

## FOR THE LOVE OF WHO WE SHOULD BE BY NOW

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By Sandy Alexandre

There's an oft-quoted passage in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1952, 1967), in which he describes an incident where a white child once publicly drew attention to him by pointing out his skin color. "Look," the child calls out to its mother, "A Negro!" The child proceeds to tell the mother that Fanon, the Negro, frightens him. Within earshot of the child's confession, Fanon is devastated to have his own worst fear confirmed: that his black skin apparently is (and, as he later concludes, will always be) reason enough to elicit such negative feelings toward him.

Fanon never mentions the child's age, so, even if belatedly, I want simultaneously to give the boy the benefit of the doubt and to console Fanon by reminding us that children, in general, tend not to mince their words; children basically "call 'em as they see 'em," as we like to say. As tactless as the little boy's method of acknowledging and understanding racial difference might be, we too often jump to the extreme end of his approach and offer up the solution that colorblindness, therefore, ought to be the antidote to this gauche sequence of staring and pointing at someone black and then adjudging them scary. Consequently, seeing becomes less about actually seeing and more about risk aversion and always anticipating the need for damage control. In other words, the act of seeing becomes self-interested—an act of deluding yourself. Colorblindness is ersatz seeing—a kind of seeing lite, if you will. Colorblindness is a self-induced restriction that we unfairly impose on our faculty of sight; abiding by the stipulations of colorblindness means abiding by an absurd and oppressive decree to deny that what we are seeing is indeed what we are seeing. At the very least, our eyes deserve more than our apparent disdain for them. How long can we go on disavowing a part of ourselves—our eyes—without compromising the whole of our humanity?

Because our country's long history of racism and white supremacy has effectively imbued racial difference with negative meaning, acknowledging someone's racial difference is often viewed as tantamount to offending that person. Such a conflation makes perfect yet unfortunate sense, especially when pointing out someone can so quickly be followed by being afraid of that person. To broach race as a topic is effectively to brandish it. But surely there is a

middle ground—a happy medium—between the pre-kindergartener’s stage of differentiating via pointing at and the post-racialist’s go-to fantasy of colorblindness. For argument’s sake, let’s say we called the site of that middle ground a historically contextualized, necessarily complicated but worthwhile reality. What would it mean to reconcile our eyes to the fact of difference in that world? What would it mean to do justice to our eyes and acknowledge, in a more sophisticated and respectful manner than pointing, that different skin colors do indeed exist among us? What would it mean to ensure that we live in a world where what is different, hypervisible, or most discernible about you isn’t immediately construed as an invitation for someone else to treat you with contempt, ridicule or physically attack and kill you? What would it mean if we trained our minds to subsequently process these differences, not in a knee-jerk and schematic way but in a cumulative and commensurately complex way every time we encountered the same kind of difference, racial or otherwise? After all, we are not little children, and we do not live in a vacuum, so I think we owe it to ourselves to acknowledge and interpret difference better than children as well as for the sake of confronting, reckoning with, and improving our shared reality in the here and now.

I strongly believe that some great potential in us atrophies (indeed is never even allowed to manifest in the first place) when we persist in responding to difference by rote and when we refuse to acknowledge difference at all. We are not who we should be. We collectively agree to remain stunted and mediocre human beings when we choose to uphold ideologies that require we simultaneously dishonor our eyes and deny our minds the right to process our observations in a manner commensurate with our brain’s complexity. Instead, let us see in ways that are worthy of our evolved eyes. Let us think and act in ways that are worthy of our intricate brains. Lest we continue to spite the fullness of our humanity by choosing to see in ways that vilify our eyes, let us strive to see aright again and not askew through ideology-tinted glasses.

With all of this talk regarding bodily organs, I would be remiss if I didn’t ask what scientists have to say about the possible consequences of essentially admonishing our eyes for what they alone are meant to do well. What does the social compulsion to repress the biological function of seeing do to our brains? How constipated by our ideological refusals and denials have we allowed our eyes to become? What are the mental and physiological side effects of relentless denial? For example, in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), was Nathaniel Hawthorne onto something in suggesting that the cause of Arthur Dimmesdale’s gradual mental and physical

deterioration, along with his eventual demise, was his long-drawn-out refusal to speak the truth about his transgression? I am no scientist, but I am a black lady and a scholar and I have lived long enough to observe that when we choose to see only one way or not at all, we ultimately shortchange ourselves by short-circuiting our cognitive process. I want to make a suggestion in an effort to thwart such an eventuality. Perhaps we can derive, reclaim, and restore the genuine vision we have earned, after so many years of evolving into the human beings we are now, by way of one of our other senses—by hearing the plea inherent in the words BLACK LIVES MATTER and responding to it with recognition of its necessity in light of global anti-black brutality. Perhaps we can be returned to the path of evolving into who we are meant to be by choosing to use our eyes to their unadulterated capacity instead of treating them condescendingly and denying them the opportunity to exercise their very function in our lives.

The insistence that black lives matter is a corresponding response to seeing black lives repeatedly devalued across the globe. To grudge black people this response of self-affirmation is not only to deny us the right to respond, but it is also to deny us our lived realities and our deeply human right to hope out loud. So if not for the love of black people, then for the love of our eyes can we show some respect for what those eyes do—what they repeatedly see—by acknowledging and responding sensibly to the sights in front of us, with eyes unfettered by everything from ideology's motes to its dark sunglasses to its blinders? For some people, the consequence of seeing the frequency of anti-black activities has galvanized their desire to will that declarative sentence into an actual and indisputable fact of all our lives. For others, the consequence of experiencing the psychological toll of that frequency has nevertheless set them to motion. And for the rest of us, I predict that returning to our patiently awaiting *ur*vision, after a long vow of disingenuous colorblindness and after seeing benightedly for so long, will certainly require some ocular therapy. We might begin that journey to eye recovery by taking seriously the following question: When will we allow ourselves to rise to the occasion of who we should already be by now so that we may build on that deferred yet hard-won inheritance in order to fulfill the concomitant expectation to be even better human beings tomorrow?

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