Black Bodies, White Gazes

THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE

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Whiteness as Ambush and the Transformative Power of Vigilance

As an antiracist racist I believe that I should always feel conflicted, full of contradictions, never as though I have "arrived."

—Christine Clark

Whites are, after all, still accorded the privileges of being White even as they ideologically renounce their whiteness, often with the best intentions.

—Peter McLaren

"Bullshit!" That was the immediate response of a white student after I gave a lecture exploring the interstitial "race" dynamics theorized in the elevator example, explored in chapter 1, where my body is confiscated and marked as dangerous. I was invited to a class on multiculturalism to talk about whiteness and the Black body. The majority of the class was white. Having given a variation of this lecture before, I had become used to hands being raised in eagerness, if only then to have my interlocutor launch into a diatribe aimed at finding holes in my presentation, but never a definitive "Bullshit!" I was particularly struck by the harsh tone of her response and the look of self-certainty that appeared on her face. Much needs to be explored in terms of the communicational dynamics that arise within contexts where Black bodies (in this case, a Black male body) speak openly and honestly about issues of whiteness to a mostly white audience. On the one hand, because I am Black, I am already the racially marked body that is expected to be able to say something knowledgeable, meaningful, and important about race. On the other hand, when that knowledge exposes the racist operations of white bodies, marks them as raced and racist, I am deemed either overly sensitive or too quick to generalize to all whites what I have experienced on the basis of a "few unfortunate events" or "exceptional cases."

The female student did not accuse me of having committed a non sequitur or having failed to define my terms adequately. She effectively created a dialogical space within which I became the "bullshitter," one who has absolutely no interest in the truth. She, of course, positioned herself as the discerner of bullshit and so as one who ought to be believed. She did go on to explain how my example did not describe her as *she* would not have responded to the presence of a Black male body on an elevator with such fear, stiff bodily comportment, and suspicion. While addressing her objection, I continued to think about the vitriolic nature of her initial response. After all, the elevator example is not intended to indict white women as such, but to theorize and make sense of the phenomenon of being alone on elevators with white women as experienced by Black men, many of whom have shared how they have had white women respond to them in precisely the way that I describe. A Black university president once disclosed to me that he too has experienced what he aptly referred to as the "elevator effect."

"Bullshit!" functioned as a form of erasure of the experiences of Black men who have indeed encountered the white gaze within the contexts of elevators and other social spaces. She assumed no "responsibility to marginalized people and to the understanding developed from their lives."[1] There was no suspension of her sense of self-certainty regarding the dynamics of race and racism and how Black men struggle daily to deal with issues of racism in their lives. She did not *listen* to me and did not take any steps toward conceding my understanding of the social world as legitimate. As Joe Feagin and Herman Vera state, "White racism involves a massive breakdown of empathy, the human capacity to experience the feelings of members of an out-group viewed as different."[2] In addition to the fact that "bullshit" functioned as a form of erasure, not unlike the humiliating experiences that I have had in the presence of certain white bodies, it also pointed to various ways in which the manifest function of certain objections may very well operate to obfuscate profound modes of living in bad faith. In other words, she was lying to herself, concealing from view the reality of her own racism in relationship to those moments on elevators or in other social spaces where she engaged in perceptual practices that criminalized or demonized the Black body. However, I am careful here to note that the epistemic validity of an objection must not be reduced to its emotional delivery or aim to insult.

In fact, one philosopher pointed out to me that if he and I held very different views regarding the ontology of numbers that an objection from him ought to be judged on the basis of its validity and nothing more. In the case of the white student, however, the context of the lecture was not about the ontology of numbers, it was about race and racism. Discussions involving the ontology of numbers, while I imagine can get very passionate, do not implicate the self in the same way discussions around race and racism do. The self is not similarly exposed, made potentially vulnerable. The white female student was not passionately

invested in defending an ontological theory regarding numbers, but conceivably invested in protecting hidden and threatening aspects of her white self that she would rather avoid. She was far more interested in protecting her sense of "goodness," which functioned to mask how she is implicated in the subtle workings of white racism.

The white student's objection raised the issue of how white interlocutors, when in discussions involving race and racism, may (more than they realize) deploy theory as a way of not being forced to examine aspects of their own white subject position. Indeed, the deployment of theory can function as a form of bad faith. Whiteness, after all, is a master of concealment; it is insidiously embedded within responses, reactions, good intentions, postural gestures, denials, and structural and material orders. Etymologically, the word "insidious" (*insidiae*) means to ambush—a powerful metaphor, as it brings to mind images and scenarios of being snared and trapped unexpectedly. Whiteness as a form of ambushing is not an anomaly. The operations of whiteness are by no means completely transparent. This is partly what it means to say that whiteness is insidious. The moment a white person claims to have arrived, he/she often undergoes a surprise attack, a form of attack that points to how whiteness ensnares even as one strives to fight against racism. Shannon Sullivan states, "Rather than rest assured that she is effectively fighting white privilege, when engaging in resistance a person needs to continually be questioning the effects of her activism on both self and world."[3]

Although there are many white antiracists who do fight and will continue to fight against the operations of white power, and while it is true that the regulatory power of whiteness will invariably attempt to undermine such efforts, it is important that white antiracists realize how much is at stake. While antiracist whites take time to get their shit together, a luxury that is a species of privilege, Black bodies and bodies of color continue to suffer, their bodies cry out for the political and existential urgency for the *immediate* undoing of the oppressive operations of whiteness. Here, the very notion of the temporal gets racialized. My point here is that even as whites take the time to theorize the complexity of whiteness, revealing its various modes of resistance to radical transformation, Black bodies continue to endure tremendous pain and suffering. Doing theory in the service of undoing whiteness comes with its own snares and seductions, its own comfort zones, and reinscription of distances. Whites who deploy theory in the service of fighting against white racism must caution against the seduction of white narcissism, the recentering of whiteness, even if it is the object of critical reflection, and, hence, the process of sequestration from the real world of weeping, suffering, and traumatized Black bodies impacted by the operations of white power. As antiracist whites continue to make mistakes and continue to falter in the face of institutional interpellation and habituated racist reflexes, tomorrow, a Black body will be murdered as it innocently reaches for its wallet. The sheer weight of this reality mocks the patience of theory.

Jane Lazarre, a white Jewish mother of "interracial" sons, relates the story of how one of her son's Black friends was harassed right outside her home by police who thought the car he was driving was stolen. Lazarre shouted, "But this is unbelievable!"[4] Her son responded angrily, reminding her that being stopped by police and questioned because he is driving a nice-looking car is something that happens to him all the time. After all, he is a Black man and as such suspect a priori. Lazarre, while certainly committed to fighting against an anti-Black racist world, was ambushed. As white, as privileged, she can remain innocent of such travesties. Her state of disbelief as she later realizes, "signifies the vast space of white blindness to the dailiness of racism."[5] Lazarre became aware that she was ambushed by her whiteness, as she realized that her subject position is productive of a form of ignorance.

While antiracist activist Tim Wise continues to make a conscious effort at eradicating racism, he realizes how trapped he is within the vortex of white power and how whiteness waylays the white self even as one fights against racism with all good intentions. He relates a story that gets at the core of how racism operates in very insidious ways. In 2003, he boarded a 737 headed to St. Louis. He notes, "I glanced into the cockpit . . . and there I saw something I had never seen before in all the years I had been flying: not one but two black pilots at the controls of the plane."[6]

Despite all the antiracist work that he had done, Wise admits that he thought: "Oh my God, can these guys fly this plane?"[7] Wise points out that what he knew to be true was of little help. In short, Wise was ambushed by whiteness. This example points to how racism is embedded within one's embodied habitual engagement with the social world and how it is weaved within the unconscious, impacting everyday mundane transactions. This raises the issue of the sheer magnitude of the work that is necessary to challenge the insidious nature of racism. It points to how racism eats away, as W. E. B. Du Bois might say, at the souls of white folk.

Wise tells another story, of his grandmother, Maw Maw, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. He shares the horrible narrative of the last stages of her life, how Maw Maw began "to forget who people were, confusing me with my father on a pretty much permanent basis." Wise poses this important question: "What does a little old lady with Alzheimer's tell us about whiteness in America?"[8] He makes a point of sharing with his readers that she was antiracist and tried to teach this to his parents and by extension to him. What makes the story even more tragic is that her father was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. He eventually quit the Klan because of her antiracist fortitude. After all, at age fifteen, she had fallen in love with Leo Wise, who was Jewish. Wise provides these details in order to give readers an example of the degrading magnitude involved in the insidious nature of racism and how it wounds the soul. As her condition worsened, she forgot her former self, which is one of the powerful tragedies of Alzheimer's. She began to call her nurses "niggers." Wise explains:

"She could not go to the bathroom by herself. She could not recognize a glass of water for what it was. But she could recognize a *nigger*. America had seen to that, and no disease would strip her of that memory. Indeed, it would be one of the last words I would hear her say, before finally she stopped talking at all."[9]

As has been argued throughout this book, whiteness is a powerful *embodied* form of being-in-the-world, where "ignorance of white domination is not just an empty gap in knowledge nor the product of a mere epistemological oversight."[10] One might say that being a white antiracist is never completely in one's control because such an identity is deferred by the sheer complexity of the fact that one is never self-transparent, that one is ensconced within structural and material power racial hierarchies, that the white body is constituted by racist habits that create a form of racist inertia even as the white body attempts to undermine its somatic normativity, and that the white self undergoes processes of inter-pellation even as the white self engages in agential acts of racist disruption. This does not mean, though, that all is hopeless or, as one white student commented, that "since racism is so powerful that we [whites] just might as well be racists." One ought to exercise vigilance and DuBoisian "long siege" even while complicity with whiteness is still possible or precisely because one is always already complicit with whiteness.

Comedian Michael Richards (known as the character "Cosmo Kramer" on the sitcom *Seinfeld*) may not have realized the significance of his insight when he attempted a televised apology for his explosive racist tirade at the Laugh Factory in 2006. Pointing to a group of Blacks in the audience who allegedly had been talking during his performance, with a great deal of anger and vitriol he shouted: "Shut-up. Fifty years ago, we'd have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass. You can talk, you can talk, you can talk. You brave now motherfucka. Throw his ass out, he's a nigger! He's a nigger! He's a nigger! A nigger, look it's a nigger!" After this tirade, people actually began to leave the show. On his way out, one of the Black men shouted back at Richards, saying how unfair it was that he used such language. Richards responded, "That's what happens when you interrupt a white man, don't you know?"[11] Particularly revealing about Richards's language is his reference to the spectacle of lynching Black male bodies with themes of unashamed sodomy, in this case with a fork. Moreover, as a *white man*, he marked his identity as a site of threatening power over and against the inferior, uncultured, and disruptive identity of the "nigger." In short, to interrupt a white man, to look a white man in the eyes, to disagree with a white man, is to forget one's place in the natural scheme of things. To think that you are more than a "nigger" requires some reminding. Richards asked, "Don't you know?" His question reminded the "niggers" in the audience that they should have known better than to interfere with a white man, whose voice and presence are sacrosanct and hegemonic. Richards used the "n-word" six times, seven if you include where he pronounced it "nigga." Later, he appeared via satellite on the *Dave Letterman Show* (with Jerry Seinfeld on the

show) and offered an apology, saying "I'm not a racist. That's what's so insane about this." How does one reconcile his understanding of himself as not a racist in the light of his blatant racism? Insightfully, he adds, "And yet, it's said. It comes through. It fires out of me."[12]

Richards could be lying about not being a racist in order to redeem his image. In short, he simply got caught. My sense though is that he was *ambushed*. Even as he thinks he is not a racist—perhaps because he has Black friends and other "friends of color" and does not use the notorious "n-word" on a daily basis, and because he does not identify as a skinhead or associate with Klan groups—his remarks belied his self-understanding. In fact, he may see himself as a "good white." Being a good white, however, does not mean that one has *arrived*. In fact, being antiracist does not mean that the white self has arrived. There are many good whites who continue to participate in structures of racial power from which they benefit, who fear for their lives while walking down the street with Black young men walking in their direction, and who have conniptions when their young daughters (and sons) bring home "persons of color" as potential dates. For many, embedded within the construction of the notion of the "good white" and the antiracist white is the sense of stasis and self-glorification. This form of self-understanding actually obstructs the necessary deeper critical work required to unearth the various ways in which one is actually complicit in terms of racist behavior. Monique Roelofs echoes this point when she is suspicious of "a supposedly achieved 'insightful,' 'sophisticated,' 'cool,' 'courageous,' 'humorous,' 'morally remediable,' 'humane' whiteness." She worries "about the capacities of self-aestheticization to pass off my whiteness as more critical than it can be."[13]

Dismantling whiteness is a *continuous* project. As Clevis Headley writes, the suspension of whiteness "must come in the form of a continuously affirmed refusal to prolong the ontological and existential project of whiteness."[14] John Warren notes that even as he attempts to perform whiteness differently, he "cannot rest under the banner of the transformed."[15] He realizes he cannot escape whiteness, nor can he discount the various ways in which he actually reproduces and reinscribes whiteness. Similarly, Lisa Heldke notes, "Expanding responsibility involves recognizing that over-privilege takes everlastingly new forms, requiring traitors [to whiteness] constantly to reinvent themselves."[16] And as Alison Bailey writes, "It is a mistake to think that becoming traitorous is tantamount to completely overcoming racism."[17] This, however, is the *ambiguous* reality of white racism. Antiracist whites must not flee this ambiguity, but continue to undo white racism even as it repositions them as privileged. The discourse of "undoing" whiteness, as used here, does not mean that one is capable of undoing whiteness as one might remove one's shirt. Whiteness is not a flimsy category such that one can simply decide to cast it aside. In other words, while "undoing" whiteness is clearly a performative metaphor, it does not presuppose an ontology of the self that is capable, through a single act of will and intention,

fails to comprehend how his own self-understanding is incongruent with the subtlety of his racist performance. This, again, speaks to the false notion that the self is completely in control of its own meanings and the contexts within which it is located. My guess is that Richards would not have gone into a long and vicious tirade had the persons talking in the audience been white women/men. And if he had, his racism would have gone undetected. Examples such as the Richards case ought to force antiracist whites who fight for social justice to interrogate the sedimentation of their own racism. Furthermore, the Richards example should force antiracist whites to admit that their efforts are always incomplete, particularly as the dynamics of self-in-context are not transparent and/or simply a case of willful management. It is one thing to remain in the company of whites and proclaim oneself an antiracist. It is another to throw oneself in the social fray where people of color move and have their being. It is within such *lived* social spaces of transacting with Black bodies, for example, that one's commitment to antiracist praxis is tested. It is so easy to hide behind antiracist rhetoric when one limits oneself to predictable social encounters that are already predicated upon social transactions that do not challenge or complicate the white self. However, in social transactions that do challenge the white self, conditions obtain that are ripe for ambush. As Richards warns, "That's what happens when you interrupt a white man, don't you know?" While being ambushed by one's whiteness can occur in the absence of people of color, as when one deems oneself an antiracist white and yet laughs hysterically at a racist joke while bonding with one's white friends, actually transacting with flesh and blood bodies of color can function as a powerful catalyst that can trigger an ambush. "You're a prolific *Black* philosopher." And yet, there is the mantra: "I'm not a racist. That's what's so insane about this."

My students are often taken aback when I ask them to raise their hands if they think that they are racist. The question itself is perceived as a threat, as it implies that one of them could actually be a racist. At this point, I ask them to close their eyes and imagine their wedding day. I encourage them to imagine the smell of the flowers, the colors of their matching wedding attire, all of the friends and family members that have been invited, and so on. Before they say, "I do," I ask them to open their eyes and disclose the "race" of their bride/ groom. The response is always, with perhaps one exception, a resounding, "white!" Because I teach in a majority white university, my objective is to get the students to see just how insane it is that whiteness is being reproduced by them even though each failed to raise his/her hand when asked if anyone in the class is a racist. My example shows that whiteness even shapes the object of love and desire. One female student got particularly upset by this suggestion. "I just don't desire Black men. This doesn't mean that I don't like them or that I'm a racist." When asked to elaborate, she reiterated that it was simply about desire, not race. I tried to get her to see that desire was not the explanatory end point, but the explanandum, that which is to be explained. On further exploration,

many of my students began to talk about how there was only one Black student in their classes and how there were only other whites to date in their neighborhoods. At first, none of my students finds this strange. After further critical discussion, a few of my students do begin to make broad connections between racial segregation, the reproduction of whiteness, white bonding, the perpetuation of "normalcy," the repetition of white sensibilities and values, the encouragement of white solipsism, and the phenomenon of desire.

To encourage whites to avoid idealizations of themselves as antiracists and therefore in some sense see their subject positions as marginal in relationship to the larger structure of white power, it is important to remind them that in racist white America there is simply no place where they can remain *permanently* marginal. This social realist position militates against any unproblematic notions of having achieved a so-called color-blind perspective, which can function as another way of avoiding challenging white structural power. While antiracist whites may anger other whites, the former still "bare a socially privileged racial identity."[22] Even so-called poor white trash identities are *white*. As Bryant Keith Alexander notes, "Disregarding issues of class and location, they [white trash identities] engage a performance of 'better than thou' in the presence of non-Whites; a performance of privilege that they assume to be either a birthright or a historically perceived sanction."[23] I would argue that "Black trash" might be said to be a tautology. Dispose, as it were, of the trash in "white trash" and one has whiteness. Dispose of the trash in "Black trash" and one is left with Blackness, which is more of the same, the disposable, the wretched, the socially unpalatable refuse. White trash might be marked by class, and inflected by class, but whiteness still allows entrance into The Gap without being followed. In other words, whiteness is interpellated as innocence as it enters into those larger social and semiotic spaces where it is constituted as "one of us." Addressing the issue of poor whites who embrace their whiteness as an ontological stamp of superiority, Marilyn Frye notes: "Many poor and working-class white people are perfectly confident that they are more intelligent, know more, have better judgment, and are more moral than black people or Chicanos or Puerto Ricans or Indians or anyone else they view as not white, and believe that they would be perfectly competent to run the country and to rule others justly and righteously if given the opportunity."[24] And while it is true that the white bourgeoisie deployed divide and conquer tactics to sustain divisions and tensions between poor Blacks and poor whites, and that this prohibited/prohibits the recognition of shared interests, "we must tell the full story of white racism in all of its complexity, and this complexity cannot be fully resolved through a class analysis that sequesters the guilty as only among the rich."[25]

To be white in America is to be always already implicated in structures of power, which complicates what it means to be a white ally (or *alligare*, "to bind to"). For even as whites fight on behalf of people of color, that is, engage in acts that bind them to people of color, there is also a sense in which whites simul-

taneously "bind to" structures of power. Some whites argue that white supremacy is something that existed in the past and that therefore, while there are still white people who are certainly prejudicial, the oppression of Black bodies no longer exists. My white students often argue this way, assuring me that they therefore must be on the side of racial justice. According to Aimee Carrillo Rowe, "'History,' as it is written through the assumption that 'oppression' could only have occurred within the rubric of overt white supremacy, becomes the narrative mechanism through which contemporary whiteness can be severed from its own genealogy. That is, white supremacy is displaced from the present and reassigned to the past through a temporal logic of white dislocation."[26] This temporal displacement, as Rowe notes, involves the investment in a narrative of white innocence. This functions to shift the emphasis away from many of my students' whiteness and how it implicates them in *present* structures of white power. However, rather than discussing issues of deep structural racism, I have had white students complain that if only Blacks and whites could stop all of the insults and stereotyping that all would be fine.

Weeks after a guest lecture I gave, one white male student provided me with a copy of the paper he had written for the course. The paper was very articulate and poignant, showing a great deal of insight into issues of white privilege. Parts of the paper explicitly described levels of frustration that he felt as I lectured. He wrote, "I felt a growing sense of uneasiness rising inside of me. It grew to a point where my stomach began to ache and my hands began to quiver." He describes going for a run after the lecture to let out some energy. He wrote that he "felt the inchoate brew of uneasiness intensify and then take the form of anger." He imagined himself back in the classroom with me and imagined himself throwing his notebook against the wall, flipping the desk in front of him and having it whirl in the air before it hit the ground. It is my sense that this heightened emotional reaction indicated a form of bad faith. While he is certainly someone who takes pride in developing an antiracist mode of being-in-the-world, he fails to accept the complex ways in which, despite this, his whiteness undergoes a process of interpellation whereby he is implicated in complex social processes that privilege his whiteness beyond his intention to the contrary. In other words, there is a sense in which he is lying to himself, masking the extent to which he is implicated in whiteness by taking a moral high ground and placing too much emphasis on his genuine antiracist efforts.

In order to work through some of his feelings, he then wrote a large portion of his paper as an imaginary conversation with me. He wrote, "Don't write me off as just a white male. If you do that, I will be more poised to write you off as just an Other. I do not want this, but it's something I've felt in me recently." Earlier in the paper, he wrote, "You don't know *me*!! Don't freaking tell *me* who I am!!" The student clearly conflates our histories. Given the history of white racism in America, it is not unreasonable that Blacks have come to find wanting white antiracists who are willing to fight against racism and who claim to have

"lost" some level of power in the process. The student flattens out our differential histories. In fact, he asserts his power to write me off as an other, performing a threat that has literally taken the form of the killing of Black bodies. The fact of the matter is that white America has already written me off as an other. He simply reiterates the history of white power and arrogance. In short, if I desist from pointing out to him how he is implicated in structures of white power and how his whiteness can function as a significant site of blindness, he will accept me, bestow upon me the wonderful status of non-other. He also falsely assumes an equality of power whereby Blacks really have the same form of power to write *him* off as an other. He felt labeled "the white male," that new group that attempts to shift victimization away from people of color. He added, "But I'm telling you, staying on the level of labels and stereotypes without getting to know me—calling me out as just a white male—will keep me on the level of labels as well." The problem is that Black denigration has never purely functioned at the level of labels and mythos. Labeling is part and parcel of a history of castration, rape, lynch mobs, being beaten beyond recognition, sold from auction blocks, and so on. His willingness to be an ally was predicated upon a conditional, that was based upon a false equivalence of historical power. This move is indicative of what Charles Mills calls "a mystificatory obfuscation of the clearly *a*symmetrical and enduring system of white power."[27] And "You don't know *me*!!" functioned to erase my own insights, my subjectivity and epistemic grounding regarding the ways of whiteness. It also communicated that he (as an atomistic consciousness) knows and controls the meaning of *his* identity. This effectively conveys who has the real power. It is important though that this student's positive efforts to identify and work through his blinkers are *not* crushed, but nurtured and critically engaged. I would agree with Gloria Yamato, when she says, "Do not blame people of color for your frustration about racism, but do appreciate the fact that people of color will often help you get in touch with that frustration," especially when that frustration takes the form of humility.[28]

To be white in America and to be an ally must involve a self-reflexive moment of realization that people of color don't owe white people anything. As Wise notes, "And if all they [Blacks] do is respond to our efforts with a terse 'about time,' then that's too bad. Get over it."[29] To be a white ally is a problematic identity when motivated by paternalism or moral narcissism. Confessions of giving generously to the United Negro College Fund, or that one has never used the "n" word or that one is currently dating someone Black or Latino(a), or that one just hired a person of color in one's philosophy department,[30] are perfectly consistent with a failure to explore deeper layers of what it means to be a white antiracist ally. In fact, such confessions often function to ease the conscience of whites.

Being an ally does not mean slumming around people of color, eager to eat their food, dance to their music, rub against their "exotic" bodies. The racial

politics of gentrification can achieve this end, while simultaneously keeping the "darkies" within a circumscribed space. Being a white antiracist ally is not simply a commitment to helping Black people and other people of color. As Gloria Yamato says, "Work on racism for your sake, not 'their' sake."[31] It involves an active commitment to relinquishing white power. It entails account-ability, where this "involves taking responsibility *for* one's social location, and for the way that understanding flows from that location."[32] A white ally is one who fights injustice even as "it costs them something personally."[33] This fight must be done precisely through the recognition that one *is* a white person, "rather than attempting to step outside that identity, in order to rebuild it from without, as it were."[34]

White people who are sincere about antiracism need to pay critical attention to the ways in which they can relinquish white power. Merely rearticulating whiteness beyond white guilt and deep feelings of angst is not sufficient. There must be the call, the continuous effort, to *disarticulate* whiteness from those juridico-political, economic, institutional, aesthetic, and other locations that will resist disarticulation to ensure the maintenance of white power. The point here is that the white body is not simply implicated in and productive of racialized spaces that have profoundly destructive psychological implications for Black bodies. Rather, the white body is tied to the operations of the state as a powerful site of white hegemony. White people and critical whiteness studies theorists must remain cognizant of the fact that Black people critiqued whiteness and struggled against whiteness (and continue to do so) because whiteness is op-pressive; it systemically excludes, derails, polices, segregates, and murders. Deploying critical pedagogies in the name of valorizing cultural heterogeneity in schools as a strategy for disrupting whiteness as normative is one thing. Fighting the police, the prison system—the repressive apparatus of the state—de facto residential segregation, bank lending practices, and racialized global capitalism, where the white imperial subject continues to expand its reach and control over nonwhite others according to its mythos of manifest destiny, is another. Hence "to bind to" Black people and other people of color involves fighting to undo the racialized material structures, discursive orders, and semiotic fields according to which the power of one's whiteness is purchased.

As whites attempt to undo power and privilege, they find themselves con-fronting a world in which whiteness is not only around them but also working through them.[35] Given this, disrupting sites of whiteness will require that white allies cultivate identities "rooted in understandings of themselves and their relations to others."[36] And given the pervasive and structural complexity of whiteness to reposition one's identity as center, and, hence, over and against those of people of color, undoing whiteness "is a project in process, always becoming, always in need of another step."[37] Even as one tries, one's efforts will be thwarted by unconscious habits of white privilege, forming roadblocks as one attempts to expose whiteness.[38] What this means is that one cannot, through a

sheer act of will, cast off one's whiteness, particularly as whiteness qua "race" is not a thin covering laid over a fundamentally non-raced identity.[39] To combat whiteness effectively requires an understanding of social ontological constitutive spaces wherein others can cite you "as white and thus contribute to the performative reiteration of racial difference."[40]

This raises the issue of the role of historical agency on the part of phenotypic whites to transgress habituated modes of being-in-the-world, while remaining cognizant of the multiple ways in which whiteness is invested in its own self-concealment. Indeed, I would argue that whites *ought* to transgress their investments in whiteness. If whiteness was a fixed essence, the discourse of ought would be meaningless. The discourse of ought, however, speaks to the condition of *lack*. This not only raises the issue of whiteness to that of the ethical level but also raises the issue of whiteness to the existential ontological level. To invoke the ethical and the existential ontological within this context raises the motifs of anguish and anxiety. If whiteness is not an essence, then the reality of choice, the cultivation of "a certain kind of identity,"[41] and the nurturing of new habits, dispositions, and responsiveness[42] become *the* pressing issues. Frye also calls for new ways of whitely-being-in-the-world, particularly in those social spaces where whiteliness is required or rewarded. She argues that antiracist whites know they must "practice new ways of being in environments that nurture different habits of feeling, perception, and thought, and that we will have to make these environments for ourselves since the world will not offer them to us."[43]

While I use the term *identity* within the context of antiracist white identity, there is no attempt to specify that which is fixed; rather, an antiracist white identity is what is reclaimed and constantly refashioned. But even here, the notion of cultivating a certain kind of identity must not be reduced to a form of *apolitical* aesthetic *self*-fashioning. There is the reality of the larger racist social processes to which one is inextricably tied; hence, the importance of sociogeny, where one does not lose sight of the social in its constitutive role in the formation of the individual.[44] I would also argue that the cultivation of new habits and dispositions—while never losing sight of the socio-structured and structuring world—which presuppose the notion of an ontological *lack*, speaks to the dynamics of existential conversion in relation to whiteness. For Simone de Beauvoir, as argued in chapter 5, existential conversion involved the rejection of grounding values in any putative absolutes. Existential conversion in relation to whiteness is indispensable in terms of militating against whiteness as it takes itself to be unconditioned and as a site of universal value. "Like the mythomaniac who while reading a love-letter pretends to forget that she has sent it to herself," whiteness is a form of bad faith.[45]

The point here is that "learning how to stop regarding one's overprivilege as natural and inevitable" or as an absolute value is an important propaedeutic to undertake as one attempts to "undo" whiteness.[46] It is also important to note that

whiteness as a repetition of acts takes on the appearance of something perm-
anent, when in fact such repetition can be fissured and cracked. It is difficult to
nurture these fissures in whiteness as long as one remains safe in one's white
comfort zone. You "must actively place yourself in situations that challenge
your biases and preconceived notions," travel to those lived spaces where
whiteness is understood very differently.[47] As a border crosser, one does not
travel to these spaces as colonizers, paternalists, and do-gooders. Rather, as
María Lugones notes, "by traveling to their 'world' we can understand *what it is
to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*."[48] Fissuring whiteness
involves a form of white double-consciousness, though maintaining a self-
reflexive posture to guard against a sense of white "ontological expansionism."
What it means to be them can easily slip into a form of romanticizing through
white subject positions. In this way, Blacks become only stereotyped "by the
[white] arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifi-
able."[49] And *what it is to be ourselves in their eyes* always borders on distortion,
defensiveness, and self-protective arrogance. The possibility of being *ambushed*
by unexplored layers of one's whiteness is always there. But this is how power
works; it shifts even as one attempts honest efforts to resist it. This is the way
those whites who struggle to undo whiteness as a multiply complex structure
must "expand responsibility as they flush out new 'pockets of incompleteness,'
and discard strategies and understandings that have lost their effectiveness."[50]

This is why it is important that the dynamics of white racism not solely be
left in hands of whites to theorize. Whites' insights must be challenged and
corrected by those bodies of color that stand to suffer from the subtle blinkers
that inhibit the efforts of antiracist whites. People of color must keep whites
cognizant of the limits of their visions, their "certainty" regarding how to tackle
whiteness. The assumption is that one is capable of learning from the so-called
other "who can open up a world aspired to by the self. The Other also provides
us with objectivity, not in a hostile sense, but in the sense of correcting the
limitations of our own perspective."[51]

Learning from people of color, opening oneself to them, also places one in
relationship to the possibility of being ambushed in new and radical ways.
Whites must respectfully position themselves in relation to people of color such
that whites will learn to expect to be ambushed, to be open to it. Whites who are
open to life-affirming and transformative transactions with people of color are
not simply waiting defensively in fear of new information that may threaten to
destabilize their sense of self. Rather, there is an openness to having one's world
transformed and cracked. Being ambushed within such transactional contexts
can lead to profound experiences of liminality, throwing the white self into
spaces of rich uncertainty and the actual phenomenological experience of the
white self as permeable. Hence, the reality of being ambushed should be
regarded as valuable to growth, not a sign of defeat. Indeed, there are trans-
formative possibilities in the valorization of an ambush experience as a mode of

surprise, as an experiential opening from which one learns and teaches about the insidious nature of whiteness. Hence, *thankfulness* ought to be the attendant attitude as one is ambushed. For in that moment, whites come to learn more about themselves, expanding knowledge of the self, revealing how the white self is other to itself. In this way, not only does the humility of thankfulness on the part of whites function as a bridge to others, but it also functions as a bridge to the white self. This type of transformative possibility was clearly exemplified in the above examples of Wise and Lazarre. Wise was able to utilize the ambush experience, embracing it as a surprise, as a challenge to his own antiracist practices. Lazarre also was able to turn her ambush experience into something positive, realizing that her construction of the police harassment of the innocent black male as unbelievable was a function of her being blinded by her own white "innocence" and privilege.

Theorizing ambush as a form of surprise in the case of Michael Richards' tirade helps to demonstrate the transformative possibilities inherent in this idea. While Richards noted that his racism came through and fired out of him, even though he said he believes he is not a racist, he did *not* use that moment of ambush as a moment of productive disclosure. He could have used that moment to focus on how whiteness snares good intentioned white people. Self-reflexively, he could have stopped himself and redirected his anger toward the shock of his own racism, creating a disruptive space of communicative power that addressed both the unconscious operations of racism and how the operations of racism can be temporarily fissured and silenced. At the moment of realizing he had been ambushed, there would have been an interval of space in which the repetition of whiteness could have been proven unreliable. Even as he shouted "nigger" six times, there was still space for that moment of realization that he was being ambushed, and, hence, a moment of redemptive possibility. Such a moment of recognition would require the thematization of just how incredibly frustrated and outraged he felt as he had spoken those words and had dehumanized those Blacks in attendance while also positioning those whites in attendance as racists as well. After all, to shout, "A nigger, look it's a nigger!" presupposed a communicative act addressed to those who would readily recognize the presence of a "nigger." Moreover, he does say "we'd" have you upside down. This is an implied reference to whites in the audience and a form of historical reference to the reality of the spectacle of *collective* white gazers vis-à-vis lynched Black bodies. Nevertheless, the ambush would have provided the opportunity for creative intervention, for assuming the subject position of an ally.

The white ally engages in a form of relationality that requires a suspension of self-certainty, arrogance, fear, and other-blaming. Inherent in the ambush experience is the possibility of fissure and suspension, a counter-hailing for antiracist action. This suspension can simultaneously involve new imaginings, daring spontaneity, and a form of world-traveling that does not seek to assimil-

ate or to intrude.[52] Indeed, the incipiency and development of alliances require "leaping" forward beyond various agonistic, supercilious, and procrustean presuppositions. And as long as the white self qua "superior" is defined dialectically in relation to the Black self qua "inferior," the possibility of a genuine alliance is precluded. White parasitism must be revealed, *shaken* and *cracked* at its core. When the fractures and fissures begin to show themselves, "it's best to avoid denial . . . wait for new possibilities to emerge. Isn't that what white folks need to allow? Must [white folk] not crack up in order to be something new?"[53] Indeed, "as long as whites are in bad faith and phobogenic constructions of blacks provide needed reinforcements of ego determinations," according to Paget Henry, "antiblack racism will be with us."[54] It is important to note, though, that while the above conceptualization and requirement of a form of suspension is necessary to transformative praxis on the part of whites, suspension does not wipe away, as if by magic, the force of white racist effective history and the ingrained and habituated practices of white people or the racist institutional structures that privilege them. In this case, suspension is both tactical and ethical, but it does not obviate all of the messy work ahead.

There is also the issue of the meaning of alliances that—while grounded in mutual respect and the deployment of suspension—are still shaped by radically differential social power positions that are buttressed by material distribution along racial lines. That is, even as one demonstrates disaffiliative efforts in relation to whiteness, one's whiteness is recuperative through mobility back to the vanilla suburbs. The larger issue, one I do not address here, is whether the ultimate aims of undoing whiteness involve making sure that people of color have greater opportunities to get a piece of the American pie (in short, having liberal democracy work for them in more effective ways) or whether undoing whiteness requires redistributing wealth and power. The point is that many whites may be willing to do the necessary work to engage in new and transformative ways of undoing whiteness without any concern for tackling issues around disparity of wealth along racial lines. However, undoing whiteness is inextricably linked to undoing those structural power relationships that continue to privilege whites, even as they strive to perform whiteness differently within the context of transacting with people of color on a daily basis. While undoing whiteness in elevator encounters is one thing or deploying critical pedagogies that challenge white teachers to trouble their whiteness in the classroom is another, doing these things does not necessarily lead to strong advocacy on the part of whites for broader systemic structural change. Undoing whiteness must also involve undoing structural power as defined along racial lines.

While existential conversion is *not* sufficient for undoing the various ways in which whiteness reasserts power and privilege, it functions as a necessary critical process in terms of exposing the contingency and historicity of whiteness, and challenging and troubling its ideological constitution as absolute and permanent. This raises the issue of the serious man/world of whiteness as

developed in chapter 5. Consider the traumatic experience Du Bois had with the tall white newcomer who refused to exchange visiting cards with him at school. She refused it peremptorily, as Du Bois says, with a glance. As a basis upon which to give critical attention to ways of disrupting whiteness as absolute consider the tall newcomer's phenomenological or lived mode of relationality to her own sense of identity. While many scholars have critically explored how significant this experience was for Du Bois, the white tall newcomer's mode of being is often left undertheorized.

When the white girl refused to exchange cards with Du Bois, she performed her identity through negation, establishing her space both physically and psychologically. She lived her body in an expansive modality. Her identity is lived with epistemic certainty. She lived her body as a ready-made sacrosanct site that defined and excluded differences. Her embodiment was itself a site of white racist dramaturgy, an enactment of a role, which actually differentially *valued* and exaggerated differences. For the newcomer, she simply *acted* with an always already sense of entitlement. She lived her body "as a corporeal entitlement to spatiality."[55] As she moved through space, she racially carved it up, as it were, distorting it, marking it with her white presence. Embodying space in this raced way, she demarcated her immediate lived space as clean, untouchable, privileged. Her *refusal*, although clearly disclosed, simultaneously involved a process of concealment. In other words, there is a white racist dominant history of knowledge production that established her white identity as secure.

Having unconsciously internalized what it means to be "normal" (that is, white), her identity was sealed, "leak-proof"; she had become a site of a monadic structure who came to believe that her identity and her whiteness were *nonrelational*. Of course, to remain ignorant of the dynamic relational basis upon which her white identity was actually predicated functions as the desideratum of whiteness. Indeed, she has come to live her whiteness, her identity, as an unconditioned state of being. But her identity was already connected to those nonwhite identities that she judged abhorrent. On my view, as I have argued previously, existential conversion addresses the unconditioned presumption of white identity. White identity, in other words, constitutes a site of value-creating force that elides the historical contingency of such values. Through existential conversion, whites are encouraged to come to terms with the reality that white identity is created within a socially situated context and not grounded in some transcendental source.

The tall newcomer has become *absorbed* in the world of whiteness. Within the process of "being-in" the world of whiteness, she *lives* its fantasies, psychologically projecting them outwardly and inwardly, all the while unaware of how she is both duped by whiteness and has become a vehicle through which whiteness is performed. She animates white racist scripts on cue, because they have become habituated modes of bodily enactment.

She has learned to enact particular somatic responses characteristic of white bodies that transact with nonwhite bodies within normative spaces that are designed to demarcate and create a wedge between normative white bodies and "anomalous" nonwhite bodies. Like the white woman in the elevator, she lives her body through inherited legitimation narratives and unconscious habits.[56] She lives her body within the framework of a narrative that projects her forward, placing her ahead of herself, forming calcified ready-made responses to those nonwhite others.[57] Her narrative is structured by an overarching myth that provides the necessary axiological and epistemological frame of reference to make sense of her identity. In short, the tall newcomer has come to inhabit the serious world of whiteness. The serious world of whiteness functions as a pre-established axiological and ontological cartography that imposes fixed coordinates that both reward and punish whites. The white order of things appears to place categorical demands on human reality.[58]

On the other side of whiteness as a serious mode of engaging and transacting with the world is the existentially converted white who recognizes the ideological grounds upon which whiteness is a farce and that whiteness is a site of values that are existentially founded. "Existentialist conversion," as Eleanore Holveck notes, "cancels the grounding of values in any absolute, whether that absolute be a god, a church, a state, etc. By existentialist conversion, one sees that all values refer to choices made by someone who is finite and limited."[59] Deemed an absolute, whiteness is a perfectly seductive trap for the (white) serious man/woman to take flight in the face of his/her freedom. Of course, other forms of white flight (the privilege of mobility) literally provide whites with safe spaces in terms of which white bonding and white fear are reproduced. In the case of the tall newcomer, she has come to embody her whiteness as it "permanently confers value upon [her]."[60] What is required is "an affectivity which would throw [her] dangerously beyond [her whitely self]."[61]

The process of existential conversion has implications for profoundly new forms of relationality. Not only are phenotypic whites faced with the anxiety of relating to nonwhites in terms that render problematic their previous racialized epistemic certainty regarding the nonwhite other, but existential conversion calls into question, indeed disrupts, their previous certainty regarding how they understand and value themselves. The fundamental premise of existential conversion is that one is not condemned to whiteness, but that there are always other ways of grounding one's identity, performing one's whiteness, even as one's whiteness is interpellated within the larger social world of white power. Existential conversion holds out the possibility that the tall newcomer may come to terms with the reality that whiteness is not an absolute value.[62]

Whiteness, in this context, does not refer to that which functions as a phenotypic marker. In choosing freedom, the newcomer chooses against acting in the world whitely. While I have heard whites express the desire to tear off their white skin, choosing freedom does not mean that one chooses against one's

phenotypic white body *as such*. To deny one's white body is to fall into bad faith. Hence, the newcomer should not reject her body. In choosing freedom, she embraces her facticity and also rejects the privilege of *exclusive transcendence*, a privilege that whites have claimed for themselves. In rejecting her whiteness as exclusive transcendence, since this is dialectically linked to the reduction of Blacks to mere facticity and immanence, she affirms not only the facticity of Blacks but their transcendence as well. She comes to realize that the *serious* world of whiteness can be opposed, and that what she previously took to be inevitable—the supremacy and superiority of whiteness—has turned out to be a *particular historically* contingent formation predicated upon a lie that passed itself off as the truth through white performative repetition. Through this repetition, white orders of power appear "natural." In other words, white forms of life constitute a framework of intelligibility "that helps whites interpret their experience and that influences behavior, alters emotions, and shapes what whites see and do not see."[63] Through existential conversion in relation to whiteness, the newcomer is able to live her body as a "calling out to the other" in his/her otherness as opposed to forms of communicative practices that occlude, seal off, and stereotype. She creates cracks within the prison house of whiteness's *sameness*, rejecting the ideological structuring of her identity as fixed and superior, thus unsettling and troubling habituated perceptual practices and fixed (racialized) spatial modes of bodily comportment in relation to nonwhite bodies. Disrupting various racialized spatial modes of bodily comportment further troubles and challenges the ways in which she/whites live her/their spatiality, productively contributing to the undoing of "the racial and racist civilized 'we' from the wild 'them.'"[64]

Hence to live her phenotypic white body in freedom, which is a continuous act of reclamation, is to live her body in ways that facilitate the freedom of nonwhite bodies; whereas, living one's whiteness in the mode of the serious attempts to occlude the nonwhite from speaking, from exercising greater spatial mobility, and, in many cases, from being. To challenge the serious world of whiteness is to question, to counter what one sees, even as the field of one's white gaze continues to construct the social world falsely. It is to welcome a form of "distortion" that sees through what has been constituted via white racist orders as "clarity." Hence, as the body of color enters various racialized spaces, indeed, elevator spaces, one must valorize the cracks, one must valorize the experience of ambush. "Don't repair them. Instead, welcome the crumble of white supremacist lies."[65] In other words, one strives to disrupt the hail of whiteness. This raises the issue of ambiguity that I raised earlier. One is at once an expression of whiteness, but its possibility for cracking, disrupting, and resignification renders problematic such an expression. As Alecia Y. Jackson notes, "I am produced through certain power relations, but I am also a site for reworking those power relations so that something different and less constraining can be produced."[66]

I conceptualize existential conversion in relation to whiteness as a constant affirmation of new forms of responsiveness, new forms of challenging unearned privileges, and assiduous attempts at founding antiwhiteness values. After all, one has to live in the everyday world in which whiteness—despite one's commitment to live one's body in freedom, that is, contrary to the expectations and ready-made meanings that always already exist in the serious world of whiteness—continues to be seductive. To "live one's body in freedom" therefore does not mean that one lives one's body outside various situational constraints and historical forces, but that one continues to achieve those self-reflexive moments that attempt to destabilize various habituated white normative practices. Hence existential conversion, at least with respect to whiteness, must involve a self-reflexive way of being-in-the-world where the newcomer continually takes up the project of disaffiliation from whitely ways of being, even as she undergoes processes of interpellation. My point here is that as she lives her body in freedom, as she challenges the white racialized and racist world, its discourses and power relations, as she attempts to forge new habits and new forms of self-knowledge, she does not live her body outside of history. There is no nonracial Archimedean point from which she can unsettle racism. Hence, while a process of constant destabilization that cracks away at whiteness is indispensable as a value and a form of praxis, there is the realization that "a cartography of race would better describe a white race traitor as 'off center,' that is, as destabilizing the center while still remaining in it."[67] So, even as the newcomer conceivably extends her hand across the color-line, reaching out to the young W. E. B. Du Bois, thus throwing her whiteness off center and situates herself in that space of liminality, she will, at some point, leave the classroom and be thrown back into the serious world of whiteness where the rich possibilities of ambush are covered over.

Concerning the insidious forms of whitely modes of being, Bailey's distinction between privilege-cognizant and privilege-evasive white scripts proves helpful. Within the framework of this discourse, the newcomer must constantly reaffirm her commitment to enacting a privilege-cognizant white script, that is, she must remain cognizant of the ways in which she is privileged (or privileges herself) because of her phenotypic whiteness. According to Bailey, privilege-cognizant whites are race traitors "who refuse to animate the scripts whites are expected to perform, and who are unfaithful to worldviews whites are expected to hold."[68] In this way, privilege-cognizant whites are committed to "doing whiteness differently."[69] If "race is constituted through the repetition of acts, verbal and nonverbal, that continue to communicate difference," then whites must engage in counterstylized iterative anti-whitely acts.[70]

It is not easy to discern the subtle and yet pervasive ways in which the ideology of whiteness profoundly distorts mutually flourishing forms of human relationality. Contesting the normative status of whiteness "means living in constant struggle, always working with self and those around you. . . . It is a

process that . . . [builds on] the notion that all benefit when whiteness inflicts less violence [on] others in the world."[71] But it is important to note, in Beauvoirian terms, that whiteness is like an "inhuman [idol] to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice" all that is of value, even the white body itself. Therefore, the serious world of whiteness is a very dangerous world. Whiteness makes tyrants out of human beings. The white elides "the subjectivity of his [her] choice" through the constitution of whiteness as an absolute value that "is being asserted through him [her]." This is done at the expense of white accountability. In this way, one is able to deny "the subjectivity and the freedom of others, to such an extent that, sacrificing them to the [idol of whiteness]" means absolutely nothing. On this score, it is accurate to describe whiteness as a form of fanaticism that is "as formidable as the fanaticism of passion."[72] White-ness as fanaticism occludes other voices from speaking, and other bodies from being, and other ways of revealing and performing the depths of, and the promises inherent in, human reality as *homo possibilitas.* So, don't be fooled. Whiteness is *not* the best that history has to offer. This conclusion signals the historical bankruptcy of whiteness as an ethical exemplar, the problematic self-certainty and narcissism of whiteness, the historical contingency of whiteness, and the possibility for new and nonhegemonic hermeneutic horizons.

Notes

1. Lisa Heldke, "On Being a Responsible Traitor," in *Daring to be Good: Essays in Feminist Ethico-Politics,* ed. Bat-Ami Bar On and Ann Ferguson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 96.

2. Joe R. Feagin and Herman Vera, *White Racism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 16.

3. Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 197.

4. Jane Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 33.

5. Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness,* 33.

6. Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2005), 133.

7. Wise, *White Like Me,* 133.

8. Wise, *White Like Me,* 128.

9. Wise, *White Like Me,* 131.

10. Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness,* 189.

11. "Kramer's Racist Tirade Caught on Tape," www.tmz.com/2006/11/20/kramers-racist-tirade-caught-on-tape.

12. "Mean Michael Richards," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2gzv-fy7ro.

13. Monique Roelofs, "Racialization as an Aesthetic Production: What Does the Aesthetic Do for Whiteness and Blackness and Vice Versa?" in *White on White/Black on Black,* ed. George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 112.