Thinking About Race, History, and Identity:An Interview with George Yancy

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Abstract

In this wide-ranging interview, Maria del Guadalupe Davidson interviews prominent philosopher George Yancy. Davidson explores Yancy's autobiographical roots and how he became deeply passionate about philosophy, African-American philosophy, questions of racial embodiment, and identity. Malcolm X and history are explored as entry points into questions regarding white myth-making and the racist iconography of the Black body. Yancy discusses his concept of the white gaze as a site of social and historical practice and hegemony. Within this context, Yancy pulls from his book *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, which is an important and unique philosophical text that engages questions of the body through the lens of critical philosophy of race, embodiment, and phenomenology. Yancy's book created an important and unique conceptual space for focusing African American philosophy on the reality of Black embodiment. This embodiment, for Yancy, functions as a site for doing theory, and raises important epistemological and social ontological questions. In short, Yancy places a conceptual premium on understanding Black lived experience under white power. Yancy also discusses the intersectional dynamics between race and gender and the protean character of Blackness. Davidson engages Yancy's work on whiteness and how he understands its structure. Yancy is among a very small group of Black philosophers who have made important contributions to African American philosophy, critical whiteness studies, and critical philosophy of race. More specifically, his work has been instrumental in engaging the meta-philosophical assumptions of philosophy through its structural whiteness

Maria Davidson: *Malcolm X once said that History is the most important of all disciplines. Do you agree that racism and other bigotries rely on ahistorical arguments that either vaguely or specifically conjure up biological myths, myths that are easily and quickly subverted by history?*

George Yancy: Yes. For Malcolm X, history was especially important in terms of gaining access to a past that demonstrated the humanity of Black people and their contributions to world history. I think that this understanding of history and its importance to Black people no doubt structured the ethos of the Nation of Islam, more generally. One might say, and I realize that Malcolm didn't say it this way, that his conception of history was anti-Hegelian vis-à-vis the history of Black people, especially Sub-Saharan African people. His de-

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ployment of history functioned to communicate to Black people living in Harlem and other Black inner-city enclaves that they are a proud people whose history is grounded in self-conscious reflection and civilizational complexity. I think that Malcolm saw the importance of using history critically on behalf of Black people as a corrective, a sort of epistemological corrective, to the multiple white racist myths formulated by European and Anglo-American thinkers. Indeed, there was an entire white supremacist world-view that had to be critiqued and rethought. So, in this sense, I do think that it is important to engage history as a tool to deconstruct myths. In this way, history can be used as a weapon.

Maria Davidson: *Yes, history can be used for all sorts of ends. That comes from the fact that no historian, no matter how thorough, can ever produce a "true history"–after all, one simply can't put down everything that happened within a particular time span to a particular people or individual, not to mention all that we do not yet know, or will never know. So given this, how would you narrate Malcolm's history-cum-epistemology? What is he emphasizing and what are the costs?*

George Yancy: It is important to note that the early Malcolm believed in a kind of mythopoetic world-view in the form of Yacub's history, which involved the story of an arrogant Black scientist who created white people. White people were believed to be a "demonic" race and were destined to rule the earth until Black people regained their ascendency. Of course, this is not to deny the sheer brutality and barbarity of white supremacy that Black people actually experienced or that Malcolm X (then Malcolm Little) and members of his family experienced. Given the actual history of white supremacy in North America, one can see how that history would have informed, and, indeed, have been used to support, the historical narrative of Yacub's history. By doing so, the central tenet of the historical narrative of Yacub's history, that is, that whites are a "demonic" race, would have been more plausible to Malcolm. In fact, one might argue that the hermeneutic framework of Yacub's history functioned as a site of Black self- empowerment. I wonder, though, whether this was a case of one myth replacing another. Then again, I would think that all grand historical narratives, to some extent, have embedded within them certain myths, where such myths function to provide people with a coherent and intelligible sense of who they are. Within this context, myths are not so much the opposite of historical facts, but play a constitutive role in collective self-understanding. Yet, I think that it is important to isolate, challenge, and overthrow those myths that are predicated upon the relegation of other human beings to the status of sub-humanity or that target others as somehow ontologically unfit to exist. What is interesting, though, is that as one view of history is deployed, and at times dogmatically, other ways of deploying history are concealed. So, Yacub's history would have valorized Black people and "demonized" whites. The cost of this version of history could function to create a certain historical myopia on the part of Malcolm. What we really want, it seems to me, is a fuller and richer narrative of history that avoids myopia and is capable of capturing the complexity of history.

Maria Davidson: *One can easily assert that all collectives define themselves—who they are—through an historical narrative: when and where they have been, and when and where they expect to go. As a result, it seems inevitable that there will be, as you put it, "myth-making."*

George Yancy: Racism**,** for example, thrives on myths. Within the North American context, Black people were deemed inferior, hyper-sexual, and bestial; they were said to be the wretched or the damned of the earth. One can think here of the Hamitic myth. It holds that Black people are descendants of Ham who apparently looked upon his father, Noah, while the latter was nude. Noah is said to have been in a drunken stupor. What Ham did exactly is somewhat unclear, but one interpretation is that it involved something "sexual." As a consequence, Noah is said to have cursed Ham's son, Canaan. Hence, as the descendants of Ham/Canaan, Black people have inherited the curse of being a "servant of servants." This narrative was used by white enslavers to support the enslavement of Black people, to "demonstrate" that Black people were born to serve others because of their "servile" and "docile" nature. In this way, their enslavement was buttressed through religious or Scriptural authority. So, here we have a case where a particular interpretation of biblical history is used to support Black moral degeneracy, and to do so through quasi-metaphysical assumptions. I say this because the Hamitic myth appears to allow for a kind of indirect divine sanction, that God somehow "allowed" the moral degeneracy of Black people to be passed on to Black people through Ham's son. This, of course,

raises the often racist logic of Manichean symbolic thinking, where Black people are the dark pole and white people constitute the diametrically white, and, thereby, "morally superior," pole. Within this context, Black people constitute the dark/evil pole of a narrative that has broad cosmological implications. Frantz Fanon also wrote about this racial and racist Manichean divide, how the Negro constitutes a phobogenic object through the white, colonial superimposition of an oppressive image of the Negro as "evil," as the very essence of "sin." One can also think here of Dr. Samuel Cartwright. He was the nineteenth century white thinker who believed that Black people possessed certain diseases that had certain character manifestations. For example, he held that Black people suffer from the Negro disease known as *drapetomania*, which was a kind of mania for running away. Hence, when Black people fled plantations this was explained through the assumption of a mythical disease. I think that *drapetomania* can be said to constitute a biological myth masquerading as a "biological fact," which attempted to undercut the idea that Black people fled plantations because they desired to be free.

What is important, though, is your point about the problematic and false character of such explanations/myths. The explanations were used to obfuscate the reality of choice on the part of white enslavers. If Black people have been cursed or if they suffer from "Negro diseases," are biologically inferior, bestial, etc., then how white people treat them is "justified" by a mythical discourse that provides, as it were, a transcendent or objective or natural reason to treat them as ersatz. In this way, white people attempt to elide their freedom through a myth that has the force of necessity. It is this same force of necessity that would establish North America as an essentially white *Herrenvolk* polity, one driven by manifest destiny. Yet, it isn't just the myths that oppress. Such an argument would reduce the forces of North American slavery to a species of philosophical idealism. It is important to keep in mind that it was the existence of white material power, physical brutality, and institutional frameworks through which those myths were enacted and enforced. I would argue that the myths and the material institutional forces of the enslavement of Black people are mutually implicative and interpenetrative. I would also argue that white racism is a site of disguise and historical obfuscation, which brings me back to Malcolm X. He thought that through a counter-historical narrative, and here it was also about getting one's facts right, not just about introducing one myth for another, Black people would be able to subvert the white racist order of things. For Malcolm, using history in the service of Black people was about Black liberation, freeing Black people from the chains of historical ignorance; it involved a process of psychological decolonization through education. You know, I don't think that this process of being properly informed about one's history is sufficient for Black liberation, though I do think that it is necessary. I recall that Fanon remarks in *Black Skin, White Masks* how delighted he would be to know that a Negro philosopher carried on some form of correspondence with Plato. Yet, Fanon proceeds to wonder exactly how this historical discovery would mitigate the suffering of Black children living under physical oppression. But I think that Malcolm has a point. The process of leading out of ignorance is indispensable for Black liberation. On my view, I think of this historical effort as a process of ideology exposure. In other words, ideology exposure attempts to unveil the ways in which whiteness functions as beyond history—as the transcendental norm. It is a process of demystifying whiteness. Of course, ideology exposure can also function to demythologize "Blackness." After all, we can't have only one version of "Blackness." There are deeper historical forces, forms of collectivity based upon collective narratives and productive myths that impact how people, on their specific historical trajectories, define Blackness. Temporality, movement, and migration impact one's point of entry into the question regarding the nature and meaning of Blackness.

Maria Davidson: *What first drew you to the field of philosophy? Did you find philosophy or did it find you? What do you see as the strengths and the weaknesses of this discipline's methodology and approach to discourses on race in the United States?*

George Yancy: In terms of me finding philosophy or philosophy finding me, I would argue that it was paradoxically both. When I was about sixteen or seventeen, living in Richard Allen Homes, which was a housing project for low income families, I discovered the etymology of the word philosophy while reading through *The World Book Encyclopedia*. Upon coming across the word *philosophia*, which is transliterated from the Greek as "the love of wisdom," there was a powerful moment of self-recognition. At that moment, I felt that I was able to provide a name for what had always been there, which I would call a certain propensity and passion for asking profound and engaging questions. Yet, it wasn't just about the esoteric nature of the questions.

There was a passion, by which I really mean a sense of suffering. As a young boy, I would ask my mother questions about religion and its truth-claims. I wondered aloud about why there were so many religions and how we could know with certainty that we had found *the one* true religion. I would also ask about death. Death was a deep mystery to me. Well, it still is. But as a boy, I just could not make sense of why I had to die, why I had to leave, why it is that someday I would no longer be. This is what philosopher Cornel West has called the "death shudder." As I recall, I would spend a great deal of time just trying to imagine myself gone, no longer, which, of course, isn't possible as I'm still the one imagining myself gone. Yet, as a young boy, the inevitability of death was hard to bear, disturbingly so. In fact, the idea of someday not existing made we wish that I had never been. I guess that I reasoned that had I never been, I would not need to worry so much about someday not being. I would also struggle mightily, often with tears flowing, with the issue of God's existence. This was later when I was a teenager. The problem of the existence of God was another one of those philosophical problems that came with suffering. Why would God not reveal God's self *to me*? Of course, later I would think of this as a bit narcissistic. It was hard for me to understand why God, assuming (as I did and still do) that God really existed, would not appear to me so as to remove *all doubt*? Why make it so difficult to know, especially as this left the real option of discarding the idea of the existence of God altogether? You know, though, it wasn't just about removing doubt. I think that my desire to know God was like a child longing to know its absent parent, longing to touch the hand, as it were, of the *beloved.* And while I can now hear the Freudian overtones and the anthropomorphism, I don't think that it can be reduced to such terms. I needed to know, I desired to know, the ultimate reason for things. You know, "Why is there something as opposed to nothing?" It is the ultimate ontological question. I needed to know why I was at all, why anything was at all. And I was brought up to believe that the answer to such fundamental questions was God. I should confess that my passion remains when it comes to my philosophical concern regarding the truth-claims of religion, the inevitability of death, and the existence of God. These themes still bear a great deal of existential weight for me. That child still suffers, still hungers.

Of course, the race issue within philosophy had not occurred to me until later, though it was there at the very moment that I read the entire entry in *The World Book Encyclopedia.* All of the pictures of the philosophers were of white men. So, there was the race issue as well as the gender issue. At this stage in my intellectual development, I think that I just saw them as thinkers. In retrospect, though, whiteness was right there on the page speaking to me about what I couldn't be. In other words, those pictures functioned insidiously to exclude; placing me, as a young Black male, under erasure. So, there must have been some awareness of race, though inchoate. I say this because I came to believe that I must be the only Black philosopher because there were no pictures of any. Having read the entire entry in *The World Book Encyclopedia*, I went on to read Bertrand Russell's *The History of Western Philosophy* and Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy.* These texts also reinforced my conception of the philosopher as normatively white. It still had not dawned upon me in a critical fashion that these were *white* philosophers, where whiteness, within the field of philosophy, would later come to signify a site of epistemic hegemony and the exclusion of philosophical voices of color. It was not until after I *finished* my undergraduate training in philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh—which many claimed to be the best philosophy department in the country during that time—that I was specifically introduced to the work of Black philosophers. Fortunately, for me, the prominent Black scholar James G. Spady took me under his proverbial wing and introduced me to the works of a critical mass of Black philosophers. This shift away from white bodies as representative of what philosophers looked like was amazing and yet disconcerting. Why didn't I know that there were professional Black philosophers until the end of my undergraduate year? After all, I was at the very best philosophy department in the country. Moreover, I had gotten through high school with no knowledge of the existence of Black philosophers. Perhaps we are back to Malcolm X. I had been deprived of a very significant part of our history. Indeed, in conversations with philosopher Janine Jones, the process of excluding the history of black people in philosophy functioned to support a myth not only about what philosophy is but who philosophers are.

To date, specifically within the field of philosophy, I have managed to author and edit the majority of books on the subject of whiteness. In terms of philosophers of color, there are three of us who have done the lion's share of this work. That would include me, Linda Alfcoff, and Charles Mills. Also, back in 1996, and this was due to the influence of Spady and his methodological emphasis upon the importance of oral histories, I conceived of the idea of interviewing Black philosophers. The idea was to create a text that was not available for

me when I most needed it. The text to which I'm referring is entitled, *African-American Philosophers, 17 Conversations*. It was published in 1998 and has since become what I think might be called a philosophical triumph when it comes to the publication of philosophy texts, to say nothing of philosophy texts that deal with African American themes. Within the context of dialogically engaging the theme of what it means to be a Black philosopher in North America, these 17 philosophers discussed questions of *Black philosophical* identity formation, questions of canon formation, the meaning of African American philosophy, and how they became interested in pursuing philosophy. There was simply no book like it. Importantly, seven of the philosophers interviewed were Black women. Since its publication, I have had younger Black philosophers say to me that *17 Conversations* was the single book that helped them to make the decision to pursue a career in philosophy. Indeed, I was once told by a younger Black male that it was *17 Conversations* that saved him, that provided him with a conceptual space for seeing himself as a philosopher. So, I think of that book as doing so much in terms of encouraging young Black people to begin to see themselves as professional philosophers. I also edited *Cornel West: A Critical Reader* in 2001, which brought together for the first time in American history a book-length critical exploration of the ideas of a major living Black philosopher.

I think that the above autobiographical details are not divergent from what we have been discussing regarding how I see the strengths and the weaknesses of philosophy's approach to discourses on race in North America. The details speak to my efforts to shift the center of conversation. In the philosophy department at the University of Pittsburgh, to my knowledge, there was no philosophical discussion of race, though the expression of whiteness as privilege and as hegemonic was everywhere to be found. My sense is that the concept of race was simply not deemed a philosophically worthy topic of conceptual analysis. This should have been especially embarrassing given the history of racism in this country. How can philosophers talk about justice, equality, rights, and ethics and leave out of discussion the ways in which white racism infused all of these so-called pristine philosophical concepts? The profession was and continues to be in a state of bad faith, of lying to itself. How could so many white philosophers see themselves year after year at American Philosophical Association conferences and not stop and mark those spaces as problematically white or male for that matter? So, I came to see that the love of wisdom is inflected by race, perhaps saturated by race and racism. My sense is that philosophy is concerned with specific philosophical problems as these problems are related to certain *interests* and value assumptions about what constitutes philosophy and a philosophical problem. These interests and assumptions are inflected by whiteness. The point that I'm raising here is not that philosophy is *simply* a question of philosophical pluralism, where it is understood that different philosophers labor upon different philosophical problems. My argument is that race is a topic that is excluded from a certain conception of philosophy and that this is a problem that is situated at the heart of so much of European and Anglo-American philosophical practice.

Maria Davidson: *So there are important meta-philosophical issues at stake?*

George Yancy: Yes. Given that the field of philosophy has been and continues to be dominated by white men, one has to theorize why it is that the concept of race is deemed philosophically nugatory. What is it about philosophy's own self-understanding that prevents it from engaging the issue of race and, by extension, racism? Many philosophers see their task as engaging theory at the level of pure abstraction. At this level of engagement, the embodied nature of philosophy loses its human face, as it were, and also loses its capacity to face the quotidian, non-abstract world of suffering human beings. Philosophy also loses the importance of how context and how certain raced bodies, with specific configured experiences, impact the epistemic claims that we make. And even though white philosophers working within the continental tradition are certainly more open to examining the philosophical significance of the complexity of lived experience and the importance of effective history, this does not mean that they are particularly attentive to theorizing ways in which whiteness/race inflects the contours of their philosophical world-views or the ways in which their whiteness defines both their credibility as philosophers and the credibility of the content of their philosophical positions vis-à-vis philosophers of color. So, even as history, contingency, subjectivity, gender, facticity, and agency are valorized as philosophical topics worthy of philosophical reflection, many white philosophers within the continental tradition still leave the subject of race, and especially their own whiteness, unexamined. So, it has primarily been philosophers of color who have attempted to change the ways in which the field

of philosophy sees itself in relationship to the question of race. One might say that Black philosophers and philosophers of color have vigorously called philosophy out on its bad faith regarding race and racism. Of course, there have also been white feminist philosophers who have been instrumental in this change, though many of them continue to critique the maleness of philosophy and leave unexamined the whiteness of those said male philosophers. Indeed, many of these feminist philosophers leave unexamined their *own* whiteness. I think that some of them, and I will *not* say more here, engage in power moves that belie their aspirations to become genuine allies of women of color in the field of philosophy. I think that we need to hear more from Black women philosophers and women of color in philosophy who are willing to call these white women out, those who hide under the banner of doing feminist philosophy. This, of course, can be potentially detrimental to one's career and psychological well-being. To address the issue of what white women philosophers think about whiteness and how it informs various philosophical themes (ethics, aesthetics, etc.), I asked white women philosophers to examine the whiteness of philosophy in my edited book, *The Center Must Not Hold: White Women Philosophers on the Whiteness of Philosophy* (2010). I also asked a critical cadre of mostly white philosophers, many of whom were white women, to personally engage their whiteness in my edited book, *White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-racism: How Does it Feel to be a White Problem?* (2015).

What we now find at major philosophical conferences are sessions dedicated to questions of race, though I would suspect that there are still some white philosophers who deem such sessions as mere sideshows. Keep in mind, though, that there are philosophers of color who are analytic in philosophical orientation who bring tremendously insightful analyses to bear upon the concept of race. And the profession is all the better for it. Of course, given my own existential phenomenological leanings, I think that the analytic approach fails to capture the density and complexity of race as *lived*. In fact, I might add that I think that abstract, conceptual approaches to race can function to obfuscate the complexities of the lived experience of race and how we are all actually implicated in processes of racialization. So, I want to describe the process of racialization, often in what sounds like a philosophical-cum-literary style. Philosopher and prominent literary figure Charles Johnson has mastered, and brilliantly so, that creative space for doing philosophy through a literary lens. My use of a certain writing style emerges within the context of lived experience and I do so for purposes of not only more concrete, detailed description, but to expose the layers of racialized experience. It is as if philosophical logos remains too abstract, whereas for me, philosophical logos, and I mean this in a non-theological way, must be made *flesh.* Philosopher Timothy Golden has implied that my writing style takes this form. To be fair, though, even those philosophers working within the analytic tradition vis-à-vis the philosophy of race are cognizant of the fruits to be gotten from alternative approaches to race other than analytic.

I guess that I am Fanonian in this regard. For me, it is within the context of lived history and sociality that race ought to be examined philosophically. Race functions as a "ready-to-hand" phenomenon which is performed in complex ways. I think that this became clear to me when I was a graduate student at Yale University. While at the University of Pittsburgh, I worked with philosopher Wilfrid Sellars and thought that after graduating I would work on something within the area of epistemology. However, while at Yale, I took a course on hermeneutics with Georgia Warnke. The course really made me think about the dynamics of history and interpretation. In fact, I became interested in questions raised by Thomas S. Kuhn regarding paradigm shifts and questions of communities of intelligibility. I became fascinated with the issue of how epistemic subjects are impacted by context and history, and how knowledge claims are indexed to time and place. With the influence of Spady on my expanding knowledge of the history of Black philosophers, and the meaning of Black philosophy, it was a small step toward theorizing a philosophical anthropology of the subject as *homo historicus.* So, I became suspicious of philosophers who engage in philosophical practice as if they are disembodied or unencumbered by social context and history. This is why, for me, African-American philosophy is a *locus philosophicus* fundamentally shaped by questions of resistance, agency, oppression, trauma, and identity within the context of America's racist past and present. More broadly, when it comes to race, lived history plays such an important role for me, especially as Blackness and whiteness (as "racial" categories) are not objective, biological facts, but sites of lived meaning.

Maria Davidson: *You take on some of the complexity of the "lived experience" of Blackness by engaging with gender difference. How and why do you see specifying the valence of Blackness as masculine or feminine as important to one of your most famous books like Black Bodies, White Gazes? How do you see the "ter-*

rain of Blackness" as a lived site of meaning today in 2016? Do you see "Blackness" as we understand it in the U.S. changing, and how we in Black Studies might meet this challenge?

George Yancy: I like how you've contextualized my work. I have been accused of speaking mainly on behalf of Black men. Then again, when I engage theory, I do it from the perspective of my own embodied subjectivity as a Black male, but I attempt to remain cognizant of the reality that I may, through that focus, place under erasure the embodied reality of Black women or women of color. *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (2008) is a prescient text. I say this because of the horrific ways in which Black bodies, inordinately more Black male bodies, have been unarmed and gunned down by white state authority or its proxies. That text frames in powerful ways the tragic killing of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and others. It is a text that theorizes, at the level of embodiment, how Black bodies are distorted under the white gaze, which is a deeply insidious practice. However, I do so in ways that don't conflate Black women's experiences of that gaze with Black men's experiences of that gaze. After all, Black women have been and are defined as "whores," "welfare queens," "nymphomaniacs" "desiring to be raped," "mammy" figures, "matriarchs," "sapphires," and as having bodies that are sites of reproductive pathology. And while I think that *Black Bodies, White Gazes* helps to make sense of the tragic situations of Sandra Bland, Renisha McBride, and the profiling of Dr. Ersula Ore, a Black professor at Arizona State University, who was eventually thrown to the ground for "Jaywalking," I do admit that I am obligated to engage in a more detailed examination of Black women's experiences, not simply in terms of the white gaze, but also under patriarchy. This was brought home to me recently. I had just finished giving a talk on how it is that whites fear Black male bodies and how that fear is predicated upon a history of white myth-making. A young Black woman raised her hand and asked me to share my thoughts on Black women's fear of Black men. My sense is that she was also referencing her own lived experience vis-à-vis Black men. I was hesitant to respond as I didn't want to give fodder for nurturing white racist appetites, especially those whites who could use this issue as a way of justifying their own irrational fears. The easy way out would have been to say that Black women are also operating with white racist assumptions about Black men. After all, I think that this is true. Blacks, more generally, are not immune to internalizing the same myths about Black men that whites perpetuate. I recall that I responded by saying that the question that she posed was a vital one that needs to be taken up by Black women and Black men in greater detail. Truth be told, I missed a significant opportunity. In fact, I may have inadvertently placed under erasure the *personal* dimensions of her critical question. Her point was a powerful one; it was one that implicated me. We can't collapse all Black women's experiences with Black men into whites' distorted projections upon Black men. In my book *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*, I interview, among 16 other Black philosophers, Adrian Piper. She critically discusses how Black women are perceived in academia as prostitutes. Let's be candid. Black men have not escaped this way of fantasizing about Black women and women of color. White men don't have a monopoly on ways to dehumanize Black women. I think that this is what this young Black woman was after. She wanted me to speak to levels of violence experienced by Black women who have to live with Black men who control their lives and how they move through space, who commit heinous acts of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and sexual objectification. She brought this point home to me.

So, I think that it is of utmost importance to keep track of that differential valence of Blackness as masculine as opposed to feminine. Again, I have no doubt that Black men and men of color are also to blame for doing violence to Black women and women of color. To what extent do we see Black women and women of color, both within the US and transnationally, as "incompetent," "inferior," and as not belonging within in academic spaces where engaging theory is believed to be a "masculine" game? To what extent have we embodied forms of poisonous masculinity where we define women of color as "hoes," "bitches," "tricks, and "exotic"? To what extent do we fantasize about confining Black women and women more generally to the space of the bedroom, perhaps bound by chains and ropes, and enacting what we, through patriarchal constructions, imagine they want sexually? With that in mind, what is the relationship between the three women (Amanda Berry, Gina DeJesus, and Michelle Knight) recently found in Cleveland, Ohio, after being held captive and sexually abused by Ariel Castro for so many years, and rapper Lil Wayne, who performed on Future's "Karate Chop (remix)," who recently rapped about how he will "beat that pussy up like Emmett Till"? These are not simply anomalies. My point here is that there are common lethal manifestations of masculinity

across race and class that speak to a larger and systemic form of a pornographic imaginary that does violence to women. As a Black male who is implicated within an androcentric culture, I think that there is more to be done, and I wonder to what extent I have dropped the ball.

I have another way of addressing your question about the "terrain of Blackness" in terms of the changing landscape of Blackness. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes,* as you know, I point to the middle passage as the crucible in terms of which Black identity is marked. It functions as that space of death, docility, amalgamation, and resistance that is important to understanding Black people in North America. So, it becomes a central existential and ontological motif through which I theorize what it means to be Black. Yet, it is important to note that those bodies were scattered and not confined to North America. So, I think that it is important to theorize the ways in which that oceanic experience shaped other Black bodies that were dispersed throughout the world. As such, then, and I must admit that this takes me outside of my scope of expertise, one must examine the different genealogies and phenomenological configurations that speak not only to those bodies that were not enslaved in North America, though came through the middle passage, but also speak to those Black bodies that did not arrive at their "destinies" through the transatlantic slave trade at all. This raises important questions regarding the *lived* meaning of "Blackness" and how Blackness is differentially defined diachronically and in terms of points of geographical origin. Furthermore, this raises questions about how Blackness is permeable and protean. This also raises the issue of the meaning of 1619 and how Black identity and Black subjectivity can be erroneously tied to that moment in time, which then raises the issue of how a specific Black historical narrative can function monolithically and thus exclude those Black bodies that don't conceptualize 1619 in the same way or even at all.

Yet, from my perspective, the "terrain of Blackness" remains a site of social pathology through the white gaze. Think here of Amadou Diallo, an immigrant from Guinea, who, in 1999, was killed by an "elite" team of white police officers. They fired a total of 41 shots. Diallo was hit by 19 bullets. Or, think about Haitian immigrant Abner Louima who, while handcuffed at the police station, was sodomized with a stick by a white police officer. Both Black bodies were *deemed* problem bodies; one killed and the other viciously dehumanized. Both were deemed in need of white disciplining. While it is important to recognize the differences in points of geographical origin, and how the meaning of Blackness is inflected by those points of origin, at the end of the day, those two bodies suffered a fate whose narrative is all too familiar to Black bodies regardless of place of origin. So, yes, given the influx of different African diasporic Black identities to North America, I think that the meaning of Blackness, out of necessity, is changing and must change. This is important because it calls for a multiplicity of origins and formations, even though the epistemology of whiteness re-inscribes a racial Manichean divide with whites on the "good" side, and those differences among Blacks relegated to ontological sameness. This epistemology of whiteness, by the way, reinforces a Black/white binary. I have been critiqued for reinforcing this binary in my work by not focusing on white racism vis-à-vis other people of color. Yet, it is whiteness that sustains this binary through its transcendental status in relationship to Blacks in the US *and* other people of color. In terms of Black Studies, however, the protean character of Blackness demands that we be attentive to the shifting ways in which the meaning of Blackness is narrated, the pluralization of historico-social ontologies, the diversity of geographically Black "racialized" body semantics, and that we grapple with epistemologies that are diverse and specific to localized places of origin throughout the African Diaspora. I think that Michelle M. Wright's text, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (2015), importantly speaks to questions regarding the shifting meaning and reality of Blackness.

Maria Davidson: *You are known for work on understanding the material and ideal valences of Blackness in the United States, but, as you also note, you have helped to spearhead philosophies of whiteness. Your book Look, a White! is a core text in the field. How do you understand the benefits and dangers of this field? What do you think are some of the largest misconceptions about it?*

George Yancy: Let's take the dangers first. One concern is that white scholars who pursue the issue of whiteness through the disciplinary lens of critical whiteness studies may do so for careerist purposes. While I understand the link between pedagogy and the larger institutional, *materialist* economic implications of what it is that we do as academics, I fear that white scholars might engage this work opportunistically. I say this because I get the sense that some white graduate students see the impact of whiteness studies in academia and jump on board as a way of increasing their expertise,

their marketability. I fear that the critical edge intended by the field might be compromised because of this. Linked to this is that the field can also become overly intellectualized, treated as a process of mastering a set of concepts as one might master concepts in calculus. Critical whiteness studies demands something more. It seems to me that whites who do critical whiteness studies (in philosophy, history, feminist studies, cultural studies) really have to remain engaged in serious processes of *self-interrogation*; they must explore the ways in which their own academic expertise is disjointed from the additional work that needs to be done on their own white selves at the level of working through aspects of a contradictory life. Put explicitly, these white scholars engage the discourse of critical whiteness studies, but continue to treat faculty of color as less than human, as ersatz, and, as not belonging within academic white spaces. Another danger is that white scholars and the field itself may re-inscribe whiteness as the center of discourse and concern, where this becomes another site of white narcissism, white monopoly, white conceit, white interest, and white power and control.

After all, the motivational features of the field don't grow from the head of Zeus. It is a field that is historically grounded in critical discourses developed by Black scholars and black people, and people of color, who have had to deal with the experiences of white terror, brutality, and arrogance on a daily basis. So, naval-gazing is not a process at the heart of engaging whiteness, but, rather, liberation from white supremacy. Thus, it is a politically centrifugal process. It is not an intellectualist project, but a project of overthrow, of undermining the ways in which whiteness continues to exist as the normative center. Whiteness studies is not a site for making a fetish of discourse and conceptual analysis regarding whiteness, but one of engaging radical ways of undoing whiteness, of being-in-the-word in the mode of constantly, ontologically resisting whiteness. So, white scholars must realize that the field itself calls for *loss*. A radical conceptualization of the field is *not* designed to make white people feel good about the fact that they are the "enlightened" ones. This is too easy; and whiteness is far too messy and dense. The radical way in which I conceptualize the field would entail whites to become un-sutured from the ties that bind them to structures of power, to undergo experiences of *crisis* and productive disorientation, where the normative structure of whiteness fails as a place of shelter. What are whites really prepared to lose? White scholars can become seduced into thinking that they are doing really important work *for* Black people, thus installing white paternalism. They can become seduced into thinking that they are radical when in fact that radicalness doesn't reach beyond the confines of their classrooms. So, while there is often a sense of critical discourse alliance with people of color, there is no alliance to undo whiteness as a site of institutional, material power, there is no alliance where white bodies actually dwell together on an equal basis with bodies of color. My point here is that white academic institutions can *accommodate* these critical discourses and thereby render them weak. Then again, the academy can also accommodate the discourses coming out of Africana critical theory, queer theory, and feminist theory. I am worried about the tactics involved in the institutional capacity to accommodate "radical" discourses/voices. If the discourses don't force the system to expurgate them or if the discourses don't radically undo the system, to what extent have the discourses become digestible and tame? Is it fair to say that the discourses don't override the interests of white people? Then again, this reminds me of Derrick Bell's concept of "interest convergence," where white people are willing to support issues of racial justice only on the condition that there is something in that support from which they can benefit, where their interests are not compromised. One might argue that this preserves the hegemonic framework of whiteness. I wonder here how hope itself can sustain hegemony. This interpretation, it seems to me, lends credence to an Afro-Pessimist perspective, an approach which I see as a form of racial realism the spirit of Derrick Bell. In critical and sustained conversations with my student, Brian Jacob Klarman, I have come to theorize Black agency in terms of Marronage as opposed to the total dismantlement of the structure of white supremacy. Within this context, Lauren Berlant's book *Cruel Optimism* is important. The idea here is that the goods and promises of North American are there, but always out of reach of Black people. So, optimism is maintained, but it is cruel because Black people, given the current state of white power, will never successfully gain the equalities and rights held before them. Perhaps what we need is a form of post-hope or post-optimism that results in a realism that musters enough strength that says, "We refuse to wait another day!"

I think that a major misconception, though, is the construction of the field as a site for inducing white guilt. While guilt may result, this is not and should not be the aim of the field; that being said, guilt can be deployed productively; it needn't result in an emotional dead-end. Moreover, critical whiteness studies is not a field designed to galvanize hatred *for white men,* or

white people, more generally, a view that I think is implied by some who have objected to the existence of the field as a relatively new academic fad. This is silly and indicative of a defensive posture. One benefit of the field is to get whites to see the importance of how whiteness prevents them from becoming more deeply concerned about what it means to be human outside a philosophical anthropology that stipulates whiteness as normative. Returning to that sense of losing one's orientation, the field attempts to get whites to mark their whiteness, to render it peculiar, to make it an *object* of critical study, and to demonstrate to white folk that there is something there *to be seen as a problem* that they have been inculcated to think does not exist at all. White people have inherited forms of discourse that enable them to remain in denial about the problems of whiteness. Also, white people deploy deep psychological and emotional tactics for avoiding the need to look, to examine their whiteness. To those whites who are serious about questions of social justice, of undoing whiteness, of critiquing insidious levels of white opacity, it seems to me that the field is capable of providing a critical lens through which whites become cognizant of the ways in which their *lived* whiteness negatively implicates bodies of color. In short, they come to realize that they are not mere atomic, neoliberal, autonomous subjects, but deeply implicated in white racist structures and white meta-narratives that form a social integument in terms of which they are linked, in oppressive ways, to people of color. This, it seems to me, has the benefit of nurturing forms of epistemological and ethical humility, ways of being that bring white people closer to seeing or to re-cognizing their social locations vis-à-vis people of color. It is in the process of seeing that connection or that shared integument, that, for me, ought to haunt white people, ought to throw white people into a state of crisis. It is fear of this crisis, however, that can cause potentially dangerous blowback. My article "Dear White America," published in *The Stone, New York Times* (2015), created a firestorm of white vitriol and hatred as I asked white people to examine their conscious, unconscious, and systemic racism. I think that we need a form of *Bildung* or *Paideia* that actually cultivates vulnerability in white people, a cultural space where they are wounded, undergo moments of trauma and narrative disorganization. This is not about having them undergo some form of white masochism. Rather, it is about growth, about being reborn, which is always a painful process. Yet, it is also about realizing that this rebirth is always a penultimate process.

Maria Davidson: *In the conclusion to Look, a White!, you distinguish yourself from those theorists who assert that the "white antiracist" is an oxymoron. You raise a crucial nuance where you argue that being a white antiracist and yet being racist is not mutually exclusive. How can we change academic epistemologies for the better, i.e., exactly as you suggest, academic disciplines based on mythological notions of "whiteness" as neutral, invisible? Should they be forced to name themselves? If it were up to you, where would you want to see changes first and foremost – and why? Put another way, for those white readers inspired by your call to join the fight against entrenched racism, where would you encourage them to focus?*

George Yancy: The idea of the antiracist racist is a way of theorizing the complexity of what is involved in "undoing" whiteness. This is what I meant previously about the rebirthing process being one that is penultimate. The white antiracist is not a noun, but more like a verb, which means that the antiracist is always in process, always making a decision, choosing her life, as best she can, through an antiracist lens. Yet, I theorize this existential freedom within the context of heteronomous and structural forces. It is at this point that many whites with whom I've shared my work begin to retreat and want to hold on to the idea that they are neoliberal selves who are not bound by contextual, historical, or psychic forces, who are not racists.

Invisibility is one important metaphor for thinking about whiteness, but there are others that complement this one, which augment the ways in which we think about whiteness. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes,* I introduced the powerful metaphor of "ambush," which involves a process where whites are attacked by deep layers of their own racism of which they are unaware. In that book, though, I had not theorized the basis for this ambush. I carry this analysis further in my authored book, *Look, a White!* Through many of the assumptions in Judith Butler's book, *Giving an Account of Oneself,* I deployed the concept of psychic opacity, which claims that white people have undergone processes of cultural "hailing" that have resulted in levels of white racism that are opaque, a position that calls into question the assumption that consciousness is a totally transparent process that makes available the inner contents of one's white racism. Introspection is not sufficient to ascertain the limits of one's embodied racism. By the time whites begin to explore their own racism, I argue, they have already been given over—through and through—to

white racism. On this score, whites are strangers to themselves vis-à-vis the sheer complexity and depth of the opacity of their own racism, which does not, by the way, let them off the proverbial hook. While I will not pursue this issue here, I argue, in *Look, a White*! that Black people and people of color can function as "gift-givers" because they are gifted at seeing whiteness given their racialized epistemic locations. This is what W.E.B. Dubois called the gift of second sight. Through the insights of Black people and people of color, whites can be encouraged to develop a white form of double consciousness in terms of which they begin to see how racism operates with greater clarity. I think that both metaphors, "ambush" and "opacity," help toward critically exposing the complexities of lived whiteness and adding to a critical vocabulary that can be used to unpack whiteness. Yet, both metaphors are hard to swallow for white folk as they indicate the reality of dispossession. All of us are dispossessed in some way. For example, we can't control for the inevitability of death; it has already claimed us from the womb. For whites, however, their lives have also been claimed by racist norms, practices, desires, bodily dispositions, historical meta-narratives, explicit and implicit racial fantasies, racial frames of reference, and so on. So, I think that you're correct where you state that I argue that being an antiracist racist does not guarantee either a decisive or an immediate victory. I even gesture toward there being no exit at all, which does not occlude resistance. Also, thanks for reiterating the importance that I place on how antiracist racists would need, given the messiness of white racism, to begin giving accounts of themselves, critiquing themselves, and continuing to reimagine themselves. I think that this critical effort would help to militate against hegemonic academic epistemologies that privilege white ways of knowing and being-in-the-world, white ways of doing theory, of defining the aims of philosophy, of defining what is and is not important philosophically, historically, and culturally. This isn't easy. Within this context, I want whites, especially those white academic liberals who deem themselves free of any racist dispositions, to begin to mark their identities as racist, to mark their spaces of knowledge production as saturated with white normative assumptions. Given that whites are always already embedded within white racist institutions and effective history, and given that they are also constituted as relational selves that have undergone anterior white racist self-formation, where white opacity results, I think that whites need to approach themselves with epistemic humility, to be prepared to face the reality that they *don't know* the depths of their racism. Tarrying with nonwhite voices, then, becomes so important within this context. This does not mean that Black people, for example, ought to be at the epistemic beck and call of white people. My sense is that whites have failed to take seriously the ways in which they continue to be racist, in and outside of the academy. Part of the problem is that they don't know people of color. They refuse to tarry with us, to dwell near us. They assume that they know us, but they don't. They only know what they imagined us to be, which is predicated upon a false construction of how they imagine themselves to be. So, I want whites to tarry with those critical voices of color that challenge the foundation of their white modes of being-in-the-world. The *browning* of America does not guarantee the overcoming of whiteness or white supremacy. If, as suggested above, Derrick Bell is correct, then whites will only reinforce their sense of supremacy and hunker down to protect what they see as their manifest destiny. After all, whites in South Africa continue to have disproportionate power, though it is a post-Apartheid South Africa. When it comes to the browning of America, whites, on my view, will simply redraw lines of ideological alliance, but do so in such a way that the core of their white interests prevail. So, again, we need a form of *Bildung* where whites can cultivate vulnerability, exposure, and risk, and rethink various white racialized forms of self-protection and affectivity. We need a form of *Bildung* that will cultivate a culture of loss among whites while installing new forms of white relationality that are non-agonistic vis-à-vis people of color. As said earlier, this form of *Bildung* would create a space where whites can be wounded and undergo crisis. Given that they have lived with a multitude of lies about their "natural supremacy" and "entitlement" for such a long time, they will also need, as my colleague Kathy Glass says, to grieve: to grieve the loss of an imperial self, and to grieve in the form of *gravitas/heaviness*, which, on the flip side, may lead to a form of ethical responsibility or maturity, requiring constant ontological renewal. You should know that I am not optimistic here. Whiteness can absorb attempts to overthrow its hegemonic power. I have no reason to think that whites will relinquish their power through a pristine act of insight or through goodwill.