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"It looks like a demon" Some Notes on the Visual Constructions of Race

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In the final seconds of their struggle, Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown because of a visual impression. From Wilson's point of view, Brown appeared to him like Hulk Hogan, and like a demon. His only conceivable response, he stated, was to shoot. Six bullets penetrated Brown's body, killing him quickly.

Demons do not appear to sane people with any frequency. Some people believe that demons exist, but few will admit they have ever seen one live, face to face. So, how would Wilson know what a demon looked like? What transposed a fictional image onto a real life face? And what does it mean that this was a black man's face?

To think about, to teach about, and ultimately to act on racial injustices, we must become better at understanding the visual components that make up what we call race. I am not suggesting that race is simply about skin color or other physically observable traits. Instead, what we believe we see when we look at someone relies on a highly contingent set of past memories and experiences, all bound up with neural processes and cultural productions.

Teaching cultural constructions of perception is one of the biggest challenges we face as teachers in our contemporary age, as the Wilson-Brown exchange begins to show. Contrary to our students' conventional wisdom, we can't "believe it because we've seen it." The world is not as it appears. Our challenge is to break down the ways of seeing and offer new visions.

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We *see* other people, other bodies, before we shake their hands, and well before any relationship might occur. Long before we speak any words with another person, our cognitive perception systems have fired off tens of thousands of visual-related impulses coursing through our neurons. All of these are swirling through our bodies as we come closer to the person and begin a conversation. We create mental models of other people based on our past experiences, and these influence any new encounters, whether we are conscious of them or not. These impulses have become part of our memories, and lay in a tangled web of associations through the neural pathways of our bodies. We are never really seeing for the first time; all vision is situated within a stream of experience. Wilson had an image of a demon in his head well before he encountered Brown: the two men's exchanges somehow invoked a transfer of that previous image onto Brown's face.

The crux of all this, and where pedagogy is at a premium, is that these memories are built up through a combination of previous real life encounters with people, as well as magazines, advertisements, television, films, video games, and music videos. Considering Wilson never saw an "actual" demon (though I don't know this), his vision had to come from somewhere, and considering the plethora of demon-like figures in popular cultural imagery, it is not much of a stretch to suggest Wilson's image of the demon was placed in his mind by seeing images on some screen.

In his recent book *Flicker: Your Brain on Movies*, cognitive psychologist Jeffrey Zacks offers this fascinating, yet disturbing idea: "Whether we experience events in real life, watch them in a movie, or hear about them in a story, we build perceptual and memory representations in the same format." In other words, studies in cognitive sciences have shown that our neural system does not easily differentiate between images we see on screen, and images we see in "real life." These visions blend together, confusing fiction and history, and confusing demons with the faces of young black men.

Part of the struggle in teaching courses dealing with media—the topic itself is absolutely essential for this day and age—is showing students alternative ways of seeing. Like all of us, students' vision has been constructed, and the opportunity we have as teachers is to find ways to both criticize existing images, and point to new images. We must learn to see better. We must teach our students to see better. And for that we need fresh images to look at.

I want to conclude by turning to some "fresh images," those found in the recent critical work of Jamaican-born poet Claudia Rankine. Last summer, Rankine was headed to St Louis to make some presentations to the Pulitzer Foundation when Michael Brown was killed. She extended her stay, visited Ferguson, and discussed race with many people around town.

Rankine understands the tensions that exist between words and images, and what difference this makes to the construction of race, and so when she published her wrenchingly beautiful book *Citizen: An American Lyric* this past autumn, she included a number of images throughout it. She discusses the seeming paradox between the invisibility and hyper-visibility that she and her discussants have experienced. Meanwhile, by creating her own visual-verbal

takes on contemporary life, she is able to challenge given ways of seeing and remembering.

"The world is wrong. You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard. Not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you."

Memories and bodies, imagination and images, insides and outsides, all coalesce to create the world in which we live. By attending to the visual constructions of race in our lives and classrooms, by being responsible for what we see, we might see how, as Rankine says, "the imagination can open up and change perception."

References:

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014.
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https://wabash.center/2015/01/it-looks-like-a-demon-some-notes-on-the-visual-constructions-of-race/