
Interpretative Profiles on Charles Johnson's Reflections on Trayvon Martin: A Dialogue between George Yancy, E. Ethelbert Miller, and Charles Johnson

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Abstract

How do we understand the tragic death of Trayvon Martin? What are the implications of his death for other Black boys and Black men within the context of North America? How do we address the larger problems of anti-Black racism, questions of racist perception, the history of racism, and the demonization and criminalization of Black male bodies? Indeed, how do we undo the perceptual practices that dehumanize and define Black bodies through racist stereotypes? These questions not only raise important political concerns, but deep ethical, epistemological, ontological, and religious concerns. In this broad ranging critical discussion regarding the tragic death of Trayvon Martin, philosopher George Yancy, writer and literary activist E. Ethelbert Miller, and prominent literary figure and philosopher Charles Johnson address these themes and more. The article is rich in philosophical exploration, providing challenging concerns that are vital and indispensable to the neglected question of race relations in North America.

George Yancy

Shortly after the verdict in the George Zimmerman second-degree murder trial where he was found not guilty, prominent literary figure and philosopher Charles Johnson wrote a thought-provoking, philosophically instructive, and painfully relevant article that explored the tragic reality of Black male *Erlebnis* or lived experience within the context of a racist anti-Black world. While Trayvon Martin's tragic death formed the locus of the piece, Johnson provided a critically insightful framework for understanding the sociogenesis of Martin's existential plight. The article, "Every 28 Hours: The Case of Trayvon Martin," is published in *Tricycle*:

The Buddhist Review (July 18, 2013). Very shortly after its publication, E. Ethelbert Miller, a literary activist, and myself, a philosopher, wrote separate, and short, responses to Johnson's important article. The responses were really informal, personal communications, designed to express our immediate reactions to Johnson's stimulating article. Johnson shared my response piece with Juliette Harris, editor of the *International Review of African American Art* (IRAAA), and she thought that a broader public exchange on the issues collectively raised and discussed would be important. Miller and I agreed that it would be important and edifying to engage Johnson's article with greater critical focus, while also expanding the range of concerns. To create



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Dr. Charles Johnson is a novelist, essayist, literary scholar, short-story writer, cartoonist, screenwriter, and professor emeritus at the University of Washington, Seattle.

a more expansive dialogical space, Johnson agreed to write a response to our two pieces. That, in a nutshell, was the impetus that resulted in what I believe is a deeply engaging conversation about Trayvon Martin and larger issues of racism, including such issues as the production and maintenance of racist perceptions, whether Black men ever dream, questions of Black humanity and its violation, the terrible loss of Trayvon Martin, the callousness and moral failure of George Zimmerman, the explicit and implicit racist violence that Black boys and Black men face on a daily basis, Johnson's Buddhist orientation and how it speaks to the Trayvon Martin tragedy and violence more broadly, and how we conceptualize ways of challenging and undoing the reality of racism that Black boys and Black men confront within an anti-Black country such as ours. I will provide the introduction to Johnson's fascinating article, emphasize important conceptual gems, and then weave my response into it. E. Ethelbert Miller will then provide his response to Johnson's article. And, finally, Johnson will respond to both pieces.

Published in *Tricycle*, Charles Johnson, a Buddhist, provides an intricate weaving of concepts that telescope the ways in which Black male bodies are ontologically truncated and stymied through racist gazes. Such gazes are predicated upon a larger and systemic white racist anti-Black history, one that continues to plague Black bodies in our contemporary moment in North America. Within this context, white discursive and non-discursive practices continue to reduce Black male bodies to sites of "pathology" and "corporeal malediction." Johnson avoids a naïve ontogenetic account of Black male suffering, one that would reinforce the myth of the Black male body as the site of dysfunction, by reminding readers of the "centuries-old demonization of black men that festers like a disease beneath Martin's death." In this way, Johnson refuses bad faith explanatory accounts and narratives that construct the death of Martin as anomalous and infrequent. Rather, Martin's death is all too familiar to the very heart and soul of North American life and history. Johnson, drawing from his Buddhist insights, then suggests insightful ways of confronting the sedimentation of perceptual practices that are not only complicit with, but help to perpetuate, a problematic racist ontology of Blackness.

In terms of the Black body as a site of "pathology," one might say, criminal pathology, Johnson argues that, according to this logic, Trayvon Martin "had to be guilty of something – some previous crime or sin or moral slip-page." Pulling from his existential phenomenological sensibilities, Johnson writes that "His [Martin's] essence

is that of a predator." Martin, in other words, is profiled according to a procrustean gaze, in this case George Zimmerman's, that reduces his ontological complexity to a singular state of being, one that is temporally frozen. Within this context, for Johnson, Martin's temporality is always already a species of the past; a *fait accompli*. It is a tragic situation where the virtual—that which is the not yet, what Martin can be or will be—is a nullity. Insightfully, Johnson pulls from his own personal experience, while walking with his son, where he was "stopped by police in New York and Seattle for simply 'walking while being black.'" In this case, and one can think here of New York's City's infamous campaign of stop-and-frisk, he and his son were stopped like so many other Black males and males of color who continue to be stopped in our so-called post-racial society. Johnson also importantly references the fact that he is now a grandfather of a very young grandson, a reference that unambiguously drives home his deeply familial investment in eradicating the racism that continues to destroy the lives of Black males and render their embodiment as sites of captivity and confiscation.

More specifically and powerfully, through his personal disclosure of having undergone an unjustified and unjustifiable policing of his body and the body of his son, Johnson lends his autobiographical voice, and the phenomenological impact of that experience, to confirm that Martin is not the problem. Rather, the problem is that Blackness is pre-marked and pre-nominated as a site of "deviance" vis-à-vis white racist epistemic and axiological frames of reference. Johnson and his son, and the bodies of Black males, more generally, were/are faced with confronting white covenants that stipulate that Black "presence is unwelcome." Black bodies, then, are transgressive in virtue of being Black, one might argue in virtue of being. Indeed, the Black body, within the context of anti-Black racism, has always already exceeded the boundaries of white legality. And while it is true that Zimmerman was not a Police Officer, and that he identifies as mixed race, the scenario is all too familiar. There is the assumption that Black bodies are about to do something, are on the verge of doing something. Embedded within the history of European and Anglo-American racism, profiling the Black body within a Manichean divide, where Blackness signifies "evil" and whiteness signifies "good," bespeaks a toxic metanarrative that is not exclusively ingrained in whites in terms of the egregious ways in which they profile Black male bodies. Zimmerman, in other words, had internalized the normative structure of whiteness. More strongly, Zimmerman is not merely

a placeholder or proxy for whiteness, his orientation-in-the-world is structurally white. He is not simply a vehicle that carries the toxicity of white normativity, but he is a site of its virulent maintenance and perpetuation. For Zimmerman, Martin's Black body was a site of indictment for just being. After all, to be Black is to be a problem. Again, in terms of a form of "ontological illegality" or "ontological transgression," this is a case where Black-being-in-the-world is the crime. Within this dehumanizing ontology, the only solution to "the problem" is the immediate death of the Black body. Put pointedly, Black ontology is haunted by death within the context of white supremacy. As of this writing, think of the recent case of Black male Jonathan Ferrell who, in 2013, in Charlotte, NC, sought assistance after being in a car crash. As he ran toward police officers, one white officer killed him after shooting him 10 times. Or think here of Renisha McBride who, also in 2013, was shot and killed by a white man after she crashed her car and was seeking help by knocking or "banging" at his door. Even Black bodies that consciously seek protection after surviving car accidents are denied sanctuary and killed on the spot in an anti-Black world. Indeed, in an anti-Black world even one's safe audible space can be subjected to white surveillance where the consequences of resistance can be deadly. Think here of the case of Jordan Davis in 2012. He and three of his friends were sitting in their vehicle within a public space in Jacksonville, Florida, listening to rap music when challenged by 47-year-old white male Michael Dunn. He asked them to turn their music down, a genre of music he apparently refers to in derogatory terms. Dunn claimed that he felt threatened and thought that he saw a weapon at which point he fired 10 shots at the vehicle, killing an unarmed Jordan Davis. Here is a case where being in one's own comfortable aesthetic space, listening to one's music, is a problem. Anyone who knows anything about rap aesthetics is cognizant of the fact that it has to be played at a certain volume. So-called loudness is deemed an aesthetic preference. As in the case of Trayvon Martin, though, it is about control. In this case, Davis had no right to be in that public space "blasting" that music. On this logic, those Black boys should have known better than to play rap music at that volume. Controlling their music is a synecdoche for controlling their Black bodies, especially given the white racial "appointed" authority of Dunn.

In his article, Johnson proceeds to deploy the critical voices of Tim Wise and Robin D.G. Kelley to scaffold his argument about the fact that Black males constitute "a racial Rorschach test" upon whom negative

assumptions are projected and the fact that such males are killed with such frequency and about whom so little is known or desired to be known. Paradoxically, even as so little is known about Black males vis-à-vis whites, the latter apparently possess "absolute knowledge" about said males. It is within this context that Johnson raises an absolutely profound question: "Do we ever wonder if black men dream?" The question fundamentally speaks to the agential interior lives of Black males and, by extension, fearlessly names the moral lassitude of whites who elide the question. Johnson notes that Trayvon Martin's father, Tracy Martin, says that his son "dreamed of being a pilot." Linking the ways in which the question goes unasked (by whites) about Black men vis-à-vis their dreams and their capacity to dream, Johnson argues that "No one speaks (as Buddhists do) of the importance of their [Black males] achieving human birth, or see them as being unique individuals with promise, talents, resources, or even genius that one day might improve this republic." Johnson acutely understands how everyday manifestations of white racism occlude the process of valuing the uniqueness of Black males and Black people, more generally. He states how Black male bodies undergo forms of "death" every day through forms of racist perceptual practices. He writes, "We rightly feel anger over the Trayvon's murdered billions of times every day by toxic perceptions and conceptions in the white mind, and then, tragically, murdered every 28 hours ['by the state or state-sanctioned violence'] for real."

Drawing attention to the mundane ways in which Black male bodies undergo micro-social forms of death, Johnson creates an important potential space for epistemological possibilities that might function to undo, to deconstruct, such rigid practices of perceptual and cognitive dehumanization. Johnson draws from the important concept of mindfulness. He argues that it is this "mindfulness that might extinguish at its root this endless cycle of early death for young black men." Drawing upon the wisdom of Bhikkhu Bodhi, who is an American born Theravada Buddhist monk, Johnson understands mindfulness as a way of undoing the field of perception and cognition; it is a process of learning or unlearning ways to see phenomena without all of the, as he states, "conceptual paint." Indeed, "To practice mindfulness is thus a matter not so much of doing but of undoing: not thinking, not judging, not associating, not planning, not imagining, not wishing." Within the Buddhist hermeneutic of mindfulness, Johnson argues that it is incumbent upon white America to work toward undoing the encrusted layers of white "racial indoctrina-

nation." As stated above, for Johnson, Martin is not the problem. The problem is located within the deeper psychic and structurally systemic recesses of a white North American nightmare that is grounded in ignorance or what Johnson refers to as *avidya*. In short, then, for Johnson, through the conceptual and spiritual lens of Buddhism, whites have failed to engage in genuinely robust forms of encountering Black bodies; they have failed or refused to engage in forms of relationality that are humanizing. Johnson argues that we ought to nurture forms of encounter that deploy "epistemological humility and egoless listening." He sees this epistemic humility as morally obligatory in relationship to everyone that we encounter. He concludes that "another name for such selfless, healing listening is love." Hence, for Johnson, the elimination of epistemological hubris and the capacity to listen, to hear, which involves the capacity to be open to be genuinely touched by the other, have important and deep relational implications that challenge the structural and psychological divisiveness of white racism. Johnson is calling for a new way of encountering and being encountered.

For me, it was with humility and thankfulness that I read Charles Johnson's reflections on Trayvon Martin and the larger lived existential context within which the latter was situated, a context that speaks to systemic white racism and the brutalization of Black male bodies. Through weaving his own autobiographical reflections into the article, Johnson provides a context for shared pain and suffering. Johnson provides sanity to so many Black males who have found themselves in critical existential situations where their sense of the reality of white racism is doubted, where their own self-understanding is placed under erasure by whites who are keen on denuding Black male bodies of their interiority, of their epistemological hold on the social world and its anti-Blackness. On this score, Johnson bears epistemic witness to the lives of so many Black males who suffer under the yoke of white oppression. Having been racially profiled, Johnson knows what it is like to be reduced to sheer externality, to be reduced to his epidermis. The process of shared existential pain and suffering raises the issue of epistemic violence and the ways in which white racist epistemology has a profound somatic impact upon the Black body. By creating a shared space of disclosure, by implication, Johnson also raises the importance of a shared and sharable framework of intelligibility in terms of which Black males can and will articulate what it means to be Black in North America, a process that can engender counter-hegemonic white narratives, that is, Black male

narratives that speak to the veridicality of Black male experiences.

As I read through Johnson's article and came upon his mention of the fact that Martin dreamed of becoming a pilot, I immediately identified with Martin. When I was in High School, I wanted to be a pilot. I expressed this to one of my white male teachers and he said that there are not many pilots who are Black and that I should therefore think about being a bricklayer or a carpenter. This is in no way to conflate my situation with Martin's. After all, he is, sorrowfully and tragically, dead – killed at a tender age that was less than a blink of an eye when compared to the history of our universe (over 13 billion years old).

I was able to feel how words can carry a death blow, how words can truncate the human spirit. The white teacher's words alienated me, momentarily extricating me from my own desires, suggesting that I ought to settle for less. After all, within the framework of the normativity of whiteness, I am an instantiation (like Johnson and Martin) of that group that falls under the ontological category of "less" or simply nothing at all, disposable. Through the assaultive words of the white teacher, I was installed as fixed, as having a racial teleology whose end was already determined at the very beginning. On this score, to invoke the philosophical lingua franca that fuels Johnson's phenomenological and existential training and writing, I exist (etymologically, *existere*, "to stand out"), but my existence is preceded by an essence. I am rendered invisible and ontologically returned to myself as a thing by whites who refuse to see me, who refuse to tarry or linger with my ontological depth and the ways in which my Black body calls to them outside of their myopic perceptual profiles. Even ordinary things, say the cup on my table, promises more as I stare at it from this particular angular perspective. Its virtual side, indeed, its virtual multiplicity, has more to offer—indeed perhaps having indefinite profiles. I only need change my angular vision, perhaps walk around it. All the more, then, one might think that my embodied humanity would usher in a flood of promises vis-à-vis the white other. Of course, in this case, it isn't a simple case of walking around to see my body from different angular perspectives, but there is the shared sense, in both examples, of a promise that there is more to be experienced. My Black embodiment, after all, should solicit whites to self-interrogate their certainty, to re-cognize, to know otherwise, to look yet again, to wonder and to stand in awe of my shared humanity. Yet, it is precisely my humanity that has been questioned and denied within white North America. As

the “predator” or the “thug,” as Johnson mentions when referring to Zimmerman’s perception of Martin, I am completely knowable, which is an act, in this case, of racial and racist violence; I become one-dimensional and ontologically totalized. Yet, along with Martin and Johnson, I am the more that exceeds the racist gaze.

I think that Johnson’s article raises an important issue, one that instigates a discussion about the ethics of perception, that is, the way in which Zimmerman ought to have seen Martin. Indeed, needed is a critical discussion about the structural violence of a particular form of looking, seeing, gazing, and beholding that diminishes, imprisons, and wrongly judges. My argument is that Zimmerman should have been “haunted” by Martin’s presence, thrown into a state of anxiety about that which is beyond his perceptual/conceptual grasp. It would have been a form of anxiety (etymologically, *anxius*, “solicitous”), which is a manifestation of concern or care, that is, a form of anxiety that did not flee to take shelter under the “safety” of fear and then mitigate that fear through acts of violence. Rather, the anxiety should have taken the form of the question: “What can I do to help you?” For Zimmerman to have remained, tarried, with that anxiety and the mystery that it struggles to express may have saved the life of Martin. Martin’s ontological multiplicity, his ontological excess, and his irreducibility, disappear under conditions of white supremacy. The disappearance or, more accurately, the “nonexistence” of such ontological features, is similar to the phenomenon of words that are not sayable under certain citationality conditions or the absence thereof. Zimmerman “sees” Martin under conditions that refuse his humanity, conditions that deny its emergence. Hence, Zimmerman was not unnerved by Martin’s presence, his multiplicity and his mystery. Zimmerman had already grasped, seized (that is, taken epistemic possession of) Martin’s being. Hence, there was no need for hospitality, to take the risk of invitation. To “possess” within this context does not give birth to disquietude; rather, the mystery that was and is Trayvon Martin was destroyed on the altar of the racist imago: he was the Black body that was “suspicious” and thereby had to be stopped, and, in this case, stopped dead. There was no epistemic postponement. Zimmerman did not see a Black boy who had come lithe into the world, but a criminal—one who Zimmerman grasped with racist certainty.

Within the context of Zimmerman’s racist certainty, this raises the significant point regarding the question: “Do we ever wonder if black men dream?” Johnson’s question fosters the theme of temporality, which involves the structural matrix out of which dreams are

made. To dream is to inhabit a space of the virtual; it is to play within the space of the imagination. Dreaming within that space, one might be said to reside, as it were, “over there,” detached from the density of this moment. To dream is to rupture the present, to fissure the fabric of facticity. The person who Zimmerman killed on that dreadful night was a Black male who did dream and who had dreams. To be and to have been Martin was to be and to have been a possibility – or the site of *homo possibilis*. To answer Johnson’s question in the affirmative – “Yes, Black men do dream!”—is to explode white racist perceptions of Black males as morally, intellectually, and imaginatively derelict. Yet, even as I affirm that Black boys and Black men do dream and have dreams, I don’t think that white North America really gives a damn, which means that Black boys and Black men will continue to dream with frustration and deep existential angst. They will dream in a world in which the content of their dreams was never meant to come to fruition. Black boys and Black men will call out to the world in longing and yearning, and the white world will rip the joy from their hands and silence their attempts to make good on their dreams, especially the “American dream.” This is a case where dreams are not just deferred, but where dreams were never meant to arise; it is a case where the generative capacity of Black males was ruled nonexistent—a priori. Within this context, the Black body is already marked for social and physical death. Indeed, as early as being in the womb, especially as Black women’s wombs are deemed sites of degeneracy, the Black body is marked as a problem. After all, the white racist construction of the Black matrilineal “stain” of reproductive pathology, a topic that Johnson does not raise within his article, must be included as one untangles the various forms of white racist technology used to police, denigrate, and dehumanize Black bodies—women and men.

In terms of my own imaginative and intellectual yearning, as a Black teenager, I recall looking through my telescope, imagining the incredible expanse of space. During this time, I was a Black kid living in Richard Allen Project Homes, trying to imagine, to conceptualize, my own finitude in relationship to the sheer magnitude of the cosmos. One day while taking my telescope outside, a white police officer said to me, “Man, I almost blew you away!” Thinking that I had a weapon, “knowing” with racist certainty that I did, I could have met the same fate as Martin. This is the tragic absurdity that we face in North America. Even while dreaming about and trying to conceptualize the complexity of the cosmos, we, as Black men,

can be shot dead. Historically, while protesting our innocence, we have been lynched by the thousands (between 1880-1940). While speaking to white women, as in the case of Emmett Till in 1957, we have been beaten beyond recognition, left monstrous in our appearance because of white hatred and control. While lying face down on a subway platform, as in the case of Oscar Grant in 2009, we have been shot in the back, and while walking home with nothing more benign than a bag of Skittles and an Iced Tea, we have been rendered suspicious, followed, and eventually killed. We will never know what Martin was dreaming about as he left the convenience store in Sanford, Florida on the night of February 26, 2012. Perhaps, on that very night, he was dreaming about becoming a pilot. Yet, any dreams that he had were cut short, severed from any chance of becoming realized. In stream with Johnson, Martin could have brought healing to our Nation and to our world; he could have been a great spiritual leader; a philosopher of tremendous creativity and genius; a brilliant scientist, someone capable of finding the cure to cancer; indeed, he could have become the best and most skilled pilot the world has ever known. As a site of Black embodiment, within the context of anti-Black racism, Martin's being-toward-the-future was always already precarious, teetering on the precipice of existential nullification. And while it is true that we are all dispossessed by death, destined to die because of our finitude, not all of us are socially marked for death.

This raises a very important point that Johnson discusses regarding the profound concept of "achieving human birth." He raises the issue of the uniqueness of a single person, the uniqueness of what it means to be an embodied Black person, an embodied Black male within a social and historical context where one's emergence upon the existential scene goes unrecognized or denied as something incredible/amazing. Yet, it is imperative that the existential gravity of Martin's birth, his being, is appreciated and properly understood. Trayvon Martin will never come this way again. All of our Black boys and Black men who have been killed and who will be killed "every 28 hours" will only pass this way once, which means that each one constitutes a unique perspective, a perspective that is not replaceable. We can never have another enfolded singularity, a lived-body that is Trayvon Martin. By extension, his embodied subjectivity, which involves his perspective on the world, is irreducible. There is no other, which means that his constituted world is gone—forever. And though he is remembered, and has left precious traces of himself with his parents, his embodied and concrete

"here from which" (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990, p.97) cannot be retrieved. Martin is irreplaceable—a unique ontological opening onto the world that has been closed. Given this, Zimmerman destroyed Martin's life, and a plethora of lived significations that are unrepeatable qua Martin's perspective. This does not deny that Martin, like all of us, was constituted through shared language, norms, social practices, epistemic regimes, fears, desires, and ambitions, which speaks to the relational and constitutive aspects of what it means to be human. Indeed, Martin, like all of us, inherits a framework of intelligibility and the iterative and fungible social rituals that take place within that framework. Yet, Martin inhabited a lived world of meaning whose vivacity meant so much to him, a world that was also constituted through his own embodiment from a phenomenological here. His was a site of lived engagement where time, space, affection, beauty, love, play, family, friendship, wonder, and divinity meant something to him. It is that meaning something to Trayvon Martin that is not repeatable, that is irreplaceable.

The gravity of thinking about the loss of my Black sons, the tragic shattering of their lived perspective on the world, because systemic white racism has dictated that they look suspicious in virtue of their being Black, is a weight I have no desire to bear. And while it is true that my sons are certainly not exempt from possibly being killed by someone not white, it is an entire white racist historical system that has marked, and continues to mark, Black male life as devalued and nugatory. In other words, "Black-on-Black crime" is not an institutional system based upon white racist assemblages of "knowledge" and an entire ideological apparatus underwritten by white hegemonic material power. While this does not make "Black-on-Black crime" any less important, I think that it is a mistake to deploy the discourse of "Black-on-Black crime" as a way to obfuscate the magnitude and toxicity of white supremacy and its impact on Black people. Indeed, such discourse renders Black people the cause of their own demise.

I can only wonder if Zimmerman has come to terms with the violent destruction of Martin's existential uniqueness. Then again, he may never come to recognize the profound mystery of that truth. Zimmerman may very well be a prisoner to *avidya*, a form of ignorance that is so deep that he not only has failed (or refuses) to see the violence done to Martin and his family, but he has also failed (or refuses) to see the violence that he has done to himself. As a lived perspective on the world, Martin's perspective on each one of us is also irreplaceable. By killing Martin, Zim-

merman diminished the potential for the enlargement of the meaning of his own being. By killing Martin, Zimmerman has cut off the very possibility of knowing himself differently through the eyes of Martin, through Martin's re-cognition of Zimmerman. Indeed, perhaps Martin could have conveyed to Zimmerman what it meant to look like a "creepy ass Cracker," especially given the latter's racist panoptic surveillance of Martin. Perhaps this knowledge would have enabled Zimmerman to understand the relational impact that his racist surveillance can have on Black bodies that live under so much existential white supremacist duress. Given this knowledge, perhaps Zimmerman would have decided against chasing one of those "assholes" who apparently get away. Had he done so, Martin would have more than likely still been alive. Zimmerman's violent world-making not only destroyed Martin, but destroyed an important access to his own meaning, a meaning that need not have been limited to a "creepy ass Cracker." Zimmerman has rendered forever irretrievable a more multifaceted response, at least from Martin, to the question of his own being: "Who am I?" Now that Martin is gone, part of Zimmerman has also gone into permanent exile. Sutured and believed closed off from Martin, having "nothing" in common, Zimmerman, through white supremacist lies, thought Martin bereft of anything to give. Martin was believed there to take. Hence, Zimmerman was there to preserve and to do so in the name of law, order, cleanliness, civilization, safety, purity, and territoriality—all powerful tropes of whiteness. Yet, to preserve, was to remain sutured, incapable of being enlarged by Martin's presence.

I conclude by addressing Johnson's conceptualization of mindfulness. The concept of mindfulness resonates with the radical possibilities inherent within phenomenological reduction or the concept of *epoché*. Just as with mindfulness, the concept of *epoché* is a form of "undoing"; an undoing through the process of cessation or bracketing. And like mindfulness, it aims toward "letting go of the 'conceptual paint.'" Within the context of white supremacy, the deployment of *epoché* would involve bracketing racist claims about Black bodies toward the aim of installing new forms of relationality that are unencumbered by white racist assumptions, perceptions, and problematic modes of comportment. Then again, within this context, whites would also have to bracket (*epoché*) assumptions about their own whiteness. In stream with Johnson, I think that mindfulness, as a species of *epoché*, is a necessary process in terms of creating transactional spaces between white bodies and bodies of color that are not curtailed

by whiteness; spaces where whites can be affected by Black embodied alterity in ways that leave them with greater understanding about their whiteness. To be "affected" already implies a certain process of "uncovering." Undoing what Johnson describes as "centuries of racial indoctrination," however, is no easy task. Letting go of the "conceptual paint," white people will experience loss; they will undergo forms of trauma and crisis, especially as the process of letting go will require the relinquishment of their own identities as the axiological standard in terms of which Black people and people of color are negatively judged and brutally treated. White identities are solidified, positively reinforced, through an understanding of the Black body as ersatz. Hence, to undo the latter will have deep implications for the former.

To practice forms of epistemological humility vis-à-vis whiteness will be necessary for white people to challenge whiteness as the transcendental norm that actually conditions their perception of themselves as not needing to undo anything at all. As the transcendental norm, whiteness elides itself as a problem. Hence, the process of mindfulness or letting go must involve the capacity for vulnerability (to be wounded), which is another way of saying that whites must strive to be un-sutured. Being un-sutured is a powerful concept as it implies, especially for whites, the capacity to tarry with the multiple ways in which their whiteness is a problem, and to remain with the weight of that reality and the pain of that realization. On this score, being mindful not only requires undoing racial indoctrination in the form of racist prejudices, but challenging the complex ways in which white people flee to seek shelter, the way in which they seek to remain sutured. Being un-sutured is a place of openness, loss and great discomfort. It is a site of suffering. And while I'm sure that Johnson's Buddhist concept of mindfulness helps to mitigate suffering, the very process of "undoing" whiteness will place white people under the weight of facing and acknowledging so many centuries of having internalized racist lies about Black people and people of color and therefore lies about their own white identities. To tarry within such a space is dangerous. It is dangerous because it is demanding; dangerous because it refuses to play it safe, which is another way of remaining sutured. What remains is that whites will find themselves in a process of alienation as they struggle to undo white racial parasitism. As they go in search of themselves, Black bodies will no longer function as props. As James Baldwin (1995), who Johnson also references, observed, "White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning

how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed” (p.21). After all, whites have needed Black bodies to be exactly what they imagined them to be—the “Sambo,” the “Buffoon,” the “Nigger.” In this way, whites could maintain the mass delusion of non-dependency and self-possession. On my view, Zimmerman needed Travon Martin’s Black body; he needed the chimera of Martin’s “criminal essence” to authorize his “absolute right” to stop Martin’s Black body as a “thing” out of place, in the “wrong” place. Zimmerman was, apparently, in the “right” place, a place that is structurally exclusive and therefore parasitic. Sutured and unmindful, Zimmerman failed/refused to be undone by Martin’s presence. “To be undone by another,” as Judith Butler (2005) says, “is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient ‘I’ as a kind of possession” (p. 136).

At the very end of his article, Johnson talks about epistemological humility, especially its capacity for “healing listening,” which he sees as a form of love. I have no illusions about the history of white supremacy, especially the kind that is uneventful, mundane, and every day—the kind that shows itself on each Sunday morning where white bodies commune together, and bond together, where Black bodies are de facto absent through iterative white practices of exclusion. I am deeply skeptical of any formulaic solution or easy fix to the problem of whiteness and white supremacy. It is the death of Trayvon Martin, and so many Black bodies that suffer under white supremacy, that keeps me grounded. I don’t think for a moment that Johnson is under any illusions about how easy it will be to undo whiteness through mindfulness. Perhaps this is why he says that it is necessary; he never says that mindfulness is sufficient. Given my understanding of whiteness as a site of psychic opacity and as a structural embedded phenomenon, which I have written about elsewhere (Yancy, 2008; Yancy, 2012), the term vigilance (etymologically, “to be watchful”) comes to mind, which is a cognate of the term mindfulness. Within the context of how I think about the complexity of whiteness and white people engaging in the process of attempting to undo it, the concept of arrival has very little if any purchase. When white people stress arrival vis-à-vis their antiracism, this can also function to keep them sutured, from lingering with the profound and intricate layers

of white supremacy. Kenosis (or emptying) in relationship to white racism involves diligence and a constant process of return. There is no single and total kenotic moment or emptying of white racist sedimentations, assumptions, images, and affects. This is why I continue to stress the importance of nurturing a disposition to be un-sutured, mindful, and in crisis. The process of undoing whiteness requires the capacity on the part of whites to disengage whiteness through constant effort, even as they will continue to undergo processes of interpellation or hailing back into the system of white supremacy. The effort will also require the Black gift, which is the gift of helping to create a form of white double consciousness. It is a gift that militates against the seductions of white narcissism, where whites install forms of epistemological hegemony that are predicated upon ignorance. On this score, many whites will falter at understanding the implications of their actions and silences and the systems that support those actions and silences. However, this will not free them from being held responsible for helping to perpetuate racial injustice. Of course, many whites are all too aware of exactly the existential, social, psychological, and political toll that their whiteness has on people of color. So, on my view, Black and other voices of color are crucial within the epistemological and political equation of insisting that whites put their whiteness into a state of crisis through getting them to nurture a form of white double consciousness—of seeing themselves through the eyes of Black people and other people of color, which means remaining both mindful and un-sutured. Yet, even as Black people and people of color do this, and I think that we must necessarily do so, there is neither the desire to recreate a relationship of dependency nor for Black people and people of color to function as martyred figures whose destiny it is to free white people from their racism while simultaneously functioning as the victims of their white racist vituperation.

E. Ethelbert Miller

I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name

My name is my own my own my own

and I can’t tell you who the hell set things up like this

but I can tell you that from now on my resistance

my simple and daily and nightly self-determination

may very well cost you your life

—June Jordan (1980, p.89)

First, just for the record let me state that I raised a black boy in America. My son is now an athletic director and basketball coach at a community college in New Jersey. My first lesson to him when he started walking the streets alone was how to identify the bad black boys on the block. I taught him how to look ahead and behind. I instructed him on how to navigate alleys and watch for parked cars with four black boys inside. My lessons to my son about safety in the streets had nothing to do with how to deal with the police or white people. I never conveyed to my son there was something wrong with him when it came to blackness. I didn't raise a problem. I raised a son.

I do recall one incident (around the time he was 17) when he came home late and rushed upstairs to my office. Out of breath and still shaking, he informed me that he had been stopped by the police. Why did this happen? My son had attended a party and upon leaving decided to give someone (he didn't know) a ride home. The kid decided to throw a firecracker out the window of my son's car. This caught the attention of a police officer in a patrol car. With the kid encouraging my son to speed up and drive away, my son pulled his car over and stopped. It was at this part of the story I decided I no longer needed to listen to my son's explanation of what had happened. While still working on what I was writing, I asked him one question. "What did you do wrong?" My son paused for a moment and then discovered the answer like Tom Brady finding his third receiver and hitting him with a pass. "I gave someone a ride I didn't know," my son responded.

It was then that my son understood that one simple infraction or penalty could have changed his life forever. The police officer could have mistaken the sound of a firecracker for that of a gun. What if the kid sitting next to my son had drugs in his pocket? I ended the conversation with my son by reminding him how he did the right thing. He ignored the kid who wanted him to place his foot on the pedal and speed away. Zoom! So many of us taken away without wings. My son stopped his car. I still have a son.

Since the Trayvon Martin trial there has been outrage across America regarding the acquittal of George Zimmerman. One of my first concerns after reading Charles Johnson's essay is that he makes reference

to black boys and men being stopped by the police. Zimmerman was not a police officer. He was a citizen who was told by a police officer not to pursue Trayvon Martin.

There have been many incidents in which black boys (and men) have had terrible encounters with police officers. My son came close to becoming a statistic. In many communities there is an ongoing failure of proper law enforcement as well as police abuse. What Johnson's essay should have focused on is the problem of gun violence in our society. This is a bigger issue than the socialization of black boys. If we are honest with ourselves, it's easy to conclude that not much has changed in the black community since Richard Wright created *Bigger*. Florida might as well be Chicago. Trayvon like *Bigger* dreams about flying a plane. His friend Gus was the one who mentioned how it was blackness holding him back. In the final exchange with Gus, *Bigger* talks about how if he could fly he would load his plane with bombs and drop them on white people.

There is something haunting and sad about Richard Wright's *Bigger*. Is it the absence of a Trayvon Martin hoodie? Martin's wardrobe made him look monastic, similar to a young Buddhist in training.

I believe Charles Johnson is correct when he mentions how black males serve as a racial Rorschach test. Might it also apply to President Obama? It should. Johnson would have to be a "Buddhist in an attic" to ignore the fact that our society has been wrestling with racial issues deeply ingrained in the marrow of American history. White people are at times ignorant of race matters and guilty of historical malpractice. Too often they are blind to the issues associated with blackness; they are comfortable when embracing our invisibility.

It's good to see Charles Johnson (near the end of his essay) moving from Buddha to Baldwin. The novelist and essayist Baldwin more than King provides the best assessment of what it means to be an American. It's not about a dream but instead the difficult task of loving another person. It's about compassion and forgiveness. My fear in the 21st century is that we enjoy the racial merry-go-round too much to get off. We prefer to talk about race more than love.

If Johnson expects us to embrace mindfulness on the path to national salvation in order to undo racial indoctrination then he hints at starting re-education camps. I doubt if white people will simply change their way of thinking if we introduce them to chanting and the burning of incense. At the end of the day we struggle with the task of heavy-lifting. Many of us belong to a "Buffet" race. We want to pick and choose the beliefs we

feel comfortable with. History remains the elephant in the room. Each generation struggles to name the animal. At times we are even unaware that we are touching.

The tragic case of Trayvon Martin is that so many other black boys like him will die before they reach home. It is unfortunate that we are trapped once again in another Middle Passage. The sharks are circling because of the blood of our race. The cotton sadly waits for our arrival.

and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this

but I can tell you that from now on my resistance

my simple and daily and nightly self-determination

may very well cost you your life. (Jordan, 1980, p.89)

Amen.

And never again!

Amen.

Charles Johnson

With our Saxon education & habit of thought we all require to be first... We are born With lotus in our mouths & are very deceivable as to our merits... If an American should wake up some morning & discover that his existence was unnecessary, he would think himself excessively ill-used & would declare himself instantly against the Government of the Universe."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journal entry, 1845* (Gilman, 2003, p.108)

I want to thank philosopher George Yancy and poet/activist Ethelbert Miller for their thoughtful responses to my meditation in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* on Trayvon Martin, George Zimmerman, and the enduring problem of how black males are treated and portrayed in a very white, Eurocentric society. Miller, who I count as an old and dear friend, responds in a fashion that is refreshingly candid. He uses well the memorable lines

from poet June Jordan that he selects as an epigraph declaring how black people do not experience themselves as "wrong." And Miller, being a loving black father, gave wise counsel to his son about how to negotiate the racial world.

However, Miller makes two statements that I must disagree with. George Zimmerman's anger-clouded, dualism-drenched (Them vs. Us) perceptions of Trayvon Martin, recorded in his 911 call, were layered with stereotypical assumptions about young black men in a way that reminds us how all our actions originate in the mind. And so it is the operations of consciousness—how we perceive and conceive the world moment by moment (and not gun violence, as Miller states)—that was the proper focus for my essay.

And, secondly, Miller unfortunately reduces the practice of Buddhist mindfulness to "chanting and the burning of incense," an inaccurate and unnecessarily glib statement that trivializes the most important limb or *anga* of the Eightfold Path. But Ethelbert Miller is an ethical man and a good poet. If his response to my essay slips in accuracy and rigor when he writes about mindfulness, his words contain no ill-will, and so I am not offended, only grateful for his participation in this three-way dialogue on a subject of enormous importance.

By contrast, George Yancy is a trained (and creative) philosopher who brings a razor-sharp rigor to his commentary, one that has coherence, consistency, and completeness (the requisites for systematic thinking). He offers us a powerful document that is intellectually dense, eloquent, rich in thought, apodictic in its claims, and exhaustive in its archeology of the meanings associated with black bodies in a Eurocentric society. This is more than commentary. It brilliantly uses phenomenological methodology to deconstruct racism at its roots. It deserves to be published as a short treatise.

Yancy instantly recognizes a crucial similarity between two seemingly different concepts, one that is 2600 years old and from the East (mindfulness), and the other that is specific to the 20th century method of Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (*epoché*) when he writes, "Just as with mindfulness, the concept of *epoché* is a form of 'undoing'; an undoing through the process of cessation or bracketing. And like mindfulness, it aims toward 'letting go' of the 'conceptual paint'." Both concepts are about empirically examining our consciousnesses for presuppositions, assumptions, and prejudices that obscure our perceptual experience as subjects (*noesis*) of objects (*noema*) and others (who can be intended either as subjects or

objects). Both are radical methods insofar as they seize upon thought as it arises, and hold it up for examination. Yet there is an important difference. Traditionally, the *epoché* is a stage (a crucial first stage) in a philosopher's systematic examination of what is given or appears in his or her perception. But mindfulness in Buddhism is the *epoché* expanded to the level of a spiritual practice where the removal of "conceptual paint" is an on-going process every moment of one's conscious life. It is a way of being-in-the-world, a 24/7 state of mind in which a *Dharma* practitioner critically observes every thought, feeling, idea and perception, asking, "Where does this idea come from? Is it true? Is it my original thought, something I truly believe, or is it *aptavacana* (Sk., "received speech")—thought or speech that I have uncritically absorbed from others: my parents, teachers, friends, or the media. This is the essence of mindfulness, a two-millennia-old proto-*epoché* that restores the endless profiles of meaning—think of how Yancy's cup presents itself—that create an inexhaustible horizon of sense. When examining a cube in *The Psychology of Imagination*, as Yancy does his cup, Jean-Paul Sartre (1972) writes that "We must learn objects, that is to say, multiply upon them the possible points of view. The object itself is the synthesis of all these appearances. The perception of an object is thus a phenomenon of an infinity of aspects. What does that mean for us? It means that we must make a tour of objects. . ." (p.9).

If we take this tour, we see that every object and other is inherently mysterious, and outstrips our perception, for we can never know things *in* themselves, only things as they are *for* us as historically situated subjects. As Yancy argues, Zimmerman did violence to both Martin and himself when through his constricted, racially and socially *conditioned* perceptions of Martin (layered with essentialist ideas and images he received from an enveloping society) he intended this young black man as an object, not a subject, and created within himself a consciousness of Martin that was impoverished. As Sartre (1972) would say, he refused to see that "there is always, at each and every moment, infinitely *more* than we see; to exhaust the wealth of my actual perception would require infinite time," because "this manner of 'brimming over' is of the very nature of objects" (p.11).

Epistemological humility, then, is demanded by what Yancy calls "the ethics of perception." It is a requirement for all of us in the social world, black, white and otherwise. In the volume *Life-World and Consciousness* (Northwestern University Press, 1972), in an article titled, "The Problem of the Beginning of Philosophy in Husserl's Phenomenology," Ludwig Landgrebe clari-

fies the project of *epoché*/mindfulness when he writes, "Thus is each of us thrown back upon himself as the 'subject' of his opinions, of his experience, upon this: he has to answer for them. He is therefore the subject of 'absolute experience'—absolute in the sense that what he acknowledges as his experience and allows to be determinant for his life depends upon himself and nothing else" (p.49).

In Plato's dialogue *Apology*, Socrates says "Life without this sort of (moral) examination is not worth living" (37e-38a). As a Western-trained philosopher, I've spent a lifetime in pursuit of that ideal. But, like Yancy, I'm skeptical about the vast majority of white Americans accepting a "Black gift" of self-examination that will plunge them into a state of racial crisis or "white double consciousness." I'm skeptical about individuals in any group doing that, for the human ego is conditioned to measure itself against others—and oftentimes it does that in terms of race, class, gender, religious or sexual orientation. Many, many people, I suspect, would prefer to live with (deluded) feelings of superiority in a social system rigged to favor their race, class, or gender. This, sadly, is human. All too human. In an essay I published in *Buddhadharma* in its winter, 2010 issue, titled, "Is Mine Bigger Than Yours?," I examined a statement posted in 2007 by Buddhist scholar Richard Hayes on the academic forum Buddha-L (also appears <http://www.onlygooddreams.com/dayamati.php>):

According to some *Abhidharma* traditions," wrote Hayes, "one of the last obstacles that a person overcomes on the road to liberation is *maana*, usually translated as pride...In *Abhidharma* literature, *maana* is described as the tendency to think in one of three ways: 1) Thinking of oneself as better than others; 2) Thinking of oneself as inferior to others; and 3) Thinking of oneself as equal to others. The Sanskrit word is derived from a verbal root that means to measure. So *maana* is the act of measuring, or perhaps comparing. It is the kind of thinking we do when we wonder, whether to ourselves or out loud, 'Is mine bigger than yours? Is mine as good as yours?' Hayes added that, "...we are all prone to looking around to see how well we stack up in comparison to others (for we are, after all, social animals, and we learn best by imitation) and whether we're still okay in the imagined eyes of other beholders...."

Every dimension of our lives—personal and professional, even our miscellaneous list of "likes" and

“dislikes”—is saturated with *maana*. From our earliest years of receiving grades that measure our academic progress to the promotions we strive for on our jobs, from the cheers we shout for our home team to the joy we rightfully feel over our children’s achievements, *maana* is an activity we engage in every minute of every day. But do we ever truly know another well enough to judge them as better, equal, or inferior to ourselves when each of us is, ontologically, not an essence or substance but instead a ceaseless play of patterns—physically, emotionally, perceptually, and in respect to consciousness? I think not.

Because *maana* and ego are at the roots of racism as well as sexism, religious bigotry and homophobia, I cannot imagine a time when those evils will be entirely eliminated from the 7 billion people on this Earth. That would require the aforementioned epistemological humility (a phrase I’ve borrowed from Herbert Spiegelberg’s *The Phenomenological Movement*), and an awakening by all of humankind to the realization that the self (racial or otherwise) is an illusion, a social con-

struct at best. But history demonstrates that progress in race relations is slow but real. That *avidya* (ignorance) in individuals can over half a century give way to a new mind-set not based on *maana* or what Emerson identified as the desire to “be first.” Martin Luther King Jr. called this the drum major instinct. “There is, deep within all of us, an instinct. It’s a kind of drum major instinct--- a desire to be first... We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade... Don’t give it up,” he continued. “Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity” (King, 1991, p.267).

While most of humankind will not be liberated from pride and ego in their lifetimes, and while most will fail at Socratic self-examination, there is nevertheless still reason to hope if those drum major instincts in the George Zimmermans of the world can be transformed and re-directed in the fashion that King so eloquently expressed.

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