Surviving the Survival Narrative Part 1: Internalised Racism and the Limits of Resistance

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Abstract

The concept of internalised racism (IR) has been criticised for its potential utilisation to perpetuate 'victim blaming'. In describing the racialised subject's indoctrination to racist beliefs about themselves and/or their group, the concept of IR has been a point of difficulty for scholarship which sustains a hyper-focus on racialised *resistance* towards structural racism and its effects. Some scholars have highlighted that this hyper-focus on resistance is connected to a political stance which essentialises racialised subjects as always resisting. In this article, I further this argument by demonstrating the limitations within resistance strategies employed by some racialised subjects. I utilise participants' narratives from a wider study to highlight three forms of limitations (*conscious renouncing, inadvertent complicity, and non-resistance*) in resisting racist ideology. I then draw on these examples to problematise scholarship that sustain a hyper-focus on resistance, one that may inadvertently foreclose the deeper impact of racism upon the racialised.

Keywords

Internalised Racism; Identity Politics; Australia; Racism; Resistance

Introduction

In this article, I examine and problematise a dominant form of contemporary race and postcolonial research that occurs in the scholarly literature. It is one which can be seen to sustain a hyper-focus on how racialised communities and individuals resist structural racism and its effects, limiting or invisibilising considerations to the material and psychological effects of racism and colonisation. I do so by utilising the concept of internalised racism (IR), generally defined as the racialised subject's indoctrination to racist beliefs about themselves and/ or their group. Utilising contrasting examples, I first illustrate the tension within contemporary forms of postcolonial and race scholarship that I aim to problematise. Then, I describe the concept of IR to demonstrate its salience and utility in examining this dynamic of hyper-resistance within the literature. By applying the concept of IR to the contemporary lived experiences of racialised subjects, I demonstrate clear limitations in the ability of the racialised to always resist. As shall be seen, this troubles the *model resistor stereotype* upon which, as I will demonstrate, the hyper-focus on resistance rests. In recognising these limitations, I then return to the examples presented, suggesting a cautionary requirement for race scholars who reproduce such forms of scholarship.

In a recent study of a small rural town called Wilcannia in rural NSW, Australia, built in the mid to late 19th Century on Barkindji country, Forsyth and Gavranovic (2017) set out to examine how the local Indigenous communities have survived the effects of settler-colonial capitalism and its logic of elimination (Wolfe 2006). For the authors, ordinary 'resistance' is too simplistic a term to describe the mechanism of Indigenous survival. They see it as reflective of an *ad hoc* measure to colonialism that does not account for what they view as a structure of survival. They write that their study has identified not only the 'themes of creative cultural and economic adaptation in Wilcannia's history', but also interpret this as evidence of 'a more coherent, systematic and subversive logic at work in Barkindji engagements with the settler economy' (pp. 3). They offer, as a counter to the logic of elimination paradigm, the notion of the Barkindji's 'logic of survival'. They interpret this as part of a Barkindji worldview, that is, a 'structural dimension of Barkindji society that, like capitalism and settler colonialism, fundamentally shaped the colonial encounter' (p. 11). This logic of survival allowed the Barkindji and their descendants to continuously have 'incorporated the things they found themselves doing after invasion into these highly flexible structures, turning the very weapons of invasion into the tools of survival' (p. 11). The authors give several examples of this Barkindji ingenuity, often injecting into their analysis the ambiguity inherent within postcolonial discourse.

The authors capture this logic of survival within the phrase 'the bush is there to nurture you', a philosophical perspective that allowed the Barkindji to adapt to changing circumstances in the land. It is this mechanism of survival that allowed the Barkindji, according to the authors, to subvert the colonial system. This could be seen in the 'humpy settlements' which were on the outskirts of Wilcannia, where the Barkindji utilised materials 'constructed literally from the debris of settler society' to form their accommodation. To this, the authors write that:

> 'In the *Barkindji* space which segregation inevitably (yet quite incidentally, and even inconveniently) produced, the Barkindji found a life-giving opportunity. Segregation too, it turned out, could be there to nurture you' (p. 19).

It is unclear from the description whether or not Forsyth and Gavranovic intended this particular philosophy of adaptation to be unique specifically to the Barkindji, or more generally to Australian Aboriginal cultural groups. Although the authors do write that '[a]sserting this logic of survival does not, however, essentialise Barkindji culture' (p. 19), it is difficult to understand how a non-essentialised view of the Barkindji would explain the authors' argument of an underlying structure that the Barkindji have all been inculcated with, even contemporarily. This would also seem to contradict what seem like more essentialist statements such as '[t]he remarkable response of the Barkindji was rooted … *in a recognisably*

Indigenous stance to the world' (p. 19). More concerningly, however, I suggest that the authors' framing of the segregationist colonial structure of apartheid as *also* a method of Barkindji subversion may be problematic. Indeed, if 'segregation too, it turned out, could be there to nurture you', then it is not clear what is so negative about the material impact of colonisation upon the Barkindji.

In contrast, take Fanon ([2004 [1961]](#)), in his influential *Wretched of the Earth*, who similarly discusses the issue of colonial 'segregation' that Forsyth and Gavranovic ([2017](#)) utilise to demonstrate the adaptational quality of the Barkindji. Fanon's focus, however, is on the destructive dynamics of colonialism upon the colonised, and is worth quoting at length:

> 'This compartmentalized world, this world divided in two, is inhabited by different species. The singularity of the colonial context lies in the fact that economic reality, inequality, and enormous disparities in lifestyles never manage to mask the human reality. Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what rac[ialised group]e one belongs to' (p. 5).

Fanon articulates a similar apartheid structure to that which Forsyth and Gavranovic ([2017](#)) describe in the colonial paradigm of Wilcannia and its humpy settlements. Yet his focus is on the overt discrepancies within the apartheid structure of colonialism, one that constantly seeks to, and indeed *does*, supplant the colonised, at least materially. The above is emblematic of the tension between these two focuses within the contemporary post/ settler-colonial and race literature. Scholars like Forsyth and Gavranovic are focusing on the agentic will of the racialised/ colonised, and their strengths in the face of a colonising/ racist force. Scholarship like that of Fanon, however, highlights a more structural impact of colonisation/ racism upon subjugated peoples, often demonstrating its negative material and psychological impact. Against this view of the current state of the literature, I want to consider this dynamic specifically through a less examined concept, that of internalised racism (IR). It is one that I believe will allow a unique insight into this conceptual tension, a point to which I will return at the conclusion.

The Model (Racialised) Resistor: On the Politicisation of Racialised Identity

The phenomenon of IR has been primarily studied within the field of psychology, where it can collectively be defined as 'the individual inculcation of the racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society about one's racial[ised] group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust and disrespect for one's race and/ or oneself' ([Pyke 2010](#), p. 553). Since the inception of the concept in the 1970s within research on Black Americans ([Lipsky 1977](#)), research has evolved to explore a similar effect of racism upon other racialised groups across national contexts (see for example [Padilla 2001](#); [Pyke & Dang 2003](#); [Seet, 2019](#)).

The literature has been helpful in highlighting key areas where IR can manifest for racialised subjects. Particularly salient to the argument made in this article are the manifestations of IR in which racialised subjects desire and/ or attempt to acquire markers of Whiteness. For instance, hooks ([1995](#)) has suggested that the colour-caste system amongst Black Americans, that is, the valuation of lighter over darker skin-tones, is attributed to how White slave owners would treat their light-skinned slaves better. This refers to a concept known as *colourism* ([Jones 2000](#)) which describes the preferences of racialised groups for lighter skin-tone. Montalvo ([2005](#)) has also highlighted the significance of colourism that impacts Latinx communities in the North American context. As it concerns Asian Americans, some scholars have connected blepharoplasties (or more colloquially what has become to be known as 'Asian eyelid surgery') as connected to the desire to achieve less ethnically Asian features and acquire a 'Whiter' aesthetic ([Mok 1998](#)). These manifestations of IR, of course, need to be contextualised within a racialised social system

wherein Whiteness (and its subsequent markers) is constructed as a hegemonic standard (for better social mobility and material advantages). Understanding the aetiology of how IR exists as a phenomenon is important for how we, as race scholars, may better appreciate its impacts upon society. As such, whilst racialised subjects do perpetuate forms of structural racism (i.e. White supremacist ideals), it is the inculcation of a White supremacist framework within their *Weltanschauung* that causes them to do so. As alluded to here, whilst having some contemporary currency within race scholarship, the concept of IR is thus not without significant criticisms. One critique that will be useful to connect us to the above scholastic consideration is what sociologist Karen Pyke (2010) has referred to as consideration of the 'politics of knowledge' (p. 552).

This critique of IR as a concept refers to the potential utilisation of the concept to allocate racialised subjects blame for the (self) perpetuation of a racist structure. Because IR highlights the potential for racialised subjects to not resist, or sometimes inadvertently contribute to maintaining a racialised and racist structure (cf. Speight 2007), its very conceptualisation is fraught with difficulties for a particular essentialised view of the racialised subject. Pyke (2010) suggests that this particular construction is based on a politicisation of racialised identity, which she attributes to the infiltration of a particular 'identity politics' within sociological race scholarship. This frame, according to Pyke, is a politically-driven perspective amongst some scholars, one that implicitly evokes the notion of authentic experience of oppression amongst the racialised. That is, to be a member of a racialised group is to simultaneously also *know* what it means to be oppressed, to supposedly have first-hand experience and conscious knowledge of systems of oppression, and to ultimately utilise such knowledge 'to forge resistance' (p. 562). She argues that the fixation on resistance within race scholarship can be traced to the political events of the 1960s and 1970s where 'organized struggle seemed capable of bringing great change in society, such as the end of Jim Crow and the war in Vietnam' (p. 560). Because of the inability to 'sustain grand narratives of revolution, insurgency, and emancipation' by the end of the 1970s, theorists turned towards the 'everyday forms of resistance' (p. 560) in order to maintain this political stance. Pyke suggests that such narratives which are constructed (and articulated) through a political register tend to reduce 'the agency of the subjugated … to resistance: to act *is* to resist' (p. 562). In this sense, the racialised subject is reduced to a model resistor stereotype. Writing from outside the academy, Douglas Murray (2019) notes that politicisation of social identities in predominantly Anglophonic Western societies, such as racialisation, are often essentially paired with a political ideology. One where 'you are only a member of a recognized minority group so long as you accept the specific grievances, political grievances and resulting electoral platforms that other people have worked out for you' (p. 154). Given the popular conflation of Blackness (and other non-White racialised groups) with a Democratic Party political affiliation in the North American context, Murray gives of an example of widespread social commentary declaring musician Kanye West 'no longer Black' for having openly supported the Republican Party's contemporary Trump administration.

The voice-of-colour thesis, as a core tenet of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework, is an apt example to illustrate the above argument as it manifests scholastically. As a racialised form of feminist standpoint epistemologies, the voice-of-colour thesis purports that 'minority status … brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism' (Delgado & Stefancic 2012, p. 10). With the principle of charity in place, it is clear that this theoretical orientation embodies a politically-required essentialism as a show of strength and resistance amongst the racialised. Such a notion has, of course, been contested within the field of CRT itself (e.g. Kennedy 1989), and recently by Paradies' (2018) more general critique of the efficacy of standpoint theories in the contemporary 'post-truth' zeitgeist. Beyond the intellectual veracity of such a stance, however, it is nevertheless understandable that those with such political proclivities would find the concept of IR concerning, to say the least, given that it is through such a concept that one understands hegemonic racialised domination as relying on the complicity of the racialised. As such, Pyke argues that scholarship generated through what she terms the *grand narrative of resistance* is often reflective more of the

political orientation of the theorist than the actual nature of structural forms of oppression, and that such a *political* stance 'forecloses attention to complicity, accommodation, and the maintenance and reproduction of domination' (p. 560) amongst the racialised. She does, importantly, maintain that recognising the effects of IR amongst the racialised should not be viewed as a point of blame, but rather as an inherent part of any hegemonic form of domination.

Whilst the notion of blame itself may not be entirely useful in conceptualising the effects of racism on the racialised specifically, and upon the society in which it manifests more generally, the notion of IR does importantly have to contend with its potential misunderstandings and subsequent misuses. In particular, that it is important to maintain a focus on the dynamics of causation; that it is the structures of racism which cause IR amongst racialised subjects. I have elsewhere, for instance, demonstrated how we can study the effects of IR upon the psychological dimension (i.e. the individual), whilst still maintaining a focus on the sociological dimension (i.e. the generative structures of society; Seet 2019). More importantly, however, it is here that we can see the utility of the concept of IR in examining the conceptual tension described in the previous section. In particular, the debate between the concept of IR, demonstrative of how the racialised can inculcate aspects of their structural domination, and the grand narrative of resistance, which constructs the racialised as always resisting such structures, connects the concept to the notion of resistance itself.

In this article, I interrogate this notion of resistance, its salience as a political tool, and its impact on the study of the effects of racist ideology upon racialised individuals and communities. I do so by examining what seem to be tensions between acts of resistance, yet paradoxically, also complicity within racist structures, as glimpsed through the lived experiences of Asian Australian subjects from a larger study. It is apparent within these participants' narratives that there exists both the *desire* to resist hegemonic White supremacist ideology, what I term the *will-to-resist*, and also the difficulties that seems to be generated by the adopting of such a position. As elaborated below, these difficulties can take a form of *conscious renouncing*, whereby an acknowledgement of the desire to relinquish embedded forms of IR is met with what seems like a habitualisation. Ngo's (2016) separation between the cognitive and somatic forms of racist habits can offer a clarity here. Another difficulty lies in participants' *inadvertent complicity* with the racist structures they are attempting to resist. Chen's (1999) elaboration on strategies of resistance which unintentionally contribute to the perpetuation of racism is useful here. I then outline a third limitation in resistance which highlights the racialised subjects' denial of racism whether in its interpersonal and/ or structural forms, what I term *non-resistance*.

Methodology

I draw on data from a larger study that examined the significance of the concept IR to understand issues of racialisation and racism in contemporary Australian society, through a socio-psychological lens. As primary researcher, I conducted 3 individual face-to-face semi-structured, narrative-based interviews with each of the 17 participants (totalling 50 interviews, as one participant could only make it to 2 interviews), over the course of 2018. Participants were controlled on factors of racialisation (all self-identified as Asian Australians from various East and Southeast Asian ethnicities), gender (9 female and 8 male), and generational status (all were either born or primarily raised in Australian society). They ranged from 18 – 46 years of age at the time of interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and I, as primary researcher, subsequently transcribed, coded, and analysed them thematically. All participants and their narratives were de-identified through the use of codes, where F stands for female-identified, and M stands for male-identified participants, along with an arbitrary numerical code assigned to differentiate among them. Questioning was only directive in terms of reframing dialogue to discuss experiences that participants

themselves felt concerned dynamics of racialisation and racism. As such, interviewing relied primarily on the participants leading the majority of the qualitative content of the discussions.

The study identified IR manifesting for participants in a number of ways. As it concerns how IR can impact one's self-identity and how one may be perceived by others, IR can be seen as impacting their sense of acculturation in terms of national and ethnic identity development, their inculcated sense of (White) racialised standards of attractiveness, and racialised romantic preferences (predominantly for White men amongst Asian female and same-sex attracted male participants). Further, IR can also be seen manifesting in terms of participants' denial or minimisation of racism. In this article, I utilise various examples from the themes above to examine the participants' narratives for the limits inherent within their strategies of resistance toward hegemonic racist ideology.

Conscious Renouncing: On the Habitualisation of Racist Habits

The first difficulty in resisting the internalisation of racist ideology for some racialised subjects concerns what I term *conscious renouncing*. It involves not only a recognition that one has inculcated aspects of a White supremacist framework, but also a recognition of the difficulty involved in divorcing oneself from it. That is, racialised subjects who attempt to resist hegemonic racist ideology here end up being confronted by a feeling of embeddedness. As such, Helen Ngo's ([2016](#)) theory of racist bodily habituation, explained in more depth below, will be fitting as a conceptual tool through which such a dynamic can be understood. For Ngo, habits are both (in a narrower sense) *habitual*, involving repetition *and* sedimentation, and are also (in a wider sense) *habituated*, describing a bodily orientation towards such racist habits in the form of gestures or responses (e.g. racialised desire). Although written specifically about Whites' inculcation of racist bodily habits, the theoretical essence seems transposable to examining this aspect of IR amongst the racialised. In this section I draw, in particular, on the theme of racialised romantic preferences, through which notions of bodily habituation often seemed to be described. An understanding of the dynamics that were reported for the female and same-sex attracted male participants' specific racialised romantic/ sexual attraction to White Western men, *and* aversion towards Asian men (see also [Seet, 2020](#)), will help us to understand this particular limitation of resistance.

Discussing his experience within the nightclub scene when he was younger, M05, a 26-year-old Australian man of Singaporean Malay and Chinese descent, remembers feeling 'intimidated' by what he refers to as 'pure Aussie' women, referring in particular to those he identifies as 'White' and 'blonde'.

> **Interviewer:** Did you ever feel as if that was hanging over your head when you were trying to date? The stereotypes against Asian males in particular.

> **M05:** No, actually I wanted to prove it wrong. Um, at the start, I did, I did feel a bit you know, intimidated to go up and approach a White person. In fact, like, I could approach any other race like, African, even the, the European Australians [Australians of South and Eastern European descent – AS] but not the pure Aussies… but after a while, you just don't give a shit (Laughs). Yeah. But at the start you do feel a bit intimidated like, oh, shit she's like you know White, she's blonde, yeah.

> **Interviewer:** So, you would go and try to pick up these women?

> **M05:** […] You just wanna like… and I dunno why but in, in ah, um the minorities' heads in Australia, it's like, whenever you see a minority with a White girl you feel like 'Damn, man!' It's like, 'this guy is a good playa!' (Laughs).

The form of resistance demonstrated by M05 concerns, in part, his relinquishing of the negative stigma carried by Asian male bodies in Western society. Unlike some other male participants, M05 did not, or rather, worked against the internalisation of an inferiorised notion of Asian male masculinities, instead attempting to 'prove it wrong'. However, the emphasis placed on feeling the need to congratulate other racialised men for dating a 'White girl' seems to signify an internalised notion of hegemonic White femininity, embodied in the archetypal White Australian female, as bearing higher racialised and sexual capital. This highlights the presence of dominant racialised and racist ideology, wherein White women are perceived as relationally of higher value than 'any other race'. Whilst he has otherwise confessed his desire to move past this racialised attraction at the time of the interviews, he still recognises having an embedded sense of wanting to congratulate 'minority' men for acquiring a 'White girl'. I suggest that this residual or lingering effect of M05's manifestation of IR demonstrates the difficulty in conscious renouncing of White supremacist ideology. After all, the standard of attractiveness internalised by M05 is one in which phenotypical racialisation seems the primary indicator of sexual desire; it is the quality of blondeness and a 'pure Aussie' essence that he specifically mentions. A similar dynamic can be recognised for M06, a 31-year-old Australian man of Hong Kong-Chinese and Singaporean-Chinese parentage, describing his specific racialised attraction towards 'Caucasian people'.

> **M06: Mmm… tsk, well if we start with sexuality, I would say it's […] still the case. No matter what I think of cognitively, [I'm] still much more attracted to Caucasian people than Asians. That's not something I like at all. In fact, I really, *really* despise that fact. But um, you know, it feels like, it feels like something that is extremely difficult if not impossible to change. It feels hardwired in me, even though I, I think it's because of socialisation, but again. Socialised so deeply that it feels hardwired.**

M06 is explicit with recognising an incongruity between what he thinks 'cognitively', as compared to the bodily impulses that seem to govern his attraction. It is a tension he realises occurring between what seems like a bodily habit of desire, where he is 'much more attracted to Caucasian people than Asians', yet recognising that such a habituation is derived within a framework of White supremacy, one in which he wants to relinquish. The tension that appears above describes an incongruence between a cognitive and somatic response, the latter of which feels difficult to remove from one's bodily repertoire. This is indicated by M06's feeling of White-preference/ Asian-aversion in attraction as 'hardwired'. It is here that Ngo's (2016) perspective may help illuminate the difficulty experienced by these participants.

On my reading, Ngo's (2016) theory synthesises the issue of racist sedimentation (i.e. feeling the difficulty of renouncing bodily habituations of racism), along with a recognition of agency on the part of the subject to counteract this feeling that it is 'hardwired'. Ngo (2016) locates agency within the idea of habituated racist somatic (i.e. bodily) responses in an individual, cultivating an understanding that there is 'uptake involved in such racist orientations' (p. 8). That is, the idea that one participates in the habituation of racist bodily responses allows a recognition of responsibility on the part of the racist actor, or more specifically, for my purpose, the racialised subject who has internalised aspects of a White supremacist ideology. Recognising this allows her (and us) to ask, how do these racist bodily responses become embedded in one's reactionary bodily repertoire in the first place? To answer this, Ngo makes use of the concept of an *acquired orientation*, what signifies recognition of the responsibility on the part of the racist actor to have engaged and participated in repetitive racist gestures over time that have indeed been sedimented within their bodily repertoire. This sedimentation, however, is a narrow focus on what a racist bodily habit is. For Ngo, it is the acquisition of multiple reiterations of racist habits performed by the subject, incorporating racism into the very fabric of their bodily repertoire, that has given the body a kind of racist disposition. As she explains, 'such racist seeing speaks to an underlying perceptual orientation; one inhabits this mode of racialized perception' (p. 13). Referring to racialised perception as one of the racist bodily gestures that can be acquired by the actor, Ngo writes that 'the rigid insistence of a perception-then-response logic obscures the way in

which our processes of perception are themselves developed throughout embodied and lived experiences' (p. 9). Put simply, the very idea of racialised difference and how it is marked (visually) is *a priori* conditional to our perception of, and thereby reaction to, racialised others. The internalisation of this same dynamic would therefore explain how participants above perceive both Whites and their fellow co-ethnics.

So how does this theoretical perspective help the understanding of the difficulty involved in the conscious renouncing of IR for the racialised subject? Although Ngo's argument of racist bodily habits aimed to locate responsibility upon the (White) racist actor, I instead focus on her concept of acquired orientation to demonstrate the difficulty in the cognitive/ somatic incongruence displayed above. Of course, it is important to note that the 'split' here between the cognitive and the somatic is more for conceptual purposes, rather than actually arguing for an understanding of mind and body as non-overlapping magisteria. Ngo's argument demonstrates that a critical consciousness-raising of the mind is only a partial aspect within the will-to-resist. That is, conceptually speaking, there needs to also be a critical consciousness-raising of the body. And herein lies the difficulty. One can clearly have a critical consciousness of the cognitive kind but fail to allow this to impact critical consciousness of the somatic kind. Utilising this conceptual frame, take F03, a 21-year-old woman with a Chinese and European heritage, who provided an in-depth account of her romantic/ sexual desire for White men contemporarily, despite now being same-sex attracted. Although she describes no longer having a romantic/ sexual preference for White Western men, F03 still finds herself desiring to be desired by them:

> **F03: [...] I don't want to, like, touch [...] White men, but I still want them to think that I'm hot. I want them to want to be with me even though I don't want to be with them.**

This excerpt can be read through Ngo's concept of acquired orientation. It suggests that the body is habitualised through repetition, suggesting that one (unintentionally) participates in the inculcation of one's racist bodily habits. F03 can be seen as communicating her seemingly contradictory desires. On the one hand, she expresses a desire to not want to date White men. Yet on the other, she *wants* them to desire her. Interpreted through the Ngo's perspective, F03 can be seen having cultivated critical consciousness of the cognitive kind. This can be seen in her stated desire to not date White men in particular, the *specific* attraction of which she views as her inculcated sense of White (heterosexual) patriarchal supremacist ideology. Yet, in expressing that she still *wants* them to desire her, F03 can be seen as demonstrating her uncultivated critical conscious of the somatic kind. This does not only indicate the habituation of racist desire within F03's bodily repertoire but suggests that she still inadvertently engages in repetition of the habit, thereby, in part, contributing to the sedimentation of her racialised desire.

Participants here can be seen to demonstrate the difficulty in acquiring both the will-to-resist of the cognitive and somatic kinds. What Ngo's perspective has shown is that racist bodily habits, or IR in the participants' case, *can* be resisted, and are not totalising despite feeling sedimented. Of course, the argument here is not to highlight how the racialised have simply overlooked an area of resistance, rendering them even more culpable in the maintenance of racist structures. On the contrary, it is to demonstrate the difficulty inherent in the act of resisting, especially when the dynamics of habituation are taken into consideration.

Inadvertent Complicity: The Maintenance and Re-Perpetuation of Racism

This section demonstrates a second kind of difficulty in resisting racist ideology that is similar to, yet differing from, the dynamic of conscious renouncing seen above. It is similar in that it contains a conscious apprehension, by the racialised subject, of the need to relinquish aspects of White supremacist ideology that they have inculcated, through which they recognise that they are devalued. Yet, it differs from it in that the

subject may not recognise, or be aware of, how their resistance strategy paradoxically reproduces the racist ideology they intended to resist. I term this the limitation of *inadvertent complicity*.

This is evident in part of an interview with M08, a 34-year-old man of Chinese-Malaysian descent. In the excerpt below, he can be seen reacting to a conversation with a platonic (White) girlfriend regarding his attractiveness. M08 recounts of how it 'pained her' to be able to see him as attractive, a situation he remembers as prompting his own reflection:

> **M08:** […] Am I unattractive or is it because I'm Asian? […] One of the ways that I sought to address that was just to become like, really beefcake. So, as soon as I finished high school, I, um, yeah like, my first year out of high school I just joined the gym.

M08's will-to-resist is demonstrated here through his own individualised response to feeling a lack in masculinity, one which led him to join the gym and become 'really beefcake', that is, to gain more muscle mass. Note that it is not important here whether or not M08's female friend *did* indeed have this perspective, but rather, to focus on the fact that M08 interpreted it as being so. I suggest that M08 devalued his own masculinity by drawing on the hegemonic discourse surrounding racialised masculinity in White Western-dominant societies, a standard within which Asian men tended to be relegated to a lower rung (cf. Chen 1999). This is evident in the connection M08 makes between being Asian and being unattractive, as the two potential reasons he believes himself to be undesirable by his female friend. This alludes to the fact that the standard of masculinity he subscribes to does bear a racialised component. Hence, M08's intention to gain more muscle mass may be a reaction to disproving the stereotypical notion that all Asian men are 'less' masculine, demonstrating an act of resistance. Yet, it is here that a limitation within this strategy of resistance can also be seen.

That one feels the need to constantly represent a more positive understanding of an otherwise stigmatised identity category, as a racialised subject, is understandable from a sociological perspective (cf. Schwalbe et al. 2000). Conceived through a White supremacist frame, for instance, M08's Asian subjectivity may be felt to be overdetermined with an inferiorised meaning, one in which he has to contend with daily in society. Yet as Chen (1999) points out in his study on the impact of ideas of hegemonic masculinity upon Asian American men, one can engage in several strategies to relinquish the stigma of their inferiorised racialisation, most of which are inadvertently complicit with hegemony. The strategy of 'compensation', wherein one is 'aware of the negative stereotypes about [one]self and consciously tries to undermine them by conforming par excellence to the hegemonic ideal' (Chen 1999, p. 592), seems relevant here. By attending the gym to gain muscle mass (something he did, in fact, achieve), M08 is inadvertently accepting first, that a supposed homogenous 'Asian' male body lacks the required marker of masculinity that is present to the dominant form of hegemonic (White) masculinity he desires (i.e. 'Asian' men as essentially lacking muscle mass). Second, the implicit acknowledgment that larger muscle mass *is,* in fact, a marker of a superior standard of masculinity.

Another aspect of the participants' narratives that could be understood as communicating a form of resistance towards White supremacist ideology, albeit still inadvertently perpetuating and maintaining racist structures, is the desire to specifically be '*half*'. F02, a 27-year-old Australian woman of Chinese-Singaporean heritage, who remembers perceiving what she terms 'halfies' as 'attractive':

> **F02:** Mmm… I guess sometimes especially when I moved to Melbourne, I saw being Asian as a negative thing? Like, I don't know, a lot of times I found myself wishing that, 'Fuck! Why wasn't I just half?'

> **Interviewer:** A half-White?

> **F02:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I always used to look at *halfies* and think like, they were always like, attractive?

At least when she was younger, F02 desired to embody what she terms 'halfies', which in her usage, specifically signifies a person with mixed 'Chinese-looking' phenotype (i.e. 'Asian') and traditional Western European phenotype (i.e. 'White'). One could read into this a form of resistance, in that F02 does not want to *be* White, but to utilise its markers to her advantage in navigating a space saturated with White supremacist ideology. Yet, it is important to notice that the logic of hybridisation as a strategy of resistance relies on a visual register that is not only racialised, but one that is also sexualised – that is, as a form of attraction. This register takes phenotypical traits as communicating something essential about the epidermalised subject. Indeed, F06, a 46-year-old Australian woman with Anglo Australian and Chinese-Malaysian parentage, gives weight to this notion with her specific racialised amalgamation, and the effect of her phenotype in a predominantly 'Chinese' setting on her sense of 'Eurasian' self:

> **F06: […] I have a very positive Eurasian identity. And that's because I grew up around the Chinese. […] I'm lucky, it's good being half-Chinese. You know. Chinese considered me more attractive because I was half-White, I had a nose-bridge and I have large eyes. […] I was positioned as more beautiful and more clever […] because I was Eurasian.**

If F06's recounting is to be believed, then the dynamic that occurs within Asian/ Chinese communities wherein 'half-White' people were considered superior may have some relevance in explaining F02's desire to embody a 'half-Whiteness'. That is, F06 demonstrates that the widespread internalisation of White/ Eurocentric supremacist ideology amongst her Chinese community, which in her case concerns both physicality (i.e. 'more beautiful') and intelligence (i.e. 'more clever'), acted both as a form of difference and social capital accrued to her. That is, this difference, the 'half-*White*' in particular, was not treated as a deficit but glorified instead. Yet this alone does not seem to explain why it is the emphasis on White hybridisation, as opposed to notions of White purity, that is foregrounded by the above participants.

To answer this, a more complex understanding of the dynamics of White/ Eurocentric supremacy must be introduced, one which will help to highlight elements of IR embedded in such a desire. The construction of Whiteness and its connection with (and through) European colonisation must be accounted for here, especially when dealing with the colonised other as an object of both fear and desire (Bhabha 1994). McKinley's (2008) explanation of representations of Maori *women* and the colonial construction of the 'primitive female' as objects of sexual desire can help understand the participants' desire to embody a '*half-*Asian-ness'. Commenting on common artwork produced during European colonisation, McKinley (2008) writes:

> 'While postcards and pictures serve as ethnographic representations, others project images of fantasy and desire, promiscuity and eroticism, exotic and alluring. I have argued elsewhere that most of the women found in the fantasy pictures were 'hybrids', that is the products of mixed racial relationships. The pictures feature women with a physical appearance of large eyes, flowing dark hair, light coloured skin, aquiline nose, oval jaw, and a sweet, passive and vulnerable gaze. The women in the pictures are not chosen for their 'Maoriness' but for their conformity to a particular European taste in female representation—a fine boned facial structure and the pale skin contrast with her Otherness of dark hair, eyes and native costume' (p. 963).

The above is suggestive of the resolution to a colonial fear and desire of the racialised other. It is seen through the representation of a European, and I would add, *male* 'taste' in female representation, which embodies this part familiar, part exotic quality. I suggest that the White hybridisation as a form of attractiveness, seen amongst the participants above, could be read as an internalisation of this particular racialised standard of sexualised attractiveness, one that, at least as an originary construction, was through a White/ European (colonial) male's racialised gaze. Seen through this postcolonial dynamic of sexual racism, it is possible to read into the desire for being half-*White* as a manifestation of IR. This renders racialised

subjects inadvertently complicit with the racialised (and gendered) representations of (female) attractiveness through a White supremacist framework. Whilst this suggests the difficulty of resisting hegemonic ideology through its subconscious inculcation amongst racialised subjects, it also raises an interesting consideration regarding the *racialisation* of the arbitrary markers of attractiveness. This is especially so when they implicitly valorise an ethnic European/ White aesthetic through the acquisition of desirable *body parts*.

Is it possible to divorce the markers of attractiveness, arbitrary as they are, from signifying Whiteness as a construct of coloniality/ racist ideology? That is, do markers of attractiveness *always* have to be racialised and more specifically, racialised as White? It seems like the narratives demonstrate, at least in part, that a simple answer to this is *no*. That is, qualities of attractiveness and Whiteness, insofar as it conjures up the image of an Anglo-Celtic/ other ethnic European subject, do *not* have to be synonymous. Indeed, M05's discussion of his desire to be seen as attractive was due to the fact that he felt desirable, with no considerations to racialisation as a factor impacting his feelings of being attractive:

> **M05:** […] Yeah, but nah, I actually never felt bad about myself. I just, I actually felt good that's why I was like 'Why can't White women approach me for once?' (Laughs). So, no I don't feel bad about myself.

> **Interviewer:** (Laughs) Ok but, did that [being an Asian man – AS] have anything to do with you being obsessed about the gym?

> **M05:** No. It [going to the gym] was just because I had never been with a White woman. […] It's pretty silly, but yeah.

Racialisation did not factor into M05's own perception of himself, in that he did not see himself through a lens that devalued his racialised self. For example, M05 did not apply common strategies of condescension to himself (i.e. he was not 'attractive *for an Asian*') but simply thought he was an attractive man and desired to be recognised in this fashion. Whilst he still viewed the acquisition of White women as the ultimate confirmation of his physical attractiveness, his perception of his own attractiveness was divorced from any hegemonic notions of racialisation, and more specifically, notions of hegemonic White masculinity. Whilst separating markers of attractiveness from Whiteness is clearly possible, at least partially, I suggest that it would be careless to sustain a hyper-focus on this dynamic which only accounts for a narrow impact of IR upon the racialised. Indeed, whilst M05 divorced muscular bodies from their racialisation as *non*-Asian, he still attempted to acquire forms of hegemonic masculinity through the acquisition of *White* women in particular.

This is evident in part of an interview discussing F02's recent blepharoplasty, and her intention to acquire more surgical enhancements cosmetically. F02's desire for attractiveness was also, according to her, divorced from any desire to 'look White', referring to markers that signify the common image of an Anglo-Celtic or Western European body.

> **F02:** Yeah! I mean I guess definitely, the nose probably like cuz', oh, I wouldn't even say that White people have nice noses though. I just honestly think like Asian people do it because they want like a higher bridge. And like more like a pointier nose or whatever. But I don't think like necessarily White people have that nose. Like, it's not like I think, like, 'oh that girl has a really nice nose'. Like, you know, I wouldn't go to a plastic surgeon and be, like, 'Hey, give me Delta Goodrem's nose'.

One could read into the above, and I suggest, *should* see an element of the will-to-resist. This takes the form of (perhaps subconsciously) identifying the archetype of the dominant standard of beauty, in this case the (positively) stereotyped White/ Eurocentric female body, and choosing not to conform to *this particular* image, whatever that may be for this specific participant. F02 wants a specific kind of nose, described only

through the non-specific comparative term '*higher* bridge'. She chooses to divorce this characteristic from the White archetypal body that she has identified as the standardised norm of attractiveness, wilfully supplanting the power of the body part from the dominant imaginary of the constructed White body itself. In this sense, she resists, and resists well.

However, with closer examination, such lengths gone to acquire supposedly non-racialised (non-White/Eurocentric) markers that speak to her sense of attractiveness cannot fully be removed from identifying the presence of an internalised (covert) racism. It is one, that in F02's case, insidiously shields the racialised component that animates certain preferred body types and types of body parts, whilst operating as if her own body, an 'Asian' body, can never attain such features without invasive cosmetic procedures such as the blepharoplasty and rhinoplasty. This makes sense, of course, when one realises that racialised groups are partially constructed upon shared phenotypical differences. As race philosopher Adam Hochman ([2014](#)) writes, 'it is a misconception that anti-realists about biological race believe that 'race' is totally uncorrelated with any biological difference: we just believe that it does not capture very much biological difference, and that it does not capture that difference very well' (p. 81). For instance, eye shape is often a marker of (inferiorised) Asian-ness in contemporary Australian society ([Hollero 2007](#)), that could very well be correlated with Asian (cosmetic) blepharoplasty. What is therefore the more important sociological focus here is recognising the framework of attractiveness through which these body parts derive their value. I suggest that what has been seen so far in this section demonstrates how attempted resistance towards White supremacist ideology, such as in F02's case, can still inadvertently and covertly perpetuate such structures. The desire for a 'higher' nose-bridge implicitly takes as its reference a White/ Eurocentric standard of attractiveness which includes archetypal features of the ethnic European phenotype. Importantly, it is a standard which F02 is explicitly trying divorce herself from, and indeed believes she does (i.e. 'I wouldn't go to a plastic surgeon and be like 'Hey, give me Delta Goodrem's nose'').

The above suggests that strategies of resistance, whether in compensating for one's perceived lack in (hegemonic) masculinity, attempting to navigate racialised spaces through embodying racialised ambiguity, or in divorcing markers of attractiveness from signifying Whiteness, can still render one inadvertently complicit in maintaining racist, or more specifically, White supremacist structures.

Non-Resistance: Blind Spots in Resisting Racism

Beyond the conscious renouncing where one recognises the difficulty of habituated White supremacist ideology, or inadvertent complicity with racist structures, a much more general limitation of studies with a hyper-focus on resistance can be glimpsed from the participants' narratives. This can be seen as a 'blind-spot' of resistance-focused scholarship, since, as I demonstrate, there are instances where the racialised simply do not attempt to resist hegemonic racist ideology. I simply term this limitation a form of *non-resistance*.

The limitation discussed here can be understood as such; if one cannot or will not recognise the existence of a problematic, one cannot be expected to develop an effective resistance towards it. Take M02, a 33-year-old Australian man of Filipino descent, who can be seen expressing his view that in contemporary Australian society both interpersonal and structural forms of racism are absent:

> **M02:** […] For me growing up in Melbourne and Melbourne sort of being […] a very big cultural hub, racism as a systematic form […] doesn't necessarily exist. […] I feel there's no actual um, systems in place that really stops an Asian Australian, specifically, from pursuing um, opportunities. […] I think a lot of the […] incidences that people would sort of deem racist or be called racist is really, I would almost call it, incidental or almost um, an isolated incident. Because it's not the attitude of most Australians.

I utilise this excerpt here to illustrate that M02, and others who embody this particular manifestation of IR, clearly do not recognise a problematic of racism. The matter of resistance toward racism, whether in its individual, interpersonal, or structural forms is therefore rendered moot in cases such as this. Some may argue that, in regard to racism's existence, the act of sublimation can be seen as a resistance strategy towards the psychological impact of racism. There certainly seems to be truth to this, at least for M02, who may not want to mar his sense of belonging to his imaginary of the Australian nation, something that the recognition of the existence of anti-Asian sentiment certainly would affect. However, such arguments would also require the positioning of one's notion of resistance as an *individualised* response to interpersonal racism (i.e. the will-to-resist), as opposed to one with any structural awareness of how racism proliferates. Hence, it would certainly be a strategy of resistance that is limited in scope given that a denial of racism would ultimately contribute to its perpetuation.

The three categories of *conscious renouncing*, *inadvertent complicity*, and *non-resistance* explicated above do not only highlight the limitations within acts of resistance for racialised subjects. I submit that it is also reflective of the difficulty to sustain a grand narrative of resistance, whereby to be a racialised subject as a politicised identity is therefore also, as an *a priori*, to resist racism. Resistance strategies, whilst potentially useful at the individual level, can and in the above cases, *do* contain an element of complicity at a structural level. At least within this study, the participants' narratives demonstrate that resistance is not always a given dynamic, and when present, not always effective. As such, if the *raison d'être* of contemporary race scholarship is to altogether dismantle racist structures, or at least begin to weaken its impact upon the racialised, then foreclosing the issue of IR through the hyper-focus on resistance seems counterintuitive to anti-racist efforts. As such, in following this line of argumentation in the final section, I identify the problem within contemporary scholarship that sustains a hyper-focus on resistance.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the article, I presented a conceptual tension within contemporary postcolonial and race scholarship. I highlighted scholarship which sustained a hyper-focus on the dynamic of resistance, and that which focused more on the negative material and/ or psychological consequences of racism for the racialised/ colonised. To this, some may argue that scholarship like Fanon's (2004), and Forsyth and Gavranovic's (2017) is aimed at different purposes. The former problematises the structural nature of colonisation and the intent of the colonisers to appropriate resources, imperially or otherwise. The latter has a micro-level focus, whereby the strengths and ingenuity of colonised, racialised, or other oppressed groups are foregrounded.

It is within this glorification of survival of the colonised groups within an oppressive paradigm, then, that I want to problematise this idea of genuine poesis. In this sense, feminist media and cultural studies scholar Angela McRobbie's (2009) work may help to further the argument, insofar as she questions the utility of these particular narratives of resistance. In particular, she interrogates their efficacy within a capitalist system of consumerism. She recalls feminist scholarship that engaged in 'celebratory connections with ordinary women', who 'created their own, now seemingly autonomous pleasures and rituals of enjoyable femininity from the goods made available by consumer culture' (p. 3). Here, McRobbie questions the validity of *discursivity* as an act of subversion (i.e. 'the meanings of the goods and values') within a hegemonic system of dominance (capitalist patriarchy, in this case).

For the subjugated, a discursive re-interpretation of meanings of their structural positioning within an oppressive system distracts from the absence of any *structural* changes; the *affective* dimension may perhaps be altered, but one's position remains a position of structural subjugation. This has important consequences for understanding the tension between resistance as an individualised act, as seen in the participants' narratives, and its impact upon the structures that each act is supposedly subverting. If this is so, it is

concerning that contemporary scholarship (cf. Pyke 2010), and perhaps society more generally (cf. Murray 2019) seem to place more emphasis on narratives of racialised resistance and survival, especially when it seems to be so at the cost of a wider and deeper understanding of racism and its impacts. As stated earlier, one of its manifestations is through the politicisation of racialised identity, and a corresponding identity politics that positions the racialised subject as a model resistor. Indeed, as the data demonstrates, it is not *always* the case that racialised subjects succeed in resisting, or sometimes even recognise the need to resist in the first place.

Taken together, I suggest that an overt focus on resistance within race scholarship serves to bulwark the ability of scholars to examine the full extent of the impact of racism upon the racialised in all its reaches, through a premature foreclosure of the problematic. A particular concerning area is the inability to then treat the phenomenon of IR with gravitas. If hegemonic dominance depends upon dynamics of consent and complicity amongst subjugated groups and individuals, then any study of racism will be incomplete without recognising how the racialised, through IR, help perpetuate and maintain a racialised system. As such, focusing on the limitations within the acts of resistance has demonstrated two things. It is in part a notion that can acknowledge the agentic will-to-resist of the racialised to be able to offer a bulwark against a racist structure that aims to be totalising. Yet it *also* allows an understanding which moves beyond the overt strengths-based focus of how the racialised resist and resist *well*, to recognising that resistance *can*, and indeed within this study, *does*, remain a problematic enterprise that is not without its own challenges for the racialised.

I maintain that resistance scholarship is of import to recognise the strengths that reside within racialised communities in the face of their racialisation, and as such commendable in its humanising efforts. However, an essentialist framework that understands all racialised subjects as either experts on their racialisation and/ or in a state of always resisting is one derived from a politicised view of racialised identity, one that may blind us to the more insidious impacts of racism. Race scholars would do well, then, to bridle their political aims when approaching the realm of intellectual inquiry, or risk inadvertently silencing a deeper meaning to be heard when the 'voices-of-colour' speak.

Acknowledgements

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