

The Ugly Face of Whiteness in the Contemporary US – And How to Encounter It

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Abstract:

In *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America*, George Yancy, scholar of the philosophy of race, shares the racist backlash he encountered as a reaction to his open letter “Dear White America.” Besides reproducing the original letter – a decisive call for an honest contestation of white racism in the US – the volume courageously engages with the various manifestations of hate speech it elicited. Most importantly, Yancy further conceptualizes the possibility of forging a coherent antiracist white subject position which he finds exemplified in some of the positive responses to his letter.

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Abstract:

In *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America*, George Yancy, scholar of the philosophy of race, shares the racist backlash he encountered as a reaction to his open letter “Dear White America.” Besides reproducing the original letter – a decisive call for an honest contestation of white racism in the US – the volume courageously engages with the various manifestations of hate speech it elicited. Most importantly, Yancy further conceptualizes the possibility of forging a coherent antiracist white subject position which he finds exemplified in some of the positive responses to his letter.

Amidst the #MeToo debate, the second year of President Trump’s reign, and ongoing racial oppression in the US, George Yancy’s *Backlash* is a blow to the jaw, a suffering, an imposition – but an inevitable one. In a painstakingly detailed manner, George Yancy, an African American Professor of philosophy at Emory University, displays the racist backlash he has had to encounter as reaction to his letter “Dear White America,” which was published on December 24, 2015 in the *New York Times’* column, The Stone.

Consequently, the first chapter is a reprint of the original letter (p. 19-25); therein, Yancy asks white America to listen with love to his request to become “un-sutured,” meaning to openly and honestly engage in the painful process of letting go of “white innocence” (21). Within a society intrinsically built upon white supremacy, as the US is, the individual privilege afforded by whiteness comes at the cost of systemic epistemological, psychological – and physical – violence against Black bodies and bodies of color. Yancy models what he is asking of white America by acknowledging that he himself is a sexist: Within a patriarchal, sexist society, he reasons, he has been complicit in and allowed himself to be seduced by the sexual objectification and degradation of women (cf. 20-1). This

painful realization necessitates a constant struggle and self-examination in order not to give in to the temptation to wear the “mask of sexism,” but to “refuse to hide behind that mirror that lies to me about my ‘non-sexist nobility’” (p. 23). Transferring this mechanism to whiteness, Yancy proposes that his white readers engage with their own implicit racism in the same manner: “White America, are you prepared to be at war with yourself, your white identity, your white power, your white privilege? Are you prepared to show me a white self that love has unmasked? I’m asking for love in return for a gift” (ibid.).

In the book’s introduction (p. 1-19), Yancy acknowledges that although having anticipated some hostile reactions, he was stunned by the quality and quantity of hate speech directed at him; therefore, the almost unbearable second chapter, entitled “Dear [N-word] Professor” (p. 25-55) displays the racist hatred that cracked open in the aftermath of the letter’s publication [Given my subject position as a white heterosexual man and Yancy’s delineation of the original phrase’s dehumanizing impact, I choose to fall back on the term ‘the N-word’ in order not to reproduce and perpetuate the racial violence brought about by the usage of the original expression.] The chapter presents excerpts from the racializing, objectifying, sexualizing, degrading, and outright threatening responses that have reached Yancy via email, mail (some of them handwritten!), and voice messages verbatim. He then meticulously contextualizes these expressions of hate within the history of white racism in the US. By way of an example, Yancy analyzes the grotesque assumption that he had only written the letter to seduce white women (and men!) as an actualization of the theme of the “hypersexualization of the Black body” (p. 40). Consequently, “[t]he intersection of sex and race is a twisted and perverse staple within the white imaginary” (ibid.) which not only unleashed the lynching of Black male bodies and justified the rape of Black female bodies, but becomes actualized in the above mentioned assumption – in fact a projection of the white imaginary. The deconstruction of these responses is not carried out in a neutral or objective manner, as Yancy directly addresses the reader to share the terror, disgust, anger, frustration, and angst thereby inflicted upon his body and soul. The chapter closes with James Baldwin – whose deep insights into the nature of racism in the US serve as intellectual and emotional guidance for the entire book – and his crucial question: “What white people have to do is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a [N-word] in the first place” (p. 54).

The third chapter addresses the white liberal reader, who states in disgust his/her repudiation of the openly racist responses to Yancy’s letter (p. 55-95). However – and that is the crux with whiteness – Yancy powerfully demonstrates that the sympathetic white liberal is not to be released from responsibility for the white racist system. In contrast to the openly racist white acknowledging his/her racism, the “opaque white racist self” (p. 79) claims to be antiracist and denies the individual privilege afforded within and due to the underlying racialized matrix. This kind of white self equally

thrives on the embodied location of whiteness, whose racial hierarchization tends to slip conscious reflection although its logic, in turn, also organizes the white body and mind. Here again, Yancy directly challenges the sympathetic white reader: “The white self that you are [...] has already arrived too late to determine the complex and insidious ways in which white racism has become embedded within your white embodied self” (ibid.). As a consequence, the embodied whiteness of the opaque white racist self becomes invisible, unmarked, naturalized – and thereby exactly reinforces the white normative framework. Besides referring to the experience of teaching whiteness in the classroom, Yancy points to numerous powerful everyday experiences to flesh out his argument.

After the book’s tour de force, it ends on a hopeful note with the fourth chapter “Accepting the Gift” (p. 95-127). Building upon his earlier work in the field, Yancy conceives the process of un-suturing as intertwined attitude and social practice, which affords the white subject the possibility to engage with his/her racist socialization and embodiment. Whereas the prior process of suturing entails the closure, the making invulnerable and untouched of the white subject to normalize and purify whiteness (cf. p. 105), “[t]he process of un-suturing disrupts; it troubles and unsettles; it risks forms of openness or embodied gestures—un-sutured gestures that are linked to the ways in which the world reveals itself differently. Un-suturing is a form of exposure, an opening, a corporeal style and a dispositional sensibility that troubles the insularity, in this case, of the white gaze” (p. 113). The respective un-sutured responses from white readers to his letter closing the book are encouraging demonstrations that, after all, an open engagement with the intricate nature of whiteness is possible and necessary.

George Yancy’s *Backlash* enables an uncomfortable insight into the state of race relations in Trump’s America. The author counters the disclosure of incredible hate he has received in response to his call for an honest engagement with whiteness with a powerful historical and theoretical comprehension of the implicit working mechanisms and explicit manifestations of white racism. Most significantly, the volume further conceptualizes the process of un-suturing as a possible means to engage in the unfinished project of tackling white privilege and forging an antiracist white subjectivity. In equal parts contemporary document, testimony, confession, and call to action, the seminal *Backlash* is destined to join the ranks of the courageous engagements with the white racist mind created by the likes of Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Michael Eric Dyson.

German Abstract:

Die hässliche Fratze des ‚Weiß-Seins‘ in den heutigen USA – und wie ihr begegnen

In *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America* verarbeitet George Yancy, afroamerikanischer Professor für Philosophie, die rassistischen Angriffe, die ihn als Reaktion auf seinen offenen Brief „Dear White America“ ereilten. Der Band beinhaltet nicht nur den Brief – ein entschiedener Appell für eine ehrliche Auseinandersetzung mit weißem Rassismus in den USA – sondern setzt sich auch entschlossen mit den vielfältigen rassistischen Manifestationen auseinander, die er hervorgerufen hat. Darüber hinaus entwickelt Yancy theoretisch weiter, wie eine kohärente antirassistische Subjektposition aussehen könnte und wie er sie in einigen der positiven Repliken auf seinen Brief verwirklicht sieht.

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