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Interview with George Yancy, African-American philosopher of critical philosophy of race

Michael A. Peters

Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

George Yancy is professor of philosophy at Emory University. He is one of the leading scholars in the US on critical philosophy of race and critical whiteness studies. Yancy received his BA (cum laude) in philosophy from the University of Pittsburgh, his first MA from Yale, and his second MA in Africana Studies from New York University. He obtained his PhD in philosophy from Duquesne University with distinction. Yancy has authored, edited, and co-edited over 20 books. Some of his recent books are *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), *On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2017), and *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018). Yancy is known for his controversial and widely discussed interviews and articles published in *The New York Times'* philosophy column, The Stone. Three of his books have won Choice Outstanding Academic Book Awards and he has twice won the American Philosophical Association Committee on Public Philosophy's Op-Ed contest.

Michael Peters: It's great to have this opportunity be able to interview you. You are not only an important scholar but also something of a 'celebrity,' if this means receiving huge media attention and lots of hate mail. Your new book *Backlash* has occasioned much comment but before getting you to talk about your most recent book can I ask you about your professional career. You are no stranger to controversy. Your 2015 essay 'Dear White America,' published in The Stone, *The New York Times* philosophy column, caught the attention of many in America who found your views unpalatable and they reacted badly, even violently. First of all, can you use this incident to explain your views on race and the controversy that followed?

George Yancy: Yes, well, you are right about the 'celebrity.' The article 'Dear White America' was one of those philosophical pieces that touched a raw nerve in white America; it went viral. The article received over two thousand comments. You know, despite the many publications that precede that article, when I am introduced to people they will often say, 'Yeah, you wrote that piece "Dear White America."' However, that 'celebrity' came with a price. But first, here is my understanding of race. To put things succinctly, race is a social construction. Like marriage, it isn't a natural kind, but a social kind. By this I mean that the concept of race doesn't have a referent in the natural world. There is no *thing* to which the concept of race points. So, it is a concept that is ontologically empty. Yet, it is a concept that exists. Its emergence in the world came from Western Europe. It is a concept that is socially and historically produced and shaped by colonial desire, bad faith, domination, psychological projection, and ontological and epistemic logics that are Manichean in nature, where whiteness has come to constitute what I term the transcendental norm. In short, whiteness, by its very nature, is binary and hierarchical. Whiteness is the thesis (that is, it establishes itself as such) and 'racialized' groups that are not white are

deemed 'different,' 'deviant,' that is, the antithesis. Despite the fact that race is not a natural kind, it has tremendous *social* ontological power; the concept is a powerful organizing social vector that functions as if it cuts at the very joints of reality. The concept of race constitutes our institutional spaces, our political forms of arrangement, our perceptions, our bodily comportment in space, our organization of lived space and lived experience. In fact, the state itself is a site of racial power. So, let's get one point clear. While the concept of race is unreal qua natural kind, the concept of race has served to create rigid social binaries and used to oppress, to dehumanize, to murder, to render disposable. That is what we mean by racism. Historically, within the context of North America, this is what I mean by white racism. In our contemporary moment, it can be argued that race continues to advantage white people globally, continues to render their lives worth living, and axiologically supreme vis-à-vis people of color.

These were some of the stated and unstated assumptions that were embedded within my article 'Dear White America.' My objective was to write a letter of love to white Americans to get them to tarry with the concept of what it means for them to have inherited, even if unintentionally, white privilege, which I see as a certain kind of immunity. The most controversial part of the letter was that I asked white people to dwell within the uncomfortable space of accepting the impact that their whiteness has on Black people and other people of color and how that implicates them within processes of racist iteration. So, I wanted white people to understand that they are positioned through a social web of racial differential power that has a negative impact on people of color. I wanted them to think about how their whiteness constitutes a relational site of oppression, and how white racism is an opaque structure that delimits how they understand their own racism. At *no* point did I say that *all* white people are racist. I argued for a contextual perspective, a relational dynamic view that argues that white racism is not to be limited to a neoliberal conception of the self and a thin causal argument about how 'mean white people' directly and consciously harm people of color. I introduced an ontology that speaks to forms of complicity that relationally place white people in positions of both psychic opacity regarding an awareness of the limits of their own racism and structural embeddedness within whiteness. Given this, how can we continue to speak of 'white innocence'? I don't think we can.

The controversy that followed the publication of 'Dear White America,' and, hence, that sense of 'celebrity' that followed, consisted of tons of really nasty and hate-filled mail sent to me by white people, threats of physical violence, death threats, and the use of unconscionable racist epithets. I was called 'nigger' hundreds of times. My sense is that I held up a disagreeable mirror to white America and they refused to see themselves within it. But James Baldwin has warned that when people continue to hold on to their innocence long after that innocence has gone that they turn into monsters. I like this point because it speaks to the fact that to maintain that 'innocence,' white people will prefer the monstrous over honesty. The lack of innocence is too hard to bear and the response to those who insist upon the lack of white 'innocence,' well, they become the targets of that massive denial. That is what I became. I became a target of white denial. I became the so-called anti-white monster who dared to tell the truth. You know, there is a price to be paid for telling the truth, especially when it involves uncovering what has been covered over. Yet, this is the history of white America. It is a history of spinelessness when it comes to facing the truth about its continued systemic white racism. So many white people would rather hide behind a hypocritical 'innocence.'

Michael Peters: A very clear explanation of whiteness and racism. Your treatment at the hands of those offended by your letter is horrendous and it must have been very scary for you and potentially dangerous for you and your family. I wonder whether I can draw you out on a couple of points. 'Dear White America' seems to me a pedagogical device and that social change is related to truth telling. This seems to me an exemplary role for a philosopher but why should White America depend on a Black philosopher for truth and responsibility? Truth seems so much

at a premium in Trump's America of systematic lying and distortion. Can you comment on this issue.

George Yancy: It was very scary, especially when one needs the protection of university police, which is what I needed after so many threats. And they continue. As recently as this interview, there was a message sent to me that said, 'Kill yourself.' You are correct. The letter was designed as a pedagogical device to cultivate a sense of white self-criticality, to augment white consciousness, to encourage white people to identify ways in which they suffer from an epistemology of ignorance and bad faith. In this sense, pedagogy ought to be dangerous, because it can function as a process of loss and fundamental transformation, which can be a very dangerous process, especially as it means losing assumptions and embodied habits that help to buttress hegemonic systems. Within this context, pedagogy is a site of parrhesia or courageous speech regarding white privilege and power. Michel Foucault described parrhesia as a process of truth-telling in the face of possible death, as a form of risking the possibility of death. I have no desire to die because of what I say, but I do want to bear witness to the truth, to speak truth in the face of so much deception, simulacra, and hyper-reality. This is what Socrates did, what Martin Luther King Jr. did, and what Audre Lorde did. It seems to me that truth-telling is part of the *raison d'être* of what it means to be a philosopher, especially within our contemporary moment in North America. Your point about dependency vis-à-vis truth and responsibility is a good one. There are times when I abhor the idea that white America depends upon me or Black people, more generally, to teach them about *their* racism and the importance of *their* responsibility to own *their* racism. It is unfair. It is like asking women to do the lion's share of the work of teaching men about their sexism, our sexism. So, women, though oppressed, are supposed to be our liberators as well? This is a move still dictated by the logics of male hegemony. Such a requirement would be an unjust form of labor. In my case, I don't want white people do be dependent upon me, but open. I want them to do the hard work of being open to be wounded by the truth that they are not innocent. In short, I see myself as a contemporary philosophical gadfly. Baldwin had this in mind when he talked about forcing our white brothers and sisters, with love, to see themselves as they are. So, it's about *Alethea*, which is the Greek word that means to be unconcealed. I want to reveal whites to themselves—unconcealed and naked. And while white people are the target of the truth-telling, there is something existentially far larger: it is the process of speaking truth so that I might live another day, so that my Black sons will not be killed by a white lie that says that they are 'criminals' because they are Black. The presupposition here is that the act of truth-telling functions to liberate us all, because our lives are haptic, what I call an ontology of no edges.

This way of reframing sociality in terms of an ontology of no edges as opposed to an ontology that undergirds neoliberalism is so important within the madness that is North America under the 'leadership' of Donald Trump. Within Trump's fictional and alternative world, the precious lives of undocumented immigrants are disposable, a 'blight' on white America's growing white nationalist isolationism. It is that white nationalist lie that is now the unabashed meta-narrative that is being fed to a predominantly white base that doesn't give a damn about truth or fact. Appearance is what matters and obfuscation helps to relieve the guilty of their guilt. Trump peddles masks and aspires for a system of control as threatening as 1984. I should have seen it coming as many white supremacist websites that 'discussed' my article had images of Trump smiling like an emoji figure. The face of Trump was juxtaposed right there next to all sorts of electronic forms of racist berating and dehumanization of me. In short, the image of Trump 'validated' the racist responses to me. Hence, the responses that I continue to receive regarding 'Dear White America' have the sound and fury of white authoritarianism and neo-fascism. And like under Nazism, if we are not careful, democratic freedom will not simply suffer, but it will die. And truth-tellers will be faced with more than the condemnation to drink hemlock. If we are not careful, Trump will outlaw truth and convince many that it is for their own good. In Trump's

ideal world, $2 + 2$ will *no longer* equal 4, but 5. And to critique whiteness will be labelled a 'thought-crime.' The threat of 1984 is upon us, the stench of dystopia is in the air.

Michael Peters: I also wonder about your ability to withstand such viciousness. As it is Black philosophers are not numerous – an aspect also of White America, or what I have called White Philosophy. It has been such a white discipline (policing the canon) even for those known as pragmatists fall short of recognizing the context and history of America. Would you please tell us something of your background and why you turned to philosophy, traditionally a white discipline even if the politics had remained buried until very recently.

George Yancy: You are correct. The last that I checked, Black people constitute about 1.1% of the profession. And there are far fewer Black women professional philosophers than Black men. So, there is the intersectional problem. You know, when the threats ushered in, I was very delighted that The Committee on the Status of Black Philosophers provided me with a great deal of support. The American Philosophical Association (APA) did as well. In fact, it was an historic moment that they came out in support of a high profile public philosopher who was being bullied. Of course, not all Black philosophers think alike. I'm sure that there were some who would rather I had not written the letter. Some may have even found themselves in the position of having to protect their white colleagues against my act of truth-telling. But your point is important as it does raise the issue of the continued paucity of Black people within the professional field of philosophy. It is, as you know, not just a question of numbers, but a question of the normative whiteness of the field, the ways in which the term 'universal' is still deployed to deny philosophical importance to issues regarding race, racism, whiteness. The normative whiteness of the field continues to attempt to reside within the ethereal clouds of ideal theory, where ideas are treated as 'ahistorical.' And while pragmatism sees philosophy as a site for engaging in processes of critical confrontation with problems that human beings confront, recognizing the importance of this-worldly issues and the importance of critical intelligence, I would welcome more white philosophers who identify as pragmatists to grapple with the issue of whiteness, their whiteness, more frequently and with deep vigilance. At the end of the day, not only does the canon continue to be policed, but Black bodies continue to be policed within the conceptual space of the profession, especially as issues that grow out of a broad and diverse 'Black experience' are not deemed *philosophically* relevant. Within this context, Black students turn away from philosophy because they don't see themselves reflected within the field; neither within the phenotypic whiteness of the field nor within the conceptual space of the field.

I initially turned to philosophy (discovered it really) at 17-year-old with absolutely no knowledge about how the field is governed by white epistemic orders, though I do remember seeing the faces of all white men when shown who represented the history of Western philosophy. Of course, Western philosophy governed and fashioned itself as philosophy qua philosophy. So, I was naïve, but I was still enthusiastic that there was this field that critically engaged questions regarding the meaning of human existence, whether or not God exists, the nature of beauty, justice, truth. I was an unusually curious young boy. I would bug my mother almost daily about the existence of God and the meaning of death. And I did all of this while living within the ghetto, a place where young Black people were to die, and where we were certainly not to emerge as philosophers. Yet, there I was reading about Plato, Spinoza, Bertrand Russell, et al. I was a young Black boy living in poverty reading the grand thoughts of white men. But there was a certain unspoken conceptual violation perpetrated. Why did I believe that I was the only Black philosopher in the world at that young age? Who had failed me? My white teachers had at no point mentioned the existence of Black philosophers. It was my good fortune, though, to have been introduced to a brilliant African-American scholar by the name of James G. Spady. He introduced me to an invisible canon that included Black philosophers. I then found myself at home within philosophy in a very different way. There began to emerge an understanding that

philosophy is inextricably linked to non-ideal conditions. Philosophy was no longer by definition white, pure, and abstracted from the deep racial horrors of everyday Black existence.

I recall when I became interested in African-American philosophy, a white philosopher-mentor of mine warned: ‘Be careful that you don’t get pegged.’ This was very revealing. At no point did he warn me about being pegged a Kantian or Hegelian or Platonist. You see, African-American philosophy, like the Black body, was marked as ‘different,’ as ‘ersatz.’ My white philosopher-mentor had already been seduced by the so-called universality of the Western philosophical experience or the white North American philosophical experience. Embedded within that notion of ‘universality’ is white narcissism, a form of white nativism. One might ask here: Is there a difference between the white ideological assumptions of philosophy and Trump’s rhetoric regarding making America great (that is, white) again? I think that both are torn from the same racist and ideologically toxic cloth, the same white hubris. And both attempt, as Henry A. Giroux might argue, to hide beneath a destructive form of neoliberal hegemonic common sense.

These days, philosophy for me is no longer simply a site of wonder, but a site of suffering. While that might sound counterintuitive to many, it isn’t for me. Philosophy dares to engage questions that speak to who and what we are, how we have failed ourselves, and what we might become. It dares to challenge power structures that are firmly in place, it dares to demask, which also includes removing the masks that I hide behind. You see, that can be painful, that involves suffering as we begin to learn about ourselves and our complicity regarding the suffering of others. Thinking philosophically makes me lose sleep. It forces me to face forms of responsibility that I would rather not see. In this way, African-American philosophy or Black philosophy or Africana philosophy must weep as it dares to face the tragic, dares to grapple with those experiences that are painfully concrete and that are implicative of who we are as finite human beings. My book *Backlash* grows out of this suffering. I characterize it as the most raw/candid book on racism written by a professional philosopher. Writing out of this experience, doing philosophy from within the muck and mire of the embodied impact of lived racism, engages the process of rethinking philosophy as a site of tarrying within the messiness of life. Like the Blues, philosophical thought tarries with pain and suffering, but doesn’t become defeated by the pain and the suffering. The Blues singer begins in a place and time of suffering; it is a location. So, African-American practice and performance of philosophy begins from *some-where*, and it lays bare the lie that philosophy begins from *nowhere*.

Michael Peters: The narrative of your background makes compelling reading and your statement ‘philosophy for me is no longer simply a site of wonder, but a site of suffering’ is very moving. Ok so let’s turn to your new book *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America* (2018). The blurb reads

When George Yancy penned a *New York Times* op-ed entitled ‘Dear White America’ asking white Americans to confront the ways that they benefit from racism, he knew his article would be controversial. But he was unprepared for the flood of vitriol in response.

The resulting blowback played out in the national media, with critics attacking Yancy in every form possible—including death threats—and supporters rallying to his side. Despite the rhetoric of a ‘post-race’ America, Yancy quickly discovered that racism is still alive, crude, and vicious in its expression.

Can you elaborate on this and maybe also talk about the way in which the election of Trump has damaged any progress – I’m thinking about Charlottesville as an example but there have been dozens of incidents including police shooting of Black folk.

George Yancy: Sure. A white female colleague of mine actually said to me that I was being disingenuous when I said that I had not anticipated the level of white racist vitriol that I received. In many ways, she perpetuated some of the same toxic discourse. In this case, she accused me of lying. By the way, there were also white readers who actually said that I lied about the racist discourse directed at me, a barrage of discourse that left its bodily impact on me. One cannot

be called a 'nigger' hundreds of times without it negatively impacting one's psyche. It is like a blunt object. Yet, I had not anticipated the sheer number of times that I was called a 'nigger,' a 'monkey,' a 'hoodrat,' a 'piece of shit,' a 'coon,' a 'racist pig,' a 'race baiter,' told to 'kill myself,' told to 'go fuck myself,' warned that I might end up on a cold slab, that my mouth needs to be shut permanently, accusations that I wrote 'Dear White America' so that white women would perform fellatio on me (no kidding here). That is the *sickness*, and so much more, that white America threw at me, vomited out of their white twisted imaginary. So, despite my understanding of white American history, I was not fully prepared. Perhaps there is this nagging urge, even if grossly misleading, to believe that white America is better. So, for me, any talk of a 'post-race' America is a lie. As Paul Gilroy has argued, we need to discern the actual *racial* work that a 'post-race' discourse performs. 'Post-race' discourse serves to maintain whiteness precisely by postulating a fictive notion of 'post' regarding race. Sorry, but we are in the belly of the beast of American white supremacy and Trump is the Freudian psychoanalytic impulsive id of its unabashed expression.

So, for me, Trump is not an anomaly. He is the expression of a subterranean sedimentation of white supremacist beliefs unleashed while occupying the 'highest' political office in the United States. And his racism didn't just begin during his morally inept characterization of what took place in Charlottesville, VA. However, it was explicitly on display and the nation and the world got to witness it. Trump claimed that there was blame on both sides when it came to judging the actions of white supremacists and those who opposed them. He also said that there were very fine people on both sides. Needless to say, white supremacists were proud of Trump's moral equivocation. And for those who are unaware of Trump's history, keep in mind that back in the early 1970s a federal lawsuit was brought against him for allegedly discriminating against African-Americans regarding renting from one of his properties. This is consistent with the racist xenophobia that we have come to know. Also keep in mind that after five teenagers of color (Black and Latino) were arrested in 1989 and imprisoned for the alleged crime of assaulting and raping a white woman, Trump took out ads in a few major New York newspapers calling for the death penalty to be returned. Fourteen years later, based upon DNA evidence, all five were found innocent. To my knowledge, Trump has not as of yet publically accepted their innocence. In short, such bodies, for Trump, are always already guilty. For Trump, the Sartrean credo regarding people of color works in reverse: essence precedes existence. We are fixed in our essence *vis-à-vis* 'criminality.' Even as he was running for president he referred to Black people in problematic and fixed terms, claiming that we live in our poverty, that our schools are no good, and that we have no jobs. This is the stuff of white racist stigmatization of Black spaces as dysfunctional. After all, he asks Black people, 'What the hell do you have to lose?' In short, Trump positioned himself as the 'white savior figure,' apparently the only one capable of healing the self-imposed pathology that Black people have brought upon themselves. Or think about the racist perpetuation of Trump's Birther lie regarding Obama's place of birth. This was and is an affront to North America's first African-American president and those, especially Black people, who voted for him. Or think about Trump's reference to 'shithole' countries in Africa, especially in opposition to Norway. This is Trump at his white racist symbolic best. Within this context, how different is Trump's rhetoric from Hitler's support of Nordicism? The expressed preference for those from Norway can't be easily extricated from myths regarding the existence of a 'master race.' After all, we know Trump's position on undocumented immigrants as being 'animals' and Mexicans being 'rapists.' And we know that NFL players (mostly Black) who decide to take a knee against racial injustice are called 'sons of bitches.' And recently, we know that those who ought to be deemed our neighbors, those for whom we ought to extend our mutually shared humanity, are being dehumanized and traumatized through violent processes of familial separation, where parents are being sequestered from their precious children under Attorney General Jeff Sessions' zero tolerance policy regarding those entering the US illegally. Sounds very much like the horrible Japanese internment camps in the US and the history of fear of the 'Yellow Peril.'

Let me be clear, these actions read like the potential nightmare of a *final solution*. And the Nazi reference is intended here. That is how dire I read Trump's neo-fascism, his xenophobia, his white nativism. Indeed, I also read Trump through several concepts articulated by Giroux where he sees a form of pathological nationalism, uninhibited militarism, the identification of 'enemies' as ideological tools of national unification, and a politics of disposability under Trump. I have every reason to agree with Giroux. Think here of the disposability of Black bodies by the state or proxies of the state. On June 19, 2018, 17-year-old Antwon Rose, in East Pittsburgh, PA, was in a vehicle stopped by police. Rose, unarmed, ran from the car and was shot 3 times and died later. This is a narrative all too familiar when it comes to Black lives; they don't matter in white America. Why do I say this? Think here of the history of the slave trade, the diseased infested hold of slave ships, states of traumatic un-freedom, phenomenological trauma, geographic dislocation and psychological disorientation, the violent rape of Black women's bodies, Black codes, the violent disruption and surveillance of Black bodies within public (white) spaces, convict leasing, Black bodies used as capital, castrated Black bodies, white myth-making, lynched Black bodies, Jim Crow, the new Jim Crow, mass incarceration, macro and micro-racist aggressions, environmental racism, the school-to-prison pipeline. That is America to me! So, when I think about young Rose, I think about that shameful and anti-theological history. In the case of Rose, where was the hesitation? Where was the benefit of the doubt? Where was that sense of Rose being treated as a Thou? How is it that running away from a police officer is a 'threat' to that police officer's life, a threat that would 'justify' shooting, in this case, Rose, who probably had his back facing the officer as he ran? America has always been a place where Black bodies have faced and been targets of white state violence. Indeed, as David Theo Goldberg would argue, America, in its state formation, is a racial formation. But when I think about the recent death of Rose, I cannot divorce such actions from Trump's militarism, his rhetoric of 'fire and fury,' the violent imagery that he used during his run for the presidency, and his statement, while president, that police officers shouldn't be 'too nice' when arresting people. What is that callous statement but a stamp of approval for the violent treatment of Black and Brown bodies, those who are disproportionately locked behind bars? So, for me, Trump is an existential threat to Black and Brown people, and he is an enemy of what is left of our fragile American democratic experiment.

This brings us back to *Backlash*. The book is a philosophical text that communicates a profound sense of suffering and does so without flinching. I think that is rare for a traditional philosophical text. Yet, it also communicates a fundamental truth about North America; it is a nation that is racist to its very core. That is hard for the white demos to hear and let alone to accept. The actual inclusion of so much of the white racist vitriol within the book also makes *Backlash* a rare philosophical text that encourages its readers to remain on the proverbial ground, situated within the sickness that floods much of white consciousness in North America. That brings me back to the theme of suffering. White America has not suffered. And by this I don't mean that white America has not seen its share of disasters. But white America has not faced its continued refusal when it comes to treating Black people as human beings. On the whole, white America doesn't give a damn about my call to suffering and certainly not a national form of healing. Yet, there will be no national healing until white America weeps long into night for its crimes against Black people. *Backlash* demands that white America see itself as it is. Its future depends upon seeing itself in our (Black) disagreeable mirror. That mirror is terrifying. It has to be, because that is the history of white America. We return, then, to masks or, more accurately, unmasking or demasking. For love can also be terrifying, especially when it asks of us to remove those masks, as Baldwin has prophetically stated, that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. That is what *Backlash* is about; it is about a form of love as a dangerous practice where white people learn how to live without masks.

Michael Peters: Thanks George.