Yancy writes as a philosopher. However, the impulsive assumption that he is just another generic philosopher—writing in a disembodied universal voice, and from the view from nowhere—represents an evasion of the existentially significant fact that he writes as a Black philosopher. The Black philosopher, always already confronted by a challenge to his/her credibility, writes philosophy while negotiating the double threat of testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. The Black philosopher, then, becomes a liminal thinker, as least relative to the universalist conception of things.

But the problem is as clear as it is obvious: any attempt to reduce Yancy to the generic category of philosopher qua philosopher risks obscuring Yancy’s writing philosophy in the context of a denial of the right to interpellation—the problem of Yancy as a Black person not having the right to question the white reader/subject. Two points are immediately relevant in this context.

First, we must confront the performative contradiction of conjoining “nigger” and philosophy. This effort at relationality, at least on a traditional view of things, courts meddling with a logical absurdity: the attempt to unite or reconcile the universal and the particular. Yancy describes this peculiarity of the Black philosopher:

The juxtaposition of the term ‘nigger’ within the context of doing philosophy and being a philosopher feels, perhaps, to many, textually and conceptually cacophonous, incongruous. After all, such an opening is so out of step given philosophy’s penchant for conceptual abstraction, where the messiness of the real world is left behind as theory soars unencumbered.

Yancy, unlike the traditional philosopher, seeks no detachment from the existential urgencies concerning race and racism.
Second, Yancy admits to being a professional philosopher embedded in a world or a form of life. Accordingly, Yancy, among other things, utilizes the resources of existential philosophy to explore “what it means to be embodied as Black and to be the target of white hatred.”

Yancy’s writing is “raw,” in that it is not saturated with unnecessary theoretical processing and the kind of bland stylistic shading that would delude its rich existential core. Put differently, he does not distance himself from following through on the unsettling implications and discrepant ramifications of his thinking. It should also be noted that Backlash is really the site of an entangled intertextuality. Yancy weaves together his reasons for writing “Dear White America,” responses from readers to “Dear White America,” and his critical working through of these responses. Accordingly, Yancy’s project is, among other descriptions, an existential phenomenological critical working through of such issues as race, racism, white supremacy, etc. It is a thick, contextually motivated project and not an abstract synchronic dissection of static phenomena.

There is, however, a strategic purpose motivating Yancy’s writing. Developing the centrality of the theme of relationality, Yancy writes that he “seek[s] white people . . . who long for genuine human relationality, a conception of the human that transcends whiteness as the very expression of the human.” There is much riding on this invitation concerning the ethico-onto-epistemic implications for Blackness.

My general strategy in this review is to highlight three important areas of thought that are critical for adequately appreciating Yancy’s position. Indeed, my claim is that his position presupposes prior theoretical activities. First, we must become familiar with Afro-pessimism and its focus on the ontological condition of the Black as identical to that of the slave; more specifically, the slave viewed as socially dead, afflicted with natal alienation and the target of gratuitous violence. Second, Yancy also writes in the aftermath of his own critique of liberalism and its addiction to abstract individualism. This is important in order to appreciate Yancy’s criticism of the sutured white self. Closely related with this concern is the fact that Yancy also rejects a certain style of thinking, that style of thinking firmly committed to the proposition that it is talk about race that encourages and sustains racism. With regard, then, to the structure of this essay, I have deliberately discussed Afro-pessimism and Yancy’s critique of liberalism in order later to discuss each in terms of Yancy’s relation to them. A third focus of the essay is closely related to Yancy’s critique of liberalism: his conception of an ethics without edges, a conception of things that emphasizes relationality, an important theme of Yancy’s thinking. Again, I want to emphasize that Yancy’s focus on an ethics without edges functions as a teleological suspension of liberalism in order thereby to recapture the importance of the relationality of the self.
Why Write Backlash?

The goal of Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, according to Yancy, is to unsettle the self-presence of a self-determined, white subject. He destabilizes the assumption of a stable white subject encountering or experiencing a determinate object, which is the Black/slave. To be more specific, the book addresses whites, urging them to seek existential transformation. As Yancy writes:

What I’m doing throughout the book as a whole is way of offering you, white reader, a way to engage in a deeper self-understanding of what it means to be white from a perspective outside your self-understanding, a place that is closed off or where you have created an edge beyond which my voice and my presence are not welcome. 6

And, in another context, Yancy proclaims that, “Backlash is about taking risks, vulnerability, and growth.” 7 But, even as Yancy invites whites to suffer existential vulnerability for the sake of becoming better selves, he also engages with the complexity of the notion of Blackness. The significant point, in this context, is the dynamics of how the white subject/consciousness constitutes the Black body. Yancy writes:

It is . . . white privilege that has implications for my Black body. You see, to be Black in America is to be always already known, and whites assume that they know everything about me. 8

Again, while emphasizing the transcendental element of white consciousness, Yancy insightfully engages “the racially distorted perceptual and interpretive frames of reference embedded within white American culture that mediate how white people make sense of Black intentions.” 9 Accordingly, Blackness, interpreted as constituted by white consciousness, is structured through the lens of white supremacist patterns of perception, habits of seeing, and socially interpretive practices.

So, instead of complacently clinging to the certainty of deductive inferences grounded on self-evident principles, Yancy urges whites to “take a leap of faith, to listen to a voice different from [their] own.” 10 And Yancy directly addresses a question to the white reader: “Why the need to constitute people of African descent as ’niggers’?” Yancy proffers an answer for the white reader through the use of an analogy. Could it be the case that white America needed the nigger in order to establish and justify a system of white supremacy analogous to similar actions by males to reinforce and justify a system of patriarchy? As a matter of fact, Yancy attributes great importance to the analogy between patriarchy and racism. He not only claims that there are relevant structural and theoretical similarities between them, but also that his employment of an analogical relation between them would, hopefully, deflect premature charges of racism leveled against him. As he writes:
When I say that as a male within a patriarchal system I’m sexist and that as a white person in a supremacist system white people are racist, I am not being racist, I am pointing to the ways in which white people are relationally situated within a white systemic power structure and the ways in which white people as a result have come to internalize racist beliefs, images, and affects. This is not judging a group based on the color of their skin.\textsuperscript{11}

This move by Yancy precludes premature charges of “equal opportunity racism.” It also grounds the strategic importance of asymmetrical thinking to Yancy’s critical engagement with race and racism.

With regard to the original event that precipitated Yancy having to write \textit{Backlash}—his letter “Dear White America”—it is fair to conclude that the circumstances which precipitated its authorship and eventual publication are well known by now. Fundamentally speaking, the main objective of “Dear White America” was to offer whites a gift, the kind of gift that facilitates and sustains self-renewal and self-growth. So, in addition to love, the metaphors of gift and gift-giving also ground the very possibility of “Dear White America.” As Yancy declares:

Dear White America was . . . penned as a gift and an act of gift-giving, one informed by a profound act of vulnerability on my part. It was a gift for you [white reader] that was filled with danger, though not physical violence or brutality; it was/is the kind of danger that implies possibility, of being otherwise/different and not-quite-yet; it was/is a form of danger that signifies vulnerability—that is, an openness . . . to be wounded.\textsuperscript{12}

Although Yancy does a marvelous job of describing and fleshing out the raw and painful existential implications of his confrontation with vile racist reactions to his letter, there are greater theoretical currents propelling the analytical rudders of his text. Hence, to truly capture the philosophical crux of \textit{Backlash}, we must correctly identify some of the theoretical currents that so inform it.

\section*{Afro-pessimism}

Although Yancy does not explicitly mention having been influenced by Afro-pessimism, it is my contention that his thinking, especially regarding the ontological profile of Blackness and whiteness within modernity, is compatible with some of the basic tenets of Afro-pessimism. Yancy shares with Afro-pessimism a critical interrogating of “questions that go to the heart of the ethico-political questions of political ontology.”\textsuperscript{13} In the most general sense, the theoretical/epistemic object of study of Afro-pessimism is Blackness and its structural obfuscation executed and sustained within the theoretical regime/imaginary of modernity. Wilderson states that

The Afro-pessimists are theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon’s insistence that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of
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the entire world’s semantic field . . . is sutured by anti-Black solidarity. . . . Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of blackness not . . . as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning is noncommunicable because, again, as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation. \(^\text{14}\)

Afro-pessimism mandates a radical rethinking of slavery. The commonsense view defines slavery as primarily a form of forced labor or primarily a relation of labor. Orlando Patterson alters this theoretical perspective and, instead, frames slavery as a relation of property. Accordingly, the thrust of Patterson’s thinking, as well as that of Afro-pessimists, is that slavery should be configured in ontological terms and not merely in terms of experience. Hence, read through the Afro-pessimist lens, “The slave is objectified in such way that they are legally made an object (a commodity) to be used and exchanged. It is not just their labor-power that is commodified—as with the worker—but their very being. As such, they are not recognized as a social subject and are thus precluded from the category of ‘human’—inclusion in humanity being predicated on social recognition, volition, subjecthood, and the valuation of life.”\(^\text{15}\) The being of the slave is alternatively defined differently from the being of the worker. The worker is defined in terms of the relation of labor; the being of the slave, contrarily, is defined in terms of the relation of property. The crucial difference here is that, unlike the worker, the slave’s being is commodified. Furthermore, the slave is excluded from the category of the human; the worker, unlike the slave, can actively pursue a liberatory agenda premised upon the idea that he/she is human and, hence, should not be subjected to exploitation or alienation; the slave has no such option in having been excluded from the category of “human.”

Since the slave is objectified, the slave becomes an object and not a subject. There are, however, dire ontological implications resulting from the slave having been objectified, or, rather, treated as property, as a commodity that is used and exchanged. As ontologically identified as property and, thereby, exiled from the category of “human,” the slave is socially dead. Indeed, the condition of social death becomes the defining feature of slavery and not forced labor. The category of forced labor correctly registers the experience of some slaves, but social death is indicative of the ontological reality of the slave, a permanent state of being that is not capable of erasure by extending to the slave the opportunity to locate him/herself under the category of “human.” According to Afro-pessimists:

The slave, as an object, is socially dead. Which means they are: 1) open to gratuitous violence, as opposed to violence contingent upon some transgression or crime; 2) natally alienated, their ties of birth not recognized and
familial structures intentionally broken apart; and 3) generally dishonored, or disgraced before any thought or action is considered.16

An important point that we should underscore, in efforts by Afro-pessimists to think slavery differently than through the lens of forced labor, is that they want to think slavery ontologically, meaning to craft an ontology of slavery. And, of course, the very notion of the ontology of slavery connotes thinking the reality of slavery in terms of the very being of slaves. Even the notion of “social death” should be semantically scrutinized as an ontological category. As Afro-pessimists would have it:

The social death of the slave goes to the very level of their being, defining their ontology. Thus, according to Afro-pessimism, the slave experiences their ‘slaveness’ ontologically, as a ‘being for the captor,’ not as an oppressed subject, who experiences exploitation and alienation, but as an object of accumulation and fungibility (exchangeability).17

There are some additional concerns that we need to briefly review. Afro-pessimists maintain that there was an historical, ontological preservation of the slave as the racial Black “subject.” This point is essentially the phenomenon of the Black equals the slave and since the slave equals social death, the Black also equals social death. Blackness, then, ontologically equates to slavery.

First, we should note that if the slave as property is excluded from the category of “human,” then the Black as slave is also excluded from the category of “human.” And, as previously stated, the Black is also socially dead. One critical implication of this ontological accounting is that since the Black is both an object and outside of humanity, then there is no ontological parity between Blackness and subject-categories of otherness: worker, immigrant, woman, etc. Accordingly, from an ontological perspective, the ontological other of Blackness is not exclusively and definitively the white. Hence, the Black/white binary is incorrect. The correct ontological formulation is the Black and the non-Black—Black/non-Black. Or, we could alternatively frame it as the human (the non-Black) and the non-human (the Black).

Afro-pessimism also commences a radical rethinking of the structural dynamics of freedom. Those subject positions grafted on the category of “human” can be mobilized around the basic categories and concepts of liberal individualism. However, since the Black is excluded from the category of “human,” the Black is structurally condemned to a discursive exile not immediately transferable into the grammar of liberal individualism, nor, for that matter, capable of being registered within the logic of liberal individualism. What is the upshot of these considerations?

Afro-pessimism makes a critical shift in focus by moving away from the Black/white binary and reframing it as Black/non-Black, in order to … center
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analysis...on the anti-Black foundations of race and modern society. In other words, ‘it is radical blackness as a necessary condition for enslavement that matters most, rather than whiteness as a sufficient condition for freedom.’ As a result, it is Blackness, and more specifically anti-Blackness, that gives coherence to categories of non-Black—white, worker, gay, i.e., ‘human.’ Categories of non-Black must establish their boundaries for inclusion in a group (humanity) by having a recognizable self within. There must also, consequently, be an outside to each group, and, as with the concept of humanity, it is Blackness that is without; it is Blackness that is the dark matter surrounding and holding together the categories of non-Black. 18

Afro-pessimists also maintain that Blackness exists as an antagonistic difference in relation to the other subject-positions or identities which are always already included under the category of the human or which in principle can be included under the category of the non-Black or the “human.” The basic point is that non-Black subjects can, on the basis of historical experiences, claim inclusion within the universal of individualism. However, the Black ontologically defined as being excluded from the category of “Human,” and as also socially dead, represents a particular singularity, a position outside the universal of, among other things, subjectivity. These considerations lead to an Afro-pessimist analytical standpoint that exposes the often unacknowledged ways that racial movements perpetuate anti-Black racism. One such way is in the rhetoric repeatedly used that takes an assumed (historically oppressed) subject at its center—e.g., workers or women. This conflates experience with existence and fails to acknowledge the incommensurate ontologies between, for instance, white women and Black women. To speak in generalities, of simply workers or women, is to speak from a position of anti-Blackness, for the non-racialized subject is the white, or at least non-Black, subject. . . . This is not to privilege anti-Black racism on a hierarchy of oppression, but to assert—against the disparaging lack of analysis—the unlivability of life for Blacks over centuries of social death and physical murder, perpetuated . . . by all non-Black subjects in society. 19

Logics of sameness and symmetrical equivalence do not accommodate thinking in terms of ontological difference; and since they are incapable of thinking ontological difference, they are epistemically blind to history. Consequently, they are incapable of registering the historical complexity of the ontological structures of Blackness. This inability directly impacts efforts to think through race and racism, as well as beyond white supremacy and the political and philosophical logic of modernity—liberalism. 20 Indeed, as promised, we turn to review Yancy’s critical involvement with liberalism.
Although liberalism reigns triumphantly, there is also the realization that liberalism is quickly becoming irreversibly ineffective in providing an analytical framework for critically confronting the persistence of structural/institutional racism.

Yancy seeks to awaken us from the dogmatic slumber induced by liberalism, particularly its social ontology, which is none other than an uncritical infatuation with atomistic individualism. Indeed, he attacks the crippling limits of liberalism, especially its reductive conceptions of sociality, equality, justice, etc. While cognizant that the theoretical stasis and analytical incapacity of liberalism cannot explain the persistence of racism, Yancy maintains that to perpetuate structures of white supremacy is not a matter of individual whites deciding to actively and intentionally engage in racist behavior. Indeed, it is also not the case that individual whites must have the intent to cause harm to Blacks or act so as to benefit themselves that would cause the occurrence of either of these two things. For Yancy, a better explanation is one in terms of the fact that whites “benefit from a white racist systemic structure to which [the white individual is] embedded and in terms of which Black people and people of color suffer.” Of course, to displace liberal individuals from the center of our theoretical focus, among other things, entails shifting our perspective on racism. As consistent with liberal individualism, racism, to the extent that it is a reality, is primarily an individual problem or phenomenon; it is something caused by the actions of individuals. But Yancy, writing outside the theoretical box of liberalism, maintains that “seeing [the white self] as not racist is the result of a narrow understanding of racism—as a site of individual acts of meanness.”

There are other defects that compromise the integrity of the liberal model of racism. On the individual model of liberal racism, there must be a direct causal link between the perpetrator of racist action(s) and the victim(s). Yancy considers the account of racist responsibility as requiring a causal link to a racist action as exceedingly too narrow a conception of racism. Consequently, he challenges the common individualistic model of racist action dependent upon a causal nexus. Yancy states, “My point, though, is that white people fail to understand the ways in which a thick conception of the embedded white racist self, a self that is also linked to perpetuating structural injustice, highlights their being part of a larger white racist network.”

However, the fact that Yancy declares the model of liberal racism inadequate because of its restricted explanatory scope, especially regarding the structural nature of racism, does not render it aimless. Indeed, its value may very well have more to do with its ability to render structural racism invisible than its ability to register structural racism. Accordingly, liberal racism becomes complicit in efforts
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I previously stated that it would be a mistake not to acknowledge that Yancy’s project is partly a decentering of liberal individualism and liberal racism. He remains convinced that the liberal notion of individualism, even as it works to the benefit of whites, can alternatively entail dangerous consequences for Blacks; the lived reality of Black is not amenable to the asocial notion of liberal individualism. As Yancy states:

Perhaps if we . . . live our lives as ‘presocial’ individuals, atomistic, self-interested and entrepreneurial, . . . we will become legible. Under those terms, though, I would be in a precarious and dangerous position of having denied social reality. I would have denied the deep and enduring reality of white American racism. . . . That charade will collapse once I’m pulled over by a white police officer and I’m asked to show my driver’s license. Then, suddenly, there is the sound of gunshots, bullets rip through my Black body, leaving me dead, and with my last breath, while looking into the white police officer’s eyes, I speak: ‘And I thought that I was like you—just an individual.’

The point is as easy as it is obvious: repudiate any and all appeals to race and one will not understand why Blacks, the historical victims of white racism, would desire to create spaces for Black sanity, and do this without focusing primarily on excluding whites.

At this time, I will pursue a brief digression in order to consider Yancy’s critical working through of whiteness. After this discussion, we will return to Yancy’s relation to Afro-pessimism and liberalism.

**Yancy on Whiteness**

Consistent with Yancy’s efforts to write outside the text of liberalism, which entails eschewing an individualistic perspective as the best way to critically engage matters pertaining to race and racism, Yancy also situates whiteness outside of an exclusive individualistic frame. Hence, in negating the addiction to individualism, Yancy adopts an ontological approach to whiteness but not the type of ontological approach concerned with whether or not whiteness is a natural kind or an essence. Rather, Yancy interrogates whites from the perspective of an existential
ontological reality of whiteness—whiteness as a lived reality, even if not always recognized as a lived reality.

It may very well be the case that the majority of whites do not “see” whiteness because whiteness, ontologically speaking, functions as normativity, and also as a site of white identity. Paradoxically, even if whiteness functions as normativity and as a site of identity, most whites do not acknowledge the ontological dominance of whiteness—the extent to which whiteness saturates being. This strange situation extends a unique ontological status to whiteness. Although whiteness constitutes the norm, whiteness as norm becomes invisible to whites. Whites live in a world structured in accordance with the basic configuration of their existence, yet they stubbornly claim not to see how whiteness benefits them; indeed, they do not even see themselves as white but as *individuals qua individuals*. Yancy’s mission is to debunk, to shatter the invisibility of whiteness for whites. As he tells us:

[W]hiteness functions as a way of evading reality, as a site of security, allowing for very little slippage. Think about white normativity in this way. It is so taken for granted that it is like breathing. You just do it. . . . In fact, whiteness as normative, because of its taken-for-granted reality, is not the sort of thing from which you can just assume a stance of moral distance; you are that site.26

If whiteness miraculously survives as unnamed, unmarked, and unraced, Yancy calls attention to the fact that the trace of whiteness envelops Being. Indeed, whiteness represents a manic “*colonial desire to possess everything*.”27 Here Yancy shares Du Bois’s concise account of this maniacal craving of whiteness for the control of being.

Obviously, for Yancy, Whiteness is not ontologically benign. Put differently, the horrible material effects of whiteness, at least for Blacks, are beyond denial. Blacks are all too aware of the toxicity of whiteness. Whiteness, for Blacks, is not an abstraction, nor a causally weak invisible force. And even if it appears ghostly, its effects are not ontologically inert. Yancy maintains that “The problem, though, is that white supremacy, white normativity, white power and privilege are not benign; they are toxic, malignant, deadly.”28 As a consequence of whites not acknowledging the ontological profile of whiteness, they also fail to recognize the equally persistent ontological status of racism.

Yancy underscores the fact that whites aggressively protest against acts of overt racism, the kind of racism easily attributable to the intentional acts of an individual. Yet, they fail to condemn covert racism or institutional racism. In this context, Yancy introduces the notion of a white antiracist racist, namely, the white individual who condemns individual racism but is silent in response to the more despicable consequences of institutional or structural racism. Furthermore, the white antiracist racist condemns intentional acts of individual racism but, ironically, fails to acknowledge the realities of white supremacy and its morally
polluting effects. So, for Yancy, the very notion of a white antiracist racist is not a contradiction. He states that, “Being a white antiracist and yet being a racist are not mutually exclusive. For me, the ‘good white people’ versus the ‘bad white people’ functions for both of these white(s) ... in such a way that it shifts and avoids the message ... —look at your racism.”

Yancy suggests that the antidote for whiteness is the death of whiteness. Here Yancy employs a sense of death as metaphorically grafted on psychological death, or at least the kind of death that serves as the possibility for the coming into being of the new, the different, the other, etc. Perhaps another way of framing the notion of death, as appropriated by Yancy, is to think in terms of a snake shedding its old skin in order to acquire a new one. Similarly, we can talk in terms of the death of an old self and the birth of a new self, of one becoming a different self. So, in addressing whites, Yancy writes:

The oppressive machinations of whiteness must die so that white people ... can truly live. What is meant by death? It involves an opening, a risk, a fissure. As white, you must be open to a kind of death—a death of your ... racial comfort,... a death of your color evasion, a death of your self-righteousness, a death of your sense of entitlement, a death of your illusions of safety, a death of your sense of ‘greatness’ and ‘manifest destiny,’ a death of all those tricks that you play to convince yourselves that you are fine, that you are the good ones, the sophisticated ones, the nonracist ones, the ones who truly care about justice and a world without oppression, hatred, and racist violence.

**Yancy, an Afro-pessimist**

Earlier in this essay, I briefly discussed some of the main themes of Afro-pessimism, motivated by the contention that Yancy’s thinking, whether deliberately adopted or accidently adopted, is in strategic alliance with the theoretical and analytical vigor of Afro-pessimism. I turn now to trace deposits of Afro-pessimism in Yancy’s position. We recall that a core theme of Afro-pessimism is the ontological framing of the Black as slave. Yancy similarly embraces this view. He maintains that Black bodies are seen as being “‘surplus’ bodies, ‘disposable’ bodies,” a conception that underscores the Afro-pessimist tenet concerning the construction of Blacks or, more specifically, peoples of African descent, as slaves. Yancy writes that “when engaging the existential predicament of Black people in white America, ‘there is a Zone of nonbeing.”

In another context, Yancy clearly gestures in the direction of Afro-pessimism. Afro-pessimism holds that whiteness functions as the norm of the human, which entails that any realistic transformation of the condition of Blacks requires a transcending of whiteness as the mark of humanity. Yancy, similarly, states that
he supports “a conception of the human that transcends whiteness as the very expression of the human.”

It was established that Afro-pessimists approach the question of Blackness from an ontological perspective and not exclusively in terms of experience. The difference here is to resist reducing Blackness only to experience, which is not to discount experience. The challenge, rather, is to focus more intensely on the role of Blackness in erecting and sustaining the conditions of possibility of the metaphysical foundation of the various discursive formations of the modernity. Yancy invokes the notion of the metaphysical status of “the nigger.” Although “nigger” has been constituted by white consciousness, the historical contingency of this constitution is occluded by extending metaphysical status to the term “nigger,” which means to think “the nigger” as an essence, as something not ontologically restricted by temporality. The entanglement of history, modernity, metaphysics, and race, especially as they pertain to Blackness, does not escape Yancy. Yancy declares:

It appears . . . that to be a nigger is to be something ‘eternal,’ noncontingent. A nigger, in short, functions, within the white imaginary, as something metaphysical, not socially metaphysical, but applying to things ‘immutable’—timeless.

Since Blackness is framed metaphysically as an immutability, as timeless, the metaphysical equation of Black with niggers imposes grave limitations or restrictions on the being of Blacks. The prison house of being for Blacks, their metaphysical restriction to a low metaphysical status—thinghood, the slave—does not escape Yancy. He maintains that, “White people framed [his] existence and the existence of Black people according to a metaphysics of the nigger, the ‘fixedness’ of what it means to be Black.”

For Yancy, the point here concerns the extent to which white consciousness constitutes Blacks in such a way as to erase the contingency of its own constitutive activities with regard to Blackness. This metaphysical deception conspires to deny subjectivity and heteronomy to Blackness, and ultimately, treats Blacks as representing a blob of being, an undifferentiated mass. Again, Yancy, in agreement with Afro-pessimists, correctly acknowledges the metaphysical compacting of Blacks as an ontological undesirable outside of the category human. As he states, “We [Blacks] were flattened out, seen as surface things, one-dimensional, indistinct and repeatable. We were excessive; one Black identifiable mass.”

As we recall, for the Afro-pessimists, white supremacy represents ontological closure for Blacks. Blacks can never fully fall under the concept of the human. Here, metaphysically speaking, Blacks’ being/existence is without ontological tension, not subject to becoming and development. Yancy, too, as Afro-pessimist, states that, “The future of the ‘nigger’ is apparently ontologically foreclosed, permanently rendered beyond the domain of the human.” And he explains that there is a “racist
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law of identity.” This racist law of identity, once materially implemented, leads to the white supremacy conviction that, “A nigger is a nigger! And as a ‘nigger’ one must be dealt with as only a nigger deserves.” What does it mean to deal with a nigger as a nigger deserves? As is commonly known, to deal with a nigger specifically as only a nigger should be dealt with means one thing: death. The analogical kinship involving slavery, Blacks, and death is undeniable.

Yancy, in agreement with the Afro-pessimists, acknowledges the deep roots of gratuitous violence in American culture, writing about “a white racist American pastime: the brutalization of Black bodies, vicious beatings and killings, and the hanging of strange fruit—Black bodies swinging in the trees with broken necks and mutilated bodies.” So, the trouble for Blacks, concerning social death, is the manner in which it can so easily morph into literal death. This point is revealing, for, as Yancy acknowledges, many of the responses from whites to his letter “fantasize . . . about harm done to me, my death.” Yancy contemplates why, for Blacks, the awareness of vulnerability, the awareness of being always a possible target of gratuitous violence, is inescapable. Ironically, gratuitous violence continues, according to Yancy, even if efforts to describe it using the language of law and order have become official State policy. As Yancy observes:

Given the sheer magnitude of unarmed Black bodies killed, . . . the feeling of wanting to flee for my life, that sense of overwhelming angst, is underwritten by the contemporary expression and the historical reality of white gratuitous violence against Black people.

Consistent with the perspectives of both Yancy and Afro-pessimists, gratuitous violence reinforces the normativity of whiteness. This development debunks the tendency of treating violence against Blacks as the random actions of a few misguided or ignorant individuals and not as part of a system of violence.

Perhaps Yancy’s most controversial claim, a claim he shares with Afro-pessimists, is the view that Blackness is not one identity among other identities. In this context, Yancy, like Afro-pessimists, challenges the ahistorical use of analogical thinking and the false symmetries and equivalences facilitated by “pornographies of deduction” to render effort to think the positionality of the Black subject within modernity all but a transcendental impossibility.

Yancy considers Blackness the ontological other of whiteness—whiteness being both the norm and equal to humanity. As previously stated, the relevant point here is that it is misleading to establish formal parity between all possible identity positions, a move that entails viewing Blackness as just another identity position and not as the categorical and absolute Other of whiteness. Of course, it should be acknowledged that neither Afro-pessimists nor Yancy construe Blackness as representative of the only legitimate subject position that has a rightful claim to be heard. Furthermore, neither the Afro-pessimist nor Yancy advocates for a toxic arithmetic of victimhood, which would be the act of quantifying which particular
group has suffered the most harm. Again, Yancy and the Afro-pessimists staunchly resist the vile project of quantifying suffering in order to rate group suffering in accordance with an objective scale. While directly addressing false equivalencies that distort the ontological structure of the Black/white binary, Yancy writes:

My claim that to be white in America is to be racist is a contextual claim about how . . . whiteness is perceived, how it has been historically constructed, . . . and how [white people], despite the ways in which [the white] subject position is a complicated one, (poor, liberal, progressive, disabled, LGBTQ, you name it), reap and perpetuate white racism . . . within a white supremacist world.44

In order to guard against gross misunderstanding of Yancy’s contention concerning the Black subject position in comparison to other subject positions, we must appreciate why he refuses to frame resistance to anti-Black racism as more important than any other issue. As well, he does not consider these other issues as lacking the moral urgency garnished by racism. The point, rather, is to establish white-on-Black racism as the paradigmatic case of racism.

Anti-Black racism is not an example of a conflict but a structural antagonism in so far as Blacks are excluded from the category of the human. Consequently, the grievances of Blacks are not immediately intelligible within the normative structures of white supremacy. This is to say that the nonwhite or Black is already subject to normative exclusion from the order of Sameness. Yancy states that the reaction against and response to the slogan “Black Lives Matter” reveal the extent to which the moral worth of innocent Black life does not qualify for State protection. In this context, Yancy shares Feagin’s view that, “White-on-Black racism is thus a—if not the—crucial paradigmatic case of racism historically and in the present.”45

From another perspective, the ontological status of the Black, within a system of white supremacy, precludes Blacks from the right to the presumption of innocence. Yancy states that, “Black people, within the context of white supremacy, are criminals.”46 As a matter of fact, having already been condemned to social death, having already been marked as criminals, there is a presumption of being guilty and as being condemned to death. And Yancy adds, “To be Black . . . is to have always already been sentenced to death in virtue of being Black within a white supremacist world, where I am just waiting to die.”47 Death, for Blacks, represents the possibility of impossibility, the possibility of nonbeing. This is a condition that applies to all human beings. However, for the Afro-pessimist and Yancy, the Black must not only contend with this generic condition of being, but must also endure the additional burden of having been already condemned to the ontological status of the impossibility of possibility, which means living with the realization that within a system of white supremacy, the Black is always already in
the midst of death or already sentenced to death. In short, the Black has no rightful claim to a future. The Black, then, becomes the “dead man/woman walking.”

**Transcending Liberalism: Deconstructing the White Self**

Yancy considers the possibility of what must happen in order to pursue a negation and rejection of white supremacy and racism. Yancy recommends a deconstruction of the white self as a constructive step in ending white supremacy and racism. We should immediately note here that this project involves a critical unmasking of the analytical and theoretical complicity between liberalism and white selfhood.

Current white selfhood must suffer a dismantling in order for there to be any realistic hope of realizing meaningful interpersonal as well as intrapersonal moral repair. We should also note that this deconstruction is justified in order to unsettle the normative and transcendental status of the white subject. Without this analytical dismantling and dethroning, there is the tendency to reinforce white normativity. Here Yancy, again, is on solid grounds with Afro-pessimist thinkers who argue that,

If the autonomous status of the Euro-subject is not presumed directly, it is presupposed because … writers assume that, in one way or another, the system (of whatever sort—economic, political, cultural, religious, and so forth) begins and, hence, ends with the inaugural actions of this subject. Typically, the procedure is something like this: the system in which the subordination occurs, because it exists, is analytically presupposed, and then the subjects are inserted into this preestablished matrix to engage in their functional articulation of the permutations prescribed therein.48

For Yancy, to deconstruct the white self is, from one perspective, a dismantling of the liberal white self. In order to pursue a deconstruction of the white self, Yancy introduces clusters of metaphors. However, these metaphors expose the unsatisfactory conception of the liberal self, and, by extension, the white liberal self.

Yancy chooses the metaphor of suturing to capture the condition of the white self, a condition that restricts the capability of the white self to confront its racism. He writes:

I have come to use the concept of suturing within the context of understanding the structure and being of whiteness. As I see it, suturing … is the process whereby white people engage in forms of closure, forms of protection from various challenges to the ways in which whiteness is seen as the norm, its unrememberable everydayness, its value assumptions, and the many ways in which it’s guilty about producing distorted knowledge about itself.49

The sutured white self is a self that seeks normative purity. As a sutured self, meaning closed off into itself, this white sutured self also desires normative suturing, meaning total separation from any alien affections. As well, the sutured
white self opposes the introduction of alien values and norms within its sterile normative purity. Consequently, the sutured white self desires, among other things, to feed upon its own normative reserves. Indeed, Yancy calls attention to the insulated white self.\(^{50}\)

The suturing of the white self is not necessarily a positive development because it sustains a fantasy of a sovereign white self. Ultimately, the sutured white self is itself trapped within the narrative closure of being a self-sustaining personality, totally exempted from the limitations of all contingencies. According to Yancy:

The process of suturing is also reflective of another fable: the white self as a site of self-possession and in absolute control of its own meaning.….Another way of saying this is that the sutured, white imperial self’s narration of its own identity tells a fantasy of ‘absolute’ autonomy.\(^{51}\)

The fable of absolute autonomy is not an inert abstract consequence of the suturing of the white self. Yancy connects the fable of autonomy to the liberal conception of the self, a conception of the self that prevents whites from adequately understanding, as previously stated, the complexity of racism. Yancy maintains that many whites hold the assumption “that they are purely autonomous selves, neoliberal subjects, and that racism is exclusively about racial stereotyping and being, in some way, mean-spirited toward [a] Black person.”\(^{52}\)

Yancy uses suturing not only to amplify the problematic nature of the white self, but also to challenge “[whites] to come to terms with [their] embeddedness within the system of white privilege and white supremacy.”\(^{53}\) If whites were to acknowledge their embeddedness within a system of white privilege and white supremacy, Yancy maintains that they would come to realize that they cannot “through a sheer act of will, stand outside the system of white supremacy.”\(^{54}\)

Yancy expands the conception of the embedded white self, and introduces the conception of the embedded white racist self. At the risk of repetition, Yancy invokes this conception to challenge the stubborn notion of the autonomous white self. This notion is particularly troubling because, once again, it encourages the notion of racism as an individual problem—all racism is a form of liberal racism. Yancy states:

My hope is that this idea helps [whites] to understand the myth that when it comes to white racism . . . [whites] are not fully autonomous, . . . a ‘law’ unto [themselves]. The idea here is that as embedded within a preexisting social matrix of white power, a matrix which fundamentally constitutes who [whites] are, though not in a deterministic way, [whites] must critically re-think the ways in which [whites] are not a site of complete self-possession . . . , but, rather, a site of dispossession.\(^{55}\)
In promoting the notion of the white self as embedded, Yancy links this development to the charge that just as autonomy should be abandoned, similarly, the idea of the transparent white self also warrants nullification. In this context, Yancy refers to the opaque white racist to underscore the difficulty of confronting racism on the assumption that a white person can, through an act of sheer, individual will, decisively extricate him/herself from the system of white supremacy. Yancy declares:

My contention of the opaque white racist self and the embedded white racist self are two important concepts that point to complex ways in which, as a white person, you never clearly come to a place of ‘arrival’—where such a place suggests a static noun—as a ‘nonracist’ white. For me, just as I am an antiseexist sexist, as white, you are an antiracist racist.56

Obviously, Yancy’s idea of the opaque white racist counters the idea of the transparent antiracist racist white. The critical point here is to challenge the uncritical allegiance to the idea of transparency, the idea of a self, which has immediate access to its consciousness. Yancy recruits Ann Berlak who maintains that “introspection as ordinarily understood is more often an imaginative construction than a retrieved process.57 Ultimately, Yancy declares that he introduced the concept of the opaque white racist self for strategic purposes. Obviously, Yancy’s goal is to invite whites to separate themselves from ways of thinking that are incapable of capturing the recalcitrance of racism. So Yancy tells us that he “provided briefly … the grounds for a more robust sense of white humility and conceptual clarity regarding the complexity of white racism; it is a call for risking the white self to—tell the truth to [itself] and to others.”58

**Yancy on Ethics without Edges, or Ethics beyond Liberalism**

Earlier in this essay I mentioned Yancy’s appeal to the idea of a relationalist ethics. In order to explicate the kind of ethics associated with the conception of the suturing of whiteness, Yancy introduces the metaphor of edges. A sutured white self has sharp edges, precisely because it is a self that is self-contained, autonomous, and transparent. But, Yancy again fears that this notion of the white self as possessing edges, meaning a white self and whiteness as sharply separated from the nonwhite others, undermines the conditions necessary for connectivity and relationality. Accordingly, Yancy writes:

whiteness functions as an edge. . . . [W]hite segregation, white redlining, white neighborhood covenants, and white gated communities . . . function as acts of building of edges, limits, boundaries, borders, perimeters.59

Yancy wants whites to abandon the ethics of edges and embrace an ethics without edges. His project directly confronts the “ethical frigidity” of a sutured
white self, a self seemingly unable to ethically embrace Blacks on the basis of love. Dethroning the idea of the liberal white self and the transparent white self, etc., Yancy declares that, instead of there being sharp edges and sharp boundaries, there are vague and porous boundaries, meaning that selves merge into or blend into other selves with no clear separation between them. Sociality is not a whole composed of an arbitrary collection of discrete selves. Rather, sociality is a network of subjects connected through clusters of entangled relationships. Hence, Yancy explains:

To say that white embodiment has no edges introduces what I’m calling an ontology (or being) and an ethics of no edges. In other words, an ethics of no edges and a radical rethinking of a relational ontology, where the white body does not terminate at some fictive corporeal edge, ought to encourage a different response from white people. The connection, the touching, after all, is already there.60

As a matter of fact, Yancy contends that an ethics appropriate to releasing the white self from its harmful fables of autonomy and sincere introspection is an ethics without edges. Furthermore, an ethics without edges would realistically position the white self to endure the critical process of confronting and dismantling white supremacy. According to Yancy:

An ethics of no edges that I have in mind rethinks or, better, lays bare a dynamic ontology of connectedness, a dynamic racialized somatic network … that problematizes a clear-cut outside limit, and thereby calls for a robust sense of ethical responsibility, indeed, white responsibility.61

Even more importantly, an ethics without edges would undermine efforts to think white existence as somehow parallel to Black existence without any possibility of border crossings. Yancy addresses whites as follows:

My point here is to encourage you, white reader, to engage critically how you are always already constituted relationally and socially and that you are politically preconfigured in the lives of Black people and people of color, especially in ways that perpetuate white racist oppression.62

Now, if an ethics without edges is to take root among whites, Yancy argues that whites must unsuture themselves. This unsuturing, however, is not going to be easy; it will be a very painful undertaking. In the most general sense, Yancy maintains that unsuturing “brings to mind a state of pain, ‘open flesh,’ ‘exposure.’ Un-suturing suggests processes of troubling a problematic ontology or mode of being. Un-suturing can function, within this case, as a way of undergoing a radical rethinking of the body as a site of profound vulnerability, and a radical way of being-in-the-world.”63

Unlike the capacity of suturing to facilitate fables of closure, autonomy, and sharp edges, unsuturing cultivates chaos, the unraveling of self, the collapsing of
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world, and the loss of narrative intelligibility. Ultimately, Yancy hopes that whites, in virtue of becoming unsutured and unstitched, will surrender their white innocence. In short, unsuturing can induce a traumatic epistemological crisis that assaults the grounds of one being. For these and other reasons, Yancy endorses unsuturing, confidently claiming that it has the potential to enable the white self to pursue a comprehensive shedding of its old self.64

Criticizing Yancy

I have endeavored in this essay to place Yancy in the appropriate context in order to avoid accusations of him being no better than the white racists that he takes to task for their vile and despicable behavior. The charge against Yancy would be that, similar to the white racists who consider Blacks the inferiors of whites and, hence, not worthy of the same moral regard and worth as whites, Yancy similarly declares all whites to be racist. Even those whites who sincerely denounce racism Yancy still judges to be racists. I have struggled to establish that this line of criticism is misleading precisely because, among other things, it is beholden to a style of thinking informed by the basic social ontological assumptions and other general assumptions constitutive of liberalism. Yancy’s decision to write outside the pages of liberalism necessitated that he utilize alternative frameworks to capture the systemic, structural, and ontological character of racism, whiteness, and white supremacy. This change in theoretical and analytical perspective explains why individual whites cannot simply invoke their innocence to ground their opposition to racism. Hence, for example, Yancy’s insistence on understanding the white self as embedded within structures of white supremacy that extend great benefits to whites even if whites individually do not support white supremacy.

Yancy’s critical optimism suggests that in order to appropriately understand the “social and existential dynamics of what it means to be Black in America,” such an understanding cannot come exclusively by means of statistics but must focus on the complex ontological ramifications of Black existence as a form of social death.

There is the insufferable charge that those who discuss or theorize about race and racism create the conditions that allow racism to flourish. Accordingly, thinkers such as Yancy are advised to cease playing the race card, to cease unproductive race baiting. Yancy directly responds to this criticism of him contributing to racism by writing and theorizing about race and racism. He writes:

pointing out how white people continue to benefit from white supremacy and how they are part of a system that treats them differently from Black people and people of color is not racist.65

There is also the issue of whether Yancy was naïve to expect that his letter was going to be widely accepted and appreciated by mainstream white society. Why
would whites be willing to accept a gift that invites them to pursue the kind of
difficult love and unsuturing of self that Yancy’s gift entailed? How can confront-
ing the kind of self-knowledge and truth about racism that Yancy says he invites
whites to confront provoke anything less than the vile and vicious responses
that Yancy received? If Blacks are indeed the subjects of gratuitous violence
instigated by whites, why not expect that the response to Yancy’s letter was going
to be anything less than a violent response? Yancy admits that he did not expect
the “sheer volume of white responses nor the depravity of so many of them.”66
To be fair, there is no way that Yancy could have anticipated the large number of
responses or the vile nature of the responses. After all, he published the letter in
the New York Times, whose readership is supposed to be not only highly educated
but also liberally progressive in having already rejected racism. Since we do not
expect low-income, uneducated whites to be avid readers of the New York Times,
it is reasonable to assume that the responses would not have been conceived in
hatred and the bloodthirst for wounding the Black body. Yancy writes:

Of course, some might regard my shock as evidence of my ‘naiveté’ regarding
the wicked and inhumane treatment of Black people by white people under
America’s structure of white supremacy. I assure the reader that I am not
naïve, but I continue to be hopeful, even as my hope feels as if it is at times
complicit with white supremacy. It feels that way because as long as I remain
hopeful, focusing on the future, white people can feel safe in the ‘knowledge’
that my rage, the intensity of my affect, can be appeased by piecemeal ges-
tures of political reform in the present. That is, I can be unmoored from the
gravity of the present reality of my lived experience under white oppression,
power, and privilege. Hope, after all, looks toward the future.67

But there remains the response as to why Yancy’s confession of shock will not
suffice. Those not convinced by the admission will insist that Yancy should have
known what would have happened. For him to say otherwise is for him to be in
bad faith, pretending not to know what he must certainly have known would
have occurred precisely because of the violent history of anti-Black racism in
American history. Indeed, according to this view, Yancy should have known that
even such a banal act as publishing his letter in the New York Times was going to
extract all sorts of intense responses given the extremely sensitive nature of the
letter; it was the perfect powder keg for unleashing the dark forces of America’s
racial unconsciousness. Yancy again responds directly to this line of criticism.
Responding to a letter, Yancy appreciates the difference between underestimating
the response and his being disingenuous. He denies being deceitful.68

In any event, I think that Yancy wisely realized the futility of responding to
these types of criticisms. Obviously, he underestimated the sheer viciousness of
the responses and the volume of responses from the readers of his letter. However,
to claim that he knew all along what the obvious response was going to be is to
fail to adequately appreciate Yancy’s own appropriation of the avowal of the Black tradition of affirming creative human agency even in the midst of the forces that threaten Black existence. Despite the threats of nonbeing directed towards Black existence, Yancy represents the tradition of Black existential improvisation, the courage to affirm being.

**Notes**

4. Ibid., 7.
5. Ibid., 13–14.
6. Ibid., 13.
7. Ibid., 15.
8. Ibid., 11.
9. Ibid., 41.
10. Ibid., xii.
11. Ibid., 71.
12. Ibid., 95.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 9.
19. Ibid., 12.
20. Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield have identified an ominous development with regard to race: the emergence of *liberal racism or white philosophy*. This uncanny development is the contagious spreading of “an antiracist attitude that coexists with support for racist outcomes.” See Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield, “White Philosophy,” *Critical Inquiry* 20(4) (1994): 737.


22. Ibid., 74.

23. Ibid., 77–78.

24. Ibid., 71.

25. Ibid., 90–91.

26. Ibid., 57.

27. Ibid., 44.

28. Ibid., 57.

29. Ibid., 68.

30. Ibid., 58.

31. Ibid., 9.

32. Ibid., 13–14.

33. Ibid., 27.

34. Ibid., 28.

35. Ibid., 35.

36. Ibid., 48.

37. Ibid., 50.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 34.

40. Ibid., 17.

41. Ibid., 93; my emphasis.

42. Ibid., 35.


46. Ibid., 75.

47. Ibid., 101.


50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., 106.

52. Ibid., 77.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 97.

55. Ibid., 76.

56. Ibid., 80.


58. Ibid., 81.

59. Ibid., 111.

60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 112.
64. Ibid., 113–14.
65. Ibid., 72.
66. Ibid., 100.
67. Ibid., 101.
68. Ibid., 103.