

Who Can Be a Racist?

Or, How to Do Things with Personhood

The previous chapter demonstrated two contexts in which unmarked cosmopolitan horizons, mediated through unmarked English, ultimately engendered stratifying intersectional propensities for Rainbow Bridge and Azanian Achievers. As to how this relationship between the ideological infrastructure of intersectionality and the semiotics of interaction unfolds, a key insight can be drawn from the work of pragmatist philosopher and semiotician, Charles Sanders Peirce (1955). He suggests that relations of iconicity or sameness are always *motivated* (Carr 2011). That is, the indispensable “iconicities” or relations of sameness that constitute both our personal intuitions and public institutions are subject to the intersubjective belief, performativity, and maintenance of meanings and values that nonetheless come to be perceived as durable, transcendent, and enduring even, or especially, to those subjects tasked with the labor of belief, performance, and maintenance. The feelings of one’s stigmatization and stereotypification in a given situation are seldom not experienced as a compounding effect of personal and public modes of “being seen.” For those with experience of race, gender, sexual, or class discrimination, the potential collapse of public institutions and private intuitions around seemingly arbitrary propositions of sameness and difference can engender crushing anxiety. Stereotypes around “who one is” are necessarily inflected by possibilities of “who one could be” in the perceptions and recognitions of others. Thus, as questions of racialized discrimination necessarily entail concerns of iconicity and alterity; so concerns of racism—as the sociopolitical motivation of racial difference—necessarily entail questions of personhood. This chapter attempts to engage the broader pragmatic question haunting current inquiries into the (im)possibility of Chinese racism: Who can be racist?

RACIALIZED INFRASTRUCTURES
AND TRANSLATIONAL LABOR

During the Ebola virus outbreak in 2014, students from a number of different African countries were quarantined in “Ebola residences”—as students referred to them—across campuses in Beijing. The policies were not enforced in a way that took account of different African countries’ relationships to the Ebola outbreak. One South African student reportedly protested saying the American international students were being preferentially treated, as the United States had more outbreaks of Ebola than South Africa. She accused the administrators of a racist decision. The administrators were perplexed, arguing that more African countries had Ebola than North American ones. Hearing this response, many Chinese students agreed with the African students, suggesting that the university administration was shifting goalposts on the issue. However, the administration stood firm on its decision as a statistically and thus scientifically informed set of measures directed toward the greater good. Testing and quarantine, however, rapidly concluded once widespread dissatisfaction was apparent. For black students from African countries, obvious forms of racism persist in China, even when they are denied through geographical and demographic recalibrations as a particularly pernicious, though seemingly objectivist, form of gaslighting—mostly because such denials and recalibrations seem so hurtfully reflexive to black African students in China. Furthermore, the very fact that forms of discrimination have taken on a nuance since 2010 does not erase fairly recent memories of racialization (Sautman 1994). In reckoning with these experiences, however, it is unfortunate that the interpersonal textures a dynamics of these interactions are left out while focusing on the outcomes of victim and perpetrator—as though both positions can be taken for granted in the absence of ideological and institutional frameworks. To put it directly, this focus risks attributing essential agency to gender and racial phenotype in the ways Barbara and Karen Fields have criticized (2012). Here, I want to explore an interaction that demonstrates how institutional and ideological scales of racialization can manifest within interpersonal encounters in fairly explicit ways, and importantly, that this convergence is facilitated by a discourse of racialization that is neither essential nor quintessentially local.

Chimai and Hondo were two Zimbabweans whom I befriended in the later stage of my fieldwork in Beijing. Chimai was something of a virtuoso on the *mbira*—an instrument with a close association with Zimbabwe, even though it travels through many musical contexts in Southern Africa. Like me, Hondo played guitar. The three of us got together relatively frequently to play. We were short on rehearsal space as our respective residences had understandable noise restrictions. At the time, I was fortunate to have access to a working space in one of the

American university research and outreach centers in Beijing, so we would meet there in the evenings to practice. On one occasion, Hondo left the rehearsal to go to the bathroom and exited into the seminar rooms adjoining hallway. I then heard a loud, anxious back-and-forth in the hallway, through the door that Hondo left ajar: “Why are you here?” and “Who let you in?” I got up to investigate and found Hondo confronted by one of the center’s visiting faculty, Professor Xu—a prominent scholar at an American university who split his time between China (his home country) and the United States—where he taught and lived. As both were looking at me with awkward hesitation, I spoke first and explained that Hondo was my guest and then asked what was going on. Professor Xu, visibly unsettled, dropped his voice and explained haltingly that he was concerned with the center’s security and just needed to establish what was going on. I had seen many foreign guests enter and leave the center, none of them encountering this reaction.

It is obvious that the surface power dynamics of such an encounter heavily favor Professor Xu. It is also apparent that Professor Xu was recruiting an uncannily familiar American mode of urban racial profiling during his late-night encounter with Hondo. What is perhaps less evident is the effect of my walking in on the interaction and the immediate framing effects of my entry into the scene—as a white, English-speaking body. Hondo, up until that point, admitted to being confused by a Chinese civilian questioning him like a police or security official in English. My arrival and Professor Xu’s response triggered a different appraisal of the situation. Later, trying to make light of the situation as we were walking back to his dorm, he joked: “For a moment there, I felt like I had just stolen fruit from a [white] farmer.” To be sure, this kind of encounter is less frequent in contemporary Zimbabwe (to say the least). However, socio-linguistic memory reaches back to times when such interactions were encompassed by cruelly racist ideological machinery that heavily favored the white farmer.

When I returned to the center the following day, Professor Liu—a different, locally affiliated Chinese faculty member—stopped me in the hallway and noted: “I heard about Professor Xu and your friend.” This set up a confidential discussion during which she assured me that Professor Xu was not being racist, indicating that he had told her about the interaction and that I might have likely “gotten the wrong idea.” My witnessing apparently generated potentially problematic iconic equivalencies with settler colonial racism. More importantly, these equivalencies not only seemed intelligible to my Chinese and Zimbabwean interlocutors. They also constituted as source of considerable anxiety and a need for effacement in light of their name-ability through my walking in. *For whom* one is racist appears at least as important a consideration as asking: “Who can be racist?”

What Hondo and Professor Xu’s encounter demonstrates is that racism and intersectional violence depend on the intersubjective maintenance of forms of iconicity—this constitutes a division of *translational labor* that is operationalized through *motivating* a constant tension between whiteness and its unmarked

mediations. Notice the subtle behind-the-scenes work between a number of actors in managing, on the one hand, the recognition of racial ordering via whiteness, and, on the other, whiteness's effacement through claims of misrecognizing "realities" that were actually unmarked. In the double-movement of recognition and effacement, race becomes stratified not only in relation to subjects' capacities for mobility, but also in relation to the dimensions of language that accompany mobile subjects like Hondo and Professor Xu. We can observe this more generally where both explicit racism, in the form of racial essentialism, and liberal racism, as a relativistic denial of race, require and necessitate consensus and co(n)texts for racism to do their ideological work.

How a *race* as a token becomes "iconic" of a horizon of excellence or dysfunction, or how *race* as a type becomes obviated by making it arbitrary both depend on *translational labor* of sameness and difference—or iconicity and alterity. Such *translations* of iconicity and alterity in relation to token and type are necessarily mediated through practices like alignment, reception, and consensus around how a *race* is "like" or "unlike" another, or how *race* stands as an arbitrary category rendering races as equal tokens of the same deferred type. It is this simultaneous dependency on consensus (explicit or implicit) and context that I am trying to evoke in understanding the pragmatics of race, its contingency on the reception of whiteness, and how "racism" uncannily emerges among non-white subjects in a non-western context.

While Peirce himself does not use the metaphor of *translation* in framing his definitions of symbol, icon, and index, linguistic anthropologists and many pragmatists have taken up his identification of iconic and indexical semiotic processes as suggestive of fundamentally nonagentive dimensions of social mediation (M. Silverstein 1976; Carr 2011; Wirtz 2014). In this regard, linguistic and other semiotic practices make meaning by receiving meaning, which in turn remake meaning and so forth. This being the case, iconic or iconizing processes—making things stand as "different" or "same"; and indexical processes, where meaning only emerges co(n)textually—in "context" and in relation to other signs or "co-texts"—are fundamentally intersocial and intersubjective (M. Silverstein and Urban 1996). Thus, translation as an *intersubjective* as well as iconicity/alterity-motivating process does not imply causal volitionality or a commitment to rational, individual intent. Translation thus presupposes a more interactional, reception-based conception of meaning-making as emerging through encounters, yet always located within the historical and material conditions that dialectically constitute, and are constituted by, their motivational space-time. In this way "I" and "you" are perspectival signs—or deictics (M. Silverstein 1976)—that occur to their users to be simultaneously preceding the interaction yet in a dynamic relationship with their context of utterance, where their translation can never be felt as "arbitrary" in the ways Ferdinand de Saussure once suggested (2011). In another critique of arbitrariness, Frantz Fanon reveals another dimension of this *translational* sensibility,

where translation manifests itself in the violence of decolonization. In *Wretched of the Earth*, he writes: “Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which gave it historical form and content” (Fanon 1963, 36).

Decolonization, an always as-yet-incomplete project, is a semantic translational process—given the ways in which the meaningful relations in one spatio-temporal context must be “incompletely” reconfigured in another. However, as Fanon demonstrates, decolonization is also a *pragmatic* translational process, in the sense that transformation from colonization to decolonization is troubled by an ideological context that does not allow for a seamless shift in relations and reappropriations of power. For thinkers of decolonization, there is an obstruction to the simple *translation* of supposedly arbitrary signs. As English is not merely a language among other languages—something Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1994) continues to tirelessly demonstrate—so, too, whiteness is not just a race among races. The reiteration of these signs, their co(n)textualization, and the way they stratify as much as commensurate their co-signs reveals both the ideological nature of translation, as well as the inescapability of translation as simultaneous social fact and stratifying reality. This is a reality within which “red,” “brown,” “black,” and “yellow” people have come to inhabit or appropriate positions subordinate or adjacent to “whites,” and where English becomes necessary social currency for all global migrants even though their capacity to enunciate its phonemes or inhabit its default white subjectivity is fundamentally unequal. These positions, for Fanon, are not arbitrary, because whiteness and other signs of the (post)colonial present never can be.

In this regard Fanon’s insights concerning the relationship between race, language, and capacities for mobility among subjects of decolonization stand in an important historical dialogue with thinkers of postcolonial translation like Gayatri Spivak ([1988] 2010) and Edward Said ([1977] 2003)—a genealogy that has influenced a rich lineage of scholars particularly in fields like English and literature studies, as well as history.

In their introduction to the edited collection *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi note that translation “does not occur in a vacuum, but in a continuum . . . an ongoing process of intellectual transfer,” that it is “not an innocent, transparent activity . . . it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems” (1999, 2). The authors’ main object of critique, however—and the primary concern of much early literary and historical engagements with the analytic of translation—is whether or not translation emerged as a process that detracted from, or diminished, the “original” historical, literary, or social text being translated. This mirrors a persistent,

but currently more depoliticized, anthropological debate around representation as translational practice in anthropology—one which perhaps is most iconically represented by (but certainly not limited to) the methodological tension that emerged between the translational approach explicated in the work of Clifford Geertz (1973, 1977) and the critiques of James Clifford and George Marcus in their edited collection *Writing Culture* (1986). All of these debates are important and ongoing critiques, but only insofar as one is preoccupied with the question: “What is being translated into what?” The following engagement with translation departs from this strictly semantic approach.

Instead, following Frantz Fanon’s imperative, explicated at length in the first chapter of his *Black Skin, White Masks*, an important translational insight emerges. Fixation on the question of what is being translated comes at the cost of considering the more pragmatic condition of possibility for translation of any kind: the units (linguistic and other signs) and space-times (material and historical contexts) of commensuration. “To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization” ([1952] 2008, 1–2). Here, Fanon was fundamentally concerned with a French colonial context in which blacks were not only stratified in relation to whites through their capacity for “good French,” but that they were also similarly stratified among one another: the Antilleans’ “good French” vis-à-vis their Senegalese subordinates, the elite cosmopolitan bilingual Martinican vis-à-vis the sedentary peasant who has only mastered creole. For Fanon, the colonial world produces limited means for motivating one’s subjectivity, value, and conditions of being—commensurations of value under the sign of capital, commensurations of meaning under the signs of a standardized language of command and its co(n)texts.

Given these limited means, colonial and decolonizing subjects ultimately come to rely on the very signs of commensuration that compromise them. The fractal stratifications that emerge as many of Fanon’s subjects translate alternatives to their own oppression do not arise because colonial subjects believe in their capacities to overthrow whiteness and French as signs of commensuration. This is clear in Fanon’s identification of the unthinkable of black creoles displacing French whites—the subject of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s masterful but severely undercelebrated work (1995, 2003). Instead, the stratifications Fanon observes emerge precisely because of his subjects’ maintenance of French and whiteness as units of commensuration in the absence of unthinkable alternatives—a condition that, in turn, dialectically reinforces the very stratifications his subjects are trying to escape. In Fanon’s argument, the target of translation—the as-yet-unimaginable future subjectivity of decolonization—is both obscured by and becomes transformed into its means: French and whiteness.

A recent example of a similar stratification emerges in the work of anthropologist Norma Mendoza-Denton (2008), where the ideological recruitment of

the racialized cultural capital of English and Spanish respectively become markers of extreme differentiation between two groups of female street gangs within a relatively ethnically homogenous Latina community in Northern California. She depicts how a north-south hemispheric localism emerges between two rival gangs, the Norteñas and Sureñas, and that this hemispheric localism is distilled through an interlinked process of linguistic and racial hyper-differentiation. Her book is a fundamentally important ethnographic contribution and its intervention is very much directed toward informing a public debate around the recognition of racial and linguistic differentiation as social facts within minority communities within the United States. Beyond fundamental regional and political contrasts, my own argument differs from hers in another important sense. Rather than interpreting “language” and “race” as categories of differentiation, I treat “whiteness” and “English” as categories of alignment and disalignment, in relation to which subjects become stratified. Thus, while I am generally concerned with the overall relationship between racialization and raciolinguistics (Alim et al. 2016), I am—as suggested earlier—specifically preoccupied with raciolinguistic horizons of whiteness as an ideological gravity that enregisters racialization. In line with linguistic anthropologists Jonathan Rosa (2016a, 2016b, 2016c) and Mary Bucholtz (2010, 2016), I am interested in the relationships between whiteness, English, and their others, where markedness and unmarkedness, of either English or whiteness, constitutes a constantly negotiated ethnographic tension, between or among subjects, that both inhabit, and perceive themselves to be inhabiting, this very tension.

In doing so, I also want to break with the idea that critiques of whiteness are somehow less analytically sophisticated than critiques of race—a blatantly false and fundamentally paralyzing position that ultimately makes the person articulating the argument into an anti-white racist pariah. It also generates a theoretical disposition that enshrines relativistic inquiry—around race and language—at the cost of recognizing the historically and ideologically situated conditions of possibility for posing ethnographic questions, which are neither equal between ethnographer and informant, nor among ethnographers themselves. I think this matter imbricates something wider than the discipline of anthropology and concerns a climate of consent for exploring certain genealogies of thought while marginalizing others.

It is worth momentarily exploring resistance against, and in some cases hostility toward, attempts at sustaining a postcolonial critique within an elite Euro-American academic sphere. Beyond my own traumatic (but ultimately subjective) experiences in trying to advocate for the merits of postcolonial theory, it is apparent that such a hostility *does* exist, considering the decline of intellectual spaces engaging postcolonial thought, despite the seemingly unproblematic escalation of academic defenses of empire and historical imperialism in recent times. Bruce Gilley’s recent article (2017) in *Third World Quarterly*—titled “The Case for Colonialism”—serves as a symptomatic example. After undergoing a double-blind

peer review in a journal that has in the past been sympathetic to authors engaging postcolonial thought, the article was published, and to the horror of many of these authors, Gilley noted that it was “high time” the British empire received its due as an agent of development. Among those offended were several members of the journal’s own editorial board who threatened to resign unless the article was retracted. This set in motion debates around free speech and censorship over an article many felt should not have seen the light of day unless there was a climate of consent that was unconcerned with its proposition. It is this climate of consent—and the complicity of a default liberal intellectualism—that continues to enable white supremacy under the auspices of open debate.

Oposing this, what I have argued—and continue to argue—seeks recourse to the intellectual legacy of black consciousness thinker, Steve Biko, who noted that intellectual propositions that propose a continuity of white imperialism decades after so-called decolonization ultimately threaten a liberal intellectual sphere that constantly recruits itself as an ally, while benefitting from racial stratifications that it criticizes.

Biko’s (1978) revealing critique of white liberal participation in black liberation movements contains a crucial insight for aspiring intellectuals seeking new liberal utopias in out-of-the-way places: that liberal nonracialist arguments for racial liberation are always based on the assumption that categories of race are arbitrary, that racism is illogical, and that therefore all races are equal. Biko observed that this easy relativism obscured the fact that races were already unequal in relation to the racial capital of whiteness, and that liberals were simultaneously complicit in it as the beneficiaries of systematic structures of racial oppression that they could criticize at their leisure. For Biko, the capacity to inhabit this privileged “activist” stance made the “default white” liberal subject the apex predator of a pervasive *liberal-racism complex*—discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.

Reading this classic black consciousness critique from Beijing, it became clear that the dynamics of stratification Biko once identified have neither disappeared nor can they be hermetically sealed within the apartheid matrix. The historical material conditions that informed the world within which Biko’s arguments were embedded continue to be at play in the cosmopolitan aspirations of African and Chinese students in Beijing, because the wider context of the Angloscene still encompasses both space-times. However, discerning a transhistorical Angloscene’s matrix necessitates an approach to translation that operates bottom up, and does not slip into the kinds of semantic subterfuge that converts every proposition of iconicity and alterity into a representational hall of mirrors. To be sure, the *target* of translation is no less obscured: What indeed is the end goal of African students’ educational transformations? What are the stakes of their fulfillment through contemporary experiments in Chinese soft power? And, in turn, what icons of “success” inform Chinese students’ own experiments in cosmopolitanism as they encounter or pass by their African peers? Following Fanon, I believe

that this question, and my account of its theater of interaction, foregrounds whiteness's persistent gravity over a diffuse, equal opportunity replicability of "power."

In what now follows, I would like to contextualize my opening question—who can be a racist?—within the interactionally *translating* and *translated* encounters of Chinese and Africans in Beijing. In this theater of interaction, the performance, adoption, and rejection of various manifestations of "politically correct" personhood—indexed and iconized through mass-mediated persons like Trevor Noah and Oprah Winfrey—becomes the mode through which Chinese and African subjects (to differing degrees) raciolinguistically stratify one another.

ENREGISTERING PC

One summer night in 2014, my informant Adam—a black, Zimbabwean political science student—and I went to a costume party in San Li Tun. With its bars, shops, and restaurants often frequented by large groups of foreigners, as well as many Chinese shoppers and partygoers, San Li Tun has also recently become a place where many young African students started going in order to "make contacts" and enjoy romantic liaisons. When we arrived, a Chinese woman at the party called Lili approached Adam excitedly and introduced him to her partner. Lili was Adam's ex-girlfriend, and had come to the event with her current white American boyfriend, Tim. During the introductions, she said jokingly, "Wow, I guess you don't need a costume." "How's that?" Adam replied. "You know, since you can say you're here as an Ebola patient," she said laughing at what, in the past, may have been a shared form of rough banter between them. Adam's smile dropped and was replaced by an uncomfortable frown. After a moment of hesitation, Adam turned to address Tim, whose jaw-dropped face expressed liberal horror, and said in a sotto, patient voice: "You really must explain to her why that is offensive." Adam and I left the party after a while and went for dinner, during which Adam vented about what happened. I asked him what he would have said to Lili if Tim had not been there. "Well, I guess I wouldn't have been that offended," he said. "I probably would have made a joke about SARS or Chinese people not being able to tell the difference between kitchens and toilets."

In Beijing, many interactions between Chinese and African interlocutors like Lili and Adam are mediated through a complex intersectional relationship between whiteness, English, and cosmopolitan aspiration. Building on the relationship between intersectionality and enregisterment discussed up until now, I will demonstrate how considerations of racially unmarked political correctness—often reflexively referred to by informants as PC—become mediated through ideal language registers. The mobilizations of such registers, like Model C English or the "standard" American Midwest dialect, ultimately engender a highly marked stratification along intersectional lines.

MAFAN FOR WHOM?

Adam's interaction with Lili reveals a number of factors that play a complementary role in framing the racial and gendered vectors of their encounter. His example also diagrams a fairly common genre of flirtatious interaction between many African male students in Beijing and certain female Chinese counterparts. Sexual relationships between them are fairly common, but these are somewhat short term because the African students, like many other foreign male and Chinese students, are in Beijing only for the duration of their studies. Unlike their Chinese counterparts, they are open to—and able to have—relationships with white, Chinese, and African female students. Another and equally important reason for the short-term nature of these liaisons is that their Chinese and white female student counterparts rarely conceive of African male subjects as marriageable, but rather as conduits for sexual experimentation (Rofel 2007).

This context of interaction very much animates Adam and Lili's exchange. Lili would later confide that she and Adam had previously had a relationship before things became *mafan*—"troubled," "messy," "complicated," or "inconvenient." We became acquainted after this event when she learned that I was both a South African student in Beijing as well as a graduate student in the United States. She was keen on attending university in the United States and wanted to know whether I, as a fellow "third-world subject," would help to edit her application materials. This is something I did as an acknowledgment of her clear but possibly ironic invocation of "third-world solidarity" (*disanshijie datuanjie*). However, admittedly, I was keen to find out more about her relationship and awkward interaction with Adam at the party. After learning that I was a South African, she became keen to talk about "Africa things," given her own regional focus as an international relations major. This, however, was only on the occasions we met to talk about her applications, and where she liked to speak about Africans' "closeness to nature":

Lili: [Africans] are so innocent, like forest animals.

Me: Is that a good thing, don't animals get hunted?

Lili: No, don't think I'm a racist. It's a good thing because they are everything [Chinese] have lost. Chinese are now just robots with giant brains.

In conversations with myself and other Africans, Lili would contrast "African natural" essence with "robotic Chinese society" while simultaneously being quite reflexive about what constitutes politically correct nonracist language to a hypothetical western listener with the caveat, "No, don't think I'm a racist."

When, on a few occasions, we met in a group with her boyfriend's American English teacher friends, she would not discuss "Africa things" and would emphasize that I was a graduate student in the United States. The present non-presence, as well as nonpresent presence of her white American boyfriend—in

both Adam and my interactions with Lili—is important here, given the way deviations from a normative center can still be seen to constitute that very normativity as the regulating principle that makes the deviation legible in the first place (Bakhtin 1981; Schmidt 1996). However, what ideological gravity imbricating their interactional space-time allowed Tim to haunt encounters without being physically present?

It seemed that since her “faux pas” at the costume party, Lili came to adopt a register of political correctness whenever her boyfriend was around, but which was almost completely abandoned in his absence. This seemed to emerge over the time I observed Adam and Lili’s respective interactions. The switching between abandonments and adoption of PC constituted a fairly extreme form of code-switching, indexing Lili’s compartmentalization of dual personas and perhaps suggestive of Lili’s gradual coming to awareness of a transnational, raciolinguistic double-consciousness—if not her own, then certainly one she perceived in her interlocutors. Thus, Lili’s abandonment of PC, in its reflexive transgression, further reaffirmed Tim’s absent-presence. Likewise, references to Africa, Africans, and African relations—her university specialization—were only cursorily referenced around her boyfriend, while his absence activated revelry in all manner of “African” oddities and inquiries—with qualifications like “I’m not racist or anything but . . .” again suggesting a persistent awareness of PC even when—or perhaps especially when—it was being transgressed. Whether this was due to her reluctance to let her boyfriend know about the fact that she had had a relationship with a black African, or her attempt to live up to the cultural expectations of western liberal political correctness’s essentialism paranoias, is not clear. In both cases, however, the effect still constitutes an encompassing whiteness, English, and cosmopolitanism, as an imbricated horizon of aspiration of which Adam could never be a part of. Adam’s role in her life was that of a concealable conduit. After hours of English lessons, academic paper editing, and the delineation of cultural references to the world of the Anglosphere and its others, Adam became a stepping stone to co-presence it. However, it appeared that now, this “stepping stone” had to be elided as a matter of self-preservation. But self-preservation from what?

To Lili’s parents and grandparents, America, English, and whiteness are appropriate civilizational aspirations. At the same time, they continue to exchange her details (picture, age, and credentials) with those of potential Chinese male suitors among kinship, friendship, and professional networks in her hometown. An African from Africa (particularly a black person or *heiren*) within these aspirational hierarchies simply does not compute. Adam, who has been in China for almost six years, is aware of this situation and these parameters, which by this time have the effect of eliciting more cynicism than outrage in our conversations and interviews. It is also his awareness of the order of things that allows him not only to recruit her boyfriend to the role of “placing her in the world of her choosing,” as he

would later remark, but also to demonstrate to his former “lover-apprentice” how he understood the Anglosphere’s regime of political correctness and its limitations better than she did. In doing so, he imagines that he has made her white American boyfriend the custodian of her further civilization, as he put it, “she’s now his problem . . . I’m handing over the reins.”

Here, the veil of white political correctness quickly allows the patriarchal machinery of civilization to do its work. This machinery—mastered initially by Adam, given his own historical colonial emplacements, and then later transmitted to Lili—not only delineates what can be said but also the language in which speech has potency. Adam and Lili could always have continued their exchanges in Chinese, the initial common language through which the two of them first met in their university classes. This is due to Adam’s Chinese abilities, which—like Palesa’s—are considerable compared to many of his fellow African peers. English, however, gradually became Adam and Lili’s mode of exchange due to Adam’s initial role as Lili’s English tutor, augmented by his own facility with the language as an English private-school-educated Zimbabwean. But this was also driven by Lili’s own desire to rapidly improve her English. Here, her motivation stemmed from her parents’ own considerable expectations that she attend a foreign university, and their investment of millions of renminbi (RMB or Chinese yuan) toward her attendance of additional English classes at private institutes like Xindongfang (New Oriental). Such investments—in the case of Lili’s parents and grandparents—for families from small Chinese towns in northeastern China, must be contextualized in terms of the ways in which English ability and its associated “cosmopolitan” world might allow for a leapfrogging or at least temporary displacement of brutal regional Chinese classism that a small town northeastern accent might otherwise engender.¹

From the perspective of many multilingual, postcolonial subjects like Lili and Adam, English and its associated “rational” political correctness—usually in “un-accented” and “civil” tones—appears to explicitly disavow institutional racism and classism of any kind (cf. Hill 2009). Compared to the discussion of white political correctness as a mode of institutionalized othering, as has been discussed in the United States and other western academic and media theaters (Hill 2009; Jackson 2010; Gupta 2014), the Sino-African reception and deployment of PC draws attention to the resilience of white Anglocentrism’s regulatory emergence, even in a context where it is supposed to be explicitly absent. Here, PC seemingly even provides a gender- and class-neutral refuge from patriarchal bullying and regional classism for African and Chinese women in their respective contexts. However, as reflected by Lili and Adam’s catch-22, this landscape of political correctness—and the racial-linguistic complex it elides—implicitly generates limited possibilities of expression for those who are simultaneously its subalterns, and who themselves have no real stake in the deployment of the asymmetries that white PC-ness (in its often-sanctimonious invocations) supposedly protects them from.

RACE AND ENREGISTERMENT

The way in which PC-ness becomes linguistically mediated between Lili and Adam, thus racially stratifying them in terms of the presence/nonpresence of Tim, can be understood as an extended example of enregisterment as introduced in the previous chapter. Here, Asif Agha's general definition of enregisterment must be considered and then extended:

Language users often employ labels like “polite language,” “informal speech,” “upper-class speech,” “women’s speech,” “literary usage,” “scientific term,” “religious language,” “slang,” and others to describe differences among speech forms. Metalinguistic labels of this kind link speech repertoires to enactable pragmatic effects, including images of the person speaking (woman, upper-class person), the relationship of speaker to interlocutor (formality, politeness), the conduct of social practices (religious, literary, or scientific activity). They hint at the existence of cultural models of speech—a metapragmatic classification of discourse types—linking speech repertoires to typifications of actor, relationship and conduct. This is the space of register variation conceived in intuitive terms. (Agha 2007b, 145)

Most examples of enregisterment diagram various forms of social stratification along lines of gender, class, and other modes of hierarchy. In their work, Susan Frekko (2009) and Kathryn Woolard et al. (2014) have provided canonical examples of enregisterment among Catalan speakers in Catalonia. Rarely, however, do studies of enregisterment engage the question of racial stratification in contexts of encounter that transcend conventionally defined speech communities in an engagement with the west or western modernity. Additionally, race—in a non-western setting, among non-whites, and through its mediation via English—is indeed an unusual case for examining enregisterment. The exploration of enregisterment in such a context, however, has important implications for demonstrating key conceptual interventions of black feminist theories of race and gender intersectionality beyond the English-speaking settler colonial realm.² Up until now, canonical case studies of intersectionality have been made primarily in western contexts or interactions more overtly framed within the rubric of “the west and its others.” Enregisterment—in this way—becomes a way of expanding the range of intersectional critique into the discourse of third-world histories and the contemporary encounters they mediate and are mediated through. Unlike gendered and classed terms, like those presented by Agha, racialized non-western, non-white encounters do not imbricate conventionalized modes of address between variously raced people in English-speaking societies where white subjectivity mediates racism. Everyday gendered and classed terms of address can be conventionalized through (nonetheless contradictory) arguments that posit the simultaneous “reality” of differences, while at the same time suggesting that they are “canceled-out” by the equal opportunity promise of long-term social reform where “things are always getting better” for women and the working class.

Race, in contrast, begins with its nonrecognition, given the ways in which English-speaking, “liberal” societies tend to treat nonracialism as their politically correct default (Erkens and Kane-Berman 2000; Mills 2017)—where race is problematically argued to be logically arbitrary, and therefore ontologically non-existent. Thus, the experience of racism for those who have it (non-whites), becomes an absurdity or illogical tragedy to those that don’t have a race (whites). For this reason, conversations where different societies and language communities can be enregistered according to different gender norms cannot be broached in terms of the enregisterment of different societies’ racialization norms. This is why non-whites, in making use of the English language, could never invoke the hierarchies of white racism toward whites, anywhere.

This raises a second enregisterment concern—its emergence among non-whites in a non-western encounter. Why do global, multilingual non-whites play by the rules (or feel they are expected to) of English PC? If Lili racially insults Adam, he can—within limits—return the insult with equal and possibly more devastating effect. Neither of them, however, could ever really turn the racism tables on Tim, who occupies an unassailable higher ground on the aspirational landscape of the white, cosmopolitan Anglosphere. Their best chance of offense, although landing with little effect as long as Tim plays by the same PC rules, is to name him a racist. Here, I propose that Adam and Lili’s encounter—and indeed other Sino-African interactions in Beijing—certainly fall beyond the conventional sites of enregisterment, but in ways that suggest a more flexible conception of the “boundedness” of speech communities. Analyzing interrelated, but not parallel, racialized and gendered stratifications beyond nation-state or monolingual speech community necessitates an approach that both situates their intersectionality through the encounter, while simultaneously attending to intersectionality’s contextualizing historical and material conditions. Here, Frantz Fanon and other postcolonial thinkers’ transnational and transhistorical analyses of intersectional stratification become an important theoretical resource.

As suggested so far, the *translation* of difference (or sameness)—in this case, the contradictions manifested in the related racial and gender stratification of a non-western encounter—must account for an intersubjective space-time or chronotope within which this ordering can unfold: an intersectional order. In contextualizing interactions like those of Adam and Lili, Frantz Fanon—in his *Black Skins, White Masks* (2008)—drew attention to two chronotopes of stratification: “The Woman of Color and the White Man,” and “The Man of Color and the White Woman.”

These two figures are key psychoanalytic protagonists in Fanon’s analysis of the colonial encounter and its postcolonial reiteration. As ambiguous formations that problematize simplistic colonial binaries, they become ideal examples to depict latent postcolonial asymmetries even where these seem to be occluded by the appearance of the “progressive” multiracial couple. Adam, Tim, and Lili’s interactions take this latency a step further in providing a contradictory insight

concerning the relationship between the raced signs of whiteness and non-whiteness in the Sino-African encounter. In the first instance, we can understand Adam as linguistically adopting a kind of whiteness both by playing a civilizing role in Lili's life at the beginning of her educational life in Beijing, as well as retrospectively through her later co-presence with Tim. Ironically, this co-presence also blackens Adam by virtue of him initially being rejected, and later voicing jealousy at the position occupied by Tim at the party. Lili, in contrast, appears to become Fanon's woman of color at different points during her move from the relationship with Adam to one with Tim. Paradoxically, her co-presence with Tim also retrospectively whitens her in relation to Adam through her negation of their prior relationship, and simultaneously remakes Adam into Fanon's dialectical black man to the white(ned) woman. From this perspective, it may even be possible to construe Adam's act of revenge at the party as a way to recapture his now retrospectively lost whiteness by underlining Lili's incapacity to live up to it.

These interactionally emergent potentials reveal a key contradiction. Adam and Lili, by virtue of Tim's presence, seem to oscillate in their capacity to occupy racialized positions vis-à-vis one another. This occurs through their transforming temporal trajectories and social alignments as Lili ascends an ideological updraft while Adam plunges down into the turbulence left in its wake. Tim's position of whiteness, by contrast, seems firmly entrenched. Their fluid versus his entrenched relations are strangely at odds with the marked versus unmarked positions they respectively occupy in American or British Commonwealth racial imaginaries (Frankenberg 2001; Gilroy 1992; Hage 2000). Whiteness, masked as political correctness, emerges again as unassailable, leaving its others in a precarious and perspectival position: Lili, like Fanon's Mayotte, aspires to drink the milk that will make her and her children whiter (Fanon [1952] 2008, 29). But how might whiteness emerge when Tim is not present?

In 2016, a Chinese detergent commercial went viral in and beyond China. The American news network CNN was one of the first to pick up on the story. Their online US edition concisely depicted the commercial with an abbreviated vignette: "A black man and a Chinese woman are flirting, as he leans in for a kiss she thrusts a detergent capsule in his mouth and bundles him into a laundry machine. She sits atop the washing machine as the man screams inside until, to her apparent delight, out pops a Chinese man dressed in a clean, white t-shirt."³ The commercial was for a Chinese detergent brand, Qiaobi, and was released near the conclusion of my fieldwork. At the time, I did not realize that its circulation and subsequent discussion would become a key impetus for the concerns discussed in this book.

Almost immediately after the ad hit, I noted how my African informants and compatriots in China, as well as many Chinese classmates and colleagues, followed and shared the ad on Chinese social media platforms like Weibo and WeChat. They, along with many others, were in agreement that the reason for the commercial's controversy and related virality lay in its apparent racist content.

However—and for reasons that will become clear—not all of my informants believed that the Chinese ad producers were racist. The authors of the CNN article, James Griffith and Shen Lu, described the content of the commercial as “staggeringly racist,” but also noted that: “The ad isn’t even original. . . . It seemingly rips-off a similar, also offensive, Italian advert, in which a slim Italian man is washed with ‘color’ detergent and emerges as a muscular black man with the slogan ‘color is better.’”

Indeed, Qiaobi was referencing an Italian commercial for another detergent, *Coloreria Italiana*, which had aired ten years before (in 2006)—complete with the same soundtrack—although, at the time, with far less western media outrage over its content. The outraged virality over the Qiaobi ad appeared to retrospectively infect *Coloreria Italiana* in almost a parody of Walter Benjamin’s (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) famous argument that “copies” of aesthetic objects constitute their “originality.” Italians and Chinese were not only equally racist, Chinese racism was an “inauthentic” copy of its Italian original. For instance, in the days following the airing of the Qiaobi commercial, the UK-based online newspaper, *Daily Mail*, ran the headline: “You thought the Chinese advert was racist . . . wait until you see the Italian ad that inspired it,” along with its own terse vignette: “The advertisement starts with a wife loading up the laundry before her skinny white husband walks in wearing only socks and his underwear. She beckons him over with a smile before shoving him into the washing machine. Trapping the man inside she sits on top of the device until the cycle is complete. At the end of the wash, her husband has been completely transformed. A large burly black man is unveiled and rises up to flex his muscles, the [white] woman looking mighty impressed.”⁴

Contemporary media representations of black subjects in China certainly do not celebrate the comradeship of a nonaligned, third-world solidary past. However, the prevalence of references to blackness, like those in the Qiaobi commercial, continue to generate an important question among internationally aware African and Chinese students in China: “Can Chinese be racist?” While most of my African and Chinese interlocutors answered in the affirmative during numerous debates in Chinese and African social media circles, a few had critical reservations concerning the capacity to return insult: “Can Africans be racist back?” For this minority of Chinese and African students, racism had a more ideological, meta-semiotic function. For them, and indeed many thinkers of the critical race theory canon, racism generates an unassailable inequality and a unidirectional communicability: “How could you ever racially insult a real flesh-and-blood white man, other than calling him a racist?” This question was voiced by various Chinese and African informants. “As for Chinese, you can always laugh at them, even when they think they are white,” noted others (also both African and Chinese students). For these informants, racism produces an impossibility of insulting the inhabitant of whiteness, which stands as the only genuine position from which racism matters. One informant, Daniel Masuka, who first introduced himself by telling me

that I would only remember his English name, rhetorically asked: “If we can all be racist to each other, then why would racism matter?” Some informants like Daniel were former victims of inter-African xenophobia in countries like South Africa. For them, genocide and other forms of identity-based violence were certainly violent and terrifying, but they were not the same as racism, which belonged to a very different cultural, historical, and ideological order of experience.

In fact, for some, structural and other forms of racism were either inevitable or, in the case of Daniel, “acceptable” compared to the trauma of xenophobic violence. His reference point, as a Zimbabwean, was the memory of his time as a student in Johannesburg, South Africa, and the ongoing experiences of his working-class compatriots who were still there. This was by no means a valorization of racism, far from it, but rather a testament to an enduring, transnational ideological condition that is so compromised that even in recognizing its contours there is no way out of its stratifying grip. In this reading of racism, whiteness stood as a condition of value that non-white Beijing informants found themselves marked in relation to, even when no white bodies were physically present. This was because unmarked whiteness, as I will argue, was still the privileged category of cosmopolitan mobility and the assumed point of articulation for standard English or its received pronunciation (RP)—what I will reveal to be the motivating factors of mobility and educational desire.

Perhaps in China, as the Qiaobi commercial suggests, Chinese men might become white enough one day, but that destiny still appears to be very much deferred for educated, aspirationally cosmopolitan black subjects like Adam. For he—unlike Fanon’s recruitment of the fictional character Jean Veneuse—*does* know his race and has a pragmatic understanding of how whites (and aspiring Chinese) understand him (Fanon [1952] 2008: 46).

There are, however, varying registers of whiteness that might play a role in stratifications beyond Lili and Adam’s encounter. In what follows, I will reveal how a similarly complex enregisterment around English and whiteness can occur fractally among Beijing’s South African community of students. Here, whiteness still emerges as the apex of stratification, but with social and historical co(n)texts particular to one community of students—where the South African historical relationship to a linguistic register termed Model C English facilitates a more general intersectional stratification in relation to PC English, reiterating the relationship between signs of whiteness and English PC depicted in Lili and Adam’s encounter. I would like to qualify that Model C enregisterment—while being specific to the context of South Africa and South African students—does have its analogs among other African students in Beijing. Due to my close familiarity with the particular context of Model C, being a product of the educational horizon it imbricates, I will focus on explicating the relationship between Model C and the wider context of English’s raciolinguistic stratification in Sino-African encounters. In future analyses, by myself or others, I am certain that analogs of this enregistered

stratification of whiteness, at different scales and within different communities, can be excavated.

ENREGISTERING MODEL C AND PC

For Lerato (see chapter 2) and many other South African students in Beijing, there is an opposition between black vernacular Englishes and elite Model C English. In her analysis of the cultural capital of certain English accents in a South African educational context, Kerryn Dixon provides a fairly standard definition of the Model C accent as follows: “Speaking with a ‘White’ [South African] English accent is seen to be ideal—and the students who speak fluent English without the intonations of African languages are often referred to as having a ‘Model C accent’” (2011, 81). Animating the notion of Model C is an unmarked, hierarchical, standard version of English, which comes to mark black African bodies who speak with it. In the context of certain encounters, it is difficult to separate Model C from the figure of the coconut—“someone who is dark on the outside but white on the inside”—as an icon of personhood (Carr 2011) that is the inhabitant of the Model C accent. This co-presence is key since a white subject can’t have a Model C accent, even if they had acquired it in the same place. In the past, it has often been used as an insult to distinguish between elite, compromised blackness with its co-presence to, and reliance on, whiteness, and authentic blackness marked by a vernacular accent. In recent times, however, coconut has been positively appropriated by many black elite South African media commentators and academics like Eusebius McKaiser and Panashe Chigumadzi. In articulating this choice Chigumadzi states:

I’ve chosen to appropriate the term and self-identify as a coconut because I believe it offers an opportunity for refusal. It’s an act of problematizing myself—and others—within the landscape of South Africa as part of the black middle class that is supposed to be the buffer against more “radical elements.” Instead of becoming the trusted mediators between black and white, we are now turning to conceptions of blackness and mobilizing anger at the very concept of the rainbow nation. The fantasy of a color-blind, post-racial South Africa has been projected onto us coconuts, but our lived experiences are far from free of racism. (2015)

McKaiser, reflecting a similar political alignment, but with a close attention to the language-based dimensions of the lived experience of being a coconut in post-apartheid South Africa, writes the following in an article titled *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being*:

Hi. My name is Eusebius. And I am fluent in the grammar of whiteness. I am such a clever black that as a scrawny little boy—hey wena, no one is born with an mkhaba! I really was scrawny once—I quickly learnt the grammar of whiteness. I remember practising “bru” in a sentence, followed by other gems such as “sarmie,” “dos” and “oke.” If you don’t know these words, I pity you. You are doomed. Kiss upward

mobility goodbye, baba. The grammar of whiteness is key to doing well in corporate South Africa. You must sound like the chief executive's son, not the chief executive's maid's son. You catch my coconut drift? I am multilingual like that—Afrikaans, English, a wee bit of Xhosa (on a good day), and a whole whack of whiteness. That is why I, how do they put it, “fit in everywhere.” (2013)

White grammar, as McKaiser terms it, is the condition of possibility—among elite non-white, non-Anglo South Africans—for “fitting in anywhere.” In part, the article was widely understood and cited—even on Anglophone African social media in Beijing—as an attempt at provincializing whiteness. McKaiser textually attempts to do this not only through his use of Zulu expressions like *mkhaba*—contextually denoting the acquisition of a “beer belly” or “bloated stomach”—as a moment of self-deprecation directed toward mostly black, specifically Xhosa-speaking readers familiar with the term. He also does so through his disparaging contextualizations of white South African English terms like *bru* (“buddy”), *oke* (“dude”), *sarmie* (“sandwich”), and *dos* (“to take a nap”). McKaiser simultaneously does this through linguistic inclusion—of a black-aligned audience—and exclusion of a white audience ignorant of *mkhaba*. However, McKaiser also points to the limits of this provincialization in that the white South African English terms require no translation for their black interlocutors, while the inverse is not the case when it comes to a term like *mkhaba*.

For elites like Chigumadzi and McKaiser, Model C has an additional function within the communities that would otherwise undermine a so-called coconut's lack of black authenticity and capacity to speak. Within communities and interactions where a white space-time is assumed to be absent, and where McKaiser and Chigumadzi's arguments are cited—like that of the elite Southern African student community in Beijing—the emergence of Model C can often become a gendered talisman against such discrimination by virtue of its association with an inter-social chronotope of de-racialized or rational political correctness (Bakhtin 1981; Agha 2007a). In contestation of encounters where black authenticity is brought into conflict with an adherence to white normativity—often under the guise of a “modernity versus tradition” dispute—such a chronotope of rational political correctness can quickly become activated through the invocation of a Model C register. In what now follows, I will show how one such encounter plays out when decontextualized from a “typically South African” theater of media reception.

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF A MEME

Given many South African students' access to a black social media sphere in Beijing, popular memes that emerge in the South African media context—which certainly do not end at the nation-state's borders—are quickly circulated among African students from a number of different African countries. One such popular meme was Ziright iGirls. As with most social media memes, Ziright iGirls

began its life prior to its mass-circulation, but through that circulation came to transform its meanings. It is commonly pronounced and spelled “ziright iighels” by a number of South African Xhosa speakers, although the spelling “ziRight iGals” has also become a popular alternative, following the wide circulation of a South African house music track by the same name—performed by Euphonik and Bekzin Terris, featuring author Khaya Dlanga.⁵ One informant and South African black social media expert, Z, explained its prior contextualization as a term usually used when “young, or older, [Xhosa] men will go enquire if the women still have enough alcohol to drink by asking *ziright iighels*, which means: ‘are the girls alright?’”

As a meme, however, Ziright iGirls began going viral when fast-food chain Nando’s picked up on the expression as it was being used on South African social media and referenced it in an advertising campaign under the slogan *Zisela ntoni igirls?* or “What would the girls like?” This sparked a mass appropriation of both expressions in situations outside of the Xhosa-specific contextualization within a matrilineal kinship and gendered-language world. As a result, its appropriation often came to be denounced as patriarchal, patronizing, and sexist among many (including many South Africans) who were unaware of its Xhosa-specific contextualization. This, however, did not hinder its popularity and further circulation among a Pan-African student community—like that in Beijing—attuned to the South African “Tweetersphere.” The absurdity of this circulation came to a head during a casual soccer game in Beijing between two groups of African students.

Azania United is a group of soccer players from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Botswana, Madagascar, and other Southern African countries. During my fieldwork, I was a regular member of the team, and played on defense, most likely because of my poor footwork, although—according to one of the senior players—my selection was based on an ethnic stereotype: “I like the aggression of you rugby-playing Boers.” On one particular occasion, we were playing against a combined team of predominantly African students from Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire (including two Koreans and one Fijian to make up their numbers). One or two of our opponents were classmates who had regular interaction with the Southern Africans and thus there was a good deal of friendly banter between the two teams, despite a fierce competition within Beijing’s African University Student League. A group of Azania United’s female supporters—mostly from South Africa—were standing behind our goalposts. Early in the game, one of our opponents broke through the middle and scored a spectacular goal in the top left-hand corner of Azania United’s goal posts (this may or may not have been partly my fault). The goal scorer, however, rushed toward the group of girls in celebration yelling *Ziright iGirls?* in what was clearly an abrasively French accent. The addressees of this inquiry were at first dumbstruck, but confusion quickly gave way to hilarity as the addressor’s intent became apparent. Following the laughter, the latter sheepishly rejoined his team for a more collective celebration. Not all invocations of *Ziright iGirls*, however, are met with the same hilarity.

During an argument on the social media forum Azanian Students in China (ASIC), *Ziright iGirls* reared its head once more. One black female member—Comrade Y—was making a politically charged argument about the #RhodesMustFall protests taking place in South Africa: “We must oppose violent means of protest at all cost. . . . It plays into the hands of our oppressors.” This was endorsed by two other female students on the forum. At that moment, another black male participant—Comrade X—entered the fray stating “*Ziright iGirls?*” The female members immediately turned on him in English, accusing him of being “patronizing” as well as “sexist.” Seeing this exchange, I privately contacted Comrade X—who was one of my teammates—and asked whether he thought he was guilty of the charges laid against him. His response—stated in a heavy Zulu accent—was that “This Oprah [Winfrey], PC thing is a problem. Take away the Model C shine and the story is very different.” Here, Comrade X not only draws a link between PC—as a very general, English discursive *type*—and Model C—as a specific *token* of phonolexical speech. He also suggests that these discursive formations—as sign sets—work together in blocking him from getting his meaning across. Thus, by way of unifying these sign sets, he invokes the figure of Oprah Winfrey as a distilled archetype—or icon of personhood—transferrable across the potentially divergent chronotopes that PC and Model C might otherwise index. In doing so, Comrade X generates a third space-time (with Oprah Winfrey as a mediator) within which PC and Model C operate very much like Weberian elective affinities—in that they reinforce and constitute Oprah Winfrey as the ideal type of modern, cosmopolitan black femininity.

Here, and in other instances that will follow, we see Oprah Winfrey emerge as an unwanted (or perhaps even dystopian) icon under which a particular brand of metadiscursive encoding (Urban 1996) is perceived as regulating appropriate PC behavior in the register of Model C, which has now become unmoored from its South African context. In this sense, Comrade X is modeling one of Slavoj Žižek’s (1989) observations concerning the nature of ideology: that ideology operates less because we believe it than because we believe others do. Comrade X judges himself as being critical of the relationship between PC and Model C in regulating the signs of value available to Africans in the world. However, he is also fully aware that knowing this and recognizing its conduits—in this case, Oprah Winfrey—does nothing to change the ideological gravity of the world within which black Africans stake out a legibility even among one another. In light of this observation, the question emerges: Does Oprah Winfrey have any challengers?

OPRAH GIRLS AND TREVOR NOAH BOYS

After Adam and Lili’s fallout (discussed at the beginning of the chapter), Adam and I chatted over a small pile of Portuguese egg tarts that can be bought for a bargain at any Chinese KFC. The topic of discussion predictably centered around racism in China, after which Adam—washing down a final egg tart with a gulp of Pepsi Cola—concluded in mock melodrama: “Ah, you know, sometimes, you want

to explain to [Chinese] people why things are racist, but then, *you look into their eyes and you realize . . . there's no hope.*" The last phrase was a direct quote from South African comedian Trevor Noah's portrayal of an encounter with a white American Californian girl who had asked Noah if he "had ever had AIDS" in his 2012 stand-up show, *That's Racist*.⁶

It is frustration at the inescapable inevitability of race that perhaps prompts Adam to invoke Trevor Noah's figure at the KFC that night. Voicing Trevor Noah as an icon of personhood appears to momentarily provide an escape from the space-time of dead-end inevitabilities masked by the language of "rational," "nongendered," "nonracialized" egalitarianism. Here, mirroring Noah indexes a streetwise worldliness that can quickly transform both universalizing political correctness and Beijing's more predictable street racisms into the kind of farce that the sassy anti-politically correct, stoic male Afropolitan can always rise above. However, as will become apparent, committing explicitly to Trevor Noah as a mass-mediated icon of personhood, and implicitly to what Noah is not, engenders its own limitations.

"*These fucking Oprah girls, they come to Beijing, only hang out among themselves, then they get all pissed off when their boyfriends want to date other girls. Then, when they get ditched, they go and sleep with their ex-boyfriend's best friends. It's lame, bro.*" South African student Edlulayo "Ed" Zuma said this to me when commenting on African girls in Beijing's student community and their incapacity to move—romantically speaking—beyond relationships with African men. The "Oprah girls" comment was provoked by an ex-girlfriend "bombing" him with messages on WeChat accusing him—in English rather than Zulu which they both speak—of "male insecurity," "internalizing his problems," and "not sharing his feelings." As we sat in his shabby dorm room eating *pap* (a South African maize porridge) while he continued to engage with his ex's WeChat messages, his roommate walked in, stole a glance at Edlulayo's exasperated texting, and commented in his French accent: "How is Oprah Winfrey?"

The person referred to as Oprah Winfrey in this conversation is one of the members of Azanian Achievers (from the previous chapter), who herself began to feel socially alienated and made a choice to withdraw from community gatherings—soccer matches, parties, and cultural days organized among African students in Beijing—to focus her energies on projects like Purple Cow and Miriam Bakgatla's organization. She was about to graduate and return to her country to take up a government job. Hers is a prominent pattern among talented black female students in Beijing, who—with exceptions like their mentor, Miriam—find the environment fairly hostile and usually end up returning to their home countries to try and take up government or private sector posts with little possibility of travel, and seldom recognizing their China-Africa expertise. While in Beijing, once they commit to styling themselves "professionally"—that is, with Model C English accents and formal "business language"—male students like Edlulayo refer to them as Oprah Winfrey girls. "They constantly want to go Doctor Phil on

you . . . *how's that working out for you?*" (voiced in a mock American accent). To be sure, this is not the Oprah Winfrey of black, everyday female empowerment as has been both invoked and critiqued in the media context of the United States (Epstein and Steinberg 1995; Wallace 1992). Rather, it emerges in its Anglophone African guise as a negative figure of personhood that stands for a naïve commitment to western-centric white political correctness, which for many of my informants is at best idealistic, and more commonly, out of kilter with the jaded expectations of many aspirational black postcolonial subjects. This perception certainly has much to do with Oprah's bad press in South Africa, following the media scandals around her leadership academy in Soweto (Hughes 2011; Stephey 2011). However, this is also part of a more complex denigration of the Oprah brand by a number of prominent African media personalities—notably, Trevor Noah. In what follows, I aim to analyze the process by which Oprah Winfrey becomes a negative icon of personhood via her recruitment into an oppositional role to the Trevor Noah icon of personhood.

Media historian Jim Pines (1992), and subsequently others (Torres 1998; Leonard and Guerrero 2013), have noted how—like in the United States—black experience in Britain was initially constituted from the perspective of a white media context of reception. The picture Pines describes is one in which “the stridently liberal position vis-à-vis white responses to black presence in Britain” becomes increasingly assumed in media representations of racial relations. As Pines unsurprisingly notes, this white liberal position “had precious little impact on overall institutional thinking and practice” within the mass-mediated default of white Britain, in spite of its diversity (1992, 10). This observation in the British mass-media context mirrors the arguments of a genealogy of critical race theorists like Paul Gilroy (1993), Anthony Kwame Appiah (1992), Charles Mills (1998), Frantz Fanon (2008 [1952]), and notably Steve Biko (2002); the latter was quite explicit in denouncing this liberal white position prior to his death in 1977:

A game at which the liberals have become masters is that of deliberate evasiveness. The question often comes up “what can you do?” If you ask him to do something like stopping to use segregated facilities or dropping out of varsity to work at menial jobs like all blacks or defying and denouncing all provisions that make him privileged, you always get the answer—“but that's unrealistic!” While this may be true, it only serves to illustrate the fact that no matter what a white man does, the colour of his skin—his passport to privilege—will always put him miles ahead of the black men. Thus, in the ultimate analysis, no white person can escape being part of the oppressor camp. (Biko 2002, 22)

Making clear that implicit white liberalism always entails an explicit compromise, Biko mirrors Fanon (2008 [1952]), and subsequently Achille Mbembe's (2001) critiques, in reflecting how there is no “outside” to the black-white dynamic that stages and restages the colonial-apartheid complex. It is through the vortex-like

force of this regulating chronotope, that—these thinkers have suggested—black Africans are “blackened” even among one another. Oprah Winfrey, for comedians like Trevor Noah, embodies this compromise, not through the color of her skin, but through the color of her language and the space-time of utopian, politically correct privilege it activates. This interplay of language and race, however, arises in a curious relationship to the gender asymmetries it diagrams, and through it, Oprah Winfrey becomes a disdained archetype among African students in Beijing. By contrast, the performed figure of Trevor Noah—for African male students—emerges as a more relatable alternative to the icons of personhood represented by the world of the Purple Cow and its not-yet-emerged Purple Giraffe. However, even this commitment has slim hopes of escaping the orbit of the Angloscene.

EVERYBODY’S GETTING A BEATING

Noah’s world, or at least the version of it that emerges among many of my informants, is filled with materials that students in Beijing can make use of to dynamically figure internal divisions and asymmetries.⁷ As suggested earlier, male Sino-Afropolitans quote Trevor Noah far more frequently than their female peers, with men usually voicing themselves as the “Noah-ing” subject in the moment of citation. As such, Noah represents an archetype or icon of personhood that men can far more easily slip into than their female peers. Furthermore, many of these citations are both *directed at* as well as *about* other female African students, or they become resources to depict and conceptualize relationships with Chinese and white foreign students. Here, many of my male African informants used Trevor Noah’s own depictions of his “equal opportunity” sexual exploits to depict their own African, Chinese, and other “cosmopolitan romances”—as one informant put it. Whether these were “fictitious” or otherwise “genuine” depictions of transnational eros, the citation of Trevor Noah’s English-language sound bites seem directed toward verbally cosplaying a desired “efficacy”—in mobile or racial terms—which their “success” in achieving it appears to entail. In what follows, I aim to analyze the citation of one of Trevor Noah’s well-circulated comedy routines, and how its invocation diagrams the contours of a key dimension of the Sino-Afropolitan ethnoscape and its limited contextualization within the Angloscene.

The footballers of Azania United, including myself, stood in a tiny patch of shade next to Lei Feng University’s soccer pitch, gingerly warming up as the searing sun refracted off Beijing’s hazy, polluted summer air. The team—made up mostly of students from Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries—were preparing to face their next opponents in the Beijing inter-African league. As each player for Azania United was given their kit, they donned their yellow shirt and blue pants, rolled-on their white socks, and strapped on their boots. As if magically protected by their Nike and Adidas talismans, the tough

talk soon began in spite of the weather and air quality that promised a harrowing ninety minutes. As I did my best to muster enough energy just to participate in the heat-exhausted banter, I overheard this exchange:

Comrade B: “Eish, we are going to give those Senegalese boys a spanking.”

Comrade C: “No, no, bra . . . we spank the monkey, we are going to beat them.”

Hearing this, I continued: “And because this is the Oprah show, EVERYBODY GETS A BEATING.” At this, the entire group sitting under the tree laughed loudly at what was a direct quote from a widely shared Trevor Noah comedy skit.⁸ I could complete the punch line only because all of us had intimate knowledge of Noah’s comedy routines and social commentary, which are extremely popular among young Africans throughout the world—even more so since Noah became the host of *The Daily Show*. His prominence was apparent among my informants, precisely because his observations, recontextualized in a concentrated African student community in Beijing, capture the absurd—and often satirical—ways in which already complex miscommunications between Africans become even further distorted when resituated more globally. Noah’s routines were constantly shared by Beijing-based African community members who verbally cited, or digitally cut and pasted his YouTube links, if they had access to a VPN (Virtual Private Network) to get around the Chinese firewall. Sometimes his clips were downloaded, copied, and circulated via flash drives or portable hard drives that are exchanged when students gather at social events. It was a common practice, for instance, to bring a media object or shareable data to a sport, music, or drinking event organized among the students. Collective screenings of such materials, some hosted by myself, were also common and reciprocally expected at social gatherings. Trevor Noah features prominently at these events, either explicitly—in the case of viewing one of his routines—or implicitly, where many one-liners from his endlessly circulated skits become ventriloquized. Virtuoso performances become social currency with which to banter about other media materials being shared, or, more commonly, to depict relationships between African students as well as their everyday interactions with Chinese and other foreign interlocutors within Beijing’s increasingly hybrid student community. Such videos are media artifacts that play a key role in imagining “cosmopolitan” identities that are simultaneously “Afrocentric” and “global,” “grassroots” and “cosmopolitan”—self-descriptive keywords and combinations of phrases that are ubiquitously juxtaposed in gatherings among African students. It is important to note, however, that the “global” and the “Afrocentric” only seem to become translatable in measured Model C English. This combination of register and deixis, mediated through tone, vocabulary, and accent, engenders the simultaneous stratification and articulation of relationships between languages, racialized identities, and classes of mobility emergent in Noah’s humor. Furthermore, the ideal signifying

subject of this imagining—the figure of personhood inhabiting Model C English and its associated hierarchies—is far from neutral.

In the exchange between Comrade B, Comrade C, and myself, the Noah joke referenced was from a sketch on Oprah Winfrey’s Soweto-based leadership academy, which was established in 2007. At the time, the school had come under heavy criticism in the South African and international media when reports surfaced, exposing the extreme abuse and implementation of corporal punishment that female students attending Winfrey’s “50-million-dollar” institution had to endure.⁹ Noah noted that the disjuncture between “state-of-the-art facilities” and not state-of-the-art teachers was the result of the fact that Oprah “was not dealing with Brad Pitt” when she was interviewing her school’s prospective teachers. Through an improvised dialogue between Oprah Winfrey and the school’s imagined principal, Noah imagines the dynamics of a hypothetical interview, mimicking Oprah’s accent in contrast with an impersonation of a Soweto-style stereotyping of township English. He exaggerates the latter in particular, most likely because of the predominantly South African audience for *The Daywalker*.

Oprah: You’re not going to spank them are you?

Principal: No, nevah, nevah, no, we can nevah spank a child.

[Noah mimes Winfrey’s departure on an airplane while cheerfully waving goodbye]

Principal: [Speaking township slang and English] *Oprah is right*. No, us, spanking a child? Nevah. We BEAT them. Ja, we BEAT children. Don’t spank a child heh, eh . . . spanking is for playing, you can spank a monkey, spankey, spankey . . . spankey, spankey, monkey, spankey, spankey, ja . . . You can spank a monkey, you don’t spank a child. We BEAT.

Here, Noah contextualizes the expectations of a western liberal education within the setting of a township school with a very different disciplinary outlook. The reception of “spanking” is very different on the parts of Oprah and the school principal—not in terms of what spanking is or whether it is necessary or not, for they both seem to settle on the idea that “you must never spank a child.” Their contextualization, however, makes explicit that their reasons for agreement arise from very different assumptions regarding spanking’s inappropriateness. In creating such scenarios, Noah generates a potential to restage “progressive” globalism within a context that talks back by juxtaposing Oprah’s chronotope with that of the township. For Africans who are abroad—men in particular—Trevor Noah has become a resource for coping with their own contextual challenges by spatio-temporally opening up the possibility of translating a difficult encounter in their own imagined Trevor’s terms. In the same comedy routine, he goes a step further by drawing attention to the way in which this contextualization and recontextualization is a far from even process. He does this by reflecting how, even when

Oprah's liberal educational outlook is resisted by the school principal's alternative interpretation, this resistance nonetheless takes place with and in relation to a theater of evaluation that valorizes the horizon of expectation represented by Oprah's world. In the sequence following the principal's earlier monologue on the distinction between beating and spanking, Noah transports us to an imagined encounter between a student and teacher in Oprah's school:

Teacher: Mavis, did you do your homework?

Mavis: No, Ma'am.

Teacher: Then you are going to get a BEATING . . .

At this moment Noah switches from a township accent to an impersonation of Oprah Winfrey, which suggests that in some way Mavis's teacher has transformed into (or perhaps become possessed by) the ghost of Oprah:

Teacher: . . . but because it's Oprah's school, EVERYBODY'S GETTING ONE. YOU'RE GETTING A BEATING, YOU'RE GETTING A BEATING, YOU'RE GETTING A BEATING . . . EVERYBODY'S GETTING A BEATING . . . LOOK UNDER YOUR SEAT, YOU'RE GETTING A BEATING.

By transforming the time-space from that of a Soweto classroom to a more sinister iteration of Oprah's Chicago West Loop studio—facilitated through his shift in accent—Noah indicates that even the beatings take place within the logics of Oprah's world, imbricating both its horizon of expectation as well as the exclusions facilitated by her brand. Noah himself is only able to momentarily subvert this hierarchy, by himself adopting his default, meta-commentary accent, which is always in well-delivered, Model C English. The invocation of English as a rationalizing register places him—if somewhat precariously—as a translator between Oprah's world and the Soweto school. Here, he is only able to get away with this move because of his self-identification with the category *coloured*.¹⁰ Noah, however, emerges as coloured-but-not-quite through his routines, because even *coloureds*—whom he frequently parodies—come across as a stereotype that he would struggle to “authentically” identify with. As the child of a relationship between a Xhosa woman and Swiss-German man, Noah always situates himself in his comedy as both “born a crime”—given the illegality of interracial relations under the conditions of apartheid during his formative years—and “daywalker”—drawing on the popular culture figure of a black half-human, half-vampire character in the Hollywood franchise *Blade*. This serves to deictically situate him in a familiar, constantly deferred “not-quite” hybrid, and thus an unassailable position from which to deliver his particular brand of comedy. But it is from this position, tellingly, that he is able to rely on a neutral English accent for delivering reflexive punch lines and meta-commentary to the multivoice, multiracial, polyglot scenarios and interactions he depicts. It is also this neutral meta-voice that utters “madness!” in every skit where the concatenation of speech genres and their worlds climax in a

kind of semiotic excess—for it is within the politically correct space-time of the Angloscene that madness's comedic possibilities can reflexively emerge in rational, commonsensical Model C English.

For different African subjects in Beijing, “being Oprah” and “being Trevor Noah” are not only gendered archetypes. They also become foils for mediating the tension between two chronotopes: one the one hand, an unmarked PC—thus, white—space-time, and on the other, a reflexive, sassy, third-world cosmopolitan space-time. Oprah was not a subject position any African female subject would want to inhabit, given its derisive invocation by many of their male peers. Trevor Noah, in contrast, appeared—at times—to be an available, third-world cosmopolitan type—one that allowed for a dignified disalignment from the ironically racializing propensity of English's PC space-time. I say “at times” because Trevor Noah's position as third-world cosmopolitan hero is both highly perspectival and situationally precarious. This is not only given the highly gendered and sexist exclusions this alignment perpetuates, where only male African subjects could aspire to be Trevor. It is also because Trevor Noah's own sassiness is completely contingent on the adoption of a highly rarified English register as the simultaneously rational and rationalizing meta-voice of anti-PC, anti-imperialism, symbolized by the caricatured archetype of Oprah Winfrey in this particular comedy routine.

I would argue that neither Trevor Noah nor Oprah could be racists even if they were to hold racist views and engage in racial essentialism, because—as generations of critical race theorists have argued—racism is not an equal-opportunity proposition. This does not mean, however, that the gendered and raced invocations of Oprah or Noah—as archetypes—do not enregister racism and racist effects. Similarly, Qiaobi and Lili's racism, discussed at the outset of the chapter, is not commensurate with the racisms of white supremacists in Britain, Europe, or other white settler societies—that is, until Chinese become white enough to be colonial agents. Instead, I have suggested that racist encounters—viewed through the lens of a Fanonian translation—are not only about what is said between interlocutors, nor purely about who those interlocutors are, but—equally importantly—what space-times they are both able to recruit, and are excluded from recruiting, to their interactions. In Sino-African encounters, the question of what racism can be, and who can be racist, remains constrained by its still Anglo-centric medium of translation and English's associated PC theater of evaluation. For this reason, “who can be racist?” remains—at least for now—imbricated in a dialectical interaction that both recruits and constitutes white space-time as its ideological gravity.