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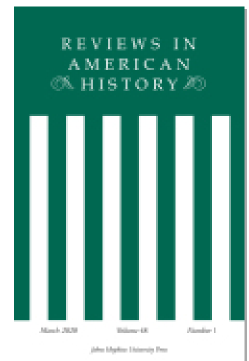

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SEEING WORTH AND WORTH SEEING: CAPITALISM, RACE, AND VISUAL CULTURE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

Joanna Cohen

Peter John Brownlee, *The Commerce of Vision: Optical Culture and Perception in Antebellum America.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 249 pp. Figures, notes, and index. $45.00.

Jessie Morgan-Owens, *Girl in Black and White: The Story of Mary Mildred Williams and the Abolition Movement*, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019. 324 pp. Figures, notes, and index. $14.99.

Does every age have a corresponding body part, a piece of us that represents the times through its physical and symbolic significance? If so, some observers think ours is the age of the thumb. The silent dance of our digits across the glowing portals of our phones now denotes our connections with the world, each other, and ourselves. We laugh at cartoons that show us with enlarged, elongated thumbs, even as we fear the effects of such technological transformations. How will they change our communities, identities, and notions of truth? Such questions are, of course, not new. In two new books exploring the visual culture of antebellum America in fascinating ways, we are clearly shown that the nineteenth century was the age of the eye. Their technological leaps encompassed American-made eyeglasses, the printed broadside, the daguerreotype, and the carte-de-visite. Each new object demanded that Americans reconsider the power of vision, and their histories show us that *how* Americans came to think about sight helped to transform the world they saw.

Opening with Emerson's observation that his was an "an ocular age," (p. 1) Peter John Brownlee's *The Commerce of Vision: Optical Culture and Perception in Antebellum America* identifies the early nineteenth century as a moment of profound change for theories of sight and the understanding of the observer. As antebellum Americans began to investigate the capacity of the human eye, they recognised that sight was not a stable, objective, or "monocular" sense. Instead, it was often flawed, fleeting, subjective, and individual. Yet Brownlee argues, urban white-collar Americans who daily faced the visual assaults of the marketplace—broadsides, shop signs, accounting columns, and newspaper

advertisements—were quick to see that sight was a crucial requirement for navigating commercial life. The tension between this newfound acceptance of sight's fallibility on the one hand and its necessity on the other spawned what Brownlee calls a new "culturing of vision," in which Americans sought to perfect sight in pursuit of profit (p. 12). How they did this and with what consequences is the subject of the book.

The Commerce of Vision begins by building on the influential insights of Jonathan Crary, who argues in the *Techniques of the Observer* (1992) that the early nineteenth century was a moment in which perceptions of vision altered, paving the way for modern visual culture.[1] As new experiments in sight proliferated, scientists and philosophers revised their understanding of vision: shifting it from an objective, stable sense to one that was "relocated in the human body," a subjective and idiosyncratic mode of perception.[2] This recognition enabled men and women to think about sight differently: now a fallible and embodied sense, it could be subjected to techniques of improvement and discipline. Thus, these scientists and philosophers helped to create a new modern subject, that of the observer.

As Crary notes, the creation of the observer grew out of and was essential to the development of capitalist modernity. Just as the observer must learn to see clearly the bodies, the signs, and the images that circulate within the uprooted and fluctuating world of global capital, so too must the world be rendered into commodities that can be observed and measured against one another. Quoting Jean Baudrilliard, Crary observes, "Happiness had to be '*measurable* in terms of objects and signs,' something that would be evident to the eye in terms of '*visible* criteria.'"[3] Crary thus illuminates a visual culture of modernity that not only trained the observer to see capital, but also rendered capital visible to the human eye.

Crary's work examines the scientific and philosophical discourses through which this change took place, locating the mechanics of the marketplace at a remove. In contrast, and with great success, Brownlee demonstrates how it was through the cut and thrust of commercial life that the modern observer was made. He begins by situating the making of the observer in the ophthalmic practices of the early nineteenth century. The resulting picture is fine-grained indeed. Alongside the rise of the ophthalmic hospitals in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston and New York, Brownlee demonstrates how opticians' catalogues and physiological treatises popularised and pathologized knowledge about the workings of the eye.

Next, using the example of the New York clerk Edward N. Tailer, Jr., Brownlee reconstructs how widespread ophthalmic knowledge changed individuals' perceptions of sight. Tailer, an earnest and hardworking individual by all accounts, mused regularly on his overworked eyes. Miserable and worried, he borrowed Johann Christoph August Franz's treatise *The Eye* (1839) from the Mercantile Library. Having read it through, he concluded his sight was so

strained that he would have to temporarily cease working and forgo promotion or risk losing his sight permanently. Only after his failing eyesight resulted in a lost opportunity did Tailer choose to purchase a pair of spectacles. With his vision corrected, Tailer narrates his rise through the ranks of the business world. From Tailer's case, Brownlee concludes, there was a "market revolution in vision" (p. 37) at the start of the nineteenth century, which required men to cultivate a visual aptitude which would permit them to succeed. The field of vision became a new site for productive labour.

Brownlee then deftly goes on to depict the proliferation of businesses that sold sight. With remarkable results, Brownlee juxtaposes advertisements with portraiture and visual satire with theater to demonstrate how vision, and in particular spectacles, became a central part of bourgeois self-fashioning, signifying productivity and efficiency. Eliding spectacles with sight itself, Brownlee argues that the former facilitated the latter into a commodity form. Whether an individual had natural visual acuity or purchased it from an optician, sight had become an attribute with a market value.

At the center of the book are two marvellous chapters that capture the way in which the urban experience assaulted the eye and challenged Americans to see their way through the mobile, transitory, desire-inducing landscapes of antebellum cities. Challenging David Henkin's vision of the "readable city," Brownlee paints a picture of a city littered with text, an indecipherable babble of print.[4] His argument is compelling, built as it is out of the overwhelming range and quantity of typefaces and signboards, all of which competed to catch the city dweller's attention. The technique of reproducing the text reminds readers that even as the city's palimpsests bewildered inhabitants, they also interpellated citizens into the mobile viewers and consumers of a modern world. Commodities, Brownlee argues, were rendered through text, rather than framed by arcades and viewed through plate glass. And making sense of the city's signage was a process through which individuals learned to desire the litany of goods and services on offer, not as part of a community of productive relations, but instead as longed-for objects whose price was clear but whose value was blurred. "The inability to see beyond one's nose," he points out, "indicated full integration with the market economy" (p. 134).

The picture Brownlee paints is rich and absorbing. Like an optician placing a variety of lenses in front of our eyes in a quest for focus, he lays each new mode of analysis carefully over the piece before, adding new depth and detail. Brownlee sees important meaning in things that other historians might well overlook–the scale and shape of a letter or the font of a pamphlet. Interpreted within a sophisticated theoretical framework and an almost immersive knowledge of urban history, literary theory, and art history, Brownlee demonstrates how vision came to dominate and structure capitalist relationships and subjectivity in antebellum America.

Yet despite this, the question of who does the looking seems somewhat elusive. As the book moves into its final section on the infrastructures of perception, the central idea of the embodied observer slips out of sight. This seems especially acute in the sections on newsprint, where Brownlee reads the creation of an "attenuated selfhood… premised on the embodiment of the dematerialized and disembodied information surging through the telegraph's taut wires" from a careful examination of the paintings of Richard Caton Woodville (p. 175). But whose bodies are subject to these processes and whose gaze is privileged? Bodies are, after all, specific vessels. As both Brownlee and Crary point out, it was the very realisation that sight was subject to the vagaries of the individual's physiology that prompted such shifts in the understanding of vision. So, it is curious that Brownlee spends so little time considering the actual bodies of those gazers, bodies that were disciplined in very different ways.

For example, while he notes the presence of the African American figures in Woodville's works, it is largely to point out that they exist in the margins. But how might vision function when it is conditioned or forced to constantly observe from the edges? In both *War News from Mexico*, Woodville's painting from 1848, and William Sidney Mount's *California News*, painted in 1850, there exist some clues to that question's answer. None of the three African American figures shown have a clear line of sight to the focus of attention. They must look around, across, or up. Their view is partially obscured. At a distance from the tiny print of the newspaper columns, they will not be able to see the specificity of the text. Yet all three are also depicted with heads slightly cocked. In Woodville's work, the two figures are in profile and it is their ears that are most obviously featured, suggesting that for those marginalised and excluded from this republic of vision, other senses had to be disciplined, trained and used. Perhaps the ability to listen in and overhear allowed for different understandings of sight in different communities? Surely, race conditioned the types of sensory engagement afforded to the men and women whose very bodies became the unjust rationale for their exclusion.

A similar question could be posed regarding women, whose bodies again were disciplined by antebellum conventions in a variety of ways. How did the full-brimmed bonnet obscure vision? What did it mean for their sense of sight that etiquette manuals of the day counselled young women to keep their neck bent and their head angled down? "For her to crane up her neck would be to change its fine swan-like bend into the scraggy throat of an ostrich," noted one such tome. A downcast eye was the mark of grace, humility and beauty.[5] Did women see commodities or value sight differently if their field of vision was restricted toward the floor? And what happened to the female seamstresses, who like Edward Tailer might find their eyes sorely taxed by their close work, and yet were perhaps unable to afford spectacles to combat

the physical wages of industrialisation. Overall, the absence of race and gender from the analysis is frustrating, particularly in a period when the constitution of the antebellum economy was so deeply structured around the somatic and discursive significance of both.

In contrast, the power of race, gender, and vision is at the heart of Jessie Morgan-Owens's incredible story of Mary Mildred Williams, a young enslaved woman who was transformed by virtue of her "white skin" into a poster child for the abolitionist cause. In this narrative, Morgan-Owens has done something quite extraordinary: she has taken a single image, one where the subject has left not one word to testify to her own interior thoughts, and created from dedicated archival excavation the astonishing details of this young woman's life. In addition to this, Morgan-Owens has applied the same method to recreating the life of the picture as both an object and discourse. Through placing this single daguerreotype with such care in the culture from which it emerged, Morgan-Owens is able to expose the way in which fictions of race, gender, and sex were crafted and made powerful in the antebellum world through the new medium of photography.

The book commences with the lives of Mary Mildred Williams's family and owners, a complex story of entangled existences. It begins with the unexpected death of Jesse Cornwell, a property owner in Virginia. Cornwell's death and subsequent will set his widow Constance onto a path that demanded endurance and cunning to survive. With four daughters, she had to make her property in enslaved people work to her advantage. This was made harder by her daughter Kitty's decision to have sexual relations with a man named Juba who was enslaved by Constance. Kitty would spend a lifetime in poverty as a result of that choice, fighting to claw back the property she believed was her birthright. Juba's far harder fate was to have his choices made for him; Constance sold him away in 1810.

Kitty and Juba's son John was born free, raised in the slave quarters, and, by virtue of his dark skin, lived his life with limited rights. Having left the state in 1826 in an attempt to make his way in the world, he was forbidden to return to Virginia. In the wake of Denmark Vesey's rebellion, the laws governing the movement of free black men and women had tightened. Yet he would inherit a large part of his grandmother Constance's property in people, including the enslaved women Letty, Letty's daughter Prudence, Prudence's daughter Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's six children, one of whom was Mary Mildred Williams. Unable to claim it from J.C. Weedon, the executor of Constance's will, who had chosen to profit from this property while it remained in his custody, John fought a protracted legal battle to retrieve these slaves.

His fight was ultimately rewarded. *Cornwell v. Weedon* was decided by the Virginia Supreme Court in October 1854, and it awarded all of the property to John Cornwell. But the success of this fight was not Cornwell's victory.

Instead, this battle had been won by Prudence's husband and Mary's father, a runaway slave named Seth Botts. Botts had escaped bondage in 1850, renamed himself Henry Williams, and spent the subsequent four years seeking out the help of prominent abolitionists in Boston in his quest to secure his family's freedom. When Cornwell won his case, it was in part because Williams had used his connections to place pressure on the legal system to seek resolution. And it was Williams, with the help of his wealthy backers, who bought the property from Cornwell and ended his family's bondage. This is how Henry's daughter, Mary Mildred Williams, came to the attention of Charles Sumner. And what Sumner noticed about this young girl was that to his eye she appeared to be white.

This narrative, which makes up nearly the first third of the book, is full of greed, calculation, suspense, hope, and ultimately love. It is an incredible effort of archival recovery, important because of its specificity. A microhistory of one family's experience of enslavement, it is a necessary precursor to the story of how Mary Mildred Williams was transformed from subject into Sumner's object and the poster child of the abolitionist movement. Like Brownlee, Morgan-Owens leaves the impression of the multiple lenses being placed in front of our eyes. Yet this time, instead of the subject coming into focus, Williams recedes from view, moving out of sight as the symbolic representations imposed upon her move into the foreground.

Morgan-Owens focuses particularly on two lenses. The first is the trope of the enslaved white child, made frightening and famous by Mary Hayden Green Pike's novel *Ida May* (1854). Though less well-known than Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Pike's *Ida May* also took the novel-reading audience of middle-class America by storm. The story recounts the harrowing abduction of a white child, Ida May, from her family in Pennsylvania, after which she is sold into slavery. She is only recovered and returned to her family because her white rescuer who was also her master "sees" her true racial identity in the qualities of her character even as he believes himself to be seeing an African American child. Thus, Ida May became eponymous shorthand for the horrors of white slavery, and by dubbing Mary Mildred Williams by the same name, Sumner forced the white audience to confront their greatest fears. Yet Pike's story also forced front and center the idea that ultimately individuals could "see" race through an examination of individual features. So, what did Sumner hope to gain from allying Williams with this narrative?

Even with Morgan-Owens's careful exploration, Sumner's motivation for calling Williams "Ida May" is difficult to fathom. Morgan-Owens speculates that this was a strategic move, designed to appeal to the sentimental mores of his audience. But the story of Ida May actually did not fit the argument Sumner wanted to make about the sin of slavery. His speeches that accompanied his presentation of Williams on the lecture circuit were designed to focus the

audience's attention on the unreliability of racial classification, particularly as the basis of slavery. Sumner pointed to Williams to demonstrate that the characteristics of race, apparently visible and detectable in the eyes, hair and skin of each person, were far from certain. Therefore, what basis could there be for perpetuating an institution whose basis in racial distinction had such a fallible foundation?

But Pike's story had confirmed that race went below the surface and the innate qualities of racial difference could always be seen. The daguerreotype of Williams might have unsettled that truth, certainly something Sumner may have hoped to achieve. But at the same time, Sumner's reference to "Ida May" seemed to return the audience to the comforting truth that distinctions of race existed in a way that protected white people from the fate of African Americans. Thus, a tension existed in the multiple presentations of Williams to the world, a set of contradictions that expose the messy realities of abolitionist strategy to the historical record.

Moreover, as Morgan-Owens points out, Sumner's decision to name his subject Ida May actually spared his audience the more brutal reality: that slavery was an institution built on rape and sexual exploitation. In choosing to elicit the middle-class's selective sympathy for the little girl in front them, by framing her as white, he hid the true history of Williams, her mother Elizabeth, her grandmother Prue and her great-grandmother Letty.

The second framework of analysis that Morgan-Owens introduces is the way in which the new technology of photography worked to transform Mary Mildred Williams into the evocative object of Sumner's campaign. By harnessing photography to their cause, Morgan-Owens argues that abolitionists appropriated the power of seeing into the arsenal of weapons they used against slavery. As Theodore Tilton, the editor and activist wrote, "The camera has hardly begun its work as an anti-slavery agent…[pictures] appeal to a sense whose potency over the convictions is well expressed in the proverb – *seeing is believing*" (p. 124). Tilton might as well have said, "seeing is feeling" and come closer to the mark of what abolitionists thought they could achieve with the power of photography. By the mid-nineteenth century, the idea that sight was the key to stirring sentiment and sympathy was long established. "Spectatorial sympathy" as Karen Halttunen has argued, was the vital act that softened the heart in order to teach virtue.[6] What Tilton, Sumner, and the other abolitionists who circulated the image of Williams had recognised, was how important visual representations of suffering and the pain of slavery were to advancing their cause. Thus, as Morgan-Owens notes, this portrait is one of the first images of photographic propaganda and one of the "first portraits made solely to prove a political point" (p. 5)

This latter argument seems unlikely. One could look at any number of satirical cartoons from the eighteenth century from Hogarth to Gillray to

find an antecedent, not to mention portraits of aristocrats and monarchs who made political points in their own way. But the first point is significant and Morgan-Owens could have gone further and pointed out that the use of the photograph to elicit sympathy for a political cause did mark a new moment in the history of visual culture, one in which suffering, and tragedy would be transformed through photography into an objectified, even universal message to provoke humanitarian action.[7]

Tilton's conviction that "*seeing is believing*" reminds us, however, that there remains one unexplored aspect of the daguerreotype of Williams: a question of truth. In ways that are both satisfying and important in this age of post-truth fictions, Morgan-Owens shows how the truth of Williams's story can be told, through careful adherence to archival evidence and faithful, critical, and thoughtful sifting of the historical record. But what about the contemporary audience who held up Williams's image for their education and entertainment? How did they perceive this picture? As Brownlee's work reminds us, sight was no longer the stable and trustworthy sense it had always been during the mid-nineteenth century. Did nineteenth-century Americans believe their eyes? Or did they start to disconnect the concept of truth from visual evidence in new ways? After all, this was a century that had begun with Peale's museum in Philadelphia, that showcased optical illusions and challenged its visitors to "undeceive" themselves.[8] It was the age of the stereoscope—which transformed the two-dimensional image into three dimensions right in front of entranced viewers' eyes. And it was the era of the kaleidoscope—which Marx and Engels called a sham, "literally a trick done with mirrors." Finally, within two decades of Williams' daguerreotype, the spirit photographer W.H. Mumler, who captured Lincoln's ghost on camera, was put on trial for fraud. He was found not guilty.[9] How did the viewers of Williams's picture really see the girl in front of them. Did they think it revealed a truth about race and slavery, or did they start to question the veracity of the photograph? It would have been interesting to see Morgan-Owens reflect more fully on how faith or indeed lack of faith in perception has shaped the production of modern truths and sensibilities.

Back in our own era of thumbs, where what we are shown through mainstream media and social media is increasingly treated with suspicion, contemporary communities, marketplaces and polities are faltering, their foundations in the "ocular age" increasingly shaky. As both books reveal, the early nineteenth century marked a moment where the field of vision expanded. Instead of only seeing what was in front of you, you could see far beyond the boundaries of physical sight. To see was to compare, contrast, and classify. Society took shape through this new culturing of vision. At the start of the twenty-first century, the reach of sight remains, but it has narrowed into tunnel vision. We see what we seek out, rather than what we are shown. We see what we believe. The society that this will make remains to be seen.

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2. Ibid., 16.
3. Ibid., 11.
4. David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (1998), 49–68.
5. *Etiquette for Ladies: With Hints on the Preservation, Improvement, and Display of Female Beauty* (1843), 134.
6. Karen Halttunen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *The American Historical Review* 100:2 (Apr., 1995): 303–334.
7. Kevin Rozario, "Delicious Horrors": Mass Culture, The Red Cross, and the Appeal of Modern American Humanitarianism," *American Quarterly*: 55:3 (Sep., 2003): 417–455; *Humanitarian Photography: A History*, ed. Heide Feherenbach and Davide Rodogno (2015).
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9. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 114–23; Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer* (2008).