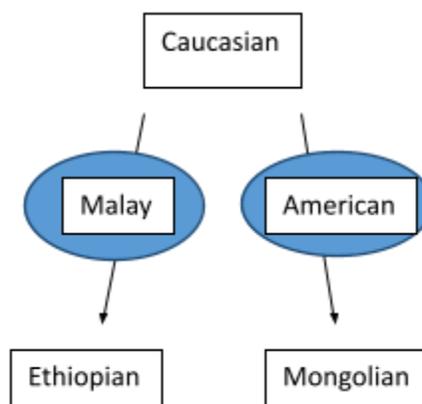


Johann Friedrich Blumenbach

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach was a prime German born physician of his time. Even today, he is still considerably influential and referenced in other philosophical works. Blumenbach had contributed to the ideologies of what was being explored as ‘race’, in the late 1700s and mid-1800s. Perhaps most notoriously, is his unique idea of anthropology and race. In Blumenbach’s influential essay, “On the Natural Variety of Mankind”. Blumenbach asserts 3 overarching concepts that generally summarize the groundwork of his essay. The first concept is that there are 5 variants of mankind. ‘Variant’ is a synonym in this text to the modern word, ‘race’. All of which, he argues, are derived from one species. That is, the ‘Caucasian’ variant. Blumenbach considers this the first variety. Eventually, this leads into a split of two polar opposite races to the ‘Caucasian’ variety. The ‘Ethiopian’ and the ‘Mongolian’. In between Caucasian and Ethiopian is the race ‘Malay’. In between the Caucasian and the Mongolian sits the ‘American’. This can be more visibly defined in the diagram below.



The second concept is the location of the ‘varieties’ geographically. In order to clearly understand what regions of the world Blumenbach is categorizing these varieties to. It is

necessary to first describe where these varieties are located. ‘Caucasians’ according to Blumenbach, were anyone who was from Europe. As well as Northern Africa and Eastern Asia. The ‘Mongolian’ variety, was anyone from Asia. The ‘American’ variety, was anyone from America or, ‘The New world’. ‘Ethiopian’ was anyone from Africa. ‘Malay’ was referred to as anyone from the Pacific islands and the Philippines. Every varieties designated locations have specific exceptions. These which can be found in pages 28 - 29 in “*The Idea of Race*”, by editors Bernasconi and Lott. It is important to note the locations to which Blumenbach is referring to because he, at times. References that facial structures and pigment of skin ended up determined geographically. This he argues, through the expanded migration from Europe. This causal message is found throughout his essay, as one of the premises to his work. The third concept is that in his essay, Blumenbach splits his essay by the different types of variants. With this in mind, he critiques and compares all variants next to each other with the goal of showing how each variant differs in facial and bodily structures. Inclusive, providing the evidence for his readers and leaving it up to them to decide whether or not they agree with him (*The Idea of Race*, 29). This will eventually contribute in with Cornel West’s idea of the *Normative Gaze*. Specifically, the idea of classical aesthetics and cultural norms.

The Normative Gaze

Cornel West is a modern day American philosopher. He created a new founded idea on how the prevalence of the *Normative Gaze* contributed to the idea of white supremacy. West argues this in his essay, “*Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*”. Specifically, Chapter 2, “*A Genealogy of Modern Racism*”. To be clear, the broader consensus of what West means by the *Normative Gaze* is the following. Seeing “white” people so often, ends up

becoming the “normal” within a society. Evidently, this becomes a conscientious expectation on what everyone should look like because it becomes normal and glorified. This is broken up into three further complex parts. That the *Normative Gaze* is made up of:

1. Scientific method
 - a. Meaning, we subconsciously categorize anything into boxes and labels
2. Cartesian philosophy
 - a. The way the world actually is. In other words, what is real in the world.
3. Classical aesthetic and cultural norms
 - a. We place what we think is better than something else in a hierarchal prism.
Historically, appearances based on Greek statues.

Blumenbach’s essay coincides to the 3rd factor of West’s idea on the *Normative Gaze* as such, listed above.

The What and The Why

In this paragraph we will explore what and why Blumenbach’s aesthetic of the *Normative Gaze* further illustrates West’s ideology. Blumenbach from the very beginning of his essay asserted that the most beautiful variety to him were the ‘Caucasians’. A term --inspired by Mt. Caucasus-- which he invented himself due to the fact that this was a place in which, “produces the most beautiful race of men... the most beautiful form of the skull” (*The Idea of Race*, 31). This suggests that Blumenbach was looking at race through the looks of normal aesthetic. It should also be noted that, Blumenbach considered himself European. Which contributes to his confidence in saying this about his own variant. This adds to West’s ideology of the *Normative*

Gaze. Blumenbach backs this with the idea that he believes that the Caucasian verity is, “white in colour, which we may fairly assume to have been the primitive colour of mankind” (*The Idea of Race*, 31). Evidently, this contributes to the idea that the color ‘white’ is the normal aesthetic to him. Especially, if this ideology is being influenced by other people of so called ‘white’ decent. In addition to this, it’s important to also bring in the perspective of Stephen Jay Gould who wrote on Blumenbach’s aesthetic ideology as well. In his essay, “*The Geometry of Race*” Gould states the following, “Blumenbach radically changed the geometry of human order from a geographically based model without explicit ranking to a hierarchy of worth, oddly based upon perceived beauty, and fanning out in two directions from a Caucasian ideal”. Gould explicitly states that that Blumenbach’s theory was not so harshly based solely on a hierarchy of the variants. But rather, based on what was considered beautiful to him. This contributes to wests idea of the *Normative Gaze* in the sense of cultural norms. This is a never ending cycle with older philosophers. Meaning that, if one philosopher quotes on what is beautiful then the next will so on quote the same thing because this is “credible”. It’s what they looked up to and grew up believing to be normal. To further understand why “Caucasian” was the *Normative Gaze* for Blumenbach, we must look further back to the era in which he lived in. Gould states the following, “Blumenbach lived in an age when ideas of progress, and the cultural superiority of European ways, dominated political and social life” (*The Geometry of Race*, 67). This makes complete sense. If you’re being constantly exposed to a certain ideology you end up growing with. It ultimately becomes hard to change. For instance, in the Middle East today, there is constant propaganda demonizing the US as a consistent oppressor. As a result, some children ended up believing some of the rumors about the US and joining ISIS. Why? Because this is what they were consistently exposed to. A single narrative of what a country is like. Thus, this

further explains a similarity in that of which, why Blumenbach was inclined to believe that only the Caucasian variety was the most beautiful.

The How

In order to further understand how Blumenbach develops his essay on aesthetic norms, we will look at the way he continues to base his argument. As I have stated above in the Johann Friedrich Blumenbach paragraph, Blumenbach re-asserts his ideology to the fact that all these variants were once deprived from the Caucasian decent. As *The Geometry of Race* and Blumenbach's essay both quote, "Besides, it is white in color, which we may fairly assume to have been the primitive color of mankind, since... it is very easy for that to degenerate into brown, but very much more difficult for dark to become white." This is indicative of three things. The first that in order for his essay to work, Blumenbach must make an assertion that the Caucasian variety in some way needs to be on top of the others. The second is that, he does this by qualitative observations based off what others have previously said about these different varieties. Lastly, this further supports West's ideology of what he means to by aesthetics. In West's ideology of the *Normative Gaze*, he describes that "The principal aim of natural history is to observe, compare, measure, and order animals and human bodies based on visible, especially physical, characteristics" (55). This further supports the idea that Blumenbach's critiques about the varieties based on image are concrete to West's ideology of the *Normative Gaze*.

Colorism not Racism

I used to think these two words meant the same thing. To be quite frank, I didn't actually know that the term colorism even existed until I went into my first philosophy class at PLU. I just thought it was the equivalent to 'whitewashing' or someone 'being a racist' towards people of

darker skin tones. Colorism, as described by Franchesca Ramsey, is actually, “not synonymous with racism, it’s a form of discrimination based on skin color”. Although I’ve never been personally victimized by my medium complexion, I’ve always known that the lighter your skin tone is, the better. Even so in the Latin American community. It wasn’t until I started really paying attention to all the actresses and actors in Mexican telenovelas, (equivalent to American TV-dramas) that it really stuck through me. They all appeared to be of light skin tones and rich. If they were tannish like me, they just had to play the role of a lower class ‘rat’. Even the black women from panama was portrayed as the ‘nana’ taking care of the family and was often named “Negra” without thought. Just google search images for, “telenovelas mexicanas” yourself and you’ll see what I’m so astonished and at the same time sadly embarrassed about. To admit to say that even we, as people of color, don’t discriminate against each other would be hypocritical. Just the other day actually, many Latin American celebrities in and around Hollywood dragged an indigenous woman. For being nominated in the 2019 Oscars as, the first indigenous woman for the category of ‘best female actress’ for her role in the movie ‘Roma’. It should be known that this was Yalitza Aparicios first movie ever, she was an elementary teacher prior to this amazing accomplishment at her tiny home in the state of Oaxaca Mexico. Many were incredulously outraged at the fact that she had had no prior experience in acting, something of which took years and money to even subtly accomplish the limelight. So what did they do exactly when they found out? They took their rants to social media outlets and poured out their disgust on how Hollywood would even permit someone “like her” in the Oscars. Classically, they attacked her on her “dark” skin tone and how her face was “wide” and “ugly”. My mother had once told me about how her own grandparents from her mom’s side didn’t want her around because she wasn’t light enough. Not like them. They’d tell her to shew away to her dads “Moreno” side. Sound

familiar? Colorism is something that Blumenbach had been referring to throughout his entire essay and how only one color must prevail above all others aesthetically, not so much as cognitive. Blumenbach washes into West's much hard worked ideology of the *Normative gaze* was as well as in reverse. I don't think Blumenbach's and West's ideology on the *Normative Gaze* will ever disappear. It's impenetrable and it's here to stay. At least, until the day the media and old folks stop glorifying one single shade. When that day comes, I'm afraid, I'll probably be long gone.