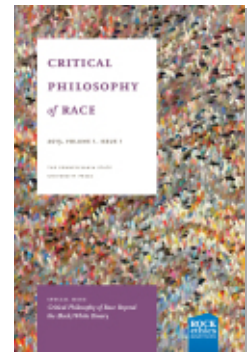# Color Blindness, Meta-Ignorance, and the Racial Imagination

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COLOR BLINDNESS, META-IGNORANCE, AND THE RACIAL IMAGINATION

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Abstract

Drawing on contemporary epistemologies of ignorance, I analyze the American ideology of color blindness as a recalcitrant form of active ignorance that operates at a meta-level. I contend that the meta-ignorance involved in color blindness operates through distorting second-order attitudes about one's cognitive and affective attitudes, resulting in *cognitive and affective numbness* with respect to racial matters: ignorance of one's racial ignorance and insensitivity to one's racial insensitivity. I contend that the black/white binary that has dominated the American racial imagination has contributed tremendously to establish and maintain meta-blindness about racial differences. I suggest that overcoming the black/white binary demands that we expand current conceptions of racial lucidity and that we go beyond the notions of *double consciousness* that critical race theorists have defended since Du Bois and Fanon. According to a more expansive social pluralism, lucidity with respect to racial differences requires a *kaleidoscopic consciousness* that does not reinscribe the black/white binary in one's racial imagination.

In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (2007) Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana brought together an impressive group of race theorists who analyzed from different angles and perspectives the kind(s) of *active ignorance* that grows from, and at the same time facilitates, relations of oppression. This *active ignorance* has to be distinguished from the mere absence of belief or the mere presence of false belief. It is a recalcitrant ignorance hard to eradicate that is rooted in active patterns of cognitive interaction and in habitual ways of perceiving, listening, talking, thinking, and acting. In this paper I want to argue that active ignorance of this sort becomes particularly recalcitrant and dangerous when it operates at a *meta-level*. I will also suggest that the black/white binary that has dominated the American imagination has been an important source of *meta-ignorance* with respect to race, instilling vitiated cognitive-affective attitudes that sometimes survive even when important degrees of racial lucidity are achieved. In the first section I develop an analysis of racial meta-ignorance, using the ideology of color blindness as a prime example. In the second section I discuss ways in which racial meta-ignorance can be fought and racial lucidity can be achieved. I will contend that racial lucidity and the fight against racial ignorance are always ongoing and unfinished tasks, and that, to keep them forever open, they need to be constantly interrogated and pluralized. Drawing on the polyphonic contextualism and pluralism I have articulated elsewhere,[1] I argue that we need to go beyond notions of racial lucidity (such as *double consciousness*) which implicitly invoke binary oppositions that distort the multiplicity and heterogeneity of racial relations.

Color Blindness and Racial Meta-Ignorance

Color blindness has figured prominently in discussions of racial issues in legislation, social policy, and institutional arrangements (such as the educational system). From Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr., key African American thinkers have argued that the ideal of color blindness can play an important role in the struggle for racial justice. From Justice Marshall Harlan to David Hollinger, liberal thinkers have thought of color blindness as required by procedural conceptions of justice according to which justice must be administered *blindly*, that is, by treating everybody equally irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, etc.[2] In this paper, however, I will not focus on the legal, sociopolitical, and institutional aspects

of ideologies of color blindness. Rather, I will focus on the interpersonal dimension of the phenomenon of color blindness, that is, on how this alleged blindness figures in face-to-face interactions and on its cognitive and affective aspects.

Consider the claim "When I look at you, I do not see color." What kind of claim is this? And under what conditions could someone become convinced that this blindness is a cognitive or ethical achievement of some sort? Perhaps the color-blind subject who sees a perceptual achievement in not seeing color in others could be calling attention to aspects of social perception that we are better off without because they distort interpersonal relations: "Others see you through racial stereotypes, I do not." Racist prejudices operate in such a way that people who see through them perceive racial others as inferior in particular respects. We are certainly better off without such prejudices; but unfortunately they do not disappear by fiat. And note that the complete refusal to see color in a racist society involves implicitly the refusal to acknowledge the force of racist prejudices and their insidious impact on interpersonal dynamics: "I do not see you as affected by racial prejudices, and my social perceptions and social relations are unaffected by them." In other words, the disavowal of racialized perception involves distancing oneself from the social reality of racism and failing to properly acknowledge its influence on social cognition.[3]

The claim "When I look at you, I do not see color" can function as a naive disavowal of racism, as if racism were an ideology that could be simply rejected by choosing what one sees, as if our racialized habits of seeing could simply disappear by a volitional act that calls for the dismissal of the cultural tendencies of one's milieu. But color blindness pronouncements constitute very different speech acts depending on who utters them, how they are uttered, to whom they are addressed, and in what context. In particular, the speech act acquires a very different significance depending on the race of the person to whom it is addressed. It is not accidental that "I do not see color in you (or in him/her/them)" typically means "I do not see you as a racial minority," just as "I do not see gender" typically means "I do not see you (or her/them) as a woman." But we are dealing with a very different scenario and a very different dynamics when the color and gender blindness is directed at a privileged subject: for example, when it means "I do not see you as a white man." In this case the object of epistemic hiding is privilege and not oppression. It is not accidental that the proclamation of color and gender blindness is often used with respect to oppressed

genderized and racialized subjects, for it is used as a denial or disavowal of negative bias and prejudice, that is, to distance oneself from racist and sexist ideologies and social discrimination. But presumably those who do not see gender and racial stigmatization do not see gender and racial privilege either; and, therefore, their blindness is a form of inattentiveness not only to social marginalization, but also to privilege: they do not *see* (or fail to pay attention to) how masculinity and whiteness can operate as a locus of privilege in their lives or that of others. Color blindness (like gender blindness) typically functions a form of active ignorance supported by epistemic vices such as arrogance, epistemic laziness, and closed-mindedness. Color blind subjects tend to arrogantly assume that there is nothing to see, that skin color can play no role or have no significance, no matter what others see. These subjects also become epistemically lazy because, through their proclamations of blindness prior to and independently of empirical findings, they are led to block critical questions and empirical explorations. And, finally, these subjects become closed-minded because they close their minds to certain racial considerations no matter how strong the evidence for the relevance of these considerations happens to be.[4]

The kind of cognitive and ethical "achievement" that color blindness purports to be will vary depending on how such alleged blindness operates in communicative interactions. Indeed color blindness can have *multiple and heterogeneous valences.* In particular, I want to highlight three key variables that affect the valence of the statement "When I look at you, I do not see color": the mutual positionality of the interlocutors (both speaker and addressee), the particular relationship(s) between them, and the context of the interaction. As suggested by an anonymous reviewer of this article, think of the claim of color blindness as it could operate in communicative acts of recognition and acknowledgement in the context of an intimate interracial relation. What could a partner mean (and what could the expressive act reveal despite its intended meaning) when s/he says to her/his lover "When I look at you, I do not see color"? Think, for example, of a white man dating a black woman, and imagine the white man saying this to his girlfriend, and also imagine the black woman uttering the statement. Clearly, in each case the proclaimed color blindness has a different valence, even if in both cases the overall meaning is pretty much the same: e.g., "I am able to disregard all the negative meanings associated with your racial identity." In the case of the white male speaker, it could express an act of condescension; but in the case of the black female speaker, it could express

an act of generosity. The different valence exists even if in both cases the claim is meant to express a positive appreciation that has become possible by achieving the overcoming of racial stereotypes: "I have learned to see you in a different way", or "I do not see what others see when I look at you". Notice that when the achievement is formulated in these ways, by drawing a contrast between the speaker's alleged colorless perception and the colored perception of others (or of the speaker's former self), there is an implicit recognition that there is racialized perception all around us, that the act of recognition takes place in the midst of racialized social perceptions, that our social contexts and our social interactions are mediated by racialized perception, even if the particular interaction in question where color blindness is proclaimed has managed to moved beyond such mediation. For this reason, these peculiar proclamations of color blindness are always *in need of clarification*: what cries out for an elucidation is how and in what sense what can be seen (or what others see) is not seen (anymore) in this case.

Sometimes the context of the color blindness proclamation clarifies to some degree what the speaker could have seen (or used to see) and does not see (anymore), thus making it possible to understand what kind of achievement is being claimed and what it means for the interaction. But typically such proclamations are opaque and are surrounded by an air of ambiguity that does not dissipate unless they are followed by clarifications that specify the content of what is not seen and what is seen. As one anonymous reviewer of this essay pointed out, the claim "When I look at you, I do not see color" is merely *a rhetorical gesture*: a pathic statement, a kind of emotive filler that must be followed by something else, such as "But of course, I do not know what it means to be black, Hispanic, Asian, etc., and you have to help me see when my blindness is a disabling blindness and not an attempt to see past a distorting way of seeing ingrained in the ways I have been socialized."[5] Let's focus on how the proclamations of color blindness apply not just to colored subjects in general but to black people in particular; and let's focus more specifically on the kind of racial ignorance that such proclamations can hide.

"When I look at you, I do not see color: I do not see a black person." Is that a compliment? It appears to be more a reflexive remark about the perceiver than a remark about the subject perceived. But although there is indeed certain amount of reflexivity in this attempt to develop epistemic appreciation for one's blindness, there is also a distinctive lack of reflection: the subject disregards the presuppositions of his/her own perspective

and its relation to the perspective of others as racialized subjects. Color blindness requires being *actively ignorant of social positionality*, which involves a double epistemic failure with respect to race: a failure in racial self-knowledge and a failure in the racial knowledge of others with whom one interacts. These two failures go together because the lack of familiarity and critical awareness of one's social positionality involves *not knowing oneself in relation to one's relevant others*, that is, not knowing how one's racialized perspective in the world positions itself vis-à-vis differently situated others and their racialized perspectives.

What kind of position does the subject occupy while treating others as colorless subjects? What kind of relationality does s/he enact? Is the subject her/himself colorless? The idea of a colorless subject remains a *social fiction* today and one that runs contrary to our social practices. This fiction seems to be particularly dangerous in a society (such as the United States) in which the mechanisms of social recognition (our social perceptions and imaginings) are so heavily racialized. This fiction seems to be doing a lot of ideological work, a lot of covering up and blocking of social scrutiny. Even now that a culture of recognizing and celebrating differences seems to be flourishing, there are still those who congratulate themselves for their color blindness as an accomplishment others should aspire to achieve. But what does this "blindness" involve? Is it a pretend blindness in which one denies what one sees, or a genuine blindness resulting from having been trained not to see? And what does this alleged blindness tell us of the subject who proclaims it and of the culture that promulgates it? For the purposes of this paper, I will focus only on color blindness as a form of *white* ignorance in the contemporary United States. Insofar as processes of racialization in the United States have been (and to some degree still are) structured around the black/white binary, the color blindness of white subjects can be considered a *double blindness*: *white blindness*, that is, white's blindness with respect to their own racial identity; and *color blindness proper*, that is, blindness with respect to those who have been colored or racialized as nonwhites. Notably it is only the latter kind of blindness that is explicitly professed in the ideology of color blindness because the object of perception of white blindness (i.e., whiteness itself) is not even registered, whereas the object of perception of color blindness (i.e., racialized colors) is in fact registered but disavowed and brushed aside. White blindness runs much deeper than color blindness because, for the color-blind white subject, whiteness is not even conceptualized as a color, but

rather, as the absence of color, signifying the absence of race, rather than a way of color-coding one more racialized identity. White blindness and color blindness are intimately connected (even though the latter does not avow or recognize the former), and they are both crucial components of white ignorance. I will here analyze the distorting attitudes towards racialized others inscribed in color blindness, thus focusing on the interpersonal aspects of white ignorance (leaving the kind of self-ignorance involved in white blindness for other studies[6]).

Color blindness is supported by certain meta-attitudes that channel and guide social perceptions. What are the blinding meta-attitudes that may contribute to color-blind perception? Color blindness is often rooted in a blinding meta-attitude according to which others appear under one's radar as one's peers only when their differences are erased or rendered inconsequential, that is, only when they are seen as being *like oneself*. The blinding effect of this meta-attitude can be illustrated by what Elizabeth Spelman (1988) has termed the "boomerang perception" characteristic of white ways of seeing racial others. As Spelman explains, neoracist and neocolonialist ways of looking at racial others are narcissistic and construe the subjects being perceived as reflections of the perceiver, hence the boomerang structure of the perception: "I look at you and come right back to myself." The logic of boomerang perception involves a complete lack of reciprocity and denies independence to the seen, which appears as a mere image in the universe (or imaginary) of the perceiver and thus as wholly dependent on the perceiver's subjectivity. By contrast, the white perceiver does not believe her/himself to be an image in other people's universe (or imaginary) and does not experience her/himself as a reflection of nonwhite people's social gaze. As Spelman puts it, "In the Unites States white children like me got early training in boomerang perception when we were told by well-meaning white adults that Black people were just like us—never, however, that we were just like Blacks" (12). This illustrates well how blindness to differences can be produced and maintained by deeply problematic meta-attitudes rooted in privilege, oppression, and social injustice; and once this blindness is in place, it makes people insensitive to—i.e., *cognitively and affectively numbed* and incapable of reacting to—the relations of privilege and oppression around them that mediate their social perceptions and their social lives. This numbness with respect to racial differences constitutes a special kind of cognitive and affective blindness. The people who become so numbed or desensitized are not just blind, but *meta-blind*: they

are incapable of recognizing the source and the contours of their blindness. This very particular kind of *meta-insensitivity*[7] is what characterizes the racial ideology of color blindness. Those who are meta-blind are *blind to their own blindness, insensitive to their own insensitivity*: they are insensitive to the cultural blind spots that they have inherited and they recirculate; they are incapable of acknowledging the presuppositions and consequences of blinding themselves to racial differences, of putting racial blinders that occlude not only the social reality of others, but also of themselves and of their positionality and relationality in the social world.

We should distinguish between *two different kinds of epistemic failure* that can happen in the social perception of racial others. On the one hand, there are specific things we should know about the racialized subjects we interact with: for example, how they think of themselves, how society thinks of them, the history and current status of the social positionality of their group, and the history and current status of the social relationality that binds the perceiving subject and the perceived subject together. One may fail to know all kinds of specific things in these areas; and these failures constitute (some degree of) *first-order or object-level racial ignorance*. But, on the other hand, specific mistaken beliefs or lack of beliefs about the racial others with whom we interact may also be rooted in and supported by very general attitudes about them and about social relationality: for example, the inability to see racial others in their differences—*blindness to racial differences*; or the assumption that racial differences are irrelevant to one's life—*blindness to the social relevance of race*. Here we would have a *second-order or meta-level racial ignorance*, which is what I have termed racial *meta-blindness*: blindness to one's own blindness, insensitivity to insensitivity.

It is indeed possible to have object-level ignorance about one's peers without having meta-level ignorance about them. For example, one might be very sensitive to epistemic lacunas about Ethiopian people and be very vigilant about one's own ignorance about them, while nonetheless maintaining a substantial body of ignorance at the object level (at the level of specific distorted beliefs or concrete epistemic lacunas about Ethiopian people). But it is not possible to have meta-level ignorance about one's peers without having object-level ignorance about them, for the former requires and at the same time breeds the latter. Social meta-ignorance cannot happen without object-level ignorance: if I know all there is to know about a group at the object level, I cannot have a wholly distorted view of

how they enter my world and how I am related to them (for this systematic distortion would be accompanied by *some* object-level ignorance). So, substantial portions of object-level ignorance have to be in place for social meta-ignorance to stick; but once social meta-ignorance and its supporting cognitive-affective structures are there, they will produce more first-order ignorance because they will maintain the subject's inability to learn about others and his/her predisposition to accept distortions about them. Social meta-ignorance produces epistemic lacunas and distorted beliefs about others, or first-order social ignorance, which in turn becomes part of the support system of meta-ignorance, providing fertile soil for its cultivation and its entrenchment. In other words, when it comes to the social ignorance about our peers, the object-level may or may not lead to the meta-level: it is a necessary condition but not a sufficient condition for it. But when there is social meta-ignorance, we always have object-level ignorance and the imminent danger of accumulating more ignorance at that level, for meta-ignorance is a sufficient condition (although not a necessary condition) for object-level ignorance. Meta-blindness protects first-order forms of blindness, which become recalcitrant and resistant to change and improvement because the recognition that there is anything that requires change or improvement is systematically blocked. Meta-blindness can, therefore, be defined as *the inability to recognize and acknowledge one's limitations and blind spots.*

In what sense is the color-blind subject a meta-blind and meta-insensitive subject? Given that the ideology of color-blind is chosen and explicitly proclaimed, it may seem paradoxical to call the subjects who profess it meta-ignorant or meta-blind. Are they not fully aware of their blindness? They are indeed aware of the cognitive stance they are choosing to adopt in their social agency, but they are not at all aware of the presuppositions and consequences of such cognitive posture. The recalcitrant ignorance or meta-ignorance involved in color blindness has to do with how the color-blind stance hides racial phenomena, especially racial privilege and racial oppression; and this hiding makes the color-blind subject become recalcitrantly unaware of how people's lives have been, are, and can be harmed and disadvantaged by racism. The meta-ignorance that color blindness breeds has immediate consequences for responsible agency: it undermines the subject's capacity to be sensitive and responsive to racial harms and disadvantages. The meta-ignorance and meta-insensitivity in question result not only in a shift of responsibility ("I am not

the one to blame for those harms"), but in a numbness that makes the need to take responsibility disappear ("There is nothing to feel responsible for"). In color blindness, the evasion of responsibility goes very deep: the recalcitrant form of ignorance that operates at the meta level renders the color-blind subject unable to take responsibility for racial injustices, which are not even registered and felt (at least not qua injustices); it results in a numbness or insensitivity to racial matters that limits the agent's capacity to respond to wrongs and to improve ethically or politically, since the subject is unable to recognize such limitation. Now, I do not want to claim that every form of color blindness involves meta-insensitivity and the inability to act responsibly and be responsive to racial injustices *to the same degree*.

Take, for example, the following case suggested by an anonymous reviewer: "an old school Marxist who sees all relations ultimately as class relations and in particular sees race as a form of division in the proletariat generated by capitalists for the exploitation of all working class peoples; there seems to be a sense in which this sort of Marxist doesn't 'see race,' and we can imagine him or her seeking to unite working people irrespective of race and downplaying race as mere subterfuge. This person has a kind of principled class consciousness that entails a kind of color blindness."[8] Clearly this person is not trying to avoid responsibility for racial injustices; in fact, she is deeply sensitive to such injustices, which she translates into economic injustices that are independent of processes of racialization. But leaving aside how problematic this classic Marxist analysis is and whether or not it can adequately capture all the different layers of injustice in a racist society, the politically conscious Marxist who does not see race is not sensitive to the racial injustices *qua racial injustices*, and this insensitivity to race can limit her/his capacity to be responsible for and responsive to certain aspects of the injustices in question: she can be relatively unable to hear certain concerns, to take certain aspirations seriously, and in short to be responsive to the specific suffering that results from racial stigmatization. This form of insensitivity can be a blind spot that undermines one's responsible agency and one's capacity to respond to injustices (or to certain aspects of those injustices). Depending on how far the color blindness of our classic Marxist goes, this insensitivity may or may not extend into a full-blown racial meta-blindness (in which the subject becomes meta-ignorant or meta-blind with respect to her/his racial insensitivity). Meta-blindness can be avoided through self-interrogation and critical openness, that is, by leaving one's blindness open to questioning and social scrutiny. To the

extent that this critical openness is there, the color blindness or racial insensitivity does not amount to a recalcitrant blind spot that makes the subject meta-blind and meta-insensitive.

Two important clarifications are in order so as to understand properly racial meta-blindness or meta-insensitivity. In the first place, although I have been focusing on *blindness* because the central target of my analysis is the ideology of color blindness, it is important to note that the meta-insensitivity or numbness in which racial meta-ignorance consists goes well *beyond sight* and it affects also *other modalities* of social perception. This is to be expected since processes of racialization operate not only through sight, but also through other senses such as audition (accents, dictions, rhythms, characteristic sounds, etc.), or smell (characteristic cooking odors, body scents, etc.). The perception of racialized identities is multidimensional and highly contextual. We do not simply perceive whiteness as such, but rather, socially and historically situated configurations of white subjectivities, such as the Southern white upper middle-class gentleman or lady, with their distinctive bodily comportments, clothing styles, accents, etc. In the contextualized practices of racialized social perception, sight (and within it, the perception of skin color) has been given special cultural prominence, but it remains nonetheless only one perceptual modality among many for racial identification. What would happen when, for example, the color-blind subject registers the distinctively racialized accent of an African American or Hispanic subject? In order to avoid contradictory social perceptions in which the encountered subject appears as not racialized in one sense but as racialized in another sense, the color-blind subject would have to become also accent-deaf—and in other contexts, insensitive to odor, taste, touch, etc. In order to filter out racial elements from social perception, a cultivated kind of insensitivity or numbness has to be brought to all perceptual modalities. When taken to its ultimate consequences, the ideology of color blindness requires the impoverishment of every perceptual modality that can carry racial markers. Although this is obscured by the obsessive focus on sight and color, the disregard of race—its erasure from social perception—requires not only blindness, but the deprivation of every sense used in social perception. Very often people are perceived as racialized even when they are not seen (e.g., by their diction, the way they write, they way they smell, the way they laugh, etc.). People can often sense race around a corner before the racialized subject appears on the scene: they can hear or smell race before they see it. The black/white binary and

other mechanisms that have sustained racism in the United States have brought racial recognition under the hegemony of the eye, hiding the work that other perceptual modalities do in processes of racialization. But fully unmasking and dismantling the racial ignorance hidden in the ideology of color blindness requires that we see through the ruse of vision, and that we put sight on the same plane as hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching.[9]

In the second place, although I have explained the racial ignorance involved in color blindness mainly in cognitive terms, this ignorance also contains crucial *affective* elements. Racial ignorance involves both cognitive and affective attitudes and meta-attitudes with respect to racial others. This is why I think it is important to think of this peculiar kind of *blindness* as a form of *insensitivity* or *numbness*, for being insensitive or numbed conveys a lack of receptivity that is simultaneously both cognitive and affective. For example, as pointed out above, racial insensitivity may involve the failure to see the social *relevance* of race in one's interactions, and this failure is not simply a cognitive deficit, but an affective failure: it involves the inability to *feel* concerned and to have an entire array of *emotions* such as empathy, sympathy, compassion, etc. This is why those who do not see the social relevance of the racial aspects of social experience often charge those who do as being *oversensitive*, as having a thin skin or feeling too much when racial elements are present in social interactions. And note that the disagreement is often not just about what is there to see, but rather, about what the appropriate way to feel about what one sees is; that is, it is not just a disagreement about beliefs, but a disagreement about feelings and emotions. Color blindness involves being *affectively numbed* to the racial aspects of social experience. There are of course very different kinds of affective numbness that may be involved in racial insensitivity. For example, a distinctive kind of affective numbness underlying racial insensitivity may consist in feeling *indifference and apathy* as a result of a cultivated lack of interest in the members of a social group and their predicament. A very different kind of affective numbness, however, would be to feel concerned by the situation of a group and by the racial injustices endured by their members, and yet not know how to talk about it and how to react to it. The latter I would call being *affectively blocked*, that is, unable to integrate in one's life what one starts to see and feel as relevant (which is characteristic of subjects who begin to become sensitive to a social injustice without at the same time having resources to come to terms with it and to make one's relation to it intelligible and manageable). The cognitive and the affective work in

tandem in shaping one's social sensibilities and agential powers, but of course the cognitive and the affective are not always congruent elements; they can pull apart and fall into tension with each other: one may know about a social harm and not care (as it happens in the case of *knowledgeable insensitivity*[10]), and one may also care (i.e., be affectively open) and not know enough to do anything with that sensitivity. Clashes between the cognitive and the affective of these sorts lead to failures in responsible agency, that is, to a diminished ability to be attentive and responsive to social problems and injustices. For this reason, in order to meliorate our social sensitivity and responsible agency, we have to be very observant and critical about how our cognitive and affective structures work together, or fail to work together.

Different kinds of insensitivity or numbness call for different analyses and responses. I do not have space here to distinguish properly between different kinds of racial insensitivity. I want simply to underscore that these different kinds of insensitivity involve both cognitive and affective attitudes and meta-attitudes, and, therefore, that their correction will require both cognitive and affective transformations which, typically, the insensitive subjects or groups are ill prepared to carry out by themselves. Precisely because of the obstacles and defense mechanisms that operate at the meta-level in color blindness, the color-blind individual will need external help to detect and correct her/his racial insensitivity: the concerted efforts of others in bringing her/him to the realization that there are aspects of the social world s/he does not see and s/he should care about. On the other hand, the color-blind group or culture will need the help of other groups or cultures, or of alternative viewpoints within them.[11] But, of course, the more empowered the color-blind individual, group, or culture is, the more difficult it will be for others to do the proper interventions and to set in motion the process of transformation and cognitive-affective melioration. The process of undoing color blindness and achieving greater degrees of social sensitivity with respect to racial relations involves much more than a mere "cognitive therapy."[12] It involves the restructuring of habits and affective structures, which requires sustained political action and deep cultural transformations. A central obstacle against attempts to meliorate social sensitivity with respect to race is the polarized racial imagination in black and white of mainstream American culture.

How does the black/white binary contribute to racial insensitivity and meta-blindness? As Franz Fanon (1967) suggested, in the racial imagination of Western cultures white is the color of the unmarked mainstream subject.

In the social perceptions controlled by this racial imagination, people will see in white and they will imagine themselves and their fellows as white subjects. According to this racial imagination, people are *white by default*, that is, *white until proven colored*, until something calls into question their status as normal subjects within the culture. In this racial imaginary, differences are blackened and can only be perceived negatively, as departures from normalcy. Blackened differences acquire a heightened negative visibility, whereas whiteness goes unnoticed and becomes a blind spot. The presumed whiteness of normal subjects is masked as absence of color. Within this racial imaginary, the attempt to overcome stigmatizing differences becomes the attempt to whiten these differences, that is, to assimilate them to the white mainstream until they are no longer perceived as differences. But notice that this kind of color-blind perception smuggles in whiteness (or *whitening processes*) into the social world under the appearance of the absence of color. Whiteness is thus masked as discoloration or color neutrality. This kind of color blindness is part of a racial ideology that privileges the white mainstream and tries to assimilate all other possible embodiments and perspectives (no matter how different) to the mainstream white culture. Within this racial imagination, *a color-blind universe is a white world*.

The normalizing tendencies of white mainstream culture can be perceived in many aspects of our daily life. Stereotypical generalizations that people take for granted and guide their actions contribute to the erasure of differences and make them blind or insensitive to marginalized subjectivities and perspectives. These generalizations are grounded in *dominant attitudes about normalcy*, about what counts as normal or mainstream or to be expected. These attitudes about normalcy that often guide social perceptions make the normal go unmarked and unnoticed, resulting in social phenomena such as the invisibility of whiteness, of Christianity, of heterosexuality, etc.—not because these things are not perceived at all, but rather, because they are seen everywhere, because they are constitutive elements of the lens through which the world is looked at. On the other hand, these attitudes have the opposite effect on what is deemed different: when we approach others with these attitudes, those aspects of them that deviate from what is taken to be the norm require special markers (and explanations, excuses, etc.) and acquire a *heightened visibility*, but a precarious and negative one: they become visible only *as a problem*.[13] These attitudes about normalcy are complicit with the status quo and contribute to

the perpetuation of the oppression or marginalization of differences. They can include, for example, the expectation that people are white until proven colored (as if white were not a color), Christian until proven of another religious affiliation (or worse yet, of no religious affiliation at all), man or woman until proven gender ambiguous or unclassifiable, heterosexual until proven otherwise, Western until proven non-Western, etc.[14]

According to my analysis, the phenomenon of color blindness often occurs as part of a larger cultural phenomenon: the phenomenon of the normalizing and homogenizing tendencies of a privileged perspective that protects itself by blocking our recognition of differences. Some versions of the contemporary ideology of color blindness call for a social orchestration that enables and encourage subjects to be in denial about racial differences as significant human differences and about their own positionality and relationality in a social network permeated by relations of racial oppression. Rendering these relations invisible makes it impossible for color-blind subjects to take responsibility for them: one cannot do anything about that which one does not see. In her classic paper on feminism and racism, Adrienne Rich (1979) already pointed out that color blindness is an ideology that protects racial privilege because it works to conceal the partiality of the white world. Rich uses the concept of "white solipsism" to describe the perceptual standpoint that assumes a white perspective as universal; and she refers to the ideology of color blindness as the protective mechanism that makes that privileging of perspective go unnoticed. In their analyses of color blindness, Benita Berry (1995) and Patricia Williams (1997) have also emphasized that color blindness often functions as an ideological cover-up strategy that deflects issues of responsibility. More recently, Linda Alcoff (2006) and Shannon Sullivan (2006) have also analyzed color blindness in a similar way.[15]

Following Berry and Williams, Alcoff (2006) has explained the phenomenon of color blindness as motivated by "a (white) anxiety about seeing race" (200) She tells us that in her experience, growing up in the post–civil rights South, "color blindness was regularly claimed by white folks and regularly repudiated by folks of color": "There seemed to be an anxiety about the perception of race on the part of some whites, a fear of acknowledging that one sees it" (199) These observations about color blindness fit in well with my analysis of meta-attitudes that produce blindness. For color blindness can be understood as a socially cultivated meta-attitude through which a particular group tries to monitor and control what they

see and are willing to acknowledge as relevant and significant in their life. The meta-attitude of color blindness identifies the perceptual judgments that have to be disavowed and the interpretations and valuations that have to be blocked and jettisoned because we cannot find a place for them in the life we want to picture for ourselves—a life without race. Repairing the damage that the internalization of the ideology of color blindness produces in people's cognitive-affective structures would require, therefore, repairing their meta-blindness with respect to the visibility and significance of racial features and racial relations; or, to put it in the positive, it would require achieving *meta-lucidity* with respect to the forms of human diversity and human relationality that processes of racialization have produced. In other words, the key is to figure out how to open people's eyes, ears, and hearts to racial differences as significant human differences, and how to make racial features and relations relevant to their life. A crucial part of this task involves resisting the black/white binary, which has been an important source of meta-ignorance with respect to race and has instilled vitiated cognitive-affective attitudes.

There are two aspects of the black/white binary that have contributed to establish and maintain racial ignorance: its color fixation and its polarizing or dualistic tendencies. In the first place, the black/white binary reduces racial differences to color-coded differences and leads to the reductive identification of racial consciousness with color consciousness.[16] This color fixation hides other aspects of racialization that are nonperceptual or operate through other perceptual modalities, as discussed above. In the second place, another source of distortion in the black/white binary is the binarism itself, that is, the fact that it forces racial differentiation to operate in a dichotomous way, assimilating every possible racialized subjectivity or experience to one of two poles, black or white, and thus desensitizing subjects to the wide spectrum of racial diversity and blocking the development of truly pluralisitic racial sensibilities. We need to move beyond racial dualisms and develop a sense for nuanced, heterogeneous, and nonpolarized racial differentiations that can appreciate the specificity of racial experiences and identities without pitting one group against another. The black/white binary creates a false dichotomy with respect to racial differences: either they are blackened and acquire a negative heightened visibility, or they are whitened and acquire a neutralized invisibility through assimilation or normalization. The blackening of racial differences and their pathologization have been heavily criticized in the literature on race and ethnicity.

By contrast, the whitening of racial differences and their normalization have received a mixed treatment. I have tried to show that this whitening process produces color blindness, but also a very problematic form of meta-blindness or insensitivity to insensitivity. The cognitive and affective meta-attitudes that operate in this process have to be rejected and replaced with a very different kind of sensitivity with respect to racial differences if we want to transcend the cultural blind alley created by the opposition between color obsession and color blindness, and move toward a richer kind of racial consciousness that overcomes the problems of color coding in black and white. To the discussion of that possibility I now turn.

Racial Lucidity Beyond the Black/White Binary: Toward a Kaleidoscopic Consciousness

In *Visible Identities* Alcoff offers a phenomenological account of the perceptual practices that make race (or processes of racialization) visible or invisible. Alcoff argues that the reduction of racism and the melioration of racial relations require becoming reflectively and critically aware of our perceptual habits and practices concerning race. As she puts it, in our fight against racism "our first task . . . is *to make visible the practices of visibility itself*" (194). To put it in the terms of my analysis here, the fight for racial justice requires a kind of *meta-lucidity*, that is, lucidity with respect to racial seeing. It is in this sense that Alcoff undertakes the task of making practices and habits of racial seeing visible. The first challenge here is to unmask the invisibility of racial constructions and of whiteness in particular. Alcoff argues that racial constructions—and especially privileged ones—while inscribed in the very structure of perception typically escape conscious perception and remain imperceptible. What is rendered permanently visible—that which is inscribed on the body itself, "the flesh of the visible"—is in an important sense rendered invisible: it is constantly being seen and not seen at the same time. What is hidden from view, precisely through perceptual practices, is the process of racialization as such, because "visible difference naturalizes racial meanings" (191). Racial seeing as such is not open to view; the processes of racialization that come to structure our social perceptions are not seen, and yet our perceptual habits and our field of vision cannot escape them. The racial meanings inscribed in the body become part of the underlying structure of our perceptual habits, that is, part of

the taken-for-granted background against which our social perceptions take place. As Alcoff explains, locating race in the domain of the visible has the phenomenological result of experiencing racial differences as natural and immutable (see esp. 192). Alcoff's phenomenological account can explain two things simultaneously: why perceptual processes of racialization "are nearly impossible to discern and why they are resistant to alteration or erasure." (188) At this point, however, this account can make it difficult to see how personal and social change can be possible for those who have been exposed to racialized perceptual practices: "are we not led to pessimism about the possibility of altering the perceptual habits of racialization?" (189)

Alcoff finds a source of optimism in the heterogeneity and pluralism of human experiences. She claims that there are "multiple schemas operating in many if not most social spaces" and that this multiplicity can serve to "mitigate against an absolute determinism and thus pessimism" about racial seeing (189). The plurality of alternative ways of perceiving that can be found even within the most strictly disciplined and constrained field of social perceptions can be exploited to produce changes and effect meliorations that improve social relations. As Alcoff puts it: "Perceptual practices are dynamic even when congealed into habit, and that dynamism can be activated by the existence of multiple forms of the gaze in various cultural productions and by the challenge of contradictory perceptions. To put it simply, people are capable of change" (189). Alcoff emphasizes the tensions and contradictions in perceptual practices which can be exploited for change. Elsewhere[17] I have described this phenomenon as standpoints exerting *resistance* against each other, making themselves noticed and felt through a kind of *epistemic friction* that is both cognitive and affective. In this case, the epistemic friction to be sought is a perceptual friction that can produce critical awareness of multiple ways of seeing and can point in the direction of change beyond a black-and-white social vision.

Given the new social and cultural conditions of today, it is increasingly hard for whiteness to remain invisible. But this does not mean that whiteness has been fully revealed or unmasked, or that it is easy to see, especially for white subjects. Insofar as whiteness remains an uncontested norm, it operates as the unmarked standard. Its invisibility is crucial for its hegemonic status as a norm: what is white is identified with the neutral, unmarked, deracialized or unraced. For the abnormalization of what is perceived as colored to be uncontested, whiteness has to be not only conceptualized, but experienced—*lived*—as the absence of racial color. Whiteness

has to be revealed as a racial identity and, more importantly, it has to be unmasked as an identity that has come to define what is considered *normal*, thereby stigmatizing those subjectivities, behaviors, and features that deviate from paradigmatic, normalizing whiteness. This unmasking of whiteness is painful; it produces discomfort for privileged racial identities, which were previously unnoticed and typically felt unproblematic. Critical white voices have joined the critical voices of racially oppressed subjects in unmasking whiteness. Many subjects who were recruited to arrogant white perception in subtle ways during their upbringing and early socialization find opportunities throughout their lives to grow uncomfortable with this racial way of seeing and to develop a critical distance with it. More and more subjects find it difficult to occupy and live privileged positions within a racialized world without hesitation and lack of comfort. More and more subjects find it difficult to inhabit the white gaze as a matter of course—no questions asked, no worried felt. Farewell to an invisible and un-interrogated white commonsense. The white gaze—the dominant way of racial seeing in mainstream culture—has been rendered visible and has been challenged from different angles, including by whites themselves. Yet, as Alcoff has argued, we have to keep in mind that the very interesting and productive phenomenon of white anti-whiteness is full of dangers and mystifications, with the possibility of self-delusion and overestimating one's powers to overcome racial perceptual practices and to become disloyal to one's race. Alcoff analyzes different versions of white anti-whiteness which, though commendable because they contain insights that many white subjects remain blind to, nonetheless fail to produce a sufficiently critical awareness of white identity that can take responsibility for racial oppression in a productive way. I would say that what we have in these instances is *white consciousness without racial lucidity*, that is, we have ways in which white people become self-conscious about their racial identity but insufficiently lucid about how deep this identity goes and about its multifaceted complicity with relations of oppression.

In order to repair racial blindness, we need to explore ways in which subjects can reconstruct their perspectives and learn to inhabit them in new ways, so that they can reconstitute their positionality and relationality in a racialized social environment. As Alcoff suggests, "only the creation of new structures of identity formation" (216) can meet the challenge of offering genuine racial liberation for white subjects, so that they can take responsibility for the structural racism that has informed their privileged

standpoint and at the same time overcome complicity with ongoing racist practices. But developing a positive sense of identity while taking responsibility for racial oppression is not easy for white subjects, for the recognition of responsibility can be shattering. What is needed is a transformative but not shattering lucidity that enables subjects to see how their whiteness has been constructed socially and historically vis-à-vis other identities, and at the same time a lucidity that points in the direction of new ways of inhabiting that identity. This requires a context-sensitive approach that examines racial attitudes and habits as they operate in the particular context in question, and an approach that is both sociohistorically and psychologically sensitive, carefully tracing the genesis of racial standpoints and offering an array of possibilities for how they can be phenomenologically experienced by different individuals. Alcoff finds an example of a fairly successful localized attempt at coming to terms with a racist past and offering paths for the rearticulation of racialized (and, in particular, white) subjectivities in Michael L. Harrington's *Traditions and Changes: The University of Mississippi in Principle and in Practice*.[18] Emphasizing and exploiting the dualities, tensions and contradictions that can be found in one's heritage, Harrington's book gives students the sense that they can learn and draw from the unfinished projects of the past, while at the same time warning them about the negative things that have also become part of their culture, of their traditions, and even of themselves, and need correction and melioration.

Following on the steps of Harrington's emphasis on the dualities and tensions of white American culture and history, Alcoff emphasizes the importance of developing a *bifurcated white standpoint* that articulates and exercises this dual approach in relation to its cultural past, present, and future. It is interesting to note that this bifurcation of white consciousness is very different from the one that generates the double consciousness of black people according to Du Bois and Fanon: it is an ambivalent attitude with respect to oneself, a dual perspective on what is recognized as one's own (one's cultural past, present, and future), which need not involve the internalization of the perspective of racial others or even be occasioned by interactions with these nonwhite others. Alcoff herself recognizes this discrepancy even though she uses the expression *white double consciousness* "to name [the] two-sided sense of the past and the future" that "white identity needs to develop" (222). Alcoff's notion of a white double consciousness does "not involve the move between white and black subjectivities or black and American perspectives, as Du Bois and Fanon developed the notion."

(223) "Instead," she goes on to argue, "for whites, double consciousness requires an ever-present acknowledgement of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclusive human community" (223).

I want to go beyond Alcoff's account of white double consciousness in two ways. In the first place, drawing on Shannon Sullivan's discussions of the racialized habits of whiteness, I want to make room for a notion of white double consciousness that involves *the internalization of the gaze of racialized others*, allowing for the confluence of multiple perspectives in the formation of white subjectivities and thus overcoming white solipsism. And, in the second place, I want to go beyond *double* consciousness and gesture toward a *multiplicitous* or *kaleidoscopic* consciousness that includes the multiplicity of perspectives required for genuine open-mindedness and for avoiding the arrogant white perception that keeps excluding even when it pretends to acknowledge (a colonizing gaze that conquers the perspectives of others, rather than being transformed by them).

Sullivan (2006) offers a situated account of embodied racial habits that is both psychological and sociohistorical, and points in the direction of a double consciousness for white subjects in a Du Boisian and Fanonian sense. As Sullivan's account makes clear, the kind of racial self-consciousness required by white double consciousness will be different from the racial awareness of black double consciousness in crucial respects, but both forms of double consciousness coincide in the following: they consist in a kind of shattering of a bodily schema produced by the internalization of the gaze of differently racialized others toward oneself, which can only happen in *actual bodily encounters with racial others* that disrupt the normal operation of one's racialized transactional habits and produces a vivid racial awareness. What is produced through these encounters is a new way of seeing oneself: seeing yourself as others see you, as racialized in a particular way different from them, making you self-aware of that difference in your bodily transactions with them. In her elucidations of Fanon's account, Sullivan makes clear that it is not sufficient to have tensions or dualities within one's psyche in order to have double consciousness; you need specific events, *lived disruptions*, that trigger the fracturing of one's subjectivity, the "zebra-stripping of the mind", as Fanon calls it (1967, 63). Sullivan recounts some personal experiences in which her psychosomatic

racial habits were disrupted and a new kind of racial consciousness started to emerge. Even in apparently simple experiences such as a middle-class white person's evening ride on the bus with black workers returning home, the subject can experience an uncomfortable and heightened consciousness about how she might be perceived by others as a differently racialized subject. She might internalize the gaze of these others and look at herself through their eyes, as an object in their world. As Sullivan puts it, what occurs in cases like this is "the shattering of a white person's 'normal' bodily schema into a racial epidermal schema: I became white, not neutral, and my whiteness interfered with the smooth, non-reflective living of my body" (117). Sullivan emphasizes that experiences of racialization do not disrupt bodily schemas in the same way for those perceived as white and privileged and for those perceived as colored and underprivileged: "While [the experience] transformed my body into an object to manipulate, the historico-racial valuing of whiteness as good and blackness as evil was not disturbed. . . . Even my disrupted bodily schema retained its white privilege. While unsure of how to live my body, I was never reduced to a subperson who faded into non-existence" (ibid.).

Although there is no "zebra-stripping" of the white mind strictly speaking (at least not in the sense of fully internalizing processes of identity formation in the black world as well as in the white world), white consciousness can nonetheless be pluralized, that is, it can acquire inner diversity through disruptions that force it to take the perspectives of differently racialized others toward itself. And from an epistemic point of view, for the internalization of the racial other's perspective to result in the genuine pluralization of one's racial consciousness, sufficient epistemic authority or a sense of legitimacy must be accorded to the other's viewpoint. For, otherwise, if alternative perspectives are internalized as intrinsically defective—as distorted perversions of the *normal* standpoint—the internalization will not avoid, but will in fact reinforce racial solipsism, leaving the subject with a colonizing gaze that takes in the perspectives of others only to turn them into subaltern perspectives that distortingly reflect the only legitimate perspective on the world and on oneself. The epistemic injustices involved in apportioning diminished levels of credibility, legitimacy, and epistemic authority to minority perspectives have been discussed in the recent literature in social epistemology.[19] These epistemic injustices have a formative dimension and a key impact on the development of our epistemic sensibilities; and, as I have argued elsewhere,[20] the epistemic injustices produced

by racism undermine and can even block the formation of a pluralistic racial consciousness.

The formation of a genuinely pluralistic racial consciousness requires interactions with *multiple* racial others under conditions of minimal epistemic justice. In order to overcome racial insensitivities, in order to make our eyes, ears, and hearts open to the lives of racial others and attuned to sensibilities different from ours, it is not enough to learn to see oneself through the eyes of a single racial other—the Other—in face-to-face interactions; it is imperative that one internalizes many other racialized viewpoints. To avoid a distorting polarization of racial perspectives and the dichotomization of one's racial consciousness (as encouraged by the black/white binary), it is crucial that we develop an open-ended multiplicitous viewpoint orientation. The more a white subjectivity is pluralized—that is, the more it internalizes the epistemically dignified gazes of racial others and learns to see itself as a perceptual object for them—the more lucidity it can achieve about its positionality and relationality with respect to racial differences. Such lucidity requires more than "zebra-stripping". Racial positionality and relationality are distorted when polarized and construed in the binary colors of a zebra: white as the color of privilege and normality, and black as the color of being underprivileged and abnormal. A truly lucid racial consciousness must go beyond the black/white binary. There are many differently racialized others who come in many colors and shades of color; we can be the object of perception of many different standpoints and gazes. And, therefore, it is highly distorting to dichotomize the social gazes available into two: the mainstream gaze, or the gaze of privilege, or the white perspective, on the one hand; and the marginalized, out of the mainstream, or colored perspective, on the other. Within each side of this polarization we find distinctive groups, experiences, and perspectives. If we take this social pluralism seriously, we need a more expansive lucidity about our positionality and relationality with respect to racial differences: we need not only a double consciousness, but a *multiplicitous* or *kaleidoscopic consciousness* that does not re-inscribe the black/white binary in one's racial imagination. To this aspect of racial lucidity I now turn.

We need to move toward a kaleidoscopic (rather than merely dual) perspective on racialized identities. What is needed is a *kaleidoscopic consciousness* that remains for ever open to being expanded, that is, a subjectivity that is always open to acknowledge and engage new perspectives. The *counterfactual* dimension of this kaleidoscopic consciousness is crucial, for

what is required for its production is to become capable of appreciating not only how things look from the multiple social locations available, but also, how things might look if we were to entertain newly created locations (or alter significantly the existing ones) and situate ourselves differently, in other words, if we were to keep considering how things might look from *elsewhere*. In *Speaking from Elsewhere* (2006a) I considered the critical power of eccentric forms of intelligibility ("an intelligibility from elsewhere"), which could shed light on established meanings and help us appreciate the limitations and blind spots of received semantic structures and communicative capacities. The same could be said about *a consciousness from elsewhere*, which is what we need to cultivate in order to achieve as much meta-lucidity as possible, as much insight into the cognitive limitations and obstacles of our perspectives as possible, knowing of course that *complete meta-lucidity is unreachable*, for the process of cognitive and affective melioration does not have an end and there are always blind spots that remain unnoticed. What is needed is the cultivation of the ability to keep searching for new perspectives and actively try to expand our perceptions and thoughts by contemplating things from elsewhere. This is the key to a kaleidoscopic consciousness. And nothing short of this complex cognitive and affective achievement will be adequate to the meta-blindness problem I have raised—i.e. the problem of blind spots and insensitivities that remain hidden to the subject's perspective(s), making the subject incapable of cognitive and affective melioration because of his/her insensitivity to insensitivity.

Indeed, if a double consciousness is not enough because the plural and heterogeneous nature of the social fabric can generate more than two perspectives, this problem is not solved by going to a triple or quadruple consciousness, for a fifth perspective may have been marginalized and rendered invisible and inaudible. Indeed, the social fabric can generate forever more standpoints (in fact, the perspective(s) of each group and even of each individual can always—at least in principle—be (further) pluralized). Instead of an infinitely pluralized consciousness, what is needed is a kaleidoscopic consciousness that has built into it a flexible and dynamic structure so that it can always adapt to the possibility of excess, that is, of there being more ways of experiencing the world than those considered. A kaleidoscopic consciousness is what is needed to come to terms with the phenomenon of racial pluralism. And note that for a kaleidoscopic consciousness to have some degree of lucidity at the meta-level, it does not need to

have full mastery of the different perceptual perspectives and standpoints (which is often impossible without having lived one's life in a certain way). Rather, it is sufficient to know that these different standpoints are there with their own powers and limitations—that is, that they have certain ways of framing that open our eyes, ears, and hearts to some things but not to others—and that there may be other standpoints that remain opaque or even invisible to us. The meta-lucidity of a kaleidoscopic consciousness is first and foremost lucidity about the multiplicity of perspectives and of the limitations of one's own standpoint, and only secondarily lucidity about the specific features of those perspectives with which one's own is entangled.

The metaphor of the kaleidoscope captures well some aspects of the multiplicitous consciousness that can hold and maintain active multiple perspectives simultaneously. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope underscores a fluid way of imagining ourselves and others in which patterns of relations are constantly emerging and vanishing, seamlessly and ceaselessly, with some relational possibilities giving way to others, constantly resisting the ossification of our categorizations. This brings to the fore the *fluidity, dynamicity, and interconnectivity* that our racial consciousness should aspire to. However, the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, like any metaphor, also has its limitations: first, it is a visual metaphor that leaves unquestioned the color fixation and the hegemony of the eye that have dominated contemporary racial ideologies and have distorted racial relations, as discussed above; and, second, the metaphor forces us to construe patterns of color and their interrelations as symmetric and orderly, and, of course, as we all know, the complex interrelations among racial identities are often not symmetric and orderly, but quite asymmetric and chaotic. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope is indeed not perfect, but it is useful in depicting our racial gaze as composed of a fluid, heterogeneous, and interconnected multiplicity. We can compensate for the premium this metaphor places on order and symmetry by calling attention to the fuzziness present in the transition from one pattern to another and in the relation between what is in the foreground and in the background of the kaleidoscopic image. And we should also supplement it with other, nonvisual metaphors. But, despite its shortcomings, the metaphor of the kaleidoscope is an improvement over the metaphor of double vision.

How does one cultivate a kaleidoscopic social consciousness that remains sensitive to differences in multiple areas of social life, producing lucidity with respect to multiple forms of oppression? How does one's racial

sensitivity relate to one's sensitivity with respect to other aspects of social life (such as gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, etc.)? Does becoming meta-lucid with respect to racial blind spots and racial bodies of ignorance help one to become sensitive to other social blind spots and bodies of ignorance, such as those grounded in homophobia or sexism? Different kinds of injustice, though typically interconnected and exhibiting deep resemblances in their logic and dynamics, are often quite distinct and they develop their own defense mechanisms, so that *a heightened sensitivity with respect to one kind of insensitivity does not guarantee any special sensitivity with respect to other forms of insensitivity*. In other words, what is learned in one context of social injustice or as a result of certain experiences of oppression should not be assumed to be immediately transferable to other contexts or experiences of oppression. We can talk about multiplicitous or kaleidoscopic consciousness with respect to class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, race, religion, sexuality, etc. And having one kind of multiplicitous or kaleidoscopic consciousness does not guarantee lucidity in other respects, that is, with respect to other forms of oppression. This phenomenon of the *compartmentalization of one's lucidity or sensitivity with respect to insensitivity*[21] constitutes an important obstacle in the personal and collective learning processes concerning multiple experiences of oppression and, therefore, a crucial obstacle for the melioration of social injustices. The *domain-specificity* of lucidity with respect to oppression can partially explain how difficult it has been for social movements of liberation to form coalitions and to fight against oppression on multiple fronts simultaneously without falling into the traps of in-fighting and divisive politics.

We should be suspicious of any claim of complete lucidity or absolute sensitivity: "I feel your pain", "I feel everybody's pain"; "I see how your reality has been distorted", "I see all distortions". Just like our perceptions and cognitions, *our meta-cognitions are also always limited and must be constantly checked and expanded*. The illusion of seeing or feeling everything can be another form of blindness or numbness, of not seeing anything in particular or of seeing things out of focus, of making oneself inattentive or insensitive to possible blind spots or insensitivities that may have gone so far undetected. However, this does not mean that we can only become lucid with respect to those forms of injustices we ourselves have experienced and become reflective about in our own life. After all, the domain-specificity of lucidity is a contingent and contextual phenomenon; and, even if there is no generic (domain- and context-independent) lucidity to

be attained, there are nonetheless ways of expanding our sensitivity to insensitivities and of becoming progressively more lucid about the different forms of blindness and numbness that support social injustices. *The expansion of one's social sensibilities*—and with it also the pluralization of one's racial consciousness—*is an ongoing task that does not have an end*. And it is a task that individuals cannot fully carry out all by themselves. Such a task requires sustained interactions with significantly different individuals and groups (interactions that provide disruptions and diverse forms of epistemic friction); it requires the continued critical interrogation of the collective imagination from multiple perspectives; and it also requires the cultivation of intra- and inter-group solidarities and the collaborative efforts of overlapping social movements that can create the conditions for cognitive and affective melioration.

NOTES

1. See esp. my book *Speaking from Elsewhere* (2006a) and my articles "Tongues Untied" (2006b), and "Whose Meanings?" (2008).

2. For a rich discussion of the different ideologies of color blindness in the United States, see ch. 2 of Ronald Sundstrom (2008).

3. Of course racial seeing involves more than merely negative social perceptions. As Alcoff (2006) suggests, racial identities provide complex interpretative horizons that embodied subjectivities use to navigate the world and make sense of their experiences and that of others.

4. For a fuller discussion of the epistemic vices of arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness, see ch. 1 (esp. sec. 1, 30–40) of my book *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2012).

5. This sentence has been adapted from the comments of one of the anonymous reviewers. I could not be more grateful for these incisive comments.

6. An excellent systematic study of white ignorance that includes an account of what I have called white blindness can be found in Sullivan (2006).

7. Contrast this kind of insensitivity with what we can call *knowledgeable insensitivity*, which certainly does not involve recalcitrant blind spots or ignorance at the meta level. Ignorance is indeed not a necessary condition for insensitivity, and there are people who can be knowingly insensitive to the suffering of others. Think, for example, of contempt or resentment as kinds of knowledgeable insensitivity. Those who feel contempt or resentment for certain problems, concerns, or forms of suffering are not ignorant about them; and I don't think they can be said to be numbed or desensitized to them either (as it happens with meta-blindness): they register the problem or harm in question, but they do not feel it as a legitimate concern or as an undeserved mistreatment or injustice; they say, for example, that such problem or harm does not constitute an ethical wrong, that the people who suffer it brought it upon themselves or deserve it, etc. (I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out to me these kinds of cases of knowledgeable insensitivity, which indeed contrast sharply with the kind of insensitivity grounded in meta-ignorance that I am arguing is at the core of the ideology of color blindness.)

8. I take the description of this case verbatim from the comments of one of the anonymous reviewers.

9. Commenting on this paragraph, one of the anonymous reviewers formulated the point with great eloquence: "As long as we are bewitched by the seductions of the eye, we remain inattentive to the other affective and perceptual dimensions of racializing." I am grateful to the commentary of this reviewer which has enabled me to bring the point into sharper focus in the revisions of the essay. However, calling attention to the nonvisual perceptual modalities of processes of racialization remains a signpost for important future work that is needed in the philosophy of race.

10. See note 7.

11. Luckily, social groups and cultures are not so homogeneous and monolithic that they contain no discordant or dissenting voices, or at least their possibility. In *Speaking from Elsewhere* (2006) I have argued that this possibility is always there.

12. I am here alluding to the charge of falling into a superficial intellectualism that reduces the fight against racial oppression to a "cognitive therapy", which Alison Bailey (2007) and others have launched against Charles Mills (1997).

13. This is of course a generalization of W. E. B. Du Bois's analysis of the distorted social perception of the Negro as a problem. See Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois et al. (1903/2010).

14. In this way, my analysis of color blindness points in the direction of a productive convergence between race theory and queer theory in their critical interrogations of the role of normative attitudes with respect to normalcy as they operate in racism and heterosexism (as well as in Christianormativity, in ethnocentrism, and in other exclusionary ideologies).

15. Sullivan (2006) describes the contemporary ideology of color-blindness as "one of the hiding places of the terror of whiteness" (127). "White people often are strongly invested in not knowing much about whiteness." (128) And although "the habit of

ignoring race" is typically presented as "a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture," this form of socially orchestrated ignorance, "far from being merely innocent," Sullivan argues, actually operates "as a shield that protects a person from realizing her complicity in an oppressive situation" (128).

16. For the distinction between "race consciousness" and "color consciousness," see Gutmann (1996).

17. See my *Epistemology of Resistance* (2012) , esp. sections 1.3 and 2.3.

18. This is a textbook that Harrington developed to use in his University Studies 101 class at the University of Mississippi. Without shying away from providing a complete account of Ole Miss's racist past, Harrington offers the students a way of positioning themselves in resistance to that past and as part of a sustained effort to create an antiracist university identity and to locate racial solidarity at the center of university life. Harrington does this through a critical and revisionary approach to U.S. Southern history and American history, arguing that U.S. cultural and political traditions have a dual character, containing both ways of institutionalizing oppression and inequality and ways of appreciating freedom and equality and trying to achieve them for all.

19. See esp. Fricker (2007) and Medina (2012).

20. See chs. 1–4 of Medina (2012).

21. I have developed an analysis of this phenomenon in chapter 5 of *The Epistemology of Resistance*.

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