
Introduction

Flipping the Script

High in the tower, where I sit above the loud complaining of
the human sea, I know many souls that toss and whirl and pass,
but none there are that intrigue me more than the Souls of
White Folk. —W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk”

To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity.
—bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

“I Give You Your Problem Back. You’re the ‘Nigger,’ Baby; It Isn’t Me”

“Look, a Negro!” The utterance grabs one’s attention. It announces something to be seen, to be looked at, to be noticed, to be watched, and, in the end, to be controlled. “Look” catches our attention, forcing us to turn our heads in anticipation, to twist our bodies, to redirect our embodied consciousness. The entire scene is corporeal. “Negro!” functions as a signifier that gives additional *urgency* to the command to “Look.” So the imperative “Look” becomes intensified vis-à-vis the appearance of a “Negro.” “Look, a shooting star!” elicits a response of excitement, of hoping to catch sight of the phenomenon and perhaps even to make a wish. “Look, a Negro!” elicits white fear and trembling, perhaps a prayer that one will not be accosted. In short, “Look” has built in it—when followed by “a Negro!”—a gestured warning against a possible threat, cautioning those whites within earshot to be on guard, to lock their car doors, to hold their wallets and purses for dear life, to gather their children together, to prepare to move house, and (in some cases) to protect the “purity” of white women and to protect white men from the manipulating dark temptress.

Frantz Fanon writes about his experiences when a little white boy “sees” him:

“Look, a Negro!” It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

“Look, a Negro!” It was true. It amused me.

“Look, a Negro!” The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.

“Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.¹

Note the iterative “Look, a Negro!” It is repetitive and effectively communicates something of a spectacle to behold. Yes. It’s a Negro! Be careful! Negroes steal, they cheat, they are hypersexual, mesmerizingly so, and the quintessence of evil and danger. The tight smile on Fanon’s face is a forced smile, uncomfortable, tolerant. Fanon feels the impact of the collective white gaze. He is, as it were, “strangled” by the attention. He has become a peculiar *thing*. He becomes a dreaded object, a thing of fear, a frightening and ominous presence. The turned heads and twisted bodies that move suddenly to catch a glimpse of the object of the white boy’s alarm function as confirmation that something has gone awry. Their abruptly turned white bodies help to “materialize” the threat through white collusion. The white boy has triggered something of an optical frenzy. Everyone is now looking, bracing for something to happen, something that the Negro will do. And given his “cannibal” nature, perhaps the Negro is hungry. Fanon writes, “The little white boy throws himself into his mother’s arms: Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up.”²

Fanon has done nothing save be a Negro. Yet this is sufficient. The Negro has always already done something by virtue of being a Negro. It is an anterior guilt that always haunts the Negro and his or her present and future actions. After all, this is what it means to be a Negro—to have done something wrong. The little white boy’s utterance is felicitous against a backdrop of white lies and myths about the black body. As Robert Gooding-Williams writes, “The [white] boy’s expression of fear posits a typified image of the Negro as behaving in threatening ways. This image has a narrative significance, Fanon implies, as it portrays the Negro as acting precisely as historically received legends and stories about Negroes generally portray them as acting.”³ One can imagine the “innocent” white index finger pointing to the black body. “Here the ‘pointing’ is not only an indicative, but the schematic

foreshadowing of an accusation, one which carries the performative force to constitute that danger which it fears and defends against.”⁴ The act of pointing is by no means benign; it takes its phenomenological or *lived* toll on the black body. As Fanon writes, “My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger.”⁵ Fanon is clear that the white boy, while not fully realizing the complex historical, psychological, and phenomenological implications, has actually distorted his (Fanon’s) body. “Look, a Negro!” is rendered intelligible vis-à-vis an entire play of white racist signifiers that ontologically truncate the black body; it is an expression that calls forth an entire white racist worldview. The white boy, though, is not a mere innocent proxy for whiteness. Rather, he is learning, at that very moment, the power of racial speech, the power of racial gesturing. He is learning how to think about and feel toward the so-called dark Other. He is undergoing white subject formation, a formation that is fundamentally linked to the object that he fears and dreads.

To invoke Fanon, “the [white] collective unconscious is not dependent on cerebral heredity; it is the result of what I shall call the unreflected imposition of a culture.”⁶ Or, as I would argue, the white boy’s racial practices are learned effortlessly, practices that are always already in process. In short, the white boy’s performance of whiteness is *not* simply the successful result of a *superimposed* superstructural grid of racist ideology. Rather, the white boy’s performance points to fundamental ways in which many white children are oriented, at the level of everyday practices, within the world, where their bodily orientations are unreflected expressions of the background *lived* orientations of whiteness, white ways of being, white modes of racial and racist practice.⁷ It is a process, though, where the white embodied subject is intimately linked to the black embodied subject. “Therefore,” as Mike Hill argues in reference to Toni Morrison’s insightful concept of American Africanism, “the distance implicit in presumptive white purity is false, and covers an occluded racial proximity.”⁸

“Look, a Negro!” draws its force from collective fear and *misrecognition*. Although Fanon does grant that, within the field of culturally available racial descriptors, it is true that he is a “Negro,” he recognizes how the term is fundamentally linked to various racist myths. This is why Fanon also writes, “‘Dirty nigger!’ Or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’”⁹ There is no distinction here within the context of the white gaze. To “see” a Negro is to “see” a nigger; it is to “see” a problem—a problem that is deemed, from the perspectives of whites, ontological. In the face of so many white gazes, one desires

to “slip into corners.”¹⁰ Yet as Fanon makes clear, it is not easy to hide. Metaphorically, he describes how his “long antennae pick up the catch-phrases strewn over the surface of things—nigger underwear smells of nigger—nigger teeth are white—nigger feet are big—the nigger’s barrel chest.”¹¹ He cannot live a life of anonymity, etymologically, “without a name” or “nameless.” Apparently, only whites have that wonderful capacity to live anonymously, thoughtlessly, to be ordinary qua human, to go unmarked and unnamed—in essence, to be white.¹² They are like Clint Eastwood’s white stock characters in his Western shoot-em-up movies who come into town nameless and mysterious.

Indeed, Eastwood’s central character is *the man with no name*. This is the portrayal of white liberalism perhaps at its best. The black lone figure already has a name. Indeed, he has multiple names: “nigger,” “rapist,” “savage.” The white townspeople become fearful as he moves through the street; they know that even as a man of the law, as shown in the comedy *Blazing Saddles* (1974), he is on the verge of “whipping it out.” Fanon writes, “The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions.”¹³ To be *the black* or *the Negro*, then, is to be immediately recognized and recognizable. One is in clear view: “Look, a Negro-nigger!” There is no escape; there are no exceptions; it is a Sisyphean mode of existence. Fanon writes, “When [white] people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle.”¹⁴

Yet this infernal circle is not of Fanon’s doing. It is the social world of white normativity and white meaning making that creates the conditions under which black people are always already marked as different/deviant/dangerous. “Look, a Negro!” (or perhaps, simply, “Look, the wretched and forlorn nigger!”) has the perlocutionary power to incite violence, violence filled with white desire and bloodlust. Call: “Look, a Negro!” Response: “Rape the black bitch!” Call: “Look, a Negro!” Response: “Get a rope!” Call: “Rape!” Response: “Castrate the nigger!” The black body is deemed a threat vis-à-vis the “virgin sanctity of whiteness,”¹⁵ something to be marked, sequestered, and in many cases killed—just for fun. In fact, in 2011 in Jackson, Mississippi, a forty-nine-year-old black man, James Craig Anderson, was targeted primarily by a white eighteen-year-old male, who, according to law enforcement officials, said to his white friends, “Let’s go fuck with some niggers.” On seeing a black man standing in a parking lot (“Look, a Negro!”), the group first repeatedly beat him. It is alleged that the expression “White Power!” was also yelled out by one of the white youth. As Anderson staggered, he was then brutally run over by a truck driven by the white

eighteen-year-old, an event captured on surveillance tape. After driving over and killing Anderson, the white male, who since has been indicted on charges of capital murder and a hate crime, allegedly said to his friends, "I ran that nigger over."¹⁶ While many of the details of this crime are still unknown as of this writing, the racist narrative is certainly consistent with the historical legacy of whiteness in North America as it relates to black people. As I write about this incident, I hear the words of many of my white students: "But our generation has changed when it comes to racism." Call: "Look, a Negro!" Response: "Run the nigger over!"

"Look, a Negro!" is a form of racist interpellation that, when examined closely, reveals whites to themselves. One might say that the "Negro" is that which whites create as the specter/phantom of their own fear.¹⁷ Thus, I would argue that the whites who engage in a surveillance of Fanon's body don't really "see" him; they see themselves. James Baldwin, speaking to white North America with eloquence and incredible psychological insight, says, "But you still think, I gather, that the 'nigger' is necessary. But he's unnecessary to me, so he must be necessary to you. I give you your problem back. You're the 'nigger', baby; it isn't me."¹⁸

What is so powerful here is the profound act of transposition. One might ask, "Will the real 'nigger' please stand up?" Ah, yes, "Look, a white!" Such naming and marking function to flip the script. Flipping the script, which is a way of changing an outcome by reversing the terms or, in this case, recasting the script¹⁹ of those who reap the benefits of white privilege says, "I see you for what and who you are!" Flipping the script is, one might say, a gift offering: an opportunity, a call to responsibility—perhaps even to greater maturity. "Look, a white!" is disruptive and clears a space for new forms of recognition. Public repetition of this expression and the realities of whiteness that are so identified and marked is one way of installing the legitimacy that there is something even seeable when it comes to whiteness. Moreover, public repetition functions to further an antiracist authority over a visual field²⁰ historically dominated by whites. It is important to note, though, that the subject of the utterance, "Look, a white!" is not a sovereign, ahistorical, neutral subject that has absolute control over the impact of the utterance. "Look, a Negro!" is already embedded within citationality conditions that involve larger racist assumptions and accusations as they relate to the black body that shape the intelligibility, and the meaningful declaration, of the utterance. "Look, a Negro!" presupposes a white subject who is historically embedded within racist social relations and a racist discursive field that pre-exists the speaker. As a form of repetition, one that would be cited often and by many, "Look, a white!" has the potential to create conditions that work to

install an intersubjective intelligibility and social force that effectively counter the direction of the gaze, a site traditionally monopolized by whites, and perhaps create a moment of uptake that induces a form of white identity crisis, a jolt that awakens a sudden and startling sense of having been seen. In response, one might hear, “You talkin’ to me?” But unlike the scenario played out in *Taxi Driver* (1976), where Robert De Niro poses this question, in this case the mirror speaks back: “*You’re damn right. Indeed, I am!*”

“Look, a white!” returns to white people the problem of whiteness. While I see it as a gift, I know that not all gifts are free of discomfort.²¹ Indeed, some are heavy laden with great responsibility. Yet it is a gift that ought to engender a sense of gratitude, a sense of humility, and an opportunity to give thanks—not the sort of attitude that reinscribes white entitlement. As bell hooks writes, “Those white people who want to continue the dominant-subordinate relationship so endemic to racist exploitation by insisting that we ‘serve’ them—that we do the work of challenging and changing their consciousness—are acting in bad faith.”²²

The gift is not all about *you*. As white, you are used to everything always being about *you*. We have heard, as Du Bois writes, your “mighty cry reverberating through the world, ‘I am white!’ Well and good, O Prometheus, divine thief.”²³ But your cry to the world was followed by exploitation, dehumanization, and death. “I am white!” was egomaniacal and thanatological; it was a process of self-naming that functioned to “justify,” through racial myth making, the actions of whites in their quest to dominate those “backward” and “inferior” others. This process of self-naming was *not* a gift but a manifestation of white messianic imperialism. In this case, it was a death-dealing superimposition of white power. As Steve Martinot notes, “As a ‘gift,’ it must see the world as other, against which it demands of its own citizens (the white members of the white nation) that they stand in allegiance and solidarity, and that the other on whom the ‘gift’ is bestowed (imposed) be grateful.”²⁴ Flipping the script, within the context of this book, however, is about *us*—collectively.

Sara Ahmed writes, “It has become commonplace for whiteness to be represented as invisible, as the unseen or the unmarked, as non-colour, the absent presence or hidden referent, against which all other colours are measured as forms of deviance.”²⁵ According to George Lipsitz, “Whiteness is everywhere in U.S. culture, but it is very hard to see.”²⁶ He goes on to say, “As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its rule as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”²⁷ Richard Dyer writes, “In fact, for most of the time white people speak about nothing but white

people, it's just that we couch it in terms of 'people' in general."²⁸ Finally, as Terrance MacMullan sees it, "White people remain ignorant of white privilege because of the fact that all aspects of our lives—our institutions, practices, ideals, and laws—were defined and tailored to fit the needs, wants, and concerns of white folk."²⁹

But to whom is whiteness invisible? Ahmed is clear that whiteness is invisible to those who inhabit it,³⁰ to those who have come to see whiteness and what it means to be human as isomorphic. For them, it has become a "mythical norm."³¹ This does not mean, however, that whites who choose to give their attention to thinking critically about whiteness are incapable of doing so, though it does mean that there will be white structural blinkers that occlude specific and complex insights by virtue of being white. Therefore, people of color are necessary to the project of critically thinking through whiteness, especially as examining whiteness has the potential of becoming a narcissistic project that elides its dialectical relationship with people of color—that is, those who continue to suffer under the regime of white power and privilege. Pointing to the importance of Audre Lorde's work, which emphasizes the importance of studying whiteness and its significance to antiracism, Ahmed argues that if the examination of whiteness "is to be more than 'about' whiteness, [it must begin] with the Black critique of how whiteness works as a form of racial privilege, as well as the effects of that privilege on the bodies of those who are recognized as black."³²

The fact of the matter is that, for white people, whiteness is the transcendental norm in terms of which they live their lives as persons, individuals. People of color, however, confront whiteness in their everyday lives, not as an abstract concept but in the form of embodied whites who engage in racist practices that negatively affect their lives. Black people and people of color thus strive to disarticulate the link between whiteness and the assumption of just being human, to create a critical slippage. By marking whiteness, black people can locate whiteness as a specific historical and ideological configuration, revealing it as "an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity."³³ The act of marking whiteness, then, is itself an act of historicizing whiteness, an act of situating whiteness within the context of material forces and raced interest-laden values that reinforce whiteness as a site of privilege and hegemony. Marking whiteness is about exposing the ways in which whites have created a form of "humanism" that obfuscates their hegemonic efforts to treat their experiences as universal and representative.

According to bell hooks, "Many [whites] are shocked that black people think critically about whiteness because racist thinking perpetuates the

fantasy that the Other who is subjugated, who is subhuman, lacks the ability to comprehend, to understand, to see the working of the powerful.”³⁴ On this score, then, black subjectivity poses a threat to the invisibility of whiteness. Yet this is a specific type of threat. Because of the profound relational reality of whiteness to the nonwhite Other, whites are not the targets of their own whiteness, so the reality of the invisibility of whiteness, its status as normative, does not affect them in the same way. In fact, this is impossible, for as whites continue to strive to make whiteness visible, they do so from their perspective (which is precisely embedded within the context of white power and privilege), not from the perspective of those who constitute the embodied subjectivities that undergo the existential traumas due to whiteness (the terror of whiteness, the colonial desires of whiteness, the possessive investments in whiteness that perpetuate problematic race-based economic orders, residential orders, judicial orders, somatic orders, etc.). Speaking directly to the ramifications of this specific threat, Crispin Sartwell writes, “One of the major strategies for preserving white invisibility to ourselves is the silencing, segregation, or delegitimation of voices that speak about whiteness from a nonwhite location.”³⁵

While it is true that not all people of color have the same understanding of the operations of whiteness, at all levels of its complex expression, this does not negate the fact that people of color undergo raced experiences vis-à-vis whiteness that lead to specific insights that render whiteness visible. Being “a wise Latina woman,”³⁶ for example, is one mode of expression of such raced experiences, experiences that have deep socio-ontological and epistemic implications. Yet how can people of color not have this epistemic advantage? After all, black people and people of color, when it comes to white people, are “bone of their thought and flesh of their language.”³⁷ As Du Bois writes, “I see these souls [that is, white souls] undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious!”³⁸

Ahmed, hooks, and Du Bois emphasize the necessity of a black counter-gaze, a gaze that recognizes the ways of whiteness, sees beyond its “invisibility,” from the perspective of a form of raced positional knowledge. The black counter-gaze is a species of flipping the script. Indeed, the expression, “Look, a white!” presupposes this counter-gaze. I encourage my white students to mark whiteness everywhere they recognize it. Of course, thinking critically with them about whiteness enables these students to become more cognizant of the obfuscatory ways in which whiteness conceals its own visibility. The critical process creates a more complex epistemic field, as it were, in terms of which whiteness becomes more recognizable in its daily manifestations.

After taking my courses, many white students say, “I can’t *stop* seeing the workings of race. It’s everywhere.” One often gets the impression that they would rather return to a more “innocent” time, before taking my course, before they learned how to see so much more.

The reality is that the “workings of race” are precisely what people of color see/experience most of the time. Important to this learning process, though, is reminding my white students that they are white, that they are part of the very “workings of race” that they are beginning to recognize.³⁹ For most of my white students, before taking my course their own whiteness is just a benign phenotypic marker. Indeed, for most of them, whiteness has not really been marked as a raced category to begin with. They do not recognize the normative status of whiteness that the marking is designed to expose. For them, “to be white” means “I am not like you guys”—those people of color. Whiteness as normative and their whiteness as unremarkable thus remain in place, uninterrogated, unblemished. Sara Ahmed writes, “There must be white bodies (it must be possible to see such bodies *as* white bodies), and yet the power of whiteness is that we don’t see those bodies as white bodies. We just see them as bodies.”⁴⁰ In short, the process of disentangling the sight of white bodies from the sight of such bodies as just bodies is not easy, but it is necessary.

For many whites, the process of marking the white body (“Look, a white!”) is not just difficult but threatening. The process dares to mark whites as racists, as perpetrators and sustainers of racism. Furthermore, the process dares to mark whites as *raced* beings, as inextricably bound to the historical legacy of the “workings of race.” Hence, the process encourages a slippage not only at the site of seeing themselves as innocent of racism but also at the site of seeing themselves as unraced.⁴¹ As Zeus Leonardo and Ronald K. Porter write, “Hiding behind the veil of color-blindness means that lifting it would force whites to confront their self-image, with people of color acting as the mirror. This act is not frightening for people of color but for whites.”⁴² It is frightening because whites must begin to see themselves through gazes that are not *prone* to lie/obfuscate when it comes to the “workings of race” qua whiteness. Indeed, there is no real need to lie about whiteness. People of color have nothing to lose; whites have so much to protect. Yet what do they have to protect? As Richard Wright notes, “Their constant outward-looking, their mania for radios, cars, and a thousand other trinkets, made them dream and fix their eyes upon the trash of life, made it impossible for them to learn a language that could have taught them to speak of what was in theirs or others’ hearts. The words of their souls were the syllables of popular songs.”⁴³