

George Yancy (editor)

White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015 (ISBN 978-0-7391-8949-8)

Reviewed by Kris Sealey, 2016

Narrated by Zoe Belinsky

George Yancy's introduction to this volume is, quite fittingly, titled "Un-Sutured." It sets up an earnest engagement with the acknowledgment of "suturing" as fundamental to an uncritical performance of whiteness. Yancy identifies suturing to "involve an effort . . . to be 'invulnerable' . . . and 'closed off'" (xv). It involves actual work, the value of which is a protection against what might compromise one's return to self as a whole and pure subject, with full authority in one's being. Suturing, according to Yancy, "occludes alterity" (xv), and so the sutured subject encounters herself as self-authored, with complete knowledge of who she is as a subject. Put otherwise, she encounters no surprises when she encounters herself.

The claim sustained throughout this volume is that white criticality--the attitude that allows white people to encounter themselves as a problem--must begin with an abandonment of the project of suturing. What ensues is the kind of "unsuturing" that makes possible what Yancy calls "being touched" by epistemologies, sensibilities, and attitudes that counter a white-centric universe. In performing whiteness in this way, the white subject is rendered open, vulnerable, and dispossessed of the types of disavowals and forgettings that would undermine her anti-racist projects. In this sense, a white criticality beyond anti-racism does not *denigrate* the value of the anti-racist project, but rather, is in the name of a more effective resistance against anti-black racism. The unsutured subject does not expect to be fully self-present. Instead, she understands that, in an anti-black world, a comportment of whiteness includes being "ambushed" by certain "white racist relational processes that exceed the white self" (xiii), for which she must take responsibility. Said otherwise, the unsutured subject, occupying white criticality beyond anti-racism, *does* encounter surprises when she encounters herself. She unexpectedly finds herself enacting practices that not only undermine an anti-racist agenda, but doing so *despite* the best of intentions. Hence, to live in dispossession is to render unsustainable the myth of self-mastery toward which the project of suturing strives. This volume claims that, when this myth is replaced with a valuing of vulnerability (of unsuturing), we have the grounds for an effective white ally-ship.

Clear threads connect all twelve chapters of this work to this claim. For this, the reader owes gratitude to the editor's oversight of the project. In her piece, Barbara Applebaum emphasizes that the white subject must take on responsibility for her racism despite the white ambush that undermines her intentionality. She quotes Audrey Thompson to emphasize that "[there] is no such thing as white innocence," and as such, "there is *only* racial responsibility or irresponsibility" (6). Furthermore, Applebaum dislodges a productive account of white criticality from the self-aggrandizing sense of guilt, the professing of which oftentimes "entails that 'I am really a good white'" who no longer needs to worry about whiteness as ambush (6). Hers is really the question of how to navigate the intractability of white complicity in the project of racism, and her response is to "[stay] in the anguish of being a problem" (2). The reader finds, in this, the decision to give up the project of suturing, or of remaining closed to the dangers of being touched by an alterity that one would rather disavow.

In other words, white criticality is "on the basis of rather than despite the opacity of the self" (2). To acknowledge this opacity is not only to take on an attitude of vigilance over how one fails to accomplish a full anti-racist comportment, but also to position oneself to "fail better" in one's commitment to creating an anti-racist world. This notion of vigilance informs Rebecca Aanerud's call for a pedagogy of humility over a pedagogy of assurance to guide classroom conversations about race. She writes that this pedagogy of humility "invites the white students to sit with incoherence, attend to its discomfiting realities and personal vulnerabilities" (104). In this, we hear a valuing of the vigilance and dispossession involved in the unsuturing project, as well as the conditions for the possibility of being touched by the kind of alterity to which Yancy alludes in his introduction.

Whereas Aanerud is willing to frame whiteness "as a site of structural racial advantage" (102), Steve Martinot de-emphasizes the *privilege* of white subjectivity, and instead, emphasizes the *dis-privileging* of other subjectivities, for whom whiteness is not a site. He writes, "If race is something that white people do to others, then whiteness presents something taken from others through those social actions of deprivation and derogation [in other words, through the project of coloniality]" (181). Whiteness, then, is not primarily a site of privilege, but rather, a site of theft. Unsuturing, on Martinot's account, would take the form of a decision to remain open to this painful truth (that whiteness is *not* primarily about "white skin privilege," but rather about being the source of coloniality).

Martinot's call to acknowledge the truth of coloniality resonates with Alexis Shotwell's powerful account of unforgetting. On her account, to unforget is to acknowledge the anti-black racism (and broader systems of oppression) that are there to be seen, once the decision to unforget is made. She writes that "systemic oppression is in fact present enough . . . that the kinds of ignorance and lack of knowledge running alongside oppression deserve explanation" (58). Forgetting as the "active ignorance and forgetting" is, for her, that explanation (58; emphasis added). We might understand the decision to unforget as the decision to remain unsutured, since what the white subject unforgets then dispossesses her of the historical narratives upon which her comfortable mode of being-in-the-world rests. Like Yancy's claim that unsuturing comes after the work of suturing is put into relief, Shotwell's position is that unforgetting marks the *end* of the active work of forgetting. Shotwell notes that this active work is institutional in nature, that it is a "social organization of forgetting" (61; emphasis added). This means that, in unforgetting, even though I put into relief the activity of forgetting, I am also going against an institutional grain that encourages me to forget.

This institutional grain "[shapes us] to think that other people are the problem" (58). In other words, like unsuturing, unforgetting reimagines the white subject's relationality with a world of others. In her contribution, Crista Lebens frames the problem of (uncritical) whiteness in this way, as a problem of relationality. More specifically, she writes that it is precisely the possibility of fully human relationships that are foreclosed in an uncritical performance of whiteness, which she calls "whiteliness." The primary features of whiteness, according to Lebens, include "[frameworks] within which the incorrect beliefs make sense" (74), a "denial of culpability, overwhelming belief in one's own goodness of good intentions, [and] authorizing one's self or other white people to be the moral arbiters of the universe" (75). Hence whiteness forecloses full human relationships insofar as it subscribes to the project of suturing. As such, the whitely subject remains in a cocoon of invulnerability and white-centricity, outside of which people of color suffer the oppression of a racist world. Implicit in Lebens's position is that unsuturing makes unsustainable this whitely subject to the degree that it places the white subject in vulnerable positions of relationality with others. It is in that

vulnerability (and the dispossession it facilitates) that fully human relationships become possible.

In Robert Jensen's words (channeling the inimitable spirit of James Baldwin), the white subject in these fully human relationships is forced to see herself as "*the nigger*," deserving of condemnation to the point of self-hatred (87). He warns against losing this capacity for self-hatred, noting that it often signals the resurfacing of "that smug white person that it is so easy to be in this world" (87). It is important to note Jensen's is a call for a "loving self-hatred," which is to say, a self-hatred that ought not to re-center the universe in terms of whiteness. Instead, a loving self-hatred would carry out the work of unsuturing, dispossessing the white subject as she moves toward responsibility for her complicity in racism.

At this point, we see that unsuturing (in all its varying manifestations) deeply implicates white people in the work involved in combating racism in the world. To my mind, this is what's at stake in this volume. When white people engage their whiteness as a problem, the war against racism acquires new soldiers. We get more troops on the ground, committed to what David E. Owen describes as "a conscious strategy [of disrupting] the operations of the [social] field itself, and hence the racial system" (164). This, Owen rightly claims, ought to be the primary goal of the anti-racist white ally,^[1] and for this reason, this volume is relevant to the fight against racism. Its overarching claim is this: the white person effectively takes on the project of combating racism, of "dismantling" the culture of "white skin decoloniality" (Martinot, chapter 12) only to the degree that she is unsutured.

Although I have been able to discuss at length only a few of the ways in which this claim has been explored, other essays also engage with it productively. For instance, Karen Teel frames unsuturing as a project of suspicion about "feeling good about [her] fighting whiteness" (33). Alison Bailey deploys Erinn Gilson's account of vulnerability-as-potential, which juxtaposes the difficulty of this kind of vulnerability against the "[light] fluttering white talk" that sutures the white self to its (heavy) complicity in white supremacy (42). Bridget M. Newell likens unsuturing to the discomfort brought on by the Socratic gadfly, and so, for the white self to cease and desist her act of suturing, she must be willing "keep the pesky gadfly around despite the discomfort it brings" (137). We might liken this gadfly to what Robin James finds in certain genres of musical dissonance, which complicates the "privilege [of] aesthetic orientation" in the white listener, precisely so that she no longer finds a home in herself, and in the world (221). Without a doubt, this "not being at home" captures the dispossession and openness in unsuturing's comportment toward being touched by alterity.

It is on this point of remaining open to alterity that I pose my question. For the sutured white self (what Lebens would call the "whitely" self), all encounter and relation with alterity is closed off, and to this end, everything that takes place inside the suturing is *of* this white self. Acting in ways that sustain suturing means that one can never be truly touched, never truly be "in danger" of being touched, which is to say, never truly encounter the kind of exteriority of which this dangerous kind of touching would consist. To this end, one wonders, "Can folks like these--the contributors to this volume who have responded to Yancy's call to flip the DuBoisian script, and ask of themselves 'How does it feel to be a white problem?'--be candidates for this kind of unsuturing?" They have all *willingly* tarried in their whiteness, all *chosen* to engage in the discomfort of dispossession and dismantling. There is no devaluing the significance of all this. But, as Teel reminds us, "[as] a white person, even if I want to, I can't lose" (34). That is to say, "[The] idea of giving up white skin privilege is a dodge [because giving] something up, as white, is itself a privileged idea" (Martinot, 180). Indeed, to say, as a white person, that you are a problem--there is power at the base of that articulation!

I don't mean the kind of power implied in Gilson's account of vulnerability-as-potential. That is to say, by "power" I don't mean the transformative potential to perform one's humanity, or one's whiteness in new and perhaps unprecedented ways. What I mean is that one does not die to oneself in acknowledging the problem of whiteness, since to die to oneself is to be touched (in that dangerous sense of touching) by what is radically exterior. It is to be touched by an alterity, by what is not (cannot be) of "you." Death--that figure of radical alterity--always comes from "elsewhere." Hence, unless I read Yancy's call for unsuturing through too much of a Levinasian lens, so long as I prepare myself for being, or acknowledge that I am, a white problem, I am not touched from the *other* side of my suturing. I am not (yet) undone, since this work of acknowledging has occurred from the inside. It is of me (or at least, can be sufficiently domesticated to be "of me" when, for instance, "[it] feels ok . . . then it feels fine . . . then it feels embarrassing . . . then it feels ok again . . ." (Newell, 138).

So, in the end, we are left with this. The candidate for successful unsuturing must not want any part of it. She must be the type who responds to criticisms of whiteness with indifference or hostility. Does this mean that, for the others (like Applebaum, Teel, Jenson, Sartwell, Garner, James, and company) who *invite* the unsuturing, unsuturing is foreclosed? What Emmanuel Levinas has to say about the impossibility of suicide is helpful here, insofar as it underscores the radical exteriority of death itself. On his account, though I avail myself of death, through a fundamental choice of suicide, death, in its moment of arrival, is always against my will. Similarly, it stands to reason that, for unsuturing to show up as a real-life possibility for the anti-racist white ally, there must be a moment in which she is precisely *not* this ally, wants no part of the radical transformation promised in the touch of what is true alterity. That is, if the bar to be met, in unsuturing, is complete dispossession, or a complete dying to oneself . . .

I pose this question not to engage in a game of semantics, but rather to understand the phenomenon of unsuturing as an oscillation between and within two poles: suture--unsuture. Through this oscillation we see, more clearly, what Yancy means in his call for white folks to be the best anti-racist racists they can be. To that end, the volume remains true to the stakes of the question posed in its subtitle: "How does it feel to be a white problem?" Honest engagement with this question does not mean that one is fully anti-racist, or that there is no more anti-racism. Rather, it facilitates an alternative performance of whiteness, through which white ally-ship means "[staying] in the anguish of being a problem" (2). I propose that, when this anguished space is understood as an oscillation between suturing and unsuturing, we

come to the full existential implications of white criticality beyond anti-racism.

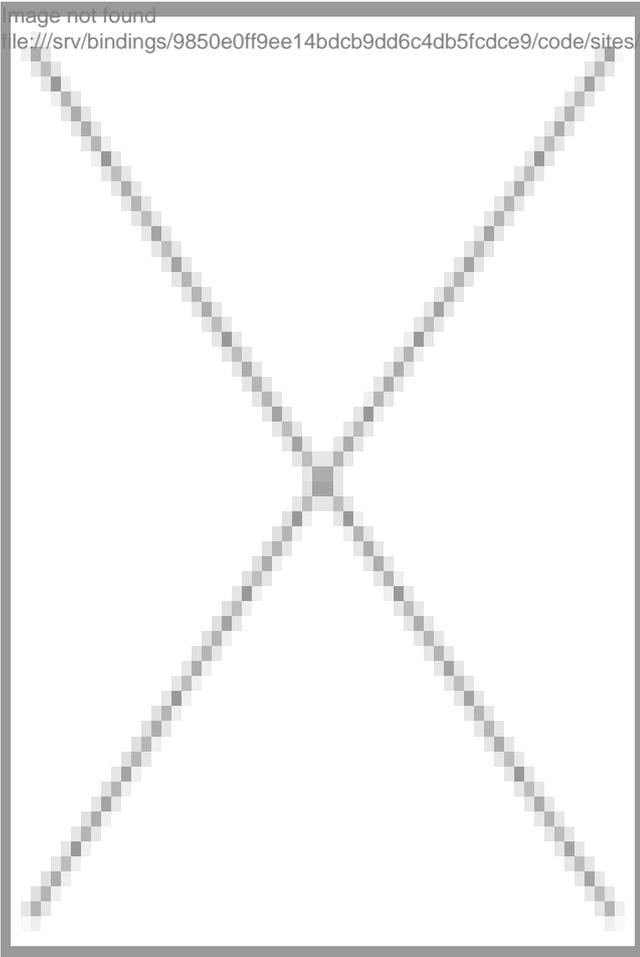
To be sure, this would have implications for all sorts of solidarity formations against systems of oppression. In particular, this metaphorical oscillation between suturing and unsuturing can meaningfully inform transnational feminist coalitions against patriarchy. Such coalitions will necessarily include identities negotiating layered intersectionalities, and would therefore call for moments of tarrying in the anguish of being a problem (across lines of race, class, nationality, religion, gender, and so on). To that end, a commitment to such feminist intersectional coalitions would be more effective if we enter them as subjects who understand our invariable complicity in some forms of oppressions. In other words, in forming such coalitions, we have to "world travel" (79), and to accomplish that effectively means to "realize who one is in [those worlds]," the worlds of our feminist allies, but also worlds in which, often, we are beneficiaries of their systemic oppression. Yancy's edited volume offers a model of solidarity among subjects who oscillate in that anguished space between suturing and unsuturing, which, to my mind, promises an effective solidarity.

For the white ally, being anti-racist amounts to tarrying in those moments in which one must be what one unavoidably is: racist. These are the moments of discomfort (of unsuturing, of being touched) that don't *counter* one's anti-racist agenda. They don't indicate a complete washing away of the sin of racism either. To remain here (to tarry) is to negotiate the truth of this moment: that there is anguish insofar as one is racist (benefiting from the project of suturing), and there is anguish *also* because one is an ally (willing to approach radical dispossession, as well as one's whiteness would allow). This work is neither for the weak of heart, nor does it belong to the (whitely) project of being a hero. Simply put, it is your only option, white ally, "because your liberation is bound up with mine" (4).

[1] There seems to be grounds to claim that the white person who tarryes with the question "How does it feel to be a white problem?" is such an ally, if the point is, indeed, to better position oneself to combat racism.

Kris Sealey is an associate professor of philosophy at Fairfield University. She received both her MA and PhD in philosophy from the University of Memphis, and does research in the areas of continental philosophy, philosophy of race, and postcolonial theory. Her book, *Moments of Disruption: Levinas, Sartre, and the Question of Transcendence*, was published in December 2013 by SUNY Press. She has published articles on Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, and the philosophy of race. Her current book project is on the relationship between creolization and nationalism.

ksealey@fairfield.edu



"For the white ally, being anti-racist amounts to tarrying in those moments in which one must be what one unavoidably is: racist."

Hypatia Reviews Online
editor@hypatiareviews.org

Website supported by Michael Digital

Source URL: <https://www.hypatiareviews.org/reviews/content/23>