

Liberal-Racisms and Invisible Orders

In the preceding chapters, I have offered an account of the ways in which whiteness, English, and cosmopolitan mobility together form an intersubjective space-time of mediation, an Angloscene, that can be understood as simultaneously reconstituted through, and recruited to, African and Chinese encounters in contemporary Beijing. Throughout, I framed this simultaneous recruiting and reconstituting process as a form of translation—conceptualized more in a dialectical and interactionist sense. In doing so, I drew attention to the historical material condition of decolonization that animates an emergent but far from depoliticized non-western encounter. I further suggested that this approach has important implications for the study of interactions—in both anthropology as well as a variety of disciplines concerned with contact, encounter, and the stratification of social diversity along multiple intersectional vectors.

In reconsidering postcolonial translation in this critical semiotic sense, I have suggested that there are three dimensions to understanding translation or mediation as simultaneously a pragmatic and dialectical concern. I suggested that there is, first, a chronotopic dimension to interactions, in the sense that they require the recruitment and construction of space-time(s) through which units of commensuration and social value—like English, whiteness, or unmarked cosmopolitan mobility—become co(n)textualized. Second, I suggested that such interactions—including but not limited to dialogical speech acts—are intersectionally emplaced (Crenshaw 1991), complicating the possibilities of “taking any line” (Goffman 1959) of interaction by any subject at any time. This is due to the ways in which relationships between race, gender, and sexuality have a propensity to stratify subjects in relation to an emergent ideological gravity of whiteness—even if their presumed national and intersocial chronotopes were very different. Finally, I showed how interactions among subjects—who are variously stratified by aspirationally cosmopolitan horizons and the personhoods these imbricate—have an (an)aesthetic propensity. Here, I reflected that the affective and mimetic capacities of non-white

sensoriums—and their techno-linguistic dependencies—become recruited to sustaining a persistent stratification through whiteness—whether by embracing a liberal nonracial cosmopolitanism, or a reconstituted “third world” *imaginaire*—as a means to escape the gravity of white space-time.

The universities and wider settings within which I was able to work during the course of my fieldwork certainly amplified the tensions imbricated by the Anglo-scene—tensions that both promised young Africans and their Chinese interlocutors access to unmarked, cosmopolitan social mobility while simultaneously deferring it. The fact that the means for making and acquiring the ideal future subject of third-world cosmopolitanism was a promise that became continuously elided prompted my observation of (an)aesthesia as a way to mitigate the disjunctive ways in which a cosmopolitan future was constantly being brought closer while being kept at bay. In this way, the interactional space-time of whiteness was very much distilled by the global university and transnational educational matrix within which African and Chinese students found themselves: transforming on- and off-campus interactions as a theater for aspiration and privilege that must (still) be imported from an “enlightened” (perhaps en-whitened) elsewhere. For many educational migrants, adolescence remains endlessly augmented, and adulthood deferred, just to cope with the “youthful” experiences of “exclusion and in-betweenness” that twenty-first-century conditions of mobility and personhood impose on non-western subjects—a concern that has emerged in the work of anthropologist, Constantine Nakassis (2016a).

In his work, Nakassis suggests that the southern Indian university campus’s interactional space-time suspends the ideological gravity of stratification acting on his “youthful” Tamil-speaking subjects, “allowing for a moment to pause and play on those hierarchies by figuratively reanimating and deforming them” (228). On campuses in Beijing, such moments of suspension are certainly present, but rather than pointing to a kind of radical, poststructural agency within conditions of neo-liberal compromise, the transformation of experiences of liminality and hierarchy through such moments of suspension have an equal propensity to also reinforce liminality and hierarchy. Transformation in the interactional here-and-now can go in more than one direction. (An)aesthetically, it can open up “spaces for youth sociality, aesthetics, value, and subjectivity” as much as it can compromise such an “opening-up” (228). Thus, it is precisely through commitments to the possibilities of opened-up conditions of youth sociality, aesthetics, value, and subjectivity that we note their dialectical, cruelly optimistic other: how the powerful conditions for historically material and semiotic alienations of personhood become not only equally possible, but also intersectionally inevitable.

I have emphasized throughout that the mediation of intersubjective and mass-mediated icons of personhood—in dialectical interactions—are central to sustaining a pragmatics of postcolonial translation: “the unmarked cosmopolitan,” “the Purple Cow,” “Sheryl Sandberg,” “Oprah Winfrey,” and “Trevor Noah.”

These archetypes come into intersubjective existence through interactions, and yet are also experienced as both prior to, and impinging upon, African and Chinese encounters. It is this interplay between present and past, interior and exterior, and emergent and transcendent that I have tried to emphasize by framing these encounters as dialectical interactions. Inhabiting this dialectical tension, my informants both attempted to overturn complex stratifications they found themselves in, as well as to recruit them in their favor—thus ultimately compromising themselves through transforming and reinforcing the very conditions of stratification they were attempting to escape. Thus, the recruitment of such archetypes and mass-mediated icons of personhood certainly allowed for a partial suspension from precarious intersubjective tensions. However, the emancipatory propensities of this recruitment and suspension—once committed to on the part of the cosmopolitan aspirant—can also be interpreted as eliding the inaccessibility of cosmopolitan realities through the fetishization of cosmopolitan potentials.

TRANSLATION'S MOBILE ENTANGLEMENTS

The attempt to convert the precarities of mobility into aspirational possibilities entails the recruitment of a universal, perhaps cosmopolitan, register to enact a postcolonial translation—in this case not only English, but also its elided raciolinguistic entailments. Suggesting a similar set of dynamics, Homi Bhabha writes that “culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. [T]he transnational dimension of cultural transformation”—which I interpret as a salient, although not totalizing dimension of mobility—“turns the specifying or localizing process of cultural translation into a complex process of signification” (1995, 48). For him and many others (Gilroy 1993; Spivak 1993; Nuttall and Mbembe 2008; Butler 1995), this transnational condition disrupts the capacity to reference “the natural(ized), unifying discourse of ‘nation,’ ‘peoples,’ ‘folk’ tradition” (Bhabha 1995, 49). In mobility, there is a transformation in concrete and signifying conditions that disrupt the signs of identity or personhood in their national or local expressions—a theme that becomes salient in transnational encounters. This disruption, for Bhabha, problematizes identity formation by short-circuiting the reading of such signs by changing the national or local context from which they derive their legibility. Since the meanings of signs are contingent on the spatial, temporal, and material totality of their context of utterance—or simply their indexical factors (M. Silverstein 1976)—conditions of mobility necessarily impinge on signs of personhood. To be sure, such disruptions open gaps in taken-for-granted worlds that are unsettled by transnational interactions and their emergent communities of reception and reproduction—where African educational migrants in Beijing and cosmopolitan Chinese graduate students in America all encounter and appropriate various cultural signs, producing perhaps productive ambiguities, curiosities, and forms of mimesis. Or is the Sino-African encounter—an object

of analysis to the western media and academic Anglosphere—merely a potential staging ground for Eurocentric multicultural fantasies, or when they fail, racist dystopias?

This book did not seek to argue against novelty or contestation. Rather, it attempted to capture the ideological conditions that both obstruct and perpetuate this fantasy of equal opportunity multiculturalism as an outlook undergirding western intellectual expectations of Chinese and African contemporary encounters. If Sino-African encounters could be genuinely equitable, egalitarian mobility would be a condition of possibility for such encounters. But what kind of mobility is in question? Is mobility an experience, or is it a physical state, objectively delineable, irrespective of the one experiencing it? In this *experience* of mobility, where and how does this experience become legible? In posing such questions, temporality and sequence become key considerations. In the movement or reproduction of language, race, and cosmopolitanism, what exactly does this mobility entail?

Homi Bhabha clearly situates the state of mobility as being in translation, while on the other side of the same epistemic coin, Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Spivak have suggested that it is the state of translation that is a mobile one. There is something happening at the confluence of mobility and translation that appears to generate the solipsism at issue for these thinkers. It is also out of this solipsism (or perhaps dialectic)—of history, meaning, and material conditions—that translation as the primary analytic of postcolonial theory has emerged—and while I do not explicitly enter into a semantic exegesis, it is translation in its postcolonial mode that has haunted my engagement throughout this project.

This necessitates a polemic of sorts, in which I have drawn on, and recontextualized a very particular genealogy of postcolonial theory—in some ways at odds with what I have experienced as its canonical, mostly American, reduction in the US university classroom. In fetishizing the moment of translation and its discursive consequences, Bhabha, Spivak, and Derrida—in a poststructural or deconstructionist mode of postcolonial inquiry—have largely been recruited into the proposition of intellectual equal opportunism within privileged American higher educational settings. I mean no disrespect to these ancestors of postcolonial theory since it is on the foundations of their work that my own critique is constructed. Instead, I am criticizing from a position of frustration at the way in which their work has both been co-opted, and (perhaps unintentionally) lends itself to a still pervasive, extractive logic that underpins many intellectual interventions that sustain social science and humanistic inquiries that simultaneously aim to be both objective and relativist without questioning the condition of possibility for this very proposition. While colonization certainly *transforms the colonizer too*, I feel that a *discourse from nowhere because it is everywhere* approach to postcolonial translation makes power an ultimately arbitrary proposition, where those who don't have it critique it and ultimately reconstitute its persistent salience. It was Erving Goffman—a contemporary of Michel Foucault—who also concluded

that hierarchies of power or “interactional orders” ultimately required interactional labor to sustain them. However, Goffman also pointed out that subjects were not equal in their capacity to participate in the maintenance or contestation of hierarchy—there was an ordering of the interaction that emerged as though imposed on it, that made the same marginal subjects perpetually bear the burden of marginality in any interaction, and that this occurred regardless of the unfinalizability of personhood that exists as a default proposition in liberal societies. Even in the more general political writings of Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe, and Mao Zedong—working at fundamentally different scales, and out of contrasting settings—a micro-interactional dynamics of stratification is at play in the politics of revolution and decolonization. In his lectures on surveillance at the University of Tunis, Fanon noted the raciolinguistic contingencies of reception (as production) that make the encounters of the colonized with the ideological space-time of the colonizer a far from open-ended one (Browne 2015). In this regard, he preceded both Said ([1977] 2003) and Foucault (2007, 1995, 1982) in noting how subject formation unfolds through “ascending relations of power,” as well as how this formation is contingent upon mediated modes of reception, like surveillance.

All of these thinkers point to the dialectical emergence of an ideological gravity where despite the constant propositions of decolonization, modernity, sovereignty, and equal opportunism, marginal subjects of history are stratified so as to bear the seemingly perpetual burdens of blackness, refugee-ness, or Chineseness as liabilities. Regardless of the volatility of semiotic forms—due to the open-ended play of difference and repetition, or the arbitrariness of signs of alterity—there appears to remain a durability in the ideological gravity of stratification: a durability that is pragmatic rather than semantic. Thus, there is no “failure” or “impossibility” of translation as a pragmatic proposition, and indeed no interaction without some attempt at translation. Even if translation fails every time, the interlocutor remains committed to it, thus sustaining translation as a durable social process even if it remains incomplete, hierarchical, and ultimately compromised—a point demonstrated explicitly in chapter 5.

Communicating this has been difficult in my time in the United States—as a graduate student and, later, as a postdoctoral student and faculty member. I can cite my own experiences of teaching postcolonial theory and attempting to make use of it in my research within the evaluatory regime of the American academy. I was constantly informed not only of how “out-of-date” this genealogy was, but also of its lack of theoretical rigor and ethnographic nuance. “More complex” readings of my own postcolonial interlocutors were constantly encouraged, where colonialism suddenly became “not the real concern” of Spivak, who could now “easily be updated with Povinelli (2001), Brown (2005), and Butler (1997).” Fanon was suddenly “not really advocating violence” as a challenge to white liberalism in the shadow of decolonization, and those who would dare to read Fanon in the “wrong way” were suddenly not “exegetic” enough—an accusation recently directed

toward South African students voicing Fanon to protest white monopoly capital. Latour, Agamben, Foucault, and *Writing Culture* became almost dogmatically prescribed (or perhaps proscribed) as a theoretical panacea to the “hysterical radicalism” that would dare to challenge the “unmarked” “objectivity” of liberal intellectualism. Masquerading as open-ended and open-minded deconstruction, so many of these accusations against radical hysteria, some of them even of racism, continue to conceal the ideological gravity within which updated translations of postcolonialism unfold.

This both implicit and explicit concealment evidences the existence of vast institutions and regimes of arbitration, not to mention economic systems that are sustained by commitments to translatability and commensuration (Sassen 2014). For example, journalistic and academic institutions of the Anglosphere that are committed to a situated objectivity—and yet speak for all others—are still squarely situated within what Adorno once called the culture industry, yet on a fundamentally more global scale masquerading as intellectual excellence. There are clearly a set of institutional practices that authenticate both legibility and value to Sino-African interactions within a subjective, far from arbitrary, regime of arbitration. There is a lot at stake in translating the cultural and economic value of a China-Africa interaction, and there are certainly those who are the authenticators of such translations. Meta-translators, like anthropologists, not only exercise authority over a translation, but also mastery of the original, the ur-text, and thus authorize an appropriate relationship to history. It is precisely for this reason that anthropologists’ situatedness in relation to both their field of study and research subjects should not be elided. “Who are the anthropologists in the field?” is a question many anthropologists these days engage with great relish, eager to perform the genre of narcissistic navel-gazing even while reflexively deriding it. Few, however, need to ask: who are they *to* their field?

As an Afrikaner anthropologist, I felt more at home in my field site of Beijing than I ever did as a graduate student in the United States. I found refuge among my informants in China and elsewhere, learning a language that I still struggle to speak. However, I will maintain that proclaiming “friendships” between myself and my informants within the chronotope of an ethnography is wholly inappropriate, even though such claims have increasingly become commonplace in the English anthropological literature. This representational politics becomes all the more apparent as increasing numbers of non-American and non-white anthropologists must internalize an appropriate affective disposition to their research subjects so as to perform an acceptable “Anthroman” (Jackson 2005). The performance of an appropriate sentiment must be mastered to put an imagined (and thus omnipresent) Euro-American arbiter at ease. We must make our friendships with our informants accessible to our evaluators by mastering a representation of our subjects that we imagine will affectively trigger our teachers’ evaluations of us. In my fieldwork, there were and continue to be genuine friendships—meaningful

ones—but I have tried, as far as possible, not to make these available to the parasitically voyeuristic imagination of the default monolingual, white, English-speaking public of American anthropology's reading Anglosphere. Proclaiming friendship in the rhetorical service of assuring the reader that one had "genuine rapport with the natives" is disingenuous at best, but it also dismisses possibilities of insight that can only be gained through other kinds of "misanthropic," or (mis)anthropological, social intensities—violence for instance.

During my fieldwork, one personal experience demonstrated the productive insights to be gained from violent, but nonetheless socially intensive, interactions. As a member of a Southern African student soccer team—Azania United—which participated in the competitive inter-Africa league in Beijing, I was at one point deliberately injured by an opposition player who was humiliated by his teammates and Azania United's manager for giving the ball away to "the only white guy on the field." Incensed by this, the freshman from Nong Da (Agricultural University) broke my leg and caused an ACL tear with an off-the-ball revenge foul. As I was recovering from my injuries, my teammates and informants—both Chinese and African—often jokingly told me that I could "walk them off." Toward the end of my fieldwork, I saw the student who had injured me in a university canteen several months later, he looked at me limping, and also jokingly said: "When are you going to come and try to steal the ball from me again?" We had rapport, but were not friends; nor would we ever be "equals" in the relativistic sense. In this regard, violent recognitions can render very different kinds of anthropological insights between increasingly atypical not-quite-native informants and not-quite-native ethnographers, making persistent American ethnographic platitudes, like "my friends, the informants," seem somewhat out of touch with reality and worthy of suspicion by the other social sciences.

In retrospect, "violent recognition" as a constant experience in and beyond the field was likely a strong motivator for my depiction of Fanon's "violence of decolonization" as a mode of translation, where "decolonization . . . sets out to change the order of the world" and "cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding" (1963, 36). Here, I understood decolonization not only as "an always as-yet-incomplete project," but also, one that is "translated" in the pragmatist sense I discussed before. By this emphasis on translation, I will further suggest that communicative incompleteness does not mean that translation is either open-ended or arbitrary—for open-endedness and arbitrariness are ultimately visible only from a truly privileged perspective. As I will demonstrate, movement between colonization and decolonization is very much contingent on an ideological context that does not allow for a seamless shift in relations and reappropriations of power, and here I will emphasize that the same is true for disciplinary debates in anthropology and other social sciences—particularly in the privileged domain of the American academic Anglosphere where consensus and passive-aggressive gatekeeping constrain debates in

their insistence on a nonconfrontational, analytical equal opportunism. This is an experienced daily reality for any third-world or intersectionally marginalized subject participating in collegial interactions within America's knowledge industry. If our debates are to be relevant, and if we are genuinely committed to decolonizing anthropology—which, I would argue, no amount of privileged relativism can ever accomplish—we may want to consider Fanon's imperative more seriously:

The Third World has no intention of organizing a vast hunger crusade against Europe. What it does expect from those who have kept it in slavery for centuries is to help rehabilitate man, ensure his triumph everywhere, once and for all. But it is obvious we are not so naïve as to think this will be achieved with the cooperation and goodwill of the European governments. This colossal task, which consists of reintroducing man into the world, man in his totality, will be achieved with the crucial help of the European masses who would do well to confess that they have often rallied behind the position of our common masters on colonial issues. In order to do this, the European masses must first of all decide to wake up, put on their thinking caps and stop playing the irresponsible game of *Sleeping Beauty*. (1963, 63)

Given that the apex of white imperialism—following Said (2003)—has perhaps shifted from Europe to the elite of America, where privilege is validated by its most prestigious institutions of knowledge—like the University of Chicago and Harvard University, for instance—the semiotic value of Europe and the European in Fanon's words must be understood as a “shifter” (M. Silverstein 1976). This shifter, however, forms an important component in enabling the maintenance of a more trans-historical, transnational, yet implicit white gravity that reiterates the stratification of its constantly thwarted others. In this regard, I understand that the American academy as the driver of a global knowledge industry (followed by an increasing number of transnational franchises) does not operate in an ideological vacuum. I also acknowledge that many of its personnel believe themselves to be fighting the good fight. Here, I hope to have demonstrated the degree to which this remains a compromised belief, while an elite—mostly liberal—American intellectual class remains oblivious to their complicity in stratifying subjectivity far beyond their own imagined, utopian horizons. I argue that this complicit stratification is enabled by many of my elite colleagues and teachers both in underestimating and investing in arguments against an imagined boogeyman of “structure.” This is an ultimately lazy intellectual commitment that bypasses the ideological impacts of vast belief systems that are dependent on structure and structural sense. The literary registers and publication industries promoting the most committed post-structural and nonrepresentational work; the mass- and linguistically mediated cosmopolitan horizons of personhood academia itself engenders; the aesthetic and ethical forms that persuade us about the existence of a culturally diverse, but far-from-disconnected Anthropocene—all of these ultimately depend on a significant faith in structure. The dismissal and denigration of postcolonial critiques of Anglo-centric mass media and English monolingualism as simplistic and somehow

“less complex” are all significant manifestations of this structural blind spot in western anthropology’s relativist yet still monolingual theater of operations. Neither “complex” nor “novel,” this critique merely underlines the compromised conditions within which so many American-trained anthropologists are attempting to rescue efficacious agency in the lives of informants who experience neither efficaciousness nor agency. In the following concluding interactional analysis, I hope to not only demonstrate some of the limits of rescuing agency and the situated theater of personhood that informs it. I hope to additionally reveal how the very proposition of liberal subjecthood—emerging in the following interaction through contestations around the term “freedom”—generates the otherwise invisible ideological order within which interactional participants are stratified.

MUTUAL BENEFITS, INVISIBLE ORDERS

As China’s contemporary engagement with Africa continues to engender a tension between “mutually beneficial” and hierarchical relations, a number of western journalists have begun to critique China as a modern-day colonizer, restaging Africa as the eternally colonized. This staging recruits Africans as a popular and recent addition to their list of China’s subalterns—equating China’s relationship with ethnic minorities, who themselves are seeking various degrees of sovereignty, with Africans’ historical and political history with Europeans. Given a topical interest in these “colonial” Sino-African encounters, increasing numbers of western journalists have become a prominent presence in a number of ethnographic settings in China and Africa. Through their hyper-legibility, they play a key role in recontextualizing the interactional frameworks that imbricate both African and Chinese actors and their ethnographic voyeurs. But, what does this recontextualization do?

This final, hopefully revealing, account of an interaction in Beijing was mediated by a famous American journalist, who, through her own attempt at “equal” participation in a Sino-African encounter, inadvertently generated the very ideological gravity that inflects Afro-Chinese “interactional orders” (Goffman 1983). I have suggested in preceding chapters, and following Goffman, that interactional orders can be understood as a dialectical, interactionally immanent, ideological stratifications that appear as transcendent to the participants in that interaction. I also theorized such interactions as mediated through linguistic enregisterment. In the interaction that follows, the stratification that unfolds is significantly informed by a set of historical and material conditions assumed to be absent in Sino-African engagements—the absent presence of a recontextualized white space-time.

In 2015, near the end of a stint of fieldwork in Beijing, I attended a talk by a former chief economist of the World Bank, Justin Lin. The talk was hosted at the Beijing branch of an elite American university—one of several Ivy League outposts in the Chinese capital. In attendance were numerous high-profile personnel from

state-related financial institutions. Liu Xiaoming, a high-ranking economist who was in charge of the Africa division of one of China's top three foreign-development banks, was among them. Attendees also included a number of journalists like Anne West, a well-known white American writer who had been active for a number of years as a feminist and ethnic minority activist in China. At the end of Lin's talk, there was a Q and A, with many of the questions coming from younger Chinese men, such as: "How does one make the most of a western education as a Chinese man?" Other questions, all of which were posed in English despite the fact that more than 90 percent of the attendees were Chinese, focused on China's future role in a world where not only Chinese labor, but Chinese capital, became central to more countries' development strategies, and the global economy as a whole. Justin Lin emphasized that China was positioned to see different kinds of investment potential compared to past European American investments, "especially in places like Africa."

At this, Lin Xiaoming somewhat overeagerly leaped out of his seat and moderated his own question to Lin: "I am the chief economist for the Africa division of China's Da Qian Bank and we have been struggling with this question for a long time. How is China going to develop Africa when we have seen many failures of development in the past? There are so many obstacles, the most pressing being epidemics, corruption, and civil war." Justin Lin looked genuinely confused by the question, perhaps due to Xiaoming's self-introduction and the contradiction of his question with China's already considerable investments in Africa. Why would an Africa investor for the Chinese government be so opposed to investment in Africa? After a considered pause, Justin Lin responded: "I think your opinion is exaggerated; surely, Africa is a big place with many different strengths in different regions?" Anne West—whom I had met on an earlier occasion through my partner—was sitting next to me at the talk, and commented in a whispered aside: "Are you kidding me?" Feeling incensed by Xiaoming's question, I had the same phrase in mind at the time, but as I would come to learn later, our exasperation stemmed from very different alignments and assumptions about the ideological context within which Sino-African interactions were emplaced. At the end of the talk, as attendees broke into groups with wine glasses in hand, Anne immediately gravitated toward Liu Xiaoming and I followed.

"I really enjoyed your question," Anne said to Xiaoming, who gleefully nodded and said, "Thank you so much, Anne, I am a really big fan of your work." Anne then introduced me as "an expert on China-Africa relations from the University of Chicago" and then immediately stepped back from the interaction, watching. Xiaoming smiled, shook my hand, and told me the name of his Ivy League university where he had studied for an MBA degree in finance. I then asked Xiaoming how often he traveled to Africa for his work. Wasn't it exhausting? He responded that it wasn't all that necessary in his position, but that he had once gone to Tanzania for two weeks. He was proud of the fact that his organization was

fortunate in that they were able to work with reliable forecasting data, making use of both Chinese and American think tanks to get the information they need to make “informed policy decisions.” As we spoke, and as Anne watched, I increasingly began to feel as though I was being drawn into an American fraternity chronotope of sorts, as his register shifted from professional to American college colloquial. As he commented on the Chicago Bulls’ poor basketball performances in recent years and whether I had been following their season, I began to realize that Xiaoming was entering into this register because he thought that I was an American. Confirming this, he then asked—probably noting my inability to engage in basketball banter—“Where in the States are you from?” When I answered, “I’m not from the States,” thus confirming his suspicions, and followed up with “I’m from South Africa,” Xiaoming’s expression and register instantly changed. The interaction stopped dead in its tracks as he said, “Oh” and looked at Anne, as though waiting for further instructions. On cue, she quickly suggested that we should “continue this fascinating conversation” over dinner the following week. Xiaoming eagerly agreed and we exchanged WeChat accounts to arrange the event, which did actually come about a week later.

Anne texted me and my partner a few days before the dinner with Xiaoming, saying that she was bringing one of her ethnic minority informants to the meeting. She then suggested that I “bring one of [my] African friends [to challenge] his assumptions.” What Anne meant by Xiaoming’s assumptions was “patriarchal Han Chinese ethnocentrism,” a theme she had often contextualized in her own work with ethnic minorities in China, and particularly ethnic minority women, and which—in interactions with (particularly male) Chinese government officials—she rarely hesitated to call out. The presence of another—this time African—subaltern would both serve as an opportunity to (perhaps intersectionally) extend her argument beyond China, as well as provide a provocative ethnographic encounter through which to demonstrate it. It is worth noting that, without Anne’s mediation, a meeting with Xiaoming would have been an unachievable feat for me, a South African anthropologist. Given my status, interactions with people like Xiaoming are mostly out of the question. When the high-profile Chinese government official and the renowned American journalist discuss their subalterns—ethnic minorities and Africans—it is anthropologists and “their colorful friends” who become the parasites of the journalistic encounter.

In preparation for our meeting, I chose to invite my informant Rousseau Asara—an ambitious finance student from Madagascar studying at one of Beijing’s top universities. Through my fieldwork, I came to know Rousseau as both a confident conversational provocateur as well as someone who had obsessively acquired knowledge of Chinese development banks’ investment strategies—the topic of his honors thesis. Thus, of all my informants, he was the one most likely to benefit professionally and academically from meeting Xiaoming. Anne and Xiaoming left it to the rest of us to make the arrangements and my partner (fittingly) chose an

ethnic minority restaurant in the Haidian district for the setting of the conversation. On the appointed day, Rousseau arrived early, wearing a pink polo shirt and a gold-colored watch, which I had never seen him wear before—possibly to impress Xiaoming. Soon after, Xiaoming arrived wearing a black suit and tie despite the heavily polluted, scorching hot weather—to impress Anne. The rest of us—including Anne, my partner, and Anne’s informant—were wearing less “high stakes,” casual attire.

From the moment we took our seats inside the air-conditioned restaurant, it was apparent that Xiaoming was uncomfortable, arising perhaps from a perception that he was obviously being set up as the overdressed Beijing government official who had to encounter an array of exotic others in an ethnic minority setting. By contrast, Anne was clearly enjoying herself, enthusiastically commenting on the diversity of ethnic minority dishes in China, before asking Rousseau all about his home country and praising his educational cosmopolitanism. Rousseau, who seemed either oblivious to the tension at the table or determined to ignore it, addressed Xiaoming and said that he admired his institution’s development strategy in Africa. This broke the ice somewhat and allowed Xiaoming to emphasize the party line—“mutual benefit should always be win-win, so China is also grateful to Africa.” Here, Xiaoming emphasized the “r” in “grateful,” as well as nasalizing the first “A” in “Africa” to suggest an American accent, thus emphasizing his education abroad, something he indexed later in the interaction when telling Rousseau that he had “studied the same major, but in the US.” After Xiaoming dropped the party line, Anne was quick to interject: “But can Africans move as freely in China as Chinese can in Africa, or Tibet for that matter?” This three-way dynamic set the tone for an exchange that took up almost an hour: Rousseau attempting to network with Xiaoming, who would voice a party-line platitude, which would be scathingly set upon by Anne, who would recruit Xiaoming to the role of privileged Han Chinese, an ethnonationalist patriarch and colonizer of transglobal subalterns.

My partner, Anne’s informant, and I watched as Xiaoming would listen thoughtfully to Anne, and then pretend that he did not entirely understand what she was driving at—turning his attention time and again to Rousseau, someone he normally would not have given the time of day, but whom in this encounter represented an escape from an unexpectedly hostile interaction. Another escape tactic presented itself when—as one dish after another arrived in our restaurant booth—Xiaoming somewhat over enthusiastically entered into a mode of connoisseurship, praising “the skill of these people.” As a distraction tactic, it backfired when Anne stated: “Well, enjoy it while it lasts,” hinting at her own journalistic criticism of the Chinese central government’s heavy-handed regulation of ethnic minorities in China. Rousseau, who had by now become aware of and/or fed up with the interactional dynamic, turned to Anne and said: “You know, everybody wants freedom, but maybe everybody doesn’t want *your* freedom” (Rousseau’s emphasis). At this,

Anne looked visibly flabbergasted, and perhaps even a little betrayed. Rousseau stared at her firmly, standing his ground. It was the first time in the interaction that Xiaoming smiled, and—spotting his gap—suggested that despite a “wonderful evening of important conversations” we should all probably “get some much needed rest.” In this way, both the evening and our interactions with Xiaoming came to an awkward end.

In a brief interaction one afternoon following the dinner, Anne voiced her disapproval of Rousseau’s views, which to her seemed naïve and uncritical of China’s real relationship to its subalterns, suggesting that Africans were “backing the wrong horse.” We were standing in her kitchen brewing a pot of tea when she said this. I asked her what horse she thought they should be backing instead. Looking at me over her glasses, she replied: “Whoever guarantees their freedom.” “Are you thinking of America?” I asked. Avoiding the question, she emphasized again: “Whoever guarantees their freedom.” Irritated, I replied: “It’s funny how those guarantees never seem to work out for blacks and indigenous people in your own country.” Anne happily conceded this point, but having now proposed both my alignment with Rousseau’s argument and her historical alignment with white settler colonialism, I was not invited back for tea. Regardless of what horse I might have been backing, it was clear that I was not backing hers.

Freedom, for Anne, certainly represented the capacity to move without constraint, and in China, she certainly observed a blatant stratification of constraint. Some people are able to move more freely than others both economically and in physical space. In addition, China has a bureaucratic system in place that entrenches these capacities for mobility along ethnic and class lines. However, while holding China accountable for entrenching inequality within a largely invisible global order of value that necessitates inequality, Anne fails to recognize that her capacity for mobility depends precisely on the relative immobility of others—that, in fact, the liberal horizon of egalitarian freedom her criticism of Rousseau presupposes, necessarily requires an outsourcing of the dirty work of stratification on the part of subalterns still willing to throw each other under the bus for the privilege of second place.

RETURNING TO AMERICA: ENCOUNTERING THE LIBERAL- SUPREMACY COMPLEX

In this final coda, I want to take a step back from the preceding interactional tensions between third-world cosmopolitanism and white space-time as they played out within Sino-African encounters in Beijing and resituate them in the *space* and *time* of writing. I want to reminisce somewhat more freely and recontextualize their revelations of still-compromised ideological conditions of personhood in the early twenty-first century by introducing a final provocation that emerged upon my return to the United States, and during the completion of my degree. Here,

I point to a wider stratification of intersectionality and mobility that I believe animates both this research and the wider context of my work.

In November 2016, following my return from fieldwork, the campus of the University of Chicago, my home institution, was vandalized with neo-Nazi or other white supremacist artifacts. Many people were outraged and upset by the racist paraphernalia littering billboards and buildings, igniting horror among liberal, elite American students and onlookers, and painful familiarity for others. For some, these signs were reiterations of nightmares that were thought to belong to another time. For others, the clumsy wielding of their signifying potential represented further evidence of the laughable ignorance of “open” white supremacy in America. As for myself, I was neither traumatized, nor laughing. The initial impact of American white supremacist gesturing emerged as a dangerous combination of absurdity and trauma, generating a climate of fear for friends, colleagues, and loved ones alike. I was compelled to take these events very seriously, because—for me—they were uncannily familiar.

I have known white supremacy intimately for my entire life: from the time I was a child growing up in apartheid South Africa, into post-apartheid adulthood when the language changed, but the inequalities remained, and all the way to the United States to pursue a graduate degree. What I initially encountered in America was the fresh face of an analogous racial, gender, queer, religious, and class prejudice. When I began my studies in the fall of 2010, during the early Obama years, the blatancy of inequality was rationalized and perpetuated through an ingenious veneer of unmarked (yet default white) liberalism. I recall at the time that it manifested as a self-satisfied narcissism that would shame those who spoke of race or racism, and would school us for thinking that postcolonialism was anything but dead, out-of-date, and “obviously structuralist.” Rather than a frothing assertion of ethnocentric pride (the kind I knew far better), whiteness manifested in an unmarked horizon of endless possibilities, basking in liberalism’s total victory over oppressions of all kinds. Any complaints to the contrary were dismissed as a misrecognition of “more complex” realities. As suggested earlier, this position was not only perpetuated by white teachers and colleagues in the American academy, but by elite former subalterns who had joined their ranks in the previous decades.

However, in the months following Donald Trump’s presidency, it became apparent that both impeccably political, liberal elitism and frothing white supremacist rage ultimately masked the same deep insecurity: a dependency on whiteness as either fetishized or unmarked. Being a “waste of a white skin” is a fear that drives many poor white Americans who imagine themselves to have no other currency, while pretending that race, and therefore whiteness, does not exist has become a pervasive liberal elite strategy for coping with various strata of privilege, even among elite non-whites. This is not a new argument, nor one situated in the liberal intellectual enclaves of the Euro-American academic Anglosphere. Many movements and intellectuals, including the most recent critiques by Black Lives Matter

in the United States, and #FeesMustFall in South Africa, have already suggested that this increasingly explicit anxiety among both liberal and racist whites constitutes only a symptom, rather than the engine, of both pervasive and persistent investments in whiteness. From the perspective of a third-world outsider, this is just a quintessentially American expression of the systemic contradictions of white liberalism once revealed by Steve Biko ([1978] 2002), and what might productively be called a liberal-racism complex.

At present, it appears that both American liberals and racists are locked in a frantic battle of self-discovery. On one side are those wildly brandishing heirlooms of mostly imagined ancestors they've never encountered or bothered to fully understand; on the other are those (safety-)pinning an identity—based on guilt, but framed in sanctimony—onto people paternalistically being recruited to be retrospective victims in the making of white saviors. But we must ask: Who is to blame for the loss of identity experienced by whites in America, even though countless non-whites, in non-western places, are (often literally) drowning in white hegemony? How did so many working-class white bodies remain unmarked up until the early hours of November 8, 2016?

Cowardice is an analytically important vector from which to conceptualize a great deal of white supremacist activity in a post-Trump world, not only because so many white supremacists lack the courage to openly address the people they often threaten outside of their communities, often opting for clandestine acts, like vandalism or anonymous cyberterrorism, intimidation, and harassment. Cowardice is indeed more manifest in the obvious lack of impetus to address inequalities among white supremacists themselves—since this is supposedly what their “struggle” (or *Kampf*) is about. White supremacists in America and Africa alike have always failed to erase structural inequalities in their own self-designated interest groups. In this regard, poor whites fundamentally trouble master-race arguments, whether these are made in America or have been enacted in apartheid South Africa. One neo-Nazi slogan that stood during a number of post-Trump vandalism campaigns was: “No Degeneracy, No Tolerance, Hail Victory.”

This slogan was suggestive of the ways in which a certain kind of tolerance was precisely at issue in the post-Trump world, since it is tolerance—of the equal opportunity variety—that has the tendency to oppress. The equal capacity to contest one's conditions of being has been a keystone in the liberal rhetoric of tolerance in America, a stance that has marginalized its working class, people of color, women, non-Christians, and queer communities in unequal but related ways. With the exportation of American-style values of liberal freedom underpinning the expansion of neoliberal globalization in a post-Cold War world, this contradictory pattern has also emerged elsewhere: from the respective class-shaming liberal environmentalism and Han-centric ethnonationalism that has characterized the simultaneous rise of these opposing elements within the Chinese middle and upper classes to the failure of liberal African governments to erase inequalities

within a global economic system that ultimately still favors the widening of planetary social inequality and the maintenance of Africa as its dysfunctional space of exception. This is because of the ways in which “tolerance”—manifesting as equal treatment of unequal people—has always reinforced, rather than alleviated, inequality regardless of where it has been applied. Once again, this point has been made over and over again within America, and by many of its greatest thinkers—most of them black intellectuals (Du Bois [1903] 1994; Lorde [1984] 2007; Robinson 1983; hooks 1992). Finally, it is also tolerance that has allowed America’s home-grown racism to ferment into the ways we see it manifested now.

The United States, followed by other influential governments like those of BRICS nations, continues to tolerate elite profit over general education—a pattern that many liberal political leaders have perpetuated through their own rational economic divestment from educational equity and social welfare. In this regard, it is ironic that—in the aftermath of November 8, 2016—the United States’ liberal elites are somehow shocked that marked white entitlement is threatening unmarked white privilege. In response, many of the American white, educated elite began wearing safety pins that were supposed to symbolize safety to those marginalized by white supremacists. The arguments made in the preceding chapters suggest that however well-intentioned such actions might be, they merely enshrine the unassailability of whiteness through positing the white savior as the only figure that can vanquish the white supremacist. This is a problematic analog to another liberal delusion: that white genocide is the dystopian solution to racism. Not only is this an astoundingly arrogant and racist assumption—that only whites are powerful (or capable) enough to end the problem of whiteness through their own suicide—it also fundamentally underestimates whiteness as a horizon of aspiration that can, as I have demonstrated, operate efficiently without a Caucasian in sight. Whiteness, in the ways I have demonstrated, does not need white bodies.

Herein, perhaps, lies the misunderstood precarity of the world’s poor whites—the subconscious realization that whiteness doesn’t need them, and is perfectly willing to leave them behind. There is, in the Angloscene and its white space-time, no available category for white failure other than white trash, and this is a far from sympathetic category of personhood. The usual PC rules do not apply, because white, liberal elitism enshrines the rules around whiteness’s unmarked unassailability. If one has ever tried racially insulting a white person, one will quickly come to the realization that the only attack that has any effect is the accusation: racist. Bottom-feeding white supremacists who will attempt to get poor whites to buy into hate know this at some level. They have used, and will continue to use, this knowledge to recruit people who feel like white “deplorables” have been branded as such by white elite liberals. In doing so, their victims feel vulnerable, as though a cabal of big white men are the only ones who can preserve a whiteness imagined to be under threat. Such patriarchs of global white supremacy, however, have a fatal flaw: they commit to whiteness not because whiteness is threatened, but because

they don't feel white enough. It should be obvious to even the most casual observer that chasing supremacist whiteness is neither transgressive nor empowering since it ultimately undermines the unassailable privileges of unmarked whiteness in the first place. Such flawed commitments to supremacist whiteness, however, have a propensity to anesthetize a far more pervasive ordering of the white liberal-supremacy complex.

A clue as to the ordering of the liberal-supremacy complex may productively emerge through a contemporary recontextualization and exegesis of and postcolonial analytic: subaltern. My use of subaltern (in this book and elsewhere) is precisely not an invocation of a cover-all term. I am not expanding the capaciousness of the term to account for all subjects of discrimination for all time. Instead, drawing on Gayatri Spivak's ([1988] 2010) original invocation of this concept (often misappropriated and misunderstood), my voicing tries to account for its chimeric dimension: the simultaneity of subalternity's both perspectival emergence and structural stratification. This simultaneity frequently emerges in questions like: How do rarified Chinese and African educational elites appropriate English, whiteness, and cosmopolitan mobility in their interactions with one another and yet come to compromise themselves by virtue of never being able to live up to the ideal subject of these appropriations? I understand subaltern in such settings of inquiry as a relational concept.

One is not a subaltern because everyone is potentially a subaltern, nor because certain subjects are intrinsic subalterns of colonial and decolonizing projects. Instead, I argue that subjects become subalterns precisely by virtue of the stratifying terms of commensuration they invoke vis-à-vis one another—terms of commensuration, which by virtue of being less easy to appropriate for some than others, ultimately reveal the limits of a subject's aspirations and their situatedness within an inescapable ideological order of stratification. This is also why I have been concerned throughout with the dynamics of interaction in intersectional (gender, race, class), interlinguistic, and transnational encounters. While intersectionality has traditionally been studied in English-speaking and/or settler colonial societies, such encounters, under conditions where Anglocentric whiteness may seem absent, precisely explicate the contradictory formation of subalternity.

Non-western encounters reveal how whiteness and Englishness—despite their seemingly absent embodiments—persistently come to manifest in perspectival yet always stratifying ways. This is the case for both those seeking refuge *through* unmarked whiteness, as well as for those seeking refuge *from* hegemonic whiteness. It is in this way, I have shown, that African and Chinese actors who attempt to pursue a novel cosmopolitan mobility have little choice but to appropriate signs that compromise this pursuit—where would-be translators, using the master units of commensuration, become the others of their own translation.

In studying the race-language tensions that imbricate Chinese and African interactions, the preceding chapters have demonstrated the enduring relevance of critical and postcolonial theories in unpacking the contradictory conditions that often generate intersectional vectors between inequalities of language, race, gender, sexuality, class, and mobility. Here, translation emerged as an intersubjective, interactional, and dialectical process—apparent in the ways ideological formations like whiteness, English, and cosmopolitan mobility are commensurated into subcategories of broader racial or mobility types. This commensuration is certainly attempted by various culture industries not only in China, but also the postcolonial contexts African students in Beijing *arrive from* (Africa), as well as the centers many of their Chinese interlocutors aspire to *go to* (Europe or America). Here, typifications like race, language, and mobility enable a great deal of alienating institutional labor in relation to their subtypes—whiteness, English, and cosmopolitanism.

In the example of race, a liberal educational discourse (particularly in the settler-colonial west) would insist on the vulgar color differences between white, black, brown, beige, and various other racialized phenotypes as being of an arbitrary nature. In doing so, additional colors are often thrown in for rhetorical effect: blue, green, and so on. For an example, consider sentences like: “I don’t care if you are black, white, blue, or purple.” In this liberal western educational schema, racism emerges as irrational and therefore unthinkable. The force of this argument stems from ignorantly motivating the equality or equivalence between subtypes of race via the broader type of Race. This generates a familiar deductive logic:

*If races are arbitrarily equivalent, then race as a measure of alterity does not
(or should not) exist.*

And therefore:

If race is not real, then racism cannot (or must not) exist.

In an imagined transnational, cosmopolitan space-time, the deductive circuit of race often diagrams a kind of liberal nonracialist ideology:

This schema is internalized by not only liberal whites in the west, but also elite, or aspirationally elite, Chinese and African subjects in Beijing, who would align themselves to this logic of racial arbitrariness. What this kind of diagramming suggests is a common sense within which white bodies predominate as protagonists on advertising billboards in China, Africa, and other non-western countries, but then become rationalized as arbitrary, because it could always have been *somebody* else: an arbitrary body or skin. Yet, what this reasoning also allows is for a white body to become the unmarked, default inhabitant of an aspirational cosmopolitan, transglobal social landscape. For many African and Chinese subjects in Beijing, this liberal nonracial common sense also allows different experiences of stratification to be—temporarily—elided or concealed until they emerge as experiences of infrastructural racism.

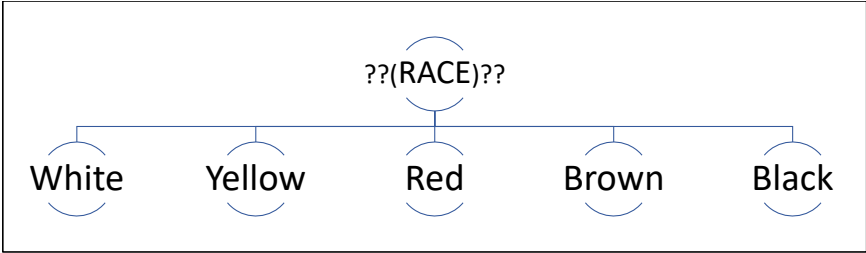


FIGURE 7. Racial arbitrariness.

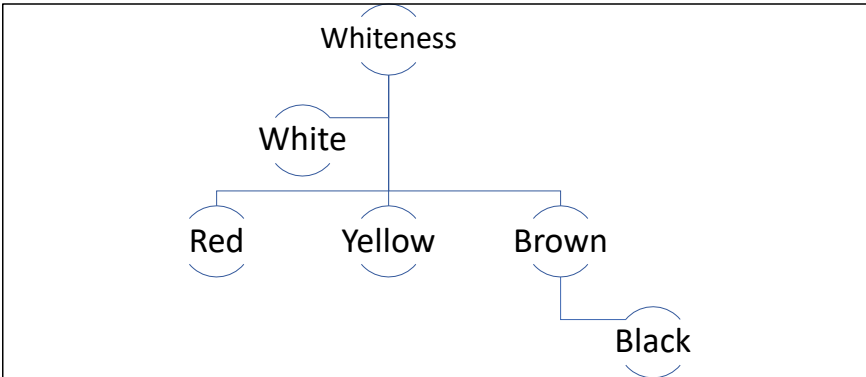


FIGURE 8. Infrastructural racism.

Figure 8 contrasts the previous liberal aspirational ideal of racial arbitrariness with the experienced dimensions of a global infrastructural racism that was prevalent among variously stratified informants. For them, and many others in the decolonizing world, it is whiteness—as an aspirational horizon—rather than race that mediates racism. It is perhaps an understatement to suggest that there is a significant experiential, and thus material, gap between figures 7 and 8. Indeed, the obvious semantic and logical concerns with these propositions have been explored and problematized at length in the work of Charles Mills (1997, 1998) and Kwame Appiah (1989, 1992). Recasting their concerns, this book has explored the pragmatic and performative consequences of these ideas in non-western social interactions that are presumed to be decolonized.

At this point I wish to draw attention to a more general semiotic contingency that underpins this gap between racial arbitrariness and the social stratifications it enables in the postcolonial politics of race, one that is also mirrored in the politics of language. As the political stratifications of whiteness are occluded by relativizing race, so too the material and cultural inequalities imbricated by English are enabled by relativizing language. In the contemporary settler colonial world,

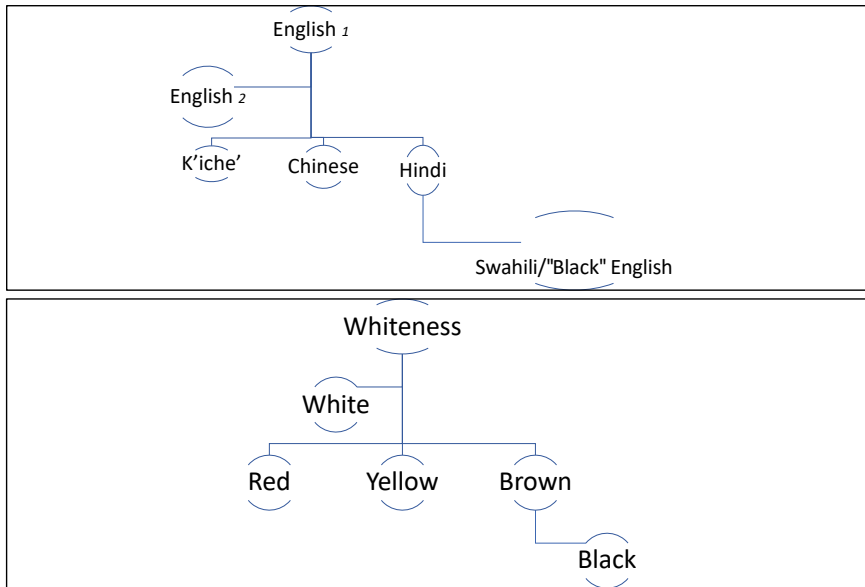


FIGURE 9. Mirroring pragmatic stratifications of English and whiteness.

the arbitrariness of language has been easier to accept than the political arbitrariness of race—even though disciplines like cultural anthropology have long played a considerable role in advocating the relativism of language and race through the analytic of culture (Trouillot 2003, 100; Baker 1998). In China and much of the decolonizing world, the picture is somewhat different: that the racial, in itself, often seems an arbitrary consideration compared to other modalities of differentiation—primary among these is the politics of language and ideas (Vukovich 2019; Ngũgĩ 1994; Spivak 1993). My goal, throughout, is to draw attention to a broader pragmatics of stratification that mutually encompasses language and race, while drawing attention to what language and race occlude. I reveal this pragmatics by disconnecting the relationship between type and subtype in the respective schemas of English as a subtype of language and whiteness as a subtype of race. In doing so, I suggest that English and whiteness transcend their typifications as language and race, mutually constituting an imbricated and encompassing horizon of aspiration—an Angloscene—that comes to compromise the very subjects seeking to exploit their associated signs of symbolic value and cultural capital. Consider the following juxtaposition of the pragmatic stratifications of English and whiteness (fig. 9), with the respective relativistic ideologies of race and language (fig. 10).

The disjuncture between figures 9 and 10 is apparent in the outrage over racial discrimination that was boiling over on at least three continents at the time of writing: riots against a racist American president, protests against white monopoly capital in South Africa, and claims of China's increasingly racist treatment of its

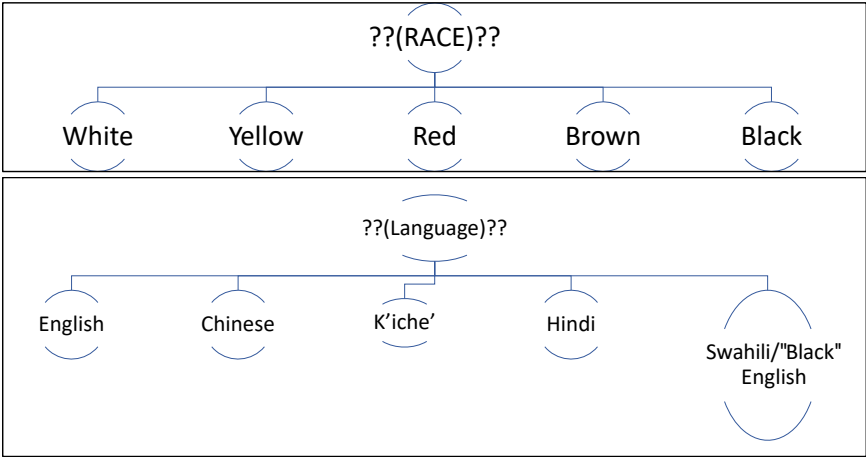


FIGURE 10. Mirroring relativist ideologies of race and language.

ethnic minority or black others. However, one of the ways in which this tension between racial arbitrariness and liberalism manifests across these different contexts—albeit in different ways—forms an important component of the arguments made throughout: if all these *tokens* of race have a genuine sameness, insofar as they are culturally relative or linguistically arbitrary, then why is the broader *type*—race—not obviated, given that race is the unit of commensuration through which its own iconicity and alterity is translated? Thus, if race is discursively arbitrary: why does it pragmatically exist, how is it felt intimately as well as discriminately, and how does it differentially stratify all those produced or occluded by its gaze? These questions remain unsolved and will likely haunt Afro-Chinese, Afro-Asian, and third-worldist encounters in the turbulent decades to come. However, it is my hope that the preceding chapters and interactions provide a starting point for undertaking an honest postcolonial discussion about race and language in the non-western conversations, interactions, and encounters that will necessarily define the twenty-first century. To this end, Audre Lorde left us a profound injunction as a productive point of departure: “Advocating the mere tolerance of difference . . . is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening.”¹