



Reflecting on the nexus of
'race' and sexuality

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This report is a reflection on doctoral research carried out between 2016 and 2019 in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London, under the supervision of Dr Gail Lewis and Professor Bruna Seu. Submitted with the title, *Gay men, Grindr, and the racialisation of 'desire as sexuality': a psychosocial investigation*, the project applied a psychosocial lens to the racialisation of sexuality in MSM (men-who-have-sex-with-men) communities in London, UK. Project strands included the formulation of a novel theoretical framework for the racialisation of sexuality (bringing psychoanalysis into conversation with queer theory and critical theories of 'race'); a theoretically-driven thematic analysis of Grindr profiles; and a psychoanalytically-informed reading of biographical interviews with MSM who identified their sexualities as racialised.

Glossary of terms

Psychosocial – While this increasingly popular term is defined and deployed in diverse ways, I use it here to denote the interplay of psychic and social forces out of which individual subjects are constituted. This has been visualised through the figure of the 'Moebius' strip; a connected form which has no beginning and no end.



Subject – Rather than referring to 'individuals', I use the philosophical terminology popular in the social sciences of 'subjects' and 'subjectivity'. In so doing I'm seeking to capture the fact that every human being is the product of social forces and processes of 'subjectification', while also highlighting the partiality and particularity of each person's perceptions and ways of seeing the world. For an accessible monograph on the topic of subjectivity see Mansfield (2000).

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Executive summary

Discussion of racialised sexualities is often shrouded in taboo and disavowal. As a topic it lacks an adequate conceptual vocabulary, despite the fact that the intersection of 'race' and sex is both a historical constant and a pre-eminent terrain on which contemporary sexualities play out. My research sought to grapple with racialised sexualities in a specific MSM context in London, UK. Responding to debates about so-called 'racial preference' in sex and dating, I wanted to better understand the ways in which race and sexuality can be mutually constitutive, and to attempt to reframe how racialised sexualities might be thought about – potentially draining the topic of some of the anxiety and animus that frequently circulates around it. Seeking out theoretical approaches to race to apply in the field, I sought to locate individual sexual subjects dynamically within both a personal, biographical, and a broader, collective, racial history. I also sought to reconfigure the ethical framework through which racialised sexualities can be parsed, centering reflexivity and social responsibility while eschewing reductive or moralistic formulations of human agency.

Background

My PhD project deployed theoretical and empirical research methods to critically interrogate the phenomenon of so-called 'racial preferences' in sex and intimate relationships, specifically in the context of MSM communities in London, UK. Keeping in mind the mission statement of The Bonnard Trust – to fund research *"into the nature of racial, religious and cultural intolerance with a view to finding a means to combat it"* – rather than summarising my research, I have written this report as a more general reflection on what the particular nexus of 'race' and sexuality might tell us about the origins, forms, and stickiness of 'racial' intolerance. In order to do this, I have structured the report around three academic approaches to 'race' that I utilised in my research – racial formation theory, psychic theories of 'race', and critical race theory. I take each of these theories in turn, bringing them into conversation

with examples from my own research, and analysing their implications for our understandings of 'race' and racism.

Racial formation theory

Racial formation theory establishes 'race' as both a socially and historically contingent construct, and as a 'fundamental organising principle' of Western societies (1986/2014: 66). Its authors, sociologists Michael Omi & Howard Winant, argue that, "*social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories*" (1986/2014: 12); a process they call 'racial formation'.

Key to this theory is an apprehension of the relatively short history of what we currently understand by 'race', beginning with the project of European colonialism through which a simplified 'racial' hierarchy was invented and then deployed to categorise all the populations encountered on colonial plunders. In this way, rather than a multitude of ethnicities and tribes, the world could be broadly split into a hierarchy of white, 'oriental', and black. At this time, it was even argued that these different 'races' might represent different species (a concept known as 'polygenesis'). The collapse of regional and ethnic specificity into 'racial' homogeneity is an enduring legacy of this way of ordering and seeing the world. Omi & Winant note the importance of 'racial' thinking for culture: "*In the cultural realm, dress, music, art, language, and indeed the very concept of 'taste' has been shaped by the racial consciousness and racial dynamics*" (1986/2014: 67). Following this, within my research I sought to demonstrate the degree to which sexuality represents a key site of 'racial' formation.

From its very inception, 'race' as a way of categorising human beings has always been preoccupied with sex. As the 'racial' hierarchy of the European colonial project was seeded around the world, it was buttressed by the construction of 'knowledge' about non-white sexualities that typically defined these as aberrant, perverse, and retrograde. If the archetypal European was defined by his (always *his*) self-restraint and privileging of the cerebral over the corporeal¹, the non-white

'native' of the colonies was most at home in their body, and helplessly in thrall to their impulses. Emergent nineteenth century disciplines such as sexology and anthropology used non-European sexualities as a more or less implicit benchmark against which to define their own model of a civilised, normative European sexuality (Stoler, 1995).

The reification of 'race' into a significant category of human ordering also erected a new boundary – economic, social, material, and, inevitably then, erotic (Nagel, 2003). By instantiating borders, 'race' became sexually charged precisely because the anxious policing of such a boundary renders its transgression enticing and exciting (historian Robert J. C. Young suggests that the English in the colonies became "*sick with desire for the Other*" [1995: 2]). It is no accident that miscegenation has featured so heavily in the story of 'race' over the past four hundred years, and the idea of interracial sex as taboo and transgressive persists today.

Sexuality has also been foundational to the anti-black racism that has structured – and structures – psyches and social relations in the United States. Patricia Hill-Collins (2006) notes that the potent myth of black men's rapacious sexuality and their positioning as a threat to white women found particular favour during the reconstruction era, when former slaves had been nominally freed and new means of regulation were required to keep the 'races' separate and black people materially and culturally subordinate.

While this historical work testifies to the long-standing pre-eminence and efficacy of 'race' as a site of social and sexual regulation, my project argues that these colonialist erotic representations endure and continue to inflect contemporary cultures and sexualities. This is evident not least in the representations of interracial sex in pornography. One example that recurred in my research on the sex and dating app Grindr was user profiles authored by white men seeking to fulfil a fantasy based on the trope of black men ravishing white women. In an

1 A split which is itself predicated on the tendency within Western philosophy to propagate a discrete 'mind: body' binary – one arguably undone by any serious consideration of human sexuality.

act of erotic role play, these men positioned themselves as being at the mercy of black men's sexualities, with several profile authors referring to themselves as 'sluts'; a moniker that can be read as signifying the transgression and moral collapse that interracial sex implies.

Crucially, racial formation theory emphasises that 'racial' dynamics unfold at both individual (micro) and social (macro) levels, and stresses the reciprocity between individuals and collective social relations. In terms of racialised sexualities, this accents the ways that a given person's sexuality is shaped by social influences and how these social influences are in turn, fed, buttressed, and sustained by the individual's own psychic investments in 'race' and racialised objects. A psychosocial perspective also seeks to emphasise that the ways in which individual subjects inhabit socially salient categories such as 'race', gender, and class (and their intersections) are dynamic rather than uniform, such that the meanings of these categories for those subjects can never be assumed in advance. This then brings me to my second theoretical approach to 'race', which is its psychic life.

Psychic theories of 'race'

While an emphasis on its social and historical construction highlights the contingency of 'race' – acting as an important corrective to biological or genetic 'racial' ideology – it arguably fails to do justice to the lived experience of racialised subjects. As Sharon Patricia Holland argues, moving us from a social constructionist to a psychic (and phenomenological) perspective: "*Race may not be on the body, but it certainly is 'in' it*" (2012: 20). Precisely because society is saturated by 'racial' thinking, 'race' gets inside us and becomes a way of seeing and experiencing the world. The chief psychological process at work here is identification, which Diana Fuss defines as "*the detour through the other that defines a self*" (1995: 2); that is, we identify with and then model ourselves on the people around us, and in so doing we become constituted by them. Since these others are racialised subjects, we inevitably also take in and become inscribed by 'race' and the racial formations they embody. Once internalised,

objects of identification become sites of psychic investment and attachment, and they shape our experiences of self – our minds and bodies – and of our relationship with the world around us. Most of this psychological activity occurs unconsciously and may thus be experienced as natural and innate. And, as Stephen Frosh (2002) and Derek Hook (2005) argue, one possible consequence of the psychic life of 'race' is that appeals to 'rational' argument, such as pointing out that 'race' is a social and historical construct, may do little to diminish its appeal for individual subjects; an argument that provides another important lens on the contemporary endurance of 'race' and racial intolerance.

While identification is a psychological process through which racialised subjects reproduce themselves as such – sustaining 'race' in the process – it is also potentially a site at which connections are made across 'racial' boundaries. As Gail Lewis argues: *"Despite a common sense that suggests otherwise, our bodies do not automatically prescribe any automatic belongings and nor can our conceptions of self be read off from our bodies in any simple way"* (2007: 875). For example then, while a black body or a white one inevitably positions a subject socially – standing as a material fact that will shape their experience of the world in multiple ways – their racialised identifications may be much more multivalent and multiracial than this social positioning suggests.

This was exemplified by one of the interview case studies I wrote up as part of my research. My interviewee was a white man who had grown up in an area of London with a large black population. He identified his sexuality as oriented exclusively to black men, and framed this in terms of a particular relationship with and investment in black cultures that is not captured by his social positioning as a white man. At one point this interviewee invoked – in order to anxiously disavow – the figure of Rachel Dolezal, the infamous white American woman who had surreptitiously 'transitioned' into the black woman she felt herself to be. While invoking Dolezal as a figure of disdain and disidentification, it seemed to me the participant was grasping for a language to describe the visceral profundity and sincerity of his own cross-racial identifications.

Shirley-Anne Tate (2015/2018) identifies romantic connections 'across the colour line' as a potential point at which race can be 'undone', suggesting that the proximity of bodies and the power of touch have the potential to dissolve boundaries and throw into relief the absurdity and *constructedness* of 'race'. France Winddance Twine (2010) makes a related, but distinct, point in her ethnographic study of the white mothers of black children in the UK. Winddance Twine developed a concept she calls 'racial literacy' to frame these interracial parent-child relationships; with white mothers developing a particular racial sense of self in the process of caring for and viewing the world through the eyes of their black children. Nonetheless, for all of the potential of intimate attachments to undermine 'race', we must be wary of idealising them. As Tate (2015/2018), Winddance Twine (2010), and Lewis (2009) all note, the great propensity of white subjects in their relationships with non-white others – however intimate – is one of an ambivalent dance in and out of the privileges and perspectives of whiteness.

Furthermore, 'race' remains a challenge for such relationships, and one that cannot simply be wished away. Amy C. Steinbugler, who has carried out the most extensive empirical studies of 'interracial' coupling in LGBTQ+ communities in the United States, finds that 'emotional labour' is involved for both parties in 'interracial' couples. Steinbugler coins the term 'racework' to capture this labour, which she defines as *"the routine actions and strategies through which individuals maintain close relationships across lines of stratification"* (2012: xiii). Steinbugler finds that such 'racework' is a phenomenon experienced to greater and lesser degrees, as more or less of a burden, depending on the two individuals involved. And, accenting the relationship between racialised sexualities and 'racial' identities, Steinbugler also argues for *"the potential of intimate relationships to fashion individual racial identities"* (2015: 2).

Another of my interview participants – a black man in a relationship with a white man – highlighted the realities and challenges of such 'racework'. This participant articulated feeling valued and recognised by his partner, but also described being witness to sweeping racist comments about 'black people', which he relayed ambivalently in the interview room. While this might represent a particularly

extreme example of 'racework' – a more everyday one could be a white partner's inattentiveness to 'race' as a factor influencing the receipt of poor customer service – it also demonstrates the degree to which prejudice can be sustained in the most intimate contexts. This relationship also reconfigured the participant's relationship to his own blackness – both distancing him from it, as he found himself increasingly inhabiting his partner's social world, which he explicitly racialised as white; and accenting it, as his blackness was thrown into particular relief *in relation to* his partner's whiteness.

Critical race theory

The final approach to 'race' used in my research is critical race theory (CRT), which comes out of American legal studies and has been broadly taken up by the social sciences. If racial formation theory attends to the social and historical life of 'race', and psychic theories its psychological inscriptions, I suggest that CRT provides a framework to think about the ethical dimensions of 'race' and racism.

While CRT is an increasingly vast field, I would like to highlight several key ideas that informed my own research, and which speak to the broader theme of racial intolerance. The first is that, *"'race', simply put, is the child of racism"* (Darder & Torres, 2004: 100). This inverts our more common understanding of 'race' and racism, which starts with the former and implicitly anchors itself to an understanding of 'race' as a biological fact rather than a social construct; in fact, argue Darder & Torres, 'race' is the thing we produce in the act of being racist.

The second key takeaway from CRT is that 'race' and racism saturate contemporary Western societies and that 'white supremacist' is an apt descriptor for this status quo. While this position has become increasingly prominent in recent years, it runs counter to the liberal consensus that defined the period from the 1980s onward when a surface veneer of so-called 'political correctness' paid lip service to anti-racism while sustaining significant 'racial' inequalities. During this period, good liberals often behaved as though an anti-racist agenda could be served by a disingenuous commitment to not seeing 'race' and purporting to treat

everyone as equal. According to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, this simply drove racism underground, producing what he calls 'colour-blind racism' or 'racism without racists', which he defines in terms of its *"slipperiness, apparent nonracialism and ambivalence"* (2002/2010: 41).

Colour-blind racism speaks to another key takeaway from a CRT approach to 'race', which is the ordinariness and everyday nature of much racism, where too often the focus is on the egregious. Thus Holland defines racism as *"almost always articulated as an everyday occurrence, as pedestrian rather than spectacular"* (2012: 3). Finally, in emphasising both the ordinariness and everyday nature of racism, CRT also emphasises that we need to move beyond considerations of the intentionality of racism towards a focus on its effects. These two points are linked: it is precisely because society is so structured and saturated by 'race' that subjects with the best of intentions can nonetheless perpetuate racisms. bell hooks formulates this in terms of *"the reality that goodwill can co-exist with racist thinking and white supremacist attitudes"* (1992: 16)². This has significant implications for how we think about racialised sexualities, where the idea of intentionality is already inappropriate, given that our erotic desires are not things over which we have any conscious hold. As such, Holland suggests that *"the erotic... touches upon that aspect of racist practices that cannot be accounted for as racist but must be understood as something else altogether"* (2012: 27).

CRT then potentially offers a useful intervention into the debates around 'racial preference', which were the initial spark for my PhD research. These debates tend to be framed by a discourse of personal responsibility, which either locates the origins and accountability for racialised sexuality within the individual (who then becomes an aberrant 'bad apple'), or else eschews questions of responsibility altogether by way of an ideological commitment to sexual freedom. I believe I found evidence of this throughout my empirical work: on Grindr, where attempts to define sexuality in terms of 'race' are often accompanied by the

² Making a related point, Holland quotes Jennifer Culbert, who argues that *"most horrific acts committed by one person against another occur as small thoughtless gestures under mundane, if not trite, circumstances"* (quoted in Holland, 2012: 1).

awkward disclaimer, *"I'm not/it's not racist"*; and in my research interviews, where many of my participants conveyed anxiety when explicitly discussing the racialised aspects of their sexualities – these sections of the interviews were defined by rambling equivocation, nervous gulps, and pauses (most especially, it should be added, in the case of white participants).

By emphasising effects over intentions, I believe CRT offers the potential to bypass a reductive discourse of responsibility while accenting the fact that our actions and our being-in-the-world help shape and define that world for all those with whom we share it.

Discussion

The phenomenon of racialised sexualities is one that lacks a satisfactory conceptual vocabulary to explain itself. The origins of this could be located *inter alia* in the anxious historical regulation of interracial intimacies, the enduring reality of racial prejudice, injury, and inequality, and the limitations of the models we currently use to construct and parse our sexualities. The result, as I encountered it, is often one of defensiveness, silence, and the shutting-down of thought.

Leveraging racial formation theory, psychic, and CRT approaches to 'race' and racism, in my project I sought to make an intervention that could acknowledge sexuality as the product of a psychosocial subject with both a personal-biographical and a broader 'racial' history. I suggest that 'race' is an inevitable and incontrovertible aspect of sexuality in white supremacist societies where it becomes a way of seeing, thinking, and experiencing. To seek to contest the existence of racialised sexualities at the level of the individual is then, in effect, to put the proverbial cart before the horse.

The best and only hope for imagining more expansive sexualities, less weighed down with the weight of history, is to make changes at the social level. In an alternate dimension in which such a thing might be possible, to drain 'race' of its social significance would be to deny it its sexual potency. Since abolishing 'race'

is not currently conceivable (and nor is it clear that this would be desirable), our energy needs to go into acknowledging and grappling with it – the exact opposite of the denial and disavowal with which both racism and racialised sexualities are often currently met. If the ethically conscious (sexual) subject can do one thing at the level of the individual then, it is to centre and think critically and reflexively about their implications in 'race' and racism, and how these mediate our experiences of the world.

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Freddy had personal experience of prejudice. At the outbreak of WWII he was studying economics at LSE and was evacuated to Cambridge, but in 1940 he was labelled an ‘enemy alien’ and interned to a camp in Canada for 10 months. He was eventually allowed to return to Britain to fight against Nazism. On joining the army in 1943, he changed his name to Frederick Bonnart. However, he was determined that his original name be preserved and associated with the actions of the Trust – hence we are calling these papers The Braunthal Reports.

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Dr Dominic Reilly received his PhD from the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London in 2020. His current work projects include managing an online therapy service for the sexual health charity Terrence Higgins Trust, and acting as Postdoctoral Research Associate on ‘States of Mind in Conflict’, a Swiss Federal Government funded project exploring the psychological dimensions of conflict and peace mediation.