

2-1-2010

The Education of Racial Perception

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This article argues for the practice of the 'education of racial perception' as a critical component of any struggle against racial oppression (and for a liberated humanity generally). Taking the phenomenological ontology suggested by Linda Alcoff's recent book Visible Identities, I argue that the project of educating our racial perception is a way to critically assess the way in which our perception of race both conditions and is conditioned by a racialized social world. By learning more about and ultimately challenging this relation we affirm our responsibility and agency in the face of an oppressive status quo.

In her recent book *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, Linda Martín Alcoff offers an account of racial identity deeply influenced by phenomenological accounts of human subjectivity as *embodied* consciousness (Alcoff, 2006). In her view, our identities are an 'interpretive horizon' (2006: 94) from and through which we come to know both ourselves, and the world around us. These interpretive horizons, in turn, are deeply conditioned by the peculiarities and specificities of our embodiment. Gender and race, therefore, are not merely incidental 'accidents' of our personal histories we would be better off ignoring in favor of a race-and-gender-less abstract humanity. Rather, they are constitutive aspects of who we are that ought to be openly and explicitly attended to both theoretically and practically, rather than marginalized or expunged from our lives. It is not, in other words, a question of *whether* we see races or ought to see them, but rather a question of *how* we see them. Taking up Alcoff's account as a starting point, this article will address the question of *how* we ought to see race, especially if we are interested in or committed to some conception of racial justice and anti-racism. Specifically, I will argue that self-consciously attending to and *educating* our racial perception is an important way to advance the *practice* of anti-racism.

Racial Embodiment, Racial Perception and the Self

What is most appealing about Alcoff's view of racial embodiment and its role in identity is that it offers a means both to capture the ways in which race exists *in the world* independently of the will of any particular agent, and at the same time to account for the ways in which race remains contingent upon, and shaped by, human agency generally. My task in offering the following exegesis of Alcoff's view on race is not to defend that view, but rather to use it as a starting point

from which to draw out my own claims regarding liberatory practice. I hope to do justice to her account and cast it in a sympathetic light (in large part because I do think it is ultimately on the right track), but those interested in a full account and defense would be best served by turning to Alcoff's book itself.¹ That being said, I do not believe that the political and moral implications of the view I advance here stand or fall with the phenomenological ontology of race described by Alcoff. That is, while I came to this view through Alcoff's work and my own study of phenomenology, I maintain that the practices I espouse are consistent in many important ways with a variety of ontological views on race, up to and including eliminativism (the view that races are pure fiction and should be eliminated). For the sake of brevity, therefore, this article will proceed from a particular ontological view on race as its starting point, but will point fundamentally toward ways in which the practical suggestions I offer remain efficacious even if one ultimately rejects the ontology that originally led me to them.

In order to grasp the full content of Alcoff's account of race it is necessary to explain her view of identity *simpliciter*. As mentioned above, she claims that identities can be understood as 'interpretive horizons'. In her view, 'We might, then, more insightfully define identities as positioned or located lived experiences in which both individuals and groups work to construct meaning in relation to historical experience and historical narratives' (Alcoff, 2006: 42). A given subject, in other words, is always and in significant ways *located*, both in the sense of one's view always being *from somewhere* and in the sense of always being viewed by others *in one's* particular location. Alcoff states that 'identities are not lived as a discrete and stable set of interests, but as a site from which one must engage in the process of meaning-making and thus from which one is open to the world' (2006: 43). Identity, as an interpretive horizon, is thus the location from which we experience, come to know, and interpret the world around us, other agents and ourselves. We are in this way conditioned and bounded by the limits of this 'horizon', but as we learn, grow, mature, and develop, the focus of that horizon shifts, opening up new vistas toward which and from which to direct our metaphorical (and literal) gaze.

One aspect of this view that is particularly crucial for an understanding of race is the fact that identity, as interpretive horizon, is fundamentally *intersubjective*. According to Alcoff, 'Horizons are open-ended, in constant motion, and aspects of our horizon are inevitably group-related or shared among members of a social identity. The significance of the group-related aspects of a horizon will vary depending on the subject matter at hand; they will not be all-determining, but they may become very significant in some contexts' (2006: 102). One's particular interpretive horizon does not arise out of nowhere, nor does it exist in a vacuum. It is both generated by and revealed to me through my interactions with other agents, all of whom, like me, are coming from a 'location'

in some ways different from my own, though often sharing important similarities as well. The more a context or subject is tied to significantly social practices and meanings (like race, for instance), the more significant this intersubjective aspect of identity will be.

All of this in turn means that far from being distinctly 'external', other agents are to varying degrees *constitutive* of one's identity. As Alcoff explains, 'The Other is internal to the self's substantive content, a part of its own horizon, and thus a part of its own identity. . . . In this sense, it is less true to say that I am dependent on the Other – as if we are clearly distinguishable – than that the Other is a part of myself' (2006: 45). Human identity is not created out of whole cloth upon a *tabula rasa* from birth to death by individual agents. Nor is it simply window-dressing – incidental details and decorations for pure reason, or rational self-interest, or some variant of a Cartesian ego. Our identities condition and limit our perspective on the world, and these identities are themselves conditioned and limited by the fact that our world is *social* – we are always already in *relation* with other agents. According to Alcoff, 'Our relational properties can be fundamental to who we are when they have causal determinacy over our epistemic and political orientations to the world – what we notice, what we care about – but also when they profoundly affect how we are seen and interacted with by others' (2006: 90).

At this point we can emphasize the phenomenological turn and point toward the full significance of identity as embodied. Alcoff's approach places the sheer physicality of human consciousness front and center. As we have already seen, embodied consciousness is always consciousness not only *of* something but also *from* somewhere. This is why she describes her account of identity as an 'interpretive horizon', and points out that it is 'essential to explain situated reasoning, the way in which one's context of horizon affects how one experiences the world and one's perceptions and interpretations' (2006: 102). Indeed, the fact of our embodiment not only impacts our perception and interpretation of the world around us, but also deeply conditions the ways in which we grasp and carve out the concepts, symbols, and metaphors we employ to map out the landscape of thought itself (2006: 105). Human subjectivity or consciousness, in other words, is saturated through and through with embodiment.

What is more, the intersubjective aspects of that consciousness, and of embodiment, mean that the ways in which one's physicality conditions one's interpretive horizon will in turn be deeply conditioned by the social meanings, symbols, and significances surrounding particular types of bodies, since any given *my body* will be an object of the perception of others. By way of example, take the relatively innocuous physical particularity of height. There are the ways in which being tall will, on its own, influence one's interpretive horizon. One's sense of place within the world, the way one relates to others (most of whom one will easily be able to 'look down' upon),

the ease with which one moves through doorways or sees over the heads of members of a crowd, and so on will all have some impact on an individual's identity. Then there are the influences of being tall that are a matter of the social capital placed upon height within a given society, which in turn will differ not only depending upon the particular cultural context, but also upon other bodily features (tallness is differently valued for men than for women, for instance). In other words, one's embodiment is significant not only because of the variations in the 'raw data' of the body itself, but also because of the social significance attached to different kinds of bodies and different kinds of features. All of this is clearly significant to any account of race and gender (and a great many other facets of human identity), especially when one emphasizes that one's interpretive horizon is always situated *relative* to others, and can thus vary dramatically from situation to situation. A white male body, for example, is one thing on its own, another thing given the way whiteness and maleness are understood socially, and yet another when in a room full of black women, or when in a room full of other white men, or when in a room full of other white men except for one black woman.

Taken as a whole, this approach leads to a deep suspicion, if not outright rejection, of any notion of identity as unitary and fixed (2006: 268–9). Identity, as interpretive horizon, and as deeply social, is susceptible to change over time. Many of the current critiques of 'identity politics' seem to be founded on the assumption that identity must be unitary, coherent, and stable. For example, one might argue that claiming 'black' or 'Latina' as part of one's identity is inconsistent with 'American' or 'female', since being any one of these things rules out 'fully' being any of the others. And this is not necessarily because these terms are mutually exclusive, but rather because one can only ever truly be, according to this view, one thing. The phenomenological approach offered by Alcoff rejects this model of identity as unitary. Our interpretive horizon can be simultaneously situated in myriad and sometimes conflicting ways.² These horizons can change, sometimes rather dramatically, from time to time and from place to place. There is, in other words, often an implicit drive toward *simplicity* behind many of the critiques of identity, while the account offered by Alcoff emphasizes complexity. It will be important to bear this rejection of (over)simplification in mind as I lay out my account of liberatory racial perception.

Race, for Alcoff, is therefore real insofar as it is a constitutive facet of one's identity, understood as an interpretive horizon, which is linked clearly to our nature as embodied subjects. Race situates our subjectivity in ways that inform and condition our perception and understanding of ourselves and the world around us. One's racial membership, in other words, *does* make a difference for one's identity, whether one would wish it so or not. Since race is generated in a social (intersubjective) context, however, it cannot be simply *reduced* to physical features. Race

and racism can, according to Alcoff, function along several different 'axes': color, physical-characteristics-other-than-color, cultural origin, and nativism (2006: 259). Under certain circumstances and in certain contexts, racial membership can be a matter of cultural origin or one's relationship to a purportedly 'native' group. Nevertheless, color, or the physical aspect of racial identification, is 'the most *dominant* and currently the most *pernicious*' determining factor of racial membership (ibid.). All of this is because there exists a dialectical relationship between particular morphologies and the cultural and political habits and institutions of racial identification. There are certain given features and traits of bodies, which are perceived and interpreted as *racial*. These ways of perceiving and interpreting are in turn sedimented in such a way that those physical features and traits are used to further refine and condition the cultural and political habits and institutions. Each comes to reinforce and legitimate the other.

One important aspect of this relationship that will become crucial to my own position is Alcoff's stress on the way in which the act of perception itself is shaped by racial reality. Following Merleau-Ponty, Alcoff contrasts her account with more 'positivist' approaches to perception, in which the subject is understood to passively receive input from the 'outside' world, and then go on subsequently to interpret that input. In her (and Merleau-Ponty's) view, we do not simply interpret perceptual data as if from some great distance. Rather, 'Perceptual practices can be organized, like bodily movements used to perform various operations, into integrated units that become habitual. . . . This account would explain both why racializing attributions are nearly impossible to discern and why they are resistant to alteration or erasure. Our experience of habitual perceptions is so attenuated as to skip the stage of conscious interpretation and intent' (2006: 188). What this means is that, as we become more and more deeply influenced by these habits and institutions of racial identification, it is not simply our *interpretations* of sensory input that become altered, but our *perceptions* themselves. We do not see a person with a certain pigmentation, and then subsequently interpret that as 'black', we see a *black person*. None of this is to deny the fact that we can, deliberately and over time, alter these perceptual habits (indeed, the alteration of these perceptual habits is the goal toward which this article aims). The claim is only that their effects are real and cannot be easily ignored (2006: 189).

On this phenomenological view, race itself can be understood as having both objective and subjective aspects or moments. It is linked to real and given features of our bodies;³ and even though the meaning of our bodies may change over time and place, and be vague or 'fuzzy' around the edges, one's racial membership cannot be simply chosen all on one's own. In other words, it is objective in the sense that it is never entirely up to me whether I am or am not a member of a particular race – one's very being as embodied in an historically situated social

context prevents this. At the same time, how one relates to, interprets, challenges, affirms, or otherwise confronts one's body and the ways in which it is raced are indeed up to the agent in question, and subject to alteration. Furthermore, the cultural habits and institutions that generate, reinforce, and legitimate racial reality are a result or an extension of historical and ongoing *projects* of particular agents. In these ways race is also subjective. It is not a simple fact of nature, or in any other way an inevitability. And while one's racial membership *conditions* one's identity in important ways, it does not *determine* it. I may be white, which does reveal important features of my experience and existence, and it also informs my identity, but at the same time, there are lots of ways to *live* (as a burden, as an object of guilt, as a divinely granted entitlement to world domination, as a moral challenge, or even as something to be denied as inconsequential) my whiteness, and it is in my choice among these (and surely countless other) different ways that I assume responsibility for my racial membership.

The Education of Racial Perception

If one accepts this basic account of race, identity, and perception, then what ought one to do if one is interested in furthering the cause of racial justice and liberation? How, in other words, does this view of racial identity and perception condition our understanding of what must be done? Alcoff hints at an approach in the following passage:

If racism is manifest at the level of perception itself and in the very domain of visibility, then an amelioration of racism would be apparent in the world we perceive as visible. A reduction of racism will affect perception itself, as well as comportment, body image, and so on. Toward this, our first task, it seems to me, is to make visible the practices of visibility itself, to outline the background from which our knowledge of others and of ourselves appears in relief. (2006: 194)

There is a two-directional causal relationship, in other words, between racial perception and racism; and one avenue of challenging racism, therefore, would be to attend to and ultimately alter our racial perception. The immediate question is how best to go about this project of revealing the background perceptual practices mentioned by Alcoff both to ourselves and to others in a way that at once takes seriously their real force and resilience on the one hand, and their susceptibility to change and reinterpretation on the other.

My argument is that self-consciously attending to and *educating* our racial perception is an important way to take up Alcoff's challenge to 'make visible the practices of visibility itself'. In explicitly confronting racial perception, one opens up these attenuated perceptual habits to

careful scrutiny and makes possible their reconfiguration with an eye toward anti-racism. Part of my project in this article is to challenge the typical reliance on vision alone for understanding race, both because racial perception is about more than just seeing, and because moving beyond the standard view of vision helps us better understand the variability of perception itself. Vision is usually held up as the paradigm of positivist accounts of perception, where we passively receive visual information that is then interpreted in a separate and subsequent action. Racial analyses, in turn, are usually captured exclusively through vision – race, understood as ‘color’, is subjected to critique, and we are either encouraged to take on an attitude of ‘color-blindness’ (to block or ignore the passive reception of ‘racial’ visual data), or to at least see color in a value-neutral way (to interpret those racial data in a value-neutral way). This relies upon exactly the sort of positivist account of perception that Alcoff (and Merleau-Ponty) rejects, insofar as the subject and object of perception are treated as completely distinct.

But we do not tend to treat the other senses in quite the same way. Musicians ‘train their ears’ to *hear differently* than they did before, massage therapists learn to *feel* sites of trauma or tension, and connoisseurs ‘educate their palate’ in ways that open up new horizons of taste and smell. In short, we are used to thinking of the other four senses in ways that allow for them to be educated or trained such that the act of perception, as an act, is altered at a fundamental level.⁴ Racial perception, I submit, ought to be understood in a similar way. Rather than reducing racial perception to a positivist account of vision, and then accounting for the education of racial perception as explaining race away altogether, we should model our understanding of racial perception more along the lines of the other four senses, such that the education of racial perception will enhance the sophistication and depth of our perception and understanding of racial reality.

The first question that emerges is what, exactly, it would mean to *educate* one’s racial perception? In understanding perception as a kind of action, the project of educating perception involves both a moment of habituation or practice, and a more traditionally epistemic moment of acquiring more straightforward (propositional) kinds of background knowledge and understanding of both the object of perception (race) and the act of perceiving itself (racial perception). Each of these moments, which for the sake of simplicity I will refer to as the propositional and the practical, is in turn dialectically related to the other. As we build propositional knowledge about a given object of perception, it alters and informs the practice of perceiving, which in turn informs and conditions the propositional knowledge we already possessed, as well as pointing toward new avenues of investigation.

Thus, one aspect or moment of the education of racial perception will involve propositional

knowledge about races and racial identification. I will here outline three different aspects of this propositional moment, though by no means do I take this list to be exhaustive. I would also like to stress that my beginning with the propositional moment of the education of racial perception does not mean that this moment is necessarily either logically or chronologically prior to the practical moment.

The first aspect of the propositional moment is historical. One should, in the course of educating racial perception, investigate the history of race as such. Its emergence and development as a concept, and the ways in which its meaning, use and salience changed over time and from place to place, should become objects of inquiry. Relations between racial exploitation and oppression and capitalism, gender oppression, colonialism, and globalization will be crucial topics to explore. At the same time, the histories of particular racial groups will be equally important. What can one learn about 'Whiteness', for example, by attending to the histories both of the racial concept of white itself, and of different white subgroups and individuals? In particular, much can be learned from examination of moments of contestation over the meaning and/or membership of particular racial groups.

A second aspect of the propositional moment of racial perception is geographical. Understanding race requires an understanding of how racial membership and racial identification can differ from place to place, and how geography itself can be raced. The landscape, so to speak, of racial perception will be different in Jamaica than it is in Toronto, or Los Angeles, or Mexico City, or Berlin, and attending to that particularity (and peculiarity) will be a crucial component of the education of racial perception. But it is not simply a matter of how place can affect race. How we understand a place can itself be racialized in significant ways. That Europe and Asia are understood as separate continents, or that 'Latin America', which is so named because of the Latin-derived languages that are spoken there, nevertheless fails to include Quebec, are both indicative of the way in which racial demarcation can significantly impact geographical demarcation. Understanding this relation between place and race will be a significant aspect of the education of racial perception.

Thirdly, one must learn about the ways and means of racial perception itself. What are the biological, linguistic, and cultural indices of racial membership, and why are they singled out in that way? How, as well, has this changed over time, and how is it affected by geographical location? This aspect should include not only historical study of how people come to recognize different races and identify members of those races, but also psychological study of the patterns of racial recognition, including the neurophysiologic mechanisms at work in the act of racial perception and identification.

All of this, again, is not necessarily an exhaustive account of this propositional moment, but it is a start. Taking these questions about race and racial perception seriously will, I am suggesting, not only prove them valuable in their own right, but will fundamentally alter our perception of race itself in ways that I argue are ultimately liberatory.

The education of racial perception cannot be accomplished by simply collecting propositional knowledge, however. Insofar as racial perception is an act,⁵ and not simply something that happens to us, it needs to be altered through *practice*. Just as educating one's musical ear requires listening to music, and educating one's palate requires eating, so educating one's racial perception requires self-consciously practising racial perception in a way that focuses upon increasing the depth and breadth of that act of perception. This means that education requires a willingness to reflect upon racial perception in ways that lead us to reapproach and re-evaluate the how and why of that perception.

Perhaps most importantly, we must *challenge* our racial perception in the same way that the musician challenges her ear or the oenophile challenges his palate. Of course, race is in many ways the air we breathe, and so we are afforded ample opportunities to fine-tune our racial perception on any given day. But, especially in a world so deeply segregated, it is not enough simply to attend more closely to our perception of the commonplace and familiar – we must abandon zones of comfort. Again, if one wishes to educate one's palate for food, a constant diet of 'home cooking' (wherever home might be) cannot take one very far – one must seek out the unusual, the different, and the unfamiliar. Likewise, we must seek out new and different opportunities to attend to racial perception if we take our education seriously.

There are clear dangers that need to be mentioned here. Such efforts to broaden one's racial experience could lead to an instrumental or objectifying approach to one's interaction with others. This danger may be especially acute for members of dominant or privileged social groups, who may come to view their interactions with others as forays into the world of exotic experience. This is one of the ways in which the analogy with food or music fails. I am not suggesting that one treat the world as a kind of racial buffet table, laden with sterno-warmed delicacies of racial perception waiting to be sampled and cataloged. The practice of racial perception, unlike these analogous modes of education, is always already a *shared* and intersubjective experience, insofar as we are perceiving and being perceived by other *people*, and not just portions of food or pieces of music. As such, we have different moral and political obligations and imperatives when it comes to the education of racial perception. I think that a great deal of insight into the process I am attempting to describe here can be found in drawing out these sorts of analogies with more aesthetic experiences,⁶ but such analogies can go only so far before the fact that we are dealing

with other agents, instead of objects, becomes very relevant indeed. The moral and political importance of this limitation of the analogies must not be underestimated, and the dangers attendant to the imperative to challenge our racial perception must be taken seriously.

At the same time, the fact that there are real and significant dangers involved in a particular practice is not sufficient reason to abandon that practice altogether. There are ways to seek out challenging moments of racial perception that are dehumanizing and oppressive to the 'objects' of perception – precisely insofar as such methods reduce other human beings to mere objects of perception. It is clearly important to avoid approaches to race that objectify other human beings, and this would surely include seeking out interactions with those of a different race for the sole purpose of gaining the experience as if it were a commodity to be hoarded.⁷ Instead, what is demanded is an engagement *with*, rather than merely an experience *of*, different racial contexts. One challenges one's racial perception not simply by going somewhere new and looking around, but by interacting and engaging with different individuals and groups in a way that is respectful of the agency and uniqueness of those individuals and groups.⁸ This demands first and foremost that one be willing to listen to and even be criticized by others in the shared effort of education, and rules out the buffet-table approach.⁹

These propositional and practical moments are, as I have suggested, dialectically related. The more we learn about the historical and geographic specificity of race, for example, the more we will come to perceive with subtlety and sophistication. The broader racial categories, though still useful for certain purposes (reporting on income inequalities, for example), will be informed by more fine-grained differentiation between sub-groups. There is 'Black', for instance, and perceiving blackness tells me something, but to begin to understand the complexity of how blackness functions in Birmingham as opposed to Chicago as opposed to Kingston as opposed to Accra will not merely alter how I *interpret* blackness, but how I perceive it from the start. As we gather this kind of more propositional knowledge, in other words, we simply *cannot* perceive races as we once did. By the same token, as our racial perception becomes more fine-tuned, it reveals new insights into our propositional knowledge about races and racial perception, and points toward new avenues of inquiry. If I notice that I am perceiving something peculiar or anomalous about a particular individual or group of individuals, for example, I will seek out ways to explain that peculiarity or anomaly. In the course of seeking that explanation, I will better understand not only my own racial perception, but the racial reality of others, as well, which will in turn further refine my perception.

Liberatory Implications of the Education of Racial Perception

I want to stress that I am not pushing a purely aesthetic approach to race – the aim is not the education of racial perception for its own sake. I am not suggesting that the goal is a world in which there are as many shades of ‘brown’ people as there are shades of blue at a paint store, or that we simply develop an *appreciation* for different races in the way one learns to ‘appreciate’ jazz or fine art (again, these analogies only take us so far). Rather, I want to advance the following argument. A deeply racialized social world structures our identity in crucial, and often hidden, ways. This shaping of our identity (as interpretive horizon) is paired with a structuring of our ways of perceiving races in the world, again in often hidden ways. Social world, identity, and perception are all racialized and intertwined on a fundamental level, such that altering any one alters the others. One kind of lever for opening up this complex to positive revision and critique is to undertake a self-consciously critical ‘education’ of racial perception. In changing one’s racial perception, in effect, one is simultaneously shaping one’s identity as well as the larger social world.

Undertaking the task of educating one’s racial perception effectively states not only that race is worth taking seriously, but also that one is willing to take real social risks in order to do so. This is because the current social climate is one of systemic *ignorance*. There is a tendency to accept overly simplistic, coarse understandings of what race is and how it functions, all of which serves effectively to maintain the racial status quo. Of course, it is not the case that all are equally ignorant. I take seriously notions of epistemic privilege vis-à-vis oppressed groups, and so would be willing to accept the idea that this ignorance is more acute or pronounced, generally speaking, in whites (and especially males, and especially of a dominant class, among other criteria of privilege). Nevertheless, there seems to me to be plenty of ignorance to go around, and given that such a process of education can never be complete (there is always more to learn), I take what I say here to be applicable to people of all races, if in slightly different ways (and exploring that difference could itself be an important component of educating racial perception). In short, we all have something to learn, and the education of racial perception can be of great value to everyone, even if some may be setting off with a bit of a head-start.

The point is that questions of the historical origins, means of production, or geographic specificity of race are very rarely raised in the broader public arena, largely, I submit, because they are lines of inquiry that would threaten the racial status quo. This is so for two basic reasons. First, the racial status quo seeks to pass itself off as inevitable, natural and necessary. It purports to be an ahistorical and mind-independent component of our ontology (and the racial elitists are surely right in their rejection of such pretensions). The education of racial perception challenges these claims by revealing the ways in which race is contingent and historical. Second,

since the racial status quo is also a *racist* state of affairs, it seeks to impose a kind of epistemic closure or an 'epistemology of ignorance' (Mills, 1997: 17–19). That is, racism functions in part as an imposition of values, including epistemic value, that attempts to position itself beyond scrutiny or criticism. The racist social schema purports to know all there is to know about the objects of its description (raced individuals and racial groups), and works to prevent any line of questioning that challenges those knowledge-claims. Within such a climate, taking race seriously in the way necessary for the education of one's racial perception is both powerful and dangerous, because when we find ourselves in such a context of systemic ignorance, the project of education is always an inherently *radical* one.

It is also a project that those who are committed to that ignorance, or at least apathetic to it, will find deeply and personally threatening. Taking racial perception seriously in this manner upsets the ways in which this systemic ignorance relies on an appeal to the inevitability (the 'naturalness') of the dominant modes of perception. If all of this is natural and inevitable, then the education of racial perception is moot. If you are undertaking such a project, however, you are saying that it is not so natural and inevitable after all. And if it is not so natural and inevitable, then we must all confront our own responsibility for it, instead of passing the proverbial buck to nature or God. This is something that many, if not most, individuals seem unwilling to do. Of course, given the enormous social pressures (systemic ignorance) in place to maintain ignorance, dominant modes of racial perception, and the racial (racist) status quo, this should hardly be surprising.

Indeed, even if there are those who are willing to challenge the dominant view, more often than not this takes the form of explaining race away altogether. That is, while most of the population seems content to passively accept dominant views of racial reality and racial perception, the other common move is to reject race outright as illusory, or inconsistent with liberal democratic ideals, or ultimately 'all about economics', and so on. What dominates much of racial discourse, in other words, is an all-or-nothing approach to racial reality. Either it is something that is effectively real in a metaphysical sense (necessary, mind-independent, ahistorical), or it is utterly lacking in reality. What the phenomenological approach that lies at the foundation of my argument demands is a rejection of this (positivistic) dualistic ontology. In other words, it points toward a way to understand what is 'real' that occupies the space between the metaphysical thing-in-itself and the utter lack of reality. By emphasizing the fundamentally intersubjective condition of human beings, the phenomenological approach points toward a status in which race is contingent and historical, but because it is a deeply *shared* phenomenon, and because our identities are constitutively social, race has a kind of *reality* that cannot be denied or written-off by

an act of volitional fiat.

The education of racial perception, as I am describing it, avoids this all-or-nothing approach. Furthermore, it is a way of taking responsibility for one's own participation in and contribution to racial experience. The more positivistic approaches both function effectively as a kind of evasion of such responsibility. This works on the one hand by denying that anything at all can be done about race (it is natural), and on the other hand by denying that there is anything to take responsibility for (it is illusory). The education of racial perception thus functions as a way of taking responsibility for one's own role in shaping a larger social *reality* that both conditions and is conditioned by one's subjectivity, and publicly to do this will be a challenge to those who abdicate such responsibility. Thus, even if it had no other effects, the education of racial perception would be a worthwhile and liberatory project simply because it brings into the open and challenges this culture of ignorance and (at least some of) its pernicious effects, by inviting us to take responsibility for our racial perception and its contribution to a larger racial reality.

This link to responsibility, however, points to a further liberatory aspect of the education of racial perception. By taking up the project of educating one's racial perception, and thus effectively assuming responsibility for that perception, one is setting out to self-consciously alter the way in which one perceives race. Insofar as that impacts one's sense of identity and one's understanding of one's relation to the larger social world, this assumption of responsibility is far-reaching indeed. It will impact how I understand who I am and the role that race plays in my identity, it will affect my relations with others both of the same racial membership and from different races (and indeed what these similarities and differences even mean), and it will alter the way I understand the roles and functions of different habitual practices and institutions relevant to racial perception and racial politics. In this way I place my own status as a political and moral *agent* in a primary role – a move which must be central to any genuinely liberatory project.

The education of one's racial perception is thus a deeply political, and ultimately radical, commitment to confronting racial reality both in oneself and the larger social world. A further liberatory aspect of the project of education is that, when undertaken sincerely, it must come to entail (even if it does not begin this way) a commitment to anti-racism. While it may be possible to sincerely undertake the education of one's racial perception from an initial position of racist beliefs and practices, the process of the education of one's racial perception must lead to a rejection of racism. This is because racism entails the 'epistemic closure' mentioned above. Racism stands or falls, in part, on its ability to maintain a normative hierarchy predicated upon the ontological 'givenness' of the value (and disvalue) of particular races.¹⁰ Whiteness, for example, is supposed to be the paradigm of virtue and blackness of vice, and any evidence to the contrary must be

ignored, or explained away, or otherwise turned into what Lewis Gordon has referred to as 'non-persuasive evidence' (Gordon, 1995: 75). Coming to understand how the meaning and scope of the 'white race' has changed over time, or how sophisticated and flourishing civilizations existed in the 'non-White' world, for example, directly challenge racist normative hierarchies. If I begin with racist beliefs and attitudes (and within such a deeply racist social context this seems a virtual inevitability for any and all), the education of racial perception must pose a real challenge to the maintenance of those beliefs, such that I will need either to begin to abandon them or to discontinue the process of education altogether.¹¹

This is true not only on an individual level, but also on a social/political level. Given the ways in which any particular individual's identity, beliefs and attitudes both condition and are conditioned by the larger social (intersubjective) context, attempts to change oneself are always also attempts to change the world, and vice versa. Any *sincere* effort to educate racial perception will come into direct conflict both with racist beliefs or attitudes within the individual, and with larger racist institutions, symbols, and structures that give those individual beliefs and attitudes meaning and salience in the first place. Undertaking the education of one's racial perception, therefore, is not simply a kind of lifestyle or aesthetic choice (in the way that the education of one's wine palate or musical taste can be), but it is an inherently and inescapably *political* act.¹²

This is true both because, as I have already discussed, the education of one's racial perception stands as a kind of public challenge to the racial status quo (and one that is likely to be met with active resistance on the part of other individuals and institutions), and because the *process* of education itself necessarily entails political struggle. Often in the course of gathering the propositional knowledge, and definitely as one works to challenge one's racial perception and engage in the *practice* of education, it will be necessary to confront individuals and institutions in what must be understood as a political act. Insofar as genuine education, as I have argued, is a radical act within the current racial climate (of ignorance), simply undertaking rigorous investigation into racial history can require serious struggle with individual and institutional apathy, inertia, or outright resistance. And what is more, the means whereby one goes about expanding one's experience and practice of racial perception must, in a world that remains deeply racially segregated (and often mutually suspicious), require that the only way to effectively challenge one's racial perception in a manner which avoids the pitfalls of commodification or objectification is through the shared participation in a common political project. Even the most apparently innocuous sorts of association with others, if they are truly educational in this way, are challenges and threats to the prevailing racial reality, and are thus political in the broadest sense.

What all of this means is that a direct, explicit and self-conscious confrontation with the

ways and means of racial perception must be an important moment in anti-racist *praxis*. Moving beyond the construal of racial perception as a passive aspect of simple *seeing*, and emphasizing the phenomenological *act* of perception and all that that entails by means of self-consciously *educating* that perception, are important moments to any anti-racist political commitment. In effect, explicitly political action directed toward anti-racism will lead to or at least be conducive to moments of education for one's racial perception, and efforts at education will, if they are undertaken sincerely, be or at least become a kind of political praxis. Part of what makes the education of racial perception so important is that without that effort at self-conscious education, well-meaning political praxis can be led astray in often pernicious ways, but if our political praxis is also an act of education, then the danger is significantly mitigated. The education of racial perception, therefore, should be understood as a necessary, though certainly not a sufficient, condition for genuinely liberatory anti-racist praxis.

Concluding Remarks

By way of conclusion, I would like to address some potential concerns with the view I am espousing here. One such concern might be to question the priority or significance of the education of racial perception given the myriad harms and forms of oppression currently manifest in the world at large. In the context of the vast array of considerable harm being generated by racial politics around the world, is the best response *really* just to undertake a project of education? Isn't that rather self-indulgent, all things considered? Indeed, one might go so far as to claim that it is only from a position of relative privilege, security, and comfort that one could place so much importance on education. If I were a forced laborer in a Brazilian mine, or a worker in a *maquiladora* outside of Juarez, or an African-American single mother on Milwaukee's north side, I might be far less enthusiastic about the liberatory potential of the education of racial perception.

To be sure, the project of education cannot take priority over survival, and in cases where one's survival is at stake, it would indeed be self-indulgent, if not outright cruel, to advocate education as a primary response. I am not arguing that the education of racial perception must take priority over every other kind of resistance to racial oppression, nor am I arguing that racial oppression must always take priority over other kinds of oppression (such as gender, class, or ability). Different circumstances demand different strategies and priorities. My argument is that the education of racial perception is an important, and ultimately necessary, component of the struggle against racial oppression.¹³ This is so in part because the project of education is as much about the *way* in which one goes about struggling against racial oppression generally as it is about a specific tactic in that struggle. Thus, even our struggles against the most extreme forms of

oppression and dehumanization, when they are undertaken in an attitude open to this kind of education, *are also* manifestations of education. It is therefore not truly a question of priority – of either/or – but rather very much a call for also/and.

What this means is that even for those individuals in the extremes of human misery, there are ways to struggle against racial oppression, or even for survival, that reify racial being, that leave the basic structures and institutions of racial hierarchy unchallenged, that, to paraphrase Frantz Fanon, move one from one *way* of life to another, but not from one *life* to another (Fanon, 1967: 220). The project of the education of racial perception, insofar as it demands a *critical* (and self-critical) approach to racial reality and racial perception, works against these pernicious tendencies. All things considered, therefore, it is better that our struggles against racial oppression (and even for survival) *also* be efforts at education (these are clearly not mutually exclusive projects). Indeed, part of my argument is that struggles for racial justice, when undertaken with a properly critical attitude, will necessarily entail moments of education, even when education is not the explicit aim. Of course, taking up an explicit project of education requires resources and support, to which we will not always have access, and when we do have such access, it will not always be to the same extent. Far from denying that reality, I am pointing out that this constitutes a kind of harm that is even greater than we might at first think. When people lack the resources and the opportunity for the education of racial perception, it diminishes everyone's capacity to struggle effectively against racial oppression. Such efforts will lack an adequate grasp of present racial reality, and have an impoverished vision of an anti-racist future. This does not mean that we should drop everything and work solely on the education of racial perception, but rather that we should strive to make the education of racial perception a significant aspect of our liberatory praxis, whatever specific form that might take.

Another important concern with the education of racial perception has to do with the ways in which different positions of power, privilege and authority impact the practice of education within and across different racial, gender, class, and national boundaries. A great deal of excellent theoretical work has mapped out some of the ways in which oppression and political power can stack the epistemic deck in a manner that disadvantages efforts to combat injustice, and any effort to *educate* in the face of such epistemic disadvantage must be fraught with peril. This is surely a very serious concern, and one that should not be ignored. What this points to, ultimately, is a way of modeling education in which certain individuals, groups, or institutions have knowledge which they then impart, either out of moral obligation, simple largesse, a sense of guilt, or even as an act of aggression ('let me tell you how it *really* is'). Surely, if the education of racial perception operates in such a way that one individual or group deigns to hand out knowledge to

the benighted masses (like a kind of epistemic soup kitchen), then it cannot be nearly as liberatory as I have been suggesting.

I take this to be a very serious concern, and a very real danger for the kind of praxis I am endorsing, but again, the presence of danger does not on its own constitute sufficient reason to abandon the practice altogether. Indeed, I see this particular danger as yet another opportunity for and call to the education of our racial perception. Since perception is linked directly to our sense of identity, as well as our understanding of how we relate to and interact with others of the same and different races, critically confronting the kinds of epistemic power relations at play here must be an integral part of any genuine educational effort. What is more, taking seriously how gender and class (and doubtless myriad other variables) impact these processes in ways similar to and different from race must also be an important component of the education of racial perception. In other words, if I decide that I possess knowledge that might be of use to others vis-à-vis their racial perception, and I simply appear before them and impart that knowledge to them before returning to the rarified atmosphere of my continued study, I have missed the point entirely. Recall that it is crucial to engage in our educational practices (including the exchange of more propositional kinds of knowledge) *with* others as part of a shared practice, rather than as a unidirectional passing along of quanta of knowledge to passive recipients. What this means is that genuine education of racial perception (and education generally, I submit) demands real *reciprocity* among the participants in any given educational practice – there cannot be simply an active giver and a passive receiver of knowledge.¹⁴

Indeed, insofar as I have argued that the education of racial perception, since it conditions our identity in deep and significant ways, serves at the same time as an engagement with and alteration of our own identity, any educational practice that treats the agents involved and the knowledge exchanged as discrete must be misguided. Thus, even if the ‘exchange’ of knowledge is equitable in some abstractly quantifiable sense, if it is undertaken in a way that purports to leave all parties fundamentally unaltered, then it cannot be genuine education in the sense I am attempting to describe. So, if I take myself to have a positive contribution to make to the education of racial perception, and I seek to share that contribution, then I must not only be open to the ways in which I have something to learn from those with whom I am sharing this effort, but must also be self-critically aware of the kinds of power relations at play in this educational moment, and how they condition the practice of education in this context. That *critical* attention to these variables serves in its own right as an educational moment. Of course, like any human action, one will make mistakes in one’s efforts at education. Such mistakes however, can themselves be educational (and liberatory) opportunities if we are open to learning from them, and from each other.

Lastly, I would like to make a point about the relation between racial ontology and the practice of racial liberation. In particular, I would like to suggest that the kind of practice I am recommending here remains vital even if one rejects the phenomenological ontology upon which it is founded. Indeed, even if one maintains an eliminativist ontology, and rejects the reality of race altogether, there are still reasons to take the education of racial perception seriously. Clearly, attending to the 'reality' of race for an eliminativist must be nonsense, but if one thinks of that aspect instead as an attention to the social impact of the illusion of race, some, though surely not all, of the force of the practice of the education of racial perception remains intact. Learning about the history and function of the *concept* of race, even if it is a metaphysically empty concept, can remain an important moment of attempts to struggle against racism, which remains all too real even if one denies the reality of race itself. The ultimate aim, to be sure, of the education of racial perception must be different for the eliminativist. Rather than attempting to come to terms with one's own responsibility for racial reality and the ways in which it conditions one's identity and agency, the eliminativist might be struggling to reveal the unreality of race on the way to a race-less future. The practice, in either case, remains similar in significant ways.

Ultimately, as one might guess, I reject the eliminativist ontology and the ideal of a race-less future for a liberated humanity. A thorough argument for this position, however, is beyond the scope of this article, and in any event I am more interested in finding common practice than in sorting out ontological differences at this point. Indeed, part of the driving ethos of the phenomenological method is to avoid uncritical acceptance or rejection of particular positions in the 'natural attitude' (Husserl, 1991: 33–7), and I can surely learn more by working with the eliminativist than by digging in my heels in resistance to him or her.¹⁵ Thus, we might work together to shed light both on the propositional and on the practical moments of racial perception, and insofar as we are both aiming to critique the passive acceptance of the racial status quo as natural and inevitable, our practice will be complementary. What is more, we are both seeking to foster an attitude of critical reflection on racial 'reality' (though clearly understanding what reality means here in different ways) in ourselves and others, we are both serious about the contingency and historicity of racial categories, and we both seek to reveal and critique the ways in which racial 'reality' conditions and is conditioned by our perception of others, our understanding of ourselves, and our sense of our place in the social world. There are, in short, more commonalities in our practice than differences. Though there are differences, and such differences are ultimately very important, sharing the commonalities in the practice of the education of racial perception allows us to better understand those real differences and their significance – it is, in short, a further opportunity for the education of our racial perception.

The way we perceive race, ultimately, is both a cause and a consequence of the deeply racialized social world in which we all find ourselves. The project of educating that perception is a means to understand, critique and most importantly assume responsibility for that world and our role within it. The education of racial perception is not on its own a panacea, and there are surely ways to go about it that can be dangerous and pernicious (ways that dehumanize others, or reinforce relations of epistemic and political domination and oppression), but without a commitment to genuine education, our struggles against racial oppression cannot achieve the depth of critique necessary for real liberation. They will either serve to reify race, or otherwise fail to emphasize the agency and responsibility we all share. What is more, since education as such is a goal that does not admit of completion (there is always more to learn), it stands as a constant praxis of critical reflection on ourselves, on our political institutions, and on our relations with others. It is, in short, a deeply radical practice geared toward the direct confrontation with the systemic ignorance passing itself off as a natural order that is the hallmark of an oppressive social world.

Notes

I would like to thank Linda Alcoff and the participants of the 2006 California Roundtable on Philosophy and Race for offering critical feedback to an early draft of this article. I am also indebted to the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences and the Caribbean Philosophical Association, where subsequent drafts were presented and subjected to helpful critique. Last, but certainly not least, this article was much improved by the feedback offered by my colleague Theresa Tobin.

1. Those already familiar with *Visible Identities* should feel free to skip this first, more exegetical section of this article.
2. Indeed, existential phenomenology in the Sartrean tradition views this conflict and tension as constitutive of humanity *as such*.
3. Of course, 'real' and 'given' ought not be understood in any sort of robustly context-independent, thing-in-itself, sense.
4. The fact that vision has been the paradigmatic example employed by positivist accounts of perception does not mean that vision really works that way. My claim is only that we tend to find it easier to think of the other senses in the more accurate way, not that vision really is any different from them.
5. By saying that perception is an act, I mean nothing more nor less than the idea that it is not

a passive process, but something actively undertaken by a given agent – that is, I mean only to distinguish this view of perception from the positivist view.

6. There are all sorts of areas in which people routinely attempt to educate their perception. Wine, music, beer, food and, of course, the visual arts (again, while vision often serves as a paradigm of a *mistaken* understanding of perception, it is still mistaken), for example. While it is very tempting to draw out a thorough analogy here, I suspect that it would ultimately be more of a distraction than an aid to my overall point. Instead, I encourage the reader to consider some variety of experience that he or she may have undertaken to deliberately cultivate and educate. What was involved in that process, and what were its consequences for the experience of perception itself?
7. We might think here of Maria Lugones' distinction between 'arrogant' and 'playful' world-traveling (Lugones, 1987).
8. What Lewis Gordon has referred to as their 'irreplacability' (Gordon, 2003).
9. Again, there are better or worse ways to go about this. Listening to or being criticized should not be a kind of self-indulgent manifestation of penance, but rather a way of learning from and with another to better practice and understand racial perception.
10. This idea has been captured in the phenomenological tradition by Lewis Gordon (1995: 95–116), and in the liberal tradition by Charles Mills (1997: 41–62).
11. I suppose it could be possible to truly stretch the boundaries of cognitive dissonance here, but I would suggest that this precludes a *genuine* commitment to education.
12. I am clearly understanding the term 'political' in a broad sense: not limited to party politics or formal policy, but including any effort to shape the social world, even in informal and often subtle ways.
13. Whether something like the education of gender perception, or maybe even class perception, would be equally important in relation to those modes of oppression is an interesting question, but not one that I can take up at present.
14. This is a point familiar to anyone who has studied Paulo Freire (Freire, 1970).
15. This is not to downplay the real and significant differences here. Ultimately, the elitist and I are likely to part ways, but where we can find common ground, I believe we can only benefit from cooperative praxis, which must, in turn, shed further light on our respective ontological differences and their implications.