

George Yancy

*On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis*

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*Reviewed by Amir Jaima, 2018*

**Amir Jaima** is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy at Texas A&M University. He did his doctoral studies at SUNY Stony Brook. His primary research interests are in aesthetics and Africana philosophy, which generally converge as Black aesthetics and/or Africana philosophy of literature. Additionally, he is interested in genre/gender theory and continental philosophy. Amir is also a creative writer and has a number of working "literary" projects that both inform and are inspired by his philosophical work.

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Between November of 2014 and December of 2015, George Yancy interviewed nineteen philosophers who specialize in various aspects of the topic of race for the *New York Times* philosophy column, "The Stone." In his culminating editorial, entitled "Dear White America," Yancy discloses that his aim was to "engage, in this very public space, with the often unnamed elephant in the room," that is, the topic of racism in America and the thin possibility of its redress. This manner of public engagement, Yancy continues, "was one part of a gift that [he] wanted to give to readers of The Stone, the larger philosophical community, and the world." He was rewarded for his "generosity"--and I use this descriptor sincerely--with hateful, racist condemnation, and even death threats. It is in the light of this "backlash"--also the name of his recent (2018) book about his harrowing experience--that we must appreciate this new volume, *On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis*, which is an expansion and a continuation of those "dangerous conversations" (9) that began in "The Stone."

As suggested by the title, *On Race* consists of thirty-four interviews: the nineteen previously published as well as fifteen new ones. The interviewees themselves comprise a star-studded chorus of "academic celebrities." Even the most superficial reader of topics that pertain to racism will recognize at least a few of the featured figures. The interviewees are arranged into eight groups based on their scholarly orientations. Most of what follows will be an attempt to paraphrase each interview in a few sentences.

The first section, "Race and the Critical Space of Black Women's Voices," opens with Yancy's conversation with bell hooks. They discuss the intersecting power structure that hooks characterizes as an "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (15). hooks then reflects on what it means to study this problem as a Buddhist and as a Black woman. She concludes with the provocative comment that while "Buddhist Christian practice challenges me, as does feminism . . . [f]eminism does not ground me. It is the discipline that comes from spiritual practice that is the foundation of my life" (23). Next, Patricia Hill Collins discusses her highly impactful work on intersectionality and her contributions to Black feminist thought. While analyzing a number of Black women celebrities--the Williams sisters most notably--Collins explains that, "Because I don't routinely separate out racial oppression and sexual oppression, it's hard to parse out the specific effects of sexism" (27). Against the backdrop of her famous 1987

piece, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers comments on the persistent contemporary perniciousness of the "toxic misnaming" of Black people. Spillers highlights the important difference between symbolic power and *real* power. She explains, "Actual power strikes fear while symbolic power does not necessarily do so" (39). Although misnaming can be hurtful, it is largely symbolic. Her greater concern is the "strengthening impression," Spillers notes, that "no one matters in America anymore" (41). In the final interview of this section, Joy James reflects on the psychological burden of confronting so much Black death. Yancy asks, "What do we do with despair?" to which James replies, "We mix sorrow with something else. . . . People sometimes miss that outrage and resistance are guided by love and the desire to bring honor to life brutally taken" (45).

In the second section, "Race and the Naming of Whiteness," Judith Butler comments on the racist misunderstanding of "all lives matter," and the practice of "doing whiteness" (57). Furthermore, Butler reflects on the possibility of *undoing* whiteness, which starts "with humility, with learning history, [and] with white people learning how the history of racism persists in the everyday vicissitudes of the present" (59). She says, "It is always possible to do whiteness otherwise" (59). Alison Bailey unpacks a footnote in her chapter "Strategic Ignorance," noting that many white people pathologically avoid the discomfort of antiracism, even while they appear to be aware of their "privilege." Borrowing insights from Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones, Bailey says that white people need to "travel" and choose to "remain in uncomfortable spaces" (64), racially speaking. Also in this section, John Caputo comments on the cultural and disciplinary importance of the "philosophy of race," and the disciplinary tendency among white philosophers to avoid it. In a moment of critical self-reflection, Caputo notes that "I am at least as guilty as other white philosophers. . . . I am always *on the verge* of mentioning race," without actually doing so (74, my emphasis). Shannon Sullivan explains that her engagement with whiteness was a natural, pedagogical extension of her engagement with feminism. Sullivan concludes with the disheartening comment that racism in the US is perhaps like the plague in Camus's novel: it "will never completely go away . . . [and] always wins in the end, even if one achieves some minor victories against it" (85). Craig Irvine describes his work on narrative medicine and the ways in which it has illuminated some of the vicissitudes of American racism. And finally, Joe Feagin explains the impactful sociological concept of the "white racial frame." Feagin explains that "Most mainstream social scientists dealing with racism issues have relied heavily on inadequate analytical concepts like prejudice, bias, animus, stereotyping, and intolerance . . . *not on society's systemic racism*" (97-98, my emphasis). The idea of the "white racial frame" better diagnoses the problems of racism by emphasizing its systemic nature.

In part III, "Race, Pedagogy, and the Domain of the Cultural," Lawrence Blum shares how he "got into race," so to speak, and how it led him, ultimately, to teach a class on race at the local high school. Blum concludes that his "focus is on encouraging white teachers to teach about race, to help develop the racial literacy all high-school graduates need to face the society they live in" (114). Next, Dan Flory reflects on the development of his interest in racial questions vis-à-vis the analysis of film. He notes that many of our popular cultural narratives are distinctly white--such as Batman or James Bond. Many aspects of racism are betrayed when we consider how dramatically different storylines would need to be if the protagonists were Black and/or women. Flory ends with a few recommendations of films that might "require [whites] to step out of their comfort zones and negotiate nonwhite worlds, or even imagine what it might be like to exist as a

nonwhite human being" (124). David Theo Goldberg shares his own intellectual development and how he came to study questions of race. He argues that in order to appreciate the urgency of questions of race, we need to reevaluate "the rubric of *how*, not what, to think today" (137). In brief, scholars must critically read data; we must read historically; and we must read in a more technologically varied manner (136).

In part IV, "Race, History, Capitalism, Ethics, and Neoliberalism," Noam Chomsky reflects on the deeply lamentable history of racism, an "America that 'Black people have always known'" (148). He concludes, unsurprisingly, that "Racism is far from eradicated" (152). Nancy Fraser discusses the intricate relationship between capitalism and racism. Sidestepping the debate as to whether race or class is the primary axis of oppression, Fraser argues in brief that "the racializing dynamics of capitalist society are crystalized in the 'mark' that distinguishes *free subjects of exploitation* from *dependent subjects of expropriation*" (159, emphasis in original). In other words, inherent in *capitalism* is the distinction between "laborers" and "slaves," and this distinction is "at once economic and political" (159). Yancy and Peter Singer *debate* the similarities and differences between racism and speciesism. Seyla Benhabib defends efforts to salvage the traditional philosophical canon, in spite of the racism of major figures like John Locke and Hegel. She explains that "we need to remember that moment of opening and closure, subversion and restoration, freedom and domination that are present in these texts that we love" (175). Naomi Zack offers insights regarding the irrational fear of Black bodies in general, but especially those of Black men and boys. Echoing social-dominance theory, Zack explains that young black men are the natural targets in a white patriarchal society. The police are "mostly white and mostly male" and see Black men as adversaries; and the myth of the Black male rapist is still "invoked to justify crimes against Black men" (181). Next, Charles Mills explains his incisive critique of classic liberalism, and why he now advocates for a "Black radical liberalism" (187). In brief, Black radical liberalism is "a normative theory that . . . is centrally located in the realm of nonideal theory, and as such makes rectificatory justice its priority" (190). Conversely, "For ideal-theory liberalism, races don't even exist," (190) much less *racism*; consequently, ideal-theory liberalism cannot ground antiracist efforts. And finally, Falguni Sheth explains aspects of the racism inherent in liberalism, such as the self-congratulatory manner in which it retreats into color-blind and postracial discourses. Sheth explains that "In 'postracial' America, white supremacy continues" (197).

Linda Alcoff starts out part V, "Race beyond the Black/White Binary," by sharing her experiences being a Latina philosopher as well as a scholar who studies Latin American philosophy. In the course of her reflection, Alcoff offers three concrete strategies for negotiating and redressing the "inhospitable climate for philosophers of color working on race" (201). Next, Eduardo Mendieta articulates a clear and incisive critique of the logic of the discourse of postrace. He also offers a nuanced analysis of Obama. David Haekwon Kim shares insights as a Korean-American philosopher who tends to handle racist vitriol "poorly!" (228) He concludes that "Asian Americans have to see themselves as part of a larger community of color" (230). And Emily Lee discusses some of the microaggressions and resultant anxieties associated with being a nonwhite professor.

In part VI, "Race and Africana Social and Political Frames," Molefi Asante explains Afrocentricity and reflects on the ways that it might contribute to contemporary antiracism

efforts. In brief, Afrocentricity is about sharing intellectual space, in contradistinction to the exclusionary bent of the current, decidedly *Euro*-centric canon. Bill Lawson shares some of the many insights that we can glean from the life and ideas of Frederick Douglass. Lawson concludes pithily, but insightfully, that Douglass teaches us that "people concerned with racial justice have to know when to act and when not to act. In other words, don't be stupid!" (252). Lucius Outlaw proposes a number of provocative and insightful *hypotheses*--as opposed to explanations--about the nature of racism in the US in general, and the profession of philosophy in particular. Notably in his responses, Outlaw cautiously attends to the allegedly limited methodological purview of philosophy proper. At one point he explains, almost tongue in cheek, "An appropriate response requires knowledge growing out of empirical data regarding behaviors and practices, accumulated and analyzed systematically. . . . I have neither such data nor such an analysis. . . . I am left, then, to take on the risks of offering considerations drawn from my limited experiences of more than four decades of engagement in academic and professional philosophy" (257). Next, Cornel West explains his metaphor of "Black prophetic fire," where and how this fire manifests in the contemporary moment, and why Obama lacked it while in office. Kwame Anthony Appiah explains how, as a relatively privileged British-Ghanaian, he came to study questions of race in the US and put forth his famous nominalist criticism of racial categories. And Clevis Headley begins by proposing a six-part program for "rethinking the Western philosophical canon" (280), and ends with a persuasive critique of the neoliberal cult of the individual and the ways in which it sustains anti-Black racism.

In section VII, "Race beyond the United States," Fiona Nicoll explains her personal and professional development vis-à-vis questions of race, and the ways in which these questions manifest in Australia. Nicoll notes that there are disheartening similarities between the experiences of Indigenous Australians and Black Americans. And Paul Gilroy discusses the slightly different racial dynamic in the UK. Somewhat critical of the (Black) American perspective, Gilroy notes, "Circulated through the ether by phenomena like #Blacktwitter, American racial codes, rhetoric, and interpretations can begin, wrongly, to trump locally based analysis and priorities" (313). And in part VIII, "Race and Religion," Charles Johnson reflects on what it means to be at once a "storyteller, visual artist, and philosopher" (325), and how Buddhist principles might inform antiracism efforts. Traci West, while reflecting on the relationship between Christianity and questions of race, offers a message to Black mothers, particularly those whose children have been the victims of racist violence.

The remarkable breadth of this collection renders it an excellent introduction for any interested and "educated" reader who is relatively new to the scholarly discussion of racism in the US. Furthermore, Yancy's tone as an interviewer is inviting and collaborative rather than confrontational. Rather than critically engaging his interviewees, even those with whom he might disagree, he has invited each of them--and by extension the reader--not to wallow in white guilt or Black self-pity, but to draw upon their expertise and experience in the service of Yancy's ambitious project of thinking through possible solutions to American racism. Yancy is particularly interested in how these thirty-four thinkers, with such varied backgrounds and identities, all came to appreciate the importance of studying American racism in some manner. What can we learn from their journeys on the "philosophy of race"? Might the knowledge of the paths that they followed help the rest of us to take similar steps? Yancy remains remarkably optimistic, in spite of the backlash to "Dear White America" and the discouraging prognoses of

American racism given by many of the interviewees themselves. Yancy asks a number of times about the transformative potential of love. As Clevis Headley muses, reflecting on Baldwin, what does love look like "when it operates politically" (291)? Many Americans, however, will not share Yancy's optimism, nor will they have much faith in the political efficacy of love, especially if they are persuaded by the institutional and systemic analyses of racism. Nevertheless, conducting these "dangerous conversations" required considerable courage; and perhaps the greater insight is betrayed by the fact that they happened at all.