

The White Man's Burden? How to Come to Terms With Whiteness as Identity Category

Robert A. Winkler

Abstract:

In *White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-Racism* George Yancy, scholar of the philosophy of race, further develops his insights into the nature of being white, and hence being a white problem for all those not sharing this privileged identity category. By assembling fourteen white scholars in the field of critical whiteness studies, this volume provides a critical perspective on the unfinished project of and ongoing personal struggles with forging an anti-racist white identity. Furthermore, this essay collection delineates thought-provoking analytical approaches to dismantling white privilege in the academy and beyond.

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Yancy, George (Hg.): *White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-racism. How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015. 253 p., hardcover, £ 70,00. ISBN: 978-0-7391-8949-8

The year 2016 brought neither the lessening of racial tensions nor the decrease of racially motivated violence, but the culmination of what W. E. B. Du Bois has called the 'problem of the color line'. How, then, to start reconciling a nation shaken by Donald J. Trump's polarizing presidential campaign on one side of the spectrum and the Black Lives Matter movement's still largely neglected demands for racial justice on the other? As a white (West European), male, heterosexual academic who is working on white privilege in the hardcore punk subculture, I approach this nexus simultaneously as a person affected and from an outsider's perspective.

George Yancy, an African American Professor of philosophy at Duquesne University, tackles the polarizing issue of race in the US from a seemingly unorthodox perspective: he assembles fourteen distinguished white scholars in the field of critical whiteness studies and confronts them with a crucial assumption formulated as the question: "How does it feel to be a white problem?" In the outstanding introduction to his volume Yancy lays bare the underlying reasoning of this approach as "the question itself is a relational one [which] implicates black bodies and bodies of color that suffer under the weight of the reality that whiteness is a problem, which means that to be white in white America is to be a problem" (p. xiii). Delineating his previous work in the field, Yancy further develops his insights into white identity formation, which would mainly be characterized by the process of 'suturing;' this condition describes a form of mental and emotional closure and detachment in order to keep intact white normative epistemological frames. Yancy counterposes the process of 'un-suturing,' which runs like a thread through the contributions of the volume: "un-suturing is a deeply embodied phenomenon that enables whites to come to terms with the realization that their embodied existence and embodied identities are always already inextricably linked to a larger white racist social integument or skin which envelops who and what they are" (p. xvii). Correspondingly, the collection's fourteen essays focus for the most part on intimate insights into the white scholar's personal struggles to remain 'un-sutured.'

Chapter ten, "Keeping the Strange Unfamiliar: The Racial Privilege of Dismantling Whiteness" (p. 141-53), is a lucid example for the volume's approach to linking intimate reflections on the

problem of being white with academic methods to effectively teach this sensitive issue. Nancy McHugh, a professor of philosophy, walks the reader through three frames, which give testimony to both her personal and academic struggles to confront the problem of white complicity and privilege. The first frame recounts her experience of teaching W. E. B. Du Bois in an Inside-Out Prison Exchange Training, where a group consisting of prison inmates ('inside students') and 'outside students' are having classes together (cf. p. 142-44); McHugh vividly recalls how her academic approach failed when being confronted with the lived experience of systemic racial oppression encountered by one of the 'inside students,' resulting in a sudden realization of her own white (academic) privilege. In the second and third frame the author forces herself to recall a racist remark she made during her college years and how she told her students about the incident – and her troubled feelings caused by it (cf. p. 144-50). The reader thereby not only participates in the challenge of remaining 'un-sutured' with regard to whiteness as identity category but additionally gains valuable insights into the difficulty of anti-racist engagement in the classroom.

Most of the essays assembled in this collection weave together personal experiences and academic situations in a manner comparable to that of McHugh's piece. The fourteenth and last chapter, "Contort Yourself: Music, Whiteness, and the Politics of Disorientation" (p. 211-29), however, approaches the problem of being white not from a personal but rather from an analytical perspective. Author Robin James makes the distinction between two different ways white pop musicians are able to address "whites' feelings of alienation from their bodies: one which reinforces white hegemony, and one which can (possibly, under the right conditions) be an opening for a critique and de-centering of white supremacy and normative structures of whiteness" (p. 211). In order to give ample evidence for her assessment Robin James analyzes the use of musical distortion and irregularity in New Wave (artist Devo as exemplary representative) and No Wave, as represented by James Chance (cf. 213-19). The author argues that Devo's use of rhythmic irregularities neglects white privilege and racism as the core of the problem of being white in order to foreground the body problem whiteness entails; in contrast, "the musical noise in some of Chance's songs can introduce epistemic noise into whites' understanding of their bodies and their racial identity" (p. 213). This 'epistemic noise' has the potential to disorient whites from their position of privilege to open up the way for reflected white anti-racist activism.

George Yancy's essay collection enables an unprecedented insight into the white academic's mind struggling to come to terms with its own privilege and complicity in structural discrimination. The contributors' honest reflections are a forceful reminder of the ongoing challenge and difficulty of acknowledging the processual nature of dismantling white privilege. However, the major contribution of this volume is to be found in Yancy's introduction, which provides the theoretical framework for the pressing task of staying 'un-sutured' vis-à-vis the comfortable and widespread attitude of having arrived at an anti-racist attitude. This unfinished process is indispensable for any white person eager to challenge the condition of silently partici-

pating and thereby perpetuating racial structures of power and oppression. The thought-provoking essay collection is highly recommended for anyone interested in better understanding – and challenging – the disconcerting state of racial affairs in the US.