

# George Yancy

## A Critical Reader

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD  
*Lanham • Boulder • New York • London*

Published by Rowman & Littlefield  
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706  
www.rowman.com  
86–90 Paul Street, London EC2A 4NE, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Is Available**

<to come>

ISBN 978-1-5381-3748-2 (cloth: alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-5381-3749-9 (electronic)

 The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

## Chapter 7

# A Phenomenology of Invisibility

## *On the Absence of Yellow Bodies*

Boram Jeong

In his reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, George Yancy argues that felt invisibility is a form of ontological and epistemological violence that points to the sedimented habits and general normative constructs of white perception. Yancy's phenomenological account of the "unseen" Black body problematizes the condition of emergence of racialized bodies in the perceptual field under the white gaze. This chapter aims to elaborate further on the racialization of the visual field by expanding Yancy's claims on invisibility beyond black bodies, to consider specifically the invisibility of Asian and Asian American "yellow" bodies. The first section focuses on Yancy's notion of "seen absence" to demonstrate how white perception marks the Black body as hypervisible, while rendering it invisible at the same time. The second section expands on Yancy's notion to examine how "yellow" bodies, despite their hypervisibility, are quickly dismissed or recede into the periphery in the white logic of perception. The perceptual neglect for yellow bodies is, I argue, a manifestation of the white perceptual logic, which situates racialized bodies temporally in a time other than the "now," and spatially in a place other than "here." In the last section, I suggest that whiteness be understood as *perceptual dysfunction* that delimits one's own cognitive possibilities and ways to engage with the world, rendering certain bodies invisible.

### YANCY'S NOTION OF "SEEN ABSENCE": THE LOGIC OF WHITE PERCEPTION

In the description of what he refers to as the "elevator effect," Yancy says that to a white woman in the elevator, his black body is immediately seen as a threat, from which her body and her belongings must be protected. He need

not *do* anything but to be black, to be a threat. If not Yancy's deeds, what exactly is the perceptual object that causes her urgent bodily reaction? Where is this alleged threat located between her eyes and his body? Yancy carries no threat in his body, his intent, or his action, but the white woman *sees* it in the presence of his body. Then what is the condition of this particular "seeing" that goes beyond a mere perception? How does this perceptual practice affect those who inhabit the bodies like his?

Yancy describes how this experience of being repeatedly seen in a certain way makes him (feel) absent. He writes, under the white gaze "who I am has already been determined. I am the Black who is present in his absence, whose genuine intentions arrive too late. I am a 'seen absence.' I am visible in my invisibility."<sup>1</sup> Note how visibility and invisibility in the perceptual field translate here as a sense of presence and absence. His body in its corporeality still takes up space, so he surely does not mean that it is physically absent. However, neither his way of seeing his own body nor his intention is communicated; the body that he sees is invisible and nonexistent to her. She sees some aura of threat before anything, and blinded by the urge to react, fails to see his body, the actual object of perception. Yancy writes: "Phenomenologically, she [the woman in the elevator] might be said to 'see' a Black, fleeting expanse, a peripherally glimpsed vague presence of something dark, forbidden, and dreadful. She does not see a dynamic subjectivity, but a sort, something eviscerated of individuality, flattened, and rendered vacuous of genuine human feelings."<sup>2</sup>

Without actually being seen, his body sticks out as a "trigger" in the otherwise smooth perceptual field. In this "overpresence," his personhood and subjectivity are hollowed out. He is absent in the sense that his way of presence does not have any weight in his encounter with the white woman. Yancy calls this curious appearance of the black body under the white gaze, a "seen absence."

The "seen absence" of the Black body is described as a paradoxical site, where it is made hypervisible yet locked in invisibility. According to Yancy, "In the case of hypervisibility, the Black body becomes excessive. Within this racially saturated field of hypervisibility, the Black body still functions as the unseen as it does in the case of its invisibility."<sup>3</sup> The hypervisibility of the Black body, in fact, only confirms its inescapable invisibility; it is unseen precisely because of the way it is seen. The white gaze, through its dual function of hypervisibility and invisibility, not only projects racialized meanings onto bodies of color but also conceals what is present in the perceptual field. It overwrites what can actually be seen as well as what could virtually be seen. The stubborn practice of the white gaze annihilates other ways of seeing, incapacitating any potentially meaningful visible signs like his well-clothedness (suit and tie) or his university hat. There is little that Yancy could do to make himself visible.

The paradox of hypervisibility and invisibility suggested by Yancy's "seen absence" reveals, what could be termed, a general "logic of white perception." By white perception, I mean the perceptual practices that center white bodies, regardless of one's intent. I call it a logic, meaning a set of principles underlying the arrangement of perceptual elements. The change of focus here from the first person account of being made hyper/in/visible to the general logic that governs the perceptual field is intentional; it is to take seriously the transition from invisibility to absence, implied in the "seen absence." The logic points us beyond the epistemic tension to the ontological denial of the Black body, emphasizing that the issue is not simply competing knowledge claims about the alleged threat, but the condition of being that erases the Black body in the here and now. I'm interested in the process in which this particular perceptual logic is normalized by determining the field of vision via "hyper/in/visibility." I analyze the process as the following: (1) a fabrication of the (racially saturated) field of the visible; (2) a reduction of bodies of color to "the hyper/in/visible"; and (3) the naturalization of white perception and its epistemic and ontological violence.

First, one of the most powerful functions of white perception is fabricating the field of the visible. When the white woman in the elevator "sees" a threat in the appearance of Yancy's body, the threat doesn't reside in his body but in blackness in the white imaginary. As Judith Butler writes in her essay on Rodney King, the white gaze "is not a simple seeing, an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible, the workings of racial constraints on what it means to 'see.'"<sup>4</sup> She maintains that an act of seeing imbued with racist episteme is no longer a seeing, but a particular *reading* or a construal. White perception makes its conceptual construct of the body hypervisible, while rendering invisible all other qualities of the body actually given in the perceptual field. As Ralph Ellison's hero in *Invisible Man* acutely observes, "When they [whites] approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."<sup>5</sup> When the white perceptual logic determines what could appear in the visual field by *fabrication*, the category of "the visible" itself needs to be reconceptualized in political terms.

Second, the white perceptual logic results in a reductive understanding of bodily possibilities. While depriving bodies of color of the possibility to be seen otherwise, it determines their condition of emergence in the perceptual field itself. As Yancy states in his comments on the killing of Trayvon Martin, "Black emergence outside of whiteness's *scopic* power is foreclosed."<sup>6</sup> Any future possibilities promised by seventeen-year-old Martin's body had to be rejected to maintain the normative constructs of white perception embodied by George Zimmerman. The totalizing power of white perception exerts "a form of ontological and epistemological violence"<sup>7</sup> in extinguishing bodily

possibilities as well as lives embodied. It is ontological because when the violence against the Black body is legitimated on the basis of the fabricated notion of danger, it is no longer simply an epistemological failure of recognition but a degradation of being itself that has been made contingent. Under the logic of white perception, the Black body becomes a source of impossibility and is ultimately reduced to absence: It is “a form of white solipsism whereby the nonwhite is erased and devalued, reduced to a form of nonbeing.”<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, it is through the workings of hyper/in/visibility that the normative constructs of white perception are naturalized. In its perceptual operation, the white logic loses its particularity and becomes normalized. The whiteness of an observer is, in Crispin Sartwell’s terms, a form of authority to see supposedly from nowhere, for everyone.<sup>9</sup> As white perception passes itself off as a neutral act of “seeing,” its epistemic and ontological violence is obscured. Also, as Al-Saji points out, racializing vision marks bodies of color by enabling only one way of seeing the body while disabling all others, and yet the one who sees considers their act of seeing as *passive* and *receptive*.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, one comes to believe that what they have projected onto the body (threat or danger, in the case of the “elevator effect”) is a quality inherent to the body (*Yancy’s* dangerous body). In attributing its imagined qualities to the bodies of color, white perception makes its own function invisible. In this sense, the hyper/in/visibility of racialized bodies is nothing but a sign of whiteness in a silent operation.

With the notion of “seen absence,” Yancy provides a phenomenological account of having one’s body unseen. Identifying the white perceptual logic shifts focus to the systematic process in which the Black body is replaced with blackness in the white imagination. Further, it reframes the problem of the hyper/in/visibility of bodies of color in terms of white domination of the perceptual field, rather than a matter of resituating bodies of color to make them visible. In the following, we will examine how the white perceptual logic renders bodies of color absent through the normative configurations of spatiotemporality.

### THE “SEEN ABSENCE” OF YELLOW BODIES: THE SPATIOTEMPORALITY OF WHITE PERCEPTION

In the first section, we have established that hyper/in/visibility is a key function of the white perceptual logic and its normalization. The second section expands on Yancy’s notion of “seen absence” to consider varying forms of racialization, especially the hyper/in/visibility of Asian and Asian American bodies in white perception. In the “seen absence” of the “Yellow” body,<sup>11</sup> an emphasis is placed on *absence* because, unlike the black body that becomes

“excessive,” the Yellow body under the white gaze turns “negligible.” Thus, this section presents an analysis of the spatiotemporality of white perception to account for its perceptual neglect for yellow bodies. In doing so, I show how the white perceptual logic, in its normative function, serves as the measure not only for the visibility but also the presence of racialized bodies.

Obviously, the “seen absence” of the Yellow body cannot be equated with that of the Black body. As a way to understand the difference between the hyper/in/visibility of the Black and the Yellow bodies, I suggest the opposition between the exaggeration (maximization) versus belittlement (minimization) of corporeality. If black bodies have historically been viewed as an object of fear, threat, or danger, yellow bodies in the white perception have receded to the periphery or the background. If black bodies have been falsely depicted as “uncontrollable” and “excessive” as Yancy put it,<sup>12</sup> yellow bodies have been neglected as “passive,” or “docile,” if not “inanimate.” Accordingly, the epistemic and ontological violence of the white perception takes the form of the obsession with physical control over black bodies, and of perceptual negligence and belittlement of yellow bodies. The white perceptual logic is complex and adaptable, for it draws on different histories of racism.

Similar to hypervisibility and invisibility, the maximization and minimization of corporeality, as negative expressions of whiteness, are not contradictory but mutually constitutive of white perceptual logic. They are both modes of what Aimé Césaire calls “thingification.”<sup>13</sup> Through the maximization of corporeality one reads into black bodies “bestial” desire to be tamed and conquered. By minimization, one sees in yellow bodies little vitality, an object without affectivity or active will to be pushed around. In short, thinghood translates as *excessive*, overpresence for black bodies, and as *negligible*, underpresence for yellow bodies. This distinction, however crude, is useful to reveal a particular use of white perceptual logic for yellow bodies. In addition to the hyper/in/visibility that defines the white perception in general, yellow bodies as “negligible presence” are racialized particularly through invisibility. That is, yellow bodies are rendered invisible not only because they are reduced to their race but also because “Asianness” itself has been defined in the white imagination by stereotypical qualities that serve to justify the invisibility, such as being compliant, nonconfrontational and self-effacing. This makes the yellow presence doubly invisible.

The invisibility of Asian Americans has often been discussed in terms of representation (social, cultural, or political). My analysis here focuses specifically on the invisibility of yellow bodies in the perceptual field, in order to further articulate the logic of white perception and its various manifestations. What Yancy’s notion of “seen absence” can offer in this regard is the way absence is understood—absence not due to a lack but to an active erasure performed by whiteness in operation. Thus, in what follows, I examine how

the white perceptual logic produces absence by looking particularly at its spatiotemporal structure that conditions the invisibility of yellow bodies. I shall further complicate the opposition between presence and absence and the idea of temporal and spatial occupancy by demonstrating how the presence of certain bodies comes to bear less weight than others.

### The Spatiality of Yellow Absence

Yellow bodies occupy a place of the “inescapably foreign” in the space shaped by the white perceptual logic. They are rendered absent for they are viewed as belonging to a place other than “here.” Therefore, the presence of yellow bodies in the white space is considered disruptive and temporary; it is contingent upon white permission. Their presence can be “permitted” as long as it is not intrusive of white bodies, that is, if it remains in the periphery. The yellow presence is “tolerated” when serving white bodies at nail salons, massage shops, dry cleaners, or cheap take-out restaurants, while remaining in the background, or better, invisible. However, their presence in invisibility hardly guarantees a place in the world because it can turn into hypervisibility whenever “white tolerance” runs out, as in moments of crisis in economy or in public health. It is supposed that the space occupied by yellow bodies can be reclaimed at any moment, for according to the white perceptual logic yellow bodies have never belonged “here.”

The COVID-19 pandemic—still unfolding at the time of this writing—shows how quickly invisible yellow bodies become hypervisible, and thus disruptive. The white logic perceives the disease as a racialized threat, which leads to a violent assertion of white dominance; a single fact that the virus originated in China was enough to instigate hate crimes against all bodies potentially associated with the entire continent of Asia. Yellow bodies, regardless of nationality or immigration status, have been made to be seen as carriers of virus. They have been harassed and assaulted around the world in the most ordinary places like gyms, public transport, and streets, minding their own business. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Chil Kong, a Korean American theater director, describes the felt hostility: “It’s a look of disdain. . . . It’s just: ‘How dare you exist in my world? You are a reminder of this disease, and you don’t belong in my world.’ . . . It’s especially hard when you grow up here and expect this world to be yours equally. But we do not live in that world anymore. That world does not exist.”<sup>14</sup>

How readily yellow bodies can be expelled from the world organized around whiteness shows that their presence in it has always been contingent upon their invisibility, the supposed absence. The presence of yellow bodies can always be questioned or revoked when they are suddenly made hypervisible as “intruders.” The question, “How dare you exist in *my* world?” is



unanswerable. Since the constitution of white space is predicated upon their absence, the hypervisible yellow bodies are confronted with the impossible task of justifying their existence in it.

Efforts have been made to respond to the accusation of yellow bodies as carriers of the virus. After a regional French newspaper *Le Courrier Picard* called the outbreak “*Alerte jaune* (Yellow alert),” the #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus (I Am Not a Virus) movement began on social media.<sup>15</sup> Phrases like “Not all Asians are Chinese, not all Chinese are infected” were circulated, arguing that there are yellow bodies that are not dangerous or infectious, and therefore, deserve to *be*. It may be meaningful as a direct response to anti-Asian violence; however, it remains reactionary in my view; distinguishing non-Chinese Asians from Chinese, while potentially important as a critique of the homogenization of all yellow bodies (a common form of Asian racialization), is not only beside the point but also can potentially exacerbate anti-Chinese sentiment: Is it justifiable to reaffirm the association between the disease and the Chinese in order to exonerate other Asians? In the same way, emphasizing that not all Chinese are infectious misses the point, since the true motive behind the violence against Asians is racism, not infection. The real question is how certain danger is racialized, and thus the people racialized as such are equated with danger—the automatic linkage between the disease and yellow bodies. We will return to this issue shortly.

Any claims of belonging would be limited if they do not tackle the underlying assumptions behind the resurfacing of anti-Asian sentiment, one of which is the white perceptual logic that determines the condition of the emergence of the Yellow body in space. The assumption is that this is and has always been the world that belongs exclusively to white bodies, where the existence of yellow bodies must always remain conditional. What is being questioned here is not simply how yellow bodies are positioned in this world, but the legitimacy of their being in the space itself. Discourse around the alleged threat of yellow bodies as carriers of the virus should be seen as one of the many manifestations of the white perceptual logic, which turns Asians and Asian Americans into foreign, readily displaceable bodies on demand. Whether yellow bodies pose an actual threat or not is not the true point of contention. As we have seen in the “elevator effect,” threat is not located in the intent or action of bodies of color but in the white imaginary.

The white logic is flexible enough to extend beyond contradictions; yellow bodies have been portrayed as equally threatening for becoming too white (“honorary whites”), and for being too foreign (disloyal and unassimilable); there is no right distance they can keep from whiteness. Same goes for visibility. Since the logic operates through the paradox of hyper/in/visibility, yellow bodies have no choice but to be placed either in the zone of invisibility or that of hypervisibility. There is no proper positioning for making themselves

visible in the white space. During the pandemic, yellow bodies have been suddenly made hypervisible, although they have done nothing to change their place in the world. It is the same yellow body that used to be praised as a well-assimilated “model minority” (invisible) that is now seen as a threat to public health (hypervisible). In the space shaped by the white logic, the visibility of all bodies of color is necessarily a hypervisibility because they are out of place: the bodies that do not belong “here.” Hypervisibility makes the once familiar space suddenly hostile. It is a form of spatial alienation, where, in Yancy’s terms, one experiences the “here” as the “there”; although in everyday life he lives his body from an existential *here*, under the white gaze “I am reduced to a point that is viewed. My *here* is experienced as a *there*.”<sup>16</sup>

### The Temporality of Yellow Absence

Temporally speaking, yellow bodies are seen as belonging to a time other than the present. The presumed “foreignness” and “exoticness” of the Yellow body in the white perception sends it back to its “origin,” not only distant in space but also in time. The foreignness implies two ways of temporal distancing: denial of contemporaneity (“backwardness”) and continuity (contingency). Denial of contemporaneity is founded upon Western modernity’s exclusive claims to rationality that characterize other forms of life as outdated. The general tendency to situate otherness in a time other than the present that Johannes Fabian refers to as a “denial of coevalness,” is very much prevalent in the temporality of white perception.<sup>17</sup> A crystallization of this belief is the ideology of Yellow Peril, which views the rising influence of East Asians as an alleged threat to predominantly white Western civilization. In the United States, the growing number of immigrants from Asia in the late nineteenth century was perceived as a mortal danger to white racial purity by a diseased, promiscuous, Godless, immoral people—the baseness of Asians can “contaminate” and “corrupt” the body and the soul of civilized white immigrants. They were not considered contemporaries, but a people of the past, barbaric and outdated.

In addition, yellow bodies are denied historical continuity as immigrants or refugees in the United States, locked in a narrative constructed by the white imagination. Asian Americans continue to be seen as closer to their ancestral origins than to their homeland, unlike white immigrants who have been integrated and are no longer associated with their European countries of origin. Yellow bodies remain alien, whose present is ceaselessly interpellated back to the past, prior to their (their ancestors’) arrival, however many decades ago. The temporal alienation of Asian Americans is a denial of not only their place in American history but also their being in the “now.” That is why the persistent query, “Where are you *really* from?” is a mundane but lethal form of

epistemic violence to Asian Americans; it is an exclusivist claim to the “now” that makes the presence of yellow bodies incidental and temporary. This is how the “eternally foreign” yellow bodies are rendered temporally absent.

To return to the COVID-19 example, “temporal distancing” is what implicitly shapes the discourse around the racialization of the disease. Chinese people have historically been racialized as unhygienic and diseased. In the late 1800s, in order to intervene in the influx of Chinese workers to the United States, the fear of contagion was systemically induced by media, leading to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which was the first legislation in the country to exclude a particular racial or national group. Horace Greeley, a *New York Tribune* editor, wrote in 1854, “The Chinese are uncivilized, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in their dispositions; every female is a prostitute of the basest order.”<sup>18</sup> The idea of uncivilized, unhygienic, disease-ridden Chinese has persistently been reappearing as a technique of temporal distancing in various forms: the Chinese lead toy recalls; MSG and the Chinese restaurant syndrome; and the “Kung Flu.”

Yellow bodies, whose national origins are often indiscernible to white vision, and thus commonly designated as “the Chinese,” are always already associated with disease. Therefore, COVID-19 was racially coded as the “Chinese virus” almost immediately after the outbreak and has remained that way since. Even when the epicenter of the pandemic switched from China to Italy and then to the United States, or when most cases in New York were found to have originated in Europe, no Euro-Americans were targeted or considered to be a public health threat. Being a public threat means a threat to white America. Identifying a group of people as a threat is comforting only when they are already alien and expellable. Only the temporally distanced, foreign, and outdated can be *sent back* to where they belong. The “now” is white.

The spatiotemporality of white perception underlying the “seen absence” of yellow bodies elaborated so far can be summarized as a denial of shared time and space. At best, they are peripheral/invisible beings, carrying less weight and significance in the here and now. As Cathy Park Hong puts it, “Asians lack presence. Asians take up apologetic space. We don’t even have enough presence to be considered real minorities. We’re not racial enough to be token.”<sup>19</sup> Their presence is contingent upon “white permission,” the terms of which remain obscure in ordinary times. Their presence is often neglected in the form of a forgotten order at a restaurant, lack of greeting or attention at a store, or being mistaken as some other Asian at a professional conference. The conditional existence of bodies of color becomes clear when the unspoken terms are violated. They are and have always been on borrowed time and space.

If the aforementioned exaggeration of corporeality leads to the white obsession to take control of black bodies, what the minimization ultimately aims to accomplish is *erasure*. It is no accident that when yellow bodies become visible in public discourse, it is through their overrated ability to *assimilate*. The promise of recognition through assimilation only exacerbates the yellow absence and invisibility, as it is a permission of their presence in white space on the condition of erasure.

### UNDERSTANDING WHITENESS AS A PERCEPTUAL DYSFUNCTION

We have seen earlier how whiteness operates perceptually as a denial of shared time and space, rendering bodies of color invisible and absent. In this last section, I suggest that we understand the epistemic and ontological violence of white perception as a form of *perceptual dysfunction*—a systematic inability to engage with the world outside of the perceptual scheme constructed around whiteness. This formulation aims specifically to highlight the harms and damages that racializing perception does to the whites themselves, by calling attention to its structural failure.

In the aforementioned essay on Rodney King, Butler states that the racial schematization of the visible field is a “crisis in the certainty of what is visible, one that is produced through the saturation and schematization of that field with the inverted projections of white paranoia.”<sup>20</sup> Note that she speaks of the racializing gaze as a crisis in the white vision. Hyper/in/visibility as a projection of their own imaginary and aggression limits, more than anything, the perceptual field of the whites. A solution to this crisis requires “‘a different ordering of the visible’ or an aggressive counter reading,” according to Butler.<sup>21</sup>

The rejection of bodies of color in the “here and now,” seen earlier, is symptomatic of the crisis in white perception. As a perceptual practice, whiteness not only fails to see ordinary actions of nonwhite bodies as ordinary but also prescribes how they should be treated in the space and time; it drives one to chase after an elderly Asian American woman with sanitizer, and to call the police on African Americans barbecuing or birdwatching in the park.<sup>22</sup> Since the threefold logic of white perception (fabrication–reduction–naturalization, analyzed in the first section) is predicated upon what Charles Mills calls a “consensual hallucination,”<sup>23</sup> its maintenance takes a constant and collective denial of social realities.

Therefore, I propose that we consider whiteness as a form of *perceptual dysfunction*. I use the language of “dysfunction” to underscore the absurdity of the white perceptual logic and to problematize its normative status. The

notion aims to remind ourselves of the fact that white perception *is* a particular, systematic pattern of deviation as a perceptual practice that centers only certain bodies, which has been made normative for the purposes of colonization and slavery. As Yancy notes, “White power and privilege are fundamentally contingent. The scopic hegemony of whiteness is grounded in structural, historical, and material processes of subjugation, dispossession, and imperial invasion.”<sup>24</sup> Seeing it as a form of dysfunction helps us situate white perceptual practices properly in its historical contingency.

In proposing the notion of whiteness as a perceptual dysfunction, I am not suggesting that perceptual function in full capacity requires a form of seeing that is entirely neutral or objective, and thus one needs to transcend their positionality entirely to disrupt the embodied logic of white perception. Rather, the formulation is meant to underscore the danger of mistaking a particular *reading* of social realities as a neutral act of *seeing*. As noted earlier, white perception, presented as nonracial and general, assumes the guise of neutrality and objectivity. Whiteness gains power by concealing its particular positionality, especially from those who inhabit it, as Sara Ahmed points out.<sup>25</sup> White perception is a dysfunction in the specific sense that its logic is unknown to those who perform it. The spatiotemporality of white perception discussed earlier is an instance where its logic is naturalized by revising the ontological categories themselves, onto which Yellow bodies are mapped. The altered ontological mapping becomes the eyes that habituate racialized perception but are themselves unseen to the viewer. White perceptual dysfunction is what Ellison’s hero calls the “inner eyes” of the people that make him invisible: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.”<sup>26</sup>

The inner eyes are, according to Yancy, “those white racist, epistemic perspectives, interlocked with various social and material forces, from which whites ‘see’ the world.”<sup>27</sup> What is made invisible here is not only the hero’s body but also the operation of white “inner eyes.” Thus, Yancy holds that challenging the socially constructed privilege and power of the white gaze requires revealing its invisible function.

In pointing to the invisibility of white perceptual logic to whites themselves, my proposal aligns with Yancy’s claim. By naming it a dysfunction, I intend to further emphasize the detrimental consequences of white perception as a normative construct, namely, its mundane practices of epistemic and ontological violence. It calls for urgent attention to one’s perceptual habits that could potentially harm bodies of color every moment of every day without their knowledge. It also highlights how the logic impoverishes one’s own

world by subjecting perceptual possibilities to white spatiotemporality, under which certain bodies are denied a shared time and space.

It is worth noting here that Charles Mills has described whiteness as a pattern of “cognitive dysfunctions.” According to Mills, one of the senses in which whiteness is a dysfunction is that it leads to self-deception, where “whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.”<sup>28</sup> One’s ignorance of their own dysfunction is what sustains “racial fantasyland,” which whites come to live in. But, of course, this fantasy is real and powerful when it works as an organizing principle of the social space.

The idea of perceptual dysfunction suggested here underscores particularly the prereflective and often undetectable act of violence that whiteness performs on bodies of color through the seemingly innocent and passive act of seeing. White perceptual dysfunction is a form of racial violence that takes no conscious effort or intent, yet could well be the most consequential kind. It is a violence resulted rather from a *lack* of effort to examine one’s racialized vision. This lack of action is what perpetuates the white logic, which continues to fabricate an arbitrary divide between danger and safety in one’s bodily engagement with the world, between bodies that belong “here and now” and bodies to be readily displaced, and between bodies that matter and bodies that are disposable and violable.

Drawing on Yancy’s notion of the “seen absence” of the Black body, I have described in this chapter the general workings of the white perceptual logic. I have shown that the logic operates through the paradox of hypervisibility and invisibility, while serving as a measure for what can be seen and what can *be*: the visibility and presence of racialized bodies. In order to demonstrate the adaptability and complexity of the white perceptual logic, I then examined the particular operation of white logic on yellow bodies rendered hypervisible (“inescapably foreign”) and invisible (“negligible”) at the same time. We have seen how white perception alters the ontological mapping of the world in the analysis of the spatiotemporality of whiteness that denies bodies of color a shared time and space. Therefore, I claimed that white perception should be understood as a form of dysfunction that delimits the bodily possibilities of racialized peoples as well as the perceptual field of one’s own.

It should be clear by now that what is suggested by Yancy’s notion of “seen absence” of bodies of color is not a quest for recognition from whites but rather an alarm that signals a crisis in white perception. Promises of recognition and “making visible” of bodies of color under the current perceptual scheme could serve (and have served) to further centralize white bodies; the idea of including racialized bodies for the sake of diversifying white space without questioning the perceptual logic itself leaves white dominance intact.

Since the white perceptual logic continues to adapt and expand itself, a comprehensive account of it would require a further analysis of its workings specific to different communities of color and its impact on interracial tensions. Disrupting the logic of white perception is a responsibility of those who embody it, one that serves their own benefit to address the crisis in perception. It serves a corrective purpose of aligning oneself with social realities beyond self-imposed dysfunction. It is not an act of benevolence or generosity toward racialized others.

## CHAPTER 7

1. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 43 (emphasis added; hereafter *BBWG*).
2. *Ibid.*, 21.
3. *Ibid.*, 68.
4. Judith Butler, “Endangered/Endangering: In Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*, edited by Robert Gooding-Williams, 16 (New York: Routledge, 1993).
5. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1947), 7.
6. Yancy, *BBWG*, 69.
7. *Ibid.*, 17.
8. George Yancy, *Look, a White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012), 116–117.
9. Crispin Sartwell, *Act Like You Know: African-American Autobiography and White Identity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 6.
10. Alia Al-Saji, “A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing,” in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, edited by Emily S. Lee, 133–172 (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).
11. I use the term “Yellow bodies” instead of Asian American bodies here, following Anne Anlin Cheng; in *Ornamentalism*, Cheng proposes to use the term “yellow woman” in her analysis of Asiatic femininity that focuses “not on the real Asian or Asian American woman but instead on the very real formation of her ghost in Euro-American culture: the yellow woman” (Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), xii).
12. Yancy, *BBWG*, 68.
13. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42.
14. Sabrina Tavernise and Richard A. Oppel Jr., “Spit On, Yelled At, Attacked: Chinese Americans Fear for Their Safety.” *New York Times*, March 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/chinese-coronavirus-racist-attacks.html>.
15. *BBC News*, “Coronavirus: French Asians Hit Back at Racism with ‘I’m Not a Virus.’” January 29, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51294305>.
16. George Yancy, “Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body.” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 4 (2005): 221.
17. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).
18. Quoted in Stuart Creighton Miller, “An East Coast Perspective to Chinese Exclusion, 1852–1882.” *The Historian* 33, no. 2 (February 1971): 190.
19. Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 7.
20. Butler, “Endangered/Endangering,” 16.
21. *Ibid.*, 22.
22. Anti-Defamation League, “Reports of Anti-Asian Assaults, Harassment and Hate Crimes Rise as Coronavirus Spreads.” *ADL blog*, June 18, 2020. <https://www.adl.org/>



www.adl.org/blog/reports-of-anti-asian-assaults-harassment-and-hate-crimes-rise-as-coronavirus-spreads; Gianluca Mezzofiore, “A White Woman Called Police on Black People Barbecuing.” *CNN*, May 22, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/22/us/white-woman-black-people-oakland-bbq-trnd/index.html>; *New York Times*, “Amy Cooper Faces Charges after Calling Police on Black Bird-Watcher.” July 6, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/06/nyregion/amy-cooper-false-report-charge.html>.

23. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.

24. Yancy, *Look, a White!*, 110.

25. Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness.” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–168.

26. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 7.

27. Yancy, *BBWG*, 69.

28. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 18.

## CHAPTER 8

1. Kendrick Lamar, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Interscope Records, 2012.

2. As a white man, it is not right for me to use or write the n-word in any form. As such, the word will be rendered as “n\*\*\*\*” when directly quoted and “the n-word” when outside of direct quotations.

3. Stereo Williams, “Kendrick Lamar, Black Language and What White Fans Don’t Get about the N-Word.” *Billboard*, May 24, 2008. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8457834/kendrick-lamar-n-word-white-fans>.

4. Real Time with Bill Maher, June 9, 2017.

5. Joel Rudinow, “Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 1 (1994): 132.

6. George Yancy, *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 34.

7. Harry A. Nethery, “Philosophy as a Practice of Suffering: An Interview with George Yancy.” *Philosophia Africana: Analysis of Philosophy and Issues in Africa and the Black Diaspora* 19, no. 1 (2020): 64–79.

8. There is also a sense in which this project argues that hip-hop engages in a “phenomenology of traumatization in virtue of being specifically Black in an antiBlack world (which does not exclude other bodies of color) can also take us in a different direction, one that theorizes specific forms of Black trauma that don’t occur for white people” (George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 66).

9. Vince Staples, *Summertime '06*. Released June 30, 2015. Def Jam Recordings, 2015.

10. Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, xv.

11. *Ibid.*