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The transnationality of mobile media and contemporary racisms: A future research agenda

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Introduction

Although there is persistent asymmetry in mobile media access and use the world over, these technologies have become ubiquitous for many people. They have become increasingly central not only to those individuals living in the so-called West, but also to the "next billion users" (Arora, 2019), that is, those of us beyond the West who comprise the majority of the world. Mobile media have consequently played a key role in the transformations that people have experienced in their social relationships. One such relationship is that amongst individuals from multicultural societies and that are entangled with the dynamics of cultural diversity elsewhere in the world.

I argue that an important task of future mobile media research would be a deeper exploration into the centrality of these technologies to the contemporary racisms in our society. Here I am talking about a racism of a second order, which perniciously entrenches White privilege across the globe. These contemporary racisms further the dynamic of how "for centuries the world has been divided between the dominated (people of colour) and the dominating (whites) [and how] this has afforded whites a set of insurmountable privileges that go beyond their class or power status" (Aoragh, 2019, p. 5). They do so by naturalizing whiteness as the yardstick with which the humanity of non-Western people is measured.

Such contemporary racisms have emerged at the confluence of two racial logics. An often-discussed one is the ever-changing but ever-insistent articulation of White privilege in the West (Titley, 2019). One currently predominant expression of this would be the rise of xenophobic right-wing populism in Europe, the USA, and Australia (Hochschild, 2016; Mondon and Winter, 2020; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Alongside this, however, is also the less discussed but equally important

logic expressed in colonially rooted racial hierarchies that non-Western people map onto each other (Raghuram, 2022). Take, for instance, the racial underpinnings of animosities between Hong Kong Chinese with mainland Chinese (Ong and Lin, 2017), amongst the established cultural communities and the new migrants in Singapore (Ortiga, 2014), and between local Filipinos and Asian migrants in the Philippines (Kim, 2016; Lorenzana, 2012).

Enacting a transnational sensibility

Extant scholarship on mobile media has already established that these technologies amplify our experiences of transnationality. These works have emphasized that the increasingly rapid development and spread of mobile technologies have allowed people to connect ever more quickly and cheaply across distances of time and space (Raiti, 2007). These technologies have enabled individuals to imagine their relationships in expansive ways that transcend “technological, geographic, psychological, physical and temporal differences” (Hjorth & Lim, 2012, p. 478). Their ubiquity also means, however, that people now literally carry the tensions of these globally entangled relationships “in their pocket” (Liew, 2020). The various mobile media that individuals constantly have on them—like the array of apps they use on their watches, phones, tablets, and laptops—can materialize in wide-ranging ways the contemporary racial dynamics that entwine the racial logics of our different societies.

To sharpen the way that globally oriented scholarship attends to the links between mobile technologies and contemporary racisms across the world, one can bring in a “transnational sensibility” (Cabañes, in press). This sensibility refers to a kind of disposition embodied in how researchers perceive and give expression to what they are studying (Wickberg, 2007). Particularly for works about mobile media and contemporary racisms, it is a stance of recognition that today’s societies across the globe are tied together by shared colonial histories and contemporary postcolonial configurations. More than this, it is a stance that insists on placing this recognition at the front and centre of one’s scholarly analysis. Such a sensibility can be enacted in two moves.

Mobile mediated racial dynamics within societies

The first move in positing a transnational sensibility entails capturing the contours of the mediated racisms that emerge from how a particular society’s racial hierarchies materialize its always-already global ties to other societies. Although there is important research on mobile media that do this, these works primarily pay attention to the West, whether it is in the context of the former imperial metropolises in Europe or the former dominion societies like the USA, Canada, and Australia (see Gunew, 2004). Their focus is primarily about mobile media use in the face of White privilege. Examples range from the racialized experiences that Australian-based Chinese queer women confront on dating

apps like Tinder, Bumble, and HER (Li and Chen, 2021) to the racist colonial legacies that African migrants in Italy negotiate with in using mobile phones for music-making (Beckles Willson, 2021), to the new protest journalism that African Americans enact through smartphones (Richardson, 2020).

There is, however, much more scope for research to look at the role of mobile media within the equally important spectrum of culturally diverse societies beyond the West. In postcolonial contexts, for instance, the use of mobile technologies happens not within the multicultural dynamics of states that have a long tradition of liberal democracy, or at least attempting to realize one. Such mobile media use is instead situated within the politics of otherness in states where the articulation of social institutions and cultural identities continue to bear the imprint of histories marked by the colonial imposition of absolute power as well as the colonial production of racial knowledge (Goh, 2008).

To indicate what a transnational sensibility can bring to one's analysis, we can turn to Xiong and Liu's (2022) work about the mobile-mediated relationship between the middle-class women in China's Greater Bay (GB) Area and their foreigner partners, over half of whom are from the West. Xiong and Liu detail how these cross-cultural couples negotiate their relationships within the distinct socio-political dynamics of China's telecommunications industry. What is distinct in this case is that the couples' mobile access is circumscribed by the Chinese state's prohibition on non-Chinese social media. This means that in their mediated intimacies, they are unable to experience the classical sense of the term "polymedia" (Madianou and Miller, 2012), which is an integrated environment of diverse communication technologies. Instead, they are limited to the state-sanctioned app WeChat that, by default, becomes the coordinator of a Chinese polymedia-like environment.

Bringing in a transnational sensibility will allow us to see that within the context mentioned above, the cross-cultural couples' use of mobile media amplifies a key racial logic that predominates in today's Chinese society. This logic is characterized by a complex imaginary of the West comprised of twin visions that can be described as two sides of a coin. On the one hand, there is a grudging acknowledgement of the West's longstanding hegemony in geopolitics. This is rooted in China remembering its historical experience of Western colonial subjugation. On the other hand, there is equally a resentment against the West that fuels a desire to overturn its power. And based on how the Chinese perceive the trajectory of today's world, they imagine themselves as overtaking the West at some future point (Dikotter, 2015).

In light of China's global ties described above, one can see how the WeChat-exclusive mobile access available to the cross-cultural couples in the GB area reinforces Chinese society's twin vision of the West. On one hand, WeChat inadvertently creates a progressive dynamic wherein the Chinese middle-class women feel empowered. They find themselves in "control [of] the weaker

communicator in [the] relationship”, as their foreigner male partners have to adjust to the way that WeChat carries with it the communicative cultural values in Chinese society broadly and the GB area particularly. In so doing, the mega-app appears to validate the ascent of a key value of Western modernity that is often weaponized against supposedly inferior cultures: that they bring with them a culture that “saves” women from other non-Western cultures that oppress them (see Abu-Lughod, 2015). On the other hand, the controlled mobile access situation in China also feeds into the competitiveness underpinning the imaginary of Chinese culture trumping Western culture. Here, the focus is on how the male foreigners—all of whom live in China—are forced to use the mega app. They are then also forced to accede to the socio-political values embedded in the app, including amongst many things the Chinese state’s stance on censorship of political speech (see Ruan et al., 2021).

Mobile-mediated racial dynamics across societies

The second move in enacting a transnational sensibility in researching mobile media and contemporary racisms is to examine how problematic racial hierarchies intertwine with each other and, subsequently, entrench White privilege. This involves identifying how mobile technologies materialize the racial entanglements that emerge because of the interplay of different racial logics across different societies both in the postcolonies and in the West.

An initial attempt to address this interplay of the distinct logics of different societies can be seen in the notion of mobile mediated “glocal intimacies” (Cabañes and Uy-Tioco, 2022). In crafting this concept, we build on Roland Robertson’s (1994) notion of “glocalisation” and highlight how the dynamic of “simultaneity” and “inter-penetration” of the local and the global manifests in mobile-mediated social relationships, from the romantic to the familial to the communal. At the same time, we also nuance Robertson’s thesis by pointing out that in postcolonial societies, the notion of the local needs to be unpacked. This is because it results from these societies’ negotiations with global forces from its colonial past and neo/postcolonial present. That said, more work needs to be done to fully flesh out how mobile media matter to the intertwining of racial hierarchies across the world.

As an example of how one can further pursue the second move in enacting a transnational sensibility, we can look at Tingyu Kang’s (2020) study on Taiwanese women in Los Angeles (LA), California in the USA and their deployment of mobile photography to visualize their experiences of birth tourism. What Kang’s observations make evident is how such mobile photographic practices are underpinned by the racial logics that have emerged from the interaction between Taiwan and USA particularly, but also the West more broadly.

Kang explains that the Taiwanese women's mediated visualization of the spatiality of their experiences manifested, amongst other dynamics, their racialized and classed subjectivities. One of the most concrete expressions of this was in their selection of what images to take and upload in order to represent their surroundings. These women determined that people back home in Taiwan would read the Chinese-speaking "ethnic enclaves" in LA as representative of ordinary life and, as such, not photo worthy. Because of this, they trained their focus on urban locales that appeared white, middle-class, and consumerist, something that people back home would interpret as extraordinary spectacles worthy of viewing and sharing.

A transnational sensibility will allow us to grasp that the Taiwanese women's choice of what spatialities to capture, display, and share via their mobile photography are emblematic of "neoliberal cosmopolitanism" (Georgiou, 2013). This is not a cosmopolitanism characterized by a progressive political vision that "raises questions about the significance of difference in advancing equality, recognition and redistribution" (p. 149). What we see in their practices is a strategic intent to use the perceived desirability of Western whiteness as a way to imbue themselves with a symbolic power that appeals to "global audiences, consumers, and capital" (p. 145). By casting themselves as upper-middle-class transnational individuals with a flexible citizenship of multiple national affiliations (Ong, 2006), they portray themselves as a cut above Taiwanese locals who are stuck in the homeland. In this exercise of cloaking themselves with the trappings of dominant White Western-rooted visual norms in contemporary social media, the women also reinforce the hegemony of White privilege.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, the cases we discuss in this article are from different ethnographic works that we conducted for over a decade. The case of cosmopolitan elite migrants navigating their ties between the homeland and land of settlement comes from 15 in-depth interviews with Filipinos in the Metropolitan Washington D.C. area (Uy-Tioco, 2017; Uy-Tioco and Cabalquinto, 2020). That of OFWs and doing family transnationally is based on two sets of data: one from 10 informal and open-ended interviews with Filipino migrant mothers in the east coast of the United States (Uy-Tioco, 2007) and one from home visits and life story interviews with 10 pairs of left-behind fathers and children in the Philippines capital of Manila (Cabañes and Acedera, 2012). Finally, that of middle-class professionals in search of global and modern relationships draws on life story interviews and dating app walkthroughs with 15 middle-class millennial Filipino women in Manila (Cabañes and Collantes, 2020).

In this piece, I have sought to underscore the importance of embarking on future mobile media research that enacts a transnational sensibility. This entails delving more deeply into the role of these technologies in the rise of contemporary racisms, which are of a second order. Borne out of the interaction between racial

logics in the postcolonies and in the West, these racisms entrench White privilege and naturalize whiteness as the yardstick by which to measure the humanity of non-Western people.

In bringing in such a transnational sensibility, it is helpful to register the different mobile mediations of racial logics that might play out in different societies. This means broadening out our discussion beyond the role of mobile technologies in Western multiculturalism by paying attention to how these technologies also matter to the myriad expressions of cultural diversity in postcolonial contexts. Enacting a transnational sensibility also involves understanding how the different mobile mediations of racial logics across the globe entwine and, ultimately, amplify problematic racisms. Doing so means engaging in the challenging task of identifying how mobile technologies become entangled in the interplay of different racial logics in postcolonial and Western societies.

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