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DISCUSSION

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The New Racial Regime: Transnational Trajectories of Racial Oppression and Resistance

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Debbie Bargallie, Houria Bouteldja, and Too Black in conversation with Alana Lentin, author of The New Racial Regime. Recalibrations of White Supremacy, London, Pluto Press, 2025, 304 pp., £ 21.99 (paperback), £ 14 (e-book). Edited by Sandeep Bakshi and Maria Elena Indelicato

ABSTRACT
This article convenes a transnational dialogue on The New Racial Regime: Recalibrations of White Supremacy by bringing together three scholars from Australia, France, and the United States – Debbie Bargallie, Houria Bouteldja, and Too Black – to reflect on the contemporary relevance of Alana Lentin's contribution to race critical theory. Each contributor engages the book through a key concern it raises, while Lentin responds by reflecting on how race critical theory operates across different political and geographical contexts. Conducted over six months via email, the exchange evolved alongside unfolding geopolitical events, prompting further consideration of the urgency and analytical significance of Lentin's work. The article reproduces this dialogue in full, highlighting the global resonance of debates on race, racism, and white supremacy in the current conjuncture.

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Introduction

Considered a towering figure among the circle of critical race studies scholars to which we, Sandeep Bakshi and Maria Elena Indelicato, belong, Alana Lentin has earned this status through her compelling analyses of the shifting dynamics of race and racism in contemporary western societies. From her critical examination of the political trajectories and strategies of various antiracist organisations in Europe (2004), through her analysis of the 'recited truths' proclaiming the death of multiculturalism across diverse geographical contexts (with Gavan Titley 2011), to her incisive interrogation of postracial public discourses in multiple fora (2020), Lentin's research has consistently unravelled the

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pernicious ways in which race and racism persist despite their publicly proclaimed demise across different historical periods and geographical locations.

Lentin's scholarship has never stood still. Moving from one manifestation of race and racism to another seemingly unrelated expression in a different context, her work has masterfully joined the dots. Across her analyses, Lentin has demonstrated how shared discursive strategies and state-engineered practices of erasure have paved the way for the globalisation of white supremacy that we are witnessing today. As the political landscape rapidly shifts under the resurgence of imperial ambitions, she continually adapts her analyses to provide the conceptual tools necessary to grasp the current conjuncture.

Her biography reflects the same intellectual generosity and ethical integrity that characterise her scholarship. Throughout her life, Lentin has participated in numerous political struggles, including movements against Islamophobia in France, the criminalisation of asylum seekers in Europe, offshore detention in Australia, and, more recently, the genocide in Gaza. She is a Founding Collective member of the Institute for the Critical Study of Zionism. More importantly, as Lentin's engagement with the work of Cedric Robinson in *The New Racial Regime: Recalibrations of White Supremacy* illustrates, in the rapidly evolving eco-system of race critical studies, where the temptation to claim ownership of new terms and concepts remains constant, Lentin has consistently acknowledged how other scholars' work and exchanges with many public intellectuals shaped her own scholarship.

In *The New Racial Regime*, Lentin contextualises Robinson's notion of racial regimes for the contemporary time. The book emerges as a point of resistance against disingenuous and uninformed attacks on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and teaching of histories of colonialism and enslavement. Lentin offers an expansive account, with specific exemplars from US, Britain, Australia, France and Palestine, to counter the onslaught of racism and white supremacy in the 'new' racial regimes, being stitched from old and new cloth in the wake of global uprising of Black Lives Movement (2020) and demands for social justice. Sounding the alarm, Lentin compels us to be wary of inclusion and diversity exercises whereby the new racial regime extends and distils white supremacist ideas through racialised subjects summoned into positions of power. The language of decolonisation, Indigeneity and social justice, in this regard, undergoes co-optation, trivialisation, and ultimate weaponisation to enact punitive disciplining on social organisers and academics engaged in radical labour.

Considering what a timely intervention *The New Racial Regime* is, we invited three scholars – Debbie Bargallie (Griffith University, Australia), Houria Bouteldja (political activist and former spokesperson for the Indigènes de la République, France), and Too Black (poet, scholar, and organiser, U.S.) – to discuss Lentin's contribution to race critical theory in the current conjuncture from three distinct geographical locations. We asked them to read Lentin's latest book, *The New Racial Regime: Recalibrations of White Supremacy*, and engage with it through one key concern it raises. We then invited Lentin to respond to each of their questions, offering reflections on how doing race critical theory speaks to different contexts. The conversation was held over six months via email, during which unfolding geopolitical events prompted further reflections on the relevance of Lentin's work. We reproduce in full the rich ensuing dialogue.

Debbie Bargallie, Thoughts and Reflections on White Performances of Responsibility, Decolonisation and Indigeneity

As an Indigenous Australian critical race scholar, my engagement with *The New Racial Regime* has focused on Chapters 2, 4 and 5 where Alana Lentin most sharply exposes how race is preserved, not through overt racism, but through institutional routines of responsibility, recognition, and regulation. These chapters speak clearly to the operation of race in settler-colonial contexts like Australia.

Lentin's engagement with the work of Indigenous Australian scholar Tony Birch in Chapter 2 is compelling. Birch insists that colonial violence is not a historical wound, but a present structure lived in the body, the land, and institutions. He critiques white performances of responsibility as affective acts that avoid material change. Lentin builds on this to show how white liberalism re-centres itself through apology or guilt, creating an affective structure where remorse operates as a form of moral credit. Here, whiteness positions itself as both the subject of harm and the agent of repair, maintaining racial order through emotional display rather than structural redress.

The insight is clear: whiteness adapts not by denying racism, but by re-narrating itself as its solution. Responsibility becomes performance, not transformation. In dialogue with Birch, Lentin highlights the need for forms of engagement that refuse innocence, displace whiteness as the subject of antiracism, and insist on the discomfort of structural change.

In Chapter 4, *Capturing Indigeneity, Colonising Decolonisation*, Lentin shows how universities and cultural institutions take up the language of decolonisation in ways that neutralise its political force. Rather than dismantling settler power, decolonisation becomes a form of governance, incorporating Indigeneity under terms that preserve institutional authority.

Indigeneity is invited into acknowledgements, advisory boards, curricula, and cultural programmes, but in forms that are curated and non-threatening. Lentin calls this capture: Indigeneity is displayed as evidence of institutional progress while stripped of its disruptive or sovereign potential. Radical critique, centred on sovereignty, land, or refusal, is sidelined, while acceptable voices are regulated into a presence that affirms the institution's liberal image.

This process is structural. Institutions proclaim decolonisation as a moral alibi, performing self-critique to secure legitimacy without material change. The louder these commitments, the more colonial foundations remain intact. What emerges is a racial regime that survives not by exclusion alone, but by accommodating Indigeneity on controlled terms.

Lentin presses us to ask: Can Indigeneity ever be institutionally visible without being captured? And how do we resist decolonisation becoming a settler project that protects, rather than unsettles, the racial regime?

In Chapter 5, Lentin critiques the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, showing that its adoption operates primarily to shield state power and police dissent, particularly around Palestine, rather than actually protecting Jewish communities. Once fixed, definitions of racism become tools to discipline critique, particularly in academic and activist spaces.

Her analysis extends beyond the IHRA, asking us to consider the political function of definition itself. Institutions rely on pre-set meanings not to expand justice but to control

what can be said, and by whom. This resonates in Australia, where the state's three-part definition of Aboriginal identity (descent, self-identification, community acceptance) has enabled strategic claims to Indigenous identity that serve institutional goals, producing inclusion without addressing sovereignty or dispossession.

The lesson is clear: definitions are never neutral. They shape the conditions of recognition and dissent. By institutionalising race through definitional frameworks, the racial regime is restitched, with anti-racist language transformed into a means of control.

Across these three chapters, Lentin demonstrates that race does not persist despite critique – it survives through it. Emotional responsibility (Chapter 2), institutionalised decolonisation (Chapter 4), and definitional authority (Chapter 5) all serve as tools for 'restitching' the racial regime, a term she borrows from Cedric Robinson. This restitching is not incidental but constitutive: the racial regime adapts precisely by absorbing its critiques and reworking them into new forms of legitimacy.

The significance of *The New Racial Regime* lies in its refusal to offer the comfort of reform. It shows how anti-racist gestures – apologies, acknowledgements, definitions – can themselves become sites of capture. For those of us working within settler-colonial contexts, the challenge is how to think and act beyond the terms institutions make available, and how to resist the absorption of critique into the machinery of governance.

Question

You draw on the work of Indigenous Australian scholar Tony Birch, whose writing insists that colonial violence is not a historical event to be reconciled with, but an ongoing structure that is lived and felt. His challenge to settler institutions, and to white antiracism more broadly, is that emotional gestures of responsibility often serve as substitutes for structural transformation.

Later, you explore how institutional definitions, particularly the IHRA definition of antisemitism, are mobilised not simply to name racism, but to control how it is understood, by whom, and under what terms. A similar dynamic can be seen in the appropriation of the terms Indigenous and Indigeneity in the Australian context, where definitions can also be used by institutions to script inclusion on their own terms.

Taken together, these two dynamics, emotional performance and definitional control, raise a critical tension: How can meaningful engagement with race occur within systems that manage it so effectively? What forms of analysis, response, or refusal might escape being absorbed by the very regimes they seek to challenge?

Response

You have given me a gift, Debbie, by reading me back to myself and laying out how different questions raised by *The New Racial Regime* are in conversation with each other. What Cedric Robinson gave us with this idea of the racial regime – a set of 'representational mythologies' (Lentin 2025: 5) which is 'not new, but renewed, restitched from old cloth' (4) – is a methodology for creating these conversations. What you call the 'emotional response' that Tony Birch critiques in the way contestations over colonial history proceed in Australia is indeed intimately related to the problems of institutionalised definitions that I raise in the book's last chapter, 'Against Definitions'. The

institutions that try to hold us to these definitions manipulate the 'emotional response' by 'capturing' radical ideas in order to perpetuate racial-colonial governance.

This problem is becoming ever-more acute in the context of the rapid dismantling of the University, and the Humanities particularly. There is now a naked attack on spaces of learning where what Amílcar Cabral called the 'weapon of theory' can be sharpened, with entire programmes being defunded, staff fired, and students turned into apprentices for whatever new scheme capitalism has found to stymy social reproduction (Cabral 1966). However, it is equally possible to witness how emotional appeals such as 'respect for Indigenous knowledges' can be recruited for similar ends. So, we need to be vigilant to how those of us who are made to feel grateful that we have at least managed to keep the wolves from the door can have our work used for purposes that are entirely contradictory to our intentions.

It was you who sent me Tony Birch's article, '"I Could feel it in my Body": War on a History War', which frames the book's second chapter (Birch 2006). The chapter is concerned with how Western conceptions of time are used to deny Indigenous, Black and colonised people's authority over their own histories and current realities. White, western epistemology disciplines the colonised and/or the enslaved within a time-bound order according to which they are always 'running out of time', 'wasting time', 'living in the past', or 'unable to catch up' and 'get with the times'. Inspired by Robinson, Damien Sojoyner in his essay on 'Dissonance in Time' rejects linear time which seeks to make 'racially-charged exploitative practices' logical (Sojoyner 2017: 89). In his critique of white Australian historians who 'wage a war' around the footnote so that the waters of truth can be muddied enough that we can no longer see our reflection' (Birch 2006: 26), Birch joins Robinson who proposed that we need an entirely 'new history' (Robinson 2000). We cannot refer to the same version of history told to uphold the current order of things and expect a theory for overturning this reality to emerge.

How does this connect to my provocation 'against definitions'? In the final chapter of the book, I make use of Cedric Robinson's essay 'The First is an Attack on Culture' (Robinson 2019b). This builds on an earlier essay in which he argued that Black intellectuals have to attack the colonising West's imposition of the term 'Negro' as 'the negation of African' as 'the precondition for the reassertion of the historical tradition of African peoples' (Robinson 1981). In other words, to write what in another essay he calls a 'native theory of history' – 'built upon the experience and consciousness of the new African people, the Blacks' (Robinson 2019a) – the Black intellectual has to criticise, or in other words, to attack the culture that represents 'Black philosophy and theory of history' in a detrimental way (ibid.: 23). This is what Birch does too when he criticises the failure of progressive white Australian historians to respect Indigenous analyses of their own history and the history of their struggles. Instead, they take a 'civil' approach that fails to use the same 'guerrilla tactics' as those used by the right-wing in 'the persistent attacks on Aboriginal people in Australia' (Birch 2006: 25).

What Robinson and Birch lay bare is that we are in a terrain of war. The right understands this and is 'not interested in the history profession's equivalent of the Geneva Convention' (22). What I expose in the last chapter is that definitions of racism have become arms in that war. What we can do is to expose how this works and to point to other ways of doing things which are more resistant to co-optation because they 'refuse to accept the terms, the language, the conceptualisations' of society (Robinson 2019b: 71).

Our work together, and with Nilmini Fernando, on racial literacy building has tried to do this by developing ways of interpreting what race does that at the same time lay bare how more palatable explanations of racism, as a set of individual pathological attitudes, divert more radical antiracist efforts grounded in anticolonial resistance, into managerial box-ticking exercises (Bargallie et al. 2024). As has become familiar to anyone attempting to do any form of social justice work, the incorporation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's 'working definition of antisemitism' into neoliberal human resources instruments such as University codes of conduct and equity and diversity policies has led to it being used, not only to negate other people's experiences of racism, but to repress antiracism efforts. Taking a stance 'against definitions' is not a rejection of the need for definitions. In our work, we suggest that racial literacy is a solidarity-building practice in which practical understandings of how race operates, not as a transhistorical category, but as a shapeshifting set of practices and epistemologies that are mobilised for exploitative and oppressive ends, are collectively honed. When definitions are set in stone and incorporated within a policy infrastructure whose aim is confinement, not liberation, this poses a direct challenge to this solidarity practice.

Yet, as our own experience has taught us, no one is protected from radical ideas being captured for 'regulation', as you put it. We were invited by the Australian Human Rights Commission to write a guide to racial literacy which included a definition of antisemitism. We defined antisemitism as 'a European phenomenon'. This was objected to by Zionist groups who have, since the publication of *The New Antisemitism* in 1970 have been heavily promoting the idea that antisemitism is now primarily an Arab and Muslim problem. This severing of the history of antisemitism from its actual roots is accompanied by the denial of the myriad harms that Zionism has caused both in the West Asian region and globally is used to justify the occupation, repression and genocide of Palestinians in their homeland. In the book's third chapter, I expose how institutionally mandated Zionism, which Anna Younes and Dylan Rodríguez both refer to as a war that has global counterinsurgent effects, not only denies Palestinians' right to freedom of expression and from repression, but also polices antiracism with detrimental effects on Black, Indigenous and colonised people struggling for liberation from racist colonial structures everywhere (Younes 2020; Rodríguez 2023). To return to Birch, 'white performances of responsibility' mean little in the face of the complete impunity given to white supremacist settler colonialism and racial rule, be it in Palestine or on stolen Aboriginal land. As Tony Birch put it, 'if people in the academy feel a need to engage in this battle, then they should be prepared to fight with the same guerrilla tactics' (Birch 2006: 25).

Houria Bouteldja, Thoughts and Reflections on Anti-racism and Resistance Today

Your book, *The New Racial Regime*, offers one of the sharpest analyses of how racism functions today – not as a leftover of the past, but as the organising logic of neoliberal governance. What I found most compelling is your insistence that the so-called 'anti-woke' backlash is not simply a reactionary wave or a culture war, but a strategic reconstruction of power. You show how states, universities, and media systems collaborate to rebuild the racial order under the language of freedom, merit, and neutrality. Racism, in

your account, is not an ideological residue; it is the very mechanism through which contemporary societies manage life, labour, and dissent.

What struck me throughout your book is how you expose the institutional depth of this system. Racism, you argue, is not primarily produced by extremists or populists, but by respectable institutions that claim to be liberal and inclusive. Your discussion of the 'new' racial regime as a set of bureaucratic, discursive, and moral operations is crucial. You describe how racism mutates into the management of difference: a form of power that incorporates critique in order to neutralise it.

Your concept of 'white forgetting' captures this perfectly. The examples you analyse – from the *1619 Project* in the U.S. to the 'history wars' in Australia and the French invention of 'Islamo-leftism' – reveal that forgetting colonialism is an active political technology. Liberal democracies do not erase the past accidentally; they police memory as a way of reproducing the racial order. The result is a moral economy of innocence that transforms decolonial scholarship into a target of suspicion.

Equally powerful is your analysis of the institutionalisation of dissent. I found the way you track the absorption of critical vocabularies – 'diversity', 'equity', 'inclusion', even 'anti-racism' itself – particularly incisive. You demonstrate how these once-radical ideas are repackaged as instruments of bureaucratic self-congratulation. Within universities, 'diversity work' often functions less as resistance than as a way to stabilise the institution by displaying a controlled form of critique. Your description of how this process now underpins the repression of pro-Palestinian activism is chillingly accurate. What you show is not just hypocrisy, but the emergence of a disciplinary antiracism – an antiracism that protects power rather than challenging it.

Your discussion of state philosemitism is equally essential. You lay bare how governments invoke the language of 'Jewish safety' to criminalise solidarity with Palestinians, transforming antisemitism into a tool of censorship. This, as you argue, represents the moral pivot of the current racial regime: the transformation of historical guilt into a technology of empire. In this context, your engagement with the capture of indigeneity – the way Zionist narratives appropriate Indigenous frameworks to erase Palestinians – reveals how settler colonial logic continually reinvents itself through mimicry and displacement.

What I admire most in your work is that you never separate the discursive from the material. Racism is not only a question of speech or representation; it structures economies, borders, and institutions. You show that the racial regime operates by managing who is allowed to be human, who is disposable, and who is profitable. That clarity gives the book an immense political force.

At the same time, your analysis raises an urgent question about strategy. If the racial regime today relies less on exclusion than on differential inclusion – the careful management and showcasing of diversity – then critique alone may not suffice. As you note, universities, NGOs, and cultural institutions now depend on the appearance of dissent to legitimise themselves. Resistance risks being captured at the very moment it becomes visible. The challenge, then, is not only to expose the regime but to out-organize it – to imagine forms of struggle that cannot be absorbed or co-opted.

Your work opens the door to that reflection. It invites us to think beyond moral discourse and beyond the safe spaces of recognition. It calls for a renewed politics that links decolonial, feminist, and anticapitalist struggles without allowing them to be managed by the very structures they seek to dismantle.

Question

In *The New Racial Regime*, you show how the management of diversity and the co-optation of dissent have become central to the reproduction of racial power. If the current order depends less on open exclusion than on the integration and containment of critique, how can antiracist movements recover their transformative potential? Do you believe that the necessary horizon today lies in rebuilding internationalist, anti-imperialist alliances – connecting struggles against policing, borders, and capitalist exploitation – or can meaningful resistance still emerge *within* neoliberal institutions like the university without feeding the very regime you describe?

Response

> I do not deny my bad faith. (Khiari 2009: 12)
> What is it that we continue to be pulled into or seduced by? Because everything that is happening is meant to derail us. (Sheehi 2026)

Your question contains its own answer, because of course 'the necessary horizon today lies in rebuilding internationalist, anti-imperialist alliances'. However, when I listened to the radical anticolonialist psychoanalyst and scholar Lara Sheehi in her conversation with podcast host Jared Ware of *Millennials are Killing Capitalism*, I was reminded that attempts at this rebuilding necessitate constant manoeuvring. Sheehi discusses the fact that even when radicals are in political alignment with each other, we are required to check what we are seduced by; what can so easily derail us. The utility of the racial regime as a heuristic is that tracking it in real time, as I did over the course of writing *The New Racial Regime*, allows one to check for seductions and possible derailments.

As Cedric Robinson lays out in the preface to *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, the book from which the idea of the racial regime is borrowed (C. J. Robinson 2007), racial regimes 'are successful because they intrinsically hide their histories and social relations' (Lentin 2025: 7). It is a 'nimble force' that uses representational mythologies about Africans for their control, maintenance and discipline (Myers 2022). I build on it to expose how race is recalibrated across time and across a variety of seemingly incommensurate contexts and through a panoply of contradictory narratives. The power of Robinson's exposition of the racial regime is that it disrupts settled theories of racial formation and draws out instead how race is reproduced recursively over time, in a much more chaotic manner than is often assumed; 'an alchemy of the intentional and the unintended' (Robinson 2007: xii). The implication of the nimbleness of the recursive capacities of the racial regime is that, by necessity, it keeps us on our toes.

Robinson reminds us that despite the 'covering conceit' of racial regimes (xii), they are subject to 'constant trembles' (xvi) because attacks from below expose their 'mechanisms of assembly' (xii) and force further recalibration. Thus, I argue that our job is to aggressively expose the origins and functions of the racial regime to undermine it. This is an arduous task for many reasons, not least the overwhelmingly disproportionate material resources and disciplinary and violent capacities that the racial regime has at its disposal. Antiracist movements must act within these constraints. However, as your own work, both as the former spokesperson for the *Movement* and later *Party of the Indigenous of the Republic* (PIR) in France and as a radical thinker who has guided an entire generation

of 'political antiracists' well beyond France itself has shown (Bouteldja 2016), antiracism is not reducible to one identifiable movement form or coherent discourse.

The PIR introduced a distinction between political and moral antiracism. Moral antiracism sees racism as the product of individual attitudes towards racialised people. You situate the emergence of this tendency in France in the 1980s when the far right was on the rise and a liberal antiracism construed the far-right voter as a 'poor uncultured person, full of prejudices and lacking in openness towards the world and other cultures' (Bouteldja 2022). We can, however, identify this moral attitude in a much earlier history, clearly visible for example among the European slavery abolitionists of the early nineteenth century. The moral form of antiracism becomes what you also term state antiracism, which is wholly compatible with a murderous border regime, institutionalised Islamophobia, western imperialism and attendant genocides.

Your question – 'can meaningful resistance still emerge *within* neoliberal institutions like the university? – is answered by your own warning about the incommensurability of political antiracism and the moral antiracism of the state. Using Robinson's emphasis on the importance of attacks from below on the racial regime, we could argue that the role of political antiracists who understand that 'a society is either racist or it is not' (Fanon 1994)[1] is to expose how institutions like the university, in line with the racial state, enforce a moral antiracism to defang its radical critics. In this time of accelerated genocide in Palestine, during which I wrote my book, the use by Zionists, which is to say all western institutions wielding power domestically and globally, of the maxims of moral antiracism as a stick to beat Palestinians and their allies with, is evidence of the dangers of working from within this structure and its logics.

Robinson long understood this. In his first book, *The Terms of Order*, he submits the western conception of the political to scrutiny from the vantage point of 'collective intelligence gathered from the struggle' (Robinson 2000: 10, cited in Myers 2023: 144), which Joshua Myers calls an 'essentially African response' (2003: 71), helping to resist life under western domination. He carries this critique through his work, particularly in two writings which I build on in *The New Racial Regime* (Robinson 1981, 2019a). He argues that in the process of decolonisation, the West's imposition of the term 'Negro' as 'the negation of African' had to be attacked by Black intellectuals. They therefore had to 'destroy the Negro' as 'the precondition for the reassertion of the historical tradition of African peoples' (Robinson 1981). He builds his argument with reference to Marx's essay *On the Jewish Question* (Marx 1972). Marx argued that this 'question' entailed an 'irrational', 'destructive' conceptualisation of the Jew, who was in fact a projection of German society (Robinson 2019: 71). This distorted projection was, Robinson argues, 'very clearly related … to the oppression of a people' (71). Just as African people had to literally be 'de*nigra*ted' in order to justify their exploitation and subsequent European enrichment, an essence of Jewishness had to be disconnected from actual Jews in order to make a free-floating 'Jewish question' available for German political needs.

We can take this together with your explanation that moral antiracism is 'essentially racist' because for '"foreigners" to be valorised, they were demanded to display their cultural specificities before all else in an often voyeuristic and obscene manner. At the same time, they were tacitly required not to make any demands on the French state' (Bouteldja

2022). Moral antiracism thus attempts to work within the constraints of the racial regime by tacitly accepting racist representations of the people it claims to work on behalf of.

IRobinson advises us that it is impossible to attack the racial regime by using the 'distorted' and 'oppressive' terms imposed upon people by colonial racist cultures (Robinson 2019). Our only option – one that comes with greater personal costs including loss of freedom, as witnessed for example in the case of the political prisoners of Palestine Action in Britain – is to refuse the terms and work towards abolition.

If indeed, as Fanon observed and as you take up, 'a society is either racist or it is not,' then we cannot accept an in-between state in which we accommodate racist 'elements'; we must fight to abolish the society and 'turn over a new leaf' (Fanon 2001: 255).

Too Black, thoughts and Reflections on the Relations Between, Capital, Race and the 'Racial Common Sense'

The New Racial Regime meticulously builds on the late scholar Cedric Robinson's understudied text, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*. Here, Lentin challenges us to reckon with the forces that produce and reproduce a 'racial common sense' by using Robinson's concept of the racial regime.

In a Western-dominated world, racial common sense is always recalibrating itself to maintain the interests of white capital. Lentin highlights the intellectual bankruptcy of the new racial regime. It produces no new ideas, so it must raid the rhetorical crates of its opposition. Therefore, anti-racism is contorted to serve corporate plunder. Indigeneity is expropriated to serve Zionist rationalizations for genocide. Anti-semitism – a phenomenon born in European society – is burdened with protecting it. The labour that is used to produce oppositional ideas is subsumed by the capital that funds it.

But as Lentin points out, these are not mere distractions or weaponisations. Race is not simply a random knife that capital pulls when it is cornered or a sideshow it performs when the high dies down. Because capital does not just manipulate racial common sense, it imbibes it. Race is foundational to Western common sense itself; it orders the world we walk in. Thus, any corrective mechanisms created to upend this order are subject to a reordering upon arrival.

Sometimes the subjects claiming to upend the racial regime do the reordering for it. Decolonial scholars who decolonise everything but the colony recalibrate the racial regime by softening the blow it deals to the premature lives of the colonised. Anti-racist psychobabble vaporises racism into an airborne virus we can't track or pin down. In a healthy society, these things would be 'distractions'. It wouldn't make sense to argue about the indigeneity of the Jew while a genocide is committed in their name. It would be ridiculous to award a Black historian a 'history prize' from a genocidal society built on denying history, and even more senseless to accept it. No humans should be involved in such matters. But that's not where we live. That's not how we're ordered. So the racial regime keeps recuperating.

As an organiser, I am interested in the process of recuperation. How do we identify the contradictions in our own movements to withstand and defeat the racial regime? What does it mean to combat the attacks on our programmes without ceding ground to do-nothing liberalism? *The New Racial Regime* forces us to ponder these questions as the terrains we face become clearer through the text.

Question

Often, people read texts like *The New Racial Regime*, and they immediately jump to 'what's the solution?' Solutions are obviously important, but this question oddly gives us few guideposts towards locating one. Thus, my question is, where do you ultimately ground the racial regime? You are critical of Western Marxist interpretations that cede race to a mechanical function of capital. Yet, I am still curious what forces you think put the racial regime in motion? What forces allow it to adapt and reload? Can these forces be targeted for defeat through any form of organization?

Response

> Like the Epstein thing, I don't really want to get into that much either, but I really am not very moved by a lot of that discourse. I don't even really care for the Epstein class framing.

During a 24th March conversation with Africana Studies scholar Momodou Taal on your show, 'The Black Myths Podcast', you had a conversation about power and imperialism that helps me answer the question of where I ground the racial regime (Taal and Black 2026). I am writing on April 10, 2026, three days since the US agreed to a temporary ceasefire of its joint assault on Iran, Donald Trump having threatened a day earlier that 'a whole civilisation will die tonight', triggering fears of a nuclear attack (Harb 2026). Your conversation casts doubt on a narrative that had gained pace over the preceding months, that, as expressed by Yumna Patel in the online Palestinian solidarity publication *Mondoweiss*, people on both the right and the left of US politics can agree 'that this relationship we've got going on with Israel is no good for us' (Patel 2026). Citing the growing affection on the anti-imperialist western left for the Iranian government's chosen moniker for the US, the 'Epstein class', you argued that beyond its rhetorical appeal, this framing does not result in 'more clarity' (Taal and Black 2026). I hope to have correctly interpreted the remark as expressing the fact that, as Cedric J. Robinson notes in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, 'maintenance device[s]' (Robinson 2007: xiv) are necessary for obscuring 'relations of power' (xii). In this case, the encapsulation of the thorny knot of exploitation – financial and sexual – and the arrangements of global power in a singular imaginal device (Bottici 2014), embodied by the monstrous figure of Epstein, may do more to obscure than to illuminate the realities of 'obscurity and chaos' (Robinson 2007: xi).

Forgeries is a book about the manufacture of racial blackness as a key technology of nationalist, (settler) colonial and imperialist power centring on the role of the United States in the twentieth century, which drew from 'early modern England', the cradle of 'the American republic' (7). The book centres on the US film industry and its representation of Black people, but it does so not only to intervene in film studies, but to use 'film and capitalism' as filters for 'Black history' (xv). Finance capital, as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth US centuries, required the 'construction of successive racial regimes publicised by motion pictures' (xv). What Robinson's framework lends to our understanding of power is an ability to glean, helped by the extensive detail he provides, the extent to which the representation of complex constructs as natural shapes the modern world. The 'contemptible Black', he writes, is both 'the most natural of beings and the most intensively manufactured subject' (4). So while, as a Black Studies scholar, Robinson is committed to excavating how 'the subject of blackness deteriorated

and had to be repaired' (7) over successive epochs, widening out from that and tracing the recalibration of the racial regime allows us to observe the functioning of the all-important processes of power maintenance.

Robinson enables us to see the role played by representation for the production, reproduction and ultimately the maintenance of power. This question is not dissociable from that of ideology, which, as Stuart Hall remarks, encapsulates the 'images, concepts and premises' that frame how we '"make sense" of some aspect of social existence' (Hall 2021: 100). The problem for many of us who try to theorise power is that the question of representation has often been kept separate from that of structure, as though there were no active mechanisms of structuring in play that work through discourse and representation. This is what Hall impresses upon us in his insistence in 'Race, the Sliding Signifier', contra Anthony Appiah (Appiah 1985), that the fact that race is conjured through discourse does not mean it 'has no purchase on the real world'; that 'because we cannot find a scientific referent for racial difference, it does not exist as a sociohistorical fact' (Hall 2017: 41).

What can be taken away from this attention to the force of representation and discourse as fundamental vehicles for the recapitulation of the semblance of order – because as Joshua Myers reminds us, what is named as order in fact necessarily produces chaos and violence (Myers 2023: 141)? In my view, it is that we cannot steer a way to a clearer picture of the ground beneath our feet without understanding that there is a constant drive, often coming from competing directions, to deny the instability of that ground. This is what I understand the interdependent concepts of racial capitalism and the racial regime, which I have sought to redeploy, doing so in Robinson's work. As Myers puts it, racial capitalism is a way of explaining how order, as a fundamental idea for the assertion of western power, 'came to construct and rely upon human differences' (57). Racial regimes, in tandem, obfuscate the terms of this order by rearranging it in different ways, representing it under multiple and often competing guises.

Robinson's grounding in Black study, while not antagonistic to Marxism, contra his critics (see Johnson 2025), means he proceeds along completely different lines to the kinds of questions that animate leftist debates. As noted by Myers, racial capitalism does not belong to the debate between reformist antiracists and socialists, for whom 'the abolition of race would come with the abolition of capitalism … It was about whole structures of thought, whole structures of being' (Myers 2023: 157). For me, as someone who is not Black but who has been guided by Black thinkers in my study of race, this means that there are no easier answers to how to resist the racial regime because we also have to contend with the disciplining demand for solutions grounded in systems based on order. This demand is grounded in a white western epistemic outlook, which actually obscures the search for answers by failing to contend with the chaos that order sows. What this means for our strategy and tactics remains unclear. However, one thing I take from Robinson, and which I find to be replicated in your own work, is the need to attack and expose the 'mechanisms of assembly' (Robinson 2007: xii) of regimes and structures. Returning to the question of what the 'Epstein class' label brings into light and what obscures the growing alignment of what should be strange bedfellows – white supremacists and Palestinians or their supporters most troublingly – requires us to do this slower work. As you put it in the introduction to the Black Myths Podcast, debunking 'the bs said about Black People' is a vital component of this work, for the more ground-clearing is done, the more the way ahead can come into sight.

Note

1. Translation from French my own. The English translation of Fanon's 1956 speech, 'Racism and Culture' translates 'is racist' as 'having race prejudice' (Fanon 1994: 41).

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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