



Article

(Re)inspiring Narratives of Resistance: COVID-19, Racisms and Narratives of Hope

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Abstract: In 2020, COVID-19 took many people by surprise, as did the intercontinental waves of protest triggered by the casual racist murder of George Floyd by a US policeman. The years of 2020 and 2021 will undoubtedly be remembered for massive, unexpected disruptions that require new social normalities to be negotiated. These social disruptions were triggered by unexpected viral pandemics and viral video footage. Yet they built on already existing, entrenched inequities marked by the intersections of racialisation/ethnicisation, social class and gender. It was common, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, for politicians and commentators to espouse a narrative that COVID-19 “does not discriminate”. This is, of course, true. However, the research analyses that followed showed that both COVID-19, and the measures taken to arrest it, exacerbated already existing social inequalities. This paper draws on two narratives of the racialized impact of COVID-19 to examine the ways in which the authors mobilise intertextual narratives to protest against racism and call for resistance to the racisms they identify. The paper argues that, while the authors do not overtly position themselves as calling for change, their narratives are crafted in ways that resist current constructions of their racialized or religious groups.

Keywords: intersectionality; narratives; COVID-19; racialization/ethnicization; positioning; hope; resistance; intertextuality

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1. Introduction

*I heard that we are in the same boat.**But it's not that.**We are in the same storm, but not in the same boat.**Your ship can be shipwrecked and mine might not be.**Or vice versa . . .*

Damian Barr 21 April 2020

The global COVID-19 pandemic and the US murder of George Floyd have both provoked many impassioned personal narratives. COVID-19 took many people by surprise, forcing dramatic change to their everyday practices and their future horizons in unexpected ways. The shock of a pandemic was compounded for many by the recognition that, across continents, COVID-19 was much more likely to kill those living in poverty and densely populated housing and those from minoritised ethnic groups (Bowleg 2020; Maestriperi 2021; Nazroo and Bécars 2021). It was a period when the narratives of everyday life were disrupted and new narratives had to be forged. The international waves of Black Lives Matter protest triggered by the video footage of the casual racist murder of George Floyd by a US policeman were partly stimulated because it occurred during the pandemic, when many people around the globe learned of it while confined to home. As with the pandemic, it also required new social norms to be negotiated and stimulated holistic thinking about the breadth of inequities that are part of racist oppression. Together, the local and global inequalities exposed by COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement

have foregrounded the urgency of the fight for social justice. Both sets of events illuminated already-existing inequities marked by the intersections of racialisation/ethnicisation, social class and gender (Luttrell 2020). The demonstrations for Black Lives Matter and the toppling of various statues of enslavers and colonialists in several countries galvanised many people into social action and many businesses and universities into public responses. As is common with events that stimulate action and discussion because they highlight inequities, public discussion, and to some extent, commitment to change, have faded as the shock has receded. However, the recognition given by the media to the inequities they underline mean that numerous narratives have been produced in the service of social justice.

Since COVID-19 produced dramatic ruptures in everyday life for many people and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter also shifted many people's perspectives (Phoenix et al. 2020), it is not surprising that they also produced a range of personal and other narratives. As Bradbury (this volume) argues, "the experience of the pandemic has released and mobilised new forms of resistance". Dramatic disjunctions between canonical narratives (the ways in which it is expected life will be lived in a culture, Bruner 1990), and the lives that are actually being lived (Riessman 2008) are likely to stimulate the production of new narratives. As Cathy Riessman (2020) shows, biographical disruptions stimulate the narratives people produce and allow researchers insights into the social context in which they are produced. Riessman (2020, p. 122) suggests that:

"A promising development in the field is the range of human problems now subjected to a narrative lens. The massive upheavals of migration in Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping the world, and Black Lives Matter movements call out for documentation and study. This is a very different moment in history ... the scale of disruptions today is huge ... "

It is, therefore, not surprising that there has been a plethora of narratives, personal, journalistic and academic, in a variety of sites, which protest against the injustice of inequities and call for new social arrangements. If successful, these "narratives of resistance" can play an important part in holding up to scrutiny the lived experiences of injustice, bringing together the personal and the structural. They can also contribute to shifts in values and understanding if they gain support (Anciano and Wheeler 2021). Narrative resistance resists the kind of storying that (re)produces negative constructions of minoritised groups and (implicitly) maintains oppressive power (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance 2017; Sylvester 2019). Instead, it resists both everyday and political oppression, as well as racist, sexist and homophobic ideology (Burnett 2014). It can be used to articulate collective values in relation to social justice, showing how individual trauma is part of collective and political experience (Anciano and Wheeler 2021). It is striking that both COVID-19 and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter brought together new collectivities across socially constructed borders of racialisation, gender and social class. Anciano and Wheeler (2021, p. 18) suggest that it is the

"reframing of dominant narratives through a counter-story that leads to its inclusion in the justice and political system. This dynamic is part of the prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement. New narratives and counter-narratives hold the potential to provide systematic social justice."

Resistance narratives, therefore, implicitly or explicitly encompass "counter narratives" which, as Molly Andrews has pointed out, counter the dominant master narratives circulating in society and "offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives" (Andrews 2004, p. 1). They are also narratives of hope in that a major motive for resistance is to stake claims to improving conditions and society. They are, however, far from simple in that the contestation they entail involves difficult relations and runs the risk of failure (Squire, this volume).

This paper draws on two written narratives, one from a British writer (although published in a US fashion magazine) and the other in a popular online shortform academic

publication by a Canadian writer. They have been selected as examples that function simultaneously as insider resistance narratives, tell a broader and more academic story, and give insights into how resistance narratives are produced in different ways, in the first case as a contextualized and historicised personal narrative and in the second as a focused, academic argument. They discuss the historical and/or more general issues for people in their ethnicised and/or religious categories, rather than just themselves. Both bring oppressive relations that are not widely known to public attention. Together, they offer possibilities for the analysis of the nature and the performativity of resistance narratives and how they aim to build collective responses that can help to move the political system towards social justice (Anciano and Wheeler 2021). Both focus on COVID-19 but, in talking about racism, draw on the themes and tropes made available by public discussions inspired by the resurgence of Black Lives Matter. As written accounts, they are reflective and present narratives that the authors have had a chance to rework as they wish, rather than stories that are developed as they speak.

Both narratives examine how the dramatic, unexpected and transformational events of COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd have inspired and re-inspired pain, anger and narratives of resistance to the inequities they have exposed. The paper argues that they have produced new political narratives that can inspire hope and new social understandings. It first discusses the importance of narratives to producing resistance and the place of hope in such narratives. The third, main part of the paper analyses the two sets of written narratives to discuss ways in which the conjunctions of 2020 and 2021 proved transformational in inspiring the production of (new) narratives of political resistance, impelling some people to campaign (in very different ways) for change towards greater equity and social justice. The chapter argues that the complex reasons that impelled these narratives include hope for “liveable” futures (Butler 2004).

2. Narrative Futures and Hope

There is multidisciplinary agreement that understanding events, the world and our position in it, the past, present and future all require storying (Meretoja 2022; Nelson and Fivush 2020). The stories we tell ourselves and other people help to craft our identities and so narratives enable people to engage in particular social and political actions (Polletta and Chen 2012; Riessman 2002). The power of narratives lie in their construction and presentation of meanings, the explanations they give and imply and the characters they include as relevant or omit. Transformation and change thus require shifts in the stories we tell, a process that happens over time, but one that can be precipitated by events. Andrews (2014, p. 1) suggests that “narrative and imagination are integrally tied to one another” and that the importance of narrative imagination cannot be overstated for “our elevated thoughts about the world as it might be, but also in the very minutiae of our daily lives”. Andrews shows that political action and desires to reach a particular future involve acts of narrative imagination in the everyday, whether or not the imagined futures are realised.

Transformation and the stories we tell are, therefore, inextricably linked and stories change the lives of societies and individuals in unanticipated ways. This is because personal identities are inextricably linked with sociostructural and cultural norms and contexts. A good example is provided by a study conducted by Ruthellen Josselson (2009) in which she followed nineteen women in the USA over a period of 46 years. An important finding was that the stories the women told changed in relation to what was happening in their lives when they were interviewed and how society had changed. “Maria”, for example, who came from an Italian American family, repeatedly recounted the narrative of a serious relationship she had in her twenties with a young African American man. However, over time she reshaped the story. As Josselson (2009) shows, the meanings she derived are temporally situated as products of their time, and relational. Different meanings were made possible by personal and social changes. This very much fits with Bruner’s (1990) notion that the individual story is also the story of the culture. As Bradbury (2020, p. 19) suggests, “[an] individual life history is entwined with the wider historical processes of

our collective life and the narrative self is never disconnected from the narratives of others, past, present and future”.

We come to understand our identities by hearing ourselves tell stories to different people (or writing them), hearing their stories about us and telling ourselves stories designed to make sense of our lives. This indicates the process by which Stuart Hall’s (Hall and Gay 1996) notion that identities are about becoming as well as being, becomes relevant and links identities with the contention of many narrative scholars that narratives are stories told in the present, about the past, in anticipation of the future (Elliott 2005). As the US linguistic anthropologist Ochs (1994) suggests, some conversational stories “step into the future”. The stories we tell always have political implications and, as powerfully persuasive rhetorical devices, can mobilise future action (Polletta and Chen 2012).

The power and complexity of narrative for mobilizing future action is concisely set out by Mary Chamberlain.

“Memory and narrative are shaped by social categories, by language and priorities, by experience and tense, by choice and context. They are shaped also by imagination, by dreams and nightmares, hopes and fantasies which, however private they may feel, are moulded by culture. We recall past events through present time, and the present always anticipates the future. The past also contained at some stage a future, what might have been and what may yet be.” (Mary Chamberlain 1997, p. 10)

It is perhaps not surprising then that the unexpected transformational conjunctions of COVID-19 and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter produce contestations and show the interlinking of the personal and sociostructural. The destabilization that many people felt led them to produce new understandings of their identities where personal and socio-cultural stories were brought into being in new ways. The conjunction of these events not only led to an outpouring of personal stories, but also to demands to change society and the global world order.

It is here that notions of hope become important, since hope is central to inspiring the production of new narratives and visions that can resist the status quo and make claims to a different future. Paulo Freire (1994), the Brazilian educator and philosopher made hope central to his philosophy and critical pedagogy, but saw hope and struggle as inextricably linked and that hope had to be taught and learned.

“Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope.” (Freire 1994, p. 3)

In keeping with this Rebecca Solnit (2020, p. 5) suggests that political agency requires hope because “[hope] just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope”. This sentiment is commonly expressed by scholars who point out that hope is essential for social change, or even everyday living.

“The more desperate a situation is, the stronger the hope . . . Hope stretches the limits of what is possible. It is linked with that basic trust in life without which we could not get from one day to the next . . . Without this sense of possibility . . . There will be no flourishing. To live by hope is to believe that it is worth taking the next step; that our actions, our families, our cultures and societies have meaning, are worth living and dying for . . . to be without hope is to be trapped. It is to be helpless, to have no sense that it is worth getting out of bed, taking a decision.” (Mary Grey 1999)

In relation to COVID-19, Nesbit-Larking and McCauley (this volume) suggest that, as with any crisis, the pandemic has stimulated future visions and provided opportunities for revitalization and the sense of possibility because of the disjunctive need to do things differently. While, however, hope and the future vision it entails is essential to change, it is

also precarious. Although she was writing three years before COVID-19 came to be widely recognized, Rebecca Solnit seems prescient in suggesting that

“This is an extraordinary time full of vital, transformative movements that could not be foreseen. It’s also a nightmarish time. Full engagement requires the ability to perceive both.” (Rebecca Solnit 2017)

This bipolar conceptualisation of hope cautions against the dangers of romanticising hope and of “over-optimistic excesses” and “naïve possibilitarianism” in order to avoid what Lauren Berlant (2011) called “cruel optimism” in favour of “a justified perseverance of hope” (Meer 2022, p. 130). It is also collective and collaborative work. Meaningful hope, therefore, has to be produced through future-oriented imagination and rooted in the everyday, rather than in an escapist ideology (Back 2015). As Giuliana Mandich (2020, p. 683) put it, hope is “modes of engagement with the future in everyday life” where social action makes the future. Those modes of engagement with the future have to include both axiological commitments to a desired future and hence to hope for the crafting of “liveable lives” (Butler 2004). This recognition of the importance of hope for taking political action towards a future requires the rethinking of social action to conceptualise it as including ways of knowing and imagining social transformation. Hope is, therefore, inextricable from power relations since they shape social phenomena (Collins 2019). It is interlinked with intersectional inequalities since intersectionality is epistemological, and “is a knowledge project whose *raison d’être* lies in its attentiveness to power relations and social inequalities”. For Ghassan Hage (2016) fruitful theorizing of hope entails “modes of imagining one’s own hope with the hope of others and not at their expense. That is, it is an invitation for a politics of co-hoping”. While the notion of co-hoping may seem strange since hope has often been conceptualised in individualised terms, Hage’s invitation makes clear that hoping is collective, political activity that has a social justice morality in that political co-hoping in Hage’s terms is not designed to further the individual’s cause at other people’s expense. Arguably, co-hoping makes it less likely that group hoping will be naïve or over-optimistic.

Given these complexities, contradictions and potential for hope to generate “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011; Meer 2022), it is not surprising that those seeking to make claims to new futures may sometimes avoid direct claims. Both narratives below make logical cases that proleptically function to deflect potential contestation. Both make indirect claims by presenting what are designed to be incontrovertible examples of racist injustice. Their accounts are presented at length since the narratives are developed across several paragraphs and the ways in which they stake their claim is less apparent in short extracts.

3. #StopAsianHate

The extract analysed below comes from an article written by Zing Tseng (2021), a Singaporean-British journalist, author and podcaster who has long lived in the UK. One of the aims was to show that “anti-Asian hate” is as much part of the UK as it is the USA. It was published in Harper’s Bazaar, the oldest American monthly women’s fashion magazine, on 18 March 2021. Tseng entitled it “It’s time we stopped downplaying the UK’s anti-Asian racism”.

“It’s tempting to see this anti-Asian hate as a uniquely contemporary American problem, and that’s how British contributors to the hashtag have tended to position it. But hate crimes against East and South East Asian (ESEA) people have increased in the UK, too. According to the advocacy group End the Virus of Racism, there has been a 300 per cent increase in hate crimes towards people of East and Southeast Asian heritage since the start of the pandemic.”

“In March of last year, Jonathan Mok—a 23-year-old student who, like me, is from Singapore—was assaulted so badly that he required facial surgery. Just last week, a bloody photo of a university lecturer named Peng Wang circulated the internet after he was attacked in Southampton.”

“I feel the same way now as I did watching the videos of Asian-American elders getting assaulted—a queasy drop in my stomach, the sense that I am observing myself through a dark mirror. After years of being systematically underrepresented in mainstream media—when merely spotting a Chinese face on a British TV show would make my mother shout for me to come to the living room—faces like mine are now overrepresented, for all the wrong reasons.”

“This racist hatred is nothing new. Speak to any kid who grew up in an Asian takeaway in the UK and they’ll have tales of their parents fending off drunk, racist customers. Coronavirus has only sharpened this inchoate prejudice and renamed it ‘kung flu’. As far back as World War II, the Home Office conspired with shipping companies in Liverpool on mass deportations of “undesirable” Chinese sailors who were striking for better pay, even after they had served in the British Merchant Navy and started families of their own. As one woman remembered it: “He just went out to the shop, and my mum was waiting for him to come home, and he never came.”

“My theory is that this kind of trauma lingers deep in the roots of a country. The conventional understanding of first-generation immigrants is that they were too focused on building their new lives and didn’t rock the boat. But if the alternative was to speak up and be ripped away from your home, what choice did they have?”

“We exist, but do we matter?” . . . Even today, politicians don’t seem ready to engage with the concerns of the ESEA community—Labour MP Sarah Owen describes seeing other politicians describe Chinese people as “evil bastards” and sharing racist caricatures. 33 per cent of the images used to report on COVID-19 in the UK featured Asian people—even though we all know by now that coronavirus is a disease that afflicts people of all backgrounds. These are all acts of racism, pure and simple, and yet no one has taken responsibility for them.”

“Then there’s the well-known micro-aggressions that grind your anger down into a dull nub. You can spot them coming: there’s always a weird glint in the eye of someone who’s determined to use the word “Oriental”, their awe that you can string a sentence together in basic English; the go-homes and where-are-you-*really*-froms; the stereotyping that sees ESEA men typecast as desexualised geeks and women as fetish objects.”

“I’ve told my friends these stories and laughed it off. Now I wonder if I was complicit in my own silencing. I’ve told the same friends about the racist messages sent to me on social media, about the woman who said “alright, ching chong?” in my face as I got out of Old Street tube, and their reactions change from amusement to horror. I don’t feel as if anything has changed, and yet I know it has. The atmosphere feels different—that familiar prickle of dread is now tinged with fear.”

Tsjeng’s article is resonant of, and intertextual with, with material published for #StopAsianHate, a blog started in 2021 by Medium to chronicle xenophobia and anti-Asian racism in the USA. It was fuelled by the spike in hate crime against people considered to look as if they might be Chinese following the identifying of COVID-19 in China. Its inspiration is overt, gross, racist attacks in the context of COVID-19. However, it is clearly also inspired by the numerous personal narratives produced in 2020 and 2021, mainly by black people in response to the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, but also by allies, about experiences of racism. [Riessman \(2020\)](#) gives pointers to doing analysis in this period.

“In the contemporary period, new and important questions are being asked of narrative segments: who is allowed to talk about their experience? Who is listening? Whose story is valued? Who gains from the research relationship?” ([Riessman 2020](#), p. 122)

The answer to the question of “who is allowed to talk about their experience?” was undoubtedly changed by the unexpected reactions to George Floyd’s murder and the mobilisation by Black Lives Matter, which gave new forms of authorisation to narratives of experiences of racism. Not surprisingly, there was a flood of these in many different media and modes. They produced the Foucault (1977) “conditions of possibility” for Tsjeng to write her narrative of resistance to racism in a traditional, mainstream fashion magazine that might not have been expected to carry such material, and for a wider audience to listen. This is not apparent in Tsjeng’s article because she does not mention Black Lives Matter or George Floyd. However, as Julia Kristeva (1980) explained, all texts are intertextual, shaped by other texts. Writing about experiences of racist attack in 2021, it would be difficult not to be influenced by the many narratives of racism that had been published over the previous twelve months. Indeed, the question “we exist, but do we matter?” apparently alludes to a Black Lives Matter slogan. The fact that many such narratives had been published and taken seriously would give hope that such narratives would also be taken seriously and valued in a way that would not have been possible previously.

The big story that Tsjeng tells is of the longstanding nature of anti-South Asian racism and of its increasing seriousness. The plurality and specificity of different forms of racism has long been identified in academic work (Brah 1996). However, it is an idea that is gaining traction as increasing numbers of people recognise that, for example, hate crimes against those considered Chinese-looking increased enormously in the UK and USA following the identification of COVID-19 in China, but did not increase for other groups (Gray and Hansen 2021). It is not, therefore, that Tsjeng’s narrative discusses racism in general, despite its intertextual relation with Black Lives Matter. Instead, it addresses highly specific examples of racism against South Asians. In order to craft a convincing case, she presents four small stories (Giaxoglou and Georgakopoulou 2021). First, she sets up a context from where she makes an unassailable case that there are real hate crimes against South Asians in the UK. She does this by citing statistical sources and individual cases that exemplify the statistics. The individual cases provide an entry point for her to position herself within the narrative and claim a narrative identity. Her second small story builds credibility by explaining that, like a student who was badly assaulted, she comes from Singapore, before describing her feelings of sickness about seeing videos of “Asian-American elders getting assaulted”. When first she brings in her personal narrative, it is to present herself as an expert witness, an insider. She rounds off the article by bringing herself into the narrative again. This time, she calls in witnesses, her friends, who she explains that she has told stories of the racism she has experienced. Her reported reaction to telling her own stories is that they “laughed it off”. This serves to counter a charge that Tsjeng presumably knows is possible, that she could be accused of over-inflating episodes she recounts. This refusing of implicit charges of over-reaction provides the context for her description of their changed reactions to the current racist messages sent to her on social media and the name calling to which she is subjected. She constructs their changed reactions as validating her conclusion that things are worse and that she now feels a familiar dread together with a new fear of racist attack. This ending helps to underline the big story that constitutes a narrative of resistance to racist attacks against South Asians and implicit hope through claims for opposition to them.

Tsjeng’s third small story is about a normalised absence/pathologised presence (Phoenix 1997) in the representation of Asian Americans. She points out that “After years of being systematically underrepresented in mainstream media—when merely spotting a Chinese face on a British TV show would make my mother shout for me to come to the living room—faces like mine are now overrepresented, for all the wrong reasons.” It is only in discussing representations of Asians that she mentions COVID-19 as producing a pathologised presence, “33 per cent of the images used to report on COVID-19 in the UK featured Asian people—even though we all know by now that coronavirus is a disease that afflicts people of all backgrounds”. She also mentions Orientalist “microaggressions”, the pathologized presence stereotypes of East and South East Asian men and women.

Her fourth small story historically contextualises anti-Asian racist hatred and does so by describing generalised racist experiences of Asian families that ran takeaway restaurants and UK Home Office mass deportations of Chinese sailors who were striking for better pay. She theorises these histories as deep trauma for the country and as limiting migrant Chinese people's opportunities for speaking out—themes that are also features of Black Lives Matter.

While this is not a research article, in relation to Riessman's third question above, Tsjeng uses academic techniques in laying out the prevalence of anti-Asian attacks and contextualising them in history and social structures. "Who gains from the research relationship?" is relevant in terms of working out the potential impact of the narrative. The analysis above makes clear that Tsjeng has written the piece in resistance to anti-Asian racism, with the aim of making it visible and to stir her readership to opposition to it. It is, therefore, resistance to anti-Asian racism that, although it does not mention anti-black racism, is inspired by the unexpected transformational conjunction of racism that inspired the resurgence of, Black Lives Matter.

The choice to publish the article in a fashion magazine is both one of resistance and of hope. It is a narrative of resistance because it tells an explicitly anti-racist story that brooks no denial of racism by contextualising its case in history, statistics and personal experience. The fact that it is a narrative of hope is more implicit, but the setting out of her case and the populating of the narrative with friends who are horrified by her explanation of the name-calling she experiences both makes horror an explicable response, constructs allies against racism and stakes a claim for social change.

4. Contradictory Positioning: Intersectionality and COVID-19 Mask Wearing

The second example analysed in this paper comes from the academic shortform publication, *The Conversation* that focuses on contemporary research relevant to a currently pressing issue. The article is entitled "Unmasking the racial politics of the coronavirus pandemic". It is written by [Jasmin Zine \(2020\)](#), a Professor of Sociology at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. As with Tsjeng's narrative above, she is concerned with the intersection of ethnicisation and COVID-19. She crafts her narrative by discussing examples of the differential receptions of mask wearing for various ethnic groups:

"While primarily a protective measure, the COVID-19 mask has also become a cultural icon. In western nations it has become a marker of social responsibility and good citizenship. It represents the wearer's compliance with public safety and communal well being through exercising care for one's self and others . . . wearing a protective mask signifies a commitment to the social and collective good of society.

But how does that perception change when a face mask is worn by someone who is Asian? Or a Black man? Why do some jurisdictions outlaw the face veil or niqab worn by some Muslim women while mandating protective masks . . .

Rather than exemplifying a commitment to the public good, an abundance of pictures of Asian individuals wearing masks may have accelerated the circulation of derogatory stereotypes. Research has shown Canadian press photos related to the 2003 SARS crisis used Asians wearing masks as a dominant image. With COVID 19, the trend of using masked Asian faces as the emblem of the crisis continues the trajectory of these racist depictions.

Instead of representing a good citizen helping to stop the spread of a possible contagion, a protective mask transforms Asian bodies into the source of contagion. Trump's insistence in referring to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" dangerously reinforced the racializing of this disease . . .

A campaign spearheaded by a Black clergy in Illinois in co-operation with local police, called "Tipping the Mask", asked people to show shopkeepers their faces when entering stores to mitigate against potential racial fears and violence.

A Black pastor recommended that his son put on his mask once he is already in the store for “fear of what others might think when they see a Black man in a mask.”

The concept of “mask tipping” calls upon racialized bodies to reveal themselves as “safe” and in return avoid biases and endangerment . . .

Muslim women who wear a niqab are not considered good liberal citizens because their covered faces are deemed culturally irreconcilable with western society. They face being penalized for violating the law while those wearing COVID-19 masks are seen as good citizens upholding the public good.

The COVID-19 mask is a barrier to transmission of the virus while the niqab is a barrier to social inclusion.

Not having to think about how one’s body is read by others when wearing a mask is a privilege of whiteness that eludes racialized groups. White mask privilege includes: not having to bear the racial stigma of being seen as a foreign disease carrier, being safe whether or not you “tip your mask”, having the ability to cover your face in public and not be denied social services.

Rather than serving as a levelling device the cultural politics behind wearing masks exposes the racial fault lines of the pandemic.”

Zine is explicit in identifying the message she wants to convey, which is encapsulated in her final paragraph, that the pandemic serves to expose racialized inequalities. Having built towards her conclusion by presenting evidence about different racialized/ethnicised/gendered groups, the conclusion serves to present resistance both to treating the pandemic as equalizing (in keeping with what many others have pointed out) and to resist the racism that predated COVID-19 and intensifies already-existing inequalities. The interpretation and acceptance of mask wearing as she shows is relational, dependent on the socially constructed groups to which people belong. The question of the impact of mask wearing for different ethnicised groups enables Zine to undertake intersectional analyses by examining ethnicity as it intersects with gender and religion, such as in the cases of Muslim women who wear niqabs and Black US men’s wearing of COVID-19 masks. It also allows her to show how minoritised ethnic groups are differentially racialized, even though they are equally negatively racialized and subjected to racisms. She also argues that white people wearing masks are able to take for granted their unearned racialized privilege in not being treated negatively as they wear their COVID-19 masks, exemplified in the extract below.

“Not having to think about how one’s body is read by others when wearing a mask is a privilege of whiteness that eludes racialized groups. White mask privilege includes: not having to bear the racial stigma of being seen as a foreign disease carrier, being safe whether or not you “tip your mask”, having the ability to cover your face in public and not be denied social services.”

An implicit part of Zine’s article is that it is possible to see psychosocial (personal and sociostructural) differences in even the apparently most mundane items and practices. It is striking that she features embodiment as central. She makes the case that bodies are presented as the source of contagion (South Asians), as dangerous (black men) and as signifying non-belonging to the nation (Muslim niqab-wearing women and South Asians). Just as with Tsjeng’s article, all these analyses are intertextual narratives that gain their potency because Zine is able to demonstrate what many readers will already know, that there are pre-existing racialized narratives that pathologise the bodies of these groups. In bringing them together and developing her narrative, she makes a strong, implicit case for disrupting such narratives and resisting the racism from which they stem. The article was published after George Floyd’s murder and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, and George Floyd is mentioned in the article, but Black Lives Matter is not. This absence may be because the aim is to avoid engaging in political rhetoric in order to make a strong case

for a wide readership. However, the sub-title, “Mask-wearing while Black”, intertextually resonates with other such formulations popularised by various campaigns, including Black Lives Matter, such as “Driving while Black” (Harris 1999).

A further theme is that the bodies of minoritised ethnic groups are both subjected to scrutiny and expected to behave in ways that make them acceptable to the white majority. They are, thus positioned in contradictory narratives of mask wearing and mask wearing is read as a negative signifier justifying racist treatment or even death (for black men). Face coverings for niqab-wearing Muslim women in European countries and the USA have long been derided, sometimes viewed as legitimate targets for ripping off and sometimes prohibited. Minoritised ethnic groups are, therefore, held to a different standard from the white majority. The overall narrative Zine constructs is, therefore, one of exclusion from belonging to the nation. It may seem that Zine’s is not a hopeful narrative. However, it is a contemporary academic narrative written for a publication designed to reach a wide readership and inform and maybe change minds. Zine has carefully laid out her case in ways that make the exclusions and contradictory positioning she identifies illegitimate. It is, therefore, underpinned by hope that the article can make a difference.

5. Re-Inspiring Narratives of Resistance

The two articles presented above both produce narratives that spell out the racialized/ethnicized inequities that predated COVID-19 and analyse the ways in which responses to aspects of COVID-19 exacerbate the racism to which various groups are subjected. The conditions of possibility for the narratives they present were the conjunctions of unexpected events (COVID-19 and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter following the murder of George Floyd) that facilitated protest narratives, including those surrounding racism. These major “biographical disruptions” (Riessman 2020) enabled both authors to stake claims to social justice and against racism. In both cases, while they focused on COVID-19, their narratives were intertextual in that their narratives resonated with claims for equality that various social movements, particularly Black Lives Matter, have highlighted.

Both articles demonstrate the power of narrative in seeking to humanize groups which, as they demonstrate through vivid examples, have been excluded from normative inclusion in the nation. While both present strong cases showing how racism is expressed against groups they represent, they do not directly call for particular actions against racism. Yet the narrative analysis of how they present their cases shows that they are carefully crafted in resistance to the racisms they identify and are designed to advocate resistance for their readership. As Bell Hooks (2016, p. 227) suggests, “one of the most vital ways we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone”. Both narratives above show that the issues they address are not individualised.

A major difference between the two articles is that Tsjeng positions herself within the narrative, taking up an identity as Singaporean Asian and an insider to experiences of racism that she describes. Zine, on the other hand, maintains an academic distance from her narrative, so that the reader is left in ignorance of her positioning in the narrative. As a result, although they present cases in similar ways, Tsjeng’s narrative is openly emotional, suggesting pain and naming fear, while Zine’s account is likely to evoke emotions, but does not name or show them. The meanings and explanations that they are hoping to shift through the stories they tell illustrate their advocacy for change and transformation, and their implicit agenda of inspiring hope. This implicitness is narratively strategic in that it avoids the danger of failure (Squire 2020) and of romanticising hope in the “cruel optimism of racial justice” (Meer 2022). Instead, both articles produce narratives of resistance that make strong cases rooted in the everyday in order to produce imaginings of the future (Back 2015; Mandich 2020).

Bell Hooks (2003, p. xiv) says that “My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them.” Both authors aim to transform the world by documenting the illegitimacy of racism and its

effects on different minoritised ethnic groups. In Ghassan Hage's (2016) formulation, they advocate co-hoping, rather than individualising the issues. Their "narratives enlarge the space of possibilities in which we can act, think, and re-imagine the world together with others and how they restrain or impoverish this space" (Meretoja 2017, p. 6). Both articles contribute to the numerous calls for social justice following COVID-19 and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter. Through telling convincing stories, they fuel a re-imagination of hope that greater awareness will lead to action against racism (Andrews 2014; Polletta 2016). In documenting their stories, they make a potential contribution to producing turning points in relation to racism. Giroux (1983), suggests that the nature and meaning of acts of resistance is linked to the emancipation and enhancement of individual power in relation to dominant groups. In choosing to craft their narratives as they have and place them in publications designed to reach wide audiences who might be affected by them, both Tsjeng and Zine can be said to have enhanced the power of minoritised ethnic groups and so produced successful and hopeful narratives of resistance. In Judith Butler's (2004) terms, they make claims to "liveable lives" and liveable futures. The fact that "these hopeful threads of alternative narratives are fragile, improvised in the weighty conditions of a status quo resistant to change" (Bradbury, this volume) makes these written accounts both important in themselves and intertextual claims to social justice that buttress what Hage (2016) calls co-hoping.

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