OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRSTPROOFS, Wed May 31 2017, NEWGEN

Alison Bailey

George Yancy: I came across an important endnote in your chapter entitled "Strategic Ignorance." You wrote, "Whites may be privilege-cognizant but metaphysically comfortable."[1] What exactly do you mean by 'metaphysically comfortable'?

Alison Bailey: That's an important endnote and one that requires some unpacking, so please bear with me! In the early days of critical whiteness studies, Ruth Frankenberg made a useful distinction between the privilege-*cognizant* and privilege-*evasive* responses that white women gave to a series of questions about how whiteness was lived, discussed, and experienced. She was one of the first scholars who prompted me to notice how much we can learn about white ways of knowing and being, by listening to how white people talk about race. Privilege-cognizant responses acknowledge and engage white privilege (e.g., "I understand how my whiteness is an asset for any move I want to make in life"). These responses are epistemically opening; they offer us an epistemic traction that moves conversations forward. Privilege-evasive responses are defensive, epistemically closing moves that maintain white ignorance. What Alice Macintyre calls "white talk" (e.g., "I'm not racist, most of my friends are Latinx," or "I get stopped by the police too!") are examples of this. These engagements offer no epistemic traction in social justice discussions. The endnote that caught your attention asks readers to look deeply at the common metaphysical foundation that underwrites *both* sets of responses.

Robin DiAngelo's account of "white fragility" has advanced my understanding of the deep and abiding hold metaphysical comfort has on white folks' sense of ourselves as so-called white people. White people live in a social environment that insulates us from race-based anxiety and stress. This protective environment fosters expectations of racial comfort. We feel entitled to

actrade-9780190498559.indd 61 5/31/2017 8:08:08 PM

be racially at ease most of the time, and indeed most of us have the freedom to structure our daily lives and movements to ensure that we are. In general, white fragility triggers a constellation of behaviors that work to steer us back to places where we feel whole, comfortable, innocent, and good. These expectations of racial comfort mean that, with few exceptions, white folks have a low tolerance for racial stress. This deep urge to remain metaphysically comfortable drives *both* privilege-evasiveness and privilege-cognizance. Also, privilege-evasive responses are privilege preserving: they maintain white comfort through denial and defensiveness. Consider the anger-laced claims such as "I am the *least* racist person you've ever met." These responses are a form of worldview protection—they work to resist new information that deeply unsettles white folks' sense of entitlement to comfort and how we understand our place in the social order. When a particular core belief—say about the United States being a meritocracy—is challenged, we become deeply agitated, unsettled, and defensive. We attempt to bolster our metaphysical wholeness with stories about our merit-based accomplishments, family immigration history, or the long hours we've worked. These narratives are one way that we keep ourselves intact.

The urge for metaphysical comfort also drives privilege-cognizant white responses, but this point seems counterintuitive, so it's easy to miss. Most white people resist doing deep critical antiracist work. We have a tendency, as Sara Ahmed puts it, to "flee the unfinished history"[2] of racism. Highlighting white goodness and innocence masks our fragility; it allows us to embrace whiteness in ways that don't threaten our metaphysical comfort. We engage racial injustice movements *in safe ways* by steering conversations back to our good deeds, quoting people of color, taking minimal emotional risks, whitewashing our family histories, and following *#BlackLivesMatter* on Twitter, but not in our community. The energy we put into assuring others that we are good-hearted and loyal allies is another means of holding white selves together. These moves are, in a subtle way, also privilege preserving: they bolster our metaphysical invulnerability by insulating us from race-based anxiety.

I am continually astounded by the persistence and depth of these yearnings in my own conversations with folks of color, and how often, despite my efforts to be mindful of the twin lures of defensiveness and goodness, I've caught myself steering a particular conversation back to a more comfortable place. White folks' efforts to work toward privilege-cognizance in ways that preserve metaphysical comfortable worry me. I think that for white people to do deep, meaningful, antiracist work, that we need not be afraid to fall apart.

G. Y.: I see. But these moves illustrate how white people keep it together. What would it really look like for white people to "fall apart"? I like your use of this metaphor because it implies a form of crisis.

A. B.: Yes, I think crisis is an accurate description here. Crises throw us into spaces where the center doesn't hold. These spaces produce anxiety, fear, panic, and foment an urgency to repair the situation by restoring the world to *exactly* the way it was before the crisis. The image that comes to mind for me is the town that gets hit by a tornado and decides to rebuild their community using the original city plan, hiring the same architects, keeping the old street names, building the same houses in the same places, and painting them the same colors. White defensiveness and retreats to goodness are responses to crisis in this sense of the word. The responses aim at restoring the comfort of the old order, and that's not what I'm after here.

Your own use of 'crisis' is closer to its Greek origins in 'decision.' Decisions are represented geographically as crossroads or turning points. I have mixed feelings about these metaphors. On the one hand, I like the way that they direct our attention away from panicked attempts at restorative repair and toward places of openness and possibility. On the other hand, I worry that they narrowly characterize decision making as a strictly cognitive process directed at choosing among structured pre-existing roads. For white selves to fall apart, we need to go "off road," so to speak. We need to make a concerted effort to leave the locations, texts, values, aesthetics, metaphysics, and epistemologies where we are at ease. We need to work with an understanding of crisis/repair that is transformative rather than merely restorative.

I'm attracted to borderland theory in general, and to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones in particular, because these scholars/activists offer a conceptual vocabulary that foregrounds the transformative sense of repair. In her later work, Anzaldúa uses the Náhuatl word '*nepantla*' to describe an *unstructured* liminal space that facilitates transformation. It is a psychic, spiritual, epistemic, and sometimes geographic space characterized by intense confusion, anxiety, and loss of control. It describes a moment or span of time when our beliefs, worldviews, and self-identities crumble. *Nepantla* is messy, confusing, painful, and chaotic; it signals unexpected, uncontrollable shifts, transitions, and changes. This is something you feel with your heart and body. It's a precognitive response to the fear of losing your ontological bearings that slowly works its way up into your head. Eventually you surrender. The old worldviews, beliefs, perspectives, and ontologies that once grounded you are but memories, and you find yourself working on a new epistemic home terrain.

In *nepantla*, we shift and a resistant self emerges; that is, a self that now can "see through" the old social order and resists reconstruction along the old lines of that order. Consider the shift that happens for most LGBTQ people during the coming-out process, or during religious conversions, or when someone comes to have a class consciousness or feminist consciousness. You can't go back because you've seen through the fictions of heteronormativity, a godless life, white supremacy, capitalism, or patriarchy.

G. Y.: Yes, you and I agree here about crisis. I mean not only the sense of losing one's footing, of *losing one's way*, or a process of disorientation, but also the etymological sense of the word crisis (from Greek *krisis*, that is, decision). Crisis, as I am using the term, is a species of *metanoia*, a kind of perceptual breakdown. It isn't about an immediate repair, but involves tarrying within that space of breakdown. It is within that space that there is a powerful sense of loss; in fact, there is a process of *kenosis* or emptying, even if the empting can't be complete and so must be repeated. So, the idea that I have of crisis is not about recovery vis-à-vis the familiar, but something radically new. Crisis is a site of dispossession. So, the concept of *deciding* denotes a life of commitment to "undo," to "trouble," over and over again, the complex psychic and socio-ontological ways in which one is embedded in whiteness. The decision is one that is made over and over again perhaps even for the rest of one's life. And, yes, crisis, this process of *metanoia* and *kenosis*, is perplexing, painful, and chaotic. It must be, because it involves facing an unfamiliar physic terrain. You know, though, my fear here is that some well-meaning whites might believe that they can *willfully* "fall apart" and that this involves some *voluntary act* when in fact whiteness involves such a deep resistant historical embeddedness.

A. B.: Exactly. Your account of crisis resonates deeply with most of the elements present in *nepantla*—the disorientation, the perceptual breakdown, and the pain. I very much like your image of losing one's footing; borderlands are indeed rough terrain.

I also share your concern about white folks' desire to force a crisis through voluntary acts. Our desire to be good drives this, but it ends up looking like ontological white flight—I picture well-meaning white selves actively driving around in search of a new neighborhood in which to reconstruct ourselves more favorably. We can't think our way out of whiteness. White fragility and the desire for metaphysical comfort, however, mean that we are constantly drawn to spaces where our identities are secure. So, resistance requires a good amount of volition on our part. For white folks to shift, we need to leave those spaces, philosophies, texts, geographies, politics, aesthetics, and worlds that keep us whole.

So, in both *nepantla* and your definition of crisis, the shift in self comes from choosing to remain in uncomfortable places. Buddhists, such as Pema Chödrön, describe this as walking into "the places that scare you."[3] You describe this as "tarrying," a kind of lingering with the truth about white selves, white supremacy, and the how these constructions are part and parcel of the colonial structures that continue to oppress people of color. And María Lugones advocates for the practice of leaving "worlds" (e.g., social spaces where you are at ease because you are fluent in the culture, history, and social practices), and hanging out in "worlds" where you are rendered strange. This travel between and among "worlds" must be animated by loving perception and playfulness of spirit.

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRSTPROOFS, Wed May 31 2017, NEWGEN

The practice of "playful, loving 'world' travel" has political, ontological, and epistemic goals. Politically, women of color (and white women) travel to one another's worlds as a way to learn to love one another and to form friendships and alliances. Ontologically, travel from one world to another is a shift in self, something very similar to a Du Boisian double-consciousness. The aim of this practice is to reduce arrogant perception and to allow what she thinks of as a "plural self" to emerge. In "travel" you have a double-image of yourself because you have a memory of yourself having an attribute in one world and not having that attribute in another world. For example, in 'worlds' where I'm at ease I'm seen as an easygoing vibrant person with a great sense of humor, but when I spend time in hostile worlds where I'm not at ease, I'm read as reserved, arrogant, quiet, or humble. Playful, loving, 'world' travel makes this plurality visible. I am a humorous-arrogant-humble-easygoing self. Epistemically, this practice teaches us to see ourselves as others see us. At one point, Lugones implores white women to acknowledge that women of color are "faithful mirrors" that show white women as no other mirror can show us.[4] It's not that they reflect back to us who we really are. They show us some of the many selves that we are. They reflect back our plurality, which she says is something that may in itself be frightening to us. Walking into these fearful reflections brings on crisis.

I think "'world' travel" can help facilitate *nepantla* moments. My first glimpse of the plurality of whiteness surfaced when I read John Langston Gwaltney's *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* and read descriptions of white folks as greedy, hateful, arrogant, cheap, lying, immodest, empty people who should be regarded with suspicion. These words threw me. In your words, they caused me to lose my footing. The tension between the narratives in this collection and the narrative of white goodness that I was raised to believe taught me the importance of understanding white identity as plural. White folks are good-hearted-greedy-well-meaning-ignorant-lying-empty . . . .etc. beings.

Now, I want to tie this plurality to your point about historical embeddedness. It's so important to keep the deep recalcitrant historical embeddedness of whiteness in mind when reflecting on these *nepantla* moments. Let me offer an example that I hope doesn't sound too forced. In the spring of 1992 I was finishing my graduate degree in Cincinnati and taking a Black feminist thought seminar. The four LA police officers who brutally beat Rodney King had just been acquitted and the LA uprising/riots had just begun. I remember Professor Hill Collins asking the white students in the seminar to make a practice of sitting next to Black and Brown people in public places and to focus on what came up for us. I was surprised by the depth of discomfort and fear that surfaced in me during this assignment. I wondered about the origins of my fear and how it came to inhabit my body so deeply. It was an abiding fear that was awakened in the aftermath of the violence done to King. I came to

actrade-9780190498559.indd 65 5/31/2017 8:08:08 PM

understand this fearful presence neither as a character flaw nor lack of vigilance on my part, but as a recalcitrant colonial artifact. My fear had an affective ancestry that was part and parcel of racial formation projects that traded, and continue to trade, on the fear of Black, Brown, and Native bodies. It was embedded deeply in my whiteness.

Making this connection threw me off center. It forced me to address the white fear that was in my body that had escaped my notice. A fear that people of color certainly notice in me, a fear that, if I had to guess, was deeply tied to folks of colors' fear of white bodies. I became hyperaware of how I saw myself and how I imagined some folks of color saw me when I took my seat on the bus: I was at once fearful and feared. I worked to unpack the relationship between these fears with friends of color in the peace movement and in our seminar discussions. As we named these intertwined fears, I came to realize that our fears had very different textures. Nonetheless the fear of white terror and my own fear of Black bodies had deeply common historical roots.

G. Y.: You link the fear that people of color noticed in you to a fear that is deeply tied to folks of colors' fear of white bodies. Say more about this. Are you conflating the fears here?

A. B.: I don't mean to conflate the fears that were circulating on the bus that afternoon. I have no way of experiencing what it must have felt like to ride the bus as a Black woman or man on that day, but the heaviness of the violence done to King felt very present to me in that space. Emotions are never pure. They are complex and come in clusters. I imagine, but cannot be certain, that the fear that Black Cincinnatians felt after King's arrest and during the trial must have felt complex, perhaps a deeply mournful, grief-laden fear mixed with a righteous anger not just over police violence, but the knowledge that white fear visible in white bodies is the greatest killer of Black bodies. I think the fear I felt that day was a fear of confrontation, revenge, a fear of violence against my own person. I felt white fragility, but I did *not* feel the terror of whiteness. An old colonial script was at play in that space. One that continues to be animated over and over again. So, I want to point out the deep historical relations between these fears without collapsing them.

G. Y.: How might we facilitate *nepantla* moments when white police officers approach Black people? And here I'm thinking about Tamir Rice and Sandra Bland. Those police officers in each case didn't risk the importance of "'world' travel." My guess is that there was no trepidation of losing their ontological bearings.

A. B.: You can't. Lugones's conceptual framework cannot be stretched to cover these cases. Her account of "playful, loving, 'world' travel" is offered as a correction to arrogant perception and a means of building alliances across differences for those who are willing to do this work. The travel must be animated by loving perception and playfulness. These conditions don't hold during the

policing of Black, Brown, or Native bodies. Lugones recognizes that most US women of color practice world travelling as a matter of necessity and that much of it is done unwillingly to hostile worlds. The officers who pulled over Sandra Bland and who shot Tamir Rice perceived them with arrogant eyes. The survival of people of color requires learning to navigate hostile worlds safely, skillfully, and creatively. You can't be playful with conquerors when you stumble into and move through worlds. You have to navigate these worlds with care and an intense amount of awareness.

In fact, your question has me thinking about how impossibly complex it is to navigate hostile worlds. All the creative strategies that you think would work regularly fail. The case of Charles Kinsey, a Black therapist who was shot in the leg by a North Miami police officer while trying to calm an autistic patient is a case in point. He was lying down with his hands up; what more could he have done to communicate that he was unarmed and not a threat?

G. Y.: Of course the idea of 'world' travel has to be respectful. So, how do white people even begin to engage Black spaces and people of color spaces without the latter feeling imposed upon?

A. B.: This is a very important point. 'World' travel is not a form of tourism. It's also not about making people into spectacles for your education, entertainment, and consumption. It's a loving way of being and living. The question of how white people should engage spaces of color is a challenging one, because it depends upon whether we are talking about neighborhoods, the Howard university campus, the women of color caucus at a conference, or an event at a local mosque. Public spaces are the most challenging because white folks often treat so-called ethnic neighborhoods as cultural playgrounds. Of course white folks should be respectful when walking through so-called non-white spaces, but in my experience most of us are not. 'World' travel, however, is not just about going into those spaces to look around. It requires that we interact and hang out with folks in those spaces. So, it's easier for me to think about your question in terms of community efforts to facilitate world travel as a means of inoculating the larger community against violence. I'm thinking about what happened in my own community in response to the June 12, 2016 mass shooting of LGBTQ people at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Communities of faith, queer organizations, and our local Not in Our Town chapter coordinated a series of open houses at local churches, mosques, and synagogues, so that all members of the community could come hang out and get to know members of the Muslim, Jewish, Queer Unitarian, and other Christian communities. It was an invitation to 'world' travel and interaction with members of the community that was respectful.

G. Y.: White resistance to 'world' traveling is linked to maintaining the fiction of white "wholeness." There is a kind of ontology of self-sufficiency and even

purity. For those of us who teach courses where white students think of themselves as atomic, neoliberal subjects, how might we get them to see that they are far more relational and, as you might say, multiple?

A. B.: I've not had much immediate success with this. Getting white students to make sense of white identity relationally takes a long time; semesters are short, and the privilege-evasiveness among most of the white students on our campus is fiercely stubborn. So, I start with their resistance for a few reasons. First, I think you get further working with privilege-evasiveness than you do trying to push back against it. I've made it my short-term goal to get white students to become mindful of the discursive, embodied, and affective habits they deploy to maintain the fiction of whiteness. I want white students to learn to notice how much energy they are putting into holding whiteness together, and to think about what would happen if they took risks and just walked into places that scare them. Next, I think that permitting white students' resistance to circulate as if it were a legitimate form of critical engagement with questions and race is incredibly stressful for students of color in the class.

I also make space for students of colors' resistance (e.g., silence, deciding to be absent, declaring that they don't have the energy for the conversation that day) and we talk about the different textures of their resistance.

Like you, I believe that classrooms are not safe spaces. They are places where ignorance and knowledge circulate with equal vigor. I've recently started to think about what it would look like for philosophers to work with a pedagogy of discomfort; so much of our teaching is geared toward the comforts of rules and certainty. Yet if metaphysical comfort continues to shape how white students engage questions of racial justice, then we need a pedagogy of discomfort. I work to make emotions and somatic expressions of these feelings visible during our discussions. I also work with students to identify what I call "shadow texts" as a way of engaging the privilege-evasive moves we discussed earlier in the interview. Let me give a quick example and then briefly introduce the concept and pedagogy.

Our class is discussing the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the Laquan McDonald shooting by Chicago police. I begin, "What does it mean to say that *Black* Lives Matter?" Eventually a white student predictably adds her opinion that "all lives matter" to the discussion. I don't want to shame her by pointing out that she had not answered my question. This is not the discomfort I'm after here. I don't want to silence her resistance/ignorance. I want to make the logic of white discomfort visible by naming and engaging it. I want the class to understand how these discursive detours and distractions signal epistemic closure; that is, they tell listeners, "I'm not going there. My white comfort zone demands that we neutralize race in this discussion of police violence."

So, I treat "all lives matter" as a shadow text. "Shadow texts" direct our attention to the ways epistemic resistance circulates during classroom discussions. The word 'shadow' is intended to call to mind the image of something walking closely alongside another thing without engaging it, which is what these responses do. They stalk the question in an attempt to reframe it along more comfortable lines. Shadows are regions of epistemic opacity. They function as obstacles that block access to pursuing further certain questions, problems, and curiosities that threaten dominant worldviews. They offer no epistemic friction. Shadow texts are certainly *reactions* to course content, but I prefer to think of them as *being called up by* the deeply affective-cognitive responses to the material. So, I get white students to think about the tension between my original question and the shadow text. Where does the reply "No! All lives matter" take us? Why do white students feel more comfortable talking about "all lives" than we do about "Black lives"? What's going on in their bodies when we focus on "Black lives"? How do members of the class feel when race is drained from the conversation?

White students must come to recognize the whitely habits of repair in themselves and to understand how these habits of invulnerability block vulnerability. I introduce Erinn Gilson's notion of vulner*ability* as potential, and we talk about the ways in which risk taking moves conversations forward. It's only at this point that I ask them to get out of their comfort zones by spending time in so-called "nonwhite" spaces and texts. Sometimes I coordinate a short 'world' travel exercise on campus, where students attend open meetings of identity-based student organizations.

G. Y.: As we engage in this conversation, I recognize that you are a privilege-cognizant white person. I also realize that you should not be (and that you don't want to be) praised by Black people or people of color for your cognizance. In contrast, how do we engage racist white people like the Klan who don't give a damn about striving to be privilege-cognizant? After the publication of my article "Dear White America" in the column *The Stone*, in the *New York Times* (2015), I received on my university answering machine, and noticed on some white supremacist websites, some really sick racist responses. I can't fathom how we might facilitate *nepantla* moments or what I'm calling *metanoia* and *kenosis* with those whites who show little or no desire to transform. Such radical moments wouldn't even get off the proverbial ground. So, what is to be done with the Klan or even Klan-like whites who may not be card-carrying members of the Klan and yet who hate Black people and people of color?

A. B.: I first want to express my compassion for your continued suffering around the "Dear White America" article. It's very difficult and dangerous to engage these hate groups. It's also impossible to ignore them. You and I can't

control another person's criminal behavior. There may be ways in the social world to change or limit the effects of this hatred, but this is a complex empirical question, and I don't know how to really answer it, so I'll offer an anecdotal response, because I remain forever hopeful that people can change.

The work we do takes a great deal of time and emotional energy. We need to be smart about where we focus our attention and how long we sustain it. We also need to be sensible about our expectations. Outside the classroom I practice a form of triage: privilege-cognizant whites are on board, so I organize with them. Privilege-evasive white folks can be brought around. It takes time and patience, but I think that it is time well invested. Think about Lee Mun Wah's film *The Color of Fear*. It took six men of color an entire week to finally get David, the well-meaning but clueless straight white man, to understand that the America he lived in was not the same as the America that people of color lived in. When he accepted this, he shifted.

But, what about the hard-core haters that belong to white identity groups? The logic of triage requires that we ignore these groups, but this creates a dilemma at least for me as a white woman. In the past I've engaged their actions and not their persons. When a Peoria white supremacist group leafleted our neighborhood, we took down the flyers and met with the mayor, but this does not foment change of character.

Some white supremacists have experienced *metanoia* on their own, so the question is, How did that happen? I'm thinking about Arno Michealis, who grew up in an alcoholic household where emotional violence was the norm. He became involved in the white power movement when he was seventeen, founded the largest racist skinhead organization in the world, and became the lead singer in a race-metal band. He eventually left the movement and now runs two antiracist/antihatred projects and works with young people. At some point he started to shift. It happened in moments. The Black woman at McDonalds who saw his swastika tattoo smiled and said, "You're better than that. I know that's not who you are." He began noticing how, time after time, he was "graced with great kindness and forgiveness"[5] by groups of people that he had been openly hostile toward. He now felt shame about harming people who had done nothing to him. He experienced the weight of hate and how it exhausted him. He became a single father. He watched friends die and go to prison. Fissures continued to appear in his world until his skinhead-self crumbled.

Now, I know it will be of little comfort to you as someone who continues to experience backlash from your *New York Times* piece. Michealis's story offers us one instance of what *metanoia* looks like from the perspective of a hard-core hater who somehow transformed himself into a peacemaker.

I don't think there is much we can do to facilitate this, but I do hang on to the hope that hundreds of small interventions can foment long-term change. In the past I've always thought, "What do you say to someone like that? Where

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRSTPROOFS, Wed May 31 2017, NEWGEN

do you begin?" I think of the power behind the remark "You're better than that. I know that's not who you are." I think about the questions I would have asked the young white man working on my roof a few summers back, who, to my surprise, took off his shirt on a hot July morning to reveal a palimpsest of white supremacist tattoos. What if, instead of saying, "I need you to put your shirt back on . . . NOW!" I'd said, "Tell me about your ink? Whose words are on your skin? Do you find that the hate in those words too heavy to carry at times? I know that's not who you are." I wonder if that conversation would have given him some pause. I don't know. I just don't know.

NOTES

1. Alison Bailey, "Strategic Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Nancy Tuana and Shannon Sullivan (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 77–94.
2. Sara Ahmed, "The Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–68; 165.
3. Pema Chödrön, *The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2005).
4. María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 67.
5. "Arno Michaelis," *The Forgiveness Project*, November 7, 2011, http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/arno-michaels-usa/.

actrade-9780190498559.indd 71 5/31/2017 8:08:09 PM