

7. Seeing Race

In contemporary discussions, recognition is often accompanied by visibility as its political partner. Demands for recognition are also demands for visibility. Marginalization and enfranchisement are discussed in terms of visibility and invisibility. In a Foucauldian vein, theorists like Judith Butler, Iris Young, and Patricia Williams, among many others, point out that certain groups of people and their problems and suffering remain invisible within mainstream culture. In this vein, visibility is a matter of power. Those empowered within dominant culture are visible, and visibility itself empowers. Those disempowered are rendered invisible, which is a means of disempowering.

The intersection of one's subject position, political convictions, and the metaphysical presuppositions that support both is belied by a type of ideological Rorschach test of what one sees and does not see. Are most welfare recipients black or white? Are single mothers responsible for the decay in moral fiber or are they the victims of patriarchal values? If young black men are at greater risk of being murdered than young white men, is it because they are criminals, because they are victims of police brutality, because racism limits their options, and so forth? What we see when we look around us is politically charged and manipulated by the media. The phrase "seeing is believing" takes on new meaning if what we see is influenced by what we believe. And experiencing what is eye-opening is not necessarily a result of opening or closing our eyelids. What we recognize and what we see are the result of much more than opening our eyes and looking.

Visibility and Property

The complications of the relation between vision and visions—visions of the past, visions for the future—become apparent, if not resolved, in the work of Patricia Williams. Her work turns around issues of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility in relation to issues of property and ownership. Williams is

looking for a way for blacks and women to be seen without being spotlighted or made into spectacles. Somewhere between invisibility and hypervisibility is the kind of recognition equality demands. Yet this place of perfect vision may not be imaginable until we interrogate our very notions of recognition, vision, and visibility. Using Williams's suggestion that our conceptions of ourselves are marinated in the economy of property and therefore are heirs to slavery, I argue that our notions of recognition and visibility are symptoms of what she calls alternatively the owned or disowned world. By examining the productive tension in Williams's work between her criticisms of the economy of property—with its ownership and the possibility of disowning—and her use of the rhetoric of visibility, recognition, and seeing, we can see how the rhetoric of visibility plays into the economy of property. The play between recognition/visibility and property/ownership must be "seen" before there is hope of imagining another vision beyond recognition and beyond property.

Williams's analyses of legal decisions, media culture, university dynamics, and her own experiences lead her to conclude that visibility is a complicated issue when it comes to race:

If race is something about which we dare not speak in polite social company, the same cannot be said of the viewing of race. How, or whether, blacks are seen depends upon a dynamic of display that ricochets between hypervisibility and oblivion. Blacks are seen "everywhere," taking over the world one minute; yet the great ongoing toll of poverty and isolation that engulfs so many remains the object of persistent oversight. If, moreover, the real lives of real blacks unfold outside the view of many whites, the fantasy of black life as a theatrical enterprise is an almost obsessive indulgence. This sort of voyeurism is hardly peculiar to the mechanics of racial colonization, of course: any group designated the colorful local, the bangled native, or the folksy ethnic stands to suffer its peculiar limitation. (1998, 17)

Throughout her work, Williams critically points to examples of these forms of "being seen" or "unseen" that variously stereotype, ignore, or make a spectacle of people marginalized and oppressed by dominant culture. In her analysis there is an undercurrent that blacks and other marginalized people need to be made visible in ways that empower rather than stereotype and objectify. There is a sense of a good visibility and a bad visibility. The good visibility is "a recognition of individuality that includes blacks as a social presence" (1991, 121). An example of good visibility is affirmative action as "an act of verification and vision, an act of social as well as professional responsi-

bility" (1991, 121). Good visibility is characterized as responsible vision that does not stereotype by group but recognizes individuality yet includes blacks as a group with social presence or importance. Bad visibility has various forms including invisibility, unseeing, hypervisibility, stereotyping, making a spectacle, and other types of exaggerated seeing. Examples of bad visibility include the ways that homeless people become invisible in public policy and in everyday experience, the ways that television and films make racist stereotypes entertainment, the ways that even white liberals approach black culture as spectacle.

Yet what is a recognition of individuality that includes blacks as a social presence? How is good visibility distinct from bad? In fact, aren't these two faces of visibility merely symptoms of a problematic notion of vision that confounds attempts at anything like mutual recognition? As Williams observes, "There is great power in being able to see the world as one will and then to have that vision enacted. But if being is seeing for the subject, then being seen is the precise measure of existence for the object" (1991, 28). It follows that if being is seeing for the subject, then being seen as a measure of one's existence renders subjects into nothing more than objects. The seeing/being seen dichotomy mirrors the subject/object dualism that is symptomatic of oppression. The seer is the active subject while the seen is the passive object. Being seen, like recognition, is a goal created by the pathology of oppression.

Oppression makes people into faceless objects or lesser subjects. The lack of visage in objects renders them invisible in any ethical or political sense. In turn, subjectivity becomes the domain of domination. Subjectivity is conferred by those in power and empowered on those they deem powerless and disempowered. The desire to be seen, to be recognized is the paradoxical desire created by oppression. It is the desire to become objectified in order to be recognized by the sovereign subject to whom the oppressed is beholden for his or her own self-worth. Bell hooks describes this dynamic:

Often when black subjects give expression to multiple aspects of our identity, which emerge from a different location, we may be seen by white others as "spectacle." For example, when I give an academic talk without reading a paper, using a popular, performative, black story-telling mode, I risk being seen by the dominating white other as unprepared, or just entertainment. Yet their mode of seeing cannot be the factor which determines style of representation or the content of one's work. Fundamental to the process of decentring the oppressive other and claiming our right to subjectivity is the insistence

that we must determine how we will be and not rely on colonizing responses to determine our legitimacy. We are not looking to that Other for recognition.

We are recognizing ourselves and willingly making contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner. (1990, 22)

So it is not merely being seen, or being recognized between spectacle and oblivion, that makes for an ethical or just relation. Rather, Williams, along with hooks, describes the oscillation between invisibility and hypervisibility as a matter not so much of being seen but of making one's world: "I know that my feelings of exaggerated visibility and invisibility are the product of my not being part of the larger cultural picture. I know too that the larger cultural picture is an illusion, albeit a powerful one, concocted from a perceptual consensus to which I am not a party; and that while these perceptions operate as dictators of truth, they are after all merely perceptions" (1991, 56). What is a stake, then, is not visibility *per se* but being a party to the perception making that shapes our world, being as seeing in addition to being as being seen. Echoing Frantz Fanon's concern for meaning making and the alienation that results from being denied the making of one's own meaning, Williams is concerned with who has the power to make meaning and truth. The split between subject and object, seeing and seen, presupposes a split between those involved in perception making for their own benefit and those subjected to it for the benefit of others.

Sometimes Williams describes this difference as that between the self-possessed and the dispossessed. The self-possessed enjoy the sense of entitlement to exercise control over themselves and their bodies, while the dispossessed are denied a sense of entitlement. The dispossessed are subject to laws and policies governing their bodies and behaviors. The dispossessed are those whose bodies have been dispossessed by culture and thereby become alien to themselves. They are the victims of the double alienation described by Fanon. Williams claims that the self-possessed are those who also possess other material property and therefore buy the right to their privacy, while the dispossessed have been ostracized and thrown into public scrutiny without basic rights, including privacy (1991, 21–26, 68–69). Those who own property are seen as virtuous while those who do not, especially those who inhabit public spaces, are seen as harmful. Homelessness is seen as a vice, and those dispossessed are seen as vicious.

For example, Williams's analysis of the beating of three black men by a group of white men in Howard Beach suggests that public space is becoming privatized and that the presence of those who do not "own" something specific" is seen as harmful (1991, 68). Dispossession is possible in an owned

world in which possessions bring with them entitlements and lack of possessions leads to disenfranchisement:

In this nation there is, it is true, relatively little force in the public domain compared to other nations, relatively little intrusive governmental interference. But we risk instead the life-crushing disenfranchisement of an entirely owned world. Permission must be sought to walk upon the face of the earth. Freedom becomes contractual and therefore obligated; freedom is framed by obligation; and obligation is paired not with duty but with debt. (1991, 43)

Freedom, rights, entitlements, and our very sense of ourselves are permeated by the market economy.

Subjects are capable of ownership, of having their own, of having "ownership," while those who are not capable of ownership become objects to be seen or not by propertied subjects.¹ In this scenario, you either own property or you are disowned. Williams discusses ownership in terms of the connection, or disconnection, between privacy and intimacy and the way in which the private-public split works to split people into subjects (the haves) and objects (the have-nots). Williams suggests that the public-private split is used to deny the proximity of others and otherness. The private realm is an illusory haven against otherness. As space becomes privatized and owned, otherness becomes disowned.

An incident in Amarillo, Texas, in 1997 points to the connections between ownership, space, entitlements, and language. Because they spoke Spanish, Ester Hernandez and Rosa Gonzales were hired at Allied Insurance Agency, "a small store-front office in the Barrio, a heavily Hispanic neighborhood in south Amarillo," "where many customers speak Spanish as their primary language" (*New York Times*, September 30, 1997, A10). But in July 1997 they were fired from their jobs for "chatting" to each other in Spanish after the owner of the agency, Pat Polk, presented them with a pledge to speak only English in the office, which they refused to sign.

The handwritten pledge began, "Linda has asked that this be an English speaking office except when we have customers who can't speak our language. All of our Employees do speak English." Linda, Polk's wife and co-owner of the agency, "said the women's chatting in Spanish was 'almost like they were whispering to each other behind our backs.'" The *New York Times* report quotes Polk as saying that

it's been made into me belittling the Spanish people, and it's not that way... They're trying to make this a racial thing, and it's not... Our office is a four-employee office... We had three Spanish and one Caucasian woman working

for us. The Spanish women were chatting in Spanish a great portion of the day amongst themselves, while I, my wife, and the other woman were left out of the conversations, as we don't understand Spanish.

The third employee fluent in both English and Spanish, Edna Mobley, agreed to sign the pledge to speak English only in the office "to which a beaming Mr. Polk beckoned to a visitor and said, 'That's one sharp little Mexican girl right there!'" The fact is that the so-called "sharp little Mexican girl," the "Spanish women," the "Caucasian woman," and the Polks are also all Americans, born in the Texas Panhandle.

Most of the people in the community who supported the Polks argued that since they owned the business, their employees should obey their rules. This idea that the Polks own the space in which their employees speak—the linguistic space itself, the space that connects coworkers to each other—is a symptom of what Williams identifies as the privatization of public space. The Polks seemed to presume that since they owned the business, that they also owned the space and relations and everything that went on within the walls of the office in which their business operated. Language itself is presumed to be something that can be owned—and certainly, in the case of the Polks' relationship to Spanish, disowned. The very identities of people and their interpersonal relationships become fungible. Rosa Gonzales—one of the women fired for the very reason she was hired—realized that her identity was at stake, when she said that in response to Polk's demand to sign the pledge, she "told him no. This is what I am; this is what I do. This is normal to me. I'm not doing it to offend anybody. It just feels comfortable." With this example, self-possession is equated with literal ownership.²

Presuming to own the space in which people speak, or to own or possess language itself, restricts rather than opens up dialogue. The idea that linguistic space is divided between owners and workers plays off of a capitalistic subject-centered notion of human relationships that ignores the fundamental responsibility that comes with subjectivity, a responsibility to respond and open up the possibility of response from others. This presumption to own linguistic space disowns those who are not allowed the self-possession of either their own linguistic space or language itself. As Williams suggests, we live in an entirely owned world where only those who have property, material, linguistic, or otherwise, are subjects and everyone else becomes dis-owned property.

In *The Rooster's Egg: On the Persistence of Prejudice* Williams argues that the notion of self-possession takes on new meaning when bodies and body

parts can be bought and sold on the market. Williams claims that slavery makes the notion of self-possession take a literal turn when the slave does not own her own body and yet all she does own is her own body (1995, 231). In addition, she points out that the notion of self-possession turns against the self when individuals can, or must, sell or rent their body parts for profit in order to survive. Here again freedom is linked with ownership. Subjectivity itself becomes a matter of property, and agency becomes a matter of property control. Even while Williams talks of "owning the self in a disowned world," she is suspicious of the ways that the economy of property has taken over our self-conceptions (1991, 181).

Williams is vigilant in tracing the legacy of slavery in our present conceptions of ourselves (1995, 232). Slavery divided human beings into two categories: property and the owners of property. Williams argues that the Civil War did not emancipate the slaves but merely "unowned" and "disowned" them by thrusting them outside of the market, the labor market and the marketplace of rights, and placed them beyond the bounds of value (1991, 21). Freed slaves were no longer property, a change in status that did away with their value as chattel, the only value they had as slaves. Because they were still disenfranchised from the making of value, from perception making or meaning making, and because they had been valued as only property by the slave-owning culture, emancipation left them without social value, disowned.

Williams sees the echoing repercussions of turning people into property and valuing them only as property in various aspects of contemporary culture. The legal precedents and rhetoric around women's reproduction, eugenics, and organ transplants are some of Williams's examples. She warns that

it is with great care, therefore, that we should look for its [slavery's] echoing repercussions in our world today, for 1856 is not very long ago at all. It is with caution that we must notice that with the advent of a variety of new technologies, we presumed free agents are not less but increasingly defined as body-centered. We live more, not less, in relation to our body parts, the disposition or employment of ourselves constrained by a complicated pattern of self-alienation. (1995, 232)

This pattern of self-alienation extends beyond new technologies. Williams's work suggests that the self-alienation inherent in slavery, in making property of people, pervades not only our legal system but also our culture and imaginations.

It is not just our material possessions and our bodies and their parts that

are seen as property but also our characteristics as well. Our properties have become property. And some properties (certain looks, physiques, accents, styles, genders, races, ethnicities) are valued more than others. Williams asks, "At what cost, this assemblage of the self-through-adornment, this sifting through the jumbled jewelry box of cultural assets, selected body parts, and just the right accessories?" (1995, 242). Difference itself has become a property (1991, 212).

Williams concludes that "'black,' 'female,' 'male,' and 'white' are every bit as much properties as the buses, private clubs, neighborhoods, and schools that provide the extracorporeal battlegrounds of their expression. . . . Possessions become the description of who we are and the reflection of our worth" (1991, 124). Even *I* or the self becomes a property such that Williams can talk of owning the self in a disowned world. *I* or *myself* becomes my prized possession, especially if I am battling against the disowned status of those marginalized within racist and sexist culture (1991, 128). As Williams points out, this commodification of human beings puts us beyond humanity and into the world of things, objects, products, to be used, even disposed of (1991, 39, 227). More than this, it recalls slavery in all of its contemporary incarnations, which, perhaps without the bill of sale, continue to treat people as property—owned or disowned, self-possessed or dispossessed.

Williams argues in favor of self-possession for those who have been dispossessed—those whose sense of self is compromised by oppression and domination—yet she criticizes the connections between the rhetoric of self-possession and the economy of property; she attempts to make visible those disenfranchised within dominant culture, yet she is critical of modes of visibility that make people into spectacles and stereotypes. She uses identity politics when it suits her purposes and deconstructs identity when it doesn't. It might be fair to say that she even uses a form of spectacle in her own writings when she puts herself, her experiences, and her emotions on display in her text. Her explicit strategy is analyzing truth and facts as rhetorical events in order to short-circuit the naturalization process through which ideologies become reality (1991, 10–11). What is at stake, it seems, is not so much (good) visibility or (good) self-possession, but reassessing reality—what is considered normal and what is considered natural. The struggle for recognition is really the struggle to be accepted as normal or natural rather than different and therefore abnormal. The struggle is to make difference normal and natural without making it the same or homogeneous.

Williams interrogates the norms that define reality by "acknowledging, challenging, playing with these [rhetorical truths] as rhetorical gestures,"

which she insists is "necessary for any conception of justice. Such acknowledgment complicates the supposed purity of gender, race, voice, boundary; it allows us to acknowledge the utility of such categorizations for certain purposes and the necessity of their breakdown on other occasions" (1991, 10–11). For her, rhetorical gestures are tied to subject positions, which must be acknowledged in order to denaturalize discourse and expose its ethical and political dimensions. Disregarding subject positions is common practice in most scholarly discourse, including law and medicine; and yet, as she points out, obscuring subject positions "hopelessly befuddles" ethical and political agency and responsibility. She proposes that

one of the most important results of reconceptualizing from "objective truth" to rhetorical event will be a more nuanced sense of legal and social responsibility. This will be so because much of what is spoken in so-called objective, unmediated voices is in fact mired in hidden subjectivities and unexamined claims that make property of others beyond the self, all the while denying such connections. (1991, 11)

Williams's concern with truth as rhetorical event or gesture resonates with my analysis of witnessing as performance. What Williams's emphasis on subject position adds is a concern for the historical-social context of the performance. Williams tries to present complex analyses of events by combining an attention to the historical context along with the realization that history is contextualized through interpretation and rhetorical gestures. In other words, Williams's work re-creates history by writing a history aware of itself as rhetorical event. The tension in Williams's work between a call for recognition, visibility, and self-possession on the one hand, and her challenge to identity politics, hypervisibility, and property on the other, is a vibration of the tension inherent in witnessing: the tension between subject positions, which are historically determined, and subjectivity, which is an infinite response-ability. By attending to both subject positions and the rhetorical events that produce them, Williams opens up the possibility of thinking through ethical, political, and social responsibility as inherent in one's very sense of oneself as an agent or subject.

Williams prefers the metaphor of investment instead of possession to convey social relations and their incumbent responsibility. Imagining a more optimistic future, she says: "What a world it would be if we could all wake up and see all of ourselves reflected in the world, not merely in a territorial sense but with a kind of nonexclusive entitlement that grants not so much possession as investment. A peculiarly anachronistic notion of investment, I

suppose, at once both ancient and futuristic. An investment that envisions each of us in each other" (1998, 16). If we can acknowledge our investment in others, then perhaps we can imagine relationships outside of an economy of property; perhaps we can see beyond self-possession or possession of the other toward mutually implicated investments in self and other.

Envisioning identity and relationships beyond an economy of property entails vision beyond vision, imagining what we do not yet see with our eyes. This investigation of what we see takes us beyond eyewitness testimony by raising the question of how we come to see what we see. Only by interrogating our perceptions, meanings, and truths—what we see—can we imagine a vision of something beyond domination and slavery in any of its forms. This kind of vision is itself an investment in a just future. For Williams, this investment is a matter of imagining the world otherwise: "Just the momentary, imaginary exercise of taking to mind and heart the investment of oneself in another, indeed the investment of oneself as that other" (1998, 69). This imaginary exercise brings with it responsibility and obligation, not as debt but as ethical duty to oneself and others in interconnection. Seeing investments in each other should prevent what Williams calls "pornographic seeing," which makes the other into an object or spectacle, there for the viewer's pleasure, possessed by the subject's gaze.

As we have seen, even as she uses metaphors of vision, Williams's analysis complicates notions of visibility and seeing race. Yet what of the notion of vision or seeing itself? Is there a relationship between the pornographic seeing of race and a pornographic notion of vision that permeates our cultural imaginary? Just as we must analyze the truth of experience as rhetorical gesture or event, so too we must analyze the truth of vision as rhetorical event. If, as Williams suggests, "for better or worse, our customs and laws, our culture and society are sustained by the myths we embrace, the stories we recalculate to explain what we behold," then vision, how we behold, is also sustained by myths and stories we recalculate to explain how we see the world (1991, 16). Pornographic seeing of race is symptomatic of racism, but pornographic seeing itself is symptomatic of a particular rhetoric of vision—a rhetoric produced in conjunction with an economy of property and therefore not far removed from the ideology of slavery.

Freddie Jameson begins *Signatures of the Visible* by claiming that "the visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object" (1992, 1). More optimistic than Jameson perhaps, later I will argue that it is not the visual itself that is porno-

graphic but indeed our thinking about the visual, our conceptions of what it is to see. Pornographic seeing is voyeuristic looking that treats the seen or looked at as an object for one's own pleasure or entertainment. The seer considers only his own interests and maintains a willful ignorance about the subject positions of those he watches. The seer also maintains a willful ignorance about the interconnection or interrelationship between himself and what he sees. His gaze is one-way since he discounts the other's ability to see. For him, the other is to be seen and not subject enough to look. Except insofar as it relates to his own pleasure, the voyeur is not concerned with the effect of his watching on his object. This type of seeing or vision divides the world into seers and seen, subjects and objects. The seer remains in control of the scene of sight, while the seen is there *for* him.

Williams gives an example of this type of disinterested or self-interested pornographic seeing when she describes the many tours of black churches in Harlem, where in spite of some churches' disapproval of being on display, hundreds of tourists flock to watch Sunday services (1998, 22; 1991, 71–72). These tourists are not there to engage in the joy and communion of Sunday services but to watch, to be entertained, to see a spectacle, without regard for the congregations' relationship to their religious practices. For the tourist, the churchgoers are not subjects expressing their faith or sense of community but objects to be watched and filmed. Williams describes various ways that these tourists disrupt and undermine Sunday services and the ways that they demonstrate total disregard for their effect on those whom they watch.

The myth that the relationship to the seen is as an object of sight, even a spectacle there for one's own enjoyment, denies the interconnection between the seer and the world seen and ignores the responsibility of seeing. Seeing is an activity that like any other brings with it responsibilities. When it involves other human beings, then it brings with it ethical, social, and political responsibilities. Pornographic seeing denies the seer's responsibility for seeing by ignoring the seer's connection to what he sees. Pornographic seeing treats others as objects for the subject, as the subject's rightful property. The subject is entitled to treat the other as spectacle; his freedom and rights guarantee that he can take others as objects. This logic of seeing as possessing or enjoying one's property became apparent to me when a student in an introduction to women's studies class defended the tourists in Williams's example by asserting that it is a "free country" and "churches are public property," so the tourists have a "right to be there watching the show." This view of rights, freedom, property, and looking presupposes an autonomous subject disconnected from the world in which he acts. Myths of property, and

human beings as property, cannot be separated from our notions of vision, visibility, and what it means to see.

Another of Williams's examples makes the politics of vision explicit. She recounts an experience of her friend "C.," who was surrounded by police in Florida when she refused to pay for the sour milk she had repeatedly asked the waitress to take back (1991, 56). In an all-white restaurant, a black woman was ordered at gunpoint to pay for sour milk. C. demanded that the police officer taste the milk himself, but C. said "no one was interested in whether or not I was telling the truth. The glass was sitting there in the middle of all this, with the curdle hanging on the sides, but nobody would taste it because a black woman's lips had touched it" (57). Williams comments on the scene, with "the police with guns drawn, batte-lines drawn, the contest over her contestation: the proof of the milk in the glass inadmissible, unaccounted for, unseen" (57).

As Williams suggests, recognition is a matter of seeing. What is unrecognized is unseen. Yet the connection between recognition and seeing is precisely the problem with theories of recognition. As Williams's illustration points up, the glass of milk was not really the issue. The issues of the relationship between power and identity, subjects and those othered, the process through which positions curdled and solidified cannot be recognized by the eyewitness; they cannot be seen. The stakes are precisely the unseen in vision—the process through which something is seen or not seen.

Color Blindness and the Pathology of Racism

Recent rhetoric of a color-blind society raises the question of what it means to see or not to see. With the metaphor of a color-blind society, the connection between vision and politics becomes explicit.³ The connections between entitlements, freedom, property, and vision become even more apparent when we analyze the rhetoric of a color-blind society. Seeing and not seeing or blindness become political acts. When not seeing race is mandated by the courts, it is time to examine the eyes of our culture. The choice of a physical limitation, color blindness, as the metaphor for racial justice is curious, to say the least. It may be useful to analyze this color blindness as a hysterical symptom. As Freud suggests in his analysis of hysterical blindness, "Excitations of the blind eye may have certain psychical consequences (for instance, they may produce affects) even though they do not become conscious. Thus hysterically blind people are only blind as far as consciousness is concerned; in their unconscious they can see" (1910, 212). Whether or not color is "seen," it produces socially and psychically significant affects in relation to

race and political effects. The rhetoric of a color-blind society denies and ignores the affective effects of seeing race in a racist society.

With good intentions people say, "I don't care whether he is black, white, green, or purple; color doesn't matter." As utopian as this sentiment is, it denies the social significance of color and the history of racism by treating socially meaningful colors on par with colors without a social history and meaning.⁴ Indeed, it trivializes the meaning of color and racism in our society by comparing what we take to be real skin colors with impossible skin colors. By appealing to a fantasy world of green and purple people, this rhetoric denies the reality of the world of racially meaningful colors in which—for better or worse—we actually live.

In addition, the conflation of ought and is in the rhetoric of a color-blind society covers over and perpetuates current social injustice. Even if we were to accept that we ought to have a color-blind society, that doesn't mean that we have one now. And to act like we do when we don't is to ignore or discount both the most violent and the most pedestrian types of racism and sexism that are still part of our everyday experience. Pretending to live in a color-blind society when we don't blinds us to social injustice and the history and reality of racism and sexism. The notion of a color-blind society levels historically meaningful differences and denies the connection between past racism and sexism and the present.

In *Seeing a Color-Blind Future* Patricia Williams tells an anecdote about her son's experience in a predominantly white nursery school. Three of the nursery schoolteachers told Williams that her son was color-blind. But when she took him to have his eyes tested, the ophthalmologist said that his vision was fine. Williams describes how she started listening to what her son said about color and discovered that he didn't confuse one color with another; instead, he resisted identifying colors at all: "I don't know," he would say when asked what color the grass was; or, most peculiarly, "It makes no difference" (1998, 3). So it wasn't that he couldn't see and identify the greenness of the grass but that he insisted that its greenness made no difference. After some investigation, Williams realized that her son's refusal to identify color or give it any meaning was the result of his teachers assuring the children that color makes no difference, that "it doesn't matter . . . whether you're black or white or red or green or blue" (3). But Williams reports that "upon further investigation, the very reason that the teachers had felt it necessary to impart this lesson in the first place was that it *did* matter, and in predictable cruel ways: some of the children had been fighting about whether black people could play 'good guys'" (3).

In her first book, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Williams describes another case of when students seem to be arguing over whether or not black people can "play good guys." She analyzes an incident at Stanford University where a black student argued with a white student about whether or not Beethoven was mulatto; the white student maintained that it was "preposterous" that Beethoven was black. *The Stanford University Campus Report* describes what happened: "The following night, the white students said that they got drunk and decided to color a poster of Beethoven to represent a black stereotype. They posted it outside the room of Q.C., the black student who had originally made the claim about Beethoven's race" (quoted in Williams 1991, 111). After the incident, the white student who instigated the poster, the one who had argued with Q.C. the night before, did some reading and found that Beethoven was indeed mulatto: "This discovery upset him, so deeply in fact that his entire relation to the music changed: he said he heard it differently" (112). His excuse was that he didn't know and that it was an innocent mistake. He wasn't disciplined, because Stanford didn't want to victimize him or infringe on his right to free speech (112).

The Beethoven example shows that the preschool arguments over whether or not black people can be "good guys," although childish, are not just a preoccupation of children. Williams wonders if the lesson of the Stanford incident is that the best that blacks can aspire to is being remembered as white like the mulattoes St. Augustine, Beethoven, Alexandre Dumas, or Aleksandr Pushkin; that those who do remember the "good guys" as black will be mocked; and that their tormentors will be absolved because it is a reasonable mistake to assume that the "good guys" are white; they just didn't know (113).

In *Report*, the white student was upset by "all this emphasis on race, on blackness. Why can't we just all be human—I think it denies one's humanity to be 'racial'" (111). Williams points out that this way of thinking implies that blackness is a category inconsistent with humanity, that being raced is not to be human. As I argued earlier, categories like *human*, *white*, and *American* masquerade as categories unmarked by race when in fact they are racially marked by whiteness. The Beethoven example goes to show once again how whiteness operates as the norm, as racially unmarked, while people of color are seen as the only ones racial or raced, and to be racially marked is not to be "just human."

The notion that we have a color-blind society, or that we should act as though we do even though we don't, reduces racism to an individual rather than a social problem: according to the white student at Stanford, individuals who mention race are the problem because they refuse to let us all be "just

human." With decisions like *Crosby* and *Hopwood*, social problems become irrelevant in a parade of individual rights and wrongs. Rather than see racism or sexism in their institutionalized forms, we see racism and sexism as personality traits or character flaws. Sometimes this character flaw is condemned, for example, when some Texas white men tie a black man to the back of their pickup and drag him to death. Or when a rapist stalks and kills college women in Florida. Sometimes this character flaw is admired as heroism, for example, when Bernhard Goetz emptied his gun into four black teenagers in a New York subway. Or when hundreds of thousands of men gather in sports arenas at Promise Keepers rallies and vow to regain authority in their homes by taking it away from their wives. Sometimes, paradoxically, this personality trait is excused as beyond one's control: "He can't help it—he was raised that way" (still ignoring the social institutions that raised him that way). Or sometimes this personality trait is funny, for example, in American icons of racism and sexism like Archie Bunker, Rush Limbaugh, or Howard Stern. When racism and sexism are turned into an individual problem, they can be dismissed as the result of a few bad or misguided individuals. That way, society—laws, government, businesses, educational institutions—don't have to face the problem. Indeed, with the renewed emphasis on individualism in our culture and courts, racism has become a matter of personal impropriety or an exercise of First Amendment rights rather than a social problem. And insofar as it is a social problem, according to our courts, it is not a legal problem.

The flip side of this individualistic attitude toward racism and sexism is that the victims' experiences of discrimination are explained away as imaginary, the product of paranoia or hysteria, or the result of some physical problem or illness. Their experiences are pathologized and they are made to feel as if there is something wrong with them rather than the social institutions, traditions, and stereotypes that are racist or sexist. Recall the example of Williams's son. His problematic relationship to colors was diagnosed as a physical limitation, as something wrong with him rather than the result of racism at school and his teachers' attempts to teach tolerance by denying that his difference was meaningful. This way of thinking is the product of the individualism that feeds empty notions of equality and counterfactual ideas about a color-blind society. It is the same individualism that supports the reasoning behind *Hopwood*: everyone who really wants to go to the university can because in America everyone can do anything they choose if they work hard enough, and if they don't succeed, then either they didn't deserve it or they didn't work hard enough.

This tendency to blame the victim is also apparent in the debates around

Washington State's Initiative 200. People of color and women are blamed for stealing jobs and opportunities that don't rightfully belong to them. The victims of discrimination are blamed for their own misfortunes—they deserve it because they are unqualified or don't work hard enough or aren't smart enough—and they are blamed for the misfortunes of the beneficiaries of discrimination. If white men are unemployed, it is because of affirmative action policies that have given their jobs to minorities and women—as if black women have all the best jobs. Turning racism and sexism into mental illness, paranoia, or hysteria, or reducing social problems to individual health issues, is another way of blaming the victim.

Blame-the-victim attitudes are fostered by an individualism that denies that any problems are social, governmental, or institutional in nature. Social problems, including racism and sexism, become family matters or individual character traits. The rhetoric of family values is a case in point. The corruption of family values is blamed as the cause of everything from teenage pregnancy and gang violence to urban decay. Instead of being seen as social problems in need of social programs, they are turned into personal or family problems as a way of justifying cuts in government programs. At the same time that politicians employing the rhetoric of family values deny abortion rights and prohibit condoms or other contraceptives from being distributed in schools, they hold young women responsible for teenage pregnancy. Even while they cut welfare, food stamps, medical benefits, day care facilities, and work programs, politicians using the rhetoric of family values hold households headed by women, primarily women of color, responsible for crime and drugs. At the same time that politicians employing the rhetoric of family values maintain that good mothers should be home caring for their children and keeping them off the streets, they complain that poor mothers are taking advantage of welfare benefits to stay home. The rhetoric of family values, with its underlying individualism, covers over the social realities of racism and sexism that work to keep black women in poverty and black men in danger of going to jail or losing their lives.

As we internalize individualistic ideals, we blame ourselves for our own victimization. Women believe that they are imagining things, that they are paranoid, or that they are inept and can't instill proper morals in their children. Blacks believe that they are responsible for racism: if only they were better mothers or fathers, there would be no gang violence or teenage pregnancy. This was the thinking behind the Million Man March when hundreds of thousands of black men gathered in Washington D.C., to "atone for their sins" and promise to be better husbands and fathers. Reducing social prob-

lems to personal sins implies that if their sons are in gangs, it is their fault. If their sons are in jail or killed on the streets, it is their fault. If those sons are more likely to be arrested, tried, and sentenced to prison terms than a white man, it is their fault. The consequences and realities of racism become personal sins rather than social problems. The recent Promise Keepers movement actually calls racism a personal sin; rather than address racism as a social problem, movement leaders ask white men to hug men of color and make friends with them at Promise Keepers rallies. The individualism behind notions of formal equality and a color- and gender-blind society reduces social problems to personal sins on the part of whites and men and mental instability or physical defects on the part of people of color and women.

While I was following stories about I-200 in the *Seattle Times*, I noticed an article titled "Biology Keeping Women Awake, Study Concludes" (October 23, 1998, A18). It said that "a study released . . . by the National Sleep Foundation shows that three specific biological events—menstruation, pregnancy and menopause—disrupt the sleep of a majority of women and interfere with how well they function during the day." The implication of this study is that women's inferior performance during the day is the result of a biologic fact. This kind of study harkens back to the idea that women are naturally inferior to men, that they just can't cut it in the professional and public world of men. Culturally and socially charged issues like menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause are reduced to mere biological facts that make women function poorly. The article tells us that the study was based on interviews with women, that is, women's own perceptions of themselves, their sleep patterns and how well they perform during the day. In a culture in which women internalize sexist ideas about their own inadequacy it should be no surprise that women perceive themselves as unable to function. The irony is that the women also report that their husbands' snoring keeps them awake, which suggests that biology may not be the cause of their sleeplessness and poor performance after all.

In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* Patricia Williams uses a story about size to illustrate the way in which children are taught to discount their own experiences as false on the basis of what they are taught to believe about the world. She describes walking down Fifth Avenue in New York behind a couple and their four-year-old son. The boy was afraid of a big dog, and his parents were trying to convince him that all dogs are alike, that he shouldn't be any more afraid of the giant wolfhound in front of them than the little Pekinese nearby. When asked why he was afraid of big dogs, the little boy

said, "They're big!" When asked what the difference between a big dog and a little dog was, the little boy said, "They're big!" The little boy's mother told him that there is no difference between big dogs and little dogs. And his father insisted that if he looked closely enough, he would see that there is really no difference, so he shouldn't be afraid of big dogs (1991, 12–13). In this situation, the parents discounted the fact that the dog was bigger than the child, that while they were looking down on the dog with his wagging tail, the little boy was looking up into a giant mouth full of big, sharp teeth. By universalizing their own relative bigness, they completely obliterated their child's relative smallness (13). To Williams the story illustrates "a paradigm of thought by which children are taught not to see what they see; by which blacks are reassured that there is no real inequality in the world, just their own bad dreams; and by which women are taught not to experience what they experience, in deference to men's ways of knowing" (13).

Rather than pathologize the experiences of women and people of color, it is time to examine the pathology of a culture in which gender blindness and color blindness operate as *hysterical symptoms* and in which race has become subject to *fetishism*, both seen and unseen, what we don't dare mention for fear of being rude, racist, or sued. Freud describes hysterical symptoms as those that "are substitutes—transcriptions as it were—for a number of emotionally cathected mental processes, wishes and desires, which by the operation of a special psychological procedure (repression), have been prevented from obtaining discharge in psychical activity that is admissible to consciousness" (1962, 30). Hysterical symptoms are what we would call psychosomatic symptoms, symptoms that have no physiological cause. Insisting that we are or should be color-blind manufactures a hysterical symptom, one that prevents us from "seeing" racial differences. The symptom, color blindness, takes the place of—or transcribes—emotionally charged issues of race and racism. Racial difference is repressed, and color blindness operates as a psychic substitute for racism. Although color blindness as hysterical symptom has cathected racist attitudes into what appears to be a socially acceptable affectation, racism continues to express itself in other, more violent ways. As Freud describes hysteria, it is prompted by tension between the repressed desire and a strong sense of social propriety. An exaggerated sense of social propriety that develops as a counterbalance to the repressed desire causes the hysteric to manifest the repressed desire as physical symptoms. In the case of hysterical color blindness, the tension between racism and social sanctions against racism redirects racism into the symptom.

In his essay "Psychogenic Visual Disturbance according to Psychoanalytic

Concepts," Freud identifies hysterical blindness with a dissociation between the unconscious and conscious caused by tension or opposition between drive forces. This dissociation becomes so extreme that Freud can say that the hysteric's consciousness is blind while his unconscious can see (1910, 212). Freud attributes this dissociation to a battle between sex drives and ego-preservation drives. He argues that certain organs that perform more than one function—genitals, mouth, eyes—are susceptible to conflict between their functions and the drives that motivate them. The tension or conflict between drives can cause symptoms to appear in these particular organs (216). He explains that hysterical blindness can result from the ego instincts refusing to see in order to curb the sex instincts, or from the sex instincts refusing to see in order to get revenge on the restrictive ego instincts (216). As a sort of cutting off the nose to spite the face, the drives cut off sight to spite each other.

As Freud describes it, hysterical blindness is a kind of punishment that the subject inflicts on himself for some evil or impropriety. A punishing voice within the subject chastises him for the misuse of an organ for evil purposes and ensures that the subject will never misuse the organ again by making that organ cease functioning altogether (217). Hysterical blindness, then, is a symptom of guilt. Freud insists that hysterical blindness is the expression and not the cause of a psychical state (212). Applying Freud's analysis to contemporary uses of color blindness in relation to race, we could interpret it as a symptom of racism. It does seem that color blindness, at least on the most generous reading, is motivated by a sense of guilt over racism.

Ruth Frankenberg's study of white women's relations to race makes this clear. Interviewing white women, she found that "for many white people in the United States, including a good number of the women I interviewed, 'color-blindness'—a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort not to 'see,' or at any rate not to acknowledge, race differences—continues to be the 'polite' language of race" (1993, 142). On the other hand, for many of the women she interviewed, "to be caught in the act of seeing race was to be caught being 'prejudiced'" (145). Frankenberg concludes that what she calls the color- and power-evasive relation to race—color blindness—is a response against earlier biological racism that operated by asserting a biological hierarchy of races:

White women who grew up before the 1960s came to adulthood well before the emergence and public visibility of the movements that emphasized cultural pride and renewal among people of color. During their formative years,

there were only two ways of looking at race difference: either it connoted hierarchy or it did not (or should not) mean anything at all. Theirs was, then, a historically situated rejection of the salience of race difference. (145)

This kind of color blindness as a reaction against racism supports Freud's thesis that hysterical blindness is the result of feelings of guilt over some evil or impropriety. Feeling guilty for racism of the past, the women whom Frankenberg interviewed refused to "see" race at all.

The persistence of the metaphor of color blindness, even long after various prideful moments of the 1960s, suggests that color blindness is not just a compensation for feelings of guilt over past racism. Color blindness is a symptom of racism. Rather than see and acknowledge racial difference, we would rather not see at all. Reversing Freud's description of the dissociation between the unconscious and conscious, a person with racial color blindness consciously sees race but remains willfully blind to the unconscious effects of the sight of racial difference. Thus remaining blind to the effects of the sight of race in a racist culture is a symptom of racism. In a culture that refuses to see race, we develop a neurotic relation to race. As a culture we suffer from hysterical color blindness, and so race becomes a type of fetish, both seen and not seen.

Hysteria and fetishism are both neuroses in that they demand substitutions that attempt to reconcile a tension between reality and unconscious desire. Whereas with hysteria the unconscious desire is manifest in the symptom, with fetishism the unconscious desire is manifest in the fetish. The fetishist uses the fetish in order to deny some unacceptable reality. The classic fetishist both believes and denies the fact that women, particularly his mother, do not have a penis; he substitutes some object or some other body part for the missing maternal penis so that he can continue to believe that she has one (see Freud 1927). Classic fetishism, then, among other things, is a denial of sexual difference. The ideal of gender blindness is just such an attempt to deny sexual difference even while acknowledging it. The ideal of gender blindness maintains that women are just like men; women are equal to men. This is a particular type of denial of sexual difference that maintains the masculine sex as the norm and turns everything else into it. Freud diagnoses the fetishist's tendency to deny sexual difference (or, as he says, the tendency to believe that woman is not castrated) as his attempt to protect his own sex. Sexual difference poses a threat against which he protects himself by denying that sexual difference and semihallucinating sexual sameness—that all people have penises.

We could argue that the current attempts to deny racial difference operate in a similar way. The ideal of color blindness operates according to the logic of fetishism: seeing and not seeing at the same time. As the classic fetishist denies sexual difference, the ideal of color blindness denies racial difference. Moreover, as the classic fetishist turns all sex into masculine sex and makes it the norm, the ideal of color blindness makes whiteness the norm. So it is not just a matter of denying difference in color or race but the semihallucinatory insistence that all are white, or all are equal to white. Just as the classic fetishist denies sexual difference in order to protect his own sex from the threat of castration and the powerlessness that comes with it, the ideal of color blindness denies racial difference in order to protect whites from a type of symbolic castration that would undermine their power and normalcy. In addition, the attempt to deny racial difference can be read as an attempt to deny that white is itself a race or that as a category, like other racial categories, it has a history intimately tied to racial differences. The attempt to deny racial difference in order to protect the presumption of whiteness as the norm and a stable category is also an attempt to deny the reality of human history that has been a history of racial mixing, which has taken particular forms and transformations in the United States.

Even while as a nation we are subject to the fetishistic and hysterical ideal of color blindness, the reality of racial difference, whose threat is confirmed by that fetishism and hysteria, came out from under its symptoms and presented itself on November 3, 1998, when 38 percent of South Carolina voters voted to keep a 103-year-old passage in their state constitution that reads, "The marriage of a white person with a Negro or mulatto, or person who shall have $\frac{1}{8}$ or more of Negro blood, shall be unlawful and void" (section 33, article 3 of the constitution of South Carolina). When more than a third of the voters in South Carolina think that blacks and whites shouldn't marry, the idea that we live in a color-blind society is at best a delusion that promotes turning a blind eye to the injustice of racism and sexism. We would rather wear blinders in the name of a color- and gender-blind society than work to end racism and sexism by facing the ways in which ours is still a racist and sexist society. We would rather cling righteously to principles of equality than face the ways in which those principles are being used to perpetuate real inequalities.

Facing the ways in which ours is still a racist and sexist society requires that we examine, elaborate, and interpret the process through which we come to see, or not to see, ourselves and others. This examination requires "looking" for what cannot be seen in seeing, the process of coming to see

itself. To avoid injustice, we need to continually and vigilantly reinterpret how and why we see what we see and how and why we look for what we do. Working-through the hysterical symptoms and fetishes of racism and sexism requires elaborating our performances in relation to race and sex. The process of interpretation cannot rest. Recognizing that subjectivity and agency depend on the process of witnessing brings with it the responsibility to response-ability. Pathologizing otherness and difference does not enable a self-affirming response on the part of those whom it victimizes. Working-through the pathology of racism requires “seeing” and embracing the responsibility for the ability to respond—the responsibility to witnessing and witnessing subjectivity—even and especially in our blind spots.

8. Vision and Recognition

The ways in which the rhetoric of a color-blind society pathologizes seeing or not seeing race carry a particular set of symptoms that result from the concrete details of historical circumstance. Earlier, following Fanon, I argued that the pathology of racism or oppression cannot be reduced to the normal process of becoming a subject; oppression and domination are not normal products of this process. I have also argued against the normalization of abjection in the process of becoming a subject and developing subjectivity and agency. Throughout *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, I have tried to present an alternative account of subject formation, subjectivity, and agency. I have argued that recognition and the struggle or demand for recognition are symptoms of the pathology of oppression. Other manifestations of this pathology are the associations of recognition with criminality and guilt and with alienation and evil. Examining these connections may shed light on the guilt associated with seeing racial or sexual difference.

Rather than challenge the *priority of vision* in philosophy or history, which has already been done by many others, I want to explore the *notion of vision* presupposed by historians and philosophers of recognition.¹ My argument is not that the centrality of vision gives rise to problematic conceptions of subjectivity. Rather, I am arguing that a particular conception of vision is problematic when it is presupposed by theories of subjectivity. Much of the pathology of recognition that I have been diagnosing throughout this project is the result of the presupposition of an especially alienating conception of vision. By thinking through the presuppositions about vision underlying the notion of recognition, I hope to begin to suggest an alternative conception of vision that might change the way that we conceive of recognition, identity, subjectivity, and ethical relations.