

Book Review: *Race and America's Long War* by Nikhil Pal Singh

**R. Alexia McFee
Spring 2019**

Racial Capitalism, Neoliberalism, and the Present and Future of American Imperial War

In *Race and America's Long War*, Nikhil Pal Singh situates the conditions that resulted in Donald Trump's ascent to U.S. presidency in a long history of U.S. racial terror and the attendant forms of sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia and other state-sanctioned violence. Singh argues that the current wars in the United States, particularly the war on drugs and the war on terror operate within the same framework of racial slavery and U.S. expansionism that required various but connected mechanisms of othering. Singh examines the ways in which narratives of national security and civilization have been deployed to 'justify' the violence occurring across several processes and periods including slavery, settler colonialism, expansionism, reconstruction, various wars including in Vietnam and Iraq and now the war on drugs and terror- to suggest that the 'moral past' that both liberals and conservatives have argued to have lost in the face of Trump's ascendancy did not exist. He gestures to the skillfulness of politicians' colorblind and multiculturalist rhetoric to mask persistent racism. Thus Trump's ascent was simply the unmasking of what he names as the afterlives of racial slavery and U.S. expansionism.

I read the central intervention Singh is making as disrupting the notion of the ‘moral past’ or a ‘better history’. He writes: “it is through the struggles of the trammeled and dispossessed - slaves, women, workers, the segregated, disenfranchised and stigmatized that our “better history” presumably has been realized” (180). The revisionist history that located former president Obama’s two-term presidency as a sign of our arrival in a truly post-racial era is taken apart in Singh’s analysis. Importantly, his analysis shows how Obama himself was both willingly and unwittingly complicit in narrating American hegemony as manifest destiny and through (neo)liberal policymaking continuing the racialization and dispossession of various populations including black people in and beyond the borders of the United States. Throughout his analysis- as it is in the “real world”, war marking and race making, homeland security, and international relations are constantly made and articulated through each other toward an anti-human capital accumulation.

Throughout the five- chapter book, Singh underscores the importance of examining intra-race difference and sees this as a way to explain both how President Obama could be elected in this colorblind era and how Trump with an overtly anti-black and anti “otherness” rhetoric could be his successor. Class becomes a central axis of difference in Singh’s analysis. But while he acknowledges that Trump’s ascent is likely the result of the white working-class rejection of ‘racial equality’ signaled by Obama, he sees an examination of, for example, voter suppression that disproportionately targeted black and other populations of color as equally important. Furthermore, he examines a sort of double-bind where Hillary Clinton (who needed the support from those who voted for Obama) was failing at articulating a sincere commitment to racial equality that could mobilize the black electorate alongside Trump’s clear articulation of a

rage that could grab the attention of the working poor. That the black voters (who arguably should have been more inspired to vote against Trump (if not for Hillary)) were so apathetic to the election signals to Singh that his victory cannot be reduced to white working class backlash.

In light of all the paradoxes, double binds, and double elisions evident in this text, it makes sense that the Duboisian double consciousness (expanded on by Ellison in the *Invisible Man*) would be an essential part of Singh's theoretical framework. The disappointment in Obama which Singh admits to having stems from what can be considered as Obama's failure to reconcile what Du Bois sees as the two striving selves- one as an African - American (inescapably marred by racism) and the other as an American who identifies with this notion of democracy and good governance that necessitates both domestic and overseas terror.

It was interesting reading this book after so much of what Singh sites and cites as desires of the far-right have been set in motion. Since the publication of *Race and America's Long War* in 2017, and notwithstanding actions from that year including the Department of Justice withdrawal of landmark 2016 guidance explaining how schools must protect transgender students under the federal law; the Department of Housing and Urban Development withdrawal of two important agency-proposed policies designed to protect LGBT people experiencing homelessness; the Justice Department announcement that it would review (and likely seek to scale back) numerous civil rights settlement agreements with police departments that responded to police abuse and racial profiling; or the President's tweet that Transgender persons will no longer be able to serve in any capacity in the U.S military, there are countless other examples of both the inner and outer war that Singh discusses. I go back to a quote from earlier in this essay in which Singh claims that American civilization and progress has always and paradoxically

been realized through war. As a reminder, Singh writes “it is through the struggles of the trammeled and dispossessed - slaves, women, workers, the segregated, disenfranchised and stigmatized that our “better history” presumably has been realized” (180). If this is considered, then Trump’s presidency sits squarely within what has always characterized America. To narrate his actions as unAmerican, Singh argues, is to participate in the revisionism.

Thus, we should not be surprised that the Federal Government will no longer recognize gang violence and domestic violence as grounds for asylum; that in South Carolina religious-affiliated services can now, legally discriminate against current and aspiring LGBT caregivers; that an executive order has been signed that pushes for work requirement for low-income people in America who receive federal assistance including Medicaid and food stamps; that there is direct targetting of reproductive rights of women evidenced by various States’ ban of abortion; that there are relentless attacks against migrant communities; expansion of immigration detention and executive order seeking to ban Muslims and refugees. Singh has done significant work to show that these are not anomalies but follow in a long tradition of racial violence and dispossession perpetrated by the United States.