

Shannon Winnubst

Way Too Cool: Selling Out Race and Ethics

New York: Columbia University Press, 2015 (ISBN 978-0-231-17295-0)

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In *Way Too Cool: Selling Out Race and Ethics*, Shannon Winnubst dwells in the disorienting space between a relentless neoliberal claim to celebrate diversity and the ongoing persistence of xenophobic violence. Although neoliberalism is often understood as a set of economic and political policies increasingly implemented toward the end of the twentieth century (for example, free trade, deregulation, privatization, and so on), *Way Too Cool* argues that these policies have also been accompanied by broad changes in how we think and feel—especially about difference. To trace the ethical contours of these transformations, Winnubst uses the trope of coolness. Coolness was once associated with post-WWII black resistance to white supremacy in the US, but under conditions of neoliberalism it is regularly emptied of these historical inflections. By tracing the development of coolness, Winnubst is able to theorize a shift from the experience of social difference as a "historical repository of xenophobia" to interchangeable, "hollowed out," cool units that facilitate increased modes of stimulation for the neoliberal subject (105). In the absence of a nuanced account of this shift, we are often left using language for social difference that is anachronistic at best. *Way Too Cool* offers an ethical engagement with difference, especially race, that takes neoliberalism seriously. The result is a provocative and field-changing book that should be read by anyone interested in using the tools of theory to think both imaginatively and ethically about the contemporary moment.

Way Too Cool begins by arguing for a move away from understanding neoliberalism as an ideology. Winnubst contends in particular that frameworks of ideology and interpellation require forms of symbolic authority that no longer capture how neoliberal rationalities function. Through a close reading of Michel Foucault's 1979 lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, chapter 1 sets the stage for this nonideological reading of neoliberalism. Acknowledging that the claim that neoliberalism has turned us into enterprising entrepreneurs has become somewhat of a "banal truism" that "seems to roll off our tongues," Winnubst nevertheless seeks to "reignite some of the awe in which Foucault held this transformation in subject formation" (28). The chapter sets up many of the Foucauldian moves (from citizen to entrepreneur, contract to market, and so on) that underlie the rest of the book. (Readers will be glad to know that the chapter includes a chart that maps these categorical shifts.) Importantly, Winnubst closes with a meditation on the need to respond ethically, not just economically or politically, to these transformations of the contemporary subject.

In chapter 2, Winnubst continues to move beyond frameworks of ideology and interpellation through a reading of Louis Althusser's classic essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." As an account of how ideology becomes internalized, Althusserian interpellation

has been enormously influential both as a supplement to Marx and as an element in theories of race, gender, and sexuality. After analyzing its influence in the work of Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*) and José Esteban Muñoz (*Disidentifications*), Winnubst questions whether the project of destabilizing the subject initiated in different ways by these "brilliant, incisive, and creative" writers is too significantly entrenched in "classical liberalism and the general schema of Enlightenment that critical theory gives us" (62). Continuing the argument that social authority no longer works in the same way, Winnubst traces a move from the internalization of interpellation by the liberal subject to an externalized, self-fashioning, interest-driven neoliberal subject.

To further illuminate the limits of interpellation, Winnubst analyzes the Lacanian influence on Althusser's accounts of social authority. Setting up the following chapters, Winnubst notes that whereas Althusser "emphasizes the symbolic and notes the imaginary," the Lacanian real never makes an appearance (63). Winnubst sees in this omission one of the most significant restrictions of the framework of interpellation. Unexpectedly, however, she then pairs this observation with the ongoing *relevance* of the framework of interpellation. In other words, although much of the chapter is devoted to what Jodi Dean calls the "decline of symbolic efficiency" (64) (or clear models of social authority) in neoliberalism, Winnubst acknowledges that there are places where these frameworks still apply: for example, "the role of state force nonetheless continues to regulate--indeed, to criminalize, imprison, and kill--a racially selected portion of the US population" (72). Pairing these insights, she closes the chapter with a final provocation: race (as the real, and as glimpsed in ongoing historical patterns of racialization through examples such as the carceral state) serves as a limit to the neoliberal machine.

To elaborate this reading of race as the real, chapter 3 draws explicitly on the Lacanian lexicon to analyze neoliberal fantasies such as that of instant wealth. Here, Winnubst develops the argument that it is cathexis (not interpellation) and the drive (not desire) that help us make sense of neoliberal subject-formation (and its attendant fantasies). The drive allows us to theorize subjectivity as caught in endless repetitions, rather than aiming at any object in particular. Cathexis gives us language beyond the internalization of ideology to think about how we attach to individual and social proclivities. Throughout, Winnubst explores how the fantasies of liberalism (tolerance and neutrality) no longer fully capture neoliberal demands on subjectivity. Although social difference in liberalism is at least acknowledged as a marker of historical xenophobia (however disavowed through values of neutrality), under conditions of neoliberalism it becomes at least potentially aestheticized and interchangeable. To put it simply: rather than being xenophobic, we are now expected to be cool.

Having developed this Foucauldian and psychoanalytic reading of neoliberalism, chapters 4 and 5 turn more directly to gender and race. Winnubst argues that the category of gender becomes a primary vehicle for the neoliberal aestheticizing of difference and evacuation of historical weight. When attempts are made to aestheticize race, however, the formalization of social difference into exchangeable, consumable units often fails. Winnubst turns to Butler's *Gender Trouble* to make the case for this use of gender. Historicizing this foundational text in queer and feminist theory, she argues, allows us to see how its emphasis on nonconformity exemplifies (often "against Judith Butler's screams of protest" [126]) the changes underway in neoliberalism. By way of explication, she then turns to a second example: metrosexuality. As a symbol of the

"making cool" of effeminate masculinity that emerged in the early 2000s, the metrosexual possesses "an unabashed narcissism and the drive to spend and consume as recklessly as necessary to feed the image" (128). Long proclaimed dead by popular culture, the metrosexual as "transitional phenomenon" nevertheless feeds Winnubst's suspicion about how gender has become a crucial part of the neoliberal, self-fashioning playground. The metrosexual also symbolizes the possible use of "gender-as-consumerism" to alleviate anxiety about sexuality and further minimize the role of class (129). As a result, "the connection of gender to long-standing structures of sexism, heterosexism, and even white supremacy is simply lost" (126).

Following this argument about gender, chapter 5 makes the explicit case that race functions as the Lacanian real, or as a limit to the neoliberal decline of the symbolic and mandate to flourish in the imaginary. Following the work in chapter 3 on the turn from liberal desire to the neoliberal drive, this chapter shows how the drive ("the circuit in which neoliberal subjects of interests endlessly [and quite happily] loop") is both sexualized and racialized. In the Lacanian lexicon, especially when routed through queer theory, both sexuality and the embodied drive bring us into contact with the real or with what cannot be folded neatly into cultural signification. By merging this work with queer of color critique's insistence that sexuality is always racialized and race is always sexualized, Winnubst does queer of color critique in an ontological register that is attentive to the complex embodiment of race.

In the final chapter, chapter 6, Winnubst returns to the question of ethics. Beautifully titled "Stop Making Sense," this chapter reflects on what it means to attend to race and racism as "powerful forces that ontologically refuse the reduction to historical categories of identity--or remedies cast purely in their terms" (143). Acknowledging the dangers of such an approach, Winnubst nevertheless explicitly argues for a radically anti-identitarian reading of race. Such a reading situates race in its "endemic relation to the destabilizing, inchoate dynamics of sexuality" (175). This is a richly layered, generative chapter that explores the specifically ethical problems sparked by contemporary anxiety about race in the US. These problems are exacerbated by a reduction of ethical values into the "neoliberal barometer of success" and "politico-economic rationalities" (182). By contrast, the ethical is aligned here with that "sprawling and shattering mess of violence, suffering, anguish, horror and also joy" that "may harbor sufficient force to rip through the aestheticizing social dynamics of neoliberal cultures" (190). It is that which resists both erasure in the imaginary and recuperation through the symbolic. Emphasizing that anxiety signals the real in a Lacanian sense, or a moment when "all words cease and all categories fail" (178), Winnubst speculates that taking seriously how and why one cannot simply "speak" these experiences of anxiety gives us some idea of what is involved in an ethics of the real.

Given the theoretical apparatus of *Way Too Cool*, and its commitment to abstract thinking and close reading (14, 21), this final call to "stop making sense" is intriguing to say the least. What resources do we find in affective and aesthetic responses to the problems diagnosed across these pages? Considering how often aesthetics and affect become aligned with neoliberalism in Winnubst's analysis (for example, the aestheticizing of difference), it would be compelling to explore further the resistant potential of both for this ethics that is "more visceral than intellectual" (189), reconfigures unconscious bodily habits, involves "[falling] silent" (195), and refuses narratives of wholeness and recuperation. In this regard, I am also thinking about the "interludes of cool" (spanning such figures as Snoopy, John Lennon, and Miles Davis)

incorporated throughout the book. Written in a different voice than the main chapters, these epigraphs capture fragments of the shifting history of coolness across the last sixty years in the United States (21). They also mark the kind of experimental work that might be required to "stir social cathexes" to coolness. The need to continue dwelling in these interludes, or in the work of artists like Kehinde Wiley (Interlude 5), is sharpened by Winnubst's concluding note of caution about how the tools of clarification and sense-making are often deployed in ways that further disavow these forces of the real.

In this vein of resisting sense-making, the psychoanalytic reading of racialization is one of the most significant contributions of the book. This reading is especially remarkable for how it merges queer and psychoanalytic theory's anti-identitarian account of sexuality with queer of color critique's insistence that sexuality is always racialized. Considering the book's historical focus on the twentieth- and twenty-first-century US, with some (European) expansion through Foucault into the eighteenth century, I would be excited to see this reading of race as the real developed from within a longer historical perspective. In particular, it would be compelling to route this argument through decolonial thought, especially in its feminist iterations that examine gender as a place where colonialism continues to shape the racialized historical ontology of the US. The insights of transgender studies might also be fruitfully brought to bear on the relation between gender and race in neoliberal cultures. The pairing of trans experience (instead of metrosexuality) with the theory of performativity would complicate in interesting ways the account of a neoliberal embrace of gender beginning in the late twentieth century. The state use of gender today (for example, identity documents, sex-segregated institutions, and so on) and high rates of violence against trans people should be considered alongside this book's compelling argument about how gender becomes a "neoliberal playground." In other words, given the argument of chapter 4 that gender serves as a neoliberal playground, how might a sustained focus on both colonialism and trans experience expand our sense of the racialized uses of gender today?

The many questions and projects sure to be inspired by this book are a testament to its richly layered and original provocations. Winnubst's reworking of longstanding theories of social difference will be of interest to a wide range of scholars seeking to understand the shifting cultural landscape. The book would also work well in courses on social and political theory. The overview of neoliberalism through the lens of ethics in chapter 1 and the exegetical work on psychoanalytic frameworks in chapter 3 are both excellent resources for courses on related topics. Chapters 4 and 5, on gender and race respectively, will be of particular interest to feminist philosophers seeking to situate canonical texts on these topics (for example, Butler) in contemporary conversations. The examples of metrosexuality, performativity, same-sex marriage, and the prison system in these two chapters alone would provide good material for course discussions. In sum, *Way Too Cool* offers a powerful map for an ethics of social difference--and in particular, of race--that genuinely wrestles with the complex changes in subject-formation and sense-making instigated by neoliberalism. This is an account to be reckoned with.