

# My teacher asks me: Why Does Race Still Matter?

*“A committed Killjoy has a lifetime of experience of being the cause of unhappiness... A Killjoy is willing to live with the consequences of what she is willing. She is thus willing to be the cause of someone’s unhappiness...”*

(Ahmed, 2018:258)

People have a short-span memory. My partner’s great grandmother was a slave in Montego Bay, my great grandfather was a settler in Tangier; Thus, I have racial capital<sup>1</sup>, my partner does not. The answer to the question- why does race still matter? It is to be found on the question itself: for as long as those racialised other than white<sup>2</sup> do not have the privilege of ignoring why race matters, as the teller of tales Cornel West remind us, race simply does matter (1992). Beyond West’s moralistic approach, race matters because it has the power to impose the vulnerability of premature death (Gilmore, 2006)- which until recently, and following the covid pandemic and the assassination of George Floyd, operated very clearly through denying the universal right to breathe (Mbembe, 2020).

In other words, race matters because of what it does. Within countries, race stipulates who gets access to healthcare, education, employment, housing, and any other good and service that one can possibly think of (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). Globally, race matters because it dictates the terms in which countries are integrated within the global world order; what economic policies are accepted or condemned and who gets to impose them; who gets to produce what, at what cost, and for the benefit of whom; who harvests ecological destruction and who collects the consequences; who has a voice within global governance institutions; who is in place and who is out of place; what cultural beliefs, ideas, and forms of knowledge production are valid or rejected; which countries are considered underdeveloped and in need of constant intervention; who dies from preventable diseases; who gets bombed; and whose lives are subjugated to eternal dispossession, debt, and modern forms of slavery (Escobar, 2012; Hickel, 2017). The list goes on, but in a nutshell: race matters because it functions as the organising principle of socio-economic and political life at both, local and planetary scale.

Race matters, but the question that we should ask ourselves is: how can we make race not matter? There are indeed no shortcuts to anti-racism (Aouragh, 2019), and not talking about race is simply not an option (DiAngelo, 2018). Yet, I believe that dominant conceptualisations of race and racism, and thus anti-racist thinking and *praxis* are short sided, hence making difficult to unmask and disassemble the ways in which race operates as a tool for biopolitical, or rather necropolitical,

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<sup>1</sup> Read as racial privilege- we both have different forms of racial capital, but mine translates into global racial privilege.

<sup>2</sup> The paper conceptualisation of whiteness goes beyond deterministic color-coded markers and includes relative cultural, economic, and geographical attributes and privileges embedded within Europeanness/Westernness (Hesse, 2016).

governance. If we want to make race not matter, the first step should acknowledge what race and racism are, where do they come from, how do they relate to each other, and ultimately how do they operate today. Highlighting these is the purpose of this piece.

### ***Race and racism, or rather, racio-colonial capitalism and white supremacy?***

As paradoxical as it may sound, I am not entirely convinced that race is an optimum term to deal with modern racism. As a matter of fact, I do not think being anti-racist is nearly enough to make race not matter. A word of caution, this statement does not imply that race does not matter, or that it matters less than the economic deterministic conceptualisation of class as the white left will have it; as noted by Stuart Hall, “race is the modality through which class is lived” (Hall *et al*, 1978:394). However, my own view is that race is one of the intersectional modalities through which colonialism is practised<sup>3</sup>. This statement is meant to put things into the *whiter* picture, that is to say, coming to terms with the fact that the forms of racism that we are dealing with today are both intrinsic and consequential of a very particular form of racial rule: European/Western Ethnogovernmentality<sup>4</sup>, usually under the banner of Global White Supremacy<sup>5</sup>.

Cornel West suggested that “one cannot talk about race, race matters and diversity, without wrestling with the vicious legacy of white supremacy” (2001); to which I may add that, one cannot wrestle with the vicious legacy of white supremacy without dismantling its hegemonic role within the global-colonial political economy (Bhambra, 2021). To put it differently, we need to acknowledge that ‘race is not only colonially constituted’ but that ‘race is colonialism speaking’ (Hesse, 2016; Wolfe, 2016). Hence, we cannot make race not matter unless we dismantle the colonial matrix of power sustained by white supremacy<sup>6</sup> (Quijano, 2000).

### ***The shortcomings of race-thinking***

The aim of this paper is by no means to side-line race, but rather to question its conceptual utility to fully dismantle the raciocracry of global white supremacy (Hesse, 2013). As race-scholar Lentin has pointed out, the shortcomings of race-thinking today are largely rooted on a lack of racial literacy. Race is predominately conceptualised as an extension of 18<sup>th</sup> century scientific racism- a descriptive term that highlights biological differences among populations, rather than a hierarchical and classificatory structure of power, an on-going process of racialisation<sup>7</sup> which goal

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<sup>3</sup> By intersectional modalities the paper refers particularly to Stoler’s idea that colonies operated as ‘laboratories of modernity’ where multiple intersectional classificatory structures of power were forged; for a discussion on gender see (Stoler, 2010), for a discussion on intersectionality see (CRC, 1977)

<sup>4</sup> The term draws from Hoffman’s analysis of governance and conflict in DRC which stresses the linkages between colonially forged identities, citizenship, and territory (2014); here the term aims at emphasizing the relationship between whiteness, Europeaness, and westernness.

<sup>5</sup> A global system of economic, social, and political oppression that rests on the idea of western cultural superiority (Francois, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> By the colonial matrix of power, I refer to the Latino American Coloniality/Modernity school’s idea of interlinked material and epistemological structures of power, see for instance (Quijano, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> The active process of race-making (Wolfe, 2016).

is the maintenance of white privilege<sup>8</sup> on a planetary scale (2020). In turn, this misunderstanding of what race is, reinforces the conceptualisation of racism as an issue fixed in a distant past by associating it with what Fredrickson has termed overtly racial regimes such as Nazi Germany, Jim Crow, and apartheid South Africa (2002). Racism today is then dismissed or at best diminished to a legacy of individual forms of prejudice, irrational behaviours, and occasional extreme acts of verbal or physical discrimination; thus obscuring the set of beliefs and practises that sustain the normativity of white supremacy. In turn, this allows racism to operate as ‘not-racism’ under post-racial tropes of neo-modernity embedded within discourses of white working-class identity politics, national self-interest, global security threats, economic common sense, migration policies, underdevelopment, and a myriad of other- I am not racist but.

### ***The useful-ness of race***

Narrow racial thinking is well acknowledged within race scholarship through the articulation of alternative definitions which stress that race is a hierarchical technology of governance for the management of human differences (Heng, 2011, 2011a); and that of racism as prejudice plus power (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). While these more-refined conceptualisations are useful to highlight structural forms of oppression and to contra-rest tropes of reverse racism, they are not enough to directly expose and dismantle the hegemonic racial doctrine which underpins and reproduces global racio-colonial capitalism.

When placed in historical perspective, these refined conceptualisations make the institution of race quite literally as old as humanity itself. In fact, Yuval-Noah Harari, author of ‘Sapiens’, goes as far as suggesting that Homo Sapiens came to dominate the world through their capacity to believe in things existing purely in the imagination, giving rise to discrimination and leading to the first genocide of humanity- the cleansing of the Neanderthals (2013). My point being that exploitation by hierarchical differentiation, and power (over the body) through imaginary classifications have always existed in societies across the world in some rudimentary form; thus, such conceptualisations make race a loaded term applicable to any society at any given time running the risk of making race an empty signifier.

### ***White Supremacy is the darker side of modernity***

Other societies have colonized and conquered, yet, doing so under the discourse of race is a Euro-colonial phenomenon, one in which whiteness acts as a tool for the legitimization of exploitation through presumed superiority. In that sense, race may be as old as humanity, but white supremacy is endemic to European modernity<sup>9</sup>. This does not mean that regimes of race did not exist before in some sort of ‘phobia’ or ‘ism’- the phenomenon commonly precedes the term, and we know that collective differentiation through generic attributes such as culture, language and religion presuppose taxonomic, color-coded discrimination (Fredrickson, 2002).

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<sup>8</sup> By white privilege I refer to the systematic socio-political and economic advantages which depend on the un-privilege of others (Dyer, 2002; McIntosh, 1982); this includes, to an extent, the geographical dilution of the ‘wages of whiteness’ to people racialized as non-white in Europe and other Western empires.

<sup>9</sup> The word European is meant to highlight that there is a pluriverse of modernity’s out there beyond Europe.

The distinctive element of white supremacy, however, is that processes of exploitation by racialization consolidated during a time that presupposed the equality of all man<sup>10</sup>, hence needing for some to be categorized as less than hu-man, or rather, less than white (*Idem*). As Patrick Wolfe has argued, modern racism is a configuration of ideological elements that emerged during the 18th century alongside economic social relations of production with the objective to harness processes of emancipation “a situation that threatened white freedom and black unfreedom alike” (Wolfe, 2016:65). To put it differently, white freedom and non-white unfreedom should be understood as mutually constitutive; it is not that one is free and the other is not, but rather, one’s freedom depends on the unfreedom of the other. This is further clarified by Robin Kelly whom drawing from W.E.B. Du Bois’ ‘Wages of whiteness’ has pointed out how of capitalism still depends on its ability to capture white people to invest in white supremacy through promising a share of the spoils (2017). In other words, the idea of whiteness has long served the purpose of pacifying the emerging white proletariat by providing racial privilege. Accordingly, white supremacy is an ‘ideology in its pure sense’ (Wolfe, 2016): whiteness is divide and rule by ideological means.

### ***The divide: Racio-colonial capitalism***

This does not mean that white supremacy is not performative, in fact, one can pinpoint with accuracy the crystallization of practises of whiteness through what Cedric Robinson refers to as internal colonisation- the proletarianization of European peoples though enclosure and slavery (Robinson, 1983). Racialisation is then part and parcel of the Euro-colonial cumulative history (Wolfe, 2016); but it was however with the conquest of the Americas that racial-practices transformed whiteness into a form of global racial capital (Quijano, 2007).

Moreover, the ‘discovery’ of whiteness did not occur in isolation, but rather in relation to interconnected broader processes that have come to constitute today’s global-colonial political economy: the formation of nation states and the expansion of the capitalist economy (Robinson 1983; Bhambra,2021). These processes were dependent on the appropriation and exploitation of natural resources<sup>11</sup> and forged through the global connections emerging from slavery and colonialism. Hence, detaching whiteness, or race and colonialism for that matter, from the formation of global capitalism ‘is not social science, is science fiction’.

Acknowledging these linkages is crucial to make race not matter because they expose the greater short-coming of anti-racist thinking today, something that Lentin refers to as the *blanchissage* of racism - the idea that racism emerged as an intra-European form of prejudice, a domestic problem disconnected from the historical and geographical social relations of dispossession on which the global-colonial political economy depends (2020; Rutazibwa, 2021). Racism is then not an aberration, a deviance from an otherwise *enlightened* normality, but rather the dividing foundation between two social worlds: metropole and colony, homo Europeus and the rest. Overcoming this ‘double bind’ is key to make race not matter (Hesse, 2006); and we should ask ourselves- will race matter the way it does if it were not the fundamental pillar of the global-colonial political economy? And consequently, can we make race not matter without dismantling the colonial matrix of power?

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<sup>10</sup> The word man is purposely used.

<sup>11</sup> Land and labour.

### ***Anti-racist or anti-colonialist?***

I believe the answer to these questions to be no, unapologetically; and thus, why I believe that although racial literacy is necessary, focusing only on race risks leading to ‘methodological coloniality’ (Bhambra, 2017). Understanding that white supremacy and the global-colonial political economy are mutually constitutive is coming to terms with the fact that being anti-racist and not being anti-colonial- which implies among other things being antiracist globally- is one way of making anti-racism highly non-performative (Ahmed, 2004).

To make race not matter, one must be anti-colonial, that is, rejecting the global-colonial political economy and the discourses that sustain it. The strength of an anti-colonial approach is that it does not only account for, but it transcends race, or rather puts race within the larger picture. This said, we need to go beyond the idea that colonialism is simply a structure, this conceptualisation does not lead to metamorphosis; race is a structure, capitalism is a structure, gender is a structure. Blaming structures is all too easy and does not make them less of a fact. And more to the point, we tend to forget that structures are made of people and their everyday interactions. Colonialism is more than a structure, it is highly performative, it is a process, it is a way of occupying the world (Hage, 2017). A way of occupying the world that rests on the cultural (epist)hegemony of white supremacy: a westernised way of inhabiting the world through classificatory relations of domination and exploitation of human and not human nature alike (*Idem*). As sisters Aph and Sly Ko have eloquently argued, the exploitation of nature is directly linked to all human forms of oppression, because at its core, it represents *the colonized ethics of humanity* (2017).

Beyond the vegan-philosophical approach of the Ko sisters, I firmly believe that understanding colonialism as a way of inhabiting the world will do much for anti-racism today. Perhaps the clearest example of this was the Corona crisis. Contrary to dominant timelines, political ecologist Andreas Malm has highlighted that the pandemic did not start in March last year, but rather it emerged alongside the global processes of exploitation and imperial expansion outlined above<sup>12</sup> (2020). Similarly, covid-19 does not deny the right to breathe aleatorily, it does so following historical patterns of dispossession; coronavirus is then racio-colonial capitalism speaking. In turn, one cannot be, pragmatically speaking, anti-racist unless it avoids occupying the world in ways that contribute towards the death of racialised others through the global-colonial political economy; in this particular case through patterns of consumption that fuel deforestation (Malm, 2020). To put it differently, one can be white, racially literate and an activist, or simply born British, and still actively contribute towards racio-colonial forms of exploitation and oppression. In short, for as long as we do not change *the way in which we occupy the world, race will matter*.

### ***Decolonization is indeed not a metaphor***

Finally, decolonization is indeed not a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012); and simply ‘decolonizing’ museums, the curriculum, and public spaces will not give back the land to native Americans, it will not stop aboriginal children in Australia from being taken by social services, it will not stop racialized rates of incarceration in the United States nor Syrian refugees dying in the European

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<sup>12</sup> Particularly with the invention of the steamboat which fastened the expansion of euro-colonialism and white supremacy through fossil fuel capitalism (Malm, 2016, 2021).

coasts, it would not stop globally produced famines and conflicts beyond western fortresses, and it will not stop the next pandemic from targeting the global proletariat. Decolonization starts by changing the way we occupy the world, by rejecting our contribution to the colonized ethics of humanity; this is extremely hard in a world that it is rigged for some of us to do so- that is the beauty of racial-privilege. Nevertheless, there are clear structural entry points beyond individual behavior that will help to make this transition: debt cancelation, reparation and retribution, equal terms of trade, democratization of international institutions, global wealth taxes, de-growth, and the democratization of the commons to name but a few (Hickel, 2017).

Moreover, dismantling the colonial matrix of power in its totality, requires breaking away from hegemonic western ideas of superiority, particularly the association of human evolution with global-colonial capitalism; which today disguises itself under discourses of neoliberalism and global development. This implies that the path to make race not matter must come from a pluriverse of alternatives that exist outside the enlightened normativity of white supremacy- be it Ubuntu philosophy or Buen Vivir take on the economy. This requires opening spaces and forms of knowledge production that will enable different ways of occupying the world beyond Fukuyama's wet dream; and it is only by doing so that we can make race not matter, or at least matter in ways that are not perverse.

The real question that we should be asking ourselves is:

***'Whose unhappiness are we willing to cause?'***

(Ahmed, 2018:258)

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