



Obasogie, O. (2014). *Blinded by sight: Seeing race through the eyes of the blind*. Stanford University Press.

## A Critical Review of ‘Blinded by Sight: Seeing Race through the Eyes of the Blind’ by Osagie Obasogie

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**Abstract:** A critical book review of Osagie Obasogie's book *Blinded by Sight: Seeing Race through the Eyes of the Blind* discussed its methodological, analytical, and theoretical choices whilst also analyzing its relevance in a contemporary setting.

**Keywords:** racial injustice, racism, sociology of law, seeing race, blindness, race, ethnicity.

*Blinded by Sight: Seeing Race through the Eyes of the Blind* is Obasogie's (2014) first monograph, and it includes over 100 interviews in an effort to bridge and overcome the inadequacies of Critical Race Theory and empirical methods. His aim was to create a new empirical Critical Race methodology based on personal experiences of how race and racial injustice operate in society. Using empirical material, he strived to answer the straightforward question of how blind people understand race. Obasogie understood race as something conceptually different from the descriptive explanation that social constructivism and Critical Race Theory propose. He challenged and moved beyond the consensus within social constructivism that race is “just a skin color, without any more significance in and of itself than eye color or foot size” (p. 115-116) to an understanding that social practices produce the visual salience and knowledge of race that inevitably guide our behaviors and policies. The title refers to Obasogie's conclusion that sighted people were unable to see past or comprehend beyond what was visually apparent. Seeing was a privilege in which the sighted could choose to ignore the practices that went beyond what was visually obvious.

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## Structure and Content

*Blinded by Sight* offered a unique perspective on the perception of race and colorblindness through the analysis of blind people's understanding of race. Through this exploration, the fundamental understanding of race might radically change from the previous dogma based on social constructivism to reveal the social practices that, in fact, produce the capability to *see* race as well as discredit the belief that law should be color-blind. The book is divided into two parts, where the first part investigated race on a sociological, interpersonal, and historical level, while the second part has its focal point on the socio-legal implications of race. In the first part, Obasogie (2014) began by situating his topic within a historical context of racial biology and Social Darwinism before moving on to his research design and describing a multitude of social practices involved in understanding blind people's understanding of race. In the second part, he discussed color blindness, and metaphors in law and culture, the Equal Justice Jurisprudence, as well as briefly discussing the possibility of a color-blind and post-racist society.

Color blindness generally refers to the social construction of race, wherein it holds no biological or social significance and thus should not be recognized as bearing any meaning. This concept of not 'seeing' race or considering race as ethnicity creates a "disassociation with the group dynamics of race" (Obasogie, 2014, p. 116). Obasogie argued throughout the book that when one claims to be color-blind by not acknowledging racial differences, it creates a sense of righteousness in society whilst still upholding the practices that are de facto reproducing racial injustices. Law often lays similar claims to neutrality and impartiality (Alessandrini, 2021; Obasogie, 2014) whilst still managing to serve justice unjustly. Color-blindness in law was used as a metaphor by Obasogie to argue for racial impartiality in the Constitution:

*Both Harlan and Tourgée use colorblindness as a metaphor to suggest that law should neither make nor enforce status distinctions based upon race, a characteristic that is defined by skin color and other visual traits. Both of their usages work from an assumption that blindness, or the inability to see such visually obvious distinctions, is empowering with regards to notions of formal equality; implicit in their claims is the idea that blind people are unable were unwilling to racially discriminate due to their disability. (Obasogie, 2014, p. 124)*

One way for the law to distance itself from racial injustice is to remove the term 'race' from legal texts and replace it with 'ethnicity,' a term considered less abrasive and less likely to incite prejudice (Brännström, 2018). Race and ethnicity are easily conflated, not only by the sighted community but also by the blind, as several respondents in Obasogie's (2014) study defined ethnicity by race. One interviewee said, when asked what race was, that:

*Generally, I think of race as being of a certain ethnic background, and when I say ethnic background, I mean differences that are very obvious, such as skin color, eye color, hair color.... So, I guess, I think of it as, probably ethnicity. (Obasogie, 2014, p. 55).*

Obasogie (2014) argued that racial differences were usually experienced as self-evident and visually coherent but that the ability to 'see' race, however, was not limited to sighted people. Obasogie (2014) showed that blind people understand race through visually obvious

characteristics, such as skin color, hair, and facial features, just as sighted people do and that they guide blind peoples' interpersonal interactions. As one of the informants said:

*Race probably plays just as important [a] part for blind people as it does for others. I wish we could be the societal model that would show every society who gives a damn how to be colorblind. But I don't think we can. Because there's a whole lot more to race than what's visually observed. We built [race] around whether it's there or not. And we can't live in a world without knowing all of this unless you're also blind and cognitively impaired. (Obasogie, 2014, p. 128)*

Obasogie (2014) was not disputing that race is a social construction per se but that it became significant in society through learned behavior and practices. This was his primary motivation for using interviews with people totally blind from birth as opposed to people becoming blind later in life as they would never have seen any physical attributes related to race. This would, according to Obasogie, have caused the underlying processes involved in constructing race to become clear. In addition to this, Obasogie interviewed a smaller sample of sighted people to enable a critical comparison between sighted and blind respondents' understandings of race. The interviews were conducted over the phone to reduce bias from the sighted respondents and meant that the questions did not need to be translated into braille or require the assistance of a sighted person. Contradictory to the previous statement, Obasogie revealed that most of his respondents were recruited through email distribution lists in the blind community and the internet. Whilst this proved to be an excellent method for gaining a lot of participants, a thorough motivation for excluding the blind-deaf community by not using braille was lacking, making the final conclusions of the book rather flawed.

Obasogie did not seem to consider the possibility of blind people's racial consciousness to be visually cognizant as an effect of their environment, explaining every visually foreign concept to them in visual terms. That blind people understood race in visual terms may not have been as counterintuitive as initially thought if one considers that their perceptions were predominantly based upon what others told them. An excerpt from an interview with a blind participant in the book demonstrated this:

*[The interviewee] said that despite being totally blind since birth, the first thing that comes to mind when he hears the world race is "people of different skin colors". He said that the visual aspect of race became significant to him through learning: "I guess it's learned. You learn the difference; you learned that there were different races, that there is a Black race and there's a White race". Thus, as [the interviewee] emphasizes, race became visually striking for learned rather than self-evident reasons. (Obasogie, 2014, p. 82)*

The question, then, rather became whether their visual understanding of race was significant to race in specific or was representative of their understanding of the world in visual terms in general. If Obasogie (2014) included people that were both blind and deaf, he would have been able to counteract this probability by critically analyzing both the perceptions of the sighted and blind participants and also comparing those to the understandings that blind-deaf have of race. As with all research, one must, however, come to terms with the possibility that the results would have been similar, as every human depends on others to learn behavior and social facts.

*Race is very often not a mystery to blind people, which is in a sense kind of sad. I think that sometimes [sighted] people look at blind folks and think [that] these people could show us the way to kind of Star Trek race blind society. And it would be great if we could do that. But we're just as much a victim of racial prejudice, stereotypes, and misconceptions as anyone else. And the fact that we're not clued to it directly by vision doesn't, in my mind, change that a bit. I think that I suffer all of the unfortunate characteristics of my upbringing regarding race that my [sighted] brothers and sisters do. (Obasogie, 2014, p. 158-159)*

*Blinded by Sight* is, without doubt, a useful contribution to the study of race, but by almost exclusively studying the racial dichotomy of Blacks and Whites, Obasogie (2014) was studying a group that did not represent the current American demographic, wherein there are more Hispanics than Blacks in the U.S. (Jones et al., 2021). His participants were multiracial, but the material and excerpts almost exclusively referred to the racial differences between Blacks and Whites. One of Obasogie's (2014) participants explained a situation in school where the teacher was trying to trick a blind student into believing that she was half Italian and half Indian, as this was considered preferable to being half Black. A similar observation was made by the same interviewee in the same excerpt, but where the school tried to convince a student that she was Filipino rather than half White and half Black. Obasogie (2014) further illustrated the ignorance of racism by other racial minorities with the fatal shooting of Black seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in 2012, where Zimmerman implicated that because he identified as Hispanic and not White, that eliminated a racial motive for his crime. Zimmerman shot Martin because he claimed that he feared for his safety due to Martin wearing a hoodie, where the hoodie became a symbol of delinquency (Obasogie, 2014). This indicates that it is not possible to be racist if one is not White, and it could imply ignorance of a more dynamic racial hierarchy that Obasogie does not really engage with. Words, objects, and even physical appearance held meanings as metaphors as well as through inciting prejudice and invoking stereotypes. Obasogie gave several examples from the interview excerpts where the respondents made assumptions about someone from a different race, such as their smell, where they live, or how they sound. Obasogie himself motivated phone interviewing as a way to reduce interviewer bias and argues that by interviewing both the sighted and blind participants over the phone, both groups would be treated equally. The main risk for bias was eventually Obasogie's name. Names obviously hold meaning, and although Obasogie's participants or analysis did not include them as a part of race or ethnicity, names were often associated with both. In Sweden, it is common practice to change your name from African or Middle Eastern-sounding names to traditionally Swedish ones (Fölster, 2017; Panshiri, 2021). This is likely to increase the chances of getting jobs and decrease racial bias (Fölster, 2017; Panshiri, 2021).

Throughout the book, Obasogie (2014) mentioned numerous topics related to the interaction between law and race, ethnicity, technology, and inequality. Touching on a multitude of issues of computer vision's inability to recognize and 'see' the author used race to illustrate how social practices and lack of diversity in the tech industry resulted in and shaped the underlying, biased algorithms (Obasogie, 2014). New technology promoting face-tracking software but being unable to 'see' Black people or cameras being unable to enable anti-blink technology on people of Asian descent were examples of this (Obasogie, 2014). Noble (2018) began her book with a similar topic by saying that she "believe[s] that artificial intelligence will become a major human rights issue" (p. 1) and that:

*While we think in terms such as “big data” and “algorithms” as being benign, neutral, or objective, they are anything but. The people who make these decisions hold all types of values, many of which openly promote racism, sexism, and false notions of meritocracy, which is well documented in studies of Silicon Valley and other tech corridors. (Noble, 2018, p. 1-2).*

This correlates to the laws’ claim of color-blindness and equality without considering the human factor behind all technological and legal advances.

## **Conclusion**

The book, whilst arguably focusing on vision and race, revolves surprisingly little around the premise of race and blindness as initially promoted. Obasogie’s (2014) continuous use of pop culture references, personal experiences, and current events in the United States were undoubtedly a method to encourage people from outside academia to engage with the topic and keep their attention. This rhetoric was clever and reminded us of the unwavering relevance of studies on race and how it has developed through recent history. Obasogie ended the book by claiming that he “hope[s] that this book will stimulate a broader public re-engagement with race” (p. 181). However, by diluting the analysis and empirical material with constant references to racial crimes, movies, personal experiences, or speeches without a clear connection to the emergence of the color-blindness-ideal or other concepts of race and blindness in specific, Obasogie failed to successfully integrate several chapters into the analysis of *race through the eyes of the blind*. Thus, a lot of the information was perceived as superfluous and did not further the analysis. While Obasogie predominately wrote in an easily comprehensible language which probably made the monograph more accessible to the broader audience, it was obvious from the differentiating language that some of it previously was part of a dissertation and multiple articles (Obasogie, 2014, p. x). This hybridity begged the question of whether the book would have benefited from being an abbreviated article instead or being more targeted toward the public.

Osagie Obasogie (2014) has written a book with a thorough analysis of *race* in the current American context, and it is recommended as a reading to those who want another perspective on the topic. But if one is aiming towards an in-depth exploration of *race as understood by blind people*, this book might be disappointing.

## **Disclosure Statement**

No financial interest or benefits exist in connection with this review.

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## Notes on Contributor

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