

Mark W. Westmoreland
Neumann College
USA

Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race

George Yancy, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008; xxiv + 267pages. \$29.95 (pb) ISBN: 0-7425-5298-5.

George Yancy's *Black Bodies, White Gazes* significantly adds to the ongoing discourse regarding Race. Yancy has solidified his place alongside such thinkers as Alcoff, Gordon, hooks, West, and Sullivan in terms of his deeply layered analysis of the lived interiority of Race, and has added, more generally, to the sorts of complex analyses of Race that have been propounded by such thinkers as Appiah, Cornell, Lawson, Shelby, and Eze. Yancy has effectively paved the way for use of narrative and accounts of bodily experience in Race Studies. His emphasis on the lived experience of embodiment has called for a re-evaluation of identity, particularly that which involves the relation between Black bodies and an oppressive system of whiteness. Yancy understands identity as an existential project formed by both history and society. Race as such is not a biologically determined category of reality; rather, Race is socially constructed. However, as Yancy notes, socially constructed Race has affect upon one's lived experience. We simply cannot push aside its structuring of our own identities.

The book unfolds through seven chapters. In chapter one, Yancy shares an account of his experience on an elevator with a white woman, who is apparently uncomfortable with his presence. He asserts that his body "is confiscated within social spaces of meaning construction and social spaces of transversal interaction that are buttressed by a racist value-laden episteme" (p.4). The woman does not see him as a particular human being; rather, she sees him as a "sort." He does not need to do anything to merit her uneasiness. She has already assessed his Black body and found him to be a threat. A threat to whom? To what? His Black body is a threat to white hegemony. Through the use of personal testimony, Yancy has laid the foundation for his phenomenological investigation of Black bodies existing under the white gaze.

Chapter two exposes the false binary of white and Black bodies. Furthermore, Yancy uncovers the hidden constructed normative nature of whiteness. He asserts that whiteness is the transcendental norm that has already made the Black body into a threat. He writes, "Whiteness is not a metaphysical substantive. Rather whiteness is a relationally lived phenomenon" (p.34). Critiquing whiteness beyond just the notion of white supremacy, Yancy reveals that whiteness is maintained through normalizing whiteness as the standard.

"The Return of the Black Body: Seven Vignettes" provides "a variety of instances in which the Black body is reduced to instantiations of the white imaginary, resulting in what [Yancy] refer[s] to as 'the phenomenological return of the Black body'" (p.66). Yancy's seven vignettes explore the lived experiences of Ossie Davis, Yancy himself, Frantz Fanon, Ellison's invisible man, Malcolm X, W.E.B. Dubois, and Sarah Baartman. In each vignette, the return of the Black body is investigated as placed within the structure of the white gaze and its power to make Black bodies inferior.

In chapter four, Yancy highlights the various ways through which Blacks, as agents, have resisted the oppressive normativity of whiteness. He argues that "Black resistance, as a mode of decoding, is simultaneously a process of recoding Black embodied existence through processes of opposition and affirmation" (p.112). Yancy claims that it is misguided to understand opposition and affirmation as two distinct actions of self-possession. Rather, he argues that Black resistance is also an act of affirmation that refuses to allow the Black image to be seen solely

through the white imagination: “To recognize the historical reality of Black resistance is to affirm dynamic forms of Black embodiment that belie the historical legacy of white lies and the Black imago in the white imaginary” (p.133).

Instead of highlighting a genealogy of the idea of Race, Yancy’s fifth chapter provides a collage of racist practices and devotes particularly attention to the autobiographical reflections of Frederick Douglass. Here, Yancy’s indebtedness to Foucault’s discussion of power and knowledge becomes fully apparent. White disciplinary techniques have molded the way Black bodies are perceived by the white gaze. For example, the Middle Passage became “a regime that involved the production of the Black body’s ‘truth’ as chattel” (p.144). Yancy also notes the ways that science has attempted to regulate the status of the Black body through biological theories that are racist. He then describes Douglass’ autobiographical reflections in order to provide the reader with an account of the power/knowledge structure by which Black bodies are oppressed and an account of how “Douglass made known to the world the atrocities of slavery and rendered visible the ideology of whiteness” (p.173).

“Desiring *Bluest Eyes*, Desiring Whiteness: The Black Body as Torn Asunder” provides an exposition of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eyes*. The protagonist, Pecola, is torn asunder by the damaging effects of the white gaze. The Black body is destroyed by the iconography of whiteness. Yancy writes, “The Black self is always already formed through discourse, through various practices that ‘confirm’ the Black self as ugly, bestial, dirty, and worthless” (p.191). Pecola “seeks white embodiment, and, or course, by extension, disembodiment from her Black body;” however, all attempts remain futile (p.208). The values of whiteness destroy Pecola’s own sense of self-identifying as a Black body that is not “ugly, bestial, dirty, and worthless.”

In the final chapter, Yancy exposes the falsity of whiteness as something easily thrown aside. Whiteness must be continually dismantled. It is bad faith to assume that, because one does not intimately share in racist ideologies as are found in the Ku Klux Klan or Neo-Nazism, one is innocent of being racially oppressive. “To be white in America,” Yancy states, “is to be always already implicated in structures of power” (p.235). In order to progressively dismantle whiteness, one “must engage in counterstylized iterative anti-whitely acts” (p.246).

Black Bodies, White Gazes is a “must-read” for those interested in Race. “*Black Bodies, White Gazes* is precisely a sustained effort to explore the Black body within the context of whiteness, a context replete with contradictions and mythopoetic constructions” (p.xv). This exploration uses such tools as fiction, personal testimony, and critical whiteness studies. Indeed, Yancy’s toolbox is in no way short of adequate sources, which readers will find extraordinarily helpful. The strength of Yancy’s text is in its ability, from a variety of perspectives, to illuminate the lived experience of Black bodies under the white gaze. Yancy, once again, has made an important and much needed contribution to contemporary discussions of Race.