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Erica Fretwell

SENSORY
EXPERIMENTS:
PSYCHOPHYSICS,
RACE, AND THE
AESTHETICS OF
FEELING

Duke University Press, 2020.

In March 2020, many US cities mandated “shelter in place” orders, or more colloquially, the “lockdown” began. In attempts to quell the surge of COVID-19 infections, restrictions minimized human contact and movement. Daily activity suddenly shifted to a standstill; a sudden reduction of sensorial stimuli led humanity into stark reality. In our previous social standards of saturated inputs and constant motion, being present to our five senses was alarming for much of society. We were

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reminded of the human condition and one's bodily experience of being without distraction. It felt foreign and uncomfortable. A 2022 Netherlands research study spoke directly to this by examining how sensory processing, defined as the "receiving, modulating, integrating and organizing sensory stimuli, and the behavioral response to these stimuli," had been exacerbated by burnout during the first few months of the COVID-19 crisis.² The results noted that the psychopathology of stress and burnout could be co-factors in the difficulty of sensory operations. There is much irony in that the coronavirus has proven to dull taste, smell, and cognitive processes leaving *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling* placed at the intersection of multiple timelines that reasserts an appreciation of the once taken for granted human sensory registers.

The study of psychophysics was established by E. H. Weber, Gustav Fechner, and Hermann von Helmholtz in the late 1800s. Similar to and a precursor of experimental psychology, the field is defined most clinically as "an experimental science that tested people's subjective responses to auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactile, and visual stimulation."³ When distilled into this sentence, the potency of it as an analytical lens is still not apparent. Erica Fretwell's study of the displaced scientific discipline of psychophysics returns the reader to the 19th century—a time in which the body, mind, and sentiment/emotional presence were studied simultaneously. Paradigmatically, this crossing of both the material and mental phenomena could never be broached again as the binary frame of "proper" science versus philosophy and/or social sciences has successively been solidified. This abandoned trans-discipline was a relic of an inexact pseudoscience relying on abstraction. Knowledge has since been concretized into limiting categories that left wholesale the entirety of psychophysical work. Fretwell contemporizes the theories and pushes the discipline further by asking, what if one could consistently apply a framework that resists essentialist and biological treatments of race and gender while valuing that the sensory perceptions gathered at the time amplify the constructive nature of these categories? In other words, the book uses a forgotten discipline, contemporizes its applications through close readings of period cultural texts to explore humanity in the most human way—an imperfect and hopeful form re-centring subjects that come into being through othering and belonging. Psychophysics, in its experiments, was incomplete in that its presentation of data by all accounts relied on measuring symbolic data with artful yet boundaryless applications. As Fretwell explains, "psychophysics straddled empiricism and metaphysics, it wagered that science could still be a philosophy."⁴ Thus, the experiments were exercises in imagining what could be inferred about being a (white male) human and therefore qualifying what is less

² Frank van den Boogert, et al., "Sensory Processing, Perceived Stress and Burnout Symptoms in a Working Population during the COVID-19 Crisis," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 4 (2022): 2043, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19042043>.

³ Fretwell, 116 (Kindle).

⁴ Fretwell, 204 (Kindle).

human (melanated and/or woman) from these sense measurements.

In Erica Fretwell's monograph, she places multiple cultural texts, from spirit photography, sensory musical instruments, perfumes, feminist classics, science fiction, recipe books, autobiographies, and more, in conversation with psychophysical concepts. It is a very ambitious undertaking of multiple layers of textual analysis placed alongside lost science that catalyses the production of potentially generative knowledge regarding social construction. Fretwell describes this layered theory as "a fundamentally creative endeavour that orients body-subjects to each other in ways that may reflect but might also refract dominant social formations."⁵ The book is a journey through the five senses: sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. In each chapter, subject formation is approached via a deeply complex textural analysis that leads one to understand the way different bodies are situated and hierarchized by race and gender. It is a curious process by which Fretwell argues towards investigative and troubling questions about the invisibility of blackness and/or gendered difference. This is by far one its strengths: a consistently intersectional investigation that both addresses the problematics of the body politic and a questioning of the psychophysical optics centred on white body experience. These profoundly intersectional treatments are the rule not the exception as she makes convincing readings of blackness as a phantom limb, sweetness as a determinant of race, and reviewing Helen Keller and W. E. B. Dubois's writings as forms of agency enabled by haptic vision. Furthermore, the author values the important difference between affect, emotion, and sentiment that psychosocial treatments often conflate or obscure. But is it successful and does it convince the reader that psychophysics can add to discussions of racialized bodies today?

In the same way that psychophysics operates as a hopeful reading of aesthetics, so do the assembly of scientific literature with literary theory and skilful applications of feminist and queer lenses. By no means is it a simple process, often the arguments are so layered in complexity that the object of study becomes lost only to be recovered by the end of the chapter. It is not an easy read; the work itself is suitably and necessarily complicated causing the reader to question the time and place of the subject. Through this entangled and multi-layered project, one could suitably perceive the book as "good trouble," a term US civil rights activist John Lewis referred to when speaking to the necessity of paradigmatic change that in the process refuses sacrificing or tapering one's ideas to ultimately shift social justice.⁶ Thus, work like Fretwell's, does not compromise in its often intricate and binocular readings of human positioning and subjectivity.

The work of *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling*, while being a treatise on the 19th century exploration, succeeds in its mission to resituate dominant narratives through an ontological study of sense experiences that is very relevant today. The afterword, cleverly named "Coda: Afterlives and

⁵ Fretwell, 124 (Kindle).

⁶ *John Lewis: Good Trouble*, directed by Dawn Porter (2020; New York and Los Angeles: Magnolia Pictures and Participant Media, 2020), DVD.

Antelives of Feeling” brings up questions useful to the 2022 discussions about abortion rights and foetal viability. Fretwell argues the foetus is not a distinct and unquestionable scientific fact but rather can be examined through meaning-making processes. The ultrasound is evidence only in that such seeing technology qualifies the image as a sign of human life. Accordingly, a culture is required that then agrees to the machine reading. What is produced is this body-like image that dreams that human life can exist prior to construction of skin and other requisite human structures. As Fretwell explains, “[i]t therefore instantiates the fantasy that human life can precede race, can precede flesh. It is a nonvisual representation of a naked body, a ‘bare’ life, but its unsettled semiotic excess and iconic force demonstrate that the human itself is the flesh that it wears—or rather, what we dress it up as.”⁷ As the US returns to legislating and restricting women’s right to make choices about one’s own body functions, psychophysics provides a promising study into the recognition of signs of human life and whether American society can differentiate the symbolic and material in this contentious debate. One can only hope that the complex theories are not disregarded and are seen as fruitful in the future of human care practices. □

⁷ Fretwell, 4762 (Kindle).