

What 'White Privilege' Really Means

By George Yancy and Naomi Zack

November 5, 2014 7:00 pm

The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

This is the first in a series of interviews with philosophers on race that I am conducting for The Stone. This week's conversation is with Naomi Zack, a professor of philosophy at the University of Oregon and the author of "The Ethics and Mores of Race: Equality After the History of Philosophy." The interview was conducted by email and edited. — George Yancy

George Yancy: What motivates you to work as a philosopher in the area of race?

Naomi Zack: I am mainly motivated by a great need to work and not to be bored, and I have a critical bent. I think there is a lot of work to be done concerning race in the United States, and a lot of ignorance and unfairness that still needs to be uncovered and corrected. I received my doctorate in philosophy from Columbia University in 1970 and then became absent from academia until 1990. When I returned it had become possible to write about real issues and apply analytic skills to social ills and other practical forms of injustice. My first book, "Race and Mixed Race" (1991) was an analysis of the incoherence of U.S. black/white racial categories in

their failure to allow for mixed race. In “Philosophy of Science and Race,” I examined the lack of a scientific foundation for biological notions of human races, and in “The Ethics and Mores of Race,” I turned to the absence of ideas of universal human equality in the Western philosophical tradition.

I’m also interested in the role of the university in homelessness and have begun to organize an ongoing project for the University of Oregon’s Community Philosophy Institute, with a unique website.

G.Y.: How can critical philosophy of race shed unique light on what has happened, and is still happening, in Ferguson, Mo.?

N.Z.: Critical philosophy of race, like critical race theory in legal studies, seeks to understand the disadvantages of nonwhite racial groups in society (blacks especially) by understanding social customs, laws, and legal practices. What’s happening in Ferguson is the result of several recent historical factors and deeply entrenched racial attitudes, as well as a breakdown in participatory democracy.

G.Y.: Would you put this in more concrete terms?

N.Z.: Let’s work backwards on this. Middle-class and poor blacks in the United States do less well than whites with the same income on many measures of human well-being: educational attainment, family wealth, employment, health, longevity, infant mortality. You would think that in a democracy, people in such circumstances would vote for political representatives on all levels of government who would be their advocates. But the United States, along with other rich Western consumer societies, has lost its active electorate (for a number of reasons that I won’t go into here). So when something goes wrong, when a blatant race-related injustice occurs, people get involved in whatever political action is accessible to them. They take to the streets, and if they do that persistently and in large enough numbers, first the talking heads and then the big media start to pay attention. And that gets the attention of politicians who want to stay in

office.

It's too soon to tell, but "Don't Shoot" could become a real political movement — or it could peter out as the morally outraged self-expression of the moment, like Occupy Wall Street.

But the value of money pales in contrast to the tragedy this country is now forced to deal with. A tragedy is the result of a mistake, of an error in judgment that is based on habit and character, which brings ruin. In recent years, it seems as though more unarmed young black men are shot by local police who believe they are doing their duty and whose actions are for the most part within established law.

In Ferguson, the American public has awakened to images of local police, fully decked out in surplus military gear from our recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, who are deploying all that in accordance with a now widespread "broken windows" policy, which was established on the hypothesis that if small crimes and misdemeanors are checked in certain neighborhoods, more serious crimes will be deterred. But this policy quickly intersected with police racial profiling already in existence to result in what has recently become evident as a propensity to shoot first. All of that surplus military gear now stands behind such actions, and should offend members of the public who protest.

G.Y.: How does this "broken windows" policy relate to the tragic deaths of young black men/boys?

N.Z.: People are now stopped by the police for suspicion of misdemeanor offenses and those encounters quickly escalate. The death of Michael Brown, like the death of Trayvon Martin before him and the death of Oscar Grant before him, may be but the tip of an iceberg.

Young black men are the convenient target of choice in the tragic intersection of the broken windows policy, the domestic effects of the war on

terror and police racial profiling.

G.Y.: Why do you think that young black men are disproportionately targeted?

N.Z.: Exactly why unarmed young black men are the target of choice, as opposed to unarmed young white women, or unarmed old black women, or even unarmed middle-aged college professors, is an expression of a long American tradition of suspicion and terrorization of members of those groups who have the lowest status in our society and have suffered the most extreme forms of oppression, for centuries. What's happening now in Ferguson is the crystallization of our grief. Don't Shoot!

We also need to understand the basic motives of whole human beings, especially those with power. The local police have a lot of power — they are “the law” for all practical purposes.

Police in the United States are mostly white and mostly male. Some confuse their work roles with their own characters. As young males, they naturally pick out other young male opponents. They have to win, because they are the law, and they have the moral charge of protecting. So young black males, who have less status than they do, and are already more likely to be imprisoned than young white males, are natural suspects.

G.Y.: But aren't young black males also stereotyped according to white racist assumptions?

N.Z.: Yes. Besides the police, a large segment of the white American public believes they are in danger from blacks, especially young black men, who they think want to rape young white women. This is an old piece of American mythology that has been invoked to justify crimes against black men, going back to lynching. The perceived danger of blacks becomes very intense when blacks are harmed. And so today, whenever an unarmed black man is shot by a police officer and the black community protests, whites in

the area buy more guns.

This whole scenario is insane. The recent unarmed young black male victims of police and auxiliary police shootings have not been criminals. Their initial reactions to being confronted by police are surprise and outrage, because they cannot believe they are suspects or that merely looking black makes them suspicious. Maybe their grandfathers told them terrible stories, but after the Civil Rights movements and advancement for middle-class blacks, we are supposed to be beyond legally sanctioned racial persecution. Their parents may not have taught them the protocol for surviving police intervention. And right now the airwaves and Internet are buzzing with the anxiety of parents of young black men. They now have to caution their sons: “Yes, I know you don’t get into trouble, and I know you are going to college, but you have to listen to me about what to do and what not to do if you are ever stopped by the police. Your life depends on it. . . Don’t roll your eyes at me, have you heard what happened to Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown?”

G.Y.: We can safely assume white parents don’t need to have this talk with their children. Do you think white privilege is at work in this context?

N.Z.: The term “white privilege” is misleading. A privilege is special treatment that goes beyond a right. It’s not so much that being white confers privilege but that not being white means being without rights in many cases. Not fearing that the police will kill your child for no reason isn’t a privilege. It’s a right. But I think that is what “white privilege” is meant to convey, that whites don’t have many of the worries nonwhites, especially blacks, do. I was talking to a white friend of mine earlier today. He has always lived in the New York City area. He couldn’t see how the Michael Brown case had anything to do with him. I guess that would be an example of white privilege.

Other examples of white privilege include all of the ways that whites are

unlikely to end up in prison for some of the same things blacks do, not having to worry about skin-color bias, not having to worry about being pulled over by the police while driving or stopped and frisked while walking in predominantly white neighborhoods, having more family wealth because your parents and other forebears were not subject to Jim Crow and slavery. Probably all of the ways in which whites are better off than blacks in our society are forms of white privilege. In the normal course of events, in the fullness of time, these differences will even out. But the sudden killings of innocent, unarmed youth bring it all to a head.

G.Y.: The fear of black bodies — the racist mythopoetic constructions of black bodies — has been perpetuated throughout the history of America. The myth of the black male rapist, for example, in “Birth of a Nation.” But even after the civil rights movements and other instances of raised awareness and progress, black bodies continue to be considered “phobogenic objects,” as Frantz Fanon would say.

N.Z.: Fanon, in his “Black Skin, White Masks,” first published in France, in 1952, quoted the reaction of a white child to him: “Look, a Negro! . . . Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” Over half a century later, it hasn’t changed much in the United States. Black people are still imagined to have a hyper-physicality in sports, entertainment, crime, sex, politics, and on the street. Black people are not seen as people with hearts and minds and hopes and skills but as cyphers that can stand in for anything whites themselves don’t want to be or think they can’t be. And so, from a black perspective, the black self that whites serve up to them is not who they are as human beings. This exaggeration of black physicality is dehumanizing.

G.Y.: Given this, why have so many adopted the idea that we live in a post-racial moment in America?

N.Z.: I don’t know where the idea of “post-racial” America came from. It may have begun when minorities were encouraged to buy homes

they could not afford so that bankers could bet against their ability to make their mortgage payments, before the real estate crash of 2007-08. It sounds like media hype to make black people feel more secure so that they will be more predictable consumers — if they can forget about the fact blacks are about four times as likely as whites to be in the criminal justice system. If America is going to become post-racial, it will be important to get the police on board with that. But it's not that difficult to do. A number of minority communities have peaceful and respectful relations with their local police. Usually it requires negotiation, bargaining, dialogue — all of which can be set up at very little cost. In addition, police departments could use intelligent camera-equipped robots or drones to question suspects before human police officers approach them. It's the human contact that is deadly here, because it lacks humanity. Indeed, the whole American system of race has always lacked humanity because it's based on fantastic biological speculations that scientists have now discarded, for all empirical purposes.

G.Y.: So is it your position that race is a social construct? If so, why don't we just abandon the concept?

N.Z.: Yes, race is through and through a social construct, previously constructed by science, now by society, including its most extreme victims. But, *we cannot abandon race*, because people would still discriminate and there would be no nonwhite identities from which to resist. Also, many people just don't want to abandon race and they have a fundamental right to their beliefs. So race remains with us as something that needs to be put right.

George Yancy is a professor of philosophy at Duquesne University. He has written, edited and co-edited numerous books, including "Black Bodies, White Gazes," "Look, a White!" and "Pursuing Trayvon Martin," co-edited with Janine Jones.

