

Stay! Refusing Forms of Evasion

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George Yancy's work is phenomenal in at least two important ways. His judiciously woven and incisive arguments exposing the "continued significance of race" in a climate that makes claims to post-raciality are bold, courageous and thought-provoking. Yancy's work is also phenomenal because phenomenology grounds his preferred method of analysis. Clevis Headley describes such a method as a "thick philosophical description of concrete experience."¹ Clearly, Yancy does philosophy from a place of lived embodied experience not for better descriptive purposes but *in order to expose* the discursive practices that perpetuate racial injustice and that can be erased by abstract theoretical analysis. His is fearless speech that creates risk because whiteness resists exposure.

Whiteness, Yancy insists, is "a master of concealment; it is insidiously embedded within responses, reactions, good intentions, postural gestures, denials, and structural and material orders."² Through experiential narratives, Yancy unmasks such concealment and explodes how power works not only through negative, false cognitions but more recalcitrantly through visceral discursive responses and ostensibly mundane habits (the quotidian) of white embodiment. Yancy makes an exceptionally powerful case for how white people are continually implicated in the maintenance of systemic racial oppression by possessing the privilege to discursively reinvest "whiteness as the transcendental norm."³ Such reiterative practices enact violence on Black bodies in ways that obscure their own production and simultaneously conceal the reproduction of white as good, pure, and innocent.

The experiences that Yancy describes — the click, click, click or "the elevator effect" — are common experiences that "blacken" bodies and underscore that white subjects are "the vehicle through which (racist) practices get performed and sustained."⁴ Although white subjects are not the origins of white norms, it is through white practices that whiteness is maintained. Yancy's arguments deftly expose such practices and trouble white innocence, making white complicity visible.

Fearless speech, Yancy tells us, requires fearless listening. "One must be willing to listen to what is often most difficult and painful to hear about oneself and our society." Yet Yancy's arguments are not always received fearlessly. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, Yancy recounts how one white student dismissed his description of the "elevator effect" with a confident outburst of "Bullshit!!" Such white denials are common in courses that teach with commitments to social justice. One wonders whether such blatant dismissals are sometimes preferable to the more veiled denials that may ostensibly sound like logic, common sense, and good intentions but instead function as distancing strategies to protect white students from considering their role in the perpetuation of racism and also safeguard the transcendental norm of whiteness from contestation.

Two questions arise. What are some of the features of fearless listening? Does fearless listening mean that one cannot disagree? (This latter question is one I commonly hear after I give a talk.) Expanding what Yancy says about tarrying with difference and the need to acknowledge the limits of self-knowledge will help me to address the first question and hint toward ways to respond to the second, which I will not have time to fully address.

Working with Judith Butler's recent claim that ethics begins with the acknowledgement of the limits of self-knowledge,⁵ Yancy puts opacity at the center of acknowledging white discursive practices. Butler rejects the possibility of a complete account of oneself because any story of the subject is relationally constituted by the other and always embedded within prior social structures, as the discussion of the "elevator effect" so vividly demonstrates. But I want to emphasize that for fearless listening to be possible and as an aspect of understanding the opacity of the embedded white racist, whites must also be exposed to how white ignorance professes to be knowledge. White ignorance is a product of an epistemology of ignorance that is not merely a lack of knowledge resulting from a personal flaw. An *epistemology* of ignorance implies a systemically supported, socially induced pattern of (mis)understanding the world that is connected to and works to sustain systemic oppression and privilege.⁶

Moreover, as Eve Sedgwick notes, systemic ignorance is not a passive lacking, as the term "ignorance" might imply, but is rather an *activity* that both protects the innocence of white people and upholds systemic racism.⁷ On the one hand, through discursive strategies of denials white subjects are *actively* protecting the system from challenge. On the other hand, these discursive moves are not original but "already available, already common forms of asserting dominance."⁸

Because it is in their interests, whites are intent on denying what is before them and thus often refuse to even consider how they might be complicit. Significantly, denials of complicity are not often seen as denials because they are couched in common sense, logic, and/or good intentions. Sara Ahmed offers a penetrating illustration of how such "desires to evade" are camouflaged by good intentions when she examines how whites often *respond to the critique of whiteness* with the question "but what can white people do?"⁹

While not casting doubt on the sincerity of the white subjects making this inquiry, Ahmed demonstrates how such questions discursively function to sustain the center of whiteness. On face value, this question seems to be progressive. Because of the solipsism implied in such speech acts, however, such pronouncements are more likely to reinscribe privilege rather than to disrupt systemic injustice. Ahmed explains that the question locates whites as the primary change agents and also implies that the white subject can transcend whiteness by "doing something." She counsels white people to examine their desire to "do something" because such desires can function to protect moral innocence and the social system upon which such innocence is based. "If we want to know how things can be different *too quickly*," Ahmed cautions, "then we might not hear anything at all." Like Yancy who

calls for whites to tarry with the critique of whiteness, Ahmed advises white students to “*stay implicated* in what they critique.” I believe this is crucial for fearless listening.

Yancy urges whites to tarry and not flee from considering their complicity. In her discussion of Judith Butler’s ethics of non-violence, Fiona Jenkins promotes “apprehension” as a mode of staying in the troubling space of always reworking but never overcoming the norms that do violence.¹⁰ This willingness not only to inhabit but to *stay* in places of discomfort opens up new opportunities to learn from the unease and unsettlement of such spaces. Apprehension makes explicit white desires to evade responsibility so that they can be countered.

Moreover, “apprehension,” according to Jenkins, does not imply a position that stands outside of one’s field of meaning “as conscious intentional subjects capable of ‘seeing through’ social illusions to reach a better truth, and a changing and remaking of ourselves in its light.” Rather subjects always remain “a part of that circuitry.”¹¹ John Warren manifests this idea when he acknowledges that “I cannot escape whiteness, nor can I discount the ways I am reproducing whiteness.... I cannot claim to be nonracist, to rest in the ideal of a positive racial identity.”¹² Yet this does not arrest his action but instead leads him to remain in the uncomfortable position of trying “to do whiteness differently.”¹³

Vulnerability, as Yancy notes, is also crucial for fearless listening. Erinn Gilson notes how vulnerability is usually understood as the state of being exposed to harm and injury and, therefore, something to be avoided.¹⁴ Gilson encourages us to shift the meaning of vulnerability from this negative connotation to “a more general term encompassing conceptions of passivity, affectivity, openness to change, dispassion, and exposure”¹⁵ — that is, to a condition of potentiality.

Gilson explains that the *ideal of invulnerability* is a form of wilful ignorance that involves the attempt to avoid what might unsettle us. Most importantly, Gilson points out that invulnerability idealizes a type of control and mastery that invites closure and continued ignorance “about oneself and one’s share of (racist) history.”¹⁶ Apprehension and vulnerability are especially crucial for whites’ ability to listen to the experiences of people of color.

In an important essay about what the discourse of diversity does, Sara Ahmed¹⁷ explains how the discourse around diversity in higher education has become “a technology of happiness” which entails “a technology for not hearing.”¹⁸ Demands for civility, love, and gratitude function to dismiss arguments about racism by interpreting them as “anger.” The existence of those who embody “diversity” in higher education is often taken as a sign that racism at such institutions has been eradicated. When these very same individuals attempt to speak out about the racism that continues, they are often interpreted as angry and ungrateful. The resulting white inability to hear seemingly justifies a dismissal of what is said. Building on the work of Audre Lorde, Ahmed urges Black feminists to *stay angry* since anger that is a response to the injustice of racism “can open the world up.”¹⁹ Yancy’s work exemplifies this call to stay angry in the sense of fearless speech.

Yet how can whites hear this anger and learn from it when it implicates us in systemic racial injustice? To answer this question is to acknowledge the significance of apprehension and vulnerability that are prerequisites of being able to listen to the anger of the marginalized *even when such anger implies the complicity of those who are systemically privileged*. What about disagreement? Paraphrasing Ahmed, I maintain that if we want to know too quickly how whites can disagree, then we might not hear anything at all. Fearless hearing, thus, must precede disagreement.

We owe a debt to George Yancy for his unflinching critical look at whiteness. He calls on whites to be willing to tarry with this critique even when it implicates our goodness. Lingering with this critique and refusing the desire to shirk this responsibility is a constructive response to learning about one's implication in systemic injustice. To whites who claim to want to dismantle racist systems, Yancy advocates acknowledging complicity and being willing to examine the ways in which white practices must be disrupted. Fearless listening is necessary for both. Clearly, white responsibility will require more of us whites than acknowledging complicity and refusing discursive forms of evasion; but, for certain, it will require no less.

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 2. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 229.
 3. *Ibid.*, xxiii.
 4. *Ibid.*, 22.
 5. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
 6. Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 13–38.
 7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 225.
 8. Kathy Hytten and John Warren, "Engaging Whiteness: How Racial Power Gets Reified in Education," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 66.
 9. Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," *borderlands e-journal* 3, no. 2 (2004): http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm.
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 11. *Ibid.*
 12. John Warren, *Performing Purity: Whiteness, Pedagogy, and the Reconstitution of Power* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 465.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. Erinn Gilson, "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 308–332.
 15. *Ibid.*, 310.
 16. *Ibid.*, 320, emphasis added.
 17. Sara Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 1 (2009): 41–52.

18. Ibid., 47.

19. Ibid., 51.