George Yancy has put together an excellent anthology that contributes to the growing literature that takes up an explicitly philosophical approach to critical issues in race studies. The contributions are all from renowned African-American scholars in the field, and all are original contributions. For one new to the field of whiteness studies, all the central topics are covered in original and accessible ways, and for the scholar these provocative and timely essays will undoubtedly prove to be of interest. Finally, for the professor interested in covering the issue of racial whiteness in the classroom, she will find the whole gamut of approaches represented here: from Sartrean and Foucauldian approaches to the best work of analytically trained authors. I do, however, have a few concerns that would best be approached by examining the selections in more detail.

Yancy provides the introduction to the work as a whole that, in addition to providing a brief synopsis of each contributor’s piece, touches on all the major themes in whiteness studies quite nicely. Whites, even well-intentioned ones Yancy argues, have a way of “speaking from the center” (p.1). This center is a kind of presumed neutral ground, and so whites avoid self-reflexive questions about their own position and the role privilege plays in their lives. Some whites find ways of disavowing their privilege by trying to focus racial discussions only on incidents that make up the lunatic fringe, such as the claims of the KKK, while others simply fail to reflect on it. Either approach leaves unexamined the status of white social ontology as central and normative, and the correlative denomination of difference as other and lacking. Thus, unlike the attempts of racial minorities to try and find a suitable name for themselves, it simply cannot be left to the good will of whites to name and mark their own racial identity. Yancy, thus, explains that it is the attempt of this work to aid in the task of such naming.

Charles Mills’ essay, entitled “Racial Exploitation and the Wages of Whiteness,” makes a first attempt at this naming, and proves to be an outstanding effort—certainly a highlight of the anthology. Mills here extends his famous account in his The Racial Contract beyond a simple investigation into the empirical failings of contract politics to establish a just society to an account of the systematic failures of such politics. To do so he aims to rehabilitate the notion of “white supremacy,” by which he means a system of privilege run by and for whites only such that it not only establishes but perpetuates that privilege (p. 31). This phenomenon, he claims, can be seen to operate in much contemporary political and philosophical discussion, since it tends to view racist incidents as anomalies rather than as systemic. Typical here is the work by John Rawls. Why, in more than 600 pages, did Rawls never take into
account the social struggles that were occurring all around him in the 1960s while he was writing his *magnum opus*. Similarly, his later work omits such engagement in favor of a discussion of the possibility of a stable and just society when citizens are divided by their adherence to reasonable and incompatible doctrines. Mills follows these insights by exploring the wages of such whiteness to locate the normative demands for racial justice within a new framework. His engagement is philosophical throughout, since he aims to answer some of the central questions of whiteness studies, and insightful. My only concern is that such a systematic emphasis might neglect the personal and individual dimensions of whiteness.

In many ways Robert Brit’s “The Bad faith of Whiteness,” which makes up the second chapter, answers some of the concerns for the individual dimension of whiteness. He provides an illuminating review of Sartre’s bad faith and suggests ways that it can shed light on the question of whether white people can be authentic. Bad faith can occur when one either identifies fully with one’s facticity or with one’s transcendence. The bad faith of whiteness, Brit argues, exhibits qualities of both. First, it identifies with the characteristics of pure transcendence, viz. intelligence, freedom, consciousness and the intellectual and moral virtues. In denying these to the black, it seeks to be fully free. Yet, at the same time, “that whiteness is predicated on denying the transcendence of the Other suggests that whiteness is also a flight from facticity” (p. 59). I find this answer interesting and theoretically fruitful, but it is also underdeveloped. Surely some whites can be authentic. What of Sartre himself? Brit accommodates this point by limiting his claim to “many whites” (p. 59). Is this sufficient? Is not the more central question: how are we to identify these many whites? Furthermore, is whiteness solely to be defined in opposition to blacks or can it not also be defined in relation to other races and ethnicities? With respect to these questions, I believe that we find the conceptual confusion surrounding whiteness clouding an otherwise excellent analysis.

The following essay, by Janie Jones, is entitled “The Impairment of Empathy in Goodwill Whites for African Americans” and makes up the third chapter. I am particularly impressed with the insight and scholarship of this essay. Jones makes use of psychological work in conjunction with philosophic analysis to explain how goodwill whites fail to make empathetic connections with members of other races. By a goodwill white she means those whites who are committed to the advance of other racers, yet cannot or will not, in specific circumstances, believe that race may be related to the matter at hand. Her concern, then, is to explain how men like Thomas Jefferson could be intellectually committed to the equality of all men and women, and yet fail to empathize with the plight of a slave mother whose child was just sold. This failure, she argues, results from an inability to map the other’s situation onto one’s own in three specific ways. The result of such an analysis is that Jones finds that certain forms of literature or particular experiences may be the best way to get goodwill whites to reflect on their own situation. This focus on the affective dimensions of the problem of racism, then, dovetails nicely with some recent work by Martha Nussbaum and promises a fruitful path of research.

Clevis Headley’s “Delegitimizing the Normativity of ‘Whiteness:’ A Critical Africana Philosophical Study of the Metaphoricity of ‘Whiteness’” makes up chapter four of the anthology. Headley’s goal is to account for the ontological reality of whiteness, but without establishing any kind of symmetry with blackness. To do so he draws upon the critical dimensions of Africana philosophy rather than the various attempts to reject all things white, or to essentialize whiteness or blackness. The principal move he suggests to elaborate this critical dimension is to substitute the prevalent metaphor of “social construction” with “social conjuring.” By doing this he can then examine further metaphorical
“economies” of whiteness (such as normativity and property), as well as psychological strategies of denial. He concludes by suggesting “[w]hiteness cannot be dismantled through rational and analytical means,” and that what is instead necessary is a teleological suspension of whiteness (p. 103). This proposal is suggestive, but seems problematic in two ways. The first concern turns on the conceptual coherence of the suggestion. While Kierkegaard elaborated the religious dimension as the possibility of the teleological suspension of the ethical, it is not clear to me that because the resolution to the difficulties of the privilege of whiteness cannot be wholly rationally, we could (much less should) leave the rational behind. Where would we go—to a “religion” of race? The analogue here seems particularly weak. My second concern is that Headly writes of the project of whiteness that “has proven too costly for human existence” (p. 103). Again, caution is necessary. What is meant by whiteness? Surely one can be white and not contribute to the decline of the human condition. I nevertheless find his analysis of the asymmetry of whiteness with other social ontologies accurate, and it fruitfully compliments George Yancy’s essay that follows.

Chapter five, entitled “A Foucauldean (Genealogical) Reading of Whiteness: The Production of the Black Body/Self and the Racial Deformation of Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye,” picks up perhaps unknowingly on Ladelle McWorter’s suggestion that whiteness studies cannot afford to ignore the productive dimensions of race. He divides his account into two parts: (i) a genealogy of whiteness, (ii) a literary analysis of Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye as an illustration of biopower in action. Both parts are excellent, and serve as a testament to Yancy’s acumen in the field of race theory. Particularly intriguing is Yancy’s analysis of the development of disciplinary technologies for the transportation of blacks across the Atlantic for slave trade. Here is perfect evidence that Foucault’s account of the rise of disciplinary technologies is shortsighted, at least insofar as it failed to address the extra-European sources for these technologies. I only wish that Yancy had explored the further inference that Foucault’s account of race, which became more diminished from his treatment in his lecture courses to his published work in the first volume of The History of Sexuality, is therefore underdeveloped.

Arnold Farr’s essay “Whiteness Visible: Enlightenment Racism and the Structure of Racialized Consciousness” makes a nice fit with Yancy’s essay, which genealogically explored the work of Human and Kant, since it explores the extent of whiteness within philosophy, using Hegel’s work as an example. There has been, and likely will continue to be, much ink spilt over the matter of Hegel’s racism. His case, unlike the straightforward statements of Hume and Kant, is complicated by the fact that his statements seem to be inconsistent. Farr’s unique contribution to this debate is to recognize what is really at issue in this controversy. The various defenders of Hegel seek to make whiteness invisible, i.e. an inconsequential component of his thought. The problem with such a goal is that it fails to recognize the way claims to universality always fail to be so universal. The perspective of the defenders, in other words, is wrong. They try to ignore the role of race in philosophy, rather than seek its concrete (a good Hegelian word) function within philosophy. I find this shift in perspective helpful, since it seems unlikely that the matter of Hegel’s racism will be definitively resolved.

Chapter seven, entitled “Rehabilitate Racial Whiteness?” is Lucius Outlaw’s contribution to the anthology. As is usual with Outlaw’s work, he provides both a provocative and profound appraisal of the matter at hand. Here he suggests both that racial excoriation has no role to play any longer (by blacks or whites) if progress is to be made, and that it would be more pragmatically intelligent to rehabilitate racial whiteness than to attempt to abolish it. The main concerns for such a project are to address the fear and greediness of white folks. The former results from a perception that the world they inhabit will no longer
be that of a white majority, while the latter results from the desire to retain the goods of white privilege. A critical engagement with whiteness, he argues, will lead to a rehabilitated notion of whiteness freed from white supremacy and hegemony. While it is clear that Outlaw is here interested in provide a program for whiteness studies, I still would like to ask: how is this possible concretely? I wish at least a preliminary sketch of how these goals are to be accomplished were provided here.

Lewis Gordon’s “Critical Reflections on Three Popular Tropes in the Study of Whiteness” proves to be (even with his clear continental inflection) a fine work of analytic philosophy. The three tropes he examines are “privilege,” “victimization,” and the popular academic notion that if race is divorced from its description as a social construction then false epistemological and dangerous ethical conclusions follow. In each case he finds that these widely accepted notions are either internally inconsistent (e.g. why for example should we declare that basic human rights are a privilege?), or have sever limitations (e.g. the social construction of race can fall into what he calls’ “Hitler’s logic”). The results of the essay are largely negative, but they are indispensable points if the future of whiteness studies is ever to escape its current conceptual confusions. Any scholar interested in this field cannot afford to overlook Gordon’s work here, and any newcomer to the field should be apprised of these critical insights.

Chapter nine features Paget Henry’s essay “Whiteness and Africana Phenomenology.” The approach taken here is not that of a Husserlian kind, but rather an adaptation of Hegel’s phenomenology that seeks to tease out implications for whiteness as a contemporary master. Unlike Farr’s essay Henry uses Hegel’s work (racial flaws and all) to argue for the blacks position relative to the white master as subaltern. The point here is that the black African for Hegel cannot even hold the status of a slave, since he lacks self-consciousness and therefore cannot enter into the struggle for recognition and lose. The implication, and a fruitful one I believe, is that a politics of recognition is inapplicable to the state of blacks, given the contemporary hegemony of whiteness. My only wish is that the author had explored this implication more fully, and had drawn some programmatic conclusions for whiteness studies.

John McClendon’s essay “On the Nature of Whiteness and the Ontology of Race: Toward a Dialectical Materialist Analysis” makes up chapter 10. He proposes to understand whiteness as a particular instantiation of the more general idea of race. This latter, in turn, is to be grounded, through an account of dialectical materialism, in the material conditions of capitalism. He does not, therefore, reduce race to class, though he does locate its significance within a larger socio-economic framework. This approach allows McClendon to draw a crucial distinction between whiteness and white supremacy. The central problem of whiteness studies is not that some people are marked as racially white, he argues, but the effects of white supremacy. This program for research is appealing, and I believe could be seen to hold even if one did not adhere to dialectical materialism in the way that McClendon does. The contentious point here, then, is that whiteness can be evaluated as on par with other racialized groups.

“Silence and Sympathy: Dewey’s Whiteness” by Paul Taylor follows as chapter 11 of the anthology, and introduces a nice critical connection between whiteness studies and Dewey’s own political engagements. He begins by considering why Dewey, who wrote the introduction to Claude McKay’s Selected Poems, concluded that he had nothing more than “humiliated sympathy” with regard to the racial matters of the poems (p. 227). This problematic moment calls for consideration of Dewey’s own ability to reflect on his status as a white man, but similarly it prompts Taylor to reflect on the aims and accomplishments of whiteness studies. He concludes by suggesting that all the major moves in whiteness studies have been accomplished—that Roediger’s and Winant’s, for example, only seem to be opposed and that everyone is against an unreconstructed account of whiteness. The intellectual work that remains to be done, then, is
empirical and perhaps methodological only insofar as scholars disagree about how that empirical work is to be done. What is refreshing about this bold proposal is that it makes clear just how much agreement there is in the field, as well as what would count as a serious disagreement. Lewis Gordon’s essay earlier in this anthology, especially in his criticisms of privilege and victimization, perhaps ought to give us pause about whether all the basic moves have been accomplished.

Blanche Curry’s “Whiteness and Feminism: Déjà Vu Discourses, What’s Next?” makes up chapter twelve. She brings an important feminist appraisal of whiteness studies to the anthology, and does so with the particular aim of avoiding Déjà Vu discourses. This aim requires a three-part exploration of the relation of feminism to whiteness. First, a consideration of how whiteness has formed the standard view of feminism, especially during the first wave, such that white feminists drew a line between themselves and Other women. Second, she looks to the works of Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and others to elaborate how black women have been Othered by their racial identity. Finally, she proposes a third form of discourse that is rooted in a transformational womanist/feminist ethics and practice. I find this examination both clear and, especially for the final proposal, suggestive. Nevertheless, her program remains elusive in application. What precisely is new in the call to authenticity and valorization of otherness? My fear is that the problems that emerged in second wave feminism (i.e. those of difference and otherness) simply cannot be addressed with a continual focus on such otherness. Stated another way, the time of Levinas and Derrida has passed—at least for political purposes. Focusing on difference only serves to problematize, not to resolve difficulties. Perhaps Curry’s account could be explicated in the specific by drawing on the recent work of Sally Haslanger or (from a Continental side) that of Alain Badiou.

The final piece in the anthology, Joy James’ “The Academic Addict: Mainlining (& Kicking) White Supremacy (WS),” is a humorous work—if somewhat difficult to follow. The piece follows the “highly offensive” suggestion that there is some correlation between academics and addicts (p. 264). She outlines five steps, following the step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, for recovering from a criticizing white supremacy. Her point seems to be a self-critical one for academics working in the field of critical race theory, and so makes a nice book-end with Yancy’s introduction that asked the philosophic community to be more self-critical in registering the lack of racial work done in the field.

Through this review of the anthology I have tried to elaborate two concerns. The first of these concerns the possible deleterious effects of casting whiteness in a simple opposition to blackness. Yancy, for example, writes the following: “Within the eyes of whiteness, Oprah, despite her talent and financial success ($1.1 billion), is still inferior because she is black (read: not white)” (p. 7). Some time ago Linda Alcoff noted that such a false opposition (not being white does not imply that one is black) is harmful to other racial identities. We Hispanics, for example, simply do not have a place within this simple opposition so that our concerns are marginalized and ignored. I take this to have serious philosophical and political consequences. The former result from the inability to gauge how African-Americans and Hispanics might learn from each other, since each face problems resulting from low socioeconomic status, increased crime rate, and low academic achievement. The latter political consequences result from the inability to see the significance of such problems for what is now the largest minority in the United States. While it might be retorted that the fundamental wager or endeavor of this anthology is to examine the philosophical significance of whiteness studies for African-Americans, such an endeavor need not make use of such facile (and dangerous) polarization. Perhaps Outlaw’s concern should be more widely heard.
The second concern is more specifically philosophical in nature. Yancy rightly leaves open the question of what “whiteness” means in his introduction, but unless this question can be answered in some way it seems that many of the central concerns of whiteness studies will be left unresolved in a hazy cloud. I believe that a failure to engage with this question substantively would mark a failure to engage the questions of whiteness at a philosophical level. Numerous essays certainly are clear about their definitions of whiteness, and if we are to agree with Paul Taylor, then there is really no disagreement at this level. However, it appears from the foregoing review that more than a few loose ends still remain at a methodological level in whiteness studies. While no one does seem to disagree that whiteness ought to be reconstructed, they hardly agree over the following points: (i) whether whiteness and white supremacy are identical or separate, and if separate what that relation is, or (ii) whether privilege exhausts white supremacy or whether something else must also be added, or (iii) whether victimization and domination are the only forms of power operative or whether Foucault’s productive biopower has a role to play, or finally (iv) whether whiteness is symmetrically related to other racializations (e.g. that it is an instantiation of racialized groups generally) or asymmetrically related (e.g. as grounding norm). It is a credit to Yancy’s work, however, that he has been able to assemble such a full cast of competent philosophers who, through their separate contributions, illustrate these difficulties. Not only are these essays provocative, but they are illuminating and useful both to scholars and to neophytes. The anthology as a whole, then, deserves an unqualified recommendation for all interested in this matter.

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