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### The search for a new language about race

From white supremacy to census ethnicity questions, a clutch of new books enters the debate over racial identity



Men and women arriving in England from Jamaica after a long sea crossing in October 1954 © Mirrorpix

**Stephen Bush** 3 HOURS AGO



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In 1871, German schoolchildren took part in the newly unified state's first ethnic census. Children with blond hair and blue eyes were declared "white". Those with any other combinations of hair and eye colour had the skin of their forearm examined: from these examinations, the German state concluded that German Jews and German Christians did not just have different religions or traditions — rather, they were two fundamentally different races.

The methods used in the German study owed a debt to the British ethnologist John Beddoe, whose "index of nigrescence" concluded that Jews were "100 per cent" Negro. Figures such as Beddoe are key to Tudor Parfitt's latest book *Hybrid Hate*, which details the strange ways that race theorists developed modern modes of anti-black racism and antisemitism.

It is a work populated by eccentric cranks such as Samuel George Morton, proud owner of "the American Golgotha", the largest collection of skulls in the US. Morton believed the world contained five races and that he could ascertain which of the five someone belonged to by measuring the number of lead pellets their cranial cavity could hold. Another was Robert Knox, a disgraced doctor who worked with serial killers and believed that Jews belonged "to the dark races of men".

As Susan Neiman argues in *Left Is Not Woke*, her new polemic on the enduring value of Enlightenment thought, "every argument against slavery, colonialism, racism or sexism is embodied in the question 'Is she not a human being?'". The life work of Parfitt's race theorists was to add a pseudo-scientific gloss to the reply: "No, she isn't."

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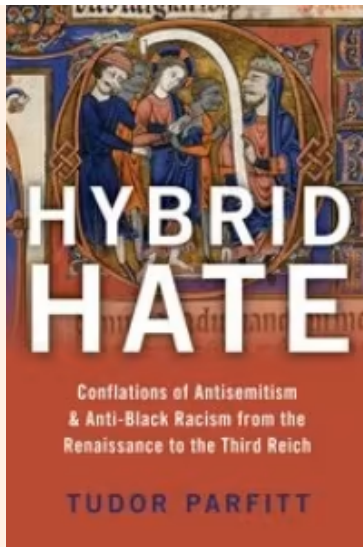
**Whether you're black is not determined by your hair or skin colour. Ultimately your 'race' is decided by society and the state**

Parfitt's engaging book would be a work of high humour if these discredited sciences hadn't at times been so successful, used by the Nazis to decide, in Hannah Arendt's words, "who should and who should not inhabit the world".

At the heart of the contemporary race debate is how to respond to that success. For some people, the answer lies in pessimism. Our terrible history is not just history; it is a warning that race hatred is, as

American author Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in *Between The World And Me* (2015), "unfortunate but immutable". The disease might go into remission from time to time, but it will recur. Your oppression can only truly be understood by and sincerely fought against by the oppressed. The only true cure is in your own institutions being ready to shield you from the next outbreak. On the other side you have the optimists: writers such as Kenan Malik, whose recent book *Not So Black and White* argued for universalism and the radical Enlightenment.

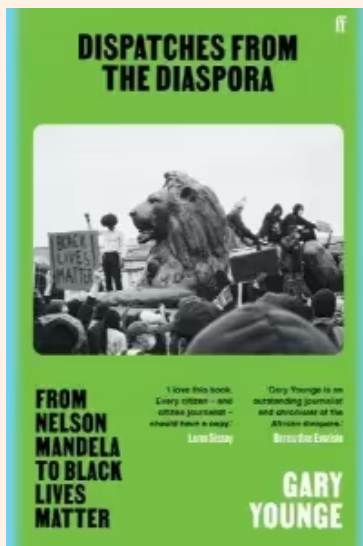
In recent years, the most successful works of non-fiction have been written by the pessimists. Now, new works by Neiman, a Berlin-based American academic of considerable renown, and Tomiwa Owolade, a young London-based cultural critic, seek to redress the balance.



The historical work of Parfitt and the journalistic endeavour of Gary Younge, collated in a new volume titled *Dispatches From the Diaspora*, form the essential “pre-history” to this debate. Whether you are on the side of the pessimists or the optimists, understanding the work of Parfitt and Younge will sharpen your understanding.

In addition to its depth of research, what makes Parfitt’s *Hybrid Hate* such a delight to read is his trust that the readers will draw their own conclusions from his work. Parfitt instead restricts himself to an elliptical remark that some of those lessons are “obvious”. One being that “blackness” is an arbitrary, political definition. The only thing black people have in common is white people, and the only thing white people have in common is that they haven’t been declared black yet: though history teaches us that they can be at any moment.

Similarly, the black people in *Dispatches from the Diaspora* do not look alike — nor do they share a birthplace, or a way of seeing the world. They range from fictional aristocrats in the popular Netflix series *Bridgerton* to Robert Mugabe, an all-too-real Zimbabwean autocrat. But these disparate works from Younge’s time as a foreign correspondent, opinion columnist and essayist share a common theme: its subjects all share the same label, of “blackness”.



Whether you’re black is not determined by the colour of your hair, your eye colour or the skin on your forearm. Ultimately your “race” is decided by society and by the state. At the beginning of the 20th century, many of Austria’s Jews didn’t identify as Jewish at all. Some were practising Christians. But as far as the Third Reich was concerned, they were to be defined, dispossessed and murdered on an industrial scale as a result of their ancestry.

In the years after the second world war, the people who came to the UK from the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent and Africa generally viewed themselves not as immigrants, but as Britons returning to the motherland. As one West Indian told the Institute of Race Relations in 1970: “We are not immigrants in the true technical sense: after all, we are members of the realm, we are British.”

However, they soon discovered that as far as British society was concerned, they were foreigners. As the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall told Younge in *Dispatches From the Diaspora*: “It was only in Britain that we became West Indians”. By the 1960s, society’s prejudices became law, and the rights of people from the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent and Africa to come to Britain were sharply curtailed.

Part of the strength of both books is that not all the lessons from them *are* “obvious”. Pessimists will leave both books feeling that the need for their own separate institutions has been given a stronger evidential footing. Optimists will feel that they show that “blackness” and “whiteness” are far too protean a set of terms to form the enduring bedrock of anything.

**Left  
Is  
Not**

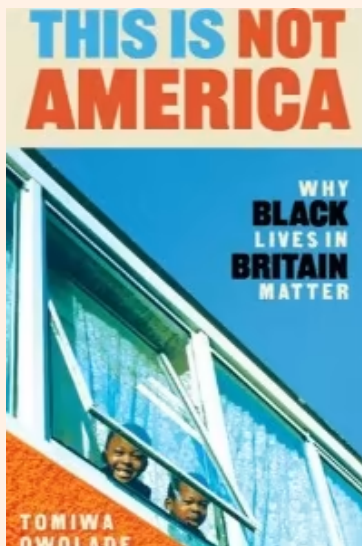
**Woke**

SUSAN NEIMAN

Those in the latter camp will surely not find a more articulate and effective champion than Neiman. Her aim in *Left Is Not Woke* is to stress the importance of these values for the political left — but her clarity of thought and expression means that her arguments ought to have a hearing well beyond her intended audience.

I have yet to read a book that better crystallised my sense of unease when I hear people use the word “ally”. “Convictions play a minor role in alliances, which is why they are often short,” she writes. “If my self-interest happens to align with yours, for a moment, we could form an alliance . . . to divide members of a movement into allies and others undermines the bases of deep solidarity”. For Neiman, what we need is not allyship, but a recognition of our shared humanity.

These topics are not new ground to Neiman, a fascinating, heterodox thinker who has long been preoccupied by the importance of universalist thought. In *This Is Not America*, Tomiwa Owolade attempts to set out his own stall as an opponent of many of the same targets as Neiman. His thesis is that the UK’s race debate has been distorted by an excessive focus on the US. But he himself has not thought or read enough about the history of UK race relations to pull it off.



Instead, Owolade relies heavily on his own personal experiences to drive his arguments. This results in a number of unfortunate authorial choices. He declares that his book will not consider the experiences of people from the Indian subcontinent because “I can only write about what interests me, and I am interested principally in black people in Britain”.

Until 1991, people from the Indian subcontinent were grouped in the same UK census category as people from the West Indies. Meanwhile, the British state referred to British Indians, Pakistanis, West Indians and British Africans alike as “coloured” for much of the last century. With this in mind, no one making a serious attempt to understand the British story of race should place their own “interest” over the

administrative decisions of the British state.

Nor is that conflation confined to the UK’s bureaucracy. Many British thinkers on race, from Ambalavaner Sivanandan to Peter Fryer — whose 1984 history of black British people, *Staying Power*, is praised by Owolade — saw people from the Indian subcontinent as belonging to an umbrella category of “blackness”. Younge’s book includes the experience of light-skinned Algerians.

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**While the optimists emphasise our common humanity, it is no surprise that so much attention is flowing in the direction of the pessimists**

This is frustrating, given that Owolade rightly notes that “being black and British is as much shaped by being British as it is by being black”: we can’t, therefore, consider the black British experience without reference to how British society and the state has classified and described “blackness”. While Owolade has every right to think that his conception of blackness is superior to Fryer’s, Younge’s or Sivanandan’s, a serious account of the black British

race debate should at least show some sign of having read and reflected on their thinking.

Ironically, for a book titled *This Is Not America*, he is much more familiar with American thinkers than British ones. James Baldwin is name-checked a dozen times, but Sivanandan, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall just merit a single mention each. Tony Sewell, author of the most recent report on race relations in the UK, is not mentioned at all.

A bigger problem for the book is that Owolade does not seem to have decided where he himself stands. He criticises the claim by the British Labour politician David Lammy that there is a commonality between racism in Minneapolis and London’s Mile End, arguing that “racism reflects norms, and norms are not universal” — adding, for example, that “the racism against African migrant workers in Italy is not the same as the racism against indigenous communities in Australia”. This is cultural relativism 101. But then Owolade goes on to argue against the cultural relativism of American academic Ibrahim X Kendi, on the grounds that “cultures don’t have rights, people do”.

“Raise a glass to the virtue of trying to understand those you disagree with,” Neiman writes. It is advice that Owolade would have done well to heed. He is preoccupied with the location of various pan-African summits and the birthplace of the movement’s key thinkers, I fear because finding these things out was less time-consuming than actually reading their arguments at length.

But despite what Owolade believes, the fact that former Senegalese president Léopold Sédar Senghor died in France and had a white wife tells us absolutely nothing about the merits or otherwise of pan-Africanism. Senghor was a pan-Africanist not because he felt he could not live in France, but because he feared that France could not live with him.

Looking at France now, the challenge for optimists such as Neiman is: who can confidently say that Senghor’s fears may not end up being justified by events? Although the optimists are surely right that the most powerful and productive form of anti-racist activity is one that emphasises our common humanity, in a hostile world it is no surprise that so much of the energy and attention is flowing in the direction of the pessimists.

**Hybrid Hate: Conflations of Antisemitism and Anti-Black Racism from the Renaissance to the Third Reich**, by Tudor Parfitt, *Oxford University Press* £25.49/\$38.95, 304 pages

**Left Is Not Woke**, by Susan Neiman, *Polity* £20/Wiley \$25, 160 pages



**[Dispatches from the Diaspora](#): From Nelson Mandela to Black Lives Matter**, by Gary Younge, *Faber* £14.99, 352 pages

**[This Is Not America](#): Why Black Lives in Britain Matter**, by Tomiwa Owolade, *Atlantic Books* £18.99, 336 pages

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