
I
*Toward a New Approach to Race
and Racial Representations:
Perspectives from Asia*

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly difficult to identify the patterns of racism, a problem exacerbated by the popular delusion that we have entered a ‘post-race’ era. Such contemporary delusions thus make it even more important to re-examine race and racial representations. For this purpose, a new approach may be needed to understand the invisible nature of racism today, as mentioned in the Introduction. Analyses of racial representations of ‘invisible races’ found in Japan and Asia may provide crucial insights for the understanding of present-day racism.¹

Such discriminatory structures are diverse and multi-layered, and race is not the only aspect of it, as it intersects with gender, class, and other stratifying social factors. Yet, why does race generate such strong discriminatory practices? A key to understanding this question seems to be the *naturalization* of these ‘differences.’ By rendering racial differences ‘natural,’ social inequality is transformed into part of the natural order presumably beyond the control of human beings and society. Representations that reduce differences to nature in this manner enhance representational strategies that *ensure the perpetuation of difference* to justify the hierarchical positioning of different groups.

In *Black Looks*, one of her classical studies of racial representation, bell hooks argues that stereotypical representations of African Americans demonstrate no serious change, despite their advancement in education and employment. She comments: ‘Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy’ (hooks 1992: 1).

As hooks points out, stereotypical representations of race have been perpetuated and therefore, make it hard to create fundamental change. In this sense, research into racial stereotypes has played a key role in critically examining the durability of racial representations, and yet, it is not beyond critique. By treating stereotypes as something ahistorical, the study of stereotypes falls into the trap

of the same essentialism that it attempts to argue against. What is more, the kind of studies that attempt to identify the ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ of certain stereotypes reveal their assumption of ‘authenticity,’ without asking who has the authority to claim such judgements (see Shohat’s chapter in this volume).²

Instead of seeing stereotypes as reflecting prejudice, many researchers have begun focusing on more complex and dynamic processes of racial representations that actively generate and regenerate social reality. To borrow Stuart Hall’s phrase, this is not a ‘reflective,’ but a ‘constructivist approach’ (Hall ed. 1997). It is in line with this train of thought that I present my thesis on racial representations that construct the social reality of race.

The characteristics of the idea of race and its three dimensions

First, let me briefly review my earlier argument on some intrinsic characteristics of the idea of race and its three dimensions (Takezawa 2005a; 2005b). In race studies, race is commonly defined as a group identified according to perceived physical differences. Although blood and lineage were the primary indicators in the old usage of the English term ‘race,’ and some previous research also includes descent in its definition (e.g. Rex 1986; Miles and Brown 2003), it would not be unfair to say that these theories are primarily constructed in terms of the relationships between American whites and ‘blacks’ defined by the ‘one drop rule,’ or between whites and Jews in Europe. When differences in (perceived) visible physical features such as skin color are the criteria for identifying race, minorities discriminated against on such basis (linked to modern Western scientific racism and the Euro-American experiences) are the only ones recognized as the victims of ‘racial discrimination.’ In other words, this definition of race fails to identify socially oppressed groups that are *not* perceived to be physically different from the mainstream group, and yet are treated as different kinds of human species by the dominant majorities. There needs to be, therefore, a new understanding of race that actively takes into account the experience of regions other than Europe and the US. Reaching out for a more global understanding, I offer the following definition of the idea of race.

1. First, bodily characteristics (such as visible or invisible physical features, but also temperaments, and abilities) are believed to be transmitted from generation to generation and thus to be determined by descent. Thus they ‘cannot be (easily) changed,’ in common perception, by environment or external factors.
2. Second, a strong tendency of *exclusion* and aversion is associated with racial systems of classification, and a clear hierarchical order is

assumed between different groups, especially in the nineteenth century understanding of race.

3. Third, this exclusionary and hierarchical order manifests itself associated with the monopolization of political and economic resources and interests in institutional structures. Race thus cannot be simply reduced to prejudice or ethnocentricism, but rather results from an organized process of social differentiation and boundary making, often linked with conflicts of interest (Takezawa 2005a; 2005b).

In my previous work I also argued that race is neither universal nor is it solely the invention of modern Western colonialism. This challenges two major theoretical paradigms on the origin of race: the universalist theory and the modern Western theory. By using the cases of Japan and Asia, I argued that race can be found in both historical settings outside of Europe. For example, in the case of burakumin (or *eta*, a pejorative term commonly used in pre-modern times) abundant historical documents describe them as being of a ‘different race’ or of ‘different racial origin’ (*shu ga chigau* or *jinshu ga chigau*). Other examples can be found among the *paekjōng* in Korea (Kim 2003),³ and the Nosu in China and other parts of Asia and Oceania. In the literature, these groups have so far been analysed solely in terms of caste, class, or discrimination based on work and descent.⁴

As a way of offering an alternative interpretation, I argued that the idea of race is formed by three dimensions: ‘race’ (race with a small ‘r’), ‘Race (Race with a capital ‘R’), and ‘Race as Resistance’ (RR). To briefly describe each dimension, ‘race’ (r) refers to cases when the concept has emerged indigenously, where differences between socially delineated groups are understood to be inherited and unalterable by the environment, where these groups are conceived as hierarchically ordered, and where group boundaries are associated with political and economic inequality. ‘race’ (r) as defined above exists in many local communities without necessarily any Western or modern influence.

‘Race’ (R) signifies a scientific concept, i.e., the belief that it is possible, using scientific methods, to classify and map human beings all over the world in terms of their racial ancestry. ‘Race’ (R) includes those categories constructed by Euro-Americans during the age of colonial expansion, and those reconfigured in some genetic studies today.

‘Race as Resistance’ (RR) is race as created and reinforced by minorities themselves as agents who mobilize racial identities within a repertoire of several other possible identities in order to fight against racism. This aspect of race thus results from a proactive resistance against hegemony and social domination. RR indicates the use of race as a discursive strategy to expose existing racial discrimination and to provide a common focus for identity politics.

Distinguishing between these three dimensions of race helps us to understand the idea in different forms across time and space, thus avoiding the binary discussion of whether race is universal or a modern Western product. It also elucidates the inseparable nature of these three dimensions of race, without falling into the ‘color-blind’ versus ‘color-conscious’ debate, yet another binary framework. Even if ‘Race as Resistance’ (RR) is seen as a threat to social integration by some, who instead seek a color-blind society, as long as racism is grounded in either ‘race’ (r) or ‘Race’ (R), these ideas will continue to exist.

Building on the above accounts of the idea of race, in the following, I will present my thesis on some dimensions of racial representations and their characteristics.

Visual representation

European modernity has prioritized vision above all other physical senses. Natural history, which began simultaneously with the dawn of modern science, granted vision a nearly exclusive privilege (Foucault 1970 (1966)). This system of ‘knowledge’ was created by the visual observation of objects and subsequent classification according to shape and size. In contrast to the privileging of vision, oral culture, passed down through sound and touch, was given a lower status. The development of printing technology to produce photographs and magazines in the nineteenth century was soon followed by film and television in the twentieth. Through these media, visual representation came to occupy the center of knowledge, thought, and sensitivity (Shohat and Stam 1994).

I argue that one of the most notable characteristics of visual representation is its accessibility in the public sphere by an infinite number of individuals. With the digital transformation of print media, this reproductive technology has been developing exponentially, as is seen in the case of Internet video ‘streams,’ shared simultaneously and iteratively on a global scale. The second most notable characteristic, though related to the first, is the immediacy of visual influence in contrast to non-visual representations, to be discussed below.

Finally, note the inseparable connection between the visual representations of race and its commodification under capitalism. The visual imprint of race serves at times to provide vivid decoration in advertisements, to play a comical role in movies, or to stimulate the senses of the viewer as in photographic images. In order for visual representation to operate according to market principles and produce profits, it needs to appeal to the aesthetic sensitivities and values of members of the dominant group, which eventually members of marginalized groups might internalize as well. Once the ruler/ruled structure is established,

as hooks has astutely argued, it becomes difficult to bring about change, and racial representations are structurally reproduced.

Non-visual representation

Non-visual representations are particularly relevant to heuristic analyses of discrimination against ‘invisible races,’ but they will also facilitate our understanding of racism in this ‘post-race’ era. People ‘feel’ and confirm racial differences through non-visual representations in their everyday life practices. Social discourses such as ‘they stink,’ ‘[they are] dirty,’ ‘dangerous,’ and ‘short tempered’ are some of the typical scripts used for the confirmation of ‘racial differences.’

Non-visual representations of invisible races have the following characteristics.⁵ In contrast to the public nature of visual representations, they tend to circulate in whispers at the local level in our daily lives. Senses such as smell and touch cannot be reproduced and cannot be shared by people simultaneously and spontaneously on a mass scale. These non-visual representations penetrate deeply into the psyche, either on a conscious or unconscious level, and have been preserved for many centuries through to the present, passed down from generation to generation, from mouth to mouth. Moreover, in contrast to their visual counterparts, non-visual representations do not in general become the objects of commodification.

Our focus here lies on non-visual representations that appeal to the bodily senses other than vision. In the case of ‘invisible races,’ appealing to senses other than vision is necessary for the continuous confirmation of the racial differences of the other. Precisely because the differences are invisible, for members of the majority the perception of difference entails feelings, as if those differences were inscribed into their physical sensibilities.

We can identify two types of non-visual representations of race. The first form refers to cases where perceived ‘racial differences’ are recognized through non-visual cognitive senses, auditory, olfactory, or tactile. Discourses, for example, include: ‘their voices are rough,’ ‘they make strange noises when they eat.’ In terms of olfactory senses, the construction of a discourse of otherness revolves around body odor or ‘stench’ (including that caused by cultural factors such as food). Tactile senses can be expressed as ‘silky skin’ and other variations that often carry sexual implications. These are not, however, mere reactions to the simple cognitive stimulations of sound, smell, and touch. They are constructed responses triggered precisely on the premise of the idea of race. In other words, it refers to a process whereby one opens, so to speak, a compartment inside the

brain that is labeled with a particular ‘race.’ Any new perceived information is usually categorized in one of the existing compartments (otherwise, fear and uneasiness ensues when categorization is not possible), and once the information is acknowledged and reconfirmed it is added to the collection of each compartment. A similar series of movements can be found in the cognitive processes based on vision.

The second type refers to cases where ‘racial differences’ are recognized through ‘feeling’ inscribed into the bodies of the individuals of the majority. There are several discernable patterns in this second type.

1. Imaginary external differences
2. Imaginary internal differences
3. Imaginary dehumanized or half-human differences

Examples of Pattern 1 include the discourse on facial ‘differences’ between Japanese and Koreans (see Lee’s chapter in this volume) and the commonly held belief in North and South America about the shape of the sexual organs of Asian women. Pattern 2 refers to ideas such as the ‘contaminated blood’ of the burakumin. Pattern 3 also involves the discourse concerning the hands of the burakumin, which are said to ‘turn into snakes at night,’ depicted in Imai Tadashi’s film, *River with No Bridge* (*Hashi no nai Kawa*, see Kurokawa’s chapter in this volume). Similar discourses can be found not only in Asia, but also in Europe. Racist discourses on Jewish people have long circulated, for example: ‘men have menstruation as well’ (Pattern 2) or that ‘they have tails’ (Pattern 3).

These imaginary differences sometimes evoke ‘dreadful,’ ‘eerie’ feelings, or sexual desire; in other words, they cause embodied *sensual reactions*, engraved and fixed in the memories of the majority. The very invisibility of the ‘invisible races’ continues to reinforce and reproduce the discourse on racial differences.

However, the first and second type outlined above are not entirely distinct. The first type could potentially reinforce the reality of race by interacting, inside the brain, with the discourses on imaginary differences entailed in the second type. When only a limited number of people, as in the case of discourses related to sexuality, confirm the first type through their everyday practices and recreate such representations in social contexts (and anything that does not conform to those stereotypes is simply ignored or forgotten), representations of the second type are circulated more widely. For the very reason of the invisibility and social taboos surrounding discourses involving bodily intimacy, these representations of ‘racial difference’ in the narratives gain even stronger social reality.

Visual and non-visual representations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the cognitive recognition of ‘racial differences’ using senses other than vision

can evoke memories of visual representations, resulting in an enhanced reality. Conversely, memories of non-visual representations can be spurred into recognition by their visual counterparts. In the interaction between these two different types of representation, a dialectical development is possible. For instance, criticisms aimed at the film *River with No Bridge* as discussed in Kurokawa's chapter can be explained as an emotional reaction caused by the clash between the non-visual representation, supposedly kept within the private sphere, and the visual, which circulates infinitely in the public sphere. It is this intersection that constituted the taboo.

A limited literature on blacks in the US has shed light on sensory stereotypes and their function in justifications of slavery and segregation. For example, Mark Smith discusses how white southerners used their senses to construct race and act from feeling rather than thought (Smith 2006). It would be of great interest to explore the similarities and differences between non-visual representations of 'invisible races' in Asia and those of 'mixed-blood,' individuals in the US, whose physical markers of difference have become invisible as well.

Scientific representations

In order to understand the social reality of race, it is not enough to analyze racial representations within the field of the humanities. As long as we deal with naturalized racial differences, scientific representations deserve to be examined as well. Now, with the deciphering of the human genome and the development of SNP (Single Nucleotide Polymorphism) identification techniques, some scientific discourses show signs of recidivism to old ways of conceiving race as a biological concept. In place of skin color and skull shape, genes are now sometimes utilized to prove that race is a 'real' biological category.⁶

Medicine is another vital arena in which race raises a set of critical questions. There has been increasing interest in the connection between race and medicine, especially with regard to morbidity and the effectiveness of medication. In June 2006, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the use of BiDil, a drug designed for African Americans with congestive heart failure, as the first 'drug targeted exclusively at a specific racial group.' The approval, however, created a huge controversy because of its trial procedure. Critics said that the number of the samples in the initial phases (I and II) was too small to validate the selection of only African Americans for the clinical trial at Phase III.⁷ While I shall omit a detailed account of the controversy over BiDil, I would like to draw attention to the different ulterior motives for the creation of drug from several standpoints, and yet with the same unintended consequence, that is, restoring

the scientific discourse of African Americans as if it was a biological category: the FDA approved BiDil as a form of compensation for the past privileging of white men as the norm in medical treatment; black community leaders welcomed the drug in the hope of saving thousands of African Americans; and the pharmaceutical company anticipated massive profits to be gained through targeting a specific racial group.

In the debates over the differences in morbidity and the effectiveness of medication among groups, what should be paid more attention to is the significant disparities among self-identified racial groups in terms of access to medical care, and the treatment of different groups by healthcare professionals. When *Unequal Treatment* revealed an astonishing level of racial disparities in medical care in the US, it stunned members of the medical community and researchers on race alike (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies 2002).

While a thorny problem remains with regard to categorization and labeling in fields such as genetics, we shall limit ourselves referring to the study by Serre and Pääbo (2004). According to them, an analysis based on samples gathered from geographically distant *populations* shows what appears to be a clear division between Africans and non-Africans. However, samples gathered on an *individual* basis according to the geographical distribution of the global population did not demonstrate such divisions, as all individuals indicated a mixture of two or more groups. This study clearly demonstrates how population-based scientific representations are not free from social and cultural constructions.

It is noteworthy that the International HapMap Project points out the risk of leading to group stigmatization and discrimination when overly broad labels induce the equation of geography with race:

... [D]escribing the populations in terms that are too broad could result in inappropriate over-generalization. This could erroneously lead those who interpret HapMap data to equate geography (the basis on which populations were defined for the HapMap) with race (an imprecise and mostly socially constructed category). This, in turn, could reinforce social and historical stereotypes, and lead to group stigmatization and discrimination in places where members of the named populations or of closely related populations are minorities.⁸

In fact, the International HapMap Project revised their description for their group samples from continental labels at its initial stage to abbreviated initials to more accurately describe their samples, referring, for example, to the Yoruba in Ibadan as ‘YRI,’ and Japanese in Tokyo as ‘JPT.’ This shows an increasing awareness among some scientists of inappropriate over-generalization with labels that may be equated with race.

Many scientists claim that biases tend to get in the way when ‘scientific truth’ shifts to ‘social interpretation.’ In fact, there are too many examples of misunderstanding, distortion, and political manipulation of scientific discoveries to mention. Yet, it should not be underestimated that scientists themselves are bound by social and cultural restraints in terms of setting problems, selecting categorization and sampling methods, and interpreting results. When it comes to creating and sharing knowledge, the compartmentalization of society and science does not stand up to scrutiny.

Quoting Epstein’s illuminating book, *Inclusion* (2007), Troy Duster (Chapter Ten in this volume) raises a very important question: ‘*for whom, why, and for what purpose* [do] we set up scientific problems.’ Why do we look at certain aspects of specific populations? Why do we not look at other populations? Why do we not research other aspects? These are the questions, he insists, that we should be asking ourselves. In other words, our focus on particular populations will inevitably lead to the identification of some sort of markers of differences, which will then produce scientific representations of differences between populations. Society does not blindly accept scientific discourse and research results. Despite their apparent or self-claimed neutrality, scientists are also, in fact, bound by politics and social values. We need to recognize that their knowledge is co-produced by both natural science and society, as stressed by Jasanoff (2004).

Representation as resistance

New challenges at the edges of multiculturalism

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, a number of nation-states have adopted official multiculturalism or affirmative action to redress institutional racism and overcome the underrepresentation of minorities, especially in education and employment. The implementation of such policies has basically depended on existing racial and ethnic categories. Community-based organizations have also, in general, pursued identity politics by strategically essentializing established racial and ethnic categories. Admittedly, society today has inherited the negative legacy of past racism, and these movements have emerged in reaction to conventional forms of racism. Thus, it cannot be denied that this form of resistance itself has reinforced the significance of ‘Race as Resistance’ (RR), while amplifying the social reality of race.

In societies that introduced official multiculturalism such as Australia, Canada, the US, and the UK, as well as in countries where multiculturalism has been promoted, today there is a feeling that multiculturalism as a social

ideal has passed its zenith. Once expected to be a promising means of recognizing differences and identities as well as redressing discrimination, multiculturalism had come under strong fire by the turn of the century. Despite the active intellectual debate about the possibility of alternative forms, from ‘critical’ multiculturalism to ‘civic’ multiculturalism, an increasing number of scholarly texts and articles suggest its decline, evident in titles such as *The Retreat of Multiculturalism*, *The End of Multiculturalism*, or *The Death of Multiculturalism*, *After Multiculturalism* (e.g. Alibhai-Brown 2000; Kundani 2002; Darder and Torres 2004; Joppke 2004; Welsh 2008).

While an examination of the innumerable debates on multiculturalism and its criticism is beyond the scope of this chapter, it may be worthwhile to review two aspects of this discourse, most importantly the criticism that multiculturalism plays a part in the reproduction of racism. The first is the idea that multiculturalism not only constructs discourses that treat ‘culture’ on which identity politics is based as fixed and homogenous, but also falls into a self-contradictory loop or trap which erases diversity and reproduces relationships of inequality *within* a group. The second point of criticism is the ways in which it conceals structural and fundamental racism without going beyond tokenistic homages to ‘culture’ under the disguise of liberalism. Kundani, for example, argues that although multiculturalism was supposed to eliminate structural racism, it has in fact degenerated into a superficial glorification of ‘black culture,’ thus betraying its original goals (Kundani 2002: 19).

The effects of multiculturalism are also called into question. For example, electoral redistricting has created enormous controversy in American politics. Even when politicians from minority backgrounds are elected with the expectation of promoting a ‘politics of difference,’ their position as the representatives of a particular ‘minority group’ does not automatically guarantee that they effectively represent the interests of their constituencies. Not infrequently, ‘the actual link between the black community and them [blacks who are fielded through existing power structures] to be just the color of their skin’ (Canon 1999).

Moreover, some point out that ways to approach the issue of resistance also need to be problematized. Representations of resistance to racism have often adopted the methodology of inverting the roles and values traditionally assigned to the powerful/powerless. However, inverting and overturning ultimately remains confined within the same old paradigms (Denzin 2002). While it was found to be initially effective as a short-term measure, it has never brought about fundamental change.

This complexity also resonates with the problem of the ‘burden of representation,’ whereby individuals who would normally have multiple identities are expected to raise their voices as members of oppressed groups.

Recently some parts of Europe and North America have shifted toward ‘post-identity’ or ‘post-race,’ particularly among the younger generation. This phenomenon takes a similar line to what Hollinger called ‘post-ethnic’ more than a decade ago (Hollinger 1995). In this phenomenon, we can see the resistance of the younger generation who are supposed to belong to ‘minority groups,’ against the burden of representation and movements based on strategic essentialism put forward by the ‘older generation.’ Yet, as gender studies have explored, the dissolution of categories and the emphasis on pluralism often ends up reducing everything to the individual level, weakening the empowerment practiced and achieved by those who have fought under the banner of collective identity. Thus, if we look at the resistance movements of the late twentieth century and their emphasis on strategies based on identity politics, we will understand the necessity of creating new strategies for representations of resistance, even though some of the old ones remain relevant.

Divided by neoliberalism

The global economy now shaped by neoliberalism has divided members of minority groups within nation-states, while reincorporating them into transnational economic activities in different ways, depending upon their positions in the global economy. When the overwhelming force of neoliberalism is coupled with the decline of multiculturalism, new forms of racial exclusion emerge, including on a global stage.⁹ These developments affect members of minority groups in different ways, depending on their positions on the global economy. The following explores some of these differences.

1. People who exercise agency in the global economy:

Even though socially and politically marginalized in their countries, some members of the global elite (e.g. professionals or traders of Chinese or Indian descent outside the homeland) play an important role in the neoliberal global economy by using their diaspora community networks. In this case, they may potentially participate in exploitative practices.

2. People who succeed in multiculturalism as middlepersons but remain marginalized at the global level:

Though considered to be intermediately successful within the nation-state framework, this group of actors can still be exploited by neo-liberalism. As long as the global market is governed by power structures rooted in white supremacy, these people are hardly free from racism.

3. People who continue to be exploited by neoliberalism alongside their positions at the bottom in the nation-state order:

Those who are left behind in marginalized or oppressed positions within the nation-state are the first to face the repercussions of neoliberalism.

However, unlike previous forms of racism and exploitation that were nationally or locally bounded, it has now become increasingly difficult for these people to have face to face relations with their exploiters and oppressors in everyday life, and therefore more difficult to identify as to whom they should address their concerns. Furthermore, gaining or maintaining solidarity with other workers and people of the same class, a once prevalent form of solidarity for political activism is also no longer an easy task.

Now, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, even in societies presumably at the forefront with policies to remedy racism, the convergence of neoliberalism and the limits of nation-state-bounded multiculturalism create the conditions for the emergence of a new form of racism.

In search of pluralistic solidarity

In the late twentieth century, we have witnessed transnational or global solidarity as a strategy for resistance movements in their fight against racism. This can be described as one of the characteristics of contemporary resistance. NGOs (non-governmental organizations), and international institutions, have contributed to disseminate the concept of 'human rights' all over the world, even in socialist countries. These movements and organizations have sometimes successfully put international pressure on unwilling nation-states in enforcing policy changes. There are a number of cases in which transnational and global resistance movements bring about changes in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, something not easily achievable at the nation-state level.

At the local level as well, various groups and community organizations have forged solidarity in their anti-racism struggles. Yet, young people of minority groups are increasingly critical of identity politics, choosing to distance themselves from community organizations. Under these divisions, it is becoming harder to build networks, let alone strengthen ties among different groups.

With the return of racism in new guises, our society faces extremely important questions; how do we identify a racism whose shape constantly changes? What measures are effective in resisting such a new form of racism? In particular, what alternative strategies can the younger generation employ when they confront racism? We cannot change racism with ideals only. To tackle the social reality of race, we need to reexamine racial representations that are engraved into our senses and memories through everyday life practices. By looking back on history and reconsidering the present, we hope to explore this important question within this book.

Note

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