

## Book Review

Mensah, Joseph, & Williams, Christopher, J. (2017). *Boomerang Ethics: How Racism Affects Us All*. Halifax: Fernwood. ISBN 9781552668863.

As a White<sup>1</sup> woman with a background in anti-racist work within post-secondary institutions, I saw in the title of Joseph Mensah and Christopher J. Williams' book, *Boomerang Ethics: How Racism Affects Us All*, an opening of a new space for White folks like myself to engage in dismantling racist structures and working against racist stereotypes. The title, after all, gestures towards the fact that we are all related in racist structures – a truth that is often overlooked in our focus on how racism affects people of color. How, I wondered, would these two Black scholars involve White folks – including me – in the anti-racist struggle?

Through their notion of the “boomerang,” Mensah and Williams introduce their White audience to the interdependence inherent to racism; however, they surprised me with their angle. Drawing attention to the limits of social justice approaches to anti-racism, the authors craft an anti-racist argument within Canada's multicultural, neoliberal context. Demonstrating how race acts as a boomerang, with harmful effects not only on the victims of racism but also on the dominant White population, they thus aim to motivate White folks to address racism because it is in our own best interest to do so. While I found their analysis of the functioning of anti-Black racism in Canada comprehensive and their approach innovative, I worry that the argument risks re-privileging White folks and simplifying racial issues within a neoliberal analysis, further marginalizing people of color in the process.

Mensah and Williams speak to the dominant society by extending their comprehensive literature review on the effects of racism to include the effects on White folks, framing their argument within Canada's multicultural, neoliberal context. Their review addresses anti-Black racism in various Canadian spheres by chapter, including within urban ethnic enclaves, the labour market, health care systems, education systems, sports, and the criminal justice system. In all cases, they draw upon a blend of studies that inform readers of the functioning of racism at the level of individuals but also at institutional and structural levels, according to theories of both “race relations” and “racial oppression.” Each chapter concludes with an analysis of how racism in that sphere boomerangs to impact White folks, having material, economic, psychological, mental, and ethical effects (p. 240). This appeal to White self-interest is complemented by the authors' use of mainstream Canadian neoliberal and multicultural discourse to frame boomerang effects. For instance, White folks are encouraged to address racism in order to reduce national expenditures on security and health care attributed to the effects of racism, as well as to increase our national competitiveness and prestige by ameliorating the quality of our workforce (p. 234). A similar appeal to Canada's multicultural identity, where “*diversity is the spice of life*” (p. 75), motivates the mainstream to uphold our national identity as a cultural mosaic and ensure the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout, I follow the choice of Mensah and Williams to use the language of “White” and “Black” in the aggregate sense in order to capture their dialectical interpenetration, while recognizing that both are “heterogeneous social torsions, imbued with multiple power dynamics, identities and ethnicities” (p. 18).

benefits of “cross-cultural learning, national unity and immigrant integration” (p. 236). In these ways, the authors apply national and corporate discourse of economic competition and unity in diversity, with the hopes of motivating anti-racist action within dominant White society.

While such appeals may persuade segments of the mainstream to act, they unfortunately gloss over structural components of racism that in fact benefit the White population, and they also normalize neoliberal economic processes as the grounds for decision-making, potentially further marginalizing people of color in the process. Notably, the authors themselves rely on a definition of racism that acknowledges how “those who are in a position to alleviate it tend to benefit from it, by way of power, money, privilege and prestige” (p. 10); however, these benefits are rarely addressed throughout, due to the emphasis on negative boomerang effects. For instance, the text obscures the benefits to mainstream Canadians that result from the very settler colonial structures that lead to inadequate health care provision for Indigenous peoples, as addressed by the third boomerang – benefits that extend to immigrant populations including Black folks (see Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Patel, Moussa, & Upadhyay, 2015). Without differentiation, the complexity of racist structures, including the differential benefits and effects on various groups, remains largely invisible within the analysis, with the exception of some treatment of east Asians. This homogenization means that the unique structures of racism connected to some groups, such as the increasing racism towards those who appear Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim post-9-11, are subsumed within a singular narrative of anti-Blackness, and White readers are never led to consider our interconnectedness within these other racist structures. With the roots of racism and its benefits to the mainstream thus obscured, the text may inadvertently re-privilege White folks through a simplification of race-related issues.

At the same time, by appealing to the self-interest of the White majority within neoliberal and multicultural framing, Mensah and Williams aspire to overturn the hierarchies associated with compassion or pity, whereby White folks are elevated by their condescension towards the victims of racism. This is a critical move, as anti-racist work necessitates upsetting the power imbalances inherent to racist structures. On the other hand, the authors risk re-privileging White folks by centring our subjectivity and self-interest, and reinforcing us as key actors over and against people of color within a normalised neoliberal system. For instance, in arguing that the “advantages of using our minority immigrant populations to access various international markets remain untapped by corporate Canada” (p. 120), Mensah and Williams risk dehumanizing racialized people for their utility and reinforcing racist immigration policies for capital gains. Furthermore, these White actors are likely to be privileged, White men, those who will see the economic and cultural benefits within what is not only a racist but also heteropatriarchal society. In reinforcing already privileged actors, the text risks overwriting the agency of Black and other folks racialized as non-White, as well as framing their expressions against the violence of racist systems as “killjoy,” as Sarah Ahmed (2010) describes such expressions, counterproductive to the positive efforts being made by White folks to counter racism in building a multicultural and economically viable national identity. Though Mensah and Williams open a necessary conversation by naming whiteness in relation to structures of racism, the overall message of the boomerang risks remarginalizing actions and critiques by victims of racism, whose words may be perceived as “killjoy” in the face of White efforts.

Despite these challenges, Mensah and Williams do gesture towards how we are all related in racist structures, how we all experience racism's deleterious effects, and that we thus all hold responsibility to act in response. As a result, their work reinvigorates democracy wherein the "binary oppositions between minority and majority interests, as well as between individual and collective concerns" (p. 243) are obliterated in a social contract that acknowledges our mutual interdependence and relationality. In doing so, *Boomerang Ethics* does not deny a social justice lens, but seeks to "dissolve the common duality between altruism and egoism" (p. 243) to motivate additional people to act. Despite its limitations, the relationality at the core of the argument is what is truly necessary if we – all of us – are to build the solidarity to address racism.

**Carrie Karsgaard**

Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta

[karsgaard@ualberta.ca](mailto:karsgaard@ualberta.ca)

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