

George Yancy, *Backlash: What Happens
When We Talk Honestly About
Racism in America*

London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, 147 pp.
ISBN: 978-1538104057

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GEORGE YANCY'S *BACKLASH* is a book about American racism. It is one black, male philosopher's recounting of what happened to him when he wrote an article for the *New York Times*' philosophy blog, "The Stone." The article took the form of an open letter to "white America" informing them that they are all racists. In the letter, Yancy describes the delivery of this information to "white America" as a "gift" and asks for "love" in return. In *Backlash*, Yancy explains that the response he expected to his letter (in addition to "love") was an increased number of white allies. However, the response he actually did receive was of quite a different nature, consisting, at least in part, of a deluge of racially infused hate mail in which he was repeatedly called the n-word, in which his academic and professional credentials, intelligence, and character were repeatedly questioned, in which he himself was called a racist (i.e., he was accused of being guilty of so-called reverse racism), and in which he was repeatedly threatened with bodily harm and even death. So much for love. *Backlash* takes the reader on a journey from the letter, to its aftermath, and then to Yancy's attempt to understand and process that aftermath. The book has some structural challenges, but it ultimately succeeds as a powerful phenomenological account of what

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1 racism (still) looks (and feels) like in *The Land of the Free*. In this review,
2 I will first summarize the contents of the book. Next, I will identify and
3 discuss the key structural challenge I think the book faces. After that, I will
4 describe the book's phenomenological and emotional power, followed by
5 concluding remarks.

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9 The book opens with a foreword by Cornel West, in which West honors Yancy
10 by comparing him to the great James Baldwin in the sense that both use tough
11 love (code for straight talk) to "call for an end to white innocence" (vii). West's
12 critique of the book, however, is that it does not do justice to "white maturity"
13 (viii) or "white courage" (ibid.), nor to "a long yet too thin tradition of white
14 radicals who, like Yancy, risk their lives and careers for truth and justice" (ibid.).

15 In the introduction, Yancy shares with the reader the personal trauma he
16 experienced from receiving the racist hate mail. It begins with a quote from
17 one of the hate messages calling Yancy the n-word over and over and over, and
18 characterizes the messages as evidencing the "truth" of white supremacy in
19 America (also referred to as "white racist America").

20 The first formal chapter repeats the *New York Times* letter in full. Highlights
21 are as follows. The letter is addressed, "Dear White America," asks "white
22 America" to "listen with love" to what Yancy calls a "gift" to "white America,"
23 asks "white America" to "try to listen" and to "practice being silent," and then
24 proceeds to model for "white America" how it should react to what he is about
25 to say through describing a sexism he recently found in himself, to which Yancy
26 admits, and that he is actively trying to change.

27 The second chapter reproduces much of the hate mail Yancy received, as
28 well as the posts on white supremacist websites that were made in response
29 to the letter. In this chapter, Yancy meticulously examines the content of
30 the messages, finding inconsistency, hypocrisy, and irrationality throughout
31 the messages and posts. Yancy concludes that "white America's" insistence that
32 Yancy is an n-word is more reflective of "white America" than of Yancy.

33 In the third chapter, Yancy grapples more deeply with the hypocrisy he sees
34 in white rejection of the message he sought to deliver in the letter. He calls for
35 "mutual understanding" and "mutual vulnerability," emphasizes his message
36 that black suffering is founded upon white comfort and cowardice, equates his
37 message with "truth," and seasons his message with a desire that all (including
38 both himself and "white America") "love with audacity."

39 The fourth chapter consists of Yancy's explaining to the "white reader" that
40 he understands that white people must "risk the white self" in order to hear his
41 message (and in the process confront their role in white supremacy), but, Yancy
42 urges, the white reader should "accept the gift" nonetheless, as well as respond

with an “act of love” (presumably, in the interest of dismantling structural racism). Yancy also reveals in this chapter that, in addition to the hate mail and posts on white supremacist websites, there were also reactions of a different sort from white people to his “gift.” At the end of this final chapter of the book, Yancy reveals these responses. In these messages, (self-identified) white people acknowledge their own racism, characterize Yancy’s original letter as, among other things, “beautiful,” and vow to confront their own white privilege in the future.

The book faces the structural challenge of confusion as to audience. Yancy spends a lot of time in *Backlash* explaining to the “white reader” what he meant in the *New York Times* letter. At times, he seems to be speaking to the writers of the racist hate mail, and at other times, he seems to be speaking to the white people who did not write the hate mail, but whom Yancy wants to convince are nonetheless part of the problem. When speaking to the hate mail writers, Yancy seems to think his audience misunderstood him. Yancy explains several times that he was not saying in the letter that *every* white American regularly engages in flagrant acts of racially motivated “meanness.” No. Instead, he was making a claim about the structural and systemic racism that pervades American society. He was saying that in virtue of being white, a given white person benefits from white privilege, and to the extent that said white person does nothing to reject or dismantle the white privilege from which he or she benefits, he or she perpetuates white supremacy, he or she is an instrument of racialized oppression.

Yancy’s presumption seems to be that if the white supremacists who sent him the hate mail had only understood his message, they would not have responded as they did. They would have broken through their denial and suddenly accepted his gift and made a vow to reject their white privilege, in the same way that he rejected his own sexism once he came to grips with it. However, this presumption seems unwarranted. The kind of person who would send racially motivated hate messages to college professors is not the kind of person who is likely to be interested in listening to reason, to accepting gifts from those they call “niggers,” or to give “love” to any such persons. Instead, it seems more probable that the hate mail senders were not listening the first time, and they are likely not listening now, that is, if they even bother to take the time to read the book (which is, of course, unlikely).

For those unfamiliar with Yancy’s work, it is important to note here that Yancy is an accomplished and prominent American philosopher who has written countless monographs, edited countless anthologies and essay collections, is the editor of an interdisciplinary book series at Lexington Books on philosophy and race, and is widely known in the community of professional philosophers as someone who grapples honestly and tirelessly with the problem of American

1 racism in his work. In other words, Yancy spoke with authority when he called
2 out “white America” in the letter, having studied the phenomenon of American
3 racism for many years. It is also the case, however, that, in virtue of these
4 same credentials, Yancy arguably should have known that racist hate mail
5 (and worse) was one likely result of calling out “white America” on its racism.
6 Speaking truth to power (or in this case, speaking the truth about American
7 racism to white Americans) is a subject of continued philosophical (and other
8 academic) inquiry for the reason that it is a persistent and intractable problem
9 in the political theory of the oppressed. In simple terms, it never works. The
10 powerful are not listening. The powerful will retaliate.

11 So, given the low success rate of speaking truth to power, and given “white
12 racist America’s” poor track record of acknowledging its own racism, and given
13 the fact that Yancy is, and was at the time he wrote the letter, certainly aware
14 of both, one might wonder to whom the book is directed. As mentioned briefly
15 above, the white supremacists who wrote the hate mail are almost certainly not
16 reading the book. Yet, much of *Backlash* is directed to them. In the book, Yancy
17 attempts to provide the would-be white supremacist convert to non-racism
18 a selfless and altruistic motivation for change. He appeals to their sense of
19 fairness and justice, and to their sense of decency. But, do the writers of racist
20 hate mail *have* a sense of decency to which one might appeal? That is, do
21 white supremacists have a sense of decency? In my experience, the answer to
22 this question is no.

23 Accordingly, it is in these moments (when making appeals to human
24 decency), among others, that Yancy seems to be speaking to those white people
25 who did not send the hate mail, that is, to the kind of white people who
26 consider themselves non-racists or “anti-racists.” If this is the case, then surely
27 Yancy has considered that this crowd may need no more convincing than is
28 contained in the *New York Times* letter. As Yancy himself evidences in the final
29 pages of the book, after all, there were many (self-identified) white people who
30 accepted his gift and vowed to change. So, if the audience is neither the white
31 supremacists who sent the hate mail nor the sort of white people who accepted
32 Yancy’s gift, the reader is left wondering who the intended audience is.

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36 Perhaps there is no intended audience for the book. Perhaps the book is not
37 meant to convince any white people of anything, but is intended to have more
38 of a rhetorical effect, perhaps even a profound one. That is, perhaps the book
39 is an effort on Yancy’s part to articulate his personal experience with American
40 racism, with no thought as to an actual audience, but with more of a focus on
41 laying bare the truth of that experience. The question is, *Toward what end?*
42 That is, why did Yancy write the book? If the book is not a continuation of the

(*New York Times*) letter directed to all or some aspect of “white America,” as the book purports to be, then what is it?

Perhaps one answer to this question emerges when *Backlash* is placed within the context of Yancy’s greater body of work. When viewed in dialogue with Yancy’s other work in phenomenology, *Backlash* can be understood as another installment in Yancy’s existing corpus, which consists in large part of Yancy’s phenomenological engagement with American racism. For example, in his book *Look, A White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, Yancy writes about white people “tarrying” with their racism long enough to see their complicity in it, rather than making excuses for unreflectively accepting the benefits with which white privilege provides them in American society. *Look, A White!* is about what it means for a black person to be the object of what is known as the “white gaze.”¹ Similarly, in *Backlash*, Yancy asks white Americans to “tarry” for a while and linger with the reality of how blacks are so often processed and seen by white people (as objects, as the Platonic form of the “The Nigger”) so that whites can have an opportunity to experience by proxy their complicity in the subjugation and degradation of persons of color in American society, by seeing racism at work through Yancy’s eyes.

A key component of Yancy’s request for “tarrying” in both cases, however, is a presumption on his part, I think, of a willingness on the part of (white) people to be introspective about their own racism. Recent scholarship on implicit bias has suggested that being introspective or “looking within” is not likely to be a successful path to a confrontation with and/or acceptance of one’s own racism, especially for persons who consider themselves particularly “objective” and “rational.” As the primary writers of mainstream history books, and canonical texts in Western philosophy, Yancy’s white people (at large) certainly qualify as members of that group. Nora Berenstain has recently (and eloquently) elaborated upon this theme (Berenstain 2018). In “Implicit Bias and the Idealized Rational Self,” Berenstain suggests that the “idealized rational self” that is at the core of the self-concept of most (white) philosophers actually *inhibits* those same philosophers from confronting and grappling with their own implicit bias, perhaps explaining why the discipline of philosophy has such a poor record, in comparison with the other humanities, of grappling with its (severe) diversity challenges.

Read in dialogue with this scholarship, Yancy’s phenomenological reduction of his encounter with the racist hate mail he received after the publication of his *New York Times* letter and his frustration with what he sees as “white America’s” failure to confront its own racism become sharpened and more intense. If *Backlash* is examined through this more phenomenological lens, in other words, and in dialogue with recent scholarship in implicit bias, it begins to rise to the level of masterpiece. What will it take for “white America” to honestly grapple with its own racism, *Backlash* seems to ask, to anyone who happens

1 to be reading it. Here in the twenty-first century, 153 years after the end of
2 chattel slavery, sixty-four years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, fifty-five
3 years after Martin Luther King's March on Washington where he gave his
4 "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, fifty-four years
5 after the enactment of the Civil Rights Act, why are black people still being
6 called niggers in the United States of America, *Backlash* seems to ask to no
7 one in particular and also to everyone on earth, and what is to be done about
8 this sad state of affairs?

9 Another possible answer to the question, *Toward what end?* might lie in
10 the raw emotion that permeates the book. *Backlash* is no arms-length treatise
11 in the philosophy of race. It is a personal, emotional account of what it
12 feels like for a black person to live in a racist society. More specifically, it
13 is a heart-wrenching account of what it feels like to be a black person, or
14 more specifically what it feels like to be a black professional philosopher, in
15 American society. One of the best ways to convey this information, as *Backlash*
16 evidences, I think, is through emotion rather than through reason, through
17 an attempt to generate compassion. This is what I see as *Backlash's* primary
18 function.

19 My personal reaction to the book may prove insightful on this point. The
20 first time I read the book, I read it through the lens of a book reviewer. I was
21 attempting to carry out my professional responsibilities. First I read through
22 my charge as a book reviewer, then I proceeded to try to get a handle on
23 Yancy's main points and arguments, after which I attempted to assess the book
24 in terms of structure, flow, and the strength and effectiveness of the arguments.
25 The following lines emerged onto the page: "George Yancy's *Backlash* faces
26 many technical challenges. These include confusion as to intended audience, a
27 stated purpose that seems artificially naïve, and a lack of reasoned arguments."
28 I then set my reviewing task aside for a few days. On the fourth day, I decided
29 to go to the gym. Before I left, I downloaded a copy of the audiobook of
30 *Backlash* so I could "read" the book again while working out, primarily to
31 see if I missed anything. When I got to the gym, I got on the treadmill and
32 clicked "Play."

33 First, the voice of Cornel West introduced the book. West was one of my
34 beloved grandfather's heroes. I thought of my grandfather. Then George
35 Yancy's voice began to narrate the book. "'Nigger!' 'Nigger!' 'Nigger!' 'Nigger!'
36 'Nigger!' 'Nigger!'" Yancy's soft and unassuming voice read aloud. Yancy's
37 voice continued with palpable vulnerability, "There were foul and nasty voice
38 messages, sickening email messages, vulgar letters mailed to my university,
39 and comments on many conservative and white supremacist websites in which
40 I was lambasted and called everything but a child of God." I continued to listen,
41 and as I heard George Yancy's voice describe in detail the ordeal to which he
42 was subjected for simply speaking his truth about white racism in America,

I began to feel a pain in my stomach. The pain grew in intensity. I thought I might vomit. I stopped running and became completely still as Yancy's voice gave life to what had up until that point been mere words on a page, arguments to be analyzed, philosophical propositions in the void, as it were. And then I began to cry. The tears flowed down my face against my will. I cried for Yancy, I cried for all black philosophers, for all black academics. I cried for my family, for my friends, and for all racialized persons everywhere. What happened to George Yancy is not a philosophical argument to be analyzed. It is a moving and disturbing account of an encounter with the harsh reality of what it's like to be a black person in America, regardless of professional credentials, regardless of accomplishments.

While the role, the job, of a professional philosopher is to do his or her best to search for knowledge, understanding, truth, and wisdom, if we are philosophers and also black, in many white minds we are also niggers. When we speak, we can be discredited, insulted, and degraded at the whim of any (white) person in power, all of our degrees, accomplishments, and reputation rendered null and void. We are fair game for hate speech, slander, defamation, and insulting accusations of the lowest and most disgusting variety. For many white people, we represent, as Yancy artfully puts it, the Platonic form of "The Nigger." In many white eyes, we are objects rather than subjects. In their minds, we are what white people say we are, none of it good, and we are so essentially, immutably, permanently. *Backlash* places this reality front and center in such an emotionally powerful way that it cannot be denied.

After reading *Backlash*, the reader is left with the impression that while it is certainly the case that the events related happened to Yancy, it is also the case that the target of the hatred he experienced was not Yancy himself, but an "uppity nigger" who dared to tell "white America" what to do (respond to his "gift" with "love"). The anger and hostility coming from the writers of the racist hate mail, the reader understands, were not directed at George Yancy the person, but at the felt injury to the hate mail writers' sense of self-importance, privilege, and entitlement. Whiteness hates blacks who reject the white sense of racial superiority. When blacks dare to challenge whiteness on its hubris, or on its appallingly obvious hypocrisy, anger and violence often arise in the white American and all too frequently generate in him or her a need to humiliate and destroy the source of the diminished (and fragile) white sense of self. Racism is not personal, *Backlash* evidences. It is a manifestation of a deeply racist society. Yancy's *Backlash*, then, is a first-person, phenomenological account of the structural racism that permeates American society. Through its honesty and raw, emotional power, it succeeds as a classic example of the utilization

1 of phenomenological reduction to depict the brutality (and durability) of
2 American racism.

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11 *Law: A Deeper Look*. She can be reached at tbotts@csufresno.edu.

12 13 **NOTE**

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15 I. Yancy writes, “The white gaze is . . . hegemonic, historically grounded in material
16 relations of white power: it was deemed disrespectful for a black person to violate
17 the white gaze by looking directly into the eyes of someone white. The white gaze
18 is also ethically solipsistic: within it only whites have the capacity of making valid
19 moral judgments” (Yancy 2013).

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