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On Why I Keep Getting [Socially] Interrupted by White People

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I read *Look, a White!* in various coffee shops and libraries throughout Los Angeles, California, and Buffalo, New York. Never has a book in my hand attracted so much attention. Written across the light blue cover the word “White” stands out in large print and rests above an index finger pointed upward. This somehow manages to antagonize passersby while simultaneously creating a sense of what can only be called “entitled curiosity.” On several occasions, I was interrupted by strangers who glanced at the cover of the book and could not resist asking questions or making comments: “What are *you* reading?” “What is *that* book about?” “Wow, that *seems* like an interesting topic...” and, eventually, “*Who* wrote that book?” Most appeared shocked and, to be quite honest, suspicious that I was reading about whiteness, maybe because I am Latino. They were even more surprised that the book’s author is African American. “I don’t see what a Black man can know about whiteness” summarizes most of the responses.

Soon after I finished the text I realized that this is exactly what George Yancy wants. *Look, a White!* challenges readers to “nominalize” the various ways whiteness permeates their life and our society: “Nomination brings attention to, discloses, renders ethically problematic, a network of iterative power relations, normative assumptions, and calcified modes of being that are created and defined by whiteness” (23). In this sense, the suspicion I perceived might not have anything to do with my identity but the fact that whiteness is being discussed openly and honestly throughout an entire text, especially one written by a Black man.

Nominalizing whiteness is crucial to combating the evolving, dynamic nature of racism. In today’s “progressive” era, people are often comfortable talking about race when it pertains to the ways in which minorities are negatively impacted and socially determined by unjust socioeconomic and political forces. Yancy’s text, however, “flips the script” and, in doing so, shows how nuanced his argument is. *Look, A White!* nominalizes whiteness by highlighting the ways in which race *positively* impacts those who tend to think of themselves as race-less, namely, whites. The positive impact that race has on the lives of white people comes at the expense of those who are denied social goods and various forms of recognition, namely, racialized minorities. Anti-Black racism is thus “socially axiomatic” in social spaces where whiteness is taken for granted and constitutes the norm (19). This is what Naomi Zack labeled “whiteness-as-antiblack-racism” (x).

Yancy’s text demonstrates how racism always accompanies whiteness, regardless of whether white people *intend* on being racist. A common response to the charge of racism is that one cannot be racist since there are no races. This sentiment appeals to the non-reality of race in order to abate the detection of racism. Here, discussions pertaining to the ontological status of race often serve as a red herring to exploring the lived significance of racism. Yancy subverts this maneuver by “bracketing”¹ or suspending questions pertaining to the ontological status of race, i.e., the nonreferential status of the concept (17). This bracketing allows for reflection upon mundane social interactions and embodied social phenomena, those very places that so many people think of as race-less, often because they do not intend any harm or because whiteness constitutes the norm (which is why the book is about naming

whiteness). Yancy writes, “My point is twofold. First, to restrict the problem of race to conceptual analysis full stop is too limiting. Second, an exploration of race as lived takes one beyond what is thought about in the abstract to the level of how race is meaningfully lived as an embodied and messy phenomenon” (19).

This book, however, is not just about identifying whiteness in its various manifestations. Much like in *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (2008), Yancy argues that anti-Black racism reveals more about white identity than the actual nature of Black people. Whiteness implies structures of domination, institutional and classical forms of racism, and asymmetrical social relations that hinder human subjectivity-formation for both whites and Blacks (not to mention “others”). The insidious nature of whiteness is the way it obscures these structures of domination and perverse social relations, thus eliding social critique and political rectification.

For the author, the sinister description “Look, a Negro!” should read: “Look, a projection of white fears, insecurity and hate, but something desperately needed for white identity (a.k.a. a ‘Negro!’)” Yancy tells the reader,

At the heart of whiteness is a profound disavowal: “*I am not that!*” In other words, whiteness is secured through marking what it is not. Yet what it (whiteness) is not (blackness in this case) is a false construction that whites themselves have created to sustain their false sense of themselves as ontologically superior. However, it is a form of superiority that involves the subordination of their freedom. (20)

Predicated on the *via negativa* (that which it is not), whiteness requires anti-whiteness as a constituting facet of white identity. More specifically, whiteness needs Blackness for its existence.² “Whiteness gains its ontological purchase,” Yancy explains, “through the construction and degradation of nonwhiteness. Thus, to ‘authenticate’ their whiteness, they [whites] must enact a form of white solipsism whereby the nonwhite is erased and devalued, reduced to a form of nonbeing” (116-117). The “solipsistic” dimension of this problem—which I return to below—becomes visible when one realizes that “Blackness” is a construct of white lies about the Black body.

Disabusing the lies that are told about the Black body is perhaps the work of those thinkers concerned with the ontological status of race, which begs the question as to whether one can completely separate abstract discussions from the lived-density project. Put differently, the *experience* of racism is so severe that it is almost impossible to completely place the nonreferential status of “race” on hold. As Yancy explains, “In a form of sociality that is fundamentally structured by race and racism, black people . . . undergo ontological truncating traumatic experiences in the face of white others who refuse to recognize their humanity. In short, blacks are reduced to their epidermis, and so the experience of black people vis-à-vis race/racism presupposes the existence of white others” (19). Is the racialized Black body, that which is “truncated” and marked as inferior, necessary for racist sentiment? If so, racists need to denigrate the Black body in order to bolster their racism. Racism thus attempts to render people objects, it permeates the ontological status of Black people. My question, then, is whether or not the lived-density of “race,” that which is explored using the phenomenological analysis, always reverts back to its referential status?

If a positive formulation of whiteness is possible, one that does not depend upon the suppression, domination, and misrecognition of Otherness, then it remains to be seen. While the average white person walking down the street may

not be the progenitor of this perverse social dependency, they are implicated in racism in several ways. Just how they are implicated is the main question that follows.

Yancy pushes the reader to rethink both the explicit and implicit forms of racism/whiteness perpetuated by our existence in this racist world. Racism, in this view, is like original sin within the Christian tradition.³ It is a sin imposed upon us by the actions of those who came before. Even though we may not have bitten any apple, all are held accountable on the basis of simply being born of flesh. Unlike original sin, however, no baptism shall cleanse one of whiteness and the racism that comes along with it. Rather than be dismissive or overly compensatory, Yancy asks white people to *dwell* on their whiteness, to give thought to a topic where usually there is none.⁴ To dwell on whiteness is not to dismiss the question of racism in light of one’s lack of racist intent or appeals to meritocracy. Similarly, quietism in response to the inability to shed one’s self of racism cannot be an option. Wrestling with the fact that one may never be capable of ridding herself of racism or, for that matter, whiteness, and seeing this as a “problem” is what Yancy desires. This is no easy task and there may be no way of saving oneself from whiteness, nor is it Yancy’s job to provide hope that something like that is possible (174-175).

Through the use of the phenomenological tradition and recognition theories of human subjectivity-formation, white people are offered the opportunity to gain a critical consciousness that reveals how white identity is indebted to racism and racialized Others. For Yancy, human identity does not form in a vacuum, nor are we the atomistic, unencumbered self of much of modern thought. Instead, humans are social beings, and our social nature has a determinant effect on our agency. We are born into a world we did not create, we come to terms with ourselves in languages that we did not found, and we inherit social positions that are not of our doing.⁵ Human agency may still exist in varying degrees depending upon an assortment of factors (i.e., class, gender, nationality, one’s relationship to white privilege), but we are not free to define ourselves from nothing. How we recognize ourselves, are recognized by others, and the continuity or discontinuity stemming from these interactions is crucial to Yancy’s critique of whiteness.

More important, as the chapter on pedagogy suggests, is the understanding of the self as a work in progress transformed and shaped through intersubjective social situations that often force growth through discomfort. “Philosophy is not about technocratic control in my classrooms but about practices of dialogical mutual freedom, dialogical reciprocity, and forms of communicative emancipation that are not afraid to walk the edge of danger to concede that one was mistaken—indeed blatantly so” (133). Whiteness distorts, obviates, and even mutes the unfolding of the self, both in the classroom and in everyday social interactions. While whites and Blacks are impacted by this stultification, the former do not realize the extent of the limitations and in fact benefit by not knowing this.

Whiteness requires a non-dialectic, sometimes called an epistemic monologue or what Enrique Dussel calls an “anti-dialogue.”⁶ Whiteness does this through the projection and imposition of white ideas about what African Americans are like or supposed to be, what Yancy calls “white solipsism.” White solipsism occurs when whites expect African Americans to be nothing more than stereotypic imaginings of Blacks as criminals, welfare recipients, drug dealers, gang members, and the like. Yancy brilliantly describes this as “anterior guilt” (2). Reflecting on Frantz Fanon’s experience of being singled out by a young white boy as a “Negro,” Yancy writes:

Fanon has done nothing save be a Negro. Yet this is sufficient. The Negro has always already done

something by virtue of being a Negro. It is an anterior guilt that always haunts the Negro and his or her present and future actions. After all, that is what it means to be a Negro—to have done something wrong. The little white boy's utterance is felicitous against a backdrop of white lies and myths about the black body. (2)

Notice the use of "always already," a phrase employed at least twelve times throughout the text. Like the idea of "arriving already," which Yancy also relies upon to describe the feeling of being represented before having a chance to speak for one's self, "always already" does the work of explaining the way African Americans are *claimed* by white ideas about them.

The nature of time in the racist world becomes an interesting issue at this point, especially the "anteriority" or "claimed" nature of Black people. In white solipsism whites are seemingly the only people who temporally advance or develop, albeit through their own projections. Blacks remain caught in a vicious web of deceit about what they are supposed to be (past tense). One can easily see how this connects with the idea of an inferior, historicized Black body, as opposed to the modern white self of the future, the only being capable of making history and not just being a part of it.⁷ Rather than actually encounter and exchange with a Black person, which would allow an authentic dialogue to unfold, whites simply resort to expectations about African Americans. This is a form of idealism; one is not actually engaging with the real world or other people, but only ideas. Nonetheless, this is an idealism that is very real, as Trayvon Martin's murder reminds us. Being stuck in their own solipsistic world, whites limit their social and personal development. White identity formation is inchoate. Given the resentment and resistance Yancy receives from his students, one might think that most white people are comfortable in this half-baked state (which is why Yancy seeks to disrupt this continuity). White solipsism results in a suspension of human social development. It is the denial of humanity in the white self and the racialized other.

For African Americans who are forced to *live*, or at least have to contend with on a daily basis, white projections of fear, hate, and insecurity, being misrecognized does not allow them to fully blossom into human beings. Black subjectivity is also muted, stunted, hindered, and *handcuffed*. The operative modes of whiteness hold us back from realizing our common humanity. It is whiteness that is the problem, a form of laziness. One is too lazy to be human in the sense that one does not want to or has been conditioned to ignore other people. At what point this complacency or laziness becomes morally reprehensible is where the debate ensues.

"Fanon is clear," Yancy writes, "that the white boy, while not fully realizing the complex, historical, psychological, and phenomenological implications, has actually distorted his (Fanon's) body." He continues, "The white boy, though, is not a mere innocent proxy for whiteness. Rather, he is learning, at that very moment, the power of racial speech, the power of racial gesturing. He is learning how to think about and feel toward the so-called dark Other. He is undergoing white subject formation, a formation that is fundamentally linked to the object that he fears and dreads" (3). Notice that some culpability lies with the boy's actions (he "is not a mere innocent proxy"). However, as Yancy argues, the boy's racial practices are "learned effortlessly," which is to say that "the white boy's performance points to fundamental ways in which many white children are oriented, at the level of everyday practices, within the world, where their bodily orientations are unreflected expressions of the background lived orientations of whiteness, white ways of being, white modes of racial and racist practice" (3).

I point out the tension between the boy's culpability and the fact that his racism is learned effortlessly, imposed from outside. Many readers will object to this idea. The claim is that the child is heteronomous, socialized into his racist views. Yet this does not fit with Yancy's thoughts. He argues that the boy is not just the product of a "superimposed superstructural grid of racist ideology" (3). The boy's very comportment in a racist world constitutes a form of racism. It is now too late for the boy; he is doomed to be a racist. There may be varying degrees of racism, but no escape from its grips.

Look, A White! problematizes debates on the nature and ethics of racism, which, in Yancy's view, is something that exceeds questions of ill will, maliciousness, and hatred.⁸

Racism inhabits a shared social space where often times people do not *intend* on *being* racist, they just *are*. It is "etched" into their being (61). More specifically, however, the culpability lies in failing to recognize their whiteness (perhaps?). They are responsible for their ignorance or failure to know. This is a tough point that not many whites will accept. I can see some people being on board with the idea that they are culpable if they live in bad faith and acknowledge their privilege but do not care to do anything about it. Similarly, if whiteness does depend upon the domination of Otherness, that too will implicate the white boy in racist activity in a "noncontroversial" way (similar to how I am implicated in sweatshop labor by buying Nike). But where exactly does racist behavior become culpable in the case of Fanon's interaction with the boy? While it may be one thing to say that it is a messy situation, this is not an argument that will hold when holding people responsible for their actions.

Overall, Yancy's project is commendable, especially for its phenomenological analysis of race and racism. Let me give one more example that attempts to show how embedded racism is in our culture and why only the phenomenological analysis can reach the depths of this kind of prejudice. Yancy argues that the racist world we live in is a product of radical contingency; we do not have to inhabit a world of white privilege: "There is, however, no historical inevitability that necessitates the accrual of white hegemony and the power of the white gaze to position and subordinate nonwhites. White power and privilege are fundamentally contingent. The scopical hegemony of whiteness is grounded in structural, historical, and material processes of subjugation, dispossession and imperial invasion" (110). This is an important point to remember since people tend to view civil rights movements and progressive moments in history in a light that is only possible in the wake of racism. What I mean is that in order for many people to fully appreciate something like our first Black president, a history of colonization, slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, and other atrocious events is *required*. In other words, history tends to be viewed as teleological, and racism is rendered necessary for our current appreciation of the world as it is. If that is the case, what about the lives of those who died for the sake of our unique appreciation of Obama's accomplishment? When it comes to racism this deeply embedded, we must not brook any theodicies. Yancy will not let us.

Written in a prose that is inspiring, eloquent, and *alive* (just see his comments on speaking in clicks, p. 30), Yancy's text guides the reader through an assortment of chapters on the embedded nature of whiteness, drawing examples from post-colonial literature, popular culture, and film (an entire chapter on the movie *White Chicks!*). Along the way, the author initiates helpful discussions about the various pedagogical issues and academic dangers that come with asking people to think seriously about whiteness and racism in historically white universities. I highly recommend this text to philosophers interested in the nature of whiteness and the complex question of racism.

Endnotes

1. I am importing the term “bracketing.” Here, the Husserlian phenomenological roots of Yancy’s project become obvious.
2. In my forthcoming manuscript, *Thinking about Justice from “The Outside” of Nationality: Re-Examining the Legal and National Dimensions of Citizenship*, I argue that nationalism and legal constructions of citizenship operate in a similar fashion to Yancy’s views on whiteness. The ideas of “nation” and legal personhood have no meaning outside of their exclusive nature that denies membership or rights to those born outside the state.
3. Yancy first made a comparison between racism and original sin in “Elevators, Social Spaces and Racism” (*Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34 [2008]). He writes, “My dark body occludes the presumption of innocence. It is as if one’s Blackness is a congenital defect, one that burdens the body with tremendous inherited guilt. On this reading, one might say that Blackness functions metaphorically as original sin. There is not anything as such that a Black body needs to do in order to be found blameworthy” (847).
4. See Chapter 6, especially p. 157 (bottom paragraph).
5. This last point will set up the objection many of Yancy’s students level against him, namely, “I didn’t own slaves and we didn’t create the oppressive social position that African Americans inherit; therefore, I’m not implicated in anti-black racism.” Although these are not of our doing, one can be implicated in the maintenance of these social positions, which begs the question as to the nature of racism (I will return to this below).
6. See Enrique Dussel, *Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origin of Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity*, trans. George Ciccariello-Maher, www.enriquedussel.org (accessed April 5, 2010). Another idea that Dussel can offer Yancy is that of analectics (“ano” and “logos,” the reason from beyond). Dussel uses this idea to offer ways of getting past solipsistic monologues, especially those of modernity. Rather than attempt to find something of one’s self in the other (to render something the “same” and thus obviate the alterity), analectics is the reason from an-Other. It is the voice of the Other who speaks from a position of oppression (a necessary condition) and thus forces growth in the self.
7. White temporality depends upon that of blackness. Although this may be a semantic issue, I do not agree with the idea of “alterRenaissance” (see 87-93). In the chapter on colonial semiotics (chapter 3), the idea of alterRenaissance is introduced to explain how *contemporeneous* with the development of modern humanisms and the modern self is an alternative script about the inferiority of the colonized. In line with Latin American philosophers, I see modern humanisms as dependent upon the colonized. The colonized as inferior is a *constituent* factor, not a coterminous event. See Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Baber (New York: Continuum, 1995).
8. For a classic account of racism that hinges on intent and hatred, see J.L.A. Garcia’s “The Heart of Racism,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 27 (1996): 5-46. I often teach this essay in conjunction with chapters from Yancy’s *Black Bodies, White Gazes*. Garcia’s Kantian/Catholic views on racism make for good comparison with Yancy’s phenomenological perspective.