**Disrupting Whiteness: The Productive Disturbance of George Yancy’s Work on White Identity & the White Gaze**

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In life the best moments are those of productive disturbance. When settled understandings are called into question we are invited into the possibility of growth, change and increased self-awareness. In my own case the most significant learning I’ve experienced has resulted from times when I have been challenged to reappraise the accuracy and validity of my assumptions. This is why I’m always drawn to writers who disturb me. I love to encounter a thinker who shows me the world through a very different lens thereby turning the familiar into something strange. This is why I find George Yancy’s work on race so helpful. He presents me with an analysis of my white identity that I would prefer not to read, but *have* to read. He gives me a gift that part of me thinks I don’t need because, after all (I tell myself) I try to work in anti-racist ways. So I must be one of the good guys, right? His gift of productive disruption stops me in my tracks whenever I start to feel too comfortable about my own moral correctness.

In 1943 the English poet Robert Grave and his collaborator Alan Hodge co-authored a book called *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* (Graves and Hodge, 1943). The book’s proposition was simple; as an author you should imagine that there are people in the room with you looking over your shoulder as you write. Graves and Hodge argued that keeping the identity of these individuals in mind as you composed your prose would help you write more clearly, directly and simply. You would be writing for your audience as much as for yourself.

As a writer I have always found this advice enormously helpful. Some of the people I imagine looking over my shoulder are Graves and Hodge themselves, along with George Orwell. When I begin to indulge myself in what I think are pleasingly lyrical turns of phrase I imagine these three saying, “come off it Stephen who are you trying to impress?” I will shamefacedly admit that the people I imagined looking over my shoulder as I climbed the academic ladder at Columbia to become a full tenured professor at Teachers College were the unknown future members of my tenure committee. It was only after gaining tenure that I could call Graves, Hodge and Orwell back into the room. So much of my pre-tenure writing was bloated, an attempt to prove how much I’d read, my theoretical acumen and the extent of my vocabulary. It is only since tenure that I’ve felt free to write simply and directly.

When I write about race George Yancy is one of the people peering over my shoulder. He is a supportive and loving presence encouraging me to be honest and to take the risk to acknowledge the white supremacy that moves within me. I rely and depend mostly on his rigorous criticality. Whenever I veer towards the self-congratulatory, whenever I feel the temptation to show off my ‘wokeness’, I hear him saying “do you really want to say *that* Stephen?” Because George’s writing is so meticulously honest in its self-appraisal, I feel called on to try and match the same openness to critique he embodies. Reading his analysis of the white gaze and the power embodied in holding a white identity means that I am constantly stopped in my tracks as I’m about to propose some ‘truth’ about whiteness. He reminds me that writing about race is a serious business and helps me understand that whatever words I compose are always going to be funneled through the white supremacist worldview that structures who I am. But stopping me from writing them is the last thing he would want to do. The generosity of spirit that moved him to write *Dear White America* (2015) as a Christmas gift to whites invites me into self-reflection. But equally he reminds me that glibness about race is a mortal sin and that any responses, proposals or conclusions I advance are always going to be inchoate, always partial.

One thing I take from George’s analysis in *Look, a white!* (2012), *White on white/Black on black* (2005), *What white looks like* (2004) and *Black bodies, white gazes* (2008) is a better understanding of how the white supremacist ideology I’ve been brought up in is just too deeply embedded in me to shake. Ever since I was old enough to perceive how the world worked I’ve assimilated a set of paradigmatic assumptions that have seemed to me to represent such obvious, common sense realities that I’ve regarded them as tacit, empirical truth rather than assumptions. Chief amongst these are that leadership is white, intelligence is white, objectivity is white, rationality is white, political legitimacy is white, history is white, and logic is white.

These assumptions comprise the essence of white supremacy. Why do whites seem to end up in leadership positions making decisions for everyone else? Because, according to white supremacy, whites have a greater facility for thinking clearly and objectively about what comprises the common good and how that should be achieved. According to this logic it would seem to make natural sense for them to be leaders. I also grew up accepting patriarchy. Not only did I accept that most leaders should be white, I also thought of them as obviously male. Just as I never questioned that whites should be in leadership positions because of their intelligence and rationality, so I never challenged the notion that men’s supposed clarity and greater objectivity meant their decisions were to be trusted over those of women who were more likely to be swayed by emotion, particularly compassion. I was an excellent little student of the white patriarchy so clearly described by Rebecca Traister (2018).

Of course critical theory has illuminated for me how ideological manipulation works and on a purely rational level I’ve been aware of white supremacy as the ideological bulwark of permanent racism. Over the years I’ve done all the ‘right’ things to show my anti-racist identity. I’ve marched against apartheid and the treatment of undocumented people, I’ve joined anti-racist coalitions and been to anti-racist conferences. I’ve tried to support colleagues and students of color by leveraging my white privilege whenever possible. But I still see the identity of a ‘good white person’ (Sullivan, 2014) claiming its self-congratulatory hold on me. It’s so easy to fall into thinking that now I’m one of the good guys who’s rid himself of racist conditioning so that therefore my work is done. I have to remind myself constantly that racial awareness is something I can opt into or out of as I wish; the complete opposite of the reality experienced by people of color.

How George has productively disturbed my thinking about race is by his insistence on locating the racism within me, by bringing home to me the way my body - as well as my actions and words - embody a supposedly superior white identity. When I read his work I’m unable to escape the uncomfortable truth of how I benefit from whiteness, how white supremacy is ideologically sedimented in me; the way it’s evident in my emotional responses, baked into my synapses, embedded in my DNA. George’s work has helped me to face the visceral, pre-conscious nature of my white racism. I count on him to disrupt me, to disassemble me, to force me to face personal realities I would much rather avoid, and to require me to examine how I am going to commit myself to the future.

**First Acquaintance: *African American Philosophers* (Yancy, 1998)**

I am a relative latecomer to a serious engagement with questions of racial identity and white supremacy. It was not until I entered my fifties and had the great good fortune to team teach with two African American colleagues - Scipio Colin Jr. III and Elizabeth Peterson – that questions of race began to loom large for me. That collaboration eventually resulted in an edited handbook on race and adult education (Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, & Brookfield, 2010) but up to that time I was emblematic of a classic white consciousness. I regarded race as something that only people of color exhibited and something that I could choose not to deal with unless I wished to. It was Scipio Colin Jr III who introduced me to Leonard Harris’ classic anthology of African American philosophy *Philosophy Born of Struggle* (Harris, 1983) and, in tracking down more of Harris’ work I came across an interview with him in George’s 1998 book of seventeen interviews with African-American philosophers (Yancy, 1998). This is where I first encountered George.

*African-American Philosophers* (Yancy, 1998) was an important book for me. Along with the Harris (1983) anthology, I was beginning to get a glimpse of the diversity of a philosophical terrain that I knew little about. Also, as someone who has only ever taken one undergraduate course in philosophy (it was in political philosophy which led to a lifelong engagement with critical theory) I am always hesitant as I approach philosophical treatises. Lacking training in, or familiarity with, philosophical terminology has meant that most of my attempts to read independently in that area have ended in a frustrating sigh of disappointment. I would usually feel that I was not smart enough to breathe in the rarified air of philosophical scholarship. But *African-American Philosophers* (Yancy, 1998) was a series of conversations and that drew me to it. Whenever I struggle with dense philosophically inclined prose I always try to find a book of interviews or conversations with the philosopher concerned. This is how I managed to get into Foucault (1980) and Habermas (1992).

*African-American Philosophers* (Yancy, 1998) was also an important building block for a manuscript I was starting to write on critical theory. Two of the philosophers George interviewed for his book – Angela Davis and Lucius T. Outlaw Jr. – had been students of Herbert Marcuse, a philosopher I first encountered as a student in 1968 and someone I was profiling in what would become *The Power of Critical Theory* (Brookfield, 2004). In George’s conversation with Angela Davis she describes Marcuse and James Baldwin as two important mentors, “who helped me to conceptualize a relationship between theory and practice, a challenge that I continue to struggle with today” (Davis, 1998, p. 20). One of the things that most impresses me about George’s work is his exploration of this relationship seen in books such as *On Race* (Yancy, 2017) and *Pursuing Trayvon Martin* (2013).

In George’s interview with Lucius T. Outlaw Jr., Outlaw describes being impressed and inspired by Marcuse calling his work “provocative, interesting and insightful” (Outlaw, 1998, p. 321). Outlaw also comments of Marcuse that “it was the nature of the rhythm of his logic and writing that I found also attractive” (p. 321). Incidentally, this is the exact opposite of my own experience of reading Marcuse! He makes me feel like I’m a complete impostor as I plough through his prose feeling like I’m missing 99.9% of what he’s saying.

But despite my difficulties as a reader, Marcuse has been a very important figure to me. I have been struck by his theory of aesthetics and his belief that the most revolutionary break with reality has its roots in the experience of estrangement produced by artistic engagement. I have also felt that his small essay on repressive tolerance (Marcuse 1965) gave me a wonderfully accurate analytical tool to understand how universities and other institutions appear to embrace change whilst simultaneously working to neuter any serious threat to their legitimacy.

Marcuse’s influence was brought home to me a couple of decades ago during a class I was teaching. I was talking about his idea of repressive tolerance, and about how the contemporary emphasis on diversity could be interpreted as an example of the dominant culture’s ability to seem to be opening itself up to dissenting views and different perspectives, when in fact it was subtly reasserting its control over public discourse. When we took a break an African-American woman who was a veteran of the civil rights movement still actively engaged in anti-racist education came up to me. “Marcuse was a beautiful man” she said, “as soon as you mentioned his name I knew I could trust you”.

One of the reasons I am interested in Marcuse is because of all those associated with the Frankfurt School tradition he placed race at the center of his analysis. He placed significant hope in extra-parliamentary direct action by the most disenfranchised members of society supporting the Black Power movement as a “far more subversive universe of discourse” (Marcuse, 1969, p. 35) than the Hippie movement. In the language of Black militants, particularly their claiming of soul – in “in its essence lily-white ever since Plato” (Marcuse, 1969, p. 36) - and their declaration that ‘Black is beautiful’, Marcuse detected “the ingression of the aesthetic into the political” (Marcuse, 1969, p. 36). Black Power represented “a systematic linguistic rebellion, which smashes the ideological context in which the words are employed and defined, and places them in the opposite context – negation of the established one. Thus, the blacks ‘take over’ some of the most sublime and sublimated concepts of Western civilization, desublimate them and redefine them” (Marcuse, 1969, p. 35).

The interviews with Angela Davis and Lucius T. Outlaw Jr. in *African American Philosophers* (Yancy 1998) (and also with Cornel West) confirmed my decision to profile Marcuse in *The Power of Critical Theory* (Brookfield, 2004). They provided me with some useful analytical leads and helped propel my intellectual project to link critical theory to a race-based analysis of the ideological dominance of white supremacy. Subsequently I published a piece in the *Harvard Educational Review* (Brookfield, 2003) which, following the lead of Lucius Outlaw Jr., investigated how critical theory could be racialized in the interests of African Americans. For a white male this was a perilous enterprise but I took heart from the open ended nature of the questioning George exercised in *African-American Philosophers* (Yancy, 1998). He seemed so open to multiple perspectives that I felt as long as my piece was meticulously researched, and as long as I never purported to speak for any of the thinkers I was exploring, that I could avoid the worst excesses of exploitation and colonization that happens when white thinkers “explain” black thought.

**A Deepening Engagement with Whiteness**

One of the things I enjoyed most about the interviews in *African-American Philosophers* (Yancy, 1998) was the disturbingly provocative nature of the questions that George posed. Although the focus of the book was, quite legitimately, on the different philosophers profiled, the nature of George’s questioning meant that his voice – probing and productively disorienting – was strongly evident throughout. That voice has continued to disturb me in a wonderfully productive way for twenty years. His work on white and black gazes, and his project of illuminating the nature of whiteness, has been particularly troublesome in the best way possible. I am always most drawn to philosophers and activists who mess my life up, who unsettle my worked out assumptions and worldview. George has done me the favor of repeatedly sending me back to square one in terms of my comprehension of white identity. I am particularly grateful for his sustained, multi-year interrogation of whiteness. Most work on whiteness is executed by white scholars and, while that is undeniably valuable, an analysis informed by the embodied African American experience is enormously helpful. As whites we can never really know what it’s like to have a white gaze permanently settled on us but scholars of color can force us to be more self-aware of how we exert that gaze on those we regard as the ‘other’.

Yancy’s work on whiteness is complex, passionate and, for a White adult educator like me, productively jarring. He writes elegantly with an enviable knack of interweaving striking stories of personal experience into philosophical analysis. When I read him I have so many turned down pages, notes in the margin and underlined sections that I know I’ve been in a real engagement. What I most appreciate is his repeated naming of how “the opaque, white racist self” (Yancy, 2012, p. 173) pervades Whites’ identities. In the very last paragraph of *Look, a white!* he captures what for me has been a truth about myself: “Being a white antiracist and yet being racist are not mutually exclusive. Rather, being a white antiracist racist signifies tremendous tension and paradox but not logical or existential futility” (Yancy, 2012, p. 175). I will always benefit from the unearned privileges and blindnesses embedded in the racist institutions and structures I move through each day. And I will never lose entirely the racist perspectives, intuitive judgments and embedded filters I have learned all too well and that are, “insidiously operating as the level of simply being bodily in the world as white” (Yancy 2012, p. 21). But I need to move forward with anti-racist work even knowing the flawed and contradictory nature of that project.

The overall intent of George’s work on whiteness is to name the enduring reality of white racism. In *Look, a white!* (Yancy, 2012) he describes being ‘interviewed’ by a White professor of philosophy. The so called interview turns into an uninterrupted effort by the professor “to present himself as ‘pure’, as a ‘good white’, who was above the fray of racism and lived beyond the trappings of race matters. He used my presence, my hour, as a space for white self-confession and self-glorification…desiring that I spend my time bearing witness to his ‘white purity’, so that I could state emphatically and unequivocally that he was one of the ‘good guys’” (Yancy, 2012, p. 18). That passage hit uncomfortably close to home for me. I was forced to ask myself how many times have I done this, and how did it make colleagues of color feel? How, in my search for approval, have I marginalized colleagues by refocusing attention on myself?

One of the great strengths of Yancy’s work for me how it constantly yanks me back from the realm of academic analysis to questions of daily conduct. Just as I’m becoming comfortable with a critical theory focus on structures and ideology, Yancy introduces a powerful personal example that concretizes this analysis and makes me ask disturbing questions of myself. This is particularly so in an analysis of bell hooks’ transgressive pedagogy. Yancy’s examples of classroom moments when students burst into tears when discussing race, and the awkwardness this induces, were vividly recognizable. He writes of “silence in the room, a sort of awkwardness of not knowing what to do next” arguing that, “this awkwardness is indicative of pedagogical success, not failure” (Yancy, 2012, p. 59). Pedagogically, allowing silence to linger “functions as a teachable moment (where) all of us present might feel the weight of the moment” (Yancy, 2012, p. 59).

Pondering uncomfortable, emotionally charged outbursts is, for Yancy, “fearless listening” (Yancy, 2012, p. 71), in which people live with important discomfort. He argues, along with hooks, that foregrounding race makes classrooms necessarily unsafe, dangerous spaces. He regards his classrooms as dangerous, “because they demand so much at the level of personal integrity, honesty, and exposure while not sacrificing critical engagement” (Yancy, 2012, p. 132). And these demands are just as present for teachers who are called on to disclose their own contradictions, knowing all the while that “to engage one’s identity and being-in-the-world through the *passionate* deployment of critical interrogation can cause suffering, great disappointment, and creative vertigo” (Yancy, 2012, p. 80).

One of the things I have most struggled with over the years is the notion, derived from enlightenment philosophy, that progress towards a kind of perfection is a natural dynamic. I have conducted my fifty years of teaching on the assumption that with the passage of time I will become more skilled at dealing with contradiction and living with inevitable ambiguity. In *Just Mercy* Bryan Stevenson (2014) writes that for transformation around racial injustice to occur, we must all learn to embrace the discomfort of talking across difference about racially charged issues and of becoming self-reflective regarding our own learned racism. For white people, entering into difficult conversations that emerge around race invariably involves the temptation offered by white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) otopreserve white emotional equanimity. The reason that many race-based discussions veer off into cries from participants to be ‘respected’ by each other is because being treated being respectfully is equated with not being upset, not being challenged and not being called out. When your whole being is focused on preserving your identity and self-concept as a good white person and your emotional synapses are screaming ‘keep me safe!’ then embracing discomfort is completely counterintuitive. Yet, as Stevenson (2014) argues, it is at the moment when you are feeling most threatened that the potential for the greatest learning is often present.

George’s work has deepened my understanding of, and steeled my determination to navigate, the emotionally turbulent nature of any effort to ask teachers and learners to challenge dominant ideologies and interrogate settled practices around race. He asks (very pertinently for me), “when did anger and the simultaneous truthful disclosure of pain and suffering become incompatible?” ((Yancy, 2012, p. 153). I have to say that the most memorable moments of my teaching career have all been suffused with emotion. And the kind of fearless, unsafe listening to passionate declarations of hurt, including denunciations of my own actions, is something that will never become routine or habitual for me. But I find George’s work so deeply grounded in identifiable experiences and felt emotions, that there is a comfort of recognition.

His analysis has also helped prompt a paradigmatic shift in how I view success in anti-racist teaching. Now I realize that before I take an initial step into any room in which I’m working I need to do some important internal mental calibration. I want to do good work and believe passionately in the importance of what I’m striving to do. I’m not immune to media depictions of successful teachers (from *Goodbye Mr. Chips* to *Dead Poets Society* and *Dangerous Minds* to *The Great Debaters*) that feature charismatic individuals who wring transformative changes in their students’ lives. The linear progress of increasing perfectionism that’s so much a part of white epistemology also has its hold on me. I always expect improvement, a smoothing out of difficulties I’m encountering. The institutional evaluations and performance appraisals I am subjected to invariably measure my effectiveness on a continuum of improvement and there is the expectation as each year goes by that I’ll get ‘better’ at teaching about race.

Working within this framework of continuous quality improvement it’s easy to go into an event designed to help people recognize whiteness assuming that success will be represented by ever larger numbers of people telling you how the racial blinders have been lifted from their eyes and how they now see whiteness and white supremacy in every corner of their lives. I’ve privately yearned for ‘Kumbaya’ moments of racial healing when people put their arms around each other and sing ‘We Shall Overcome’. So before I meet with any group I have to give myself a stern talking to and tell myself, “that ain’t gonna happen”.

George has helped me understand that what should count as success is leaving a session with some evidence that people are ready to continue a conversation. I expect a lot of confusion, push back and some expressions of outright hostility. I anticipate long, awkward, uncomfortable silences, crying, angry outbursts and expect to feel like a complete novice. I tell myself that if I’m defining ‘going well’ by things adhering to the white epistemological norm of staying calm, keeping things on an even keel, and not letting things ‘get out of control’ through the expression of strong emotions, then I’m destined to fail. So I have tried to reframe what the indicators of what I used to think of as failure as actually representing success. I accept there will be periods of non-communication along the way as people need time to process the starkly different realities they hear from others in a group or from myself as facilitator. But if, at the end of a session, people are still open to talking further then for me the event has exceeded expectations.

**Facing Backlash**

A couple of years ago I was having dinner with a woman friend who had spent a career of 40 years engaged in literacy work in New York’s Harlem and Washington Heights. She is white and has worked almost entirely with people of color who love her for her humor, spirit and warmth, but mostly for her tireless advocacy on their behalf. She won’t put up with any bullshit and woe betide any Gotham administrator who creates a bureaucratic obstacle to block her students trying to realize their potential.

Over dinner she told me she had been to a workshop on racism and that the first thing the workshop facilitators did was to ask every white person in the room to stand up and take turns saying “I am a racist”. As she recounted this event her voice shook with anger. She couldn’t believe that her four decades of anti-racist endeavors had been discounted by these facilitator-strangers who didn’t know anything about her. I’m guessing that the intent of the facilitators was to convey the message that we are all implicated in a racist system and that we have all learned racist instincts and impulses. But my friend was so profoundly insulted that she left the workshop immediately.

I thought about this event, and so many others that have happened to me, as I read George’s *Backlash: What Happened When We Talk Honestly About Race in America* (Yancy, 2018). The book recounts the fallout from a December 2015 op-ed piece he wrote for the *New York Times’* philosophy column, ‘The Stone’. Titled *Dear White America* the piece was framed as a gift inviting whites to consider their often unacknowledged collusion in a white supremacist system. But for George it was the start of a vicious and sustained assault unleashed on him that continues to this day. Death threats became common and being called (all from one voicemail) “a fucking racist... a piece of shit destroying the youth of this country… a fucking smug nigger … a fucking animal” (Yancy, 2018, pp. 36-37) is now his new normal.

In his words, his “physiology registered the wounds. Mood swings. Irritability. Trepidation. Disgust. Anger. Nausea.” (Yancy, 2018, p. 45). *Backlash* expands on why he wrote the original letter and allows him to explore more fully the nature of contemporary racism. It chronicles the vitriol directed at him via e-mails, letters and voice mails, and on various websites. To anyone proclaiming the arrival of a post-racial world *Backlash* stands as the starkest possible rebuttal. It illustrates how President Trump’s nativist signals have clearly legitimized white supremacy to emerge full blown into our national discourse.

Most white readers will, I suspect, be struck most powerfully by the cruelty that George endured. For a professional philosopher to communicate such deep rawness and suffering is, quite simply, astounding. Philosophy sometimes privileges language games but *Backlash* vibrates with visceral feeling and emotion. Pain leaps from its pages along with righteous anger and an agonizing cry for relief. There is simply no contemporary book on race by a professional philosopher written with this level of directness and emotional candor. But what does this book mean for Whites like myself and my woman friend quoted earlier, who can never walk in George’s shoes but who are committed to anti-racist work?

As I’ve argued already, as a white man I always look to George to profoundly, but productively, disturb me. In his own terms I need him to wound me, to un-suture my de-facto view of myself as a good white person on the right side of history. Whenever I start to get too comfortable with thinking I’ve got a handle on white supremacy, I count on him to be my Paul Robeson, Angela Davis, or W.E.B. DuBois. As he figuratively peers over my shoulder to see what I’m writing I expect to hear him saying, “come off it Stephen, are you kidding me? *That’s* why you think you’ve escaped racism?”

*Backlash* uncompromisingly calls on whites to do one of the most difficult things we can do; to acknowledge being racist as an unvarnished empirical fact. It asks us to recognize how we are caught within a racist system that we benefit from. Whether or not we are righteously committed to working in anti-racist ways is beside the point. There is no contradiction in Whites working as anti-racist leaders, activists, teachers or citizens and their being racist. This is because racism is *not* the process of individually demeaning or diminishing others, “a site of individual acts of meanness” (Yancy, 2018, p. 74); rather, it’s being “implicated in a complex web of racist power relationships … heteronomous webs of white practices to which you, as a white, are linked both as a beneficiary and as co-contributor to such practices” (Yancy, 2018, p. 75). Since my whiteness constantly benefits me, and since that benefit accrues to me because I’m defined in relation to the stigma of blackness, I am a racist. I don’t go about hurling racial epithets but I am “embedded in a pre-existing social matrix of white power” (Yancy, 2018, p. 76) that gives me advantages of which I have only an occasional awareness. To feel safe is my norm, to be “systemically *racially* marked for death” (Yancy, 2018, p. 102) is George’s.

Because I grew up intellectually as a critical theorist I agree that I am systemically formed. I don’t think I – Stephen Brookfield - constitute a monological, atomistic, discrete identity. I’m in history and culture and I’m fluid. Who I am is in large part a function of ideological manipulation. I’ve grown up surrounded with, and formed by, some very powerful ideologies. These include racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, capitalism and militarism. These belief systems, and the practices and systems in which they’re embedded, construct my normal. I’ve spent a lot of time teaching against racism but, as George argues, that doesn’t mean I’m not a racist. I have internalized racist stereotypes at such a deeply visceral, pre-conscious level that I will never lose them.

Take my instinctive reaction to blackness, especially to black maleness. Blackness screams a complex and contradictory mess of signals to me. In my youth it was ‘coolness’, mostly because of music and cricket (I grew up in England). In my adulthood it’s been ‘danger’, something animalistic, uncontrollable and profoundly threatening. I feel an instinctive tightening of my body when I encounter a group of black men. This is beyond reason, deeply sedimented, learned and transmitted over several decades of media and cultural representations of blackness as violence. My physiology changes as I drive through a mostly black area and I hear a panicked voice inside my head saying “whatever happens, please don’t let my car stall”. I find myself locking the doors, checking my surroundings and preparing for confrontation.

My conscious thinking process is remarkably weak when placed against these impulses and feelings. I can tell myself “there’s your white supremacist conditioning kicking in again” and steel my cognitive warriors to fire their arrows of reason into this oncoming tsunami of emotion. But reasoning doesn’t mean much in the face of white supremacist ideological conditioning. Just as with the clinical depression and anxiety that I suffer from, admonitions to ‘snap out of it’ or ‘stop being so irrational’ are mostly powerless. With my depression and anxiety, the doctor can prescribe medication that makes a big difference and keeps me stable. If only someone could write me a prescription to combat the white supremacist ideology embedded in my cultural DNA.

So I am fine (well, maybe not fine, I still desperately want to plead for absolution and forgiveness even as I speak it out loud) with saying I am racist. But this is not true for my woman friend. Even though she has a white racial identity in a white supremacist world she resents being called racist, and feels her life in anti-racist work proves that she’s not. I meet many white friends, colleagues and students who feel the same. What do I say to them?

Well, I’ll start off by talking about how I’ve noticed my own learned racism framing my perception of a current event, or how I caught myself in a micro-aggression earlier that day. There is such shame in the word ‘racist’, such power to humiliate, that I’m wary of beginning a conversation by asking that white friends and colleagues declare themselves racist. Instead I need to ‘normalize’ racism, to show that because most whites are constantly immersed in racist conditioning, it would be strange if they *didn’t* have learned racist impulses, instincts and perspectives lurking within them. So I need to show first how racism is embedded in my worldview and how I enact racism. I need to earn the right to ask them to consider their own racist identity by first exploring mine. The kind of public modeling that George has done around his own sexism has been an important example of how I might do the same around my racism

Does a preparatory modeling of one’s own racism pay too much respect to white fragility, to the alarm and subsequent retreat from confrontation that stops so many whites from looking squarely at their own racism? I go back and forth on this question. My teacher voice says, “you have to start where people are. Starting with your own agenda without having built a connection to their world is self-indulgent. Get over making yourself feel righteous and take the time to know them”. My activist voice replies, “here you go again, copping out and backing off from necessary danger. Don’t be so cowardly – tell it like it is”.

Depending on the day, either one of these voices triumphs. But I am helped by the distinction offered by Myles Horton (1990), the social activist who formed the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee that played such a crucial role in the civil rights movement. Myles would say that if your agenda is an educational one and you want to foster learning, you have no option but to start where people are. You need to understand their experiences and world views. However, if your agenda is immediate social change and you’re fighting against a powerful enemy, you often have no choice other than direct confrontation. You don’t have the luxury of time and space needed to bring people into a radical new worldview. You need to drop bombs of dissonance and create crises that explode settled perspectives and disrupt power.

The last part of *Backlash* (Yancy, 2018) explores what whites can do in terms of searching honestly for the learned racism and privilege at the heart of their identity. This is hard given that bearing witness to the kind of racist terrorism chronicled in the book typically prompts whites to show solidarity with people of color. We want to tell them that not all whites are their enemy and that they can count on some of us for support. Speaking for myself, I know that part of me desperately wants the approval of people of color. I want to be told I’m one of the good guys who’s exempted from blanket condemnations of white racism. I want to be reassured that I’m an exception and to feel a flush of self-aggrandizing pleasure when saying to myself “you know what, my mother was right, I *am* a good person.”.

One of the hardest lessons I have learned as a white person, and therefore as a representative (in the eyes of people of color) of white supremacy, is that I must expect to be mistrusted. I must also anticipate white colleagues accusing me of politically correct reverse racism. When this happens, I need to remember that this is *not* a sign that somehow I’m failing; it happens to every white person in this work. So I tell colleagues getting involved in anti-racist teaching or other activism for the first time that for different reasons they should be prepared to be called a racist both by people of color and by Whites. It comes with the territory.

I remember in the early 1990’s teaching a class in which the only student of color in the room declared “I will never trust a White person”. George’s analysis of the effects of the white gaze and white constructions of blackness help explain why that’s the case. I responded to that student by saying, “that’s completely understandable, I don’t see why you would”. But the white majority in the group were shocked and demoralized by his comment and spent a lot of time and energy trying to convince him that they were humane, enlightened and worthy of his trust. George helps me see that completely valid suspicion, skepticism and hostility will inevitably accompany any white person’s attempt to work alongside people of color in an anti-racist effort. This is no comment on you personally. It’s a comment on how the history of white supremacy has conditioned people of color to expect whites always to pursue their own self-interest and bolster their own power.

George teaches me that the judgment of whether or not you are an ally to people of color is completely in their hands. You should never expect to be told that you are one, and shouldn’t get hung up on gauging your anti-racist virtue by whether or not you receive that designation. Of course, if you *do* hear that term applied to you by people of color you should take it as a sincere recognition that you’re doing something important and worthwhile. And, for a moment, it’s fine to be proud of yourself. We all need moments of recognition and affirmation to keep our energy up for the tough stuff.

But repeat after me; *never declare yourself an ally*. No matter how strongly you are committed to that identity, keep it private. A White person saying “I’m your ally” comes across as condescending and inauthentic. You don’t become an ally by saying that you are. You become one by consistently showing up in support of people of color. You become one by losing something. Instead of worrying about getting approval for being heroically anti-racist, you should be putting yourself on the line. You should be risking institutional condemnation by doing and saying the things that people of color will suffer even more harshly for doing and saying. Your job is to lose friends, colleagues, money, employment, perks and prestige by calling out white supremacy in yourself and other Whites, and then not to have anyone notice or thank you for it.

**Conclusion**

I expect, rely and depend on George to keep upending my worldview. His role as a public intellectual has been inspiring and I know he will keep crossing the boundary between the ivory tower and civil society to pose difficult questions regarding the enduring significance of race. As the permanent racial fissures embedded in this apparently ‘post-racial’ USA become ever clearer we will need truth tellers who are unafraid to disturb and provoke us on what it means to be white. George’s body of work does this for us as we move into the third decade of the new millennium, and we will be all the better for it.

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