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Book Review: "Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race" (George Yancy)

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Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race
George Yancy
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
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In the text, *Black Bodies White Gazes: the Continuing Significance of Race*, George Yancy provides a powerful narrative concerning what he identifies in his introduction as the historical ontology of blackness as this applies to the fluid presencing of human embodiment within the context of anti-black racism. More importantly, Yancy explores the way in which whiteness becomes constructed as a “transcendental norm,” which is never “raced”, but whose “privilege’ is always implicated in the problematic presencing of the black body. However, he also argues that the historical objectification of blackness is never sufficient to completely silence those potentialities for black embodiment which seek to construct an alternative meaning(s) for blackness that is not beholden to this transcendental normative process. As such, the social presencing of the Black body is never totally captured by the ongoing historical project of anti-black racism and is therefore always capable of constructing an alternative meaning for blackness that is free from the objectifying restrictions imposed upon it.

More generally, then, the body’s meaning is a site of contestation. That the body is a site of contested meanings signifies the historicity of its “being” as lived and meant within the interstices of social semiotics, institutional forces, and various discursive frames of reference. (Yancy, 2008, p. xxii)

Yancy’s description of this historical presencing of the body evokes current phenomenological perspectives related to the *givenness* of the event and the presencing of embodiment reflected in the work of Jean-Luc Marion, Claude Romano and James Mensch. The body as contested site, implies that the meaning of these embodied interactions unfold as a fluid historical possibility that always retain the potentiality for a different type of lived

meaning that transcends or moves beyond that which was previously possible or defined by what *they say*. By so doing, Yancy removes the Black body and its signifying givenness away from the pathological orbit of the white imagination, allowing it to reclaim that which has been lost in the transaction between white privilege and black objectification. However, he also informs us that his real or primary target is the undoing of whiteness and the privileged vantage of the white gaze. He warns us, however, that such a goal demands ongoing vigilance.

Hence, I critique the performance metaphor of “undoing” whiteness, arguing that this process does not culminate in a person’s having “arrived” in the form of an idyllic anti-racist. Rather, undoing whiteness is a continuous process of material, institutional, and discursive forces that involve the reassertion of whiteness as privilege and power. I argue that disarticulating the white gaze involves a continuous effort on the part of whites to forge new ways of seeing, knowing, and being. (Yancy, 2008, xxiii)

To see differently, to “disarticulate the white gaze,” implies a different type of being that not only rejects the privilege of whiteness as a transcendental norm, but also rejects the possibility of a finished or totalized presencing for the meaning of black embodiment. As such, the body loses its focal presencing as a site of contestation, and becomes a moment of shared potentiality evoked by the givenness of this event. The French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion argues that the givenness of any event is predicated upon the degree to which human experience is open to that which is given and formulates this possibility as “more reduction, more givenness.” Though stated in slightly different language, Yancy appears to be exploring the same concern.

The onto-historical formulation and construction of the black body through the lens of the white gaze, denies the givenness of the black body by its exclusive manifestation as a pathological social object. To disarticulate the power of the white gaze is to dismantle the

meaning-generating processes that make this objectification possible. To attempt to impose a specific set of socially derived meanings for the world is to deny and limit what that world may actually be or mean. But Yancy maintains such a result may be difficult to achieve.

As recent events have sadly demonstrated, the vitality of white privilege will not be easily dismantled. The election of a black President, a monumental event for a country with our history, has done little in the way of lasting change and certainly supports Yancy's claim that the undoing of whiteness must be seen as an ongoing process. The thinly veiled rhetoric of white vitriol often cloaked as attacks against so-called socialist leanings or religious afflation, sound all too familiar to those who have heard this type of discourse before and certainly causes one to question just how far we have come as a nation: the continuing significance of race indeed.

Yancy takes the reader through a variety of situations and examples, some personal, some social or political and some philosophical without ever losing his focus or lessening his narrative power. *Black Bodies, White Gazes* is a powerful testament to the continuing significance of race and the work that is still to be done. By focusing on the relationship between the white gaze and black embodiment, Yancy recognizes that the ground for liberation, the ground from which the disarticulation of whiteness must occur, is a co-constituted event that calls into service both sides of this relationship and charges them with specific tasks that if executed correctly and honestly, changes them both.

Finally, this text also provides a powerful theoretical framework by which to conceptualize and explore the continuing significance of race within the practice of criminology, criminal justice and offender treatment. Within these institutionalized practices, the black body is defined as a finished pathological presence that is stripped of its humanity and totalized as a "fixed and material truth." Once so constructed, these disciplinary practices become little more the technologized extensions of systemic mechanisms of control that are more focused on containment and isolation than rehabilitation and restoration. *Black Bodies, White Gazes* provides an important

philosophical critique that not only addresses the dynamic of white privilege and its effects on black embodiment, but also begins to construct an ethics of the body, which seeks to regain the humanity of our shared existence. This is an important book that should be read, taught and discussed for some time to come.