



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Racial Aura: Walter Benjamin and the Work of Art in a Biotechnological Age

Alys Eve Weinbaum

Literature and Medicine, Volume 26, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 207-239  
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/lm.2008.0011](https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2008.0011)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lm/summary/v026/26.1weinbaum.html>

# Racial Aura: Walter Benjamin and the Work of Art in a Biotechnological Age

Alys Eve Weinbaum

[T]he meaning of racial difference is itself being changed, as the relationship between human beings and nature is reconstructed by the impact of the DNA revolution and of the technological developments that have energized it. . . . [W]e must try to take possession of that profound transformation and somehow set it to work against the tainted logic that produced it.

Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imaging Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*

In recent years, humanists, scientists, social scientists, and the popular press have argued that race is no longer a biologically meaningful category or concept. In view of recent genetic evidence about inherited traits, scholars and pundits argue, it is clear that the collection of purported essences and phenotypic traits that we have thought about until now and referred to as racial in character cease to index significant genetic differences and thus cease to exist as meaningful biological differences.<sup>1</sup> Such assertions about what may most aptly be dubbed our “post-racial” moment represent the culmination of a larger cross-disciplinary consensus produced in the wake of the eugenics movement in the early years of the twentieth-century and the subsequent genocide of World War II.<sup>2</sup> As the argument goes, nothing less than a move beyond race will enable a race-obsessed society to transcend the reportedly invidious idea of race, which advocates of post-racialism regard as responsible for racism. As critical race theorists such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain, the contemporary racial formation is undergirded by a liberal mantra that has proven instrumental in recent decades in dismantling affirmative action and

a variety of other race-based social justice programs, the mantra of so-called colorblindness.<sup>3</sup>

In its current incarnation as scientific “fact,” the colorblind position gathers renewed force: a colorblind, nay post-racial society, it is now argued, is achievable by subjecting the idea of race to the blinding light of genetic reason, or perhaps more accurately to gel electrophoresis, the laboratory protocol used to process DNA fragments so that they may be sequenced and analyzed. Indeed, ever since the announcement of the completion of the map of the human genome in June 2000, the case against race more often than not is presented in genetic terms and as definitively closed. As a headline in the *New York Times* rhetorically queried as early as August 2000, “Do Races Differ? Not Really Genes Show.” By 2003, *Scientific American* saw fit to announce on its cover that “Science Has the Answer” to the age-old conundrum of racial difference: race has no genetic basis.<sup>4</sup> What concerns me in this article is that even as the hegemony of a colorblind racial project currently being expressed as a post-racial euphoria holds sway, the dominant understanding of race, newly energized by genomics, exists side by side with a culture that continues to renew its commitment to the idea of race through its practice of biotechnology.

### I. The Genetics of Colorblindness, or the Paradox of the Post-Racial Consensus

Most of the biotechnological, medical, and consumer practices currently available, routinely prescribed, and widely purchased depend on geneticized ideas of race and, paradoxically, on the same genomic science that has been invoked to prove the non-existence of genetically distinct races. Here, I refer to a range of practices, among them recreational genealogy, race-based medicine, and the new fertility medicine comprised of an arsenal of assisted reproductive technologies, or so-called ARTs.

In one clear-cut instance, race is resurrected in and through the expanding market in recreational genealogy that frequently claims to be able to identify the consumer’s “racial origins.” Such genealogical tests popularize and commercialize the work of population geneticists who have used DNA analysis of many of the world’s peoples to argue that individuals can be assigned to their continent of origin on the basis of their “DNA fingerprint” by adding to this research the claim that such geographic regions correspond to self-identified racial

categories.<sup>5</sup> Consumers mail off a swab of inner cheek cells and two to four hundred dollars and receive an analysis of their DNA that identifies their origins in terms of race and ethnicity, informing them whether they are African, East Asian, Jewish, Native American, or, perhaps, a bit of each. Different consumers are purchasing such tests for diverse reasons: African Americans are using testing to establish genealogical linkages to Africa severed by the legacy of slavery and, in some prominent cases (Oprah Winfrey and Henry Louis Gates Jr. among others), to establish connections with particular African tribes. By contrast, Americans who have lived their lives as white are using the tests to prove their minority status in the hopes of qualifying for race-based resources, including college admission and financial aid. While it is improbable that governments, universities, and other institutions will soon accept commercial DNA tests as proof of racial identity, the degree to which such testing is today impacting the construction of racial identity is profound. Specifically, availability of recreational DNA testing has inaugurated the largest surge in African American interest in genealogy since Alex Haley's 1976 novel *Roots*. It has also routinized white people's opportunistic use of a powerful tool (DNA testing) capable of undermining racial identities internalized and long held to be self-evident based on phenotype.<sup>6</sup>

In referring to the resurgence of the idea of race in our supposedly post-racial moment, I refer secondly to the use of race in the development of drugs advertised by their makers to act selectively on specific racial groups. The most often discussed and controversial of these is commercially known as BiDil, a combination of two existing drugs, isosorbide dinitrate and hydralazine, which was approved in 2005 by the FDA for prescription to "blacks" who suffer from heart failure. FDA approval was based on a series of clinical trials that purport to have revealed BiDil's exclusive effectiveness among African Americans.<sup>7</sup> Although the debates among scientists and researchers raised by BiDil are the same ongoing debates about genetics and disease and the role of race and/or racism in the production of health disparities that have plagued the medical and research communities over the years, what is unprecedented in the current situation is the collective willingness to forge ahead with the use of "black" and/or "African American" as a principal criterion for drug prescription, even in the face of the consensus expressed by geneticists that race does not exist. As sociologist Troy Duster has cogently and repeatedly explained to those willing to listen, even as some scientists argue against the existence of race, others have become increasingly sanguine about utilizing the category of

race in their research on disease when this category produces results desirable to pharmaceutical companies and desperate patients alike.<sup>8</sup> In 2003, for equally strategic reasons having to do with the history of racist disparities in the provision of health care in the United States, Howard University, an historically black institution, announced its plan to create a databank of DNA from individuals who identify as being of African descent in order to insure that African Americans are not left out when the medical benefits of the genomic revolution are reaped.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, while both race-based medicine and recreational genealogy reveal the paradoxical persistence of geneticized racial thinking in our supposedly post-racial moment, arguably the most commonplace recourse to race made by millions of American consumers each year occurs in the context of the purchase and practice of reproductive medicine, particularly the purchase and use of ARTs and the genetic materials they often require. These technologies, including artificial or intra-uterine insemination (AI or IUI), in vitro fertilization (IVF), embryo transfer (ET), and a range of other more sophisticated techniques, have become so completely integrated into Euro-American culture that they are regarded as part and parcel of “normal” reproductive medicine—not as a resource to be sought by a select few but rather as an option routinely selected by the ever-expanding portion of the population (generally estimated at 15–20%) who are deemed infertile and thus in need of biotechnological assistance.<sup>10</sup> As anthropologist Sarah Franklin has persuasively argued, when the “natural” processes of reproduction need continuous technological assistance, we witness an unprecedented implosion of nature into culture and a consequent “loss of faith in nature as a referent system.”<sup>11</sup>

Without exception, consumers of ARTs use race as a primary criterion in the selection of the genetic materials necessary to redress infertility. Eggs, sperm, and zygotes are all understood to possess genetically identifiable racial traits, especially those that consumers anticipate will become visible on the surface of their child-to-be’s body. And thus, again, the paradox: even as the post-racial consensus takes root, ARTs are practiced in a manner that resolutely depends on the deployment and reification of geneticized ideas of race, that is, on the idea of race as a biological and inheritable essence, resident in DNA and, most importantly, visible on the body’s surface may be calculated. As feminist anthropologists and sociologists have documented, in the vast majority of cases, reproduction of “perfected” progeny amounts not only to production of a “defect-” and “disability-” free child but, as importantly, to the creation of a child who is identifiable as the same “race” as the social “parents” to be.

Of course, as I have argued extensively elsewhere, the misguided idea of race as a biologically reproducible and visible identity has remained remarkably static in the modern period, and thus the paradoxical invocation of race in our supposedly post-racial moment emerges as perhaps all too predictable.<sup>12</sup> Within the transatlantic context, beginning in the nineteenth century, arguments grounded in the so-called racial sciences cast traits such as “inferiority” and “degeneration” as “race traits” that could be reproduced and passed on from generation to generation if reproductive alliances failed to be carefully monitored and controlled. Belief in the idea of the reproducibility of “racial traits” underlay much of the century’s anti-immigration policy, including the ideology of racial nationalism or white nationhood invoked by immigration Restrictionists and Nativists who sought to keep the national gene pool “pure” and “white” throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the development of “one-drop” rules and Jim Crow, and the birth of the eugenics movement that began in the United States in the 1910s and soon migrated to Germany. Belief in this racialized and geneticized reproductive logic in the United States also led to mass sterilization campaigns of those deemed “unfit” for reproduction, including Native Americans, the so-called feeble-minded, and those regarded as sexually deviant.<sup>13</sup>

Currently, far from having transcended ideas about the reproducibility of race as a biological essence, we are witnessing consolidation of such ideas through their deepened geneticization and commodification. In infrequent cases in which white women have elected to use sperm from men of different races, their pursuit and purchase of exotic commodities can (though does not always) auger the infinite variety of forms that racism can and does take. Such wayward racial selections are expressly intended to produce interracial children, a (re)productive practice that is ultimately no more or less race conscious than that which aims to create a perfect “racial match.” In fact, even in those cases in which lesbian or queer interracial couples elect to produce mixed race children “reflective” of the racial composition of their relationships, we witness yet one more of the infinite forms that contemporary racial fetishism may take. In the case of surrogacy, when surrogates gestate embryos comprised of their own ova, their services and bodily materials become indistinguishable, and surrogates are thus selected by consumers based on the projected racial and phenotypic outcomes that the surrogates’ employment will enable. Conversely, as anthropologist, Heléna Ragoné demonstrates, in instances in which surrogates gestate unrelated genetic material, the racial differences between the surrogate and social parents are deemed less relevant.<sup>14</sup> Far from contravening

the dominant social belief in the genetics of race, this practice only further suggests its power: the race of the surrogate becomes inconsequential when she is reduced to a laboring body, a womb for sale. Once again, the racial connections that count are those that produce the veneer of racial continuity across generations. Apparently, in the context of a supposedly post-racial free market in genetic materials and reproductive services, even multicultural forms of reproductive reciprocity are fraught with eugenic undertones.<sup>15</sup>

Given these trends, it is perhaps unsurprising that in rare instances in which use of genetic commodities have resulted in offspring of an unanticipated race, lawsuits have ensued. In one instructive instance, a white mother who underwent in vitro fertilization involving donated sperm gave birth to twins, one of whom was, upon birth, deemed black. She sued the fertility clinic that had performed the procedure for damages resulting from the duress of her wayward birth and the racist taunting that her child subsequently confronted. Her grievance stemmed from the claim that she had been inseminated with racially mismatched sperm, from an overriding sense that the race of the sperm should have been genetically identifiable by her doctors, and also from her feeling that her white reproductive body should rightfully have been the repository of a white child.<sup>16</sup> In another case that went before the United States Supreme Court (*Johnson v. Calvert*, 1993), a black surrogate who attempted to breach contract in order to keep the white-looking child that she had gestated for a white man and his Filipina wife lost her legal battle for custody. In the Court's decision, the fact that the surrogate was genetically unrelated to the child and, not coincidentally, that she was of a visibly different race figured prominently.<sup>17</sup>

In these and other cases, genetic selection amounts to racial selection. Even in the absence of a genetic basis for race, ARTs and the laws that have been implemented to govern their sale, purchase, and use are practiced with race in mind and, for the most part, continue to be used to secure racial likeness among (as opposed to difference from) parents and progeny. Given that this genetic manipulation is intended to ensure rigid, recognizable, and desirable kinship structures and the racial distinctions that organize them, it seems clear that eugenics, defined by Francis Galton, who coined the term in 1883 and defined it as the science of "improving" human stock by increasing "desirables" and decreasing "undesirables," did not die after its catastrophic, if failed, implementation during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Rather, it is more accurate to say that it went dormant, lying in wait, ready to return with a vengeance once it had successfully refashioned

itself as what the Critical Art Ensemble has described as the “perfect complement to the capitalist political-economic imperative.” As members of this guerilla art group argue in their manifesto, *Flesh Machine*, in the practice of ARTs, eugenics are “offered as just another commodity under the legitimized authority of medical institutions,” a situation that normalizes and naturalizes the purchase and implementation of ARTs, and, I would add, one that consolidates the eugenic, or more aptly, the geneticized ideas of race that have supposedly been banished.<sup>18</sup> And thus, although it has been argued that ARTs rework normative notions of kinship and family (witness, for example, the increasing numbers of gay couples using donor gestational surrogates, lesbian parents using artificial insemination, and heterosexual single and older women using biotechnologies to create children and alternative household forms), we must also acknowledge that the racial dynamics necessarily engaged each time ARTS are practiced are at best uninterrogated and at worst actively promoted under the guise of consumer choice.<sup>19</sup>

To be sure, unprecedented modalities of inter-racial reproductive reciprocity might still be enabled by ARTs, but to date these have been too seldom pursued. Although we might hope that time-worn racial hierarchies would not inflect the choices made as individuals and couples practice reproduction and consume biotechnological procedures and genetic materials, in our supposedly post-racial moment, biotechnological reproduction has proven to be only as anti-racist as the larger social, political, and economic contexts of its creation—contexts that our dominant practices of biotechnological reproduction paradoxically serve to consolidate.

## II. Racial Aura

The idea that the same technologies that might potentially be used for liberatory, even anti-racist ends can and are all too often used to maintain oppressive social hierarchies is one whose examination has historical precedent in the 1930s. Amidst the rise of the Third Reich and just prior to the imposition of genocidal Nazi eugenic policies implemented in the name of “racial hygiene” and “race improvement,” Marxist theorist Walter Benjamin sought to understand how the new technologies of reproduction by which he was surrounded were altering both human sense perception and political consciousness. Although Benjamin’s now famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” examined film and photography and could not possibly



have accounted for ARTs as they exist today, in this section I explore how and why Benjamin's analysis of the cultural and ideological effects of the reproductive technologies by which he was surrounded is relevant to the analysis of the biotechnologies by which we are surrounded in our supposedly post-racial age.<sup>20</sup> Although we can limn the paradox that confronts us—the simultaneous insistence on the obsolescence of race and the accelerated practice of racial distinction through the use of biotechnology—in order to theorize this paradox and, as importantly, to understand how it produces an array of cultural and ideological effects that alter our perception of race, reproduction, and kinship, a return to Benjamin is both timely and politically useful.

In "The Work of Art" Benjamin's central insight is that changes in the mode of production are manifest in transformations in cultural production and, in turn, in human sense perception. As he explains, technological developments structure the transformation of culture, including the production of the artistic objects and forms available to the masses. In so doing, they alter the mass perception of reality—nothing less than how we collectively apprehend our world. In particular, the reproductive technologies of photography and film that most concerned Benjamin do this in three distinct ways: 1) they capture images that escape natural vision through various techniques, including the close-up, filmic editing, and slow motion; 2) they put copies of the original object into situations that would be out of reach of the original through wide dissemination, thus exposing art to a mass viewership rather than solely to an elite or select one; and 3) they enable the art work and the viewer to meet "halfway." By this last point, Benjamin suggests that reproductive technologies allow viewers to engage in a conceptual exchange that leads to the elevation of the viewer as a critical observer (as opposed to a passive recipient) of artistic representations leading also to a depreciation of the quality of the presence of the original work of art, a diminishment of the art work's "authority" as "historical testimony."<sup>21</sup>

The alteration of human sense perception enabled by technologies of mechanical reproduction did not, however, produce a singular political effect. Rather, much to Benjamin's dismay, the impact of changes in perception heralded by film and photography lay precariously in the balance. And thus, writing on the eve of World War II, Benjamin's guiding political question had to do with whether the work of art and new mode of perception that it enabled would be used to foment human oppression or liberation or, in the terms of his day, fascism or communism. On the one hand, when made infinitely

reproducible and thus available for consumption by the masses, film and photography possessed the potential to democratize society by making viewers into critics and giving them an experience of critical and liberatory collectivity. On the other hand, film and photography and the sense perception they enabled were ripe for exploitation by the fascist ideology machine eager to create a compliant mass, blind to its own exploitation.

The urgency of Benjamin's essay thus stemmed from his desire to advocate for the liberatory potential of mechanical reproducibility and from his hopeful sense that it was still possible to appropriate reproductive technology and turn it away from fascist ends. In his essay's famous epilogue, he starkly renders the stakes of his argument:

The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of [a technological] apparatus which is pressed into production of ritual values . . . All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war . . . Only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technical resources while maintaining the property system.<sup>22</sup>

According to Benjamin, Fascism aestheticizes politics, using film and photography as required. Through "violation of an [technological] apparatus," Fascism mobilizes the masses to maintain their own proletarianization and the prevailing property system. Fascist art (the example Benjamin gives is that of Italian Futurist, Franco Marinetti) supplies "gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology" to such an extreme degree that society "can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."<sup>23</sup> Alternatively, liberatory cultural forms (those spawned by a critique of the prevailing property system) respond to changes in perception "by politicizing art."<sup>24</sup> In other words, Benjamin tightly binds human liberation to particular forms of artistic production. In his view, radical politics require art that reflects and refracts transformations in the mode of production and perception, and channels these changes into critical consciousness, which, for Benjamin, was tantamount to class consciousness.

Those of us living in the United States find ourselves in an unprecedented situation in terms of the particular variety of reproductive technologies by which we are surrounded—and, here, I refer not to the technologies of film, photography, or war of which Benjamin wrote, but rather to the powerful biotechnologies that I have already

described—those which, through use, transform our perception of biological life itself. Works of art, as well as a wide range of popular cultural representations produced within the context of the proliferation of these biotechnologies reveal unprecedented transformations in our perception of race, reproduction, and kinship.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, contemporary art responsive to and productive of changes in our perception reveals to us the manner in which we hang in the balance, poised between an oppressive eugenic social order and an anti-racist one. On the one hand, such art can and often does aestheticize race, rendering it an ever more reified concept. On the other hand, at the best of times, such art reveals the paradox of our supposedly post-racial moment, exposing to us the pitfalls of those post-racial arguments that insist that genetic science and reason have moved us beyond race and therefore beyond racism.

Before launching into a discussion of contemporary art, it is important to acknowledge that the idea that art has been transformed by new technologies is not particularly novel. Art historians and cultural critics have demonstrated that new forms of image making, sculpture, installation, interactive computer-based performance, and bioart (art that employs biotechnology in its creation and content) are currently commonplace.<sup>26</sup> It is also noteworthy that Benjamin has already been invoked to demonstrate the existence of emergent artistic forms responsive to the new mode of production.<sup>27</sup> As important as such work of demonstration is, however, this article departs from it in order to explore not only how this new art is shaped by technology but also how it functions to create critical awareness of biotechnology, particularly by registering the paradoxical perception of race that characterizes our biotechnological age.

In order to understand the critical work that art does, one Benjaminian concept above others is germane. I refer to “aura,” the “breath” of “authenticity” that recedes when technologically reproduced objects replace hand made ones. Although it recedes, crucially, the desire for aura and thus its specter never disappears. As Benjamin explains it, when the work of art of a previous age comes into contact with that which is mechanically reproduced, perception of the former is transformed:

The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. . . . In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus—namely, its authenticity—is interfered with. . . . The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is trans-

missible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. . . . And [thus] what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. . . .

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.<sup>28</sup>

Aura is initially associated with “historical testimony,” “authority,” and “authenticity.” However, after first introducing the concept in this passage, Benjamin continually returns to, augments, and reworks it so that aura eventually becomes associated not only with these attributes but also with the pretense of their presence, with their spectral effect. In other words, while aura initially names that which “withers” or “decays,” it later comes to name that which is artificially produced to replace or fill-in where a loss of “authority” or “authenticity” is identified or felt. Structurally akin to the Derridian supplement, aura identifies what is lacking, what has been lost, what has withered, or what has been obscured, and, it simultaneously indicates the shape of the whole, the entity in its entirety prior to this lack, loss, or diminishment.<sup>29</sup>

In the boldest formulation, I am suggesting an uncanny correspondence between aura, as Benjamin develops it, and the concept of race that circulates in our supposedly post-racial times: The present denial of the biological existence of race shapes all invocations of race, effectively making biological race auratic each and every time it appears. In this sense, aura and race in the present context are not simply analogous; rather, race has emerged as constitutively auratic within contemporary culture. Just as notions of hand-madeness, authority, and uniqueness haunt the mechanically produced object of which Benjamin wrote, rendering aura spectral, notions of race as a biological, genetic, and scientifically quantifiable essence haunt the biotechnological practices and products that this essay describes, rendering race spectral. Put differently, like aura for Benjamin, race, for us, is present and absent—it is rendered obsolete by the new forms of genetic knowledge, and it is simultaneously reinvigorated when biotechnological procedures and the necessary genetic materials are used. In this literal and practical sense, it can be argued that as the paradoxical authenticity of the art object in an age of mechanical reproducibility is captured by and condensed in the concept of aura, the paradoxical persistence of race in our supposedly post-racial moment is captured and condensed in a concept I call “racial aura.”

For Benjamin, aura at first appears to be a descriptive concept, but becomes, over the course of his essay, an increasingly critical one. This shift is evident in his discussion of film. In the figure of the film star, the contradictory manifestations of aura—as authentic on the one hand, and as a veneer of authenticity on the other—converge, revealing aura to be present in the form of its negation, a spectral manifestation of a longed for originality, authority, and uniqueness and also at once an instrument of political oppression. As Benjamin explains, “The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio.”<sup>30</sup> As if to compensate for the fact that film is the reproductive technology that might potentially destroy aura, film paradoxically gives back to the audience the veneer or feeling of aura in the form of “the cult of the movie star.” But as Benjamin cynically notes, we should not be deceived by the gift that film proffers: “the cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but [rather] the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity”<sup>31</sup> The cult of the film star mollifies the masses to their alienation from the technologies by which they are surrounded; instead of allowing them to occupy a critical posture in relation to these technologies, the production of the veneer of aura, of its “phony spell,” opens film up to Fascist instrumentalization. In short, as the pretense of aura pacifies viewers, it numbs consciousness to exploitation, and it conceals the liberatory potential embedded in film and the new forms of perception that this particular reproductive technology might otherwise enable.<sup>32</sup>

If the viewer’s failure to critically apprehend the decline of aura and acceptance of the “phony spell of the commodity” as its substitute negates film’s radical potential, it would seem to follow that the converse—critical apprehension of aura’s demise—could actualize the radical potential of art in a mechanical age. And it is in this sense that Benjamin goes on to argue that the decay of aura is not necessarily a bad thing; rather, it is precisely what opens up space for critical apprehension of the mechanism by which the new mechanical technologies transform perception.<sup>33</sup> The trick, as Benjamin understood, was not to engage in a form of romantic anti-capitalism that too readily dismissed the decay of aura as a human tragedy. Rather, the trick was to lay hold of aura’s political potential to raise consciousness about changes in the mode of production. In putting the decay of aura on display, works of art enable consciousness of the transformation in perception of which the decay of aura is the principal effect.

From such a vantage point it becomes clear that aura resides no more on the side of human oppression or liberation than do the

technologies whose emergence precipitates aura's demise. Rather, the difference between art that foments human oppression and art that paves the way for liberation lies in the difference between art that covers over the decay of aura and art that critically apprehends its doubleness or makes aura's spectral presence visible. As Benjamin explains, the film or photograph either trains us in apprehension of our new relationship to technology and to changes in our mode of perception, or, alternatively, it mystifies this relationship, shrouding it in the "phony spell of the commodity" and acclimating us to our exploitation. Indeed, art's liberatory function resides in its ability to put aura on display as a vestigial presence, as a specter, as the clue to the transformations in the mode of production that precipitate changes in our perception.

In the epigraph I used to begin this essay, Paul Gilroy, perhaps unwittingly, makes a very Benjaminian point about race: "The meaning of racial difference is itself being changed as the relationship between human beings and nature is reconstructed by the impact of the DNA revolution,"<sup>34</sup> he writes. In the spirit of Benjaminian critique, Gilroy goes on to conclude the thought not by pessimistically noting that race has become irreducibly geneticized and commodified, but rather by observing that the transformation in the concept of race that has been precipitated by new scientific advances and technologies actually clears space for a liberatory reconceptualization of the concept of race. Urging us, his readers, to "try to take possession" of the "profound transformation" that has been wrought by the DNA revolution, he suggests that we "somehow set it to work against the tainted logic that produced it."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, it can be argued that, like Benjamin before him, Gilroy sees the production of aura, in this case racial aura, as a political opportunity.

Finally, it is in thinking about the critical work that art produced in the context of rapid transformation in the mode of (re)production does that the questions about artistic production most pertinent to our biotechnological age finally take form: How does contemporary art allow for apprehension of changes in our perception of race, reproduction, and kinship produced by the new biotechnologies? How does it facilitate apprehension of the decay of racial aura and the simultaneous persistence of its "phony spell"? How does art produced in an age of biotechnological reproduction politicize aesthetics by showing us how we might set to work the profound transformations we are witnessing against the tainted logic that produced them?

Like the aura of originality and uniqueness of which Benjamin wrote, racial aura haunts us and hides from us, proliferates and withers.

And, it is precisely for this reason that contemporary art that engages racial aura possesses the potential to reveal to us the paradoxical nature of “race” in our supposedly post-racial moment, for such art reveals transformations in our perceptions of race, reproduction, and kinship and, ideally, catalyzes critical awareness of the liberatory nature of these perceptions—not least, our awareness that the post-racial consensus that has been at once so destructive of hard won forms of racial justice, so seemingly authoritative, and so incontestably dominant, is in fact founded upon paradoxically unstable “scientific” foundations.

### III. The Work Art Does

In the last decade, as research on the human genome has accelerated and a genomics industry has emerged, as the denial of the existence of racial difference has come to hold sway, art has begun to meditate changes in perception of race by engaging a gamut of issues, including DNA sequencing and identification, genetic commodification and patenting, transgenics and cloning, and the sale and purchase of ARTs and the materials they require.<sup>36</sup> In short, contemporary art meditates on the range of biotechnological practices that have precipitated the transformation in our perceptions of race, reproduction, and kinship. And while it is clear that art is not the only or even necessarily the privileged cultural form that might perform the work of critique, Benjamin’s initial insight about art as critical tool remains pertinent, allowing us to see race’s spectral effects—nothing less than the existence of racial aura. Although the works of art I examine in this concluding section do not espouse or promote a unified racial politics, they exhibit a shared sensitivity to transformations in the mode of production and thus possess the critical edge that the demise of aura enables. In this important way, they collaborate in clearing space for new thinking about race, generating critical awareness of the form(s) of racial consciousness that might now become possible but, as of yet, remain largely emergent.

Paul Vanouse’s “Relative Velocity Inscription Device” (RVID) exudes racial aura both by showing race’s easy reanimation as a biological, genetic entity and by documenting transformations in the dominant thinking about race heralded by genomics. As a functioning science project, “RVID” sits uneasily on the borderline between scientific experiment, art installation, and interactive performance. The piece was commissioned by Seattle’s Henry Gallery, for *Gene(sis)*, a traveling exhibit

that juxtaposed works by twenty-six artists for whom the “accelerated pace of genetic research and the potential socio-cultural impact of recent scientific developments on our daily lives” has been the principal imaginative spark.<sup>37</sup> “RVID” uses DNA fragments extracted from four members of Vanouse’s multiracial Jamaican/white family to produce the semblance of a “road race” among competing family members whose genetic materials move through a computer-regulated separation gel eerily bathed in ultra-violet light [See Figure 1]. A camera situated above the glowing gel tray through which fragments of Vanouse’s DNA and that of his biracial sister, “brown” Jamaican mother, and “white” father travel, projects the “race” in progress onto an illuminated wall display that indicates the relative position of each DNA fragment as it makes its way through the medium, propelled by a variable electrical current whose strength is manipulated by viewer/participants who interact with the experiment through an attached computer terminal.

The question of the genetics of race is central to the narrative that accompanies RVID and describes the experiment in progress. At the same time, race is animated as a eugenic conception of “inferiority” or “superiority” through Vanouse’s placement of an open copy of Charles B. Davenport’s 1929 tract, *Race Crossing in Jamaica*, on the same table as the gel tray. Davenport, one of the founders of the American eugenics movement, was famous for promoting the belief that so-called racial mixing produced “inferior” progeny, individuals who were weaker in constitution and capacity than either of their racially “pure” and thus “superior” parents. As *Race Crossing*’s placement on the scientific table implies, Davenport’s work might be used to explain (as it has in the past) the relative “success” of people of different “races” and “racial mixtures” in the “life-race.” And yet, the point of “RVID” is at once to introduce such racial thinking and to simultaneously confound the eugenic assumptions on which the “road race” in progress might be based. As becomes clear to the viewer who reads the commentary that accompanies the installation, a given race’s outcome in the road race that has been set up by the experiment is determined not by the assumed “race” of the DNA fragment, but rather by the amount of electrical current passed through the gel and by the length of the fragment (which has been randomly snipped). Put differently, “RVID” compels us to operationalize buried assumptions about the genetics of race as we encounter contemporary genetic representations and to confront these buried assumptions as eugenic in origin. In this way it allows us to become aware of the ease with which race can be made to “look” genetic when in fact, as geneticists concur, it is not. Just as



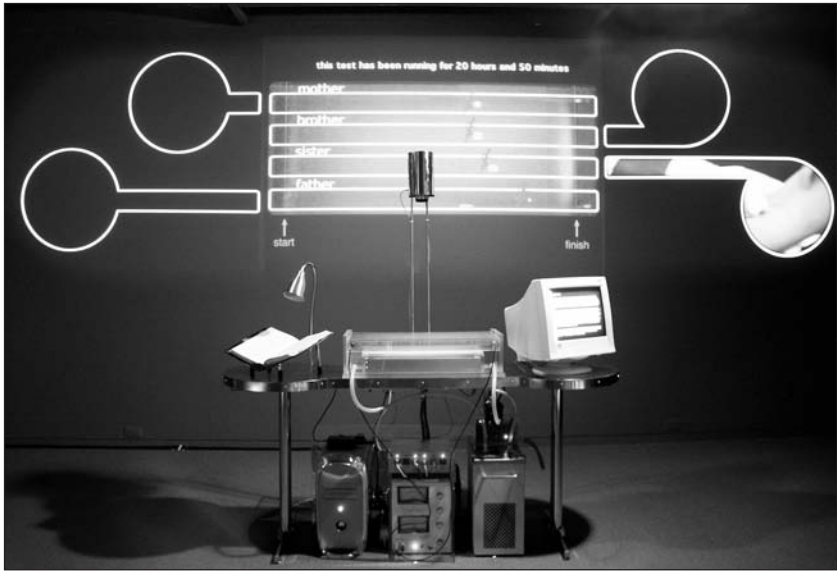


FIGURE 1. Installation of Paul Vanouse's "Relative Velocity Inscription Device" (RVID), Henry Art Gallery, Seattle 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

the "phony spell" of the screen star is animated in the Hollywood film, so too is the "phony spell" of race or the spectral presence of racial aura animated in "RVID." As Vanouse elsewhere explains, he created a "race about race" to demonstrate the idea that any particular "race" or "mixture" is genetically "inferior" or "superior"—faster, more agile or competitive—is a racist ruse. Racial biology continues to structure our thinking in a supposedly post-racial moment, principally through the historical sedimentation of eugenics that continues to burden our imaginations.<sup>38</sup> As "RVID" reveals, Davenport's eugenic thinking is effortlessly reanimated for viewers by a road race among variously "raced" genetic materials, demonstrating that we continue to code race as a genetic essence through our daily interactions with biotechnology even as the dominant culture announces the triumph of the post-racial consensus.

The racial aura whose spectral presence dynamizes Vanouse's "RVID" also dynamizes contemporary photographic work. Zhang Huan's series of nine self-portraits, "Family Tree" (2000), documents a performance in which he uses his own face as a canvas upon which to inscribe, in Chinese characters, familiar names and, most visibly, a well-known Chinese proverb about a foolish man's belief in the power

of the generations to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles and the foolish man's insistence on the power of familial genealogy and of dedicated sons and grandsons [See Figure 2].<sup>39</sup> In this way, Zhang effectively creates a new visual vocabulary for exploring questions of belonging and genealogical connection: Zhang's portraits incrementally document the gradual occlusion of his visage as it is inscribed with so much black ink that the writing covers over his skin and visibly Asian features. By the last three photographs in his series, as the calligraphy renders his face and the writing itself unreadable, he succeeds in reappropriating ideas of both personal identity and familial genealogy: in blacking himself out, he effectively refuses to (dis)cover himself as an inheritor of an august Chinese lineage and instead provokes viewers to reconsider the presumed national, racial, and familial descent that might be most readily attributed to Zhang based on phenotype and on his self-identification as Chinese. As Zhang observes on his website, in this work that "speaks about a family story, a spirit of family," by the end of the day of the performance recorded in these nine photographic images—that is, after calligraphy blacks out his visage—"I cannot tell who I am. My identity has disappeared."<sup>40</sup> In "Family Tree," Zhang uses his body, as Vanouse used the bodies of himself and his family in "RVID" (in this case Zhang's face rather than a fragment of his DNA), to comment on the superficiality of contemporary racial and cultural meaning making; on its misguided dependence on old, outworn racial, national, and cultural scripts; on the presumed visibility of racial and national identity; and on the poverty of the idea that the search for belonging and genealogical descent can reveal to us unknown, buried truths about our selves. Although it never explicitly engages the issue of genetics and race, in commenting as it does on unanticipated inheritance, Zhang's blackface neatly exposes the paradox of the post-racial consensus. It at once corroborates the idea of humanity's shared African origins—the thesis proposed by population geneticists who study patterns of human migration through study of DNA—and the idea that this thesis is itself a form of blackface, a "phony spell" that geneticizes race and covers over other salient "truths" about our origins that might be, and in some instances have been, constructed as we create our ideas of familial and racial descent and our sense of belonging in the world.

As in "RVID" and "Family Tree," Daniel Lee's photographic series *Judgment*, animates racial aura through the specter of genealogy gone awry, in particular through the specter of racialized interspecies "mixture."<sup>41</sup> *Judgment* comprises eleven poster size digital c-prints of

human/non-human animal hybrids that gaze resolutely out at viewers. These creatures, a curatorial plaque informs, are the judge, jury, and guards who comprise “the mythological court under the earth” where the one-hundred-and-eight types of existent beings, including human beings, are judged after death.<sup>42</sup> In all cases, Lee’s hybrids are phenotypic composites of familiar animals and people of color (mostly East Asians), individuals whose “otherness” is expressed through sartorial style, skin tone, facial feature, and hair. For instance, juror number six, “Leopard Spirit,” is asianized by his Chinese jacket, elongated eyes, and the stereotypical gesture he assumes, hands patiently folded behind his back [See Figure 3].

In these and all his other portraits of the court, Lee’s racialized and animalized images put racial aura on display in the form of nineteenth century “scientific” ideas about hybridization and destruction of “purity” of form. In this way Lee’s images indicate the extent to which all modern discussions of hybridity are intrinsically racialized, whether or not race is explicitly foregrounded, for, by the middle of the nineteenth century, ideas about mixed progeny as “degenerate” and about “degeneration” as a consequence of “devolution” to a more animalized and, thus, less “civilized” and less “human” state were commonplace. Indeed, Lee’s work reminds us that in the largely uncontested “racial science” of the nineteenth century (that which preceded Davenport’s eugenic theories and from which he borrowed), ideas about racial mixing were sifted through ideas about the hybridization of species—human and non-human animals—such that interspecism and interracialism were virtually interchangeable. This was an especially powerful conflation in contexts such as American racial slavery, in which black people were regarded as less than fully human, as animal chattel. As the etymology of the term “Mulatto” indicates, rooted as it is in the word mule, the progeny of wayward reproductions across racial lines have a long history of portrayal as sterile beings, inferior blends of incompatible parts, be they donkey and horse or white and black.<sup>43</sup>

In Lee’s images the monstrosity of mixture realizes its most robust expression in cross-species human/non-human animal mixture. However, lest the contemporary genomic resonance of Lee’s human/non-human animal hybrids be overlooked by viewers, in the gallery space in which Lee’s *Judgment* series was on display, his work was juxtaposed by curators with Catherine Chalmer’s photographic series *Transgenic Mice* [See Figure 4]. Chalmer’s portraits of creatures such as “Obese Mouse” and “Rhino Mouse,” blown-up so they appear the size of toddlers, depict actual scientific specimens produced by combining human DNA with



FIGURE 2. Images from Zhang Huan's performance and photographic series, "Family Tree 2000." Courtesy of the artist.

mouse DNA. Such mice are used in research on a variety of human diseases, with the most well known one, "Onco-Mouse," developed to study cancer. Although race is nowhere apparent in the manifest content of Chalmer's images, the juxtaposition of Lee's and Chalmer's hybrids produces a synergy that racializes the mice and simultaneously geneticizes the hybrids that comprise Lee's court. In other words, when brought together, Lee's court and Chalmer's mice manifest racial aura in the form of overlapping conceptions of mixture as monstrosity. By grabbing our attention and fascinating our gaze, these very different

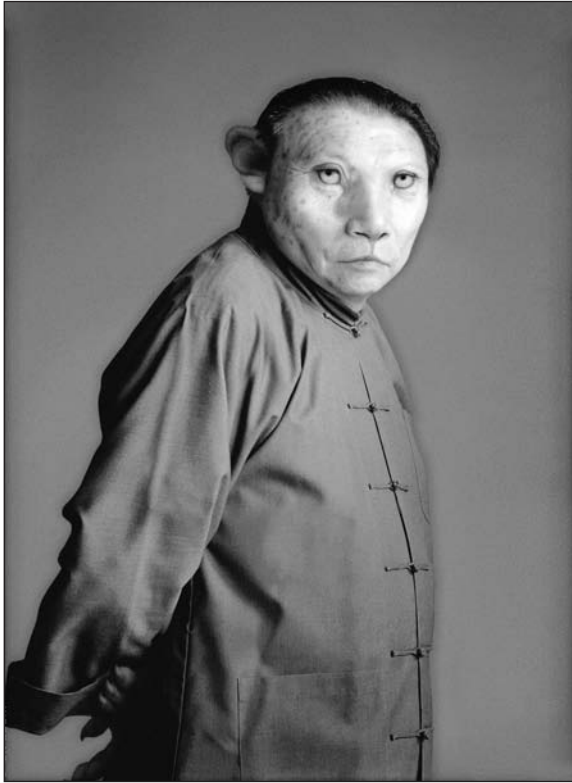


FIGURE 3. Daniel Lee's "Juror No. 6 (Leopard Spirit)," part 4 in the 1994 series *Judgment*. Courtesy of the artist.

portraits collude to reveal the origin of the freakishness they depict in a combination of old, supposedly outmoded ideas about racial mixture and very contemporary ideas of transgenics—and this is the case, even as the post-racial consensus is consolidated by the genetic science that tells us that race does not exist.

Perhaps one of the most striking features of Chalmer's *Transgenic Mice* is that it suggests that in a supposedly post-racial age even genomic art without overt racial content is paradoxically haunted by racial aura. Indeed, works such as this one show that the denial of the existence of the genetic reality of race is in fact accompanied by racial aura; or, put differently, that in the context of post-racialism, race is always already present. In order to explore this last point, the final work that this essay treats is one in which race is entirely ab-



FIGURE 4. Catherine Chalmers' "Rhino Mouse" from the photographic series *Transgenic Mice*, 2000. Courtesy of the artist.

sent from the manifest content of the work and yet one from which racial aura emanates in especially powerful and instructive ways. I refer to Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's *The Garden of Delights*, which I will argue, despite being devoid of manifest racial content, nonetheless is haunted by racial aura and thus has the potential to generate awareness of the paradoxical conceptualization of race and kinship in our biotechnological age, our supposedly post-racial moment. As we shall see, *Garden* animates both new and old ideas of hybridity through play with formal painterly conventions, through historical citation, and not least through commentary about the art provided to viewers by the curators of the galleries in which it has been displayed.

*Garden*, a series of forty-eight genetic portraits arranged in sixteen groups of three, each titled with a series of first names ("Armando, Maria, and Jack," "Dan, Axel, and Sander," "Jane, Laurie, and Naomi" and so forth), is abstract and pleasing to the eye, and in the original, vibrantly colored [See Figure 5]. As Ronn Platt's curatorial commentary explains, each triptych contains an image of the genetic "fingerprints" of three people: an individual asked by the artist to choose two additional individuals to be similarly fingerprinted.<sup>44</sup> Though it is not apparent from the cluster of first names that title each grouping of three genetic portraits, commentary further clarifies that some groups are comprised of people who are biologically related, while others are comprised of friends and lovers. These groups, often referred to by the artist and

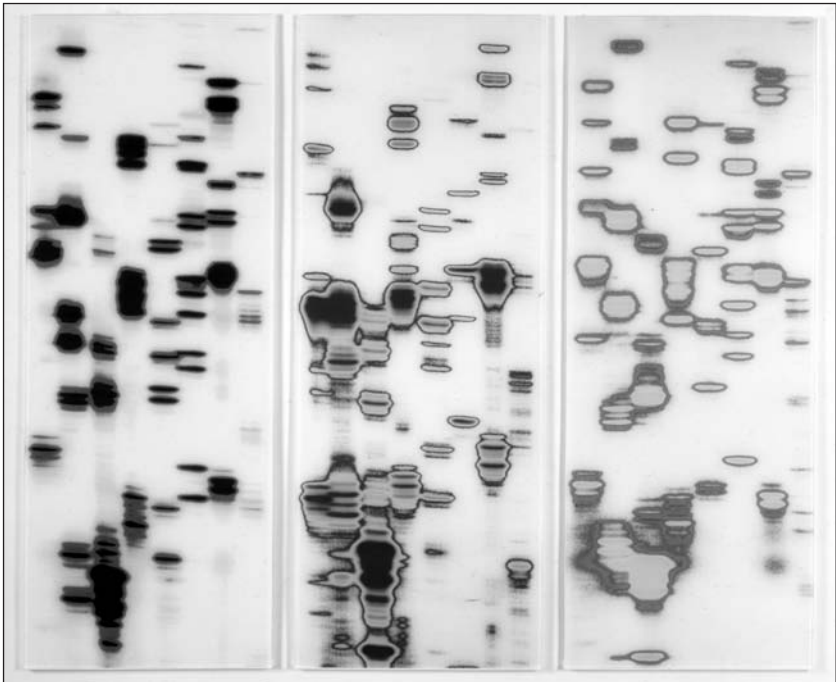


FIGURE 5. Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, “Carter Anna Daryl” from *The Garden of Delights*, 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

in the criticism as “families,” are as often created through affinity as through filiation, and are as likely to be queer as straight.<sup>45</sup>

While the overlapping genetic images lead us to presume, or at the very least to search for visual cues indexing biological relatedness—a search compelled by the fact that the triptychs are color-coded so that each “family” has its own dominant color scheme distinguishing it from other “families”—our expectations are assiduously, if quietly undercut by our befuddlement in the face of the inadequate first name titles and our confrontation with our own lack of information about how to decode these authoritative scientific images. As we gaze at the triptychs, we are forced to concede that we do not possess the information that would allow us to infer the content of the relationships so plainly on display. In these triptychs, the phenotypic evidence of relatedness that we expect portraits to provide has been supplanted by abstract, color-coded graphics. Indeed, there is no obvious correlation between some invisible phenotype that presumably lurks outside the portrait’s

frame and the highly visible graphic color and form of each genetic fingerprint. The upshot is that we are forced to realize that any form of information about relatedness that we think we have discerned has, in fact, been imposed on these abstractions by our imaginations. Put more starkly still, *Garden* has the potential to make us conscious of the fact that when we are confronted with scientifically authoritative images that reveal nothing to the inexpert eye about kinship or race, our desire to read such images in terms of already existent scripts that link familiarity, genetics, and racial likeness is determinative. In fact, the desire is so strong that it is difficult not to read the color-coded familiarity of the triptychs as a sign of genetic and, by extension, racial relatedness.

If racial aura is implicitly animated by *Garden* through instigation of our desire to see evidence of relatedness among the members of color-coded “families,” it is explicitly integrated into the work through two central art historical precedents: the work’s namesake, Hieronymus Bosch’s fifteenth century triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, and eighteenth-century Spanish *casta*, or caste, paintings. Bosch’s famous work, which depicts the Antediluvian garden of Eden and the hell into which are tossed the pleasure seeking, sexually debauched, and oft times monstrously hybridized children that are the progeny of the wayward Eve, is not coincidentally housed in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Monglano-Ovalle’s childhood home.<sup>46</sup> The three panel paintings (the left panel depicts the Sixth Day and sin’s entry into the world, the middle panel depicts life in the garden of Eden, and the right panel hell<sup>47</sup>) clearly constitutes a formal precedent—it is after all a triptych bearing a similar name. But perhaps more importantly, it is a conceptual precedent that focuses, like *Garden*, on sexuality, reproduction, and the possibility of wayward mixture. As in Lee’s *Judgment* and Chalmer’s *Transgenic Mice*, Bosch’s mixtures are often across species. And, while the hybrid offspring whom Bosch depicts are infrequently racialized as other than white, acts of racial mixing can be found in the painting’s details: the bodies that sneak off into giant eggs, clam shells, and fruits to fornicate and pleasure themselves in the fabulous, seething, and sensuous middle panel of the painting are multiracial: white, African, and Semitic [See Figure 6]. Indeed, upon close inspection, Bosch’s world emerges as one populated by beings who transgress all manner of borders, including those among races and those between human and non-human animal, animal and mineral, and life and death. And, it is the strange bodily forms of these hybrid beings that embody and express their “wickedness,” the impress of their “unnatural begetting.”<sup>48</sup>



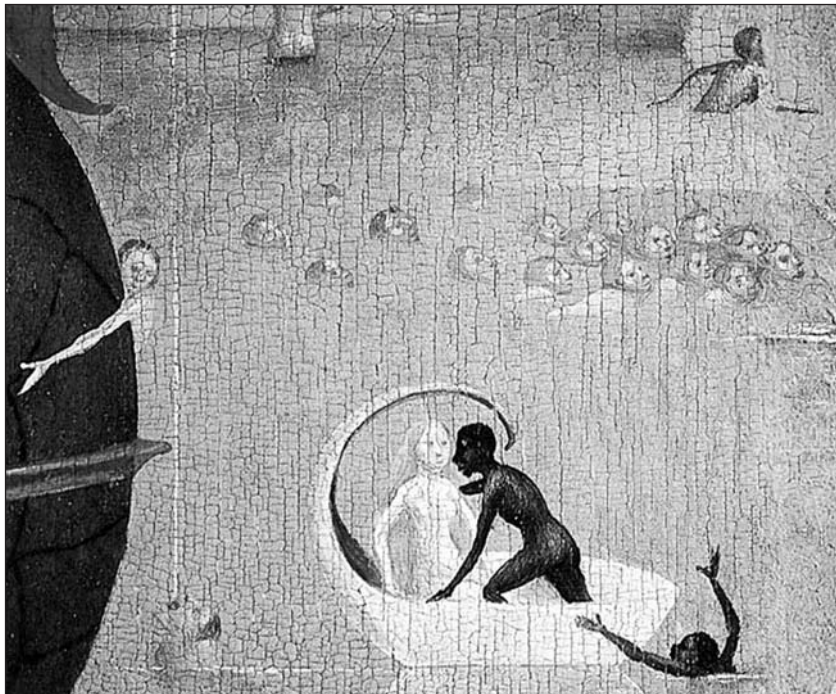


FIGURE 6. Detail of an interracial encounter from Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, middle panel.

If Manglano-Ovalle conjures the monstrosity of mixture with his references to Bosch, he underscores the racialization of such monstrosity through his invocation of *casta* paintings. While not triptychs in the conventional sense, *casta* paintings are composites of three portraits—mother, father, and progeny—that illustrate the results of racial mixing among Spanish, Africans, and Indians, the three principal groups who populated Spain's New World colonies [See Figure 7]. *Casta* paintings, which come in groups of sixteen (most often a series of separate images, though occasionally all sixteen portraits are compiled on a single canvas), obey rigid formal protocols: like each of Manglano-Ovalle's sixteen triptychs, each *casta* bears a title, in this case one that identifies, rather than conceals the racial mixture that is depicted ("Spanish and Indian produce Mestizo," "Spanish and Black produce Mulato," "Indian and Black produce Zambo," and so forth). The couplings that *casta* paintings portray are arranged in formalized, sequential order beginning with mixtures involving Spanish men and



FIGURE 7. A casta painting divided into sixteen portraits of interracial pairs and their progeny.

women of color, and concluding with mixtures that are the result of prior admixtures (“Mestizo and Mulato produce Castizo”). Notably, as progeny become more racially “distant” from the “pure” Spanish type, they are animalized and their socioeconomic status diminished. One title accompanying an image of poor peasants explains, “African and Native produce El Lobo,” another confirms, “Mestizo and Native produce La Coyote.” When the most dangerously wayward progeny are represented in casta painting, they are given fanciful names such as “tente en el aire” (hold-yourself-in-mid-air) and “no te entiendo” (I-don’t-understand-you), as if in the act of labeling hybrid beings it would be possible to produce the missing understanding of the mixed race

body, or perhaps to prevent those whose admixture was exceedingly complex from flying away (under cover of an unintelligible phenotype) and thus freeing themselves from the caste system altogether. As the foremost critic of *casta* paintings, Ilona Katzew, explains, these images produced by the Spanish for export back to the metropole were intended to taxonomize, organize, and in this way exert control over the inter-racial reproductive practices germane to the colonies. They were not meant to convey harmonious coexistence of races but rather to serve as a form of ideological population control—as a reassuring reminder to colonial subjects and the Spanish Crown that Mexico was a racially hierarchical society in which each group occupied an identifiable and thus controllable racial and socioeconomic niche.<sup>49</sup>

In Manglano-Ovalle's hands, Bosch's hybrids and the racially-mixed progeny depicted in *casta* paintings are redeemed. Individuals in his triptychs define themselves and create their "families" rather than being defined or created by them. "Mixture," if it can be said to exist, appears not as monstrous hybridity but rather as harmonious abstraction, as a pleasing blend of color and light, pattern and form. And yet, it is precisely the pleasure and superficial ease with which we view Manglano-Ovalle's triptychs that should give us pause. For once attuned to the relationship of their smooth surfaces to the ideologically charged *casta* paintings on which they comment, we are able to recognize that, although race is nowhere evident in the manifest content of these genetic images, racial aura haunts them, lurking below their glossy surfaces not only in our imaginations but also in their history, form, and message. In other words, although these triptychs convey identity as if it actually were post-racial, as if an individual's DNA fingerprint and racial identity *did not* coincide within the popular imagination, and, thus, as if the announcement of the triumph of the post-racial consensus *were not* in fact paradoxical, they also suggest that smooth, seamless post-racialism is deeply phantasmagoric—a flawed idea in any context burdened by histories of racial taxonomizing, containment, and control. Ultimately, the ideal of post-racialism is here revealed to be as unattainable as the antediluvian "Garden of Earthly Delights" to which we can no longer return or to which we can only return in our imaginations.

On quick inspection of Bosch's triptych it can seem as if all is well with the cavorting beings who populate the garden; on closer inspection it is clear, starting from the first panel depicting Eden as a place populated by three-headed salamanders and two-legged dogs, that something is deeply, darkly, amiss. Similarly, on the surface, we

gain a sense of order from Manglano-Ovalle's *Garden of Delights*. And yet, as his abandonment of "Earthly" in the title borrowed from Bosch indicates, there is something quite unearthly about the post-racial world that this updated *Garden* depicts. This biotechnological world—our world—is one in which individual identity has been reduced to color-coded DNA fingerprints, to marks that cover over and ultimately sever the viewer from critical consciousness of the complex manner in which we continue to geneticize race and racialize genetics through our direct practice of biotechnology or, at the very least, through our tacit participation in the post-racial consensus.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, genetic portraiture, while seemingly the most accurate of all forms of portraiture—the form that conveys to us what lies inside our bodies rather than on their surfaces—actually obscures from view the racial meanings and historically sedimented narratives that necessarily animate our imaginations and inform the choices that we make as we participate in a world in which biotechnological practices make DNA portraiture possible. And thus it is ultimately in and through the production of racial aura that Manglano-Ovalle's triptychs clear space for awareness of transformation of our mode of perception of race, of the existence of race as a spectral presence, and thus of the contradictory racial meanings that the new mode of biotechnological reproduction augurs.

Even as Benjamin foretold the decay of aura in the age of the artwork's mechanical reproducibility, he insisted that the same technologies that were being used to aestheticize politics and promote Fascism, might also have an apotropaic function—that is, they might enable the spectator to become critical of the transformation of perception that was underway.<sup>51</sup> We might also discern a desire for such a critical opening in Paul Gilroy's expressed hope that the DNA revolution might be set to work in dismantling rather than shoring up various forms of racial essentialism and eugenics. We can thus update Benjamin's formulation and adopt Gilroy's hope: the same technologies that are being used to aestheticize genetics and promote post-racialism, might also have an apotropaic function—that is, they might enable critical apprehension of racial aura and critical assessment of our supposedly post-racial moment. Put differently, the biotechnologies by which we are surrounded might enable realization of the racial aura that emanates from contemporary art as an anti-racist tool in an age in which biological race is said to no longer exist, but in which biotechnology continues to be routinely used to generate all too familiar racial meanings and racialized social structures. Indeed, using art to locate the racial aura that haunts contemporary culture may well constitute a first

move toward generating critical awareness of the transformation in the mode of perception that is now underway. For, although race may no longer be viewed as a biological, genetic reality, it is clear that if we dispense with race as a meaningful category of social identity and a tool of radical politics, we will have lost the opportunity to come to terms with the paradoxes that structure our practice of biotechnology in a biotechnological age necessarily laden by old racist scripts. In this sense, in the present and the foreseeable future, art can be a tool of anti-racist politics as long as it enables us to track racial aura's spectral presence and to vigilantly keep race in view, if not in the manifest content of the artwork itself.

## NOTES

1. Richard Lewontin is frequently cited as the first to present the case. As he argued, there is a statistically insignificant .02 percent difference in the genetic make-up of people of different races, while a larger percent difference can often be found among people of the same race. Lewontin's work was brought to the attention of humanists by philosopher Anthony Kwame Appiah in his influential article, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race." Numerous scientists and scientific popularizers advance what I am calling the post-racial consensus. See, among others, Cavalli-Sforza, *Genes, Peoples, and Languages*; Ridley, *Genome: The Autobiography of a Species in 23 Chapters*; Jones, *The Language of Genes: Solving the Mysteries of Our Genetic Past, Present and Future*; and Owens and King, "Genomic Views of Human History."

2. Paul Gilroy was among the first to characterize the current moment as "post-racial." Notably, the book in which he does so waffles between advocacy of what he dubs the new post-racial humanism and critique of the limits of an anti-racist politics that attempts to move us beyond racism by moving us beyond race. See Gilroy, *Against Race: Imaging Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Other pundits argue with far less ambivalence that the move beyond race will cure the reportedly divisive affirmation of difference resulting from affirmative action and/or multiculturalism. See, for example, Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*; Close, *Color-Blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World*; Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*; and Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*.

3. See Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s*. In placing colorblindness and post-racialism on a continuum I do not mean to obscure the historical specificity of these discourses, even as I suggest the way in which the latter emerges from the former as the consensus is consolidated: colorblindness, the term preferred by Omi and Winant, names the post-war consensus and is keyed to postwar liberalism and liberal humanism; post-racialism, a more pernicious form of colorblind reasoning that has been used to dismantle affirmative action and other race based forms of social justice is keyed to neo-liberalism.

4. See Angier, "Do Races Differ?"; and Bamshad and Olsen, "Does Race Exist?"

5. The false promise of this consumer product indexes the vexed work of the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP) which sought to use genomics to map

human diversity and origins but ran aground because of the project's inability to come up with a classification schema capable of grappling with the shifting meanings of "race" and "population" as these terms of description cross disciplinary domains within academia and cross between academia and the larger social field. See Reardon, *Race to the Finish: Identity and Governance in an Age of Genomics*; Wald, "Blood and Stories"; and Marks, "We're Going to Tell These People Who They Really Are."

6. See Harmon, "Blacks Pin Hope"; Harmon, "Seeking Ancestry"; and Harmon, "Who's Your Great-Great-Great-Great-Granddaddy?"

7. Duster, "Race and Reification in Science." For discussion of problems with race-based medicine see Wald, "Blood and Stories." For arguments for and against the use of "race" in medical research see Sankar, Cho, Condit, et al., "Genetic Research and Health Disparities"; Henig, "The Genome in Black and White"; Collins, "What We Do"; Kahn, "Getting Numbers Right"; and Risch, Burchard, Ziv, and Tang, "Categorization of Humans." Notably, the co-founders of the human genome sequence disagree: In Henig, "The Genome in Black and White," 50, Craig Venter, former president of Celera, the private company that competed with the National Human Genome Research Institute in sequencing the genome, argues that the map reveals the obsolescence of race as useful scientific category; Francis S. Collins, the head of the Institute, takes the opposing position.

8. Duster, "Race and Reification in Science." As Duster explains, scientists' insistence on use of race in the study of disease prevalence and treatment amounts to "misplaced concreteness," a deployment of racial categories as if they were "immutable in nature and society."

9. Kaiser, "African American Population Biobank Proposed," 1485.

10. Spar, *The Baby Business*, 1–2.

11. Franklin, "Postmodern Procreation," 338.

12. Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions*.

13. See Ordovery, *American Eugenics*; and Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*.

14. See Ragoné, *Surrogate Motherhood* and "Of Likeness and Difference."

15. Egan, "Wanted: A Few Good Sperm." As one white woman explains of her sperm selection: "I would probably choose somebody with a darker skin color so I don't have to slather sunblock on my kid all the time. I want it to be a healthy mix . . . Mutts are always the friendly ones, the intelligent ones, the ones who don't bark and have a good character." As an African American woman notes in explaining her selection, Latino sperm will enable her child to have "lighter skin and nonkinky hair.

16. See Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 251.

17. Grayson, "Mediating Intimacy."

18. Critical Art Ensemble, *Flesh Machine*, 122.

19. On curtailment of the potentially radical reconfigurations of race and kinship by ARTs see Cussins, "Producing Reproduction" and Franklin, *Embodied Progress*.

20. See Benjamin, "The Work of Art." Notably, Benjamin's newly translated and collected works (Harvard University Press) present several versions of this essay. Some Benjamin scholars, particularly Miriam Hansen, have argued for treating earlier versions in which Benjamin's focus on film is more sustained and his exploration of aura more open ended. Here I use the most oft read version in order to bring in the greatest number of readers, but note that my analysis of aura draws on Hansen's work with textual variants. See Hansen, "Room-for-Play."

21. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 220–221.

22. *Ibid*, 241.

23. *Ibid*, 242.

24. *Ibid*.

25. In this paper I limit myself to discussion of contemporary artistic production that is widely acknowledged as "art" by the art critical establishment. In the larger book project of which this essay is a part, I extend my discussion to popular

cultural production, including contemporary film and pulp fiction. See Weinbaum, *The New Biologic: Human Reproduction, Transnationalism, Cultural Critique*.

26. See Anker and Nelkin, *The Molecular Gaze*; Wilson, *Information Arts*; and Held, "Gene(sis)."

27. W. J. T. Mitchell returns to Benjamin to understand artistic production in a "biocybernetic" age. While I am sympathetic to the spirit of Mitchell's inquiry, his focus on biocybernetics forecloses treatment of the transformation in racial perception that concerns me here and tends to neglect Benjamin's primary concern: reproduction. See Mitchell, "The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction."

28. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 221.

29. See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

30. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 231.

31. *Ibid.*

32. As Benjamin notes, and as Benjamin scholars concur, aura needs to be understood as intimately related to the fetish character of the commodity. Aura is similar to the fetish in that it covers over the exploitation of labor and labor's social value, and is also that which must be critically interpreted in order for political consciousness of exploitation and collectivity to be gained. See Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*.

33. This clearing of space that accompanies the decay of aura is akin to what Miriam Hansen refers to as "room-for-play," or what Benjamin calls *Spiel-Raum*. See Hansen, "Room-for-Play," 6–16.

34. Gilroy, *Against Race*, 15.

35. *Ibid.*

36. See Madoff, "The Wonders of Genetics Breed a New Art"; Held, "Gene(sis)"; and Anker and Nelkin, *The Molecular Gaze*.

37. Quotation excerpted from promotional pamphlet for public programs related to the *Gene(sis)* exhibit. The Henry Gallery is housed on the University of Washington Campus.

38. Vanouse, "A Race about Race."

39. "Yu Gong Yi Shan" (Move the Mountain by Fool), a widely known proverb tells the story of a Foolish Old Man who believes it is possible to dig up two mountains that block his view, over the course of time, as he is certain that his sons and grandsons into infinity will take on the task that he has begun. Mao Zedong appropriates the proverb as a metaphor for the power of the Chinese people to move the twin mountains of imperialism and feudalism. Notably, when he produced "Family Tree," Zhang had already emigrated from China. In this sense the blacked out self that we find in these portraits also necessarily speaks to feelings of cultural exile. See Collins, "Zhang Huan." In an interview Zhang discusses the necessity of using his body in creating his art. See Qian Zhijian, "Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma 60–81. Thanks to James Tweedie for pointing me towards the provenance of this proverb.

40. <http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowWorkContent.asp?id=27&iParentID=18&mid=1> (accessed 28 July 2007).

41. An earlier version of this discussion of Lee and Chalmers previously appeared in Weinbaum, "Gene/alogies for a New Millennium."

42. Like Vanouse's "RVID," Lee's *Judgment* and Chalmers's *Transgenic Mice* were included in the *Gene(sis)* exhibit. This quote is from the curatorial plaque used on that occasion.

43. Lee's images also draw on literary and visual depictions of chimera, grafted varieties combining distinct parts in a single organism. Since the nineteenth century, chimera have been used to conjure fears of science run wild, as in H. G. Well's 1896 novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Notably, in the recent film, Well's monstrous creatures are visibly racialized. On chimeric and transgenic images in art see Anker

and Nelkin, *The Molecular Gaze*, 81–112. On the intrinsic racialization of the concept of hybridity and its connection to miscegenation see Young, *Colonial Desire*.

44. Platt, *Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle*.

45. Pollack, "The Genetic Esthetic"; Dougherty, "Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle"; and Platt, 18.

46. Platt, *Manglano-Ovalle*, 22.

47. When the two side panels are closed, a fourth image takes form, that of the Third Day of Creation. Done in grisaille, this image depicts the earth, shrouded in mist, burgeoning forth as the waters recede. For present purposes I restrict myself to the painting's three main panels.

48. Beagle, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 39.

49. Katzew, "Casta Painting"; and Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth Century Mexico*. Also see, Klor de Alva, "Mestizaje from New Spain to Aztlan."

50. Here my argument counters that proposed by Platt and Anker and Nelkin—critics who interpret "Garden" as a celebration of post-racialism, rather than as a critique of its false promises. See Platt, 18, and Anker and Nelkin, *The Molecular Gaze*, 33.

51. See "Room-for-play," 7.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Angier, Natalie. "Do Races Differ? Not Really Genes Show." *The New York Times*, 22 Aug. 2000, F1–F5.
- Anker, Suzanne and Dorothy Nelkin. *The Molecular Gaze: Art in the Genetic Age*. Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2004.
- Appiah, Anthony Kwame. "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race." In "Race," *Writing and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., 21–37. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Bamshad, Michael J. and Steve E. Olsen. "Does Race Exist." *Scientific American* 289, no. 6 (December 2003): 78–85.
- Beagle, Peter S. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. New York: The Viking Press, 1982.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, 217–251. New York: Schocken Book, 1968.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.
- Cavalli-Sforza, Luigi Luca. *Genes, Peoples, and Languages*. New York: North Point Press, 2000.
- Close, Ellis. *Color-Blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World*. New York: Harper Collins, 1997.
- Collins, Francis S. "What We Do and Don't Know about 'Race,' 'Ethnicity,' Genetics and Health at the Dawn of the Genome Era." *Nature Genetics Supplement* 36, no. 11 (November 2004): S13–15.
- Collins, Thom. "Zang Huan." <http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowText.asp?id=17&sClassID=1> (accessed 28 July 2007).
- Critical Art Ensemble. *Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies, and New Eugenic Consciousness*. New York: Autonomedia, 1998.
- Cussins, Charis. "Producing Reproduction: Techniques of Normalization and Naturalization in Infertility Clinics." In *Reproducing Reproduction: Kinship, Power and Technological Innovation*, edited by Sarah Franklin and Helena Ragoné, 66–101. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.



- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, translated and introduction by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 141–64. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Dougherty, Linda Johnson. "Íñigo Manglano-Ovalle: Southeastern Century for Contemporary Art (SECCA)." *Sculpture* 18, no. 2 (March 1999), 66.
- Duster, Troy. "Race and Reification in Science." *Science* 307 (18 February 2005): 1050–1051.
- Egan, Jennifer. "Wanted: A Few Good Sperm." *The New York Times Magazine*, 19 March 2006, 48.
- Franklin, Sarah. *Embodied Progress: A Cultural Account of Assisted Conception*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997.
- . "Postmodern Procreation: A Cultural Account of Assisted Reproduction." In *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*, edited by Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, 323–345. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race: Imaging Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Grayson, Deborah R. "Mediating Intimacy: Black Surrogate Mothers and the Law." *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 525–46.
- Hansen, Miriam. "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema." *October* 109 (Summer 2004): 3–45.
- Harmon, Amy. "Blacks Pin Hope on DNA to Fill Slavery's Gaps in Family Trees." *The New York Times*, 25 July 2005, A1
- . "Seeking Ancestry, and Privilege in DNA Ties Uncovered by Tests." *The New York Times*, 12 April 2006, A1.
- . "Who's Your Great-Great-Great-Great-Granddaddy?" *The New York Times*, 11 June 2006, A1.
- Held, Robin. "Gene(sis): Contemporary Art Explores Human Genomics." In *Data Made Flesh: Embodying Information*, edited by Robert Mitchell and Phillip Thurtle, 263–278. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Henig, Robin Marantz. "The Genome in Black and White (and Gray)." *The New York Times Magazine*, 10 Oct. 2004, 47–51.
- Hollinger, David A. *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.
- Jones, Steve. *The Language of Genes: Solving the Mysteries of Our Genetic Past, Present and Future*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1994.
- Kahn, Jonathan. "Getting Numbers Right: Statistical Mischief and Racial Profiling in Heart Failure Research." *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 46, no. 4 (2003): 473–83.
- Kaiser, Joceyl. "African American Population Biobank Proposed." *Science* 300.5625 (June 6, 2003): 1485.
- Katzew, Ilona. *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth Century Mexico*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
- . "Casta Painting: Identity and Social Stratification in Colonial Mexico." In *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America*, 8–29. New York: Americas Society Art Gallery, 1996.
- Kevles, Daniel. *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Klor de Alva, J. Jorge. "Mestizaje from New Spain to Aztlan: On the Control and Classification of Collective Identities." In *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America*, 58–72.
- Madoff, Steven Henry. "The Wonders of Genetics Breed a New Art." *The New York Times*, 26 May 2002, 2–1 and 30.
- Marks, Jonathan. "'We're Going to Tell These People Who They Really Are': Science and Relatedness." In *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies* edited by

- Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, 355–83. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. "The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction." *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 3 (2003): 481–500.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge, 1986.
- Ordover, Nancy. *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Owens, Kelly and Mary Claire King. "Genomic Views of Human History." *Science* 286 (October 1999): 451–453.
- Platt, Ronn (curator). *Itiño Manglano-Ovalle: The Garden of Delights: Artist and the Community*. Winston-Salem, MA: Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 1998.
- Pollack, Barbara. "Chromosomes and the Sublime." *ARTnews* 99 no. 11 (December 2000): 132–135.
- . "The Genetic Esthetic." *ARTnews* 99, no. 4 (April 2000), 137.
- Ragoné, Heléna. "Of Likeness and Difference: How Race is Being Transfigured by Gestational Surrogacy." In *Ideologies and Technologies of Motherhood: Race, Class, Sexuality, Nationalism*, edited by Heléna Ragoné and France Winddance Twine, 56–75. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- . *Surrogate Motherhood: Conception in the Heart*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994.
- Reardon, Jenny. *Race to the Finish: Identity and Governance in an Age of Genomics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Ridley, Matt. *Genome: The Autobiography of a Species in 23 Chapters*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999.
- Risch, Neil, Estaban Burchard, Elad Ziv, and Hua Tang, "Categorization of Humans in Biomedical Research: Genes, Race and Disease." *Genome Biology* 3, no. 7 (July 2002): 1–12.
- Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Pantheon, 1997.
- Sankar, Pamela, Mildred K. Cho, Celeste Condit, et al. "Genetic Research and Health Disparities." *JAMA* 291–324, no. 23/30 (June 2004): 2985–2989.
- Smith, Rogers. *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Spar, Debora L. *The Baby Business: How Money, Science, and Politics Drive the Commerce of Conception*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2006.
- Vanouse, Paul. "A Race about Race: Inter-race and post-race in the study of human genetics." *Afterimage* 30 no. 2 (September/October 2002): supp. 1–4.
- Wald, Priscilla. "Blood and Stories: How Genomics is Changing Race, Medicine, and Human History." *Patterns of Justice* 40, no. 4–5 (Nov. 2006): 303–333.
- Weinbaum, Alys Eve. "Gene/alogies for a New Millennium." In *Wayward Reproductions*, 234–39. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- . *The New Biologic: Human Reproduction, Transnationalism, Cultural Critique* (work in progress).
- . *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Wilson, Stephen. *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science, and Technology*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002.
- Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. New York: Routledge, 1995.