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Perforating colour lines: Japan and the problem of race in the 'non-West'

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Abstract

Why do racialised states subscribe to the racial international hierarchy? While the critical scholarship in International Relations (IR) has meaningfully unsettled the discipline's silence on race, it remains bound to the white versus non-white binary, neglecting the transmission and persistence of racism in international politics outside that divide. This article proposes a Lacanian reading of race as constitutive of state subjectivity in the modern world order to address this gap. Focusing on Lacan's notion of the 'lack in the Other', I suggest that non-West/non-white racism is a fantasy that racialised states construct upon encountering the void of 'Whiteness' as a master signifier. I argue that racialised states appropriate racism in response to the anxiety induced by the collapse of the Other's authority. Using the case of Japan's transition to a modern nation-state, I mobilise the framework to examine Japan's flirtation with Western racial theories and subsequent attempts to depart from the white racial order by creating its own racial hierarchy.

Introduction

Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 was a critical juncture in the history of the global colour line. It discredited global white supremacy and changed how the colonised viewed their imperial masters.[1] For the first time in modern warfare, a non-white country defeated a white European power using advanced military technology adopted from the West. While the unprecedented event reinforced the 'yellow peril' ideology, founded on the fear that the Orient would shatter Western dominance,[2] Japan's ascension to global power status also inspired a wave of anti-colonial movements in the non-West.[3] Japan's military triumph became the moral victory of the colonised. W. E. B. Du Bois, who famously proclaimed that 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line', considered it as the 'awakening for the yellow races, that brown and black races would follow'.[4]

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[1]Rotem Kowner, 'Between a colonial clash and world war zero: The impact of the Russo-Japanese war in a global perspective', in Kowner, *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 1–26.

[2]Rotem Kowner, '"Lighter than yellow, but not enough": Western discourse on the Japanese "race", 1854–1904', *The Historical Journal*, 43:1 (2000), pp. 103–31.

[3]Cemil Aydin, 'A global anti-Western moment? The Russo-Japanese War, decolonization, and Asian modernity', in Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier (eds.), *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s–1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 213–36.

[4]W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The color line belts the world', in Bill Mullen and Cathryn Watson (eds.), *W.E.B. Du Bois on Asia: Crossing the Global Color Line* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), pp. 33–4.

However, this awakening meant something different for Japan. The war became a 'takeoff point' for institutionalising Japanese imperialism in the early 20th century,[5] which intensified the modern racial perspectives developed in the early Meiji period. Rather than subverting it, the discourse on racial hierarchy during the war revolved around promoting Japan's racial superiority and learning from the Western racial system. Some Japanese dissociated themselves from the 'yellow' race because of its pejorative connotations. There were even views that the war brought Japan closer to the white Anglo-Saxon race. Japan's racial equality clause proposal to the League of Nations in Versailles in 1919 served its leaders' interests – to be equals with the West and to assert primacy in Asia. Throughout this period, notions of Japanese racial superiority animated Japanese colonial policies in Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan and its treatment of Okinawans and Ainus. In its attempt to overcome racial hierarchy, Japan had ironically reinforced it.

Japan's curious position as both a challenger to and perpetrator of modern racism represents a pertinent yet under-explored puzzle in the study of race in International Relations (IR): why do some racialised states, despite their experience of racial subjugation and their ability to oppose white racial dominance, subscribe to the racial hierarchical world order? How was the modern conception of racism transformed and perpetuated in the racialised non-West? Tackling these questions contributes to decolonising IR, by offering an understanding of race and racism as a modern phenomenon that transcends the white/non-white, coloniser/colonised binaries and occurs among non-Western, racialised societies. However, to avoid 'epistemically mapping' the non-West/non-white racism as distinct,[6] I aim to offer a non-white perspective of racism that could help elucidate the civilisational and historically specific function of the global colour line as a metaphorical tool to justify state actors seeking a global power status. Rather than reproducing binaries, a trap some decolonial approaches to IR fall into,[7] I aim to show that various civilisational structures and political imperatives have implicated modalities of race and racism.

To address these questions, I propose a Lacanian reading of race as constitutive of state subjectivity in the modern racialised world order. European colonial expansion institutionalised 'Whiteness' as a master signifier of international status in the Eurocentric racial symbolic order. 'Whiteness' introduced a lack to the racialised subject and posed to fill that lack. Yet the racialised order that 'Whiteness' signifies is also lacking: the more the non-white subject identifies with it, the more they realise it cannot fulfil their lack. The subject thus embarks upon endless attempts to reconstitute the racialised symbolic order to maintain a sense of coherent identity. I theorise that racialised states pursue racism in response to the anxiety brought about by the erosion of the authority of the Other. It is a fantasy created to confront the fact that the Other, on whom the subject's sense of wholeness depends, cannot guarantee the lost *jouissance*. Through non-white derivatives of modern racism, racialised states pursue fantasies that enable them to act as if the racial symbolic order is not lacking. These fantasies serve a dual function: the beatific, which gives a sense of subjective coherence, and the horrific, which sustains the desire for maintaining racial order by perpetuating racial violence on the Other.

In suggesting that a racialised state's racism is a fantasy built to overcome the lack that the Western racial hierarchical order introduced, this paper offers a Lacanian analysis of racialisation's function in the formation of Japan's national subjectivity. I build my psychoanalytically inspired argument on existing Lacanian IR approaches that regard 'lack' as a fundamental feature of subjectivity.[8] I particularly draw from three works. First, inspired by Epstein's Lacanian take on identity in IR, I examine state identifications as fluid and constitutive of various and sometimes competing

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[5]Peter Duus, 'The takeoff point of Japanese imperialism', in Harry Wray and Hilary Conroy (eds.), *Japan Examined: Perspectives on Modern Japanese History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), pp. 153–7.

[6]Christopher Murray, 'Imperial dialectics and epistemic mapping: From decolonisation to anti-eurocentric IR', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:2 (2020), pp. 419–42.

[7]Zeynep Gulsah Çapan, 'Decolonising international relations?', *Third World Quarterly*, 38:1 (2017), pp. 1–15.

[8]Charlotte Epstein, 'Who speaks? Discourse, the subject and the study of identity in international politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:2 (2011), pp. 327–50; Ty Solomon, *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Linus Hagström, 'Great Power narcissism and ontological (in)security:

group and individual subjectivities. Second, I follow Eberle's argument that fantasies are necessary to cope with the subject's lack because they 'connect subjects to social order by arousing desire and channelling it to socially constructed objects'.[9] I construe fantasies not as illusions but as real insofar as they provide an ontological relief to the subject's lack and help stabilise their sense of social reality. Third, I borrow from Vieira's view of post-colonial subjectivity as a consequence of colonial experience.[10] The lack that Western racial hierarchy introduced to the post-colonial state induced anxiety in the latter, which propelled it to identify with the impossible Western standards, especially of achieving 'Whiteness'.

Yet I believe that in explaining the allure of modern racism to the racialised subject, it is insufficient to analyse how the racialised subject copes with their ontological lack. It is also necessary to further investigate the lack in the symbolic order. I thus differ from previous insights in two ways. First, instead of treating the Western idealised Other as a given, coherent structure, I claim that it is the very impossibility of its symbolic coherence that reinforces the subject's lack. The racial anxiety that underlines non-West racism is founded not on the unattainability of standards of the Other but on the moment the lacking subject realises that the racial order in which the subject invested cannot guarantee wholeness.[11] Racial fantasy constitutes the subject's coping mechanism, which masks the reality of this lack in the Other and maintains their sense of wholeness.

Second, my Lacanian approach takes the collapse of race-based symbolic efficiency as productive. On the one hand, it allows for examining the relationship between the signifier of race and the subject, especially in how the realisation of the Other's lack stimulates the racialised subject to create their versions of racial hierarchy. This perspective clarifies why attempts to destabilise the racial order do not automatically cease its function of guaranteeing coherence. On the other hand, recognising the lack in the Other enables the subject to 'traverse the fantasy' and seek alternative ways of confronting the subject's search for wholeness by forging a singularity outside the fragmented social order. Dismantling the authority of the white racial order allows the racialised subject to confront the impossibility of wholeness and question the legitimacy of their fantasies, to live with its lack without succumbing to the allure of racial world order.

Although concentrating on subjective lack is common in Lacanian IR, I argue that a psychoanalytical approach of subjectivity without an appreciation for the Other's incoherence is incomplete because 'identification is only thinkable as a result of the lack within the structure … of the social Other'.[12] Analysing the transmission of racism reanimates the relationship between the racialised *subject* and the racialised *structure*. By showing that the former has its interpretation of the latter, this article avoids reproducing a white/non-white dichotomy and a view of the racialised subject as eternally subordinated to the white master.[13] It also construes non-Western identification with the West beyond the boundaries of colonial insecurity and mimicry. Examining non-white racism is particularly illuminating because it moves from a critique of racial hierarchy of denouncing white supremacy towards seeking to understand the motivations behind the persistent investment in racial hierarchies. This article will show that non-white racism cannot be reduced to identifying as 'White'. It is a reaction to the anxiety of not having an identity anchor in the racialised world order.

The first part of the paper revisits key scholarship on race in IR. While these efforts are laudable, I show that their interventions fall short of comprehensively tackling the 'global' problem of racism by leaving out the racism of the non-West. Second, I elaborate on my Lacanian theoretical approach to non-white racism. I suggest that the relationship between subjective and symbolic lacks can help

overcome fixed binary thinking on race and uncover how fantasy sustains racial hierarchies. I also introduce the process of perforation of the symbolic order, which I deem crucial to explaining the transference of modern racism to the non-West and why racialised subjects contest the white racial order without destroying its underlying structure. Third, I demonstrate this approach through a Lacanian reading of Japan's appropriation of modern racism into their understanding of world hierarchy from the late 19th to the early 20th century to construct a racial order with the Japanese race on top.

Race and racism in the 'international'

Critical studies on race and racism in IR are gaining momentum. Although still at the discipline's margins, the scholarly engagement on the adverse impact of racialisation in global politics has explained why and how racialised differences continue to inform international politics. Postcolonial scholars, particularly, 'have begun to elucidate the ways in which prevalent constructions of race have shaped visions and practices of international politics, thus helping to sustain and reproduce a deeply unjust stratified global order'.[14] These works are crucial to unmasking the racialisation that long operated in IR's Eurocentrism and debunking the myth of global white supremacy in domestic and international politics. The message is clear: the time has come for the discipline to confront the problem of the global colour line.[15]

However, some existing scholarship tends to truncate racism in the non-Western, non-white context. Current literature portrays racialised subjects in two broad ways. On the one hand, there is the non-West subjugated Other, who is racially discriminated against and excluded from international decision-making.[16] On the other hand, there is the non-West agent who can subvert the racial order through various epistemological and physical acts of resistance.[17] While making the experiences and perspectives of the racialised non-West relevant in IR is imperative in order to decolonise the discipline, extant literature's focus on coloniser/colonised relations between the 'white West' and the 'non-white, non-West' bypassed racism among and within the latter. In this section, I suggest that it is crucial to extend the analysis to the non-white subject as an agent perpetuating racial hierarchies. The purpose is not to assuage global white supremacy. Rather, it is to understand the implications of retreating to a historically specific notion of 'Whiteness' in tackling the global problem of racism.

Certainly, the argument I put forward owes much to existing scholarship. The inquiry into the persistence of race is significant in dismantling mainstream IR in two overlapping domains. First is the critique of disciplinary IR. Race was crucial to the 'birth of the discipline', whose primary objective was to aid imperial powers in managing their colonies and averting their anxieties.[18] In the late 20th century, IR retained its 'Whiteness' by giving race an 'epistemological status of

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[14]Duncan Bell, 'Race and international relations: Introduction', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:1 (2013), pp. 1–4.

[15]Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam, 'Confronting the global colour line: An introduction', in Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam (eds.), *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1–16.

[16]Siba N. Grovogui, 'Come to Africa: A hermeneutics of race in international theory', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 26:4 (2001), pp. 425–48.

[17]See, for example, Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Branwen Gruffydd Jones, 'Race, culture and liberation: African anticolonial thought and practice in the time of decolonisation', *The International History Review*, 42:6 (2020), pp. 1238–56; Errol A. Henderson, 'The revolution will not be theorised: Du Bois, Locke, and the Howard School's challenge to white supremacist IR theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 492–510.

[18]Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Vineet Thakur, Alexander E. Davis, and Peter Vale, 'Imperial mission, "scientific" method: An alternative account of the origins of IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:1 (2017), pp. 3–23.

silence'.[19] Colonial violence is buried deep under abstraction and theoretical debates that valorise European thinkers and thought.[20] Various strands of Eurocentric racism continue to inform IR theory, preserving a white-racialised subject position through defending 'the moral respectability and good faith of the West'.[21] This enables what Thompson calls 'racial aphasia', or the calculated forgetting of race in IR, allowing the concept of race to evolve without questioning its underlying logic.[22]

Theories and ideas of race alone do not sustain IR's silence on race. Discursive and structural implications constitute the second domain of critical race inquiry. The colonial practice of representing the colonised Other as racially inferior and uncivilised remains in governance practices, notably through the 'embedded racism' of the liberal international order.[23] While international institutions and powerful countries recognise the problem of race, they continue to generate foreign policies that reinforce exclusion, upholding a moral aporia based on the West's alleged paternal role over non-white, non-West 'anarchic' societies.[24] The material implications of racialised practices are also manifest in the global distribution of power that still relies on the colonial principles of expansion and wealth accumulation.[25] These factors demonstrate that discourse and practices intertwine to perpetuate the West's white racial superiority over the non-West, reminding us that despite decolonisation, racism remains an international ordering principle.

Whether it is discourse or practice-oriented, there is an agreement across the literature about conceptualising race as a social phenomenon. Although race is attached to biologically inherited characteristics, racism is considered a modern system of exclusion and hierarchisation between the 'West' and the 'rest'. Race, in its politicised form, is a 'set of powerful ideas under constant (re)articulation and (re)negotiation' that maintains differences across societies, domestically and internationally.[26] Colour matters less in the service of preserving racial divisions. As Thakur, Davis, and Vale show, racial practices evolved to incorporate locals within the British colonial apparatus, not to eradicate differences but to assume the white men's burden.[27] Racism without race, to use Etienne Balibar's term denoting the replacement of culture as racism's reference point, animates today's globalised world, despite its rudimentary affirmation of multiculturalism.[28]

Indeed, a discipline of 'white' origins warrants the burgeoning rebuke. However, one cannot help but notice the absolute position that 'Whiteness' occupies in the discourse. A recent example is Sabaratnam's critique of IR as 'white'. She defines 'Whiteness' as a type of subject positioning of entitlement vis-à-vis the non-white, available to people racialised as 'white'. Yet, like previous studies, she limits the critique to works by white men. She suggests decentring 'Whiteness' through diversifying points of authority 'informed by the spirit of hermeneutic suspicion in which writers not racialized as white have often greeted projections of Western civilizations'.[29] Allowing other perspectives not only pluralises the discussion, it also sheds light on what non-whites could contribute

[19]Randolph B. Persaud and R. B. J. Walker, 'Apertura: Race in international relations', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 26:4 (2001), pp. 373–6.

[20]Sankaran Krishna, 'Race, amnesia, and the education of international relations', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 26:4 (2001), pp. 401–24.

[21]See John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Meera Sabaratnam, 'Is IR theory white? Racialised subject-positioning in three canonical texts', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 49:1 (2020), pp. 3–31.

[22]Debra Thompson, 'Through, against and beyond the racial state: The transnational stratum of race', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:1 (2013), pp. 133–51.

[23]Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Grovogui, 'Come to Africa'.

[24]James H. Mittelman, 'The salience of race', *International Studies Perspectives*, 10:1 (2009), pp. 99–107; Cecelia Lynch, 'The moral aporia of race in International Relations', *International Relations*, 33:2 (2019), pp. 267–85.

[25]Branwen Gruffydd Jones, 'Race in the ontology of international order', *Political Studies*, 56:4 (2008), pp. 907–27.

[26]Thompson, 'Through, against and beyond the racial state', p. 146.

[27]Thakur, Davis, and Vale, 'Imperial mission'.

[28]Mittelman, 'The salience of race'.

[29]Sabaratnam, 'Is IR theory white?', pp. 29–30; Errol A. Henderson, 'Hidden in plain sight: Racism in International Relations theory', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:1 (2013), pp. 71–92.

to IR had they been allowed to speak. As necessary as it is, the idea nevertheless leads one to ask how such critique's transformative promise can apply to non-white perspectives which denounce 'Whiteness' but also perpetuate IR's racialisation and Eurocentrism. Put differently, to what extent can it encourage overcoming racism if it concerns itself with how IR thrives on racial ignorance *only* in white/non-white terms?

The risk in relying on a fixed white vs. non-white analytical axis is that, even if we define 'white' in sociocultural terms, the analysis, echoing Doty, tends to allow essentialised notions of race, including its biological roots, to slide back into the analysis.[30] Following a Lacanian critique of subject positions, such interpretation of 'Whiteness' naturalises the subject and deters an analysis that transcends the power relations being analysed.[31] As such, it may overlook contexts where the concept of race has undergone reconstruction, as the case of Japan demonstrates. Not closely examining these mutations could enable a homogenising reading of non-white texts and anti-racism figures who might otherwise be a hero on one side and an antagonist on the other. For instance, Du Bois was at one point oblivious to East Asia's racial problems. During his visit to Manchuria, he observed that 'the colonial enterprise by a colored nation need not imply the caste, exploitation, and subjection which it has always implied in the case of white Europe', a statement that reflected some African-Americans' apologist stance towards Japanese imperialism.[32] One must also heed Krishna's warning against idealising Gandhi as a pacifist icon: 'Color may reveal as much as it may hide.'[33]

It is crucial to note that inserting non-white racism in the critique of racism in IR is not intended to undermine anti-colonial and anti-racist figures. They are indispensable to challenging the discipline's coloniality and Eurocentrism, which this article seeks to address. Yet the current treatment of 'white' as an independent variable conceals a binary reversal that risks deifying non-white figures and practices. Doing so diminishes what they could teach us about the complex positionalities of being non-white and the burden of dealing with multiple layers of subjugation – a predicament that many scholars critical of IR's Eurocentrism also face.[34] The point is to acknowledge that a white/non-white perspective applies to some contexts but is ill-suited to others. Notwithstanding its merits, a critique of racism based on a unitary notion of 'Whiteness' may even impede a deeper understanding of the problem of racialised hierarchies. Indeed, while I agree with Sabaratnam that IR's 'Whiteness' sanctions the discipline's Eurocentric immanence and innocence, such an approach may be inadequate to apprehend the complexities of racial epistemologies that have travelled to non-white, non-Western contexts.

A more serious implication of a critique of racism based on 'Whiteness' as signified by subject positions is presenting an incomplete account of global racism. It creates a closed-circuit view that begins and ends with the white/non-white dichotomy within the Euro-American setting, including its former colonies. While racism cannot be disconnected from its imperial and colonial pasts, modern racism survived through various paths, where it encountered agents who questioned the racial hierarchy *and* who produced an alternative ontology of race and racism. By treating the racialised white subject as the main referent of critique, current perspectives have induced a strange form of racial aphasia that shrugs off the racisms before and after racial thinking gravitated toward the white/non-white binary.[35] By this, I refer not only to cultural racism as evolved versions of white racism but also to the racisms falling outside coloniser white/colonised non-white dichotomies.

[30]Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'The bounds of "race" in International Relations', *Millennium*, 22:3 (1993), pp. 443–61.

[31]Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

[32]Reginald Kearney, 'The pro-Japanese utterances of W.E.B. Du Bois', *Contributions to Black Studies*, 13:7 (1995), pp. 201–17. It is important to note that Du Bois retracted his earlier argument of preferring Japanese over European imperialism.

[33]Sankaran Krishna, 'Postcolonial racial/spatial order: Gandhi, Ambedkar and the construction of the international', in Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam (eds.), *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 154.

[34]Robbie Shilliam, 'Race and racism in International Relations: Retrieving a scholarly inheritance', *International Politics Reviews*, 8:2 (2020), pp. 152–95.

[35]Yasuko Takezawa, 'Transcending the Western paradigm of the idea of race', *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, 6 (2005), pp. 5–30.

Aside from looking for non-racial alternatives outside the West, I suggest examining excluded communitiesin the non-West who are discriminated for reasons that the metaphor 'color line' cannot capture, such as the *Dalits*, the Okinawans, and the Uighurs. Doing so could elucidate how ideas and practices of modern racism were repurposed to reinforce existing exclusionary systems.

Moreover, overlooking this phenomenon underplays the instrumentality of racialisation in nationalist homogenisation projects, especially in non-white and non-Western states. In her analysis of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) use of the racialised trope 'nuclear apartheid', Biswas shows how nationalist leaders' emphasis on the inter-state discrimination between the nuclear 'haves' and 'have-nots' under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) ran parallel to its nationalist ambitions.[36] Modi's populist leadership in India, according to Kinnvall, utilises race and gender to cope with his government's sense of emasculation and ontological insecurity.[37] As Mandelbaum argues, using Lacan, Israel's homonationalism masks discrimination against the racial and ethno-religious Other to attract people's loyalty.[38] These studies show that integrating race in IR can shed light on how nationalist racial exclusions exist *outside* the white/non-white binary. I interpret this as a warning against non-white nationalist leaders invoking 'Whiteness' in the form of 'victimhood racism' to justify foreign policies that advocate for equal treatment of states yet refuse equal rights to its 'citizens' and neighbours. As Hall suggests, race is a 'floating signifier … subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation'.[39] Looking at non-white racism can help explain the allure of racism to the racialised and how they appropriated European racial ideology to their own culture.[40]

To be sure, I do not suggest abandoning 'Whiteness' in the analysis. As Alcoff argues, doing so sacrifices a vital variable that explains unequal material distribution in certain societies.[41] In the Lacanian perspective I offer, I treat 'Whiteness' as a powerful signifier sustaining our investment in racialisation to comprehend the white and non-white subjects' attachment to race. It may be that the racial ignorance of those racialised as white reflects not just ignorance of the non-white's history but the wilful ignorance of their *own* history. Such a perspective redirects the inquiry from *how* IR scholars sustain racial ignorance to *why* in Sabaratnam's words, 'they need to assert and defend the moral respectability and good faith of the West' despite contradicting evidence. The latter could reveal that the primary function of 'Whiteness' is to ensure the white subject's immunity to being racialised. Suppose those invested in whitewashing IR's history expose the inherent contradictions of the West's claims to greatness. In that case, they also reveal nothing exceptionally great about being 'white'. The discipline's persistent disavowal of race then becomes necessary to cope with the awareness that its constructs are spurious.

The harsh reality is that, even if we exhaust all the critique against 'Whiteness', we know that raising awareness alone cannot overturn the discipline's racial undertones. Acknowledging the positive role of non-white, non-Western actors is an important step but is also insufficient in collapsing IR's racialised narratives. If indeed the problem of race is international, then it is crucial to complement the analysis of white racism's persistence with an inquiry regarding racial thought and practices outside 'Europe'. This further exposes the contradictions of Eurocentrism and presents a more complex dynamic of racism in international politics. How did some societies identify with it? How did they subvert the supposed perfection of 'Whiteness'? To decenter

[36]Shampa Biswas, '"Nuclear Apartheid" as Political Position: Race as a Postcolonial Resource?' *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 26:4 (2001), pp. 485–522.

[37]Catarina Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the masculinization of Indian politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 283–302.

[38]Moran M. Mandelbaum, '"I'm a proud Israeli": Homonationalism, belonging and the insecurity of the Jewish-Israeli body national', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 23:2 (2018), pp. 160–79.

[39]Stuart Hall, 'Race, the floating signifier', available at: {https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Race-the-Floating-Signifier-Transcript.pdf}.

[40]Charles W. Mills, 'Unwriting and unwhitening the world', in Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam (eds.), *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 202–214.

[41]Linda Alcoff, *The Future of 'Whiteness'* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

'Whiteness', it is therefore not enough to relocate the locus of power elsewhere. We need to understand that 'Whiteness', no matter how its interlocutors insist on its sturdiness, is a fragile concept. It is on this fragility that I build my framework to understand the desire of the racialised for racial hierarchies.

From one racial fantasy to another: A Lacanian perspective

The task at hand is to investigate the persistence of racial hierarchy in international politics. As I discussed, a good way of explaining it is to look at the discipline itself, one that is 'white' and in denial of race as an epistemic position. What follows is an attempt to lay out a Lacanian framework. I do so by stepping out of the disciplinary debates while relying on a crucial insight they put forward: the discursive reproduction of racial hierarchy affects international politics. This foregrounds the disavowal this section seeks to capture – agents of racialised states know very well that racial hierarchy is a myth, but they nevertheless reinforce it. In this section, rather than treating 'Whiteness' solely as an imposing, idealised other, I construe it as a master signifier that embodies the unfathomable big Other.[42]

It is useful to begin with two key premises of Lacanian psychoanalysis. First, it posits the subject as lacking, and any pursuit of a coherent identity as impossible. For Lacan, the unified Self is an illusion the subject creates to fill a constitutive lack, a price to pay upon entering the symbolic order, what he calls the big Other, or simply the Other.[43] Identification occurs not because the binaries separate the *cogito*'s fullness from the outside but because the subject constantly searches for signifiers to fill this lack. The subject is split because any form of identification with available signifiers cannot recapture what was lost in entering the symbolic. The subject is both signified by and alienated from the Other since the latter 'bears a mark of irreducible dissonance; it never fits the subject'.[44] Subjectivity emerges when the subject sacrifices a part of themselves to the 'agency of the signifier', which sets them the impossible task of retrieving what was lost, of attempts to cover up for their lack.

This subjective lack is linked to the second premise: the Other from whom the subject seeks its fullness is also lacking. That is, the symbolic cannot guarantee the *jouissance* or real enjoyment forever lost when the subject entered the symbolic. Considered the 'most radical dimension of Lacanian theory', recognising the lack in the Other is crucial because it explains why the subject keeps identifying despite multiple failures.[45] Lacan insisted on distinguishing the little other, an ego projection, from the Other, which is the Law that operates in the symbolic. The Other emerges once the subject embeds themselves in the symbolic realm of language that links the subject to the social through traditions, institutions, and various codes of conduct. Yet the Other is also the source of the subject's anxiety because, with all its supposed authority, it still cannot fill the subject's lack. The Other does not exist beyond 'the status of presupposition' and is never fully confirmed unless through the subject's fantasy creations.[46] The Other's symbolic efficiency lies both on its 'hypothetical authority' and the subject's awareness of its semblance: the subject needs the Other, so it needs to act as if it exists. It is the lack in the Other, not the lack of the subject, that sustains the subject's anxiety and their desire for fullness.

Recognising subjective and objective lacks benefits my analysis in three ways. First, it avoids essentialised accounts of the subject. Construing the racialised subject as lacking foregrounds an understanding of the 'socio-symbolic dependence of [their] subjectivity', which enables us to

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[42]Derek Hook, 'Absolute Other: Lacan's "big Other" as adjunct to critical social psychological analysis?', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2:1 (2008), pp. 51–73.

[43]Stavrakakis, *Lacan & the Political*.

[44]Slavoj Žižek, The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 46-47.

[45]Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 137.

[46]Hook, 'Absolute Other', p. 60.

explore the various ways they constitute their identity.[47] Second, the interplay of the subject with a wide array of signifiers is critical to go beyond interpreting existing binary oppositions such as white/non-white, coloniser/colonised, West/non-West as only sources of subjectivities. While the racial symbolic order imposes limits, the lack in the Other tells us that the subject is not limited to what 'exists'. Instead, it drives the subject to create different means to relive the irretrievable *jouissance*.[48] Lastly, it helps explicate the object-cause of desire that drives subjective racial fantasies. To paraphrase Hook, integrating the lack in the Other prevents us from seeing the Other as a singular, powerful figure (of a 'white man') and compels us to examine at it in terms of its function.[49] The point of the Lacanian approach I offer is not to make the Other knowable. Rather, it is to elucidate how the lack of the subject relates to the lack in the Other.

The question is, how does the Other, despite its imperfection, remain as a locus of authority? How can we theorise the investment in the racialised order by presupposing its emptiness instead of viewing it as an anchor of stability? Where do we begin if not with a fixed idea of 'Whiteness'? Here, it is essential to emphasise that from a Lacanian perspective, race is irreducible to the psychological level of the ego and its relationship between the racist 'self' and the racialised 'other'. As Seshadri-Crooks argues, to do so mistakenly assumes that race is an 'illusory, narcissistic construct, and racism is an ego defence'.[50] Accordingly, the goal of the Lacanian psychoanalytic approach is to determine how the master signifier, in this case, 'Whiteness', affords the signifiers white, black, yellow, and so on a position in the signifying chain. This stops us from analysing racism as a problem of consciousness and 'Whiteness' as a subject position. It asks, instead, what the master signifier of 'Whiteness' stands for in relation to the signified and the type of fantasy that sustains the racial symbolic order.

Identification sustains the subject's relation to the Other through attempts to constitute themselves in the social. Lacan posits two important orders of identification. The imaginary order is the domain of images where the subject derives an idea of a 'perfect Self'. The perceived unity in the imaginary results from the captivation with the mirror image, the 'ideal-ego'. This will become an important reference for the subject's self-perception within the symbolic order. Unlike the imaginary, the symbolic is something 'superimposed', because the subject cannot resolve their sense of ambiguity in the imaginary. Žižek summarises the relationship between the two orders as follows: 'imaginary identification is identification with the image in which we appear likable to ourselves, with the image representing 'what we would like to be', and symbolic identification, identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed, *from where* we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likable, worthy of love'.[51] What is crucial to note is that desire undergirds identification. Imaginary and symbolic identifications do not mean 'imitating' the Other (non-white wanting to be Caucasian). Rather, it is a way of seeing oneself in the image of the Other (identifying with the 'wholeness' or 'humanness' that 'Whiteness' signifies). What Lacan means by 'Desire is the desire for the Other's desire' is that desire is the desire to acquire the perceived unity of the Other *and* to be the Other's desire.

Yet the subject cannot know what the Other desires because the Other is lacking. Awareness of the Other's lack emerges when the subject encounters the Real, the pre-symbolic remainder of what cannot be signified. What sustains desire despite failures of identification, that is, the failure of the symbolic to provide *jouissance*, is fantasy. Fantasies are scenarios that make 'bearable' the lack in the Other – it maintains the lacking subject as a desiring subject.[52] Acknowledging the

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[47] Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Lacan and political subjectivity: Fantasy and enjoyment in psychoanalysis and political theory', *Subjectivity*, 24:1 (2008), pp. 256–74.

[48] Mari Ruti, 'The fall of fantasies: A Lacanian reading of lack', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 56:2 (2008), pp. 483–508.

[49] Derek Hook, 'Absolute other: Lacan's 'big Other' as adjunct to critical social psychological analysis?,' *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2:1 (2008), pp. 51–73.

[50] Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring 'Whiteness'*, p. 32.

[51] Stavrakakis, *Lacan & the Political*.

[52] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 116.

role of fantasies in IR helps explain why subjects remain invested in specific identifications, such as 'white American patriots', even if they facilitate catastrophic outcomes.[53] We could link imaginary identifications to the state's self-perceptions and symbolic identifications as national images created to gain (mis)recognition from other states. The international system is the Other capable of wreaking havoc on the state's ideal-ego of a national Self. As Vieira argues, postcolonial states' self-images remain haunted by anxiety-driven lack because of the desire to identify with the white coloniser.[54] A Lacanian perspective of anxiety enhances this interpretation. Anxiety emerges not when the subject encounters their own lack but when the fantasy fails to cover up for the lack in the Other, and at the same time when the subject encounters an object in place of that lack.

According to Seshadri-Crooks, the master signifier 'Whiteness' raises anxiety in the racialised because it prevents their access to parts of the symbolic order by masquerading it as 'full'.[55] Departing from the Lacanian intervention that sex cannot be captured in the symbolic, she argues that 'racial difference attempts to compensate for sex's failure of language'.[56] Unlike sex, which cannot be signified, race relies on the 'Whiteness' that acts to offer perpetual wholeness. For the non-white racialised subject, 'Whiteness' crushes the fantasy of becoming human because it poses as a signifier of being where there should be none (being is non-signifiable). This echoes Fanon's Lacanian approach toward racism and the *nègre*, where he argues that in the racialised symbolic, the difference between the *antiblack black* men and women collapses as both resent being 'black' and seek to become 'white'.[57] The signifying function of race is to establish differences according to a fixed hierarchy based on visibility that sexual identifications cannot. The 'visible' factors afford the signifier 'Whiteness' to escape the historical contingency of race that induces the subject's anxiety. As I will later show, militarisation ('masculine') did not transform the West's image of Japan as an inferior, effeminate state, so the Japanese further invested in racial hierarchisation.

Construing 'Whiteness' as a master signifier instead of subject positions illustrates my earlier point that when a racialised subject identifies with 'Whiteness', it is not the white skin that they desire, but the position the signifier 'Whiteness' occupies (superiority, civilisation, status, etc.). For the racialised subject, especially if they are non-white, any attempt to identify with 'Whiteness' is doomed to fail. It is impossible to become the Other's desire because, to borrow again from Fanon's psychoanalytical interpretation, any attempt to identify as 'white' only leads to an 'engine failure': the Black subject is incomplete because they are not white, yet when they try to be white they become a menace, that is, undesirable, to the eyes of the white man.[58] The failure to capture the non-signifiable Real in the Other is what further drives the desire for *jouissance*, so that when the fantasy collapses, the non-white subject realises the impossibility of fully identifying with the racial symbolic. They are then wont to construct other fantasies that would suture their anxiety. In that sense, anxiety is productive. As Zevnik argues, the purpose of America's post-racial fantasy is to act as if racism does not exist, despite attempts of the Black rights movements to prove otherwise.[59] The yellow peril worked with a similar logic: the Europeans demonised the Japanese to sustain the myth of white supremacy. In this case, we can see the double-sided nature of white racial fantasy: the beatific side that promises fullness for the racialised white subject and the horrific side that maintains racial violence towards the non-white subject.[60]

However, we must not foreclose the productive side of anxiety for maintaining white racial fantasy. The emptying of the symbolic via exposing the fraudulence of 'Whiteness' creates a void to

[53]Stavrakakis, *Lacan & the Political*.

[54]Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression'.

[55]Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring 'Whiteness'*.

[56]Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring 'Whiteness'*, p. 6.

[57]Lewis R. Gordon, 'Through the zone of nonbeing: A reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* in celebration of Fanon's eightieth birthday', *The CLR James Journal*, 11:1 (2005), pp. 1–43.

[58]Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

[59]Andreja Zevnik, 'Society as social fantasy: Black communities trapped between racism and a struggle for political recognition', *Political Psychology*, 38:4 (2017), pp. 621–35.

[60]Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression'.

be filled. The subject's realisation of the lack in the racialised symbolic can lead to two things. First is what Lacan calls 'separation', or the process of de-alienating the subject from the authority of the Other. Here, the subject 'traverses' the fantasies that sustain the desire for wholeness and accepts its inherent impossibility.[61] In Peter Hudson's reading of Fanon, he describes this process as the colonised shifts from his identification with 'Whiteness' as a way out of colonial destitution to the 'destruction of his attachment to "Whiteness"'.[62] Only in accepting that the Other cannot fill the void can the Black subject begin to explore alternative ways of being. The second is the creation of a new fantasy to replace the old one. The refusal to identify with 'Whiteness' does not destroy the order. Rather, it produces an anxious racialised subject going 'through the fantasy all the time'. While anti-colonial and anti-racist practices are a *cause célèbre*, one must recall Lacan's warning: 'Revolutionary aspirations have only one possibility: always to end up in the discourse of the master'.[63] Because the alluring trap of fantasy as the means towards fullness is so strong, the collapse of fantasy does not guarantee the breakdown of the symbolic as Law; it merely empties the place of the current master signifier for a new one. The fanaticism behind the political logics of 'White Only' apartheid South Africa and Leninism demonstrates that the consequence of a broken fantasy is not its demise but more destructive attempts to sustain it.[64] This is perhaps why, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon underscored the importance of 'starting anew' for the newly independent states, for colonialism has left lasting legacies in the minds of the colonised intellectuals and new managers.

In other words, the Lacanian framework focusing on the Other's lack allows us to dig deeper into the racialised subject's attachments to racial signifiers. The lack of the Other makes the signifier race portable and open to anybody who identifies with the racial hierarchy to attain wholeness. The symbolic void enables the racialised subject to perforate the colour line upon realising that 'Whiteness' can no longer fulfil its desire. This, however, does not automatically lead to separation from the racial hierarchy. Giving up the promise of fullness that racial superiority affords is not easy. Hence the racial disavowal of race: the racialised subject knows very well that racial hierarchy is a myth, but they nevertheless fantasise as if it is real. What occurs is a transfer of identification with 'Whiteness' to the perforation of its 'wholeness', a movement from one racial fantasy to another, masking the void that produces subjectivity. This new racial fantasy promises fulfilment and engenders violence, as the case of Japan demonstrates.

Japan: Confronting the world racial order

In this section, I apply the Lacanian reading of race to the case of Japan's transition from a pre-modern to a modern nation-state. The Japanese flirtation with and subsequent ambivalent departure from the European white racial order indicate, on the one hand, the Other's symbolic efficiency as a source of fulfilling Japan's subjective lack. On the other hand, it shows how the white racial order's inability to provide Japan with a sense of Self caused Japan to construct alternative fantasies of racial superiority to fill the void. In what follows, I demonstrate through Japan's engagement with Western racism how the master signifier of 'Whiteness' is not static and can be renegotiated and perforated. I examine the trajectory of discourse on racism from the Meiji to World War II periods from the perspective of important state and non-state political figures who influenced Japan's views on racial differences.

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[61]Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2009).

[62]Peter Hudson, 'The state and the colonial unconscious', *Social Dynamics*, 39:2 (2013), pp. 263–77; Derek Hook, 'Fanon via Lacan, or: Decolonization by psychoanalytic means …?', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 51:4 (2020), pp. 305–19.

[63]Stavrakakis, *Lacan & the Political*, p. 12.

[64]Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

Several studies have already demonstrated the significance of Japan's encounter with the West.[65] However, they do not tackle race as a signifier of 'full' membership and superiority in the Eurocentric international system and its impact on Japan's ambivalent attitude towards racism from the late 18th century onwards. Japan's case is particularly illuminating because it is the first Asian country to adopt the nation-state formula of modernisation, to which racialisation was integral. It also elucidates how a racialised society utilised a 'racialised worldview' against its neighbours and the very architect of the racial ideology, the West.[66] A Lacanian perspective based on the subject's phantasmatic constructions to cover up for lack of the racial symbolic Other explains this phenomenon better than an analysis anchored only on rigid white/non-white, West/non-West dichotomies and identities. If we maintain that racism is solely an unadulterated European import, an issue of 'Whiteness' that the racialised Japan perpetually grapples with as an 'inferior other', we risk overlooking Japan's racial thought and practices.

Faithful to the framework's claim that the Other is not fully knowable, Japan's identification with international racial hierarchy must be understood as transcending mimicry or imitation of the West. Japan's racial thought and practices were not a replica of the West, signalling, as I mentioned earlier, that the symbolic could not be 'subjectivised'. Instead, it was contingent upon the mediation of race as a status signifier of the international symbolic order that promised to give Japan a sense of wholeness. As Takezawa argues, translating 'race' in Japan means to 'transform Japan's position' to make themselves appear respectable 'to its geopolitical Others'.[67] A Lacanian reading examines the critical role of race in Japan's identification with a racialised international order, that is, how Japan's flirtation with fantasies of racial equality with the West and racial superiority over the 'rest' (which at some point included the 'West') can be interpreted as attempts to grapple with the lack in the Other.

While it can be argued that Japan had practised the 'most extreme form of rudimentary racist policies' in East Asia before the Age of Discovery, it was not until its humiliating encounter with the West that Japan adopted modern racial views.[68] As this section will show, while the Japanese had no clear idea of modern racism, their appropriation demonstrates that race is an empty signifier that could acquire meaning depending on context and purpose. Yet their identification with the racial order also formed the image of an ideal Japanese Self based on the fantasy of racial superiority, which the white racial order cannot fulfil. Japan's racial fantasy, so to speak, covered up for the lack of the Other. The purpose of replacing the master signifier of 'Whiteness' with 'Japan's racial superiority' was twofold: to justify a Japan-led regional order and to reinstate its self-image of superiority lost in its encounters with the West. Japan's socio-symbolic dependency structured its fantasy of an ideal Self.

How did a country with minimal contact with the outside world for over two centuries develop racism? It is important to understand that Japan's imaginary identification, or 'what it would like to be', occurred prior to European colonialism. The symbolic order that faced this imaginary identification was not a racial one. It was based on the Sino-centric world that Edo Japan refused to recognise because it would negate its ideal image of civilisational superiority and imperial divinity based on the belief that Japan 'is the land of the gods'. The Chinese Confucianist hierarchical separation between the civilised (*ka*) and the barbarian (*i*) influenced this self-perception and was intertwined with a nativist understanding of

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[65]Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Xavier Guillaume, *International Relations and Identity: A Dialogical Approach* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

[66]Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel, 'Modern East Asia and the rise of racial thought: Possible links, unique features and unsettled issues', in Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel (eds.), *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Western and Eastern Constructions* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 1–40.

[67]Yasuko Takezawa, 'Translating and transforming "race": Early Meiji period textbooks', *Japanese Studies*, 35:1 (2015), pp. 5–21.

[68]Kowner and Demel, 'Modern East Asia'.

the Japan-centric notion of world order, conceiving a 'normative hierarchy of peoples'.[69] As historian Ronald Toby observes, Japan (much like China) concealed certain aspects of reality to 'preserve a desired image', and it was Japan's self-isolation combined with the Edo Japan's military government's (*bakufu*) power to control external relations that enabled them to construct a symbolic order around its perceived centrality, autonomous from the Sino-centric world order.[70]

Despite its stringent hierarchical socio-political system, Japan did not have an ideology of race in the 17th to 18th centuries. Even though visibility, such as clothing and hairstyle, was integral to conveying status, social gradations of function, propriety, and submission defined exclusion in pre-Meiji Japan.[71] Skin colour marked class, not race. For instance, Japan imported cosmetic skin whitening (*oshiroi*) from Chinese aristocratic customs. Dark skin already had a negative connotation before Chinese encounters with enslaved Africans during the Song dynasty (960–1279), as it was equated with the peasant class, who were more likely to be exposed to the sun.[72] Nevertheless, the absence of a coherent racial ideology in Japan before European colonialism did not preclude practices with racial undertones that were affected by external interactions.[73] Japan's policy of expelling Japanese women who had intimate relationships with the Portuguese, then called 'the Southern barbarians' (*nanbanjin*), and later of children with mixed ancestry out of fear of miscegenation resonates, albeit on a different scale, with Dutch and British colonial policies in Southeast Asia.[74] If we take this as a precedent for the present discrimination against the *hafu* or mixed-race Japanese, it is arguable that Japan's ideal self-image found its way through various reconstructions of the symbolic order across time and space.

Identification with 'Whiteness' as civilisation

The Japan-centric order shattered upon the advent of Western expansion in East Asia. During the Meiji Restoration, Japan opted to leave Asia (*datsu-A ron*) and identified with the Western symbolic order. The outcome of the Opium Wars can be interpreted as a revelation of the lack of the Chinese Other. Identification with Chinese notions of superiority became untenable, as Japanese figures saw China as a 'negative model' for civilisation. In this period, gender, not yet race, signalled differentiation between 'masculine' and 'strong' Japan and 'feminine' and 'weak' China. They believed the country would suffer a similar fate if Japan followed the Chinese path of unwillingness to learn from the West.[75] The fantasy frame of the Japan-centric world order that enabled them to reconstruct the Chinese model to reinforce Japanese authority collapsed. This encounter with the Real induced anxiety towards looking for another fantasy frame to support Japan's desire to identify with something that signified civilisation. For Japan, it was the West. The only problem was that the West equated civilisation with race; in that racial hierarchy, the Japanese 'yellow' skin colour automatically indicated inferiority. The lacking Japanese subject asked, how could I become the Western Other's desire?

Reconfiguring the concept of race was among Japan's attempts to identify with the Western, racialised symbolic order and thus the search for the 'Japanese' national identity. According to Morris-Suzuki, Western ideas influenced the inside/outside division during the Meiji period in

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[69]Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

[70]Toby, *State and Diplomacy*.

[71]Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

[72]John G. Russell, 'The other Other: The Black presence in the Japanese experience', in Michael Weiner (ed), *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 84–115.

[73]Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel (eds.), *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Western and Eastern Constructions* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

[74]Anne Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

[75]Sushila Narsimhan, *Japanese Perceptions of China in the Nineteenth Century: Influence of Fukuzawa Yukichi* (New Delhi: Phoenix Publishing House, 1999).

two ways: first, the Japanese adopted an attenuated notion of citizenship, assuming that all people within the newly founded nation-state were 'Japanese' bound by the 'duty of loyalty'.[76] To reinforce this new social order, Meiji leaders called the nation-state a family state (*Kazoku-kokka*), where all members acted as a community under the paternal leadership of the emperor. The second, crucial for establishing difference, was the importation of race (*jinshu*) and *Volk* or ethnic group (*minzoku*) in a period where social Darwinist and scientific racism was popular in the West. Although intellectuals and political figures opted for the word *minzoku* to refer to Japan's unique characteristics over *jinshu*, which evoked Western racial scientific theories, intellectuals and officials used them interchangeably.[77] Arguably, these concepts were adopted from the treasury of signifiers to consolidate a nation-state identity and identify with the white racial order.

Interestingly, the pioneer of the *datsu-A ron*, Fukuzawa Yukichi, also popularised Western racialisation based on Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's theory of race. He stated that the purpose of his best-selling book *Sekai kunizukushi* (*All the Countries of the World*) was based on his belief that 'the source of fortune and misfortune under heaven is nothing other than the intelligence and stupidity of the people'. This implied that Japan's road towards civilisation depended on learning about the five races of the world and emulating the lifestyle of the people belonging to the 'civilised' race, that is, people from the United States, England, France, Germany, and the Netherlands.[78] Fukuzawa even argued that the intrinsic deficits of its people were to blame for the fall of the Spanish empire and that Japan was transitioning from a semi-civilised to a civilised nation.[79] Modernisation of education included learning from Japanese translations of foreign geography books, which reflected not only Western racial categorisation but also Japanese efforts to get to know their status in the symbolic order.

It is not difficult to detect a sense of inferiority informing these interpretations. After all, despite Japan's efforts to identify with the white racial order, the Western discourse reflected an ambivalent view of Japan, which raised anxiety among the Japanese. Orientalist views of pre-modern Japan portrayed Japan as an exotic, harmless 'toyland' filled with artists and pretty women, which did not neatly coincide with an image of Japan that resisted Western incursion.[80] During this time, racial ideologies and hostility towards non-whites were already established in the United States and Europe. Social Darwinist theories of race were prevalent, and Japan, as a Mongoloid race, was considered inferior to Caucasians. Nevertheless, although the West would never treat Japan as racial equals, 'raciologists' and 'impressionists' during the early 18th century differentiated the Chinese from the Japanese, comparing the latter's variegated physical features, including skin colour, to the people of Southern France, the Portuguese, Spanish, and Jews.[81] However, these outlooks that exalted Japanese uniqueness among the yellow races faded as Japan began to rise in power, evident during the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki that threatened the European stronghold in East Asia. The Japanese, seen as a superior yellow race, became the representation of yellow peril and were again relegated to the position of equals among the inferior yellow race.

Modern Japan's identification with the Western racial order was replete with competing fantasies that can be interpreted as means to sustain the desire for 'Whiteness' as civilisation. These fantasies emerged out of Japan's anxiety towards their internalised inferiority against the Other. Debates over the mixed-residence policy reflected this, where some argued that the Japanese inherent inferiority made them incapable of competing with the West or even advancing to the outside world.[82] Some proponents of the 'mixed-blood theory', such as Takahashi Yoshio, who authored *Nihon Jinshu*

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[76]Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan*.

[77]Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan*.

[78]Takezawa, 'Translating and transforming "race"'.

[79]Michael Weiner (ed.), *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

[80]Kowner, '"Lighter than yellow, but not enough"'.

[81]Kowner, '"Lighter than yellow, but not enough"'.

[82]Eiji Oguma, *A Genealogy of 'Japanese' Self-Images*, trans. David Askew (Melbourne: TransPacific Press, 2002).

Kairyorōn (*Improvement of the Japanese Race*), suggested that miscegenation with Westerners could upgrade Japan's racial status. Similar theories that emerged proved influential in national policy-making; the then-prime minister Itō Hirobumi even sought counsel from none other than social Darwinist Herbert Spencer, who then opposed the idea because it would be calamitous, referring to Latin America.[83] Indeed, the question of how the 'inferior' Japanese could gain the status of superiority in international politics ignited a debate among eugenicists and nationalists on how to create a New Japan (*shin nippon*) with a New Japanese.[84]

The decline of the symbolic faith in the Western racial symbolic order began in the late Meiji period. Although the idea of Caucasian racial superiority did not sit well with others, this did not lead Japan to 'traverse the fantasy' and instead continued to construct racial fantasies. Proponents of the 'pure-blood' theory, such as the imperial advisor and Tokyo University chancellor Katō Hiroyuki, argued that miscegenation would 'result in race transformation, not race betterment', sullying the purity of Japanese blood.[85] Towards the late stages of the Meiji period, when Japan had a consolidated nation-state consciousness, with military and economic prowess expected of a powerful state on the international stage, Japanese officials and intellectuals realised that civilisation was not exclusive to the white race. In Lacanian parlance, such an encounter with the Real revealed the symbolic inefficiency of 'Whiteness', and the anticipated *jouissance* was absent. But at this point, the anxious racialised Japanese still adhered to the fantasy of equalising the Japanese with the white race as the primary means to cover up for the symbolic lack. Geography textbooks began to deviate from the earlier ways of translating Western texts of racial classifications of peoples towards exalting the Japanese race as equals with the Caucasians and, therefore, superior to other races, including 'other' yellow races.[86] A prominent example is Taguchi Ukichi's theory that Japan belonged to the Aryan race, which adopted Western science to argue that the Japanese were not part of the yellow race. Japan's rapid modernisation demonstrated Japan's racial superiority over the yellow *and* Aryan races.[87]

As mentioned, fantasies have two sides. In the case of Japan, the beatific side consisted of a sense of 'coherence' by identifying with Western racial precepts; the horrific side consisted of differentiating between the superior Japanese race and its *others*. Undergirding the desire for an international status and national identity was Japan's construction of its system of racial hierarchy based on racial purity rather than skin colour. The Japanese differentiated themselves from those racialised as 'yellows'. Japan positioned itself among the 'civilised' Westerners. At the same time, they depicted Okinawans, Ainus, Indigenous Taiwanese, Chinese, Koreans, and Africans, among others, as 'savages' and 'backward people' in the 1903 Human Pavilion that aimed to showcase different races of the world. As we shall see, the Japanese would retain such categorisations but in a different race configuration that would further justify Japan's imperial ambitions and concretise national identity and, ultimately, its ambivalent departure from the white racial symbolic order.

Perforating colour lines and the superior Japanese 'nation'

It is important to reiterate that while the Japanese identified with 'Whiteness', it does not mean that their idea of race as a signifier of superiority is fixed. This is how they dealt with the confounding dilemma of overcoming race as a standard of civilisation. This inability to be the Other's desire, to be recognised by the Western racial order, appeared inescapable. As Cemil Aydin notes, the non-West grappled with the Western gaze that sees the non-West as incapable of fulfilling the

[83]Micheal Weiner, '"Self" and "Other" in Imperial Japan,' in Michael Weiner (ed), Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 1–20'.

[84]Jennifer Robertson, 'Blood talks: Eugenic modernity and the creation of new Japanese', *History and Anthropology*, 13:3 (2002), pp. 191–216.

[85]Robertson, 'Blood talks', p. 198.

[86]Takezawa, 'Translating and transforming "race"'.

[87]Oguma, *A Genealogy of 'Japanese' Self-Images*.

requirements of 'standards of civilization because of defects in their racial makeup, religious dogmatism, and cultural character'.[88] The master signifier, as mentioned, is linked to other signifiers that could maintain the logic of fantasy.

Indeed, international politics for Japan also consisted of cultural power. Aside from engaging in military warfare, Japan also launched an artistic campaign to gain international status. 'Aesthetic warfare', including fine and industrial arts, was part of Japan's policy to avoid colonisation and gain pro-Japanese sentiment during the Russo-Japanese War.[89] Japan's artistic exhibition at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair earned the country recognition as 'one of the first nations of the world'. Perhaps inadvertently, it also showcased the Japanese superiority through its displays of 'hairy race' Ainus, which was intended to show the Westerners that, like them, the Japanese have their own 'savage others'. The racial signifier functioned efficiently for both sides. To some Western anthropologists, the Ainus who lived in the contested Sakhalin Islands were 'white' people whom the Japanese conquered, suggesting the Japanese could win over Russia.[90] Indeed, by the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Japan did not only gain international recognition; it also proved that civilisation did not belong to the white race alone. In other words, it revealed the lack in the Other, that the master signifier 'Whiteness' could no longer guarantee a sense of fullness.

However, the West was thoroughly invested in what 'Whiteness' signified for them. It had to cover up for its lack to retain 'Whiteness' as the master signifier of superiority and civilisation. The anxiety induced by an 'intruder' perforating the white racial symbolic order magnified the American and European racist fantasies towards the yellows, particularly the Japanese.[91] Arguably, the biggest hurdle for Japan lay not in gendered representations, because it had already fulfilled the basic requirement of masculinity: military modernisation and victory. Again, when Japan drew closer to 'whitening' itself, in the Western eyes, it transformed from being an exotic, gentle, and effeminate country into a menace. Europeans, especially the Germans, took the Japanese victory as a threat to Christianity and white racial dominance. Discrimination against Japanese immigrants intensified in the United States. While Roosevelt's Gentlemen's Agreement sought to limit Japanese immigration in an 'amiable' manner, local governments, especially in California, promoted racial segregation of the Mongoloid race (mainly Japanese).[92] Perhaps the most significant blow was the West's refusal to accept Japan's 'Racial Equality Proposal' during the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. Given the racially discriminatory policies in its colonies, promoting universal racial equality was not Japan's goal. It was to afford Japan an equal status with the West. In other words, despite Japan's technological and political progress, the West was unwilling to take Japan as a racial equal.[93]

From a Lacanian perspective, Japan's situation can be interpreted as that of a lacking subject who finds themselves traumatised when, upon reaching the object of desire (global power status), they find no real *jouissance*. A fantasy was then built around Japan's continuous sense of subjective insecurity and increasing disinterest in identifying with 'Whiteness'. Theories of race (*jinshuron*), which emerged during the Russo-Japanese War, were used to counter Western aggression, particularly during World War II. The principles of *jinshuron* varied from Asianism to 'escaping Asia'. For instance, some intellectuals and politicians argued that Japan had to collaborate with another yellow race, China, against the white race. In contrast, others believed the yellow race could only defeat the white race through Western technology. The relationship between 'Asia' and 'race', especially in geopolitics, was thus muddled on whether to treat those belonging to the 'yellow race' as equals or inferiors.[94] This also explains why race and whiteness sometimes eclipses the broader dichotomy of

[88]Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 40–3.

[89]Miya Mizuta, '"Fair Japan": On art and war at the Saint Louis World's Fair, 1904', *Discourse*, 28:1 (2008), pp. 28–52.

[90]Mizuta, '"Fair Japan"'.

[91]Rotem Kowner, 'Between contempt and fear: Western racial construction of East Asians since 1800', in *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 87–126.

[92]Kowner, 'Between contempt and fear'.

[93]Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[94]Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*; Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

West/East that dominated much of Japanese discourse on intersubjectivity. As Shimazu suggests, *jinshuron* was a 'double-edged sword', as it justified Japan's colonial expansion in China and 'rationalized Japan's insecurity vis-à-vis the West'.[95] 'Whiteness' might have lost its symbolic currency to the Japanese, yet the alienating impact of the Other remained.

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, another object can embody the Other. In Japan's case, this was Japanese racial superiority. The new fantasy that emerged towards the beginning of World War II was racial, yet instead of aspiring to be equals with the whites, it exalted the Japanese race. Again, several competing theories emerged that supported the same fantasy frame but were off-shoots of the previous debates and geopolitics. The myth of 'racial purity' argued that the Japanese came from a single imperial bloodline dating back to the age of the gods, where the Japanese were considered the 'true golden people', unlike the Chinese, who are 'quasi-golden people'.[96] Dower argued that such belief coloured Japan's wartime racial ideology, which, in his view, was a continuation of a pre-modern attachment to purity and brightness. However, as Fujitani pointed out, the racial purity myth contradicted the demands of war and colonialism. Thus, another fantasy emerged to support the wartime reality.

If Japan was to portray itself as 'Asia's liberator' from the West during World War II, it had to develop a myth that maintained Asian one-ness. It did so with the wartime slogan 'all nations under one roof' (*hakkō ichiu*). A myth based on Japanese racial hybridity, which underscored Japan's unique position to lead Asia towards progress, supported this. For example, the 'mixed nation theory' linked Japan's superiority to its ability to assimilate other races and cultures. In his 1929 publication, historian Kita Sadakichi argued that the Japanese as a single ethnic group (*minzoku*) was historically an amalgam of various races.[97] In line with this, feminist Takamure contrasted Japan's 'history of peaceful assimilation' to Western 'military expansion', arguing that Japan's historical role was to create a 'world family'.[98] Another was the 'common ancestry' myth (*dōsoron*), considered 'the most odious ideologies that justified aggression in the Great Japanese empire', which viewed the Japanese and their colonial subjects, especially the Koreans, as having the same ancestor.[99] Despite the apparent differences between theories of racial purity and hybridity, they both point to the main fantasy of Japan as a homogeneous nation, which Oguma characterised: 'The Japanese nation has consisted, and today still consists, of only the Japanese nation, which shares a single, pure origin, and a common culture and lineage.'[100]

This somewhat resolves the paradox that historian Peter Duus captured in his study of the Japanese colonisation of Korea: 'How could a people so close and similar to the Japanese remain so distant and alien?'[101] While the idea of one Japanese nation overturned Western racial thought, it retained the power of race as a signifier of superiority. If before the Japanese used the Ainus, Taiwanese, Okinawans, and Koreans to show the West that, like them, the Japanese also had their own 'savages', wartime demanded that these colonial subjects be 'assimilated' into the Japanese national polity. To do so, the Japanese disguised its imperial pursuit as an act of goodwill through spiritual and cultural formation. Rather than an act of vulgar racism, Fujitani argues that the war compelled the Japanese (and the Americans) to pursue *polite racism*, a strategy of disavowing racism by including 'despised populations within their national communities'.[102] For instance, while Japan officially considered the Koreans 'leaders of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere', the manual for conscripted Korean soldiers outlined cultural and physical differences that made

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[95]Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality*, p. 112.

[96]Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan*, p. 90.

[97]Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan*.

[98]Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan*.

[99]Oguma, *A Genealogy of 'Japanese' Self-Images*.

[100]Oguma, *A Genealogy of 'Japanese' Self-Images*, p. xxx.

[101]Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1985–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 397.

[102]Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

them submissive and backward, which Japanese educators must patiently correct.[103] Similarly, Okinawans had to undergo 'Japanisation' to remind them of what they had *forgotten* as Japanese during ancient times.

Cultural racism, to an extent, replaced biological racism. However, since the Japanese still identified with the racial symbolic order, polite racism could not conceal racial practices and beliefs. Koreans who resided in Japan were called *futei senjin*, a derogatory term meaning 'lawless and rebellious', supposedly informed by scientific studies, which suggested that Koreans were inherently criminal and violent. This roused the Japanese to massacre thousands of Koreans during the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake, believing that the *futei senjin* poisoned the wells. At the height of World War II, eugenics, which gained a foothold alongside social Darwinist ideas in late 19th-century Japan, became popular. Influential thinkers such as Eizō Koyama advocated for the simultaneous studying of race and ethnic spirit (*minzoku seishin*) to enhance Japan's policy towards East and Southeast Asia.[104] The 1940 Eugenics Law that legalised sterilisation of people with 'bad blood' and similar policies, such as prohibiting intermarriage between Japanese women and foreigners, were all intended to preserve the purity of the Japanese nation and justify imperial expansion.

Conclusion: Emancipation through separation

All these appear as 'history' from the present vantage point. When Black Lives Matter (BLM) reached Japan, hundreds of Japanese conveyed their support to the movement. While some hoped this would ignite a discussion about racial discrimination in Japan, it only highlighted the common Japanese perception that racism only occurs in the United States and Europe. Anthropologist John G. Russell attributes this to the prevailing view of racism as Black and white, wherein racism in Japan also occurs towards Asians. Racism is *alive* in Japan, and the recent years are replete with examples. The Japan Broadcasting Corporation's (NHK) controversial program on the BLM protests depicted Black people as angry mobs and attributed the police brutality to the anxiety they felt around Black neighbourhoods. A Japanese CEO of cosmetics company DHC mocked rival company Suntory as 'Chontory' for using Korean-Japanese models. A survey conducted among South Koreans living in Japan and *zainichi*s, or ethnic Koreans who migrated to Japan during Imperial Japan's rule and their descendants, revealed the extent of the hate speech and discrimination they face daily. In early 2023, a school administrator separated a *hafu* student with African roots during a graduation ceremony because of his hairstyle. Meanwhile, like other people of colour, Japanese immigrants and tourists continue to face discrimination abroad.

The congruent persistence of racism in Japan and the myth that Japan is a homogeneous nation highlights the problem this article tried to address: why do racialised states subscribe to racial hierarchies despite their own experiences of inferiorisation and subjugation? I situated this inquiry within the IR discourse because understanding this puzzle requires a perspective that goes beyond the white/non-white dichotomy that underpins most studies on race in international politics. Indeed, critical scholarship on race and IR has done admirable work in revealing the discipline's epistemological silence on race and how it continues to shape international politics. However, the scholarship's tendency to view racism in white/non-white terms has truncated non-West and non-white racism from the discourse and has thus far concentrated on white racism, especially in the Euro-American context. I suggested that while existing approaches may help broaden our understanding of racism as a global issue, they may also hinder us from looking at non-white racism, which took shape before and was reinforced by colonial encounters.

To make sense of this phenomenon, I proposed a Lacanian framework that tackles the lack in the Other. Such an approach allows us to examine the racialised subject's relationship with the symbolic order. Looking at the lack in the Other also helps stress the functional principle of the Other in the subjective constitution. I construe 'Whiteness' as the master signifier of status and being

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[103]Fujitani, *Race for Empire*.

[104]Tessa Morris-Suzuki, 'Debating racial science in wartime Japan', *Osiris*, 2nd series, 13 (1998), pp. 354–75.

in the white racial symbolic order, and the racialised desire to identify with it facilitates the construction of fantasies that subscribe to such racial significations. At the same time, it shows how the lack of the Other enables the racialised to perforate the white symbolic order, to replace the master signifier of 'Whiteness' with another racial one. This ultimately leads to the phantasmatic constructions supporting a different racial hierarchy. As a Lacanian reading of Japan illustrates, the attachment to the racial symbolic order was due to its quest for an international status alongside its pre-modern self-perceptions of superiority and civilisation. Japan identified with 'Whiteness' through appropriating Western racial theories. Upon realising that the white racial order was lacking, Japan constructed racial fantasies that supported a racial world order based on the superiority of the Japanese race.

That Japan's case is by no means an exception points to the usefulness of this framework in analysing racism outside the white/non-white racial categories. An inquiry premised on the lack of the symbolic racial order could explain inter-minority racism and the persistence of 'racism without race' in certain societies. A Lacanian reading of non-white racism can also help probe into historically specific encounters that facilitated learning across racialised peoples. As Gerald Horne notes, the current Black intellectual discourse on race in the United States, unlike in the early 20th century when they extensively engaged with Asia, 'not only simply focuses on just the black-white dyad but refuses to stray beyond the shores of this nation'.[105] Inquiry into why this shift is framed according to the investment in such symbolic ordering may also be fruitful. Moreover, the framework could contribute to critical and decolonial debates in IR and help unmask the Eurofetishist undercurrent of theories masquerading as 'global' and 'non-Western'.[106] Hopefully, by touching upon the Lacanian concept of separation, this article could inspire future research about how the racialised subject constitutes themselves beyond fantasies that unconsciously feed on the racial symbolic order's polarities.

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[105]Gerald Horne, 'TOKYO BOUND: African Americans and Japan confront white supremacy', *Souls*, 3:3 (2001), p. 27.

[106]John M. Hobson and Alina Sajed, 'Navigating beyond the Eurofetishist frontier of critical IR theory: Exploring the complex landscapes of non-Western agency', *International Studies Review*, 19:4 (2017), pp. 547–72.