

# Raced and Gendered Scripts in Public Backlash against Critical Philosophers of Race

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George Yancy's *Backlash* is not an easy book to read.<sup>1</sup> The volume and intensity of the vitriol directed at Yancy after the publication of "Dear White America" is overwhelming. Like the sulfuric acid literally produced by vitriol when heated, the emails, letters, and phone messages received by Yancy were caustic, dangerous, and even life-threatening. They burned, and not just metaphorically. "Mood swings. Irritability. Trepidation. Disgust. Anger. Nausea. Words do things; they carry the vestiges of the bloody and brutal contexts in which they were animated," as Yancy explains the psychosomatic effects of the responses he received (44–45). This is especially true of the voicemail messages left for Yancy, in which he could hear and feel the strong emotional currents of hate that were directed at him. Yancy was burned by the corrosive crap slung at him, and the injuries inflicted upon him were intentional. "In the air [was] the smell of burning Black flesh" when Black bodies were lynched and then torn to pieces, as Yancy reminds us (45), and this is what many of Yancy's respondents longed to do to him.

The vitriol experienced by Yancy did not come out of nowhere. It has deep historical roots, as Yancy is well aware. A crucial component of those roots concerns relationships between Black men and white women. White supremacy and white class privilege in the United States repeat and reinvent themselves over time through those relationships, producing a pattern deeply engrained in the American psyche. This pattern, forcefully criticized, for example, by Ida B. Wells-Barnett, dates at least to the mid-nineteenth century: the angry/violent/dangerous Black man supposedly is a threat to the innocent/naïve/pure white woman, who in turn needs to be protected/corrected by white men, thereby "justifying" white (male) terror waged against Black men.<sup>2</sup> I would argue that these historical patterns

and scripts are being re-enacted in the responses to Yancy's essay (which is not to claim that Yancy's respondents consciously invoke those scripts). The pattern is most evident in comments that accuse Yancy of writing "Dear White America" to seduce white women, manipulating them into wanting to have sex with him (see, e.g., page 41). But it also is evident in the so-called generic threats sent to Yancy, the ones that wished him harm without mentioning white women or any other particular reason for wanting to harm him. ("Generic" here does not mean any less dangerous, I should add.) Like the photographic negative in which dark areas of an image are light and light areas are dark, *The Dangerous Black Man* and *The Innocent White Woman* are each other's negatives. They are not so much opposites as they are complements: the same fantastical image in reverse tones.

One way to make this pattern visible is to compare the kind of vicious responses Yancy received to his publicly engaged scholarship on race to the responses that white women receive, taking myself as an example. I am unsure if my experience is similar to or shared by most white women academics who write critically about whiteness—that information would be interesting to gather—but I believe that it is instructive nonetheless. While public response to Yancy's presentations and publications often threatened him, the tenor (and smaller quantity) of feedback that I have received tends to be different. It often is insulting, even mean, but never threatening. Instead I am criticized for being gullible, duped, and/or an idiot, and the comments often aim to correct me with a condescending lesson about white people's "real" interests that I somehow am too simple-minded or too clueless to understand.

Consider the following example, which I received via email in December 2014, shortly after the *New York Times* published an interview that Yancy conducted with me as part of his *Philosophy and Race* series in "The Stone":<sup>3</sup>

Uuh, what a bunch of drivel. What about wretched irish americans in south boston. I guess you've never been there. Also, what about the poor whites who fought to preserve the union and abolish slavery. . . . I don't [owe reparations], so get off my back. My forbears were serfs in russia (jews). You are doing a great disservice to your students with this sloppy and inflammatory thinking. Do something useful for the community and the country—like being a police officer. (Email received December 8, 2014)

Likewise, after a conservative college newspaper ran an article on a 2017 essay of mine called "White Priority,"<sup>4</sup> I received a number of critical emails and letters from the public, including the following email:

Hey Shannon. I have just read the article in 'The College Fix' relating to your comments about "white priority" and "white privilege." It is clear that you (1) live in a bubble, (2) are ashamed of your "whiteness," (3) have a distorted view of race and racism, (4) need to read a few non-biased history books, and (5) are an idiot. Perhaps you have not noticed the advantages of being

black in today's world. Perhaps you have not noticed the deliberate exclusion of whites in all facets of American life. Perhaps you are just blind. . . . We—whites and blacks—do not need your hate or ignorant dribble. (Email received August 7, 2017)

Sometimes, the responses I receive do not address me at all, but merely include “facts” about race that the sender apparently thinks that I do not know. For example, in August 2017 (also seemingly in response to *The College Fix*’s article critical of “White Priority”), I received a four-page single-spaced document that supposedly explained and documented in great detail how universities were invented by European Christian males and later “perverted by inferior others,” why Black people should be more like Chinese Americans and other model minorities, how Black people are responsible for most violent crime, and how Black people benefit unfairly from a number of racial advantages, such as the existence of the United Negro College Fund, Black Entertainment TV, and “openly proclaimed” Black colleges (i.e., HBCUs).

In contrast, when Yancy was insulted after writing “Dear White America,” the insults were always accompanied and/or framed by vicious threats filled with vile degradation. It is difficult, for example, even to count the number of times the word “fuck” was used in messages sent to him. This term often was paired with crude references to feces, animal imagery (especially concerning monkeys and baboons), frequent use of the “n” word, and fantasies of Yancy’s killing himself or being killed, e.g., via beheading or “lovingly” being penetrated by a meat hook (51). In contrast, there were relatively few times (three on my count) that Yancy’s intelligence was insulted by being explicitly called an idiot or dumb. In those cases, the respondent (a) told Yancy to go back to sub-Saharan Africa, insisting that Yancy didn’t belong in the United States and wasn’t a real American (53), or (b) seemed to be furiously piling up as many insults as the respondent could think of, calling Yancy “a dumb ass living piece of shit” (43), or (c) claimed that Yancy, like other Black people, in fact was “not dumb” because he knows that his race talk could manipulate “white idiots, especially white women” into performing fellatio on him (41). (I note in the third example how the image of the clueless white woman makes an explicit appearance.) My point is that all of the insults hurled at Yancy, including the few that referenced being an idiot or (deceptively not) dumb, were meant to do more than merely insult him. They were not merely condescending. They were meant to terrorize Yancy and to do so as viciously and violently as possible.

While Yancy and I have different experiences with the public as we criticize whiteness, our contrasting experiences are complementary. Together they reveal a great deal of what Robin DiAngelo has diagnosed as white (male) fragility and an attempt to keep both Black men and white women “in their place” via a well-worn script that uses white women to justify white aggression and terror-

ism against people of color and Black men in particular.<sup>5</sup> How can one disrupt the re-inscription of these patterns? The first step is to draw awareness to them, as *Backlash* vividly does. I would venture that every philosopher, whatever their race, working in critical philosophy of race has been criticized in ways and/or by people that support white supremacy, but it is important to note that not all such criticism has the same end. Paying intersectional attention to the gendered (and other/related) dynamics of that criticism is important for understanding what is going on, and *Backlash* helps us to do so.

The next step is to develop strategies for interrupting these patterns, and those strategies likely will differ depending on people's different subject positions. In the case of white women, I think that an important strategy for refusing the position of childlike innocence is for them (us) to do the hard, emotional work of tackling the racialized fear that they (we) have learned to feel in a white supremacist world. Rather than play the childlike role of being scared (e.g., of Black men encountered on an elevator or approaching on a sidewalk), white women need to grow up and realize that their racialized fear makes them an active tool of white terrorism. Socially taught and politically encouraged by a white supremacist society, white women's learned fear functions as a key justification for white violence against Black men. As the 1930s-era Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching understood, by combatting their fear, white women can help disrupt the violence done in their name.<sup>6</sup>

In *Backlash*, Yancy interrupts this pattern in a different way: by emphasizing love, mutual vulnerability, and understanding—that is, by not playing the role of the angry, dangerous Black man into which many of Yancy's respondents tried to force him. As Yancy explains, he offered a gift to white people that sought "genuine human connection, not something that is just non-violent, but that which dares to resist white supremacy's effort to keep us from loving each other, being truthful to each other" (14). It is important to realize, however, that in offering this gift, Yancy *is* dangerous to white people, and it is here that *Backlash*'s most significant interruption takes place. Yancy embraces the role of being dangerous, albeit in a different sense of danger than the one used in the stereotype of the violent Black man. Rather than being physically dangerous, Yancy is ontologically dangerous by threatening to upend white people's sense of self. He threatens to undo the racial suturing that closes off whiteness and white people as the racial norm. The ontological danger that Yancy poses to white people is "not physical violence or brutality . . . [but] the kind of danger that implies possibility, of being otherwise/different and not-quite-yet . . . a form of danger that signifies vulnerability—that is an openness on [white people's] part to be wounded" (95). The wounds here are ontological rather than narrowly physical, but they are no less significant, painful, or embodied as a result.

Clearly many white readers of Yancy's *New York Times* letter were not willing to risk the ontological danger that it involved. But as chapter 4 of *Backlash* demonstrates, some white people were willing to accept Yancy's gift and become a little bit undone—a little bit unsutured—in response to the vulnerability that Yancy offered them. Will *Backlash* help more white people do this, beyond the small number that did so in response to “Dear White America”? Yancy suggests that he is not optimistic given the ways that white America historically has treated and currently treats Black Americans. At the same time, however, he adds, “I can't be a pessimist, because I'm alive . . . [even though] being alive feels like borrowed time” (101). Borrowed or not, time will tell if Yancy's refusal of pessimism is well placed. In the meanwhile, let's hope that for the sake of their own lives as well as those of Black and other people of color, white people can learn to take ontological racial risks.<sup>7</sup>

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## NOTES

1. George Yancy, *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018). Citations to the book are provided in the text.
2. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynchings* (Mineola, NY: Dover Books, 2014).
3. Shannon Sullivan and George Yancy, “White Anxiety and the Futility of Black Hope,” *Opinionator* (blog), *New York Times*, December 5, 2014; <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/05/white-anxiety-and-the-futility-of-black-hope/>.
4. Nathan Rubbelke, “Professor Coins Term ‘White Priority,’ Says White People Think They're Better Than Others,” *The College Fix*, August 1, 2017; <https://www.thecollegefix.com/post/35063/>. See also Shannon Sullivan, “White Priority,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5(2) (2017): 171–82.
5. I unfortunately do not have space here to examine how white women often are complicit with their prescribed role as racially ignorant and innocent. On this topic, see, e.g., Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Pelegrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), and Adrienne Rich, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 2007).
6. For more on this association, see Henry E. Barber, “The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, 1930–1942,” *Phylon* 34(4) (1973): 378–89.
7. Thanks to George Yancy for email conversations about responses to our work that helped frame my thinking in this essay.