

Book Review: On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis edited by George Yancy

In On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis, George Yancy brings together scholars to reflect on how race and racism have shaped their careers and intellectual work. The collection is a great example of how scholarly dialogue can contribute to pressing public debate, writes Leonardo Custódio, building bridges between personal experiences of racism and philosophical reflections on race and racism's implications for everyday life, politics and social relations.

On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis. George Yancy (ed.). Oxford University Press. 2018.

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As an intellectual activist and a public scholar, the African American philosopher [George Yancy](#) has a prolific publication record. In addition to dozens of scholarly books and articles, Yancy regularly engages in public debate by writing outside of traditional academic platforms. Most notably, he has frequently published essays and interviews as part of the column, '[The Stone](#)', at the *New York Times*.

His recent book *On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis* follows up some of the intellectual dialogues started at 'The Stone'. As someone trying to balance research and activism in my own work, I believe Yancy's book is a great example of how scholarly dialogue can contribute to high-quality public debates, especially about essentially contested concepts and topics such as race and racism.

As a Brazilian academic researcher leading [a new international activist-research project](#) on anti-racism media activism in Finland and abroad, I am often amazed by how public debates on race and racism tend to be similarly contentious in very different contexts. Take, as recent examples, Finland (where I live), Brazil (where I am from) and the United States (whose domestic racial conflicts have dominated international news and scholarly debates on race for decades).

On the one hand, black and brown people, especially women, in [Finland](#), [Brazil](#) and [the US](#) have similarly used online media platforms to speak up, mobilise and act against everyday racism, misogyny and homophobia. On the other hand, [Finland](#), [Brazil](#) and [the US](#) have also seen an increase in aggressively louder voices that ridicule victims of racism, deny the existence of racial discrimination and even deliberately engage in hateful and racist speeches and actions (Yancy's most recent book [Backlash](#) deals with this problem). I am sure people reading these lines in [other contexts](#) will also recognise these conflicting patterns.

The contentious nature of race-related public debates creates a problem for those of us who suffer from racism and/or acknowledge [its pervasive impact upon the lives of racialised people](#) around the world. The more people speak up publicly against racism, the more others interested in listening and learning about race-related arguments, experiences and concepts try to join the conversations. However, the abundance of hateful, ill-informed opinions and false information flooding mass media channels and online platforms also tends to cause confusion, information fatigue and discouragement from raising voices.

In these paradoxical circumstances, George Yancy's *On Race* provides in-depth, theory-based reflections and analytically dense knowledge in very accessible language. The character of the book is not coincidental. In fact, *On Race* is an explicitly political effort to engage philosophy and intellectuality in public discussions. In the introduction, for example, Yancy describes how the recurring cases of police brutality against African Americans like himself have motivated the book:

It is courageous speech, the fight against racial injustices, the belief that philosophy has a public role to play in critically engaging ideas, and the demand for clarity regarding race, that are some of the elements that drive this book (7-8).

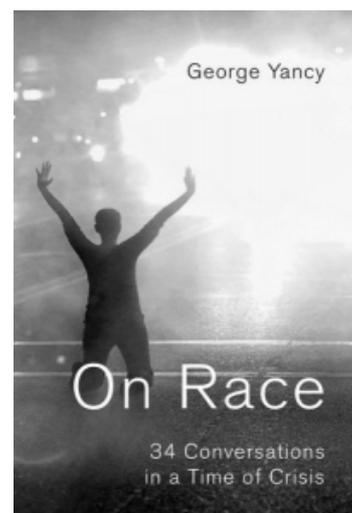




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On Race has eight parts in which internationally recognised scholars talk to Yancy and reflect on how race has related to their careers and theories. For instance, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins reflect on Black women's voices; Noam Chomsky, Nancy Fraser and Charles Mills discuss the interplay between race and capitalism; Cornel West and Kwame Anthony Appiah talk about African views on race and society; and different authors of Asian and Latino descent discuss race outside the black-white binary. Intersections of race with pedagogy and religion are also discussed in the book.

I especially enjoyed the way that all the authors discussing whiteness are white. In her award-winning book [Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race](#), the Black British author Reni Eddo-Lodge describes how it can be a very heavy task for racialised people to explain whiteness to white people. Therefore, seeing white authors – including white feminist icon Judith Butler – reflecting about whiteness feels relieving.

For me, the only disappointing part of *On Race* is the section entitled 'Race beyond the United States'. With merely two conversations with Australian and British scholars Fiona Nicoll and Paul Gilroy, Yancy remains within the context of former British colonies. Knowing that many scholars from Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Eastern Europe have published internationally in English, it is unjustifiable that the book neglects voices from and about those regions.

Despite the geopolitical limitations, *On Race* is a valuable book in times of widespread polarisation between voices against racism on one side and loud, aggressive, often irrational and overtly racist responses on the other. In many ways, the book resembles a quiet space in which people interested in listening and learning about race can do so away from the social media frenzy.

Most importantly, the 34 conversations are starting points. The personal tone of the interviews contributes to demonstrating how intellectuals experience dilemmas, decisions and emotions as they develop their theories. This is an important step towards opening scholarly practice to people outside academia. In addition, each part of the book ends with questions that invite readers to reflect on what they have just read and to begin discussions with others. By doing so, Yancy builds a bridge that readers can cross from their personal experiences suffering from and/or acting against racism to deeper philosophical reflections about the implications and impacts of race and racism in everyday life, politics and social relations.

Leonardo Custódio is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Social Research (IASR), University of Tampere, Finland. He is also co-coordinator, with journalist-activist Monica Gathuo, of the Anti-Racism Media Activist Alliance (ARMA), a three-year project (2018-20) funded by [the Kone Foundation](#). [Read more by Leonardo Custódio](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.