

## Newark Lessons: A Response to George Yancy's *Backlash*

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Dear George,

I hold your gift in my hands. I feel its weight. The news of the past month (July 2018) has made the gift heavier. As I write this, immigrant families seeking asylum at our nation's southern border are being separated from their children and detained in cyclone-fence cages. Last week the Supreme Court of the United States upheld the administration's decision to instate a ban on immigrants, refugees, and visa holders from five "majority Muslim" countries. Justice Kennedy has announced his retirement, and the attacks on affirmative action and reproductive health care have begun. There have been six shootings in my small Illinois community in the past month. The press names all the people involved, but photos accompany stories about Black and Brown shooters and their victims. Many white community members remark that we never had shootings until "those people from Chicago came down state after they demolished public housing up there."

You have encouraged me to return to James Baldwin's "most disagreeable mirror"—the mirror that reflects the truths about whiteness—and to tell the truths about my white woman self to the extent that this is possible. You have asked me to tarry before the mirror without blinking, looking away, or fleeing. You ask that I risk vulnerability, listen with love, and look at the parts of my white self that might cause me pain and terror. I need a tarrying point, a question to ask before the mirror, as it were, so I wonder, what does the false promise of whiteness extract from my body, soul, heart, and mind? The question is not aimed at recentering whiteness. White supremacy creates, in your words, a "relational suffering" (Yancy 2018:13). So, as I sit with your request, I keep firmly in mind the deep wounds that white supremacy continues to inflict on folks of color and how my white fears make me complicit in that suffering.

White supremacy is America's uncomfortable truth. White supremacy repackages itself from time to time—settler colonialism, Native American genocide, slavery, Jim Crow, color-blind racism, make America great again. . . . We are sadly in the midst of a “post-Obama correction,” a violent effort to put white supremacy back on track by reawakening old scripts that play on white fears about race and immigration. Familiar old tropes reappear: the melting pot is darkening, the barbarians are at our gates, they are going to consume our (white) resources, take our (white) jobs, rape our (white) women, and destroy our (white) culture. The world is on fire, but as friends and colleagues of color remind me—“Alison, for some of us the world has been on fire for a very long time. This is nothing new for us. You'll be fine.”

I want to tarry with the white fear that drives the false promise of whiteness. I'm surprised at how often I lose sight of the ugly truth that white fear damages our collective humanity in ways that are toxic to me and sometimes fatal to you. American history is the story of how the scaffolding of white supremacy was constructed and how it has violently maintained itself for over 400 years. These scripts make me angry, but what I find more disturbing is their power to ignite my own old white fears despite my constant efforts to mindfully manage these fears when they arise. Fear is an unwelcome obstacle to seeing another's humanity. I must be extremely vigilant.

I am a white woman born and raised in a white-supremacist society. My body is white, but whiteness is also *in* my body, and this is the hardest truth of all. Assessing its damage is a dangerous act. The false promise of whiteness took hold of my being at an early age. Bit by bit, day by day, I learned what Lillian Smith called “the dance that cripples the human spirit”: “step by step. . . . These ceremonials in honor of white supremacy, performed from babyhood, slip from the conscious mind down deep into muscles and glands and become difficult to tear out” (1961: 91). Your description of these steps as “the clicks that install white identities” is a helpful way for me to conceptualize how the neatly layered messages about the value of whiteness took root in my young white girl body, and what they do to me. In your words, “Not only are the white bodies that initiate the clicks performing their white identities through them; the clicks themselves install white identities, hail white identities, and solidify white identities” (Yancy 2012: 30).

When I was six years old, I sat in a room on the second floor of our rented home in West Orange, New Jersey and watched Newark burn. There were 159 race riots during that long hot summer of 1967, but I could smell the smoke and hear the sirens from this one. I remember expressing concern, as only a six-year-old can, about the citizens of Newark whose neighborhoods were burning. I remember feeling sad and frightened for the kids in Newark because I was worried that they had no homes, but my attention to their suffering was immediately redirected. I was told not to worry, this was “not our Newark.” The appropriate response to Newark was fear, not compassion. Newark was everything that whiteness was not. My childhood would continue to be heavily punctuated with cautionary tales that began or ended with

the phrase “the Negroes (or Puerto Ricans) from Newark.” *Lock the doors when you drive through Newark. The Negroes from Newark aren't trustworthy. They are not like us. They will rob you. The Negroes from Newark will destroy what we have worked so hard to make. They don't value work. The Negroes from Newark drink all day and live on welfare. They don't take care of their things.* As I grew older the lessons became more gendered. *Don't get your ears pierced you'll look like a Puerto Rican from Newark. You don't want to get pregnant or end up like those Negro and Puerto Rican prostitutes in Newark. Sometimes girls who go to Newark end up in the gutter without their underwear. Never look at or talk to the Negroes from Newark. Don't even say hello, keep walking. The Negroes and Puerto Ricans from Newark are moving to West Orange! They are getting closer!* We moved three years later.

The clicks that installed these Newark lessons remain. My white fear ambushes me even when my fears make absolutely no sense. My body can be ahead of my thoughts when it comes to race. I still feel the pull of the clicks when I drive through unfamiliar neighborhoods and my attention is drawn to the car door locks, even when I'm certain that nobody is going to run into traffic and attack me. I feel their draw when I realize that the summer shootings are all within a mile from my home. I receive a well-timed direct mailing from a security service and catch myself wondering if this is something I should consider. I do this despite knowing that the crime in my neighborhood is committed almost exclusively by white boys breaking into cars and garages at night. I feel the clicks when folks of color, wearing their fast-food uniforms, walk through the neighborhood, even though I know they are on their way to work.

A deeply tragic sadness occurs when the Newark lessons are triggered by friends, colleagues, and neighbors. I feel their pull when I see a dark face at my front door one evening and my body jumps. It's my neighbor with some mail. He notices my body jump. I notice that he notices. We are doing the dance that cripples the human spirit. It's not good for either of us. I have wounded a good friend and I feel ashamed of my reaction. But, I remind myself of James Baldwin's words about the great force of history, that “comes from that fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is *present* in all that we do” (1985: 410). I find some comfort in his words. It's not just in *my* white body that jumps, collective white fear is centuries deep, so it predates my Newark lessons. This is normal. I'm not alone. Lots of white folks react this way. Then, I start to notice communities of fearful white people and imagine their startled bodies jumping in response to the unexpected presence of Black and Brown faces. My comfort vanishes. It is replaced by a most terrifying realization—that the fears driving these repeated collective white jumpings have cost Black folks their lives, restricted their public movement, created stressors that weather and exhaust Black bodies, cause pregnant Black bodies to give birth prematurely or miscarry, and make parents fear for their children's lives. This is *not* normal. White supremacy is terrorism. I see what it does to you, my neighbors, my colleagues, and my friends, and I'm begin-

ning to understand what it does to me. As a friend once remarked, “We’ve always known that white supremacy is killing us. That’s a no-brainer for Black people. It’s killing you too, you just don’t realize it. That’s the hidden cost of white privilege.”

The false promise of whiteness requires that white folks live in a constant state of fear—a fear of harm, a fear of not being safe, a fear of losing those resources and social goods to which we feel entitled. Our constant white vigilance of Black and Brown bodies creates habits that prompt us to move through the world in a near constant state of anxiety that throws off our moral compasses. We lose our ability to make accurate moral judgements about the behaviors, actions, words, and intentions of people of color. White supremacy teaches white folks to see the world inaccurately, while assuring us that our shared misperceptions are accurate. So, when Lolade Siyonbola took a nap in the common room of her dorm at Yale, white eyes were literally unable to see a graduate student taking a rest between her assignments. *What’s she doing here? Is she homeless? . . . Better call campus security. What did she expect?* Last week a white woman called the police to report an eight-year-old Black girl selling bottled water in front of her home. *She was selling water without a permit; what did she expect?* Her actions were criminalized in a way that any white kids’ lemonade stands would never be. White kids are entrepreneurs. Black kids are unlawful peddlers. Over the fourth of July holiday a white man in North Carolina called the police on a Black woman and her family who were swimming at the neighborhood pool. *What did they expect?* White families are club members. Black families are gate crashers. But these are not just mistakes, they are fear-driven, historically rooted, patterned responses that put folks of color in harm’s way. White fear cultivates in white folks a high tolerance for the cruelty, violence, and suffering of folks of color, as suffering that feels justified on the grounds that we believe it keeps us safe and protects our entitlements. It does not. Our sense of white entitlement and safety makes us arrogant and possessive. Our desire to hold on tightly to social goods and opportunities makes us stingy, greedy, heartless, and competitive. So, white fear erodes our humanity.

I have to talk a ton of sense into myself every time the Newark lessons kick in. I remind myself gently to tarry with that history deep within me and to consider what it does to you, to me, and to us. We never really tarry alone. I realize that your request places an unequal burden on each of us: speaking truth about whiteness *to* power comes at an exponentially greater cost than speaking truth about whiteness *from* power. Yet we must both speak because, as Audre Lorde reminds us, “the machine will grind [us] into dust anyway, whether [we] speak or not” (1984: 42). Lorde’s words remind me that you and I have a collective stake in describing our realities to one another as fully, honestly, and clearly as we can.

I am grateful for the courage of your words.

Alison

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