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Book Review: *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America*

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How do we have candid, genuine dialogues about racism in America? Author George Yancy explores this very question in *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America*. If any book should be on all “anti-racist racists” reading lists, this deeply honest, powerfully written, and not overtly optimistic book (as most anti-racist ones are) should be atop that list.

In the introduction, Yancy sets the context for what drove him to write this book. On December 25, 2015, he wrote an article in The Stone of the New York Times entitled, “Dear white America” (Yancy, 2015). The article went viral and he received hundreds of emails, letters, phone messages, and hate comments on the stone page, including death threats. In response to the violence enacted upon him as a Black man for telling the truth about white racism in America, he responds by directing this book to white readers, even often saying “dear white reader,” encouraging us to recognize the ongoing dehumanization Black people in America continue to experience and our role in upholding white supremacy in this country. As conceptualized by Yancy, white racism refers to the ways white people are “linked both as beneficiary and as a co-contributor of [white] practices” (p. 75).

Chapter 1 consists of a reprinting of the letter. Yancy begins the letter by modeling the vulnerability he requests white Americans to practice by illustrating how he is implicated in sexism as a Black man, whether he tries to work towards interrogating patriarchy or not. He also indicates how his male privilege functions in harmful ways for all women, including how this gendered racism operates differently for Women of Color. He then offers a gift, a gift that many will not accept, a removal in the belief of “white innocence” and to replace this with the truth that all white people should address their own racism and the systemic nature of that racism. He asks that we truly consider our embeddedness in whiteness and how “[white people’s] comfort is linked to [Black people and People of Color’s] pain and suffering” (p. 22).

Chapter 2 paints a brief picture of “twenty-first century white terror” (p. 45) Dr. Yancy received in response to his letter, analyzing how each response deeply articulates how the white imaginary works. He is frequently referred to as the n-word and as an animal, illustrating just how non-human Black bodies are seen. There are several sexualized references, reinforcing how whites continue to

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1 As conceptualized by Yancy (2018), an anti-racist racist is a white person who knows they are racist.
hypersexualize Black men. He even illustrates how in a “white progressive” philosophy conference, that is supposed to be seen as a “safe space” his white colleagues compliment the only other Black man there for the speech Yancy gave, reducing them into one person. These various messages and actions serve to illustrate how white supremacy “maintains its hegemony through change” (p. 46).

In Chapter 3, Yancy speaks directly to whom he perceives to be the readers of this book: the white people who don’t believe they are racist. Further exploring responses he received from “Dear White America” and journal entries about how everyday racism unfolds for white students in his classroom, he thoroughly depicts that white racism is embedded in each and every white person who comes into existence in America, whether they admit to it or not. Furthermore, Yancy articulates that having Black family members, friends, and romantic partners does not absolve white people from being racist. Lastly, he further expounds on what white racism is, the violence enacted upon Black bodies caused by the white imaginary, and why white allyship is problematic.

In Chapter 4, Yancy once again calls for white people to “accept the gift” he offered in his original letter. That gift ultimately calls for “an openness on [our] part to be wounded” (p. 95). He refers to this form of opening through the concepts of suturing, unsuturing, and tarrying with whiteness and what that looks like for white people to do. Yancy warns that this openness could lead to a loss of orientation and would simultaneously help white people reach a deeper understanding of the falsehood of whiteness.

One of the most significant contributions of this book is the way Yancy forces white people to “tarry” with or engage with the feelings Yancy himself experienced through the hate mail he received. Another strength of the text is the ending of the letter itself, where Yancy asks white Americans to imagine that our own children are Black. I believe by ending the letter this way, Yancy is attempting to push white people to experience discomfort and push us to see ourselves as a part of the problem of white racism. Additionally, his deep honesty and vulnerability in regard to his own anti-sexist sexism serve as a model for white people—like me—to also unsuture and tarry. Lastly, as a white person myself, I appreciated Yancy’s challenges for readers to not jump to “solutions,” to sit in the pain, as well as the accessibility of his writing, all of which allowed me to more deeply engage with many of the topics discussed.

I recommend this book to anyone passionate about understanding the machinations of whiteness and racism in our current sociopolitical climate. I also recommend this text to those willing to be vulnerable enough to deeply examine their own white racism. Not only will “anti-racist racists” find this book impactful, but so will scholars from various fields, educators, student affairs practitioners, and others who are working to interrogate white supremacy. Yancy ultimately provides the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the various
ways in which whiteness manifests, and a call to remove this mask and push whites to consider ourselves as the race problem.

**References**
