UNSETTLING ENCOUNTERS: ON THE ONTOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF HABITUAL RACISM

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In July 2020, a video began to circulate online of a white woman in Oakland County, Michigan aiming a loaded handgun at a Black woman and her teenage daughter in a restaurant parking lot (Barmore 2020). The confrontation escalated quickly after the white woman, Jillian Wuestenberg, bumped into Takela Hill's daughter, who retorted: "Excuse you." In raised voices, Wuestenberg accused the family of "invading her personal space" and blocking her exit, while Hill and her daughter demanded an apology, calling Wuestenberg "ignorant" and "racist." Visibly distraught, the two women continued yelling for several minutes as Wuestenberg and her husband got into their vehicle to pull out of the parking lot, nearly backing into Hill in the process. When Hill began banging on the back of the car, Wuestenberg exited the vehicle with gun in hand screaming, "Get away!" (Barmore 2020). Oddly, in the aftermath, it was Wuestenberg who reported feeling "terrified" during the encounter (Kiertzner 2020). When asked what was going through her mind, she said, "I just remember thinking, 'I'm not going home tonight . . . I need to live. I need to survive'" (Kiertzner 2020). Deputies on the scene said they "were presented with two very different stories" of the altercation: though only one of the women was armed, both claimed that they felt "extremely threatened" (Armus and Guarino 2020).

Indeed, when describing encounters with a person of another race, both white and racialized people[1] often report feeling threatened, with psychological and physiological responses of tension (Yancy 2017, 20), distress (Salamon 2018, 116), nausea (Sullivan 2015,

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[1] When using "racist" and "racialized," I have in mind Helen Ngo's (2017) definitions. Ngo defines *racism* as "a belief system in which certain 'races' (and their members) are considered inferior by virtue of characteristics or traits pertaining to that 'race'" (xiii). Here, "inferior" invokes not only discrimination but also condescension, pity, and *racialization*: the process by which a person is regarded as having a race and is assigned a racial identity. As Frantz Fanon (2008) suggests, racial stereotypes are not discovered; rather, the racist "*creates the inferiorized*" (73). Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre (1995) writes: "it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew" (69). Though not representative of all cases, in the Western context in which I am writing, "racialization" most often refers to the process by which people of color are "othered" as non-white, while the "non-naming" of whiteness normalizesd the perception of white people as "unraced." As such, I have followed Ngo in reserving the use of "racialized other" for people of color.

134), and trembling (Ngo 2017, 61). But while an abundance of empirical data is available to justify feelings of threat experienced by people of color—see, for example, data on police violence (Edwards, Lee, and Esposito 2019) or hospital mortality rates (Lucas et al. 2006)— the reasons for a white person's perceived sense of threat are less clear. Consequently, my inquiry is guided by two main questions: first, why is it that a white person who faces no physical danger during an encounter with a person of color nevertheless (mis)perceives the situation as threatening? Second, why is it that the white person subsequently leaves these encounters feeling reaffirmed while the person of color often leaves feeling "unsettled" (Ngo 2017, 61)? To answer these questions, I elaborate on recent developments in critical phenomenology from Helen Ngo, Shannon Sullivan, and Gayle Salamon to argue that encounters which give rise to offensive (and sometimes violent) reactions to the racialized other often share a common feature. Namely, these encounters have the potential to *unsettle* one's "at-home-ness" in the world.

The richness of the term "unsettling" has made it readily employable for phenomenological accounts of racism in philosophy of race literature; yet, the term has been left largely under-theorized. Here, I argue that unsettling encounters can be said to occur when the unfamiliar other has come into contact with the boundary of one's existential home. For many white people, interracial interactions produce an (often unwarranted) feeling of physical danger, but as I hope to show, this habitual (mis)perception of such encounters is not merely a conditioned response; it also functions to subvert situations that might unsettle white identifies partially constituted by phenomenological demarcations of space along racial lines. Crucial, then, to my thesis is an appropriation of Martin Heidegger's *ontico-ontological* difference: the distinction between the outward or empirically present features of the world (i.e., the ontic) and the structural conditions that make particular ways of being-in and moving-through the world possible (i.e., the ontological). While one might think of an *ontic* threat as a threat of physical harm to one's body as such, an *ontological* threat may challenge the internalized (culturally and historically contingent) "rules" and "categories" that found one's capacity to "have" a body at all. As I will argue, reports of feeling *ontically* threatened are often imagined—the result of a habitual, defensive (mis)perception of *ontological* threats to the structural conditions (i.e., the cultural, political, and socioeconomic underpinnings) of white lived experience. In making this claim, I aim to highlight some of the challenges facing attempts to dismantle white normativity[2] and bolster arguments by Ngo, George Yancy, and others that many of us remain "*too much* at-ease" or "*too much* at-home," such that we insulate ourselves from experiences that might otherwise lead us to re-evaluate our normative expectations (Ngo 2017, 94; emphasis in original).

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[2] Sociologist Korie Edwards (2008) has described white normativity as the "normalization of whites' cultural practices, ideologies, and location within the racial hierarchy such that how whites do things; their understandings about life, society, and the world; and their dominant social location over other racial groups are accepted as 'just how things are'" (10).

HOME

In her book *The Habits of Racism*, Ngo (2017) draws on Heidegger's use of the term *die Unheimlichkeit,* meaning "uncanniness" or (more literally) "un-home-liness," to give an account of the racialized person's everyday experience in the world (93). Heidegger introduces the term "uncanniness" during a discussion of the individual's relationship to the public: the ways "Dasein gets lured into—or lost in—the idle hum of 'the They' (*das Man*)" (Ngo 2017, 94). How we are each ontologically constituted and distinguished from one another is a primary interest for Heidegger in *Being and Time* (Mansbach 1991, 65). Thus, one of Heidegger's largest concerns is the extent to which individuals allow their familiar everyday experiences to be influenced and shaped by the public. Heidegger (1962) argues that the public, or "publicness" [*die Öffentlichkeit*], "proximally controls" every way in which Dasein interprets herself and the world around her such that the individual-as-public lacks the capacity to see the boundaries of her own experience (165). He writes:

> We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking. (164; emphasis in original)

Despite this rather negative characterization of "Being-in-the-world," Heidegger argues that it is precisely when the individual is most absorbed in her everyday life (that is to say, taken in and preoccupied with it) that she feels most "at-home" (234). This is because Dasein finds herself located in, and fascinated with, a world already richly populated with commonly accepted meaning. As Dasein is habituated to her world, and the "immediate circle of beings" in which she dwells, she comes to find it "familiar, reliable, [and] ordinary" (1971, 54). On the other hand, Heidegger (1996) maintains that experiences of uncanniness—which "[give] rise to anxiety"—come about when Dasein is pulled out of her absorption in everyday activities and set apart from the public (74). Take, for example, the experience of falling ill, when—as described by Luís Madeira and Beatriz Leal (2019)— the "pre-reflexive, intimate, and familiar" features of the body become "other" and the "painful, heavy, nauseated, feverish body, now alien and out of control, is no longer *home*" (278; emphasis in original). Drawing from his own experiences with illness, Drew Leder (2016) similarly writes that "when we fall sick, we are banished from the daily round of roles and duties on which so much of our conventional identity is based." Lying in a hospital bed, set apart from the public, "we are no longer a party to the concerns that absorb the outer world" (16).

However, Ngo (2017) points out that, as a minority, people of color are often *already* set apart from a public largely constituted by white bodies. Thus, in an effort to situate the racialized body within the Heideggerian framework, Ngo distinguishes the white person's experience—typically characterized by a feeling of being "at home" in one's body and the world-at-large—from the racialized person's, which Ngo claims is frequently "shaken, figuratively and literally" by encounters with racism (61). For example, Ngo (an Asian

woman) describes the effects of a racist encounter with a vendor while walking down the street. "My gut sinks," she writes. "A lump grows in my throat, my mouth goes dry" as the vendor repeatedly calls out "Ni Hao!"—"lips pursed . . . my cheeks betray slight signs of the internal fluster" (Ngo 2017, 55). George Yancy (2013), a Black man, similarly describes a time when a white police officer in North Philadelphia yelled out at him, "Man, I almost blew you away! . . . I thought you had a weapon." Yancy writes, "[t]he words made me tremble and pause; I felt the sort of bodily stress and deep existential anguish that no teenager should have to endure." Thus, Ngo (2017) suggests that Heidegger's description of the familiarity and comfort with which the white person typically moves through the world cannot always speak to the experience of racialized people who, often feeling not-at-home, are threatened by an "existential instability" (70).

The contrast between white and racialized embodiment is borne out further in Shannon Sullivan's (2006) work on "ontological expansiveness," which she argues is a characterizing feature of white experience:

> As ontologically expansive, white people tend to act and think as if all spaces—whether geographical, physical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise—are or should be available for them to move in and out of as they wish. (10)

Here, the white person's orientation to the world is such that she feels entitled to move through any space with ease and confidence, "uninhibited and unobstructed by one's own body" (Ngo 2017, 80). By contrast, Yancy (2017) describes how his own bodily expansiveness is limited when he enters an elevator where a white woman is waiting to reach her floor. Upon seeing Yancy (or, more specifically, Yancy's "Black body"), the woman clutches her handbag more closely to her side (21). Yancy writes:

> My movements become and remain stilted. I dare not move suddenly… I feel trapped. I no longer feel bodily expansiveness within the elevator, but corporeally constrained, limited. I now begin to calculate, paying almost neurotic attention to my body movements, making sure this "Black object," what now feels like an appendage, a weight, is not too close, not too tall, not too threatening. (32)

Yancy's example demonstrates one of the ways ordinary life is interrupted for the racialized other. While almost everyone is likely to become aware of their bodily comportment during a job interview or doctor's visit—"in other words, for *events* or *occasions*"—the racialized body must engage in this kind of work in everyday "*non-events*" like strolling through the park or while shopping (Ngo 2017, 58; emphasis in original). Ngo (2017) cites a number of "coping mechanism[s]" used by people of color to appear non-threatening or subvert other stereotypes, from whistling songs by the Beatles as one walks past a young white couple at night to wearing university-branded clothing while shopping for real estate (57). During such cases, the racialized other is not "at home" in the world; rather, she may find herself "disturbed, destabilized, unsettled" (61). Ngo writes:

> In experiencing one's body schema as inherently unsettled or at any moment "unsettleable," the racialized body not only becomes accustomed to but indeed *anticipates* these moments of unraveling. (Ngo 2017, 70; emphasis in original)

Ngo's use of "unsettled" and "unsettleable" is interesting insofar as it points to the vulnerable nature of this existential home: even when she feels *settled*, she remains *unsettleable*. To further explore this characteristic of the home, we must first understand how one comes to feel settled, or "at home," in the first place. In the next section, I turn to Ngo once again and provide an overview of the role habit plays in constituting the home.

HABIT

In his lecture, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* Heidegger (1996) writes that the "homely" aspects of life are those which are "habitual" and "intimately familiar" (71). The connection between *habit* and *inhabit* is an important one for Ngo whose project is to reframe racism as something expressed habitually. Drawing on the work of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ngo (2017) argues that racism "is not simply a practice that one engages in through conscious words or actions," nor is it "merely a set of attitudes held in thoughts;" rather, racism is "more deeply embedded in our bodily habits of movement, gesture, perception, and orientation" (1). While we might have a familiar association of "habit" with repetitive, absent-minded actions, such as biting one's nails, Merleau-Ponty (2012) uses habit specifically to denote experiences one has become accustomed or "habituated" to. For example:

> If I possess the habit of driving a car, then I enter into a lane and see that "I can pass" without comparing the width of the lane to that of the fender, just as I go through a door without comparing the width of the door to that of my body. (144)

Here, habit designates the ability to move in and respond to one's surroundings with *ease*, *familiarity*, and *confidence*. When I navigate a crowd wearing a backpack, there is no need to stop and evaluate the backpack's depth or calculate the distance between the people ahead of me—I am already aware of such things. My movement is smooth and uninterrupted, and while I do not have perfect knowledge of my backpack's position at all times, I have a sense of it. The knowledge of my surroundings and the space I occupy is not precise, but it is practical, and it shapes my movements as I maneuver through the crowd. One's interactions with the world are functional, in some sense, only because of the prevalence of this practical knowledge. "Indeed think of how we often employ our hands to convey indications of size, distance, direction, or shape in imprecise yet still meaningful ways," writes Ngo (2017, 3). The prevalence of habit in everyday activities (e.g., eating, walking,

driving, speaking) suggests that habits are more than something we accumulate; they are a "fundamental and primordial feature of embodied being" (3).

In a description of bodily habituation, Merleau-Ponty (2012) bears out the connection between habit and home, writing that "[t]o habituate oneself to a hat, an automobile, or a cane is to take up residence in them, or inversely, to make them participate within the voluminosity of one's own body" (144–45). For example, after spending only a short time becoming acquainted with an unfamiliar organ, an experienced organist nevertheless "settles into the organ." Merleau-Ponty writes:

> He sits on the bench, engages with the pedals, and pulls out the stops, he sizes up the instrument with his body, he incorporates its direction and dimensions, and he settles into the organ as one settles into a house. (146)

The habit "takes up residence" in the body, and in turn, the body 'settles into' the world around it. Ngo (2017) notes the way one might familiarize oneself with a new city, "first by orienting ourselves and attending to basic needs (navigating public transport, bureaucracy, and so forth)" and then by the gathering of habits: "visiting the same *boulangerie* every morning, figuring out one's route to the metro, or finding a local hangout spot to frequent" (8). This phenomenological account of habit provides the basis for Ngo's critical analysis of racism. Once again, Ngo's claim is that racism is expressed not only through overt acts of racial violence, hatred, and discrimination but also in the kinds of subtle bodily gestures and perceptions displayed by a white man who locks his car door as a person of color passes by. Or, returning to Ngo's earlier example, the white woman who, upon seeing Yancy, clutches her handbag more closely to her side. Ngo writes that the woman's "bodily habits are racist," that they have "settled into her bodily repertoire, and are made immediately available to her upon the unanticipated interaction with a Black man" (23). Thus, Ngo suggests that as the woman accustoms herself to this gesture, she becomes "at home" in her racism.

Oddly, however, though the woman Yancy encountered may have felt "at home" or at ease with her racist habits, the very deployment of these habits indicates (and perhaps even occasions) her apparent sense of *dis-ease* with the situation. She does not appear *comfortable* or *uninhibited* in the elevator. On the contrary, Yancy (2017) writes that the woman seems desperate to flee: "she feels anxiety in the pit of her stomach," her palms become clammy, she has difficulty swallowing, and she appears nauseous (21). Feeling "threatened," she begins to tense up, contract, and pull her body (and handbag) inward while "her peripheral vision surveils [Yancy]" (27). In this instance, the bodily habits of racism described by Ngo as that which allows the white person to feel "at home" are accompanied instead by intense, negative physiological responses similar to those exhibited by Yancy, who describes feeling "trapped" and "thrown into an uncomfortable awareness of [his] body" (32).

Ngo (2017) explains the woman's behavior—"the tensing, the constricted breathing, the uneasy shifting of the body"—as a response to her inscription or projection of "Blackness" onto Yancy (16). He does nothing to provoke the woman's response; rather, she responds with fear and defensiveness to her own habitual racist perception of Black

men as threatening. I take Ngo's account of the woman's reaction to Yancy to be correct. However, I propose that Ngo's account is incomplete insofar as it only addresses those forms of habitual racism in which the person of color is typically stereotyped as a physical or *ontic* threat to the white person's wellbeing. Indeed, even in cases where a particular racial group has been explicitly stereotyped as *non-dominant* (i.e., less assertive or domineering), the group is often still perceived as ontically threatening in other ways—for example, as a shrewd economic competitor on the job market (Berdahl and Min 2012). While ontic explanations are frequently given as justification for racist behavior, such behavior is not limited to encounters that can be easily misread as ontically threatening. Instead, negative responses to racialized people appear to coalesce around violations of racial boundaries; one need only look at the negative reaction many white people have to, for example, Black men with "white" hobbies or Asian men with knowledge of domestic vs. imported beers (Phelan and Rudman 2010). Moreover, the empirical literature suggests that interactions with individuals from different racial groups are often perceived as "distressing" (Richeson and Trawalter 2005, 934), causing not only feelings of danger or worry but also "uncertainty, discomfort, [and] anxiety" (Blascovich et al. 2001, 253). Thus, in supplementing Ngo's description of *how* habitual forms of perception lead to experiences of threat, I propose an explanation for *why* white people are invested in such a process at all.

When confronted with behaviors that challenge racial boundaries, those boundaries—and, by extension, the relative status and comfort of white people—are called into question. In the next section, I argue that the white person's apparent discomfort and racist response during these encounters are actually the result of *ontological* threats not altogether dissimilar from those which Ngo, Yancy, and countless other people of color must live with on a regular basis: for a brief moment, the white person experiences herself as *unsettleable* and responds with perceptual habits that reassure her that racial boundaries are still in place. In other words, I suggest that habitual forms of racism can be re-evaluated as more than a conditioned response; they are also functionally salient, serving as a *defense mechanism* by recycling perceptual patterns that support and reinforce the race-based boundaries that white normativity depends on.

THREAT

Ngo (2017) is clear that people of color often experience an uncanniness "*particular* to racialized being" (125; emphasis in original). Yancy (2017), for example, writes that he is unsettled by the racist gestures and perceptions of a white woman who forces him to "catch a glimpse of [him]self through the white person's gaze" (xxxv). In light of this, it is important to note that in claiming that white people may experience themselves as "unsettleable," I do not mean to treat as identical the lived experiences of white and racialized groups. Nor do I mean to conflate, for example, the very real threat of police brutality faced by Black men with the imagined threat white people often report during encounters with people of color. It is nevertheless the case that white people often *perceive* interracial encounters as threatening, and it is with this in mind that I continue my inquiry

into why habitual perceptions are triggered at all, and why they are often accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and anxiety.

The divergence between white and racialized experience is made clearer by the fallout of interracial encounters. Though both white and racialized people may describe the encounter itself as "unsettling," white people most often leave these encounters having reaffirmed themselves and their habitual racism, while the racialized person may leave in a state of deep existential anguish. Indeed, empirical research has demonstrated that in cases where racial and gender boundaries are challenged, stereotype violations appear to "cast perceivers into a state of uncertainty" by "threatening [their] worldview" (Phelan and Rudman 2010, 178, 266). For example, in a study of stereotyping in the workplace, psychologists Jennifer Berdahl and Ji-A Min (2012) found that East Asians in North America were expected to behave less dominantly than their white co-workers; consequently, East Asians who challenged this expectation were more frequently the target of racial harassment than peers who "stayed in their place" (149). Philosopher David Haekwon Kim (2020) writes that nonpassive Asians may be viewed as "a provocation or unsettling" to the perceiver's "habits or habitual body," such that "the Asian person's apparent dominance troubles the perceiver's normative expectations and related comportment in the world" (297). In this moment of "uncertainty," white people have a chance to reconsider the expectations which have just been challenged; however, psychologists Julie E. Phelan and Laurie A. Rudman (2010) have found that rather than altering these expectations, white people typically respond with backlash that increases their self-esteem (266). Thus, already animated in the empirical literature is a conceptual reworking of the role habitual racism (e.g., the habitual perception of Black men as dangerous) plays as a *response* to the presence of a deeper, ontological threat.

The empirical literature illustrates that the habitual perception of people of color as dangerous, as well as the physiological symptoms already mentioned here (e.g., nausea, trembling, flushing, tensing), often arise in moments when racial boundaries have been crossed: a phenomenon some psychologists have labeled a "distinctiveness" threat. Social categorization is said to "provide us with meaningful identities, which allow us to make sense of the world" by structuring our social environment and defining our place within it (Branscombe et al. 1999, 41). However, when these categories are violated by an out-group member (i.e., a member of a social group with which one does not identify), individuals may feel that they lack a distinct social identity and respond by displaying out-group degradation in attempts to differentiate themselves (37). This is illustrated quite clearly in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Franz Fanon (2008) cites psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni's description of an argument used by "racialists" to persuade other white people of the alleged inferiority of Black people:

> "What," they say, "*if you had a daughter, do you mean to say that you would marry her to a Negro?*" I have seen people who appeared to have no racialist bias lose all critical sense when confronted with this kind of question. The reason is that such an argument disturbs certain uneasy feelings in them (more exactly, *incestuous* feelings) and they turn to racialism as a defense reaction. (142; emphasis in original)

Fanon (2008) writes that "the white man is convinced the black man is an animal" and, when confronted with evidence to the contrary, must "defend himself" by "characteriz[ing]" the unfamiliar other as dangerous, sexually promiscuous, etc. (147). Here, the "white man" is no longer "at home." He is disturbed, uneasy at the thought of allowing a person of color into his family, and he "defends" himself against this unsettling proposition with the same habitual perceptions Ngo describes: the projection of Blackness onto a person of color.

In *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, Sullivan (2015) suggests that this desire for differentiation is responsible for many of the unconscious psychological and physiological habits we hold. During a period of extreme racial segregation in 19th century America, eating with a person of color carried a taboo equivalent to interracial sex—a violation of (white) racial etiquette enforced with severe physical punishment (135). Expectations regarding mealtime etiquette were "so deeply ingrained in the habits of white lives that many white people experienced intense revulsion at the thought of eating with African Americans" (136). However, as white people were aware and accepting of the fact that African Americans prepared and served their food to them, Sullivan suggests that the "revulsion" they felt was not caused by racist stereotypes of African Americans as dirty or unclean; rather, white refusal to eat with African Americans reflected a racist rejection of people of color as a way of defining white identity. Segregation enacted in restaurants, dining cars, and kitchens was not merely geographical or political; it was also ontological. Sullivan writes, "it was a matter of what parts of the 'outside' world would be taken into white bodies to help constitute them" (137). Consequently, the many physiological habits that alert white people to the alleged danger of African Americans appear to function not as a response to physical danger, dirtiness, or other ontic features, but as a means to convince white people that they are ontologically separate from African Americans who come into contact with the boundaries of white normativity.

Further highlighting the ontological significance of habitual racism, Sullivan (2006) writes that the habits which enforce racial boundaries often begin developing at a young age as children adopt signifiers unconsciously displayed by their parents during tense or racially charged situations:

> Along with timbre of voice—itself a bodily effect—it is the comportment of adults' faces, hands, and feet that communicate to the children. A tensely pursed mouth, an anxiously tapping foot, a worried wrung hand convey the gravity of their family's world to [children] even though they do not fully know why the situation is grave and cannot understand the words used by the adults to discuss it. (66)

These perceptual and physiological responses are then taken up by children who use them to read and respond to situations in their own lives. For example, Sullivan writes of the "enigmatic messages" about race that were relayed to her as a child by the "distasteful hiss" in her grandmother's voice as she pronounced the word "Mexican" (69). Similarly,

she describes an olfactory association she developed between cumin—a spice often used in Mexican and Tex-Mex food—and negative stereotypes about Mexican-Americans. Sullivan (2006) writes that her negative reaction to the smell of cumin involved a racist process by which the spice was identified through its disavowal: to give up the olfactory association would be to "challenge the oppositional relationship between white and non-white people that helps guarantee [her] whiteness." In this way, unconscious habits appear to "protect [her] white privileged sense of self" (68). Indeed, to give up such habits would be to leave oneself open to a Heideggerian anxiety during which "everyday familiarity collapses" (Heidegger 1962, 233). The examples we have encountered so far suggest that, in order to prevent this anxiety, the white person maintains a range of habitual responses waiting to be deployed. Heidegger (1962) writes that when faced with anxiety-producing unfamiliarity, "we flee [back] *into* the 'at home' of publicness, we flee *in the face of* the 'not-at-home'; that is, we flee in the face of the uncanniness" because it "is a threat to [our] everyday lostness in the 'they'" (234; emphasis in original). I suggest that by exercising the racist habits which help constitute this existential home, white people (mis)perceive *ontological* threats to their "worldview"—e.g., a "bookish" Black student or a masculine gay man (Schimel et al. 1999)—as *ontically* threatening so as to avoid the kind of work and existential anguish that altering one's normative expectations would require.

This phenomenon is illustrated perhaps most clearly in Gayle Salamon's (2018) *The Life and Death of Latisha King*. In the next section, I turn to Salamon's work, which not only provides a useful case study of the unsettleable nature of one's familiar understanding of the world but also demonstrates the applications of this concept beyond racism.

SHOCK

On February 12, 2008, Larry King was shot by Brandon McInerney, a fellow student at E. O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, California. Brandon shot Larry twice in the back of the head at point-blank range with a handgun, one of several kept in the family home. Larry died in the hospital the next day.

– Gayle Salamon, *The Life and Death of Latisha King*

Larry King was a fifteen-year-old male mixed-race student who identified as Black and had decided to go by the name "Latisha" only ten days before being murdered by Brandon McInerney. When asked if he had any doubts about his decision to shoot Latisha, Brandon told Dr. Donald Hoagland—a psychologist called as an expert witness by the defense during Brandon's trial—that he was certain of his decision when he heard that Larry had changed his name. When asked, "What was so disturbing about that name change?" Brandon said, "It was so shocking and disgusting that he would do that" (Salamon 2018, 6). According to Brandon, the inciting incident was when Latisha called him "baby" one day as they passed each other in the hall. "I have never been disrespected like that," he said (58). When asked

why such a seemingly harmless comment would lead Brandon to react violently, Hoagland responded:

> There are multiple things. One was that this boy who was dressing as a woman and secondarily who was gay . . . was coming up and saying these kinds of provocative things to him in front of many other people. (Salamon 2018, 59)

"I knew he was gay," Brandon said, "but he took it to a whole other level. What the hell, high heels and makeup and hairdo? It was surprising and disgusting" (59).

The signs of revulsion in Brandon's answer to Hoagland are demonstrative of the "gay panic" defense mounted by Brandon's lawyers. Salamon writes that the defense showed no evidence of any explicit sexual aggression from Latisha but instead relied on a "submerged logic in which no sexual provocation was required to provide such a panic *because Larry's feminine gender was already a panic-inducing provocation*" (5; emphasis in original). The defense claimed that "Larry's" dressing, sounding, and walking "like a girl" was "provocative" and tantamount to harassment of those around him (31–36). When the prosecution asked Hoagland if he spoke to Brandon about why he found Latisha's comportment so disgusting, he responded: "Yes. He said that it was such a disruption of what he expected from a male that simply seeing [Latisha] was upsetting and disturbing" (59).

Present in this example are the same fantasies of aggression that Ngo (2017) describes. Though Latisha never levied any physical threat against Brandon, aggression was still projected onto Latisha, and her "harassment" was used as justification for the transphobic and racist violence she endured. Latisha's case is useful insofar as it highlights the real source of animosity felt by her classmates and teachers: her "disruption" of the status quo. The testimony suggests that there was, in fact, no need for an inciting incident because the mere presence of Latisha, her particular way of Being-in-the-world, was considered threatening. Salamon (2018) writes that Brandon was "shocked" by Latisha, who broke his "representational frame" and challenged him to shift his normative expectations—his "habits of seeing, [and] ways of hearing" (71, 65, 64). Salamon writes that such disruptions produce a "jarring and unexpected shift" that may prompt a "reconstitution of meaning" (65). But rather than take this opportunity to reflect on the normative expectations which give them comfort, Latisha's teachers and classmates responded with revulsion, anger, and fantasies of aggression. Salamon writes:

> It is the feeling of having our habitual and familiar experience of the world suddenly snapped. This is how many of the teachers at E. O. Green Junior High described their experiences with Latisha. In her appearance, her mannerisms, her comportment, she was a radical affront to their assessment of how a boy should look and behave, and also of what constituted a girl.

The sound of her high heels clicking on the hallway floor as she walked to class "occasioned a break in the familiar everydayness of the school" (66). In one instance, a teacher, Debi

Goldstein, was asked if the way Latisha dressed was a disruption. "Yes, it was," Goldstein said. "He went too far" (154). But, as Salamon notes, Goldstein did not single out any one element of Latisha's attire or behavior; rather, she was distressed by "the general gestalt of her gender presentation" (155). Moreover, Salamon reports that "Latisha's name was almost never uttered, not at the school, not during the trial" (64). It would seem that merely mentioning the feminine name in reference to a male body was too uncomfortable for the people around her. The name did too much to counter their familiar understanding of the world; it produced too strong a shock to their existential home. Latisha's classmates and teachers found her very existence unsettling.

DEFAMILIARIZATION

What does it mean when one group's "ease" requires the permanent unsettledness of those it deems other? My aim has been to draw attention to the role habitual racism plays as a response to the ontologically unsettling nature of interracial encounters—specifically, the use and maintenance of perceptual and physiological habits as a defense against racial "threats" to white normativity. Unsettling encounters highlight the challenges facing those who wish to combat habitual forms of racism, further supporting Ngo's (2017) claim that there are those among us who are "*too much* at-ease" or "too much at-home" (108; emphasis in original). As Heidegger (1996) clarifies, the anxiety that is so fiercely avoided (by white people) via defensive perceptual and physiological habits is not necessarily negative.[3] The uncanniness that characterizes anxiety represents, for Heidegger, an authentic mode of Being in which the individual, who is typically concealed from herself while absorbed in her everydayness is, through anxiety, disclosed to herself: her taken-for-granted understanding of the world is made available for re-evaluation (74). This openness to rethinking one's normative expectations has been a distinctive feature of the call to curb individual and interpersonal forms of racism. For example, Sullivan (2004) writes in "White World-Traveling" that white people need to accept that there are spaces where they do not belong despite the sense of dis-ease this idea tends to produce in them (303). Still others have suggested various forms of "defamiliarization"—by way of speculative fiction, cross-cultural comparisons, and "empathic unsettlement"—in the hope that such methods will encourage readers to question racial, gender, and other social boundaries (Schalk 2018; Shuman 2011; Marcus and Fischer 1999). In a letter titled "Dear White America," Yancy (2015) asked his readers not to "seek shelter from your own racism" or "hide from your responsibility," but to "practice being vulnerable." More specifically, Yancy asked his white readers to open themselves up to the "pain" of anxiety: "I'm asking you to tarry, to linger, with the ways in which you perpetuate a racist society, the ways in which you are racist." The harassment and threats of violence Yancy received in response suggest that

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[3] Heidegger (1996) writes: "Yet even though we are making an attempt to grasp the uncanny more decisively as the unhomely, we may still easily fall prey to the danger of thinking this essential trait of human beings in a merely negative way, in accordance with the sound of the word: mere not-being— namely not being within the homely, a mere departing and breaking free from the homely" (74).

even the mere request to reconsider one's standing in the world is too unsettling for many white people.

It should be noted that while the habitual forms of racism discussed here may have a co-constitutive relationship with the institutional and ideological structures that enforce racial boundaries, these systemic factors are not reducible to racism at the local, individual level and must be addressed in their own right. Nevertheless, habitual racism reframed as a defensive measure working to construct fantasies of aggression during interracial encounters demonstrates a particular obstacle to localized progress and deserves further exploration. If phenomenological boundaries of race are to be dismantled, it will require that white people be willing to engaged in the difficult work and existential anguish that altering the conditions of one's live experience often necessitates.

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