

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

George Yancy

Cornel West, Contributor

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Searing, honest, and unflagging in its pursuit of understanding, George Yancy's *Backlash* holds a mirror up to angry commenters and white liberals alike, forcing a reckoning with shared complicity in racism.

Yancy's now-famous 2015 letter in the *New York Times* titled "Dear White America" received such an outpouring of hate-filled response that he chose to expand and explain his letter, while also taking time to address the particular kinds of insults commenters hurl at African-American intellectuals who speak up about racism.

The book includes harsh language and shocking comments from respondents to Yancy's original letter; it is a deliberately painful unveiling of the level of resentment poured out on him. This chronicle of comments is interspersed with reminders that even those who would never engage in such invectives are still benefiting from the legacy of white supremacy.

Though many wish to consider the case on American racism closed, Yancy shows that mindsets and attitudes have not changed as much as purported, even if outward actions have; silent attitudes, he points out, still create a pervasively unsafe situation for people of color.

Both "Dear White America" and this expansive response deliver a hard-to-bear message of love, showing unwavering commitment to helping "antiracist white racists" acknowledge their own positions as they work to alter racism in America.

The book's conclusion, in particular, alternates realistically between hope for the future and frustration with the present, acknowledging that change is necessary. The book is not exceptionally long, but the density of its prose makes it a slow, thoughtful, worthwhile read. Care must be taken to fully comprehend its complexities.

Backlash is a work of well-informed cultural criticism that acknowledges the real impact of racism—in particular, the costs of refusing to acknowledge racism as it stands.

LAURA LEAVITT (May/June 2018)

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