

THE QUARRY

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Xenophobia is a Virus

Racism isn't getting worse, it's getting attention. From deserted Chinatown districts to plummeting sales at Chinese restaurants to the violent abuse – both verbal and physical – people of my skin-tone bear the weight of the colonial gaze in extra measure. Viral paranoia spreads faster than viral infection, and COVID-19 gives them an excuse to justify their hostility openly. That is, the covert subliminal racism I'm used to, has now burgeoned into overt, brazen racism, where myself and others who look remotely “Chinese”, can be suspected of carrying the coronavirus – whether we're at Macquarie Centre, or riding the metro in the CBD, or disembarking a flight from Singapore.

An Unjust Pecking Order

I was born in Singapore, a British colony up till 1963. The epistemological system of colonies is based on the "creation and maintenance of an unequal economic, cultural, and territorial relationship... based on domination and subordination". Postcolonial theorist Edward Said calls this 'Orientalism', which constructs binaries between Occident (Western world) and Orient (East), from a Eurocentric (colonist's) perspective. This is achieved by "making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient". These are fundamentally exploitative practices, where colonised people become marginalised as colonial powers move money, people, commodities, and technologies around the world in the service of colonial capital.

Said describes Orientalism as a "western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient". This pits West against East, which identifies and "subordinate[s] peoples of the Orient as the 'Other'... the non-European self". In postcolonial theory, this is interpreted as coloniser (West) and colonised (East) forming hierarchal binary logic, whereby West is regarded and universalised as superior in cultural standard and the "oft-invoked Other usually occupies a subjugated position".

You also see this hierarchal discourse in the terms "first-world" and "third-world". It's reflective of colonial powers. One of the first postcolonial writers was Frantz Fanon, who was highly critical of the way Eurocentric ideas became the universalised standard against which everything else is judged as inadequate. In his words: "for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white". It is this same language you hear in the White House today – the "Chinese virus"- words used to keep colonial power in place; their white supremacist discourse justifying their casual racism by repeating colonial ideology. It's never enforced (think along the lines of Marxist false consciousness).

So why am I pissed about referring to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus"?

This Orientalist discourse paints a problematic 'us vs. them' binary logic. The East is seen as 'exotic, sensual, spiritual, mystical, uninhibited, primal'. Take yoga and martial arts, for example. If they're considered 'spiritual', the West is, by connotation, 'unspiritual'. It doesn't matter which way it goes, it's still Orientalising. Each time you say something about the East, it allows you think something about the West by inference because they're caught in this binary

relationship. For example: Scientific West vs. superstitious East. Modern West vs. backward East. Moral West vs. immoral East. Rational West vs. irrational East. Progressive West vs. regressive East. Open West vs. inscrutable East.

The East, then, becomes a screen for the West's fears and fantasies. It's the unfounded misgivings conjured when encountering a passer-by wearing the hijab or burqa. It's the Japanese-American *citizens* in World War II being labelled as 'foreign spies' and mass incarcerated. It's the *Asian-American* soldier in the Vietnam War pulled out of formation by their platoon commanders and sergeant majors to be an example of "what the enemy looks like".

It's the more-than-passing-glance glower I get on the street that translates to "get the fuck away from me".

Yet even though West is the dominant term, it has no value without an East against which it is not, but which at the same time it relies on them not being not, to be what it is. In other words, without the supplementary idea of East, there is no framework with which to define what West is either. The relational-but-differential status of the Other is always necessary. A term like "white culture" wouldn't make sense if everything and everyone was white.

When societal 'harmony' is disrupted by threats to our conceptions of the world, humanity instinctively turns to revulsion or humour to right their perceived wrongs. This is why homophobes think LGBTQ+ people are either scary enough to be murdered, or ridiculous enough to be laughed at. Same goes for the Asian man in predominantly white countries. He is both scary enough to be immediately perceived as a COVID-19 carrier, but also funny enough to be caricatured as the anime-watching, ramen-eating kung-fu sensei. Racism in society functions by maintaining these exclusions, and disrupting them nudges one out of inertia and into paranoia and ridicule.

Situating Myself in All This

I am a walking, talking example of this. I intentionally, unrelentingly press into it. My English is unnervingly fluent to the white man. I have a Diploma in Mass Communication, a Bachelor of Media, and I'm working on a Master of Creative Writing to back it up. I embody the binary contradiction – English enough, but not quite really. I can perform the social codes of 'Englishness', but my skin tone and code-switching marks me as distinctively **not** English.

In these spaces, my English grants me overt power (official approval), but my sociolinguistic accent tendencies grant me covert power (social affirmation). This signifier grants me access to societal spaces where less fluent English speakers aren't 'welcome'. My language puts me one foot in the insider's circle, while my race puts my other foot outside. Back home in Singapore, speaking Mandarin grants me this same covert power. One Kopimotion [article](#) puts it this way:

"language is instrumentalised to both include and exclude at the same time. Often, what this means is that even though English remains the official working language in our institutions, Mandarin achieves an unofficial status as an informal working language. On the table, we speak in English; off the table – where deals are actually negotiated and ties of friendship are formed – we grant access only to those who speak Chinese."

Synthesising an Other in Another

The problem with this in today's postcolonial world is "there is no neat binary opposition between coloniser [majority] and colonised [minority] – both are caught up in a complex reciprocity and [the Other] can negotiate the cracks of dominant discourses in a variety of ways". Homi K. Bhabha coined this negotiation as "hybridity". Instead of demarcating civilisations into rigid homogenised coloniser-colonised binaries, postcolonial societies are marked by the confluence of both dominant and subordinate cultures, and the movement of subjects across those strata.

The role of postcolonial critics is to challenge Eurocentric universalism and western hegemony (like Fanon), where white values have become standardised as arbiters of an apotheosis, and thus used to judge anything not white. They aren't universalised at all; they're relative values presented in a universalising way because those who are universalising have the authoritative power to do so. The myth of universality is therefore "a primary strategy for imperial control".

Ambivalence is key to the postcolonial experience. We are endlessly hassled to 'assimilate'. An example question would be: "you're totally different from us; why can't you be like us?" The colonised person is appropriated and assimilated into, and by the, dominant culture and institutions. A popular Western discourse is the concept of Asians as the 'model minority', which highlights socioeconomic disparity between racial demographics. Asians are typecast as unassuming, polite, intelligent, law-abiding members of society, in contrast to

uneducated, welfare-dependent, criminal-prone black or Hispanic stereotypes. Positive or negative, these colonised are both inside and outside of the assimilation process. The trouble here (with white people in Australia) is that without Aboriginal/black/Asian people, they don't know they're white. Their very identity as a white person is predicated on the Aboriginal/black/Asian 'other'. That is, you need to know who you are; yet if I become like you, I won't be your other (therefore you won't know who you are), or I'll remain separate from you, and thus be the subject of your endless anxiety about your own cultural identity. The existence of the Other is always necessary; total assimilation means no one knows who they are in relation.

I can seamlessly assimilate while retaining the identity of my cultural roots ('both/and', not 'either/or'). Bhabha calls this tactic 'mimicry', where colonisers desire "a reformed recognisable Other, as a subject that is almost the same, but not quite". That is, I pretend to be who you want me to be so you can be who you think you are. But me being who you want me to be means I'm not who I am, which means you aren't who you really are either. This is intrinsically destabilising to the majoritarian white, who considers this resemblance a "menace". The colonial gaze can't put the Other in their place. For the case of 'Chinese virus', the term's use is to try and put China in its 'subjugated place' as enforced by centuries of colonial standards.

One Century of Diseases Later

Even after the devastation of the 1918 influenza pandemic, humanity still hasn't learnt its lesson. Contagion outbreaks evince double standards. The 1918 influenza pandemic is more commonly known as the 'Spanish' flu. Its name is a misnomer, because the first few outbreaks and mortalities were documented in the US. Because Spain was neutral during the concurrent World War I, it wasn't under wartime censorship. Therefore, the false impression that Spain was hardest hit gave rise to its 'Spanish' flu designation. It was one of two pandemics caused by H1N1 influenza A virus. The other is the 2009 swine flu outbreak that originated in North America. The first incidence of Mad Cow disease and its associated vCJD came from the UK in 1986. Yet there's no 'American bacteria' or 'British prion'. The 2013-2016 Ebola crisis became a rhetorical proxy for 'African-ness'. COVID-19 isn't new ground. Two other coronaviruses have been prevalent in my lifetime – SARS in 2003, and MERS in 2012. Even though the latter stands for Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, xenophobic sentiments aren't

nearly commensurate to the racialised backlash COVID-19 has had on those of Asian descent, like me.

Identities are produced through series of social categorisations; who you are is a function of how you are treated because of the social categories you occupy. These different 'selves', which arise at the interstitial liminal spaces of different lines of privilege and prejudice, are what critical theorists call 'subject positions'. Even though different skin colours occupy the same physical space, we occupy different subject positions because we are included and excluded differently through circles of language, culture, and power that box us to varying degrees. Unfortunately, since who we are is so deeply connected to our very different social realities, we cannot learn compassion if we refuse to look through each other's eyes. Until we're willing to, this xenophobia will propagate long after COVID-19 is etched into the annals of history.

Endnotes:

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