



Sensory experiments; Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of feeling,
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Marietta Kosma*

Book Review

*DPhil student,
University of Oxford, English
Department,
marietta.kosma@lmh.ox.ac.uk

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In *Sensory experiments; Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of feeling*, Erica Fretwell employs the science of psychophysics and its theorizations of sensation in order to shed light to the cultural landscape of affect in the United States during the nineteenth century. She touches upon the concerns of scholars of American literary studies in terms of affect and feeling and also with their entanglement with histories of racialization. Fretwell critically engages with the disciplines of post-humanism, aesthetics, affect theory and new materialism. She employs in her analysis different medical case studies, music, perfumes and recipes in order to highlight how our five senses turned into indispensable elements of pointing out human difference along the continuum of race, gender and ability. *Sensory experiments* consists of five chapters, each of which deals with one of our five senses and also by short intervals on the synthesis of different senses. The structuring of the narrative is innovative as different literary genres are employed to subvert the nineteenth century hierarchy of senses.

Fretwell demonstrates how psychophysics, an epistemology which derives from Germany, can be viewed as the locus in which feelings can be understood, eventually opening up the phenomenological terrain of lived experience. Psychophysics of the nineteenth century is largely included in contemporary theories of affect, more specifically in the US which tends to study affecting theory through the lens of sentiment. This is reasonable because psychophysics is the predominant ideology- epistemology in that era however due to this very dominance, sentiment has occluded other theories of feeling that took course in that era. A major question

posed by the psychophysical archive is what does affect look like apart from sentiment? What does sentiment look like when it sears away from sentimentality? Psychophysics is a science which lies on the border of physiology and philosophy and it is the science that gave ground to experimental psychology. It used laboratory methods to answer philosophical problems, isolating and measuring responses to stimuli further exploring the relation between matter and mind.

The idea that matter and mind are interrelated but not causally related needs to be further explored. In effect, consciousness is understood as interior but not mechanistic. This replaces god as a universal ordering principal and puts forward theories of organic unity with more scientific materialism. Fretwell suggests that the discipline of psychophysics deconstructs the idea of an existing a priori unity with a more robust scientific materialism. Psychophysics has a central role in the field of biopolitics as it is the means through which social difference becomes apparent. This has led to the racialization of aesthetics and more importantly it has opened up the possibility for an alternative way of existence.

Psychophysics registers the early perceptible transmissions between self and the world. The discipline subjects are offering new conventions or genres for navigating the experience of an acutely vertiginous social landscape. Sensory configurations of citizenship have led to the emergence of real tension between inner feeling and outer difference, subjective perception and population management and have pointed towards the crucial question of what synesthesia is. Fretwell perceives synesthesia as a subjective experience which is related to bio-political maturity. A recurring question throughout the narrative is ‘how does it feel to be a problem’? If that question is addressed sumptuously rather than idiomatically, the description of racial invasion has the sensation of shifting the ground of discipline from the corporeal to the individual. W.E.B. Du Bois’s theorization of double consciousness comes to the forefront at this point as it reflects this intricate connection among body and mind. He defines double consciousness as “a peculiar sensation [...] the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity. One feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (Du Bois 364). Du Bois’s conceptualization of double consciousness is intricately connected to psychophysics, the science of measuring the soul. Psychophysics laid the groundwork for narrating the inner life of external structures of power. We tend to focus on the fact that sense is always looking one’s self through the eyes of others. However, if one keeps moving his eyes to measuring one’s self by the tip of a white world something new comes into view; the need to challenge racial difference.

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One of the challenges that Fretwell faces in her book is defining the terms soul, spirit, consciousness, psyche which are used largely interchangeably in the twenty first century but have not been used interchangeably during the nineteenth century. There is a distinction between the mind as a physiological entity versus consciousness, a domain of feeling and experience. Psychophysics has this idealism that affirms the soul's autonomy but that autonomy arrives imminently; this autonomy is embedded to reality itself and the natural world. The propagation of such terms during the twenty-first century that closely resemble each other, reflects the struggle during the present as it is extremely difficult to determine the bounds of the body-mind relationship. According to the psychophysical vocabulary circulating during the nineteenth century, it is the soul that derives imminently through the body. Consciousness as a term is now empty, therefore one shall be extremely careful when it comes to its employment. Employing the term consciousness is an attempt to join scientific materialism to idealist models that prioritize a transcendent principle ordering the world as well as the idea that laws of nature can explain the mind but cannot fully explain the nature of consciousness. Psychophysics conduces to addressing the mind body conundrum, affirming the reality of racialization and of racial experience without it being reduced to its biological essence or to fiction. The body mind correlation is necessarily a reality representation, a correlation between fiction and reality. Fretwell points out that these experiences of fictions are embedded in a particular context therefore psychophysics is not a temporary vacuous thing as it has a constitutive force in people's lives. It has a durability that needs to be thought. For example, in the case of race, race has a durability that is attached to any kind of empirical reality and also for those who experience it which cannot be overlooked. In this case this refers to all modern subjects therefore it is something that is consequential, it exists irrespectively of whether it is empirically or morally correct.

Two key psychophysical concepts that Fretwell employs and need to be addressed are "perceptual sensitivity" and "psychophysical aesthesis". "Perceptual sensitivity" is an individual's capacity to perceive finer feelings and "psychophysical aesthesis", an aesthetic sensibility in order to register the affect of shock that registers the change in sensory intensity, its irresponsiveness to fine grained differences in the world. Through attention to slight gradations in sensory experiences that acquired significant social meaning, it is obvious that theory is relational. These concepts "perceptual sensitivity" and "psychophysical aesthesis" had been pulled in cultural discourses in which our sensory experience is material but also symbolic. Through tracking the migration of psychophysical theories and vocabularies in the United States, Fretwell exposes the gravitation of American authors of the nineteenth century in perceiving social order as increasingly biologized. Even when sensitivity became folded in racial projects, psychophysical models inculcate a form of interiority that is material but not strictly biological.

The senses come to articulating this experience of variation or difference where consciousness which is understood as embodied and yet animate comes to displace the nerves and the blood in terms of racial configurations. The senses are understood to mediate rather than mirror racial configurations, they start making historical moments legible to subjects' easily perceptible transactions. Through a cultural project called psychophysical aesthesis writers extended the psychophysical relation between mental life and material life to social life. Each sense becomes a feeling embodying conventions that mediate the affect of relation between self and the world.

Through her work, Fretwell prompts us to reconsider the epistemology of psychophysics in the context of racial capitalism. She disrupts the dominant assumption that sensation and emotion were synonymous during the nineteenth century. She situates herself in the wider spectrum of thinkers of race theory and scholars, who critically engage with psychophysics, affect theory and phenomenology. She goes on an exploration of how science and literature challenge racial boundaries. Fretwell's contribution is significant as she focuses on how psychophysics which has been neglected as a science and often problematized, is central in the way that affect, power and aesthetics are theorized. What is innovative about Fretwell's project is that she employs psychophysics to explain why and how feelings material yet ineffable came to acquire social meanings in the twenty-first century, in a way that they had not before.

Bibliography

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BIO

Marietta Kosma is a second year DPhil student in English at the University of Oxford at Lady Margaret Hall. Her academic background includes a master in English from JSU and a master in Ancient Greek Theater from the University of the Aegean. Her research interests lie in twentieth-century American literature, post colonialism and gender studies. Her research focuses on the construction of African American female identity in contemporary neo-slave narratives. She has participated in numerous conferences and has written in a wide variety of journals, newspapers, magazines and in an edited book collection. She is a peer-reviewer for numerous journals and an editor for the *Right for Education Oxford* and for the *Oxford Student*.