

and it's a loss. It feels like a loss. But fortunately there's a lot to write about. I actually feel that the part of my life that has nothing to do with South Asia is something that I perhaps haven't written enough about and I'm interested to look there. I've lived in New York fifteen years and other than *Fury* and the last part of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, I haven't set much work there. I'm interested to do that. So I don't know, I'm just going on the journey. It's true that the relationship with India has shifted and it's a sadness to me.

An Interview with George Yancy, Professor of Philosophy, Duquesne University

Aegis: How did you come to philosophy, and how did you come to study it?

Actually, I edited a book called *The Philosophical I: Personal Reflections on Life in Philosophy* in 2002. In that book I wrote a chapter entitled "Between Facticity and Possibility" where I discuss how I fell in love with philosophy. What's interesting in my case is that I initially wanted to be a pilot, so I'd always look in the 'p' encyclopedia. One day I was looking through the 'p' encyclopedia and I came across this word *philosophy*. And I thought, *Oh my goodness, you mean there's a field that I can actually study—and be paid for—and explore all the issues that apparently I had been already thinking about?* It was an incredible revelation. Philosophy meant the love of wisdom (*philo-sophia*) and I had, from my young perspective, already been in love with wisdom. As a young boy, I was very peculiar in this regard. I recall around the age of seven—my mom was fundamentalist Baptist—and she would always have me and my sister say that famous Child's Bedtime Prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." So, we would do that every night. At one point, I would say, "God bless my Mother, my sister," and I would name my friends, and then one day I asked my mom if it was okay to pray for the Devil. Now, that completely threw her off. I think that any mother would have been a bit concerned. My reasoning, at this very young age, was that if I'm praying, and if in fact, according to Christianity, there's this kind of possible intervention in real history—that God can actually reach out and touch people and make a difference—why not the Devil, since, within the context of the Baptist Church, the Devil is deemed that entity that is a separate, independent thing, a malevolent being whose essence it is to be evil. So I thought, if anyone needed saving or blessing, it was the Devil. So my mom thought about it for a while, and in about a month or so, she finally came back with an answer: yes. So there I was as a little kid, saying, "God bless my mother, God bless my friends," and at the very end I'd say, "And God bless the Devil." Of course in retrospect, that was a deeply philosophical and theological issue. What does theology have to say about that? Can the Devil be redeemed? Does the Devil have freedom and why doesn't he choose the right thing to do? Apparently, for the Devil, there's no redemption at all. You know, perhaps it was my way of showing concern for those who are most in need of it. Also, what led me to philosophy was this 'obsession with death.' And I still have that obsession. As a very young boy, at nine or ten years old, I was always wondering—and I didn't use this language—*Why are we finite? Why don't we continue?* I remember once saying to my mom—I was very angry with her—and I said, "Why is it that we were brought here only to leave? It would have been better if I had not been born." Of course, my mom got upset with my saying this, because she had given birth to me, and I'm saying, "I wish I hadn't come into the world." Of course,

I've come to terms with this, realizing that I am here. And while it remains a great mystery, there is tremendous beauty that I am here. In many ways, you might argue that my early philosophical development—although I didn't have the discourse to explain it—was kind of existentialist, especially in terms of thinking about finitude, existential direction, the meaning of human existence, whether there's a God or not.

So there I was loving wisdom, and I usually couch this in terms of having my mother's passion, and having my father's intellectual wherewithal. *Passion*, if you look at that word, etymologically, means, "to suffer." So, I see a fundamental relationship between the exploration of philosophical ideas—particularly when it comes to issues around death, human existence, race, whiteness, privilege, power, hegemony—that these issues bring about a certain kind of suffering because they're so weighty. From the sheer gravitas of these philosophical problems, there's a certain kind of personal investment that one has in them, and as a result, there's this kind of suffering.

So, I'd say I probably came to philosophy non-traditionally, especially in terms of not having read anything, when I was ten. In terms of knowing that there was an actual field—around sixteen years old is when I read it in an encyclopedia. From there, I was hooked: *This is what I want to do!* So, I've known that I wanted to major in Philosophy from at least sixteen or seventeen years old. And then what I'd do was I'd go out, I would take out books from the library—one important text was Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy*, and I was trying to read it all the way through. I would go to my high school and ask teachers, "Can you help me explain this?" One thing was really important at this point, though. A high school math teacher of mine who had gone to LaSalle University asked his professor from when he was at LaSalle if I could come and sit in on an introductory course in philosophy. At that point I was about eighteen. He allowed me to audit, and I got an 'A' for the course. In the course there were a lot of older students, and they would ask, "What year are you?" I would say, "I'm still in high school." And they would say, "No, there's no way!" So, again, my entry into philosophy, then, was through this kind of early curiosity, this early passion, this kind of suffering, around these profound issues for which I didn't have a name. But then I discovered that there was and is this field called philosophy and everything began from there.

I knew I what I wanted to do. I was encouraged to apply to the University of Pittsburgh and got in. The University of Pittsburgh was one of the best philosophy departments in the country during the late eighties, and probably still is—they do analytic philosophy, which is a certain conceptual and discursive approach to philosophical questions. I worked with some phenomenal people like Wilfrid Sellars, who was a very nationally and internationally influential epistemologist. In fact, Sellars directed my philosophy honors thesis. I took courses with people like Adolf Grunbaum, Nicholas Rescher, Annette Baier. I also had various fascinating conversations with Carl Gustav Hempel. These were just incredibly historical philosophical figures. It was a fascinating place to be. From Pitt, I applied to grad school, and got into Yale University. I got into their Ph.D. program, but decided to just get the MA, and left afterward. Long story short, I did some other work and then went on to Duquesne University. While at Duquesne, I got a second Master's degree in African Studies from NYU before I actually defended my dissertation. After completing that second MA, I came back to Duquesne, completed my Ph.D. and then was hired at Duquesne right away.

Aegis: More specifically, how did you become interested in the problem of whiteness?

At Yale, I became interested in questions of Philosophy of Science. Thomas Kuhn wrote this important book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. He was concerned with questions like, "What is it about the claims that we make, for example, when we say, 'Electrons exist,' or something of the sort. What justifies that kind of claim? He argues that we have to think about the larger paradigm within which that statement is made; he is interested in how we make certain kinds of ontological and epistemological commitments—about what we know and what things are real in the world and how certain claims are dictated by (or mediated by) a paradigmatic way of thinking about the world. So, I became interested in what the relationship is between the larger ontological and epistemological stories that we tell ourselves and the claims that we make within those larger stories, which made me think about how the ways that we make ontological claims about reality are historically contingent claims. In the context of religion, for example, is it the case that any particular religion (Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism) "gets" at the essence of God?

My sense was that the relationship between those questions of religion and questions of science was similar in terms of the fact that they're giving us different stories about reality, which made me think about questions of contingency and questions of social construction. How do we get beyond those stories? This led me to ask larger questions within hermeneutics, questions like: "What, then, is real, if everything is a question of interpretation?"

I had a mentor at that time, James G. Spady, and when I left Yale and returned to Philadelphia, we would have sessions where we would talk about everything from race to rap and hip-hop to the philosophy of religion, history, culture, you name it. It was within that matrix that questions of race began to emerge. I began to ask, "What is race, then? How is race reflective of a particular kind of framework? Is it real? If it is, what does that mean? If it isn't, what does that mean?"

So, I started off being deeply interested in this question of race and whether it is real, which led to the field of Critical Whiteness Studies. So, one day I said, "I'll read everything out there in the area of Critical Whiteness Studies." This was me being the autodidact. I had no idea that I would come to influence not only the field of Critical Whiteness Studies but also what is now called Critical Philosophy of Race. I started with Peggy McIntosh's work, and then I read all of the material. Again, at that time, I didn't know that I would go on to publish important work that would influence the area. For me, then, whiteness becomes a very important topic to think about particularly in a country that, at the moment, deems itself "post-racial." When it comes to whiteness, I'm interested in questions such as: What is whiteness? How has whiteness evolved? What does whiteness do? How is whiteness lived? How does whiteness impact people who have no idea that it is there, influencing their every move through the world? I call whiteness the "transcendental norm." Whiteness is the transcendental norm such that it defines all others—or, rather, non-whites—as different, deviant, named, marked, but itself is unmarked. I'm interested in the way that whiteness is not only a site of privilege, but a site of power, a site of oppression, a site of deception and arrogance, one that pretends that it is innocent. I'm interested in the

way that whiteness is an expression of bodily ways of being. What does it mean to be in the world as white? What does it mean to walk through a space as white? My claim is that white people carry this weight independently of their desires, and of course, the problem is that it's easy to say, "I have privilege," without thinking about the relational dynamics of privilege. Even if you accept the fact that you have this privilege, the question is what this privilege is doing to bodies that don't look like you. That's where it gets nasty. That's where you have to really begin to bring ethics and responsibility into the very heart of the notion that one is white. Because as white, one must deal with the question of one's complicity.

Aegis: And how do you define the problem of whiteness?

There are a lot of problems with whiteness! [Laughs.] Peggy McIntosh gives us forty-six examples of white privilege, and one of them is that she doesn't have to talk to her children about what to do in situations, say, involving the police. Recently, after the killing of Trayvon Martin, there's been this talk of what's called "the talk"—the talk that Black parents or parents of color give to their children, so, there's a way in which to be white in America—and this is going back to this notion of space—such that one can walk through space and one's children can walk through space where parents don't need to worry about the spaces through which they or their children walk. So, what does that mean? Barbara Applebaum talks about this; she says that whiteness signifies white ways of being. Notice, she didn't say whiteness signifies lynching, or whiteness signifies owning Black bodies. In fact she doesn't even say it indicates a certain kind of hatred. It's a mode of being that has deep existential implications. If you're white and you're not telling your children to be careful around police officers, or not to run down the street, in some sense, you're getting to live out your existence at the expense of those identities that are non-white because you get to be free in that space, to engage in that space with a certain kind of mobility that those Black bodies don't. That is a privilege that white people take from granted. I call it a privilege, because they are being judged based upon their skin color, not by something that they did or didn't do. And even if one says that it is not a privilege, but a right, I would argue that this right is white. It is a *white* right.

Franz Fanon is a post-colonial thinker; he says that what he wanted to do is to "come lithe into the world"—it's a beautiful expression—which meant to engage the world effortlessly. Black bodies, when they engage the world, engage the world with effort. There's something that's very traumatic, existentially and emotionally, about that experience of having to always micromanage your behavior within a predominantly white space. Whereas white people, then, can come lithe into the world; they don't need to see their bodies as problem bodies. They can move through spaces without effort. Take an example of a white person who is stopped while driving. White people have the privilege of thinking: *Did I not turn on my turn signal? or Did I run the red light? or Did I not stop at the stop sign?* These are the things that come to them. Well, that speaks to a way of being in the world where you have the freedom to think about certain kinds of options rather than others. If you're Black and you're stopped, the response is: *Here we go again*. There's this way in which Black people don't have the privilege to think about various explanatory options for why they were stopped, because they're stopped so much, and stopped because they are Black. In fact,

according to the stats, Blacks are three times more likely to be profiled and stopped by police officers—even as it's the case that whites are four times more likely to actually have illegal stuff when they're stopped. Stop more white people, get more illegal stuff. It seems to me, that the problem with whiteness is the historical accrual of power, privilege, and normality, because to be white is to be human. That is the assumption.

To be white is to be a person as such. To be Black, however, is to be marked as a sub-person. To be Latino is to be marked. To be Asian is to be marked. But the problem of whiteness is not just privilege; it's also a site of obfuscation. It's a site of confusion. It's a site of denial. It's a site of *living in bad faith*. So what whites want to do is say that basically, to be white is really not a problem at all; it's just a designation. There are whites who say things like: "Don't call me white, call me Jane or Smith. My name is Jane, it is Smith." But that speaks to white privilege—the fact that white people can say, "Call me Jane." Whereas a Black person or a person of color can't claim: "Only call me or know me by my name." It is almost a death sentence, because then you begin to live in the world as if you were white, without realizing that your Blackness precedes your name. But, of course, your whiteness precedes your name, too; that's just denied. So, I think that what we need to do in terms of critically engaging whiteness is to pose a different question: *What does it mean to be a white problem?* To do that requires not just insight, but the gift of the Black gaze. Just as men can't possibly get together and talk about resolving the problem of sexism without the presence of women, so too white people can't possibly solve the problem of whiteness without the presence of voices of color or Black people, which, by the way, does not mean that people of color or Black people are the servants of white people.

So, for me, then, the immediate question in 2014 is: How do we make whiteness visible? What I've done—at least my work has been characterized this way—is created a discourse for people to think about ways of critically engaging whiteness, of naming it. Terms like "ambush," and being "sutured" and "un-sutured," for example, are terms that I've introduced into the discourse. I'm interested in the ways in which white people don't know the extent to which they're racist. It's this idea of what I call the opaque white racist self—it's not just the problem of making whiteness visible; the problem is that part of what it means to be white is to have been given over—from the very beginning of one's life—where whiteness is so normative that it is etched into one's soul. As such, then, there is this primary relational dynamic that has taken place such that one may not even have access to the levels of one's own racism, and that becomes a problem. This means that the concept of arrival—the idea that one can arrive at a state called being an "anti-racist," or being "non-racist"—I see as being a chimera. It's just a fiction. There's no place called "arrival." There is a place called resistance, but not arrival.

I think we need to think about whiteness and the importance of vigilance. Vigilance comes from "*vigilare*," which means "to keep watch." So I'm suggesting that what we need to do is to think about whiteness as a long-term project that needs to be undone at every moment of one's existence. So you can't wake up tomorrow and say, "On Tuesday, I will no longer be a white racist." It's not about changing one's clothes, which is easy to do. Becoming an anti-racist is more like a verb than a noun. It's a continuous process of introspection—which has its limits—a continuous process of undoing sites where whiteness resides. It is a

continuous site of becoming un-sutured, of being opened to be wounded, of being touched by those who don't look like you. One has to be prepared to undergo a kind of cut, and opening. For example: Here at Otterbein, I notice that this is a predominately white campus. But what does this mean in terms of race and whiteness? What does it mean in terms of power relationships? What does it mean in terms of how Black bodies or people of color feel within this space? Do white students and teachers engage them in conversations about what it means to inhabit such white space? How do we call whiteness into question? How do we encourage whites to examine whiteness on this campus, when there are so many white people? It's normative. Pretty much—I'm assuming—white students/teachers don't think it's a problem at all. But precisely in not thinking that it's a problem is indicative of white privilege. White privilege blinds white people from problematizing whiteness itself.

Aegis: You have—rightly—observed that [Otterbein] is a space of primarily white students. As a professor and as someone who works to dismantle whiteness, what would you tell students of color who move through a space like this daily, as people of color, in a predominantly white space? What would you tell the white students, who are the majority, about dismantling racism as what you call an “anti-racist racist”?

Let's start with the “anti-racist racist.” The idea points to the idea of the opaque white racist self and the embedded white racist self. The point is that one can engage in anti-racist acts, but they're not sufficient for undoing racism. What I argue, on a more complex level, is that not only does the white self have to contend with its own unconscious opaque forms of white racism, but also white people have to engage with the way they're embedded in a social structure—the way that privilege is imposed upon them. You can try to get out of racism, but you can't—our bodies are perceived differently. Thus: the “anti-racist racist.”

My advice for Black students within this context is to assure them of one thing: that they are sane. They are sane within a context that will have the effect of making them believe that there are not any racial problems on campus or making them believe that it's all in their heads. I'm here to say: you know your world and don't let anyone deceive you about what you know. Of course, this does not mean that Black people are infallible. My aim is to communicate to them about what they're up against: a lot of microaggression, a lot of stereotyping, and a lot of nastiness from which the whites who are doing this to them are not even necessarily aware that they're doing. This doesn't let white people off the hook. They are still responsible. Yet, [Black students] have to bear the brunt of that conscious and unconscious racism. It's hard to tell them. You tell them that they're sane, you tell them that they're not irrational, you confirm for them that their pain is real. Imagine the psychic weight you have to carry around when you know that this is happening and yet white people are denying this.

White people need to take responsibility and they need to realize that Black people on campus need their help. What does that look like? Well, it takes a lot of critical engagement. The stats have it that less than ten percent of white people have Black friends. They start out having Black friends...but then you start asking questions like, “What are their last names?” “What do you do together?” “Do your parents know each other?” After you ask these questions, it turns out that they're not really friends at all. White people, then,

need to develop the capacity of empathy, which is difficult. Whites need to become what I'm calling “un-sutured.” To be sutured literally means “to be sewn up.” Generally, when something's un-sutured, we want to sew it up, to cover the wound. But, what I'm saying is counterintuitive. In terms of the concept we're talking about here—white students vis-à-vis students of color—whites have to remain un-sutured, which means not only do they have to remain open, to be wounded by Black people telling them, “What you did was racist,” they have to feel the pain of being un-sutured. You're allowing the opening—the scar, as it were—to remain visible, to be touched again and again and again—and that's powerful.

So, we're talking about practical stuff here: we need more bodies that don't look like you—if you're white—on campus, so that we can have a more robust discussion. I think the percentage here is eighty percent white and maybe, four percent Black—so, then, how do you have a robust discussion, given those stats? You can't, given the racial demographics of the place. Your university is a site of racism. They've really done nothing to bring people of color to campus, in terms of students or in terms of faculty. The idea of whiteness as a site of privilege, as a site of power, gets re-inscribed precisely through the practices of being a white university itself, which perhaps hides in terms of their call for “diversity.” How can you be encouraged into a state of questioning your own epistemic reality if you don't have people who hold a different kind of epistemic reality, who understand their worlds differently? You can't. What you're going to get is a reinforcement of whiteness as normative, which will then attempt to bring in Black folk into a normative space, a space which is anti-Black. What we need is to increase numbers and we need to hear the voices of Black people. Don't ask white people about the meaning of racism—go to Black people.

On the other hand, we have to get white people to admit that there is such a thing as white privilege and that it's historically cumulative. It's not as if because, say, there are no longer any Jim Crow Laws, de facto, we're not living in a Jim Crow-like world. As a predominantly white community, it's a corrupt community—I know it's a hard charge, but it has failed to look at itself critically, ethically, honestly. It has failed to render itself visible. As I said, there is no place, even as a community, which you're going to reach that is “anti-racist,” as a noun, as static—it's a continuous process.

Aegis: It's almost as if we see the concept of “diversity” being commodified; promotional materials and marketing would lead people to believe that Otterbein is a very diverse campus.

Yes. It's an act of bad faith, as I see it. It's a form of lying to oneself. Commodification of the Black body speaks to one's own ethical efforts that are, really, just strategic. It says something like: “Let's get some bodies of color in here and our job is done.” It is a way of freeing one from white guilt, of using Black bodies as instruments for purposes of “demonstrating” racial inclusion. If that's what the Black body means, then that's re-inscribing the Black body as marked again. Think about the history of slavery in America—what is that but commodification of the Black body? And, in this case, it's being held up as a site of “goodwill,” as “good white people.” We have to challenge the very distinction between “good whites” and “bad whites.”

Part of the problem is that white people see themselves as individuals—again: “Call me by my name.” The idea of the white self as autonomous is part of the deception. It is based upon a form of liberalism that is misleading and unethical. In fact, I’m more interested in heteronomy—the law of the other. White people don’t have to be concerned with these issues, but I must, because I am a person of color—this could cost me my life. To pretend to be an individual (without race) is dangerous. Say to Trayvon Martin, say to Michael Brown, say to Renisah McBride, Jordan Davis, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice, that race doesn’t matter. You can’t escape history—it claims you, even as you don’t want it to claim you. It claims white people in ways that it doesn’t claim me. History doesn’t just drop off—it doesn’t nicely split off and then begin. There’s historical sedimentation, and white bodies are embedded with this racial sedimentation.

John Warren raises the question: “Why do you have white skin?” Well, there’s a benign way in which we can talk about that: “Both of my parents were white.” Fair enough. And what about their parents? They were white, too. We can talk about lack of melanin—that’s one level, biological lineage. However, at some point we’re going to come up against anti-miscegenation laws—laws that prevented Black people and white people from marrying or having sex. In some sense, then, your body’s physical expression cannot be separated from normative constructs and legal constructs that were put into place. Your physical body can’t be separated from various actions engaged in by other white people over an historical period. You wear that history. You are the manifestation of that history.

The classroom needs to be dangerous. We need dangerous spaces—I’m not talking about fighting, but I am talking about being fundamentally uncomfortable, having one’s white identity rocked and shaken. It must be a continual interrogation, a continual vigilance. We have to think of ourselves as a continuous project, constantly in transition, constantly in a state of metamorphosis. How do we create that kind of society? Do we need a savior figure to do it? Do we need another white savior—do we need Superman to come and intervene on our behalf? Or can we do it? That is the question that we are faced with. And it cuts at the very heart and soul of whether or not we have the vision, the desire, and the strength to create a better world.

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