



Book Review

Why Race Still Matters by Alana Lentin. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020. x + 242pp. \$23.95 paperback.

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***Why Race Still Matters* by Alana Lentin. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020. x + 242pp. \$23.95 paperback.**

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I was introduced to *Why Race Still Matters* as part of my PhD coursework in Indigenous studies and welcome its contribution to the current literature in critical race and whiteness studies. My current research focuses on Ukrainian–Indigenous relations on the Canadian prairies and seeks to understand how Indigenous people have been erased from Ukrainian-Canadian histories and narratives as well as the lands occupied by Ukrainian settlers and their descendants. As a settler whose Ukrainian-speaking ancestors arrived in east central Alberta in 1909, I have wondered how or if my great-grandparents considered their presence on the land in relation to Indigenous dispossession. I have also been considering how race and racism inform my kin’s unwillingness to talk about racism and their role in dispossession and their commitment to maintaining the idea that they cannot be racist because of the hardships they faced, including racisms they experienced when they arrived in Canada. Indeed, while much of the literature I have been reading contains well-supported theories surrounding the argument “I’m not racist,” some critical race and whiteness scholars in North America have not moved beyond black/white binaries of race and continue to ignore the role that possession, dispossession, and Indigeneity play in settler colonial states. *Why Race Still Matters* begins to fill a gap in the current literature by moving beyond black/white binaries of race and considering how our unwillingness to talk about race emboldens the power of whiteness to define and re-define what racism is.

In arguing that race still matters, Lentin explicates her positionality as a researcher and the reasons why talking about race is so important to her. As a Jewish woman born to Romanian refugees in occupied Palestine, raised in Catholic Ireland, and now living on Indigenous land in Australia, Lentin provides a unique location from which to analyze race. She argues that ways to explain and talk about race must be realized if we are to effectively dismantle the systems and attitudes that continue to dehumanize and discriminate in its name. By encouraging the reader to critically examine race, Lentin successfully argues that “understanding how race matters is essential for a fuller understanding of our contemporary lives” (15). With the goal of providing readers with the tools required to critically engage with race, including the tools needed to consider race beyond a black/white binary, Lentin writes an informative book that builds capacity to understand how and why race continues to matter, even when it is said to not.

Why Race Still Matters devotes each of its four chapters to discrediting one pervasive argument for the current irrelevance of race – that race is a social construct (e.g. “it is not racism; you are just making it about race”) – and claims against antisemitism. First, Lentin argues that we need to expand our racial literacy to examine the construction of race.

Second, Lentin argues that, by providing a history of how racism came to be constructed, we can move beyond the narcissistic discussions of race that quickly end with “I’m not a racist.” Third, Lentin deconstructs accusations of “playing the race card,” arguing that refusing to see racism is to be complicit in the ways race continues to dispossess racialized people. Last, antisemitism is analyzed to highlight the ways in which it is operationalized by whiteness to obscure race and is politicized to support anti-Islamic racism. Demonstrating how these arguments are created, sustained, and employed to maintain racial boundaries allows Lentin to explore two ideas central to her thesis. First, she demonstrates why and how talking about race continues to matter. Then, by drawing the reader’s attention to the ways in which critical race theorizing and writing, especially in the United States, ignore race outside of black/white binaries, Lentin achieves the second goal of her book and “provides a counterpoint to the North American hegemony within race scholarship ...” (4) by bringing Indigenous people, people of colour, and colonization into discussions of race.

In constructing her framework of analysis, Lentin builds upon the scholarship of Stuart Hall, who contends that race is the centerpiece of hierarchal scientific thinking that seeks to categorize and differentiate. Thus, framing “race as a technology for the management of human differences the main goal of which is the production, reproduction and maintenance of white supremacy on both a local and planetary scale” (5) allows Lentin to dismantle the arguments for the current irrelevance of race and demonstrate that we must continue engaging with race if we are to understand and subvert its power. Although each chapter is devoted to one way in which talking about race is deflected, her argument gains complexity and nuance as she expands current frameworks for the discussion of race beyond black/white binaries. Importantly, this book contributes to the body of literature in critical race studies of Indigenous and people racialized as not-white.

Building on the first argument, Lentin suggests that we need to closely examine colonialism and its role in classification. Indeed, she states that the origin of classifying race lies in the colonial doctrine of “declaring parts of [the world] terra nullius and placing the population living there outside the realms of humanity to achieve colonial domination” (49). In this way, Lentin expands ideas of race to include more than a black/white binary by including racism experienced by brown and Indigenous bodies, something lacking in some of the current critical race literature in the United States. Lentin then moves to an exploration of the discomfort of naming racism and how racism is depicted as the stereotypical white supremacist portrayed in the media. This frozen account of racism, argues Lentin, distills racism down to lone wolf individuals and informs her argument that it is whites who get to decide what is racist and what is not. For Lentin, “not racism” entails the constant redefinition of racism to suit white agendas and goes to the heart of the question of who gets to define what racism is” (56). Lentin posits that, in naming whiteness, white people feel the individualized moral judgment of being called a racist. Instead of whiteness being identified to interrogate racialized power, it is individualized as a new form of racism against whites, and ultimately circles around to the claim of identity politics, something that both the left and right argue makes race “matter too much” (92).

These ideas lead to discussions on both the left and right of identity politics and the use of the metaphorical “race card” which serve to conceptualize racism as irrational, thereby allowing Western societies to consider themselves as “rational” and beyond the ability to see race. However, as Lentin suggests, “to refuse to see race is to choose complicity and ignore the layers of power in and resultant complicity required in dealing with what race continues to do” (96). To support this argument, Lentin uses the examples of immigration, Islamophobia, Indigenous sovereignty, and anti-Black racism. She analyzes how antiracism is re-labelled as “identity politics” and, as a result, is dismissed through moral judgments, white innocence, and a preference for being around those who are similar to us.

Returning again to racial literacy and building upon the argument about identity politics, Lentin contends that the tools necessary to critically engage with race need to be expanded to acknowledge the distinctions between race and Indigeneity. Without this expansion, Lentin states, Indigeneity and race cannot be disentangled and will continue to be conflated as support for colonial systems to deny Indigenous sovereignty. To support this argument, Lentin focuses on the ways in which whiteness prescribes Indigeneity as frozen in an “essentialized palimpsests of their past and forced to perform a cultural authenticity that in fact has been lost to many as a result of colonial dispossession” (121). By not talking about the ways in which the conflation of Indigeneity and race freeze Indigenous people in the past, the pervasive idea that Indigenous people do not possess the skills or tools needed to succeed in modern life cannot be overcome. Further, ensuring the conceptual distinctions and politically strategic confluences of the separation between Indigeneity and race reveals ways to better understand how, as Hawaiian scholar J. Kēhaulani Kauanui maintains, Wall Street would not exist without Indigenous dispossession. By examining how colonialism is operationalized to exclude those racialized as “other than white” from national belonging and racial constructs of property, we can begin to understand how race extends beyond black/white binaries.

In her last chapter, “Good Jew/Bad Jew” Lentin examines how antisemitism is operationalized through whiteness to define and re-define race to suit political agendas. According to Lentin, antisemitism has stepped in as an absolute measure for racism, perpetuated and empowered through whiteness by comparing current racism to the historic wrongs perpetrated during the Holocaust. She also argues that “the political utility of antisemitism today is not to illuminate the operations of race, but rather to obscure them” (136). To support these arguments, Lentin demonstrates that, where antisemitism exists, Islamophobia often exists too but, by framing antisemitism in racism and Islamophobia in faith, whiteness constructs Islamophobia not as racism but as a rational reaction to an irrational faith – something that is not seen as congruent with the ways in Western society understands freedom. Thus, Lentin contends that all of these processes – antiblackness, antisemitism, Islamophobia, colonialism, and white supremacy – are co-constituted and mobilized to advance white interests at the expense of racialized people.

Lentin demonstrates that we need to talk about the ways in which race is operationalized in order that it can be dismantled. Indeed, her main argument, “pretending race does not matter does not make it go away,” is supported throughout her book. By talking about race, we can remove the power inherent in it to further white supremacy. Centring the voices of Indigenous and Black communities and people of colour helps tear down the structures that presuppose who can and cannot be knowers about race matters.

This book is valuable to critical race studies because it draws attention to discussions of race that move away from the personification of racism, which seeks to keep racism framed as character morality. Further, this book is important to Indigenous studies because it explores race beyond black/white binaries and builds on the work of Indigenous studies scholars who have argued that Indigeneity and race are distinct factors in understanding how whiteness is perpetuated through settler-colonialism. As a student whose research focuses on understanding the complexities of Ukrainian-Canadian whiteness and its ability to perpetuate Indigenous erasure, *Why Race Still Matters* is important because it demystifies talking about race and provides insight into the ways discussions of race are often sidestepped. Lentin effectively argues that it is only by talking about race and the power it holds as a technology to include and exclude that we can begin to untangle the ways that race is perpetuated through Islamophobia, antiblack racism, colonialism, anti-Semitism and how white supremacy is co-constituted and continually redefined to manage exclusion and inclusion in national and transnational contexts.