training,” race is more central to the organization and neurosis of the modern world than many would care to admit.<sup>3</sup> It preoccupies us and seems to drive much of our social, cultural, and political decision-making strategies and ethical codes. With mounting claims of police brutality against certain racially designated groups, rising numbers of incidences of racial bias in both the public and private sectors, and the barrage of recent attacks on affirmative action, race is decidedly more relevant than ever to our contemporary lives.

Even though the “problem” of race is one of the most profound issues confronting us today, the art historical discourse on the connections between race, raciality, and visual representation remains minimal and inadequate. Commentators seem unwilling or at least hesitant to parallel the potency of race and racial difference in our social lives with race and its multiple nuanced aspects in our visual/aesthetic experiences. In terms of the visual, the determination of race is inevitably marked by external attributes of the physical body—skin pigmentation, physiognomy, body type, hair texture, and so on. As theorists of race have discussed, however, these characteristics are not always genetic or physiological but cultural and discursive. Venturing beyond essentialist and intentionalist debates about race that tend to reduce racialized imagery from a complex field of significations to the simplistic binary poles of affirmation and denigration or black and white, the articles in this issue engage a variety of historical, ideological, and critical perspectives that consider how race works in and on visual representation. They reassure us that definitions of race do not confine themselves to structures of physical differences alone but are intricately bound up with the complications invested in class, gender, cultural, and national differences.

Eduardo de Jesús Douglas and Ellen McBreen delve into modern and contemporary forms of race and racial structures as they are intimately tied to aspects of marginalized sexuality and erotic desire. Examining the Mexican

1. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

2. For a poststructuralist analysis of Fanon’s influence on the understanding and perception of race, see Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997). For Fanon’s impact on visual culture, see Alan Read, ed., *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996).

3. Fanon, while working in Algeria during its conflict with France in the 1960s, suggested the idea of race as a process and training. Homi Bhabha has reiterated this suggestion in his recent writings on race. See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Evergreen-Grove Press, 1982); Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

artist Nahum B. Zenil's theatricalized self-portraits, Douglas interrogates the relationships among race, male subjectivity, cultural designation, and the gaze in the interstices of colonialism and homosexuality. Suggesting that conjoined racial and masculine identities are individually and cooperatively fragile and provisional, he also investigates the psychological and moral implications of transgression and identification for racial difference, cultural histories, political ideologies, and the performative dimensions of gender. Focusing on previously unpublished illustrations by the writer and artist Richard Bruce Nugent, McBreen demonstrates how one African American visualized race through a creative meshing of biblical, aesthetic, and erotic fancy. She hurls the reader into the dense nebula of race, gender, and queer cultural politics as they were used to exercise control over life and art in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s.

Venturing into the premodern arena of late eighteenth-century Mexican *casta* paintings, Magali M. Carrera attempts to locate and expose the unstable and fragile aspects of race, class, and color difference within a classificatory scheme of racial and cultural hybridization. In a very different context and through an alternative methodology, Norman L. Kleeblatt draws connections between an artist's racial background and her or his choice of literary sources as a means of reinforcing racial, personal, and social identity. Following yet another mode of investigation, Karen K. Kosasa unpacks complex deliberations among race, colonialist structures, and the long-term effects of pedagogy in perpetuating ideas of conquest and the erasure of racial difference by the dominant culture in Hawai'i. Last, Jeannene M. Przyblyski tackles the constructive and deconstructive aspects of race within the context of a historically black institution through the medium of photography.

The politicized nature of race requires that I comment on what does not appear in this issue. If one is searching for a multiculturally representative inclusivity of racial groups, one will be sorely disappointed. As co-editors, we make no claims to provide a comprehensive investigation of all racial groups and their modes of visual representation. Any and all omissions happened, not by design, but by chance. The most serious absence is a discussion of whiteness as a racial category. It is particularly true in the case of art history that "whiteness produces itself as the unmarked, universal term by projecting the burden of difference onto other bodies."<sup>4</sup> For as Richard Dyer has observed in his fine book *White*, the act of racing whiteness is subversive and political, for it "dislodges whites from the position of power in racing and speaking about and for others."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, there are long-term negative consequences to a continued ignoring of white racial imagery and white as a racial category.

No doubt about it, race is and remains a volatile concept in our minds and lives and will not go away any time soon, even amid the heady vapors of utopian dreams of a multicultural and race-blind society. This should not be taken as either pessimism or cynicism. In fact, the articles in this issue should be viewed as a significant step forward in discussing race and visual representation in alternative ways that help to challenge old structures of Othering and thus turn the mechanisms of fixed racial significations against themselves. By doing so, new subjectivities, fresh positions of enunciation and identification, and novel understandings are allowed to emerge and circulate among us.<sup>6</sup>

4. Pellegrini, 92.

5. Dyer, 2.

6. See Stuart Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why Black Skin, White Masks?" in Read, ed., 19.

James Smalls is assistant professor of art at Rutgers University. He has published in the fields of African American and nineteenth-century French art and is most interested in those aspects of visual culture in which elements of race, sexuality, and gender converge. He is the author of *Esclave, Nègre, Noir: The Black Presence in French Art from 1789 to 1870* (University of California Press, forthcoming).

Judith Wilson, assistant professor of African American studies and art history at the University of California at Irvine, is chief essayist for the exhibition catalogue *Bob Thompson*, edited by Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).