

# **ALWAYS THERE AND ALL A PART**

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BLINDSIDE**

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**TWO TEXTS ON WHITENESS BY  
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# **Ghost Stories of Sadism: notes on micro-racism**

**Diego Ramirez**

*Micro-racism* is a term that accounts for the embittering casual encounters that draw attention to one's visible difference: accent, skin colour, "physiognomy". Although the term conjures a fistful of quinoa compressed into a Facebook post about capybaras, as a concept it effectively captures a form of communication that is otherwise difficult to locate. Micro-racism usually takes place when the emitter articulates a string of words that codify the receiver as an unfamiliar entity ("*where are you from?*"), charting the listener outside the territory of the speaker even though the former already inhabits the realm of the latter ("*no, where are you really from?*"). While rarely explicitly hostile in intent, this mode of communication functions like a magic cape that grants invisibility to the person who exercises it. Allowing them to turn themselves into an unspeakable and unseeable entity by marking out the listener as Other. Like the most stereotypical depiction of a ghost (white and hollow), the speaker pretends to float in a void that exists beyond racialized meaning or knowledge; hovering as if their skin was an ectoplasmic layer that continually dissipates to avoid any possible interpretation. Micro-racism is an everyday form of denigration where the Western gaze is felt, but not named.

## *The Ghostly Speaker*

Thus, the emitter becomes a spectre that can *see* but can't be *seen* and its micro-racist speech circulates in the mind of the receiver with the sadistic resonance of a dreadful scare: "*boo! Your accent is very strong*". Like a poltergeist pulling one's feet at night, this expression turns the homely into the unhomely and

terror ensues with a succession of banal yet invasive gestures. Even though these recurrent encounters may be sparse, anguish pervades as one recognizes a gradual degradation of agency (since one can't simply expel these racial manifestations). However, it may take years to realize that one is haunted, as the dammed forces that mobilise these encounters are hopelessly invisible. One commonly needs to read about micro-racism to learn how to identify it or deduce it through lived experience. This is because its mechanisms are ambivalent and ghostly.

The ghostly apparitions of micro-racism are insidious because they often hide under a veil of amicability and innocuousness. Some culprits simply want to communicate but are unaware that their words are unwelcomed. This speech may initially appear curious to the listener, however, with the passing of time it becomes increasingly disturbing - gaining a torturous charge through accumulation. Yet, the ghostly speaker claims a state of innocence akin to Casper the Friendly Ghost - who doesn't understand why everyone runs away from him. In effect, spirits such as Casper act naively because when the dead appear to the living, they often don't know they are already dead. The speaker of micro-racism is in a similar position, as it is unaware of how the listener is interpreting this irritating speech. In simple terms, micro-racism is nefarious because it is repetitive, seemingly invisible and protected by a guise of naivety: if these mechanisms are exposed to a friendly ghost, the listener is likely to be accused of preciousness, bullying or divisiveness.

### *The Sadistic Message*

If there is a torture practice that shares the same ghostly qualities of micro-racism, it is the "Chinese water torture". Developed during the late Middle-Ages and bearing a racist title itself, drops of water

are slowly oozed on the victim's forehead to provoke insanity. First, the captured is told the water will create a hole in their forehead. Then their feet, arms and head are strapped to a claustrophobic wooden structure that restrains their pitiful spasms. The victim – who believes the dribble will hollow their skull – is quickly engulfed by an unbearable anxiety that amplifies every drop into a probing cacophony of torment. Finally, the prisoner is consumed by lunacy. This is a spectral form of torture: the physical effects of the dripping water are absent, yet signalled by the gentle and psychotic repetition of the endless drip over the victim's forehead.

Micro-racism could be said to function in a similar manner, as it is not the singularity of each exchange – but rather an accumulation of repetitive actions – that disturbs the receiver. The real maddening effect lies in its invisibility, as it is often difficult to interpret whether the meaning of the exchange was real, imagined or intentional (like the victims of water torture, who couldn't decipher if the drops were indeed forming a hollow because they couldn't see their foreheads).

### *The Holy Listener*

If the speaker of micro-racism is a ghost, and its message a form of water drop torture, one must ask what is the listener. Rather than locating the latter as a victim (which is rather tedious), I prefer to picture it as a slightly maddened subject with a third eye (hole) in its forehead – someone *woke* (a cliché term that invokes a dislocated episode of the Netflix series *Dear White People* yet serves the purpose of this paragraph). A state that allows one to see these ghostly speakers and interpret their wretched words with accuracy. One could further compare the effects of micro-racism to *trepanning*, a surgical process that involves drilling a small hole into the human skull to

**increase mental capacities. While a controversial practice, it is rumoured that holy subjects such as priests and shamans practiced trepanation to develop psychic abilities. The hole of micro-racism – formed by the water drop torture of the ghostly speaker – is what allows one to become “woke” and shed light on previously obscured semiotics.**

**The awakening of a third eye (hole) is a necessary initiation into the “professional arts industry”, where so called artists of colour are inevitably framed by their identity. While most artists have their grievances in this field of self-immolation regardless of their cultural identity, the art world is undeniably structured to assign an uncomfortable position to its Others – the noble savage, the exotic subject, the erotic object. In countless openings, it is common to be reminded of this diagram as these modes of exhibition are mimicked by ghostly speakers that initiate an unpleasant exchange forged by the fiery breath of cheap wine: one imagines their fridge stocked with Marley Spoon leftovers, the walls of their home simulating a Tiki bar (without a sizeable budget) and a copy of The Travels of Marco Polo hidden under their bed like a stained porn magazine. Speakers of micro-racism are already dead, but they don’t know it yet.**

# **Always There and All a Part**

**Andy Butler**

**Sometimes I wonder whether I can overcome Whiteness, and mostly I don't know if I can. At least not with one exhibition, not with one essay, not with the individual actions of people with a vested interest in dismantling Whiteness. Especially when this sort of work is always positioned as 'issues based'. Smashing White supremacy is an ongoing process, decolonisation is an ongoing process, recognising the ways that I've internalised Whiteness is an ongoing process.**

**Creative practices among non-White communities are always there. However, these are only ever included on the terms of Whiteness. There are always conditions, always a need to contort oneself, an unspoken rule to never make those who are beneficiaries of structural racism uncomfortable. White supremacy still lives on through a commitment to diversity.**

**Navigating White arts institutions is isolating and lonely.**

***Always there and all a part* was conceived to interrogate the ways that, across differences in cultural background, heritage, experience, medium, material or practice, artists who can't be wholly integrated in to Whiteness are affected.**

***Always there and all a part* brings these works together to trouble the happy narrative of diversity. To trouble whether Whiteness can ever overcome itself.**

**The presented works collectively push back against the will of a progressive White audience to distance themselves from being complicit in structural racism. So often it's the very presence of non-White bodies or**

**art works that are used by the beneficiaries of White supremacy to obscure the very structures that uphold racial inequality. People can't be bad if they support the work of diverse artists, that's what people always want to tell me. They have brown friends, they have black friends, they have Culturally and Linguistically Diverse friends. The presence of these artists is always already politicised in institutionally White spaces.**

**Whiteness will always be there if we only ever talk about diversity and inclusion. Diversity is such a limp word, just like multiculturalism before it, which can never lead to any structural change to make the arts more equal. That's why White people love it. Including people is enough, having non-White bodies punctuate the sea-of-Whiteness that makes up our sector is the extent of the work we must do if all we care about is 'diversity and inclusion'. Diversity is the lowest bar you could set for overcoming structural racism. It is hardly even a rung on the ladder. We never seem to make it to a point where there's meaningful action. Diversity, inclusion, multiculturalism, are ideas that never question how power is distributed in our sector, which groups get to make the decisions, who gets to manage the influx and the limits of non-White artists and audiences. Why can non-White artists only ever expect inclusion in a sector that is built to exploit their labour for the benefit and maintenance of Whiteness?**

**I've been told by a lot of arts professionals that now is the time to push for diversity. Everyone wants a piece of us. Diversity has hit a peak and we (that is, 'diverse' artists/arts workers/writers/curators etc) should be grateful for the opportunity to participate in the arts, and to roll out an agenda that leads to a fairer sector. This framing of the issue is exploitative, ill-informed, and shifts the responsibility in the wrong direction. The problem with the arts isn't a lack of diversity, it's the presence of Whiteness.**

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