

## How Can You *Teach* Me if You Don't Know Me? Embedded Racism and White Opacity

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When I was asked to contribute an essay within the context of philosophy of education, I immediately thought about the theme of “diversity.” I thought that it would be productive to discuss how different cultural experiences add to a more healthy educational experience for students and teachers alike. I thought about how nice it would be to talk about how we as educators have become more open to “differences,” open to those who are *not* like us, open to new experiences that challenge our assumptions and perspectives. Hence, I thought just how great it would be to rejoice collectively regarding how well we do at being true to our postmodern sensibilities, sensibilities that valorize multiplicity and difference, sensibilities that celebrate our complex and differential epistemic standpoints, and sensibilities that encourage and support our diverse ways of constructing and thinking about the world. But then I thought that this approach would be far too easy. It occurred to me that we do not need a praise song of comfort, but something cacophonous, something far more disruptive. Indeed, it would be a waste of *your* time to talk about diversity in terms of what I call “Odysseus-style diversity.” If you recall, Odysseus was the Greek mythical figure who tied himself to the mast of a ship and had his men stuff wax in their ears so that they would not hear the beautiful voices of the Sirens lest they be thrown to their death.

So, I decided to talk about diversity in a way that would create risk, something that Odysseus failed to do. In other words, diversity, within the context of white North America, requires something more radical than Odysseus was willing to do. Hence, I think that it is important that I deploy one central pedagogical value that I hold dear, one that will shape the spirit of this talk: *parrhesia* (or fearless speech). Fearless or courageous speech involves genuine risk and vulnerability. Fearless or courageous speech, however, also involves fearless or courageous listening, which is a form of listening that does not leave us intact, unmoved, and dogmatic. *One must be willing to listen to what is often most difficult and painful to hear* about oneself and our society. So, I decided to talk about what I see as part of the problem for genuine diversity to take place: namely, the problem of whiteness. My talk then is not designed to leave us feeling “good” about ourselves; it is not designed to make us feel that my presence here — the fact that you see before you a Black philosopher talking about diversity — is a sign of *your* progress, and *your* liberal political sensibilities, *your* openness to dialogue. After all, if whiteness is the problem, then it is important that we avoid reinforcing the centrality of that problem.

So, my contention is that instances of diversity where whiteness remains the center of privilege, invisibility, and power are not genuine instances of diversity at all. If diversity-talk is to be more robust, and if diversity at the level of *lived* experience is to be more fruitful and vivacious, then it is necessary that we engage

in the process of un-concealing whiteness, revealing its subtle dynamism and structure. After all, without this pre-conditional critical work of naming whiteness, of critically engaging whiteness, “diversity” might simply function to serve the hidden values of whites as a group; diversity might function as a way of feeding white moral narcissism; and, diversity might function as a way of making whites comfortable, giving them a false sense of post-racial and post-racist arrival. What we really want to do, then, is to make whiteness “unsafe” as a normative category. Therefore, it is important to put whiteness at risk. Otherwise, whiteness can maintain its stability precisely through the rhetoric of self-congratulatory processes as it constructs its own safe vision of diversity. What is necessary is a discussion about diversity that raises the stakes, like walking from Jerusalem to Jericho, where something is “lost,” where we disorient ourselves, where we “dwell near” others in a transformative way, where we do not simply walk by and notice that which is different from us, but where we “dwell near” differences, where we tarry with differences. So, before we can talk about happy stories of diversity, we must, as Sara Ahmed would say, hear unhappy stories about racism,<sup>1</sup> specifically the way in which the Black body constitutes not a site of difference as the *human* other, but difference as the *problematic* other, the other who is only allowed a voice so long as that voice does not disrupt whiteness as usual. The title of this essay — “How Can You Teach Me if You Don't Know Me?” — suggests the idea that to know me as an embodied Black person it is necessary that I am actually heard, that is, that I am not occluded by white voices from speaking from my own embodied experiences. Indeed, it is also important that my voice is not simply rearticulated through a prism of white discourse that can and often does obfuscate the voices of people of color. Another way of thinking about the critique of whiteness as implied within the title of this essay is to ask: How can you critically engage the theme of diversity if *you don't know yourself*? This question gives the problem back to whites, signifying their own cognitive and emotive distortion vis-à-vis themselves. Indeed, the heart of this question posed to whites involves a powerful act of transposition: How does it feel to be a *white* problem? Rethinking the term “nigger” through the process of reversal, James Baldwin asks, “But if I am not the ‘nigger’ and if it is true that your invention reveals you, then who is the nigger?” Baldwin goes on to say, “I give you your problem back. You're the nigger, baby, it isn't me.” As long as whites see themselves as normative, and I am different *qua* “nigger,” diversity will function as a cover, a political maneuver, a mere empty gesture. Baldwin's point forces us to ask: Will the real “nigger” please stand up?

#### CLICKING SOUNDS

The sounds of car doors locking are deafening: *Click. Click, Click. Click, Click, Click. Click, Click, Click, Click, Click. ClickClickClickClickClickClickClick*. The *clicking* sounds are always already accompanied by white nervous gestures, and eyes that want to look, but are hesitant to do so. The *click* ensures their safety, effectively re-signifying their white bodies as in need of protection vis-à-vis the site of danger, death, doom, and *blackness*. In fact, the *clicks* begin to return me to myself as this dangerous beast, a phantom, rendering my body the site of microtomy and volatility.

The *clicks* attempt to seal my identity as a dark savage. The *clicking* sounds mark me; they inscribe me, “re-materializing” my presence, as it were, in ways that I know to be untrue — *in ways that are not me*. Unable to stop the *clicking*, unable to stop white women from tightening the hold of their purses as I walk by, unable to stop white women from crossing to the other side of the street once they have seen me walking in their direction, unable to stop white men from looking several times over their shoulders as I walk behind them minding my own business, unable to establish a form of recognition that creates a space of trust or liminality, there are times when I want to become *their* fantasy, to become *their* Black monster, *their* bogeyman. In the case of the *clicks*, I want to pull open the car door and shout: “Surprise! You’ve just been carjacked by a ghost, a fantasy of *your own* creation. Now, get the hell out of the car!” But, of course, this act of agency, this act of protest would simply reinforce the racist stereotype of the Black male as brutal and violent.

But what if the clicking sounds could speak? What would they communicate to me? *Click* (nigger). *Click* (nigger). *Click* (nigger). *Click* (nigger). *Click, Click* (nigger, nigger). *Click, Click, Click* (nigger, nigger, nigger). *Click, Click, Click, Click* (nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger). *ClickClickClickClickClickClickClickClickClick* (*niggerniggerniggerniggerniggerniggerniggernigger*). The clicking sounds would begin to fragment my existence, cut away at my integrity, depicting me in the form of an essence, a solid-type. *Click* (thug), *Click* (criminal), *Click* (thief), *Click* (danger), *Click* (hypersexual), *Click* (predator), *Click* (violent), *Click* (wild), *Click* (primitive), *Click* (angry), *Click* (savage), *Click* (rapist). I am on the receiving side of the *clicks*. And yet, those whites in their cars, through the sheer act of locking their doors, perform their *white* identities as in need of “safety,” as in need of “protection.” The *clicks* signify multiple layers of *their* identity. *Click* (white), *Click, Click* (white, white), *Click, Click, Click*, (white, white, white), *Click* (pure). *Click* (innocent). *Click* (good). *Click* (law-abiding). *Click* (vulnerable). *Click* (decent). *Click* (threatened). *Click* (prey). *Click* (better than). *Click* (epistemically credible). *Click* (civilized).

Not only are the bodies that initiate the *clicks* performing their white identities through the *clicks*, but the *clicks* themselves install white identities, interpellate white identities, and solidify white identities. The *clicks* are not isolated, pure auditory data, but markers of social meaning, signifiers of regulated space, forms of disciplining bodies, and part of a racial and racist web of significance that bespeaks the sedimentation of racist history and racist iteration. Yet, as suggested, the clicks misidentify me. The clicks “de-materialize” me, only to “re-materialize” me in a form that I do not recognize. W.E.B. Du Bois argues that for those Blacks who have given thought to the situation of Black people in America they will often ask themselves, “What, after all, am I?”<sup>2</sup> Through an uneventful, mundane act of white index fingers locking their car doors (*click, click*), the Color Line is drawn. After so many clicks, on so many occasions, I am installed as a stranger to myself, forcing a peculiar question: Where *is* my body? The question itself makes sense once the body is theorized not as a brute *res extensa*, but as a site of confluent norms, as that whose meaning is a function of a complex interpretive and perceptual framework.

I am *not* a criminal, a beast waiting to attack white people. Hence, their sense of safety is a fabrication. They have created a false dichotomy: an outside (the Blacks) as opposed to the inside (the whites). But what if that inside, that feeling of safety, that fabricated space, is a construction that is parasitic upon the false construction of the Black body as dangerous? If so, then their sense of themselves as “safe” is purchased at the expense of the possibility for a greater, more robust sense of human community or *Mitsein*. They have cut themselves off from the possibility of fellowship, of expanding their identities, of reaping the rewards of being touched by the Black other and thereby shaking the boundaries of their white selves. To live a life predicated upon a lie often requires more lies to cover it over. Black bodies, then, function to conceal the truth that so many whites lead lives that are constructed around a profound deception — namely, white people need protecting from Black people. The need for this lie bespeaks a (white) self that is on the precipice of ontological evisceration.

#### RACE AS *LIVED*

There has been a great deal of important work that argues that race is semantically empty, ontologically bankrupt, and scientifically meaningless. In short, there are many philosophers who argue that race is an illusion, that there is no factual support for a racial taxonomy. Since race has no referent and does not cut at the joints of reality, so to speak, it is said to be a fiction. From this, we are advised to abandon the concept of race just as the concepts of phlogiston and spontaneous generation were abandoned. It is important to note, however, that to believe that there is no more to be said about race because it is impossible to reduce it to a naturally occurring object in the spatiotemporal world is to engage in a form of disciplinary hegemony.

My sense is that it is at the level of the *lived* density of race that so much more work needs to be done. It is at this level where the funkiness of race/racism resides. Indeed, I have known whites who are staunchly *against* the claim that the concept of race cuts at the joints of reality. Yet, how they live race, how they live their *own* racism, is unmistakable. I was once interviewed by a white philosopher for a job opening where the department was looking for someone whose areas of specialization were philosophy of race and African American philosophy. I met with this one white male faculty member for an hour. My assumption was that we would spend time talking about what I would teach, what I desired to teach, my curriculum vitae, and so on. However, he spent the bulk of the time talking about *his* “anti-racism.” He also provided a personal narrative incident that was intended to “demonstrate” this. As I recall, there were no questions about my pedagogy or my relatively extensive publication record. Here was a white philosopher who no doubt, if asked, would have said that the concept of race was scientifically vacuous and had no empirical referent in the natural world, that race is a mere social construction/social category. Yet, he felt the need to present himself as “pure,” as someone who was 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. There he was — fully visible, “entrails” revealed — 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. Yet, he doth self-praise too much. It was as if he was preparing me for those “real” white racist others, you know, the “bad” ones. I was unmoved by the implied dichotomy. He needed my approval and admiration. My Black body, my presence, functioned redemptively. In retrospect, I see with greater clarity. This was a situation that must be named: *What white narcissism! What white hubris! Look, A White! Look, A White! Look, A White!* Here was a case where my presence, my voice, my interior complexity had taken a back seat to *his* white narcissism. I was neither heard nor in some sense hearable.

The fact is that whiteness as race continues to exist within the socially and existentially *lived* space of our everyday experiences. The “reality” of race, then, though not a natural kind, is purchased within the framework of a *social ontology* that recognizes the very serious persistence and implications of race beyond what has been called its ontological vacuity.

My work theorizes and understands Black embodiment within the context of white everyday power or hegemony. Within this context, the power of the white gaze, which is a *structured* way of “seeing,” is always already mediated by certain norms and values, interpellating the Black body as that which is epistemologically and ontologically “given.” This is a situation that involves the collapse of ontology and epistemology into each other without much slippage. What it (the Black body) “is” and how “it” is known is constructed through gazes, bodily gestures, visual images, various representations, and discursive practices that have over-determined its being and constructed it as a denigrated *thing*.

#### BLACK BODY AS THING

The use of “thing” here is more than a tropological reference, particularly when one thinks of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel who thought that Black people did not possess *Geist* or spirit. Hegel says, “Nothing consonant with humanity is to be found in his [the Negro’s] character.”<sup>3</sup> The Negro is an animal man, sensuous, and without subjectivity, self-consciousness, and the capacity of representation. This is why the Negro is unable to represent in an abstract sense that human flesh is a body that is capable of psychological associations, and not simply an object of the senses, something to be eaten. In short, the Black body has endured a process of both inscription *and* description (both terms intimately linked).

Think of the lynched Black body — a *thing* in need of discipline. For example, in 1934, twenty-three-year-old Claude Neal was accused of killing a white woman and it is said that a confession was wrung out of him, meaning that it was forced, twisted, or strained out of him. Neal was first castrated. His penis was cut off and stuffed in his mouth and he was made to say that he liked it. His testicles were then stuffed in his mouth, and he was forced to say that he liked them. His sides were sliced. Now and then someone would slice off a finger or a toe. Also, red-hot irons were used to burn him from top to bottom. He was eventually killed. Pictures were sold of his mutilated body and other body parts were kept as prized possessions.<sup>4</sup>

Or think about the rape of enslaved Black women's bodies that were said to be always sexually available, indeed, hyper-sexual *essences* ("things") which, therefore, could not be raped. Such Black bodies (the other of the second sex) were metaphorically open, always desiring to be taken. Black women's bodies might be said to be holes without bottoms, or perhaps just bottoms with holes.

And if 1934 is too remote to engender some sense of recognition regarding how to treat such *Black things*, think of 1999 in New York when Black male Amadou Diallo — a thing-like essence always already on the brink of violence — was shot at 41 times by white police officers and hit with 19 bullets after reaching for his wallet. Or think of Black male Abner Louima in 1997, who was handcuffed by white police officers as a broom handle was pushed into his rectum by these police officers and then was allegedly forced into his mouth. Or, think of Susan Smith, the white woman who, in 1994, drowned her children and then blamed it on a Black man. Or think of Charles Stuart, a white man who, in 1989, shot and killed his pregnant wife, shot himself in the abdomen, and then blamed it on a Black man. The mantra: "A Black man did it!" occludes knowing the other; he is already *known*.

Or think of Bill Bennett, former secretary of education under Ronald Reagan, and his remark: "I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime you could, if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every Black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down."<sup>5</sup> He then goes on to say how impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible this would be, but yet true. So, while he clearly disagrees with the statistic that crime is down because abortion is up, he has no problem using the epistemic operator "true" vis-à-vis the apparent necessary connection between aborting *Black babies* and the decrease in crime rate. Note that he says "I do *know*." In short, Bennett *knows* that it is *true* that the category of Blacks who are still in the womb will *necessarily* commit crimes, and he knows this prior to their birth. Hence, in the name of a future that we cannot possibly predict, little Jamal, let us say, has already committed a crime, his body is already against the law, because Bennett knows that it is true that if he is aborted our crime rate will go down. Here is a case where the Black fetus is always already the essence of criminality, prior to its birth. This is not a case of three strikes and you're out or even one strike and you're out. Presumably, all that is required for one to be out is to be a *Black thing*. At the moment of conception, then, Black life is already out.

Or what about being a Black philosopher within a country and within academic contexts where Black intelligence is denied, where, for example, I become an oxymoron as a Black philosopher standing before you only mimicking speech. David Hume said of Negroes that they are parrots.<sup>6</sup> Worse off than the poets critiqued by Plato, Blacks even lack inspiration. In other words, Black people can say intelligent things, but we don't comprehend what it is that we say.

#### THE ELEVATOR SCENARIO

Well-dressed, I enter an elevator where a white woman waits to reach her floor. She "sees" my Black body, though not the same one I have seen reflected back to me from the mirror on any number of occasions. She sees a Black body "supersaturated

with meaning, as they [Black bodies] have been relentlessly subjected to [negative] characterization by newspapers, newscasters, popular film, television programming, public officials, policy pundits and other agents of representation.”<sup>77</sup> Her body language signifies, “Look, *the Black!*” On this score, though short of a performative locution, her body language functions as an insult. Over and above how my body is clothed, regardless of the fact that I wear a suit and tie, she “sees” a criminal. Indeed, she does not really “see” me. Rather, phenomenologically, she might be said to “see” a black, fleeting expanse, a peripherally glimpsed vague presence of something dark, forbidden, and dreadful. Despite what I think about myself, how I am for-myself, her perspective, her third-person account, seeps into my consciousness. I catch a glimpse of myself through her eyes and just for that moment I experience some form of double consciousness, but what I see does not shatter my identity or unglue my sense of moral decency. After all, from the perspective of white hegemony, hers is deemed the only real point of view. One might say that the white woman’s consciousness of the meaning of my Black body coincides with the meaning of the Black body *as such*, and that from her perspective there is no meaning that the Black body possesses that is foreign to her, that is, a meaning that is capable of enlarging her field of consciousness/“seeing.” When she “sees” me, the symbolic order of “Blackness *as evil*” is collapsed: *I am evil*. My Blackness *is* the stimulus that triggers her response. “The Negro,” as Frantz Fanon notes, “is a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety.”<sup>78</sup> Her gaze is “not a simple seeing, an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible, the workings of racial constraints on what it means to ‘see.’”<sup>79</sup>

As Black, I am the “looked at.” As white, she is the bearer of the “white look.” But note that I have not given my consent to have my body transformed, to have it reshaped, and thrown back to me as something I am supposed to *own*, as a meaning I am supposed to accept. Then again, who does? She clutches her purse, eagerly anticipating the arrival of her floor, “knowing” that this Black predator will soon strike. As she clutches her purse, I am reminded of the sounds of whites locking their car doors as they catch a glimpse of my Black body as I walk by (*click, click*). She fears that a direct look might incite the anger of the Black predator. She fakes a smile. By her smile she hopes to elicit a spark of decency from me. But I don’t return the smile. I fear that it might be interpreted as a gesture of sexual advance. After all, within the social space of the elevator, which has become a hermeneutic transactional space within which all of my intended meanings get falsified, it is as if I am no longer in charge of what I mean/intend. What she “sees” or “hears” is governed by a racist epistemology of certitude that places me under erasure. Her alleged literacy regarding the semiotics of my Black body is actually an instance of profound illiteracy. Her gaze upon my Black body might be said to function like a *camera obscura*. Her gaze consists of a racist socio-epistemic *aperture*, as it were, through which the (white) *light* of “truth” casts an inverted/distorted image. It is through her gaze that I become hyper-vigilant of my own embodied spatiality. On previous occasions, particularly when alone, I have moved my body within the space of the elevator in a non-calculative fashion, paying no particular attention to my bodily

comportment, the movement of my hands, my eyes, the position of my feet. On such occasions, my “being-in” the space of the elevator is familiar; my bodily movements, my stance, are indicative of what it means to *inhabit* a space of familiarity.

The movement away from the familiar is what is effected vis-à-vis the white woman's gaze. My movements become and remain stilted. I dare not move suddenly. The apparent racial neutrality of the space within the elevator (when I am standing alone) has become one filled with white normativity. I feel trapped. I no longer feel bodily expansiveness within the elevator, but constrained. I now begin to calculate, paying almost neurotic attention to the proxemic positioning of my body, making sure that this “black object,” what now feels like an appendage, a weight, is not too close, not too tall, not too threatening. So, I genuflect, but only slightly, a movement that feels like an act of worship. My lived body comes back to me like something ontologically *occurrent*, something merely *there* in its facticity. Notice that she need not speak a word to render my Black body “captive.” She need not scream “Rape!” She need not call me “Nigger!” Indeed, it is not a necessary requirement that she hates me in order for her to script my body in the negative ways that she does. White America has bombarded me and other Black males with the “reality” of our dual hyper-sexualization: “you are a sexual trophy and a certain rapist.” Fanon, aware of the horrible narrative myths used to depict Black bodies, notes that the Negro *is* the genital and *is* the incarnation of evil, being that which is to be avoided and yet desired. Ritualistically enacting her racialized and racist consciousness/embodiment, she reveals her putative racist narrative competence. “One cannot decently ‘have a hard on’ everywhere,” as Fanon says, but within the white imaginary, I apparently fit the bill. To put a slight interpretive inflection on Fanon here, as the insatiable, ever desiring Black penis, a walking, talking, hard-on, I am believed eager to introduce white women into a sexual universe for which the white male “does not have the key, the weapons, or the attributes.”

I am often reminded of my purpose, my inner *racial* teleology, that is, my essence, through popular culture. I sit in movie theaters waiting for “me” to appear on screen, waiting to see “my body” appear before me. For example, in the movie *White Chicks* (2004), I am the character Latrell Spencer who reminds white women: “You know what they say: when you go Black, you’re going to need a wheelchair.” I am the sadistic Black body in search of masochistic white female bodies. I also saw myself in the movie *The Heartbreak Kid* (2007), where a white woman who plays Ben Stiller's wife pleads with him while having sex. She shouts, “Fuck me like a Black guy!”<sup>10</sup> One, of course, feels sorry for Stiller's character as he really tries, with pronounced gyrations, “to have sex with her like a Black guy.” But he does so to no avail. And in *Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo* (1999), I was the Black man who entered a closet with a white woman who was blind. After having sex with her, not only does she miraculously gain sight, but she says: “You’re Black? I knew it!”<sup>11</sup> Here, the Black male penis reveals its multiple talents: not only is it capable of temporarily crippling white women and confining them to wheelchairs and rendering extreme pleasure, but the Black penis is also capable of healing the blind.

The white gaze has fixed me. Like looking into Medusa's eyes, I have been made into stone, stiff, forever erect. It is as if Viagra runs naturally through my veins. In fact, I have become a phantasm. So fictive has the Black body become, that its very material presence has become superfluous. There are times when the Black body is not even needed to trigger the right response. All that is needed is the imago. Fanon observes, "A [white] prostitute told me that in her early days the mere thought of going to bed with a Negro brought on an orgasm."<sup>12</sup> While actual Black bodies suffered during the spectacle of lynchings, one wonders to what extent the *Black body* as phantasmatic object was the fulcrum around which the spectacle was animated.

Within the *lived* and consequential semiotic space of the elevator, the white woman has "taken" my body from me, sending an extraneous meaning back to me, an extraneous *thing*, something *foreign*. What then am I to do? Within this racially saturated field of visibility, I have somehow become this "predator-stereotype" from which it appears hopeless to escape. The white woman thinks that her act of "seeing" me is an act of "knowing" what I am, of knowing what I will do next, that is, hers is believed to be simply a process of unmediated/uninterpreted perception. However, her coming to "see" me as she does is actually a cultural achievement. It is an achievement that not only distorts my Black body, but also distorts her white body. I am, as it were, a phantom, indeed, a "spook," that lives between the interstices of my physical, phenotypically dark body and the white woman's gesticulatory performances. *She performs, ergo, I become the criminal.*

#### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

What am I to do within this racially charged space? How do I "de-segregate" the experienced space within the elevator? Do I enact a disruptive, counter-white racist performance? If so, what would this look like? And what if such a performance gets reinterpreted within her racial schema? I could always turn around and state contemptuously: "Frankly, I don't give a damn about you or your kind!" But this would only confirm her fears of the mythical raging, angry Black male. In other words, my action would only increase her feelings of trepidation. I could also strike up a conversation: "I am a philosopher, with a PhD, and I also attended Yale University." There is the possibility, though, that her white gaze is so fixed that this newly discovered information would not shake her framework. Her head would say yes, but her body would say no. I could also attempt to trigger a sense of shame: "Miss, I assure you that I am not interested in your trashy possessions and I especially have no desire to humiliate you through the violence of rape nor are my sexual desires outside my control." Then again, she could be thinking, "'Nigger,' just who do you think you're talking to?" This would function as a way of eliding the truth that she felt threatened by what she and other whites daily construct as the "Black monster," while still maintaining a sense of "superiority" by questioning that I spoke to her in such an "uppity" fashion.

Then again, what if I have indeed positioned her to feel shame? What if she leaves the elevator feeling bad about what she did, feeling bad about her whiteness? But what happens when this feeling gets quickly transformed into a *positive* sense

of self-discovery? Perhaps she will now make a point of remaining with her shame, wallowing in it as a cleansing agent. Perhaps this shame, as Sara Ahmed might say, is an unhappy performance once it is uttered in the form, "I am ashamed." It is like uttering, "I am modest," which has the result of undoing itself.<sup>13</sup> What happens when her position as the "white-shamed-one" transforms into a place of white narcissism, what happens when being ashamed functions as a false "movement" of transcendence vis-à-vis whiteness? She becomes no longer concerned about Black pain and suffering, or my pain and suffering, but *her* pain, *her* guilt, *her* need to feel good, pure, and ethical. In short, she fails to tarry with Black pain and suffering and she also fails to tarry with the complexity of her whiteness. What appeared to be a movement toward "undoing" whiteness is re-inscribed as a place for precisely *doing* whiteness.

What if the elevator broke down for six hours? Would this create a space for her death or perhaps her salvation? Or perhaps this is a distinction without a difference. What if she got to know me differently during these six hours? What if her perceptual practices began to crack — though slightly? Is this not the beginning of a bridge to diversity? Perhaps we need more experiences where the spaces that we inhabit break down — like the elevator, spaces where we get to "dwell near." Then again, what happens when the elevator starts up again? She returns to a world in which white skin privilege is systemic, where her white privilege gets cited, re-inscribed, and complicit with white norms, where whites come to live their lives within a frame that they fail or refuse to recognize as a frame.

#### THE EMBEDDED WHITE RACIST SELF

Many of my white students have difficulty accepting what I call the "conception of the embedded white racist." On my view, though, this conception of the embedded white racist self helps them to appreciate the ways in which they have missed the social ontologically robust ways in which they are *not* self-identical substances moving through space and time, fully self-present and fully autonomous, etymologically, a "law" unto themselves. Theorized as embedded within a pre-existing social matrix of white power,<sup>14</sup> one that is fundamentally constitutive, though not deterministic, my students are encouraged to think critically about ways in which they are *not* sites of complete self-possession, but sites of dispossession.<sup>15</sup> Part of the meaning of the process of dispossession is that one is not *the* ego-logical sovereign that governs its own meaning, definition, and constitution. The white embodied self, on this score, is "transitive" (etymologically, "passing over"); its being presupposes others, signifying a relational constitution that takes place within the context of material history and situational facticity. The white embodied self is always already constituted through its connectivity to discursive and material practices that are fundamentally racist and in terms of which the white self is already consigned a meaning; it is an embodied white self that has already been given over, as it were, to embedded and embodied white others. My white students, then, have already undergone processes of racist interpellation by the time white racism/whiteness even becomes an issue for them, something to be critically and seriously reckoned

with. So, even as her perceptual practices begin to crack, we must not celebrate too quickly. After all, as white, she has already “*been given over from the start.*”<sup>16</sup>

#### THE OPAQUE WHITE RACIST SELF

Just as my white students have difficulty accepting the “conception of the embedded white racist,” they resist what I refer to as the “conception of the opaque white racist.” Most of them rely on the assumption that they can ascertain their own racism through a sincere act of introspection. They assume that if they “look” deep enough, shine the light of consciousness bright and long enough, that they will be able to ascertain the limits of their racism. Indeed, they assume that the process of ascertaining the limits of one’s white racism is guaranteed by an “all-knowing” consciousness that is capable of peeling back, as it were, various levels of internalized racism and at once discovering a nonracist innocent white core. Yet, I find problematic the very conception of the white racist self as fully capable of such levels of epistemic depth. So, just as the white subject undergoes white racist interpellation within the context of white racist systemic structures and institutional practices, the white self undergoes processes of interpellation vis-à-vis the psychic opacity of the white racist self. One responds, as it were, to the hail of one’s “immanent other” — the opaque white racist self. Faced with important facets of themselves that belie the metaphysics of self-grounding and the metaphysics of presence, whites, more generally, find themselves as already having undergone insidious racist forces that delimit the specious claims to absolute self-knowledge or self-transparency. More compellingly, perhaps this psychic configuration of white racist opacity has a structural “permanence” that has no exit. Moreover, it would seem that the attempt to “stand outside” white racist configurations of embedded, systemic power and privilege is also “pointless,” also providing no exit. To use Otto Neurath’s analogy of “sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock and to reconstruct it there out of the best material,”<sup>17</sup> there is no “dry-dock” where white people can go to rehabilitate their whiteness. The white self is already on the open sea of white power, privilege, and narcissism. To invoke the discourse of repair or rehabilitation, there is *no exit* where the problematic white self, the fractured and broken white vessel, can be repaired or rehabilitated *in toto* and from the bottom up. One must begin with the *racist* white self. To invoke René Descartes’ metaphor, one *cannot* “raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations.”<sup>18</sup> And there is no innocent fictive *tabula rasa* to which one can return. The white self that *desires* to flee white power and privilege is precisely the problematic white self of power and privilege, a white self whose desire may constitute a function of that very white power, privilege, and narcissism *ab initio*. Indeed, the white self that desires and attempts to “rebuild” or “rehabilitate” itself does so precisely within the context of complex and formative white racist social and institutional material forces *and* intra-psychic forces.

So, what are the implications for genuine diversity? How do we make sense of *educare* (“to lead out”) given that there are so many complex layers of whiteness

through which to navigate? Indeed, what if the effort to undo whiteness completely is like reaching for the horizon that forever recedes. In conclusion, then, perhaps there is no place called white innocence. And if this is so, what are the implications for Black bodies and white gazes?

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1. Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 164.
  2. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of the Races," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 24.
  3. Emmanuel Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 128.
  4. Digital History, "A Report from Walter White on the Lynching of Claude Neale," [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning\\_history/lynching/white6.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/lynching/white6.cfm).
  5. Media Matters for America, "Media Matters Exposes Bennett: '[Y]ou Could Abort Every Black Baby in This Country, and Your Crime Rate Would Go Down,'" *Media Matters for America*, September 28, 2005, <http://mediamatters.org/items/200509280006>.
  6. David Hume, "Of National Characters," in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, vol. 3, ed. T.H. Grose (London: Longman, Green, 1882), 252n.
  7. Robert Gooding-Williams, "Look, a Negro!" in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 158.
  8. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 151.
  9. Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Gooding-Williams, 16.
  10. *The Heartbreak Kid*, directed by Peter Farrelly and Bobby Farrelly (Universal City, CA: Dreamworks Pictures, 2007), sec. 44:30.
  11. *Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo*, directed by Mike Mitchell (Culver City, CA: Happy Madison Productions, 1999), sec. 1:21:25.
  12. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 158.
  13. 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](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm).
  14. Of course, people of color are also embedded within this matrix, but the results of their embedded reality are differently experienced from whites. We must also caution against conflating the ways in which people of color experience their embedded reality within this matrix. This also applies to the ways in which people of color are differentially positioned along multiple axes vis-à-vis whites.
  15. I use this term in the philosophical spirit of Judith Butler, particularly in terms of its poststructural implications, though I restrict its use here to speak to white subject formation.
  16. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press), 77.
  17. Otto Neurath, "Protocol Sentences," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A.J. Ayer, trans. George Schlick (Chicago: Free Press, 1959), 201.
  18. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), 13.

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